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What happened to coercion? Categories of work and preconceptions in early-modern Chinese labour history

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Over the past three decades, the now well-established field of global labour history, moving forward hand-in-hand with feminist and gender history, has been instrumental in pushing the time, space and theoretical boundaries of a labour history “which [often] began and ended in the factory, which [often] began and ended with men”¹. As a result of this rapid expansion, coercion, as a heuristic concept, has recently been singled out by some historians as an alternative “lens” through which to approach labour (and more generally social) history after the global turn, and as a critical entry point to overcoming the “Polarisations” of the field (its primary focus on two “extreme categories” – wage labour and slavery – and on the equally unsatisfactory “free/unfree” dyad)². As underlined by proponents of this recent methodological shift, the proposal would amount to radically shifting away from binary and taxonomical approaches towards exploring coercion as constitutive “virtually [of] all labour relations, past and present”³.

Studies of China, for their part, have also paid a great deal of attention to labour history in the past decades, not least thanks to the work of gender and economic historians. And yet, whereas coercion and exploitation used

¹ . M. Dalla Costa and S. James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Richmond, Falling Wall Press, 1975 [3rd ed.], 3, quoted in R. Sarti, A. Bellavitis and M. Martini (eds), *What is Work? Gender at the Crossroads of Home, Family, and Business from the Early Modern Era to the Present*, New York, Oxford, Berghan Books, 2018, 21.

² . M. Van der Linden and M. Rodríguez García (eds), *On Coerced Labor. Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery*, Leiden, Brill, 2016, 1-2; J. Heinsen and J. Schiel, “Labour and coercion: Doing social history after the global turn”, *Past & Present Supplement*, forthcoming.

³ . See, for instance, C. Bernardi et al., “Introduction: Moving Workers in History”, in C. Bernardi et al. (eds), *Moving Workers. Historical Perspectives on Labour, Coercion and Im/Mobilities*, Berlin and Boston, De Gruyter, 2023, 4-7.

to be ubiquitous in historical inquiries that analysed the origins, formation and struggles of the Chinese working class, studies on China have contributed relatively few empirically-grounded and concrete case studies about everyday work and coercion in the Ming-Qing era. This essay is thus an invitation for historians to re-examine the field of coercion in early-modern China, not only as a means to reassess the significance of bound labour but also as an opportunity to revisit the social worlds of the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties in a more comprehensive manner, in all their geographical variations and temporal specificities.

I will briefly review past narratives and more recent trends in early-modern Chinese labour history before proposing possible explanations for the relative lack of attention paid to the issue of coercion. More specifically, I will evaluate the main arguments that historians usually foreground to ascertain that the Chinese workforce was massively emancipated of its “traditional” bonds of dependency at the turn of the eighteenth century in order to highlight the preconceptions that underlie such an assertion. I will then conclude with a few remarks as to how and why historians should, collectively, revisit the narrative of the advent of “free” and independent labour in Qing China.

Past narratives and recent trends in early-modern Chinese labour history

On the basis of accounts written by European missionaries dispatched to the Qing empire, French Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Grosier (1743-1823) reported, in 1785, on the existence of “slavery” in China⁴:

Slavery is known and authorised in China; but the Chinese have greatly moderated its severity. A Slave [“esclave”] among them may purchase his liberty, when he has inserted a clause for this purpose in his act of engagement [“acte d’engagement”], and even in default of such restriction, if his master thinks proper to agree to it. The Chinese employ also hired servants [“domestiques à gages”], who may quit their service when they are displeased with their masters, and in like manner the master may discharge his servants whenever he chooses. In these transactions administration has no concern, nor does it ever interfere⁵.

⁴ . Grosier never set foot in China but he had continuously worked on the publication of Joseph de Mailla (1669-1748)’s *Histoire générale de la Chine*.

⁵ . J.B. Grosier, *A General Description of China. Containing the Topography of the Fifteen Provinces which Compose this Vast Empire, that of Tartary, the Isles, and Other Tributary Countries*, London, G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1788 [French ed. 1785], vol.2, 126-127. The terms between brackets are from the French edition of Grosier’s *Description générale de la Chine*.

Like most at that time, Grosier considered that slavery under the rule of the Sino-Manchu emperors was more “moderate”, “milder” and more “humane” than it was on the plantations of the European colonial dominions⁶. That “slavery” could coexist with other forms of servitude and that it might be the result of a voluntary “act of engagement” may come as a surprise to the twenty-first century reader used to equating enslavement with “slave societies” and with violent subjugation⁷. The term “slavery” itself, used in relation to Qing society, may even seem inappropriate to many historians of China, who have long accepted that, by the end of the Imperial era, “genuine slavery” only persisted among “the tribal societies along China’s borders”⁸.

Decades after Grosier’s *General Description of China* was published, Western readers were still frequently presented with narratives of the persistence of slavery in China, even though assessments of its numeric significance were fairly contradictory. In 1856, English readers were informed by the British interpreter and “intelligence officer”⁹ Thomas Meadows (1815-1868) that although it had “legal existence in China, and large establishments of male slaves [were still] kept in the extensive residences of wealthy families”, “slavery [had] disappeared from Chinese life taken generally, as serfdom disappeared in England”¹⁰. By contrast, the readers of the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, published by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, may have been shocked to learn in 1884 that “it is pretty certain that there are now in China alone more Slaves than are contained in the rest of the world” – at least 50,000,000 according to an anonymous “American consul who had long resided in China”¹¹.

In the aftermath of the so-called Opium Wars of 1839-1842 and 1856-1860, the rhetoric of “slavery” was essentially mobilised for political (and sometimes humanitarian) purposes. As in many colonial contexts, its presence was foregrounded as proof of China’s “backwardness”, while its alleged absence was taken as evidence of the progress of “civilisation”

⁶ . See, for instance, T. Thornton, *A History of China. From the Earliest Records to the Treaty with Great Britain in 1842*, London, Wm. H. Allen and Co., 1844, vol.1, 466; H.A. Wallon, *Histoire de l’esclavage dans l’Antiquité*, Paris, Dezobry, E. Magdeleine & Cie, 1847, vol.1, 44; and E. Huc, *Souvenirs d’un voyage dans la Tartarie, le Thibet et la Chine pendant les années 1844, 1845 et 1846*, Paris, Librairie d’Adrien Le Clere & Cie, 1853 [2nd ed.], vol.1, 288-289.

⁷ . On “voluntary enslavement” in general, see C. Chevalyere, “Esclavage volontaire”, in P. Ismard, B. Rossi and C. Vidal (eds), *Les mondes de l’esclavage. Une histoire comparée*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 2021, 513-524.

⁸ . P. Ebrey and A. Walthall, *East Asia: A Cultural, Social, and Political History, Volume II: From 1600. A Cultural, Social, and Political History*, Boston, Wadsworth, 2013 [3rd ed.], 380.

⁹ . J.K Fairbank, “Meadows on China: A centennial review”, *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 14-3, 1955, 365-371.

¹⁰ . T.T. Meadows, *The Chinese and their Rebellions, Viewed in Connection with their National Philosophy, Ethics, Legislation, and Administration*, London, Smith, Elder & Co., 1856, 635.

¹¹ . *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, series 4, vol. IV, no.7 (19 July 1884), 150.

among the Chinese¹². In other words, Western observers of the second half of the nineteenth century – who could rely on no serious statistical figures in that regard – often tended to evaluate the prominence of slavery and other forms of coerced labour in China based on their subjective perception of China’s “progress”; not the other way around¹³.

A similar observation could be made nowadays about the profusion of narratives intended to demonstrate (often on the basis of very limited data) that early- modern China followed and even preceded Europe on the allegedly universal path leading to the advent of a “free” labour market. It is indeed striking how, in the grand historical narratives that depict China’s development path, little attention is paid to labour in general, and to coercion in work relations in particular (even less to local variations of coercive labour regimes). The current state of the field of early-modern Chinese labour history is even more puzzling given that the “class struggles” (*jiejī douzheng*) generated by the “feudal” “exploitation” (*boxue*) and “oppression” (*yapo*) of the Chinese labouring masses in the Ming and Qing eras used to be at the core of research into social and economic history conducted in the People’s Republic of China (and into social history in general)¹⁴. Despite its framing within Marxian theory, the Chinese scholarship of the past century has produced a treasure trove of sources and rich empirical research about labour and coercion that could certainly have been revised and put into systematic dialogue with recent developments in global history. Yet, with few exceptions, historians of early-modern China have barely started to engage with the scholarly trends that emphasise the importance of coercion to the transformations of the early-modern world, like the New History of Capitalism (NHC)¹⁵, global labour history¹⁶ and slavery studies that now take a close interest in the history of slaving across early-modern Asia and the Indian Ocean World¹⁷.

¹² . On the rhetoric of slavery in China at the turn of the twentieth century, see C. Chevalyere, “Under pressure and out of respect for human dignity: the 1910 Chinese abolition”, in M. Cottias and M.-J. Rossignol (eds), *Distant Ripples of the British Abolitionist Wave*, Trenton, Africa World Press, 2017, 176-181. On its use in India, for instance, see A. Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2012, 264.

¹³ . 50 million “slaves”, as suggested by the “American consul”, would have meant that around 12% of the Chinese population (estimated at c. 430 million in the mid-nineteenth century) was made up of enslaved people. For demographic figures, see S. Chen, “Demography in Qing China”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, 2022.

¹⁴ . E.g., Y. Fu, *Ming-Qing nongcun shehui jingji* (Rural economy and society in the Ming and Qing dynasties), Beijing, Sanlian shudian, 1961; C. Gu, *Mingmo nongmin zhanzheng shi* (A history of the Late Ming peasant wars), Beijing, Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1984.

¹⁵ . NHC’s primary focus is American capitalism and it is frequently criticised for overemphasising the importance of coercion to economic growth. See for instance T. Burnard and G. Riello, “Slavery and the new history of Capitalism”, *Journal of Global History*, 15-2, 2020, 225-244.

¹⁶ . See M. Van der Linden, *Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global Labor History*, Leiden, Brill, 2008; and J. Lucassen (ed.), *Global Labour History. A State of the Art*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2008.

¹⁷ . Very recent exceptions include R. Allen (ed.), *Slavery and Bonded Labor in Asia, 1250-1900*, Leiden, Brill, 2021; K. Ekama, L. Hellman and M. van Rossum (eds), *Slavery and Bondage in Asia, 1550-1850. Towards a Global*

This general observation does not mean that historians of early-modern China do not pay attention to labour issues at all. As a research topic in its own right, labour has even been a key line of inquiry in the prolific field of Chinese women's history that has flourished over the past four decades. Making innovative use of hitherto little-exploited source materials (like lineage registers, court records, technical treatises, novels, etc.), gender historians have been instrumental in “break[ing] open the carapace” of the early-modern household and in rejuvenating Chinese labour history¹⁸. This decades-long and well-established trend has largely contributed to giving Chinese women a voice and agency and to reassessing their all-too-often overlooked roles in the “fabrics of power”, the economy, the management of lineages and state affairs, the preservation of the social order, etc.¹⁹.

One significant aspect of the relationship between gender and work that historians have extensively studied is the gender divisions of labour and their evolution in the long run. Exploring the changing patterns of women's mobility since the Song (960-1279) period and the propagation of rigorous moral standards of gender separation in the Ming and Qing dynasties, historians have underlined, for instance, the crucial contribution of women's work to state revenues (through the production of goods used as payment of taxes) and to the expansion of textile production since the fourteenth century²⁰. Some have also ventured to analyse the effects of the gender division of labour on the mobilisation of women's work in the early twentieth century and its legacies in the post-Mao era²¹. More recently, the study of work and gender has even started to expand beyond the boundaries of elite families to probe into the labour organisation of the imperial households and the Manchu banner society²². To borrow the words of Christine Moll-Murata, it could thus be said that “work and labour relations are [now] part of a growing number of studies that perceive labour as an integral part of the entire economic system, consider

History of Coerced Labour, Berlin and Boston, De Gruyter, 2022; and the special issue “Slavery in Early Modern East, Inner, and Southeast Asia” published by the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 81-1-2, 2021.

¹⁸ . F. Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, 180.

¹⁹ . E.g., S. Mann, *Precious Records. Women in China. Long Eighteenth Century*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, 36ff; B. Goodman and W. Larson (eds), *Gender in Motion. Divisions of Labor and Cultural Encounters in Late imperial and Modern China*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005; B. Bossler (ed.), *Gender and Chinese History. Transformative Encounters*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 2015.

²⁰ . K. Pomeranz, “Women's work and the economics of respectability”, in B. Goodman and W. Larson (eds), *Gender in Motion*, op. cit., 239-263.

²¹ . S. Mann, “Work and household in Chinese culture. Historical perspectives”, in B. Entwisle and G.E. Henderson (eds), *Re-drawing Boundaries. Work, Households and Gender in China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000, 15-32.

²² . C. Moll-Murata, “Working the Qing Palace Machine: the servant's perspective”, in M. Siebert, K. Chen and D. Ko (eds), *Making the Palace Machine Work*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2021, 47-72; B. Hsieh, *Concubinage and Servitude in Late Imperial China*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2014, 141-304.

the gender-specific division of labour, or concentrate on particular branches of the economy”²³.

The evaporation of coercion

Despite the many contributions of the past decades to our understanding of work in early-modern society, blind spots and unaddressed questions remain. What ordinary people (beyond elite lineages and households) actually “did to make a living”, for instance, is seldom addressed²⁴. The limitations of what Chinese sources have to offer (especially in comparison to the more detailed series and accounts available for early-modern Europe) do not suffice to explain the relative lack of attention to everyday work. As mentioned above, gender historians have made innovative use of the available sources to break the carapace of the early-modern Chinese household²⁵, and as we shall see below, judicial sources offer promising perspectives for exploring this issue in more detail.

With few notable exceptions, interest in the economic and social significance of exploitation and coercion also seems to have somewhat evaporated from current scholarly debate²⁶. This might be due, in part, to a wider shift of focus in social history from an (over)emphasis on the subaltern masses as victims of “feudal” exploitation to a reappraisal of their individualised experiences and of their agency. In her study of concubinage and servitude in late-Imperial China, for instance, Bao Hua Hsieh repeatedly emphasises that, without neglecting “the vicious side of imperial concubinage and servitude”, she chose to give “particular attention” to such aspects as “power” and opportunities for “upward social mobility” in the lived experiences of subaltern women²⁷. While such revisions of the social history of women in early-modern China are undoubtedly necessary and long overdue, they have also caused a significant semantic shift.

Whereas past narratives about subordinate and dependent workers used to resort to the language of bondage and exploitation (often with reference

²³ . C. Moll-Murata, “China”, in K. Hofmeester and M. Van der Linden (eds), *Handbook: The Global History of Work*, Berlin and Boston, De Gruyter, 2018, 21.

²⁴ . “What people did to make a living” is the key question of the ground-breaking project led by Maria Ågren, “Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society” (GAW). See M. Ågren (ed.), *Making a Living, Making a Difference: Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

²⁵ . In the field of household bondage, novels like *Jing Ping Mei* have received a lot of attention. E.g., T. Lu, “Slavery and Genre in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 81-1-2, 2021, 85-108.

²⁶ . Exceptions include studies at the crossroads of gender and bondage history: X. Wang, *16-18 shiji binü shengcun zhuangtai yanjiu* (Research on the living conditions of enslaved women in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries), Harbin, Heilongjiang daxue chubanshe, 2008; X. Wang, *Mingdai binü qunti yanjiu* (Research on enslaved women in the Ming dynasty), Beijing, Renmin chubanshe, 2019; B. Hsieh, *Concubinage and Servitude*, op. cit. My most recent contribution on these topics is C. Chevalyere, “Status, power, and punishments. ‘Household workers’ in Late Imperial China”, *International Review of Social History*, 68-31, 2023, 109-134.

²⁷ . B. Hsieh, *Concubinage and Servitude*, op. cit., xxi-xxiii.

to serfdom and in terms reminiscent of the features of slavery), more recent ones are generally framed in a language referring to domestic service. Yet, as pointed out by historian Raffaella Sarti, the “domestic servant” category is a very “vague” and ambiguous one that, depending on the historical context, may cover very different conditions, statuses and situations of subordination, ranging from slavery to “free” domestic work²⁸. Using it as an umbrella term “to deal with different historical and geographical contexts may [thus] create a misleading impression of uniformity”; it has “methodological implications [that] need to be carefully addressed so as to avoid or [...] reduce the multiple misunderstandings that all the necessary translations imply”²⁹. One question that is usually not raised is that of the levels of misrepresentation that are actually caused by an inconsistent, and in some cases unreflective, mobilisation of the terminology of domestic service, sometimes mixed with those of patronage and servitude, to represent subordinate work arrangements in late-Imperial China.

An eighteenth-century transition to “free” labour?

Furthermore, I would argue that the relative lack of attention paid to coercion in labour relations is not only the result of vague terminology and hasty translations but also of unquestioned preconceptions that seem particularly prevalent in recent literature on Chinese economic history. Like gender historians, economic historians have paid a great deal of attention to the issue of labour, not least in their attempts to outline the characteristics of China’s development path until it radically “diverged” from the European model in the nineteenth century (and perhaps earlier on, according to recent scholarship)³⁰. Labour is indeed a factor of critical importance to the analysis of the “Great Divergence” between China and Europe, alongside others like land and resource availability, demographics, technological evolution, marketisation and institutions. Recent studies in economic history have been able, for instance, to challenge previous assumptions about labour relations in early-modern China, such as the

²⁸ . R. Sarti, “Le ‘nom de domestique’ est un ‘mot vague’. Débats parlementaires sur la domesticité pendant la Révolution française”, *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée modernes et contemporaines*, 131-1, 2019, 40ff.

²⁹ . R. Sarti, “Can historians speak? A few thoughts and proposals on a global history of domestic servants”, in N. Sinha, N. Varma and P. Jha (eds), *Servants’ Pasts. Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century South Asia. Vol.1*, Telangana, Orient Blackswan, 2019, 350, 347.

³⁰ . S. Broadberry, H. Guan and D. Li, “China, Europe, and the Great Divergence: A study in historical national accounting, 980-1850”, *The Journal of Economic History*, 4-78, 2018, 955-1000; C. Yang, “The occupational structure of Late Imperial China, 1736-1898”, Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 2019, iv passim.

supposedly exorbitant level of tenancy rents that used to be foregrounded as a hallmark of the exploitative nature of the “feudal” society³¹.

However, labour is frequently approached as a quantifiable variable used to analyse the evolution of taxation (especially the service levies and their progressive “silverization” in the Ming era), incomes, returns to labour, (“real”) wages and shifts in labour inputs, the expansion of labour-absorbing strategies, fluctuations in productivity and the sectorial distribution of the workforce, among other measurable factors³². In other words, labour is usually conceived as an abstract economic factor, as aggregate data, as a quantifiable resource and as a (free) market of wage earners that started to expand rapidly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries³³. As summarised by Kishimoto Mio, in a chapter that displays an unusually acute sense of the persistence, plurality and local variations of bound labour in the Ming and Qing period, it “seems that the old image of China’s economy during the late-Imperial period as a static and restrictive one with inactive factor markets has already been replaced by a new view that emphasizes its free, vigorous and market-oriented characteristics”³⁴. The flip-side of this otherwise capital re-examination of Chinese economic history is that, with regard to work, historians often seem to take for granted that the workforce was massively emancipated of its “traditional” bonds of dependency at the turn of the eighteenth century, with the active support of the imperial state.

Kenneth Pomeranz, for instance, considers that in “matters of ‘free labor’ and markets in the overall economy”, Europe may well have “lagged behind” China on the eve of the Great Divergence. According to him, “in both China and western Europe, a sharp decline in the number of bound servants and tenants from at least the sixteenth century, plus the growing urbanisation of the elite, was making it harder to maintain large retinues”³⁵. This “sharp decline” purportedly led to a profound reconfiguration of Chinese society where, after the seventeenth century, work was performed by self-employed “owner-cultivators”, “free tenants” and “waged

³¹ . G. Wangling, *Zudian guanxi xinlun. Dizhu, nongmin he dizu* (New perspectives on tenancy relations), Shanghai, Shanghai shudian, 2005.

³² . D. Ma and R. von Glahn (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of China*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022, vol.1, 363, 685-697, passim.

³³ . Among other examples, see R. Allen et al., “Wages, prices, and living standards in China, 1738-1925: In comparison with Europe, Japan, and India”, *Economic History Review*, 64, 2011, 8-38; K. Pomeranz, “Labour-intensive industrialization in the rural Yangzi delta: Late Imperial patterns and their modern fates”, in G. Austin and K. Sugihara (eds), *Labour-Intensive Industrialization in Global History*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2013, 122-143.

³⁴ . M. Kishimoto, “Property rights and factor markets”, in D. Ma and R. von Glahn (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of China*, op. cit., vol.1, 481 (also 453).

³⁵ . K. Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021 [2000], 165, 132.

labour”³⁶. Talking more specifically about the developed Jiangnan area, Pomeranz writes:

It is a reasonable guess that from about 1670 [...] half of all land was managed by small-holding owner-cultivators, and almost all the rest by free tenants. Probably less than 15 per cent of farm work was done by waged labour, and that figure includes work done by tenants and small-holders supplementing their income with a little casual labour, and/or households dealing with a temporary surplus of working age males³⁷.

In his *longue durée* study of landed property in early-modern and modern China, Shaohua Zhan offers another telling example of this narrative:

The expansion of serfdom in the late Ming dynasty was characterized by the increased use of bondservants (*nupu* in Chinese). [...] The expansion of servitude met resistance, and millions of bondservants joined domestic rebellions in the early seventeenth century, contributing directly to the fall of the late Ming regime. [...] After taking power in 1723, the Yongzheng [r. 1723-1735] emperor announced a series of emancipatory policies liberating outcast social/occupational groups, including musician households (*yuehu*), debased people (*duomin*), hereditary servants (*shipu*), tenant bondservants (*tianpu* [*sic*])³⁸ [...]. The policies were so radical and their effects so profound that historians called the change the “Yongzheng’s emancipation”. The use of bondservants had virtually disappeared, and the tenant-landlord relationship was bound by contract rather than by personal dependence³⁹.

Unlike Pomeranz, Zhan brings back into the narrative the many pieces of evidence that suggest an increase in number of the enslaved population (“bondservants”, i.e., *nubi/nupu* in Chinese) during the Ming period, as well as this trend’s culmination in an episode (almost unique in Chinese history) of protracted “enslaved revolts” (*nubian*) between the 1630s and the 1650s⁴⁰. But the picture that emerges is roughly the same as Pomeranz’s. Set aside the somewhat outdated characterisation of *nubi* as a

³⁶ . K. Pomeranz, “The rural economy”, in D. Ma and R. von Glahn (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of China*, op. cit., chap.13.

³⁷ . K. Pomeranz, “Labour-intensive industrialization in the rural Yangzi delta”, op. cit., 124.

³⁸ . The accurate transliteration for the Chinese term referring to “tenant bondservant” should be *dianpu*.

³⁹ . S. Zhan, *The Land Question in China. Agrarian Capitalism, Industrious Revolution, and East Asian Development*, London and New York, Routledge, 2019, 22.

⁴⁰ . On this topic, see C. Chevalyere, “Slavery in Late Ming China”, in D. Pargas and J. Schiel (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Slavery in History*, Cham, Palgrave MacMillan, 2023, 297-317.

form of feudal servitude (*serfdom*)⁴¹, Zhan similarly identifies a “radical” shift in the eighteenth century resulting in the disappearance of past bonds of dependency and their replacement by work relations framed by “contracts”. In other words, the picture that he draws of the High Qing is that of a uniform social and economic landscape of work that was dominated by “freestanding commoner households”⁴², independent smallholders, free tenants and wage contractors.

Considering that historians have only vague demographic estimates for early-modern China and almost no statistical data on labour relations and their geographical variations to work with, what are the underpinnings of this shared perception that Chinese society, from the eighteenth century onward, was made up of independent and free workers? When stating that “Most laborers who were still bound when the Ming-Qing transition commenced (c. 1620) were freed during the wars, chaos, and subsequent labor shortages of the next fifty years”, Pomeranz is mainly referring to Mark Elvin’s account of the “the disappearance of serfdom”, published in 1973⁴³. Expounding on the rise of pawnbroking and (absentee) landlordism in the Ming period, Elvin definitely came to the conclusion that “the manorial order, and indeed serfdom, disappeared” in the seventeenth century⁴⁴. Using a wide variety of sources, he painted with broad brush strokes a convincing picture of the general evolution of the imperial social and economic order, but he stopped short of concluding that the workforce had been entirely emancipated.

High Qing policies: between emancipation and strengthened hierarchies

Other historians, however, resort to less impressionistic arguments to support this now standard narrative. One argument is that the so-called “emancipation edicts” of the Yongzheng era (r. 1723-1735), mentioned by Zhan above, resulted in the actual emancipation of “mean people” (*jianmin*)

⁴¹. With the relative toning down of the Marxian-inspired Five Stages theory since the 1990s, the “feudal” nature of China’s imperial society has been increasingly challenged. Even as early as 1973, Mark Elvin considered that the Song era was a period of “Manorialism without Feudalism” (M. Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1973, chap.6). The debate achieved new momentum in the 2000s when Tianyu Feng presented “feudalism” as a misrepresentation of the imperial order. See T. Feng, *Fengjian kaolun*, Wuchang, Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2006. For an introduction in English to Feng’s analysis, see T. Feng, “Society of imperial power: Reinterpreting China’s ‘feudal society’”, trans. by P. Hou and W. Zhang, *Journal of Chinese Humanities*, 1-1, 2015, 25-50.

⁴². S. Zhan, *The Land Question in China*, op. cit., 22.

⁴³. K. Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, op. cit., 81, 63; M. Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, op. cit., chap.15. ⁴⁴. Ibid., 255.

– an heterogeneous social and legal category of stigmatised people, of which the enslaved (*nubi*) were the main constituent⁴⁴.

Heir to a stabilised empire, Yongzheng indeed endeavoured to emancipate “people of ‘mean’ occupations”, as explained in 1974 by Pei Huang, who saw in this gesture “the most striking feature of Yung-Cheng [Yongzheng] autocracy”⁴⁵. Between 1723 and 1730, several regional groups of people customarily considered as “mean” (often referred to as “pariahs” or “outcasts” in English) were successively restored to commoner status (*liangmin*) on the condition that they “reform themselves” (*zixin*), that is, that they abandon the debased/impure activities they were associated with (in particular prostitution)⁴⁶. The first series of edicts promulgated by Yongzheng in 1723 specifically targeted the *yuehu* (“musician” households) in Shanxi province and the *duomin* (“fallen” people) in Zhejiang. It was followed in 1727-1730 by other edicts targeting the groups known as *bandang* (hereditary tenants) and *shipu* (hereditary slaves) in Anhui province, the *danmin* (Tanka/boat people) of South China, and then the *gaihu* (beggars’ households) of the Suzhou prefectural area⁴⁷. In so doing, Yongzheng definitely intended to liberate these localised groups of hereditary mean people from the social debasement they had been held in customarily and to merge them with the general population. And by the end of the dynasty, some of them seem to have effectively disappeared⁴⁸.

Another common argument is that the incremental redefinition of the legal status of “hirelings” (*gugong*) that occurred between 1588 and 1788 should be interpreted as a salient manifestation of the “incipient capitalism” (*ziben zhuyi mengya*) of the Ming-Qing period and as resulting in the actual emancipation of hired workers from their bonds of dependency⁴⁹. Elvin notes that in Ming times “hired workers should not be seen as necessarily entirely ‘free’”⁵⁰. In fact, to be hired in exchange for wages and food had legal effects similar to being enslaved, since in Ming law, *gugong* status was akin to *nubi* status and produced analogous discrimination and

⁴⁴ . W. Rowe, *China's Last Empire. The Great Qing*, Cambridge MA and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009, 98.

⁴⁵ . P. Huang, *Autocracy at Work. A Study of the Yung-Cheng Period, 1723-1735*, Bloomington and London, Indiana University Press, 1974, 226.

⁴⁶ . A. Hansson, *Chinese Outcasts. Discrimination and Emancipation in Late Imperial China*, Leiden, Brill, 1996, in particular chap.8; and J. Jing, *Qingdai shehui de jianmin dengji* (The Debased Stratum in Qing Society), Hangzhou, Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1993.

⁴⁷ . A. Hansson, *Chinese Outcasts*, op. cit., 163.

⁴⁸ . Ibid., 164.

⁴⁹ . On this topic, see C. Chevalyre, “Serving and working for others. Negotiating legal status and social relations of household laborers in Late Imperial China”, *Journal of Global Slavery*, 5-2, 2020, 170-203 (here 171-172).

⁵⁰ . M. Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, op. cit., 238.

asymmetry. Both *nubi* and *gugong* were incorporated into the structure of their employer's household as "inferiors and juniors" (*beiyou*); both were considered as providing "service" (*yi*) and both were subjected to the almost absolute power of the head of the household they served. The principal differences between the enslaved and hirelings, though, was that the former were alienated from their kins and from society and permanently debased and discriminated against both inside *and* outside the household, whereas the latter were not saleable and were demeaned *only* in relation to the head of the household and his close relatives, and for the sole duration of their employment⁵¹.

In 1588, however, a "Newly submitted statute" (*xinti li*) reshaped the legal definition of *gugong*. From then on, individuals contractually hired for less than a year were to be treated legally as commoners in relation to their employer, whereas people hired for more than a year remained *gugong* under the law, and thus discriminated against. As a result, short-term hirelings were legally emancipated from the authority of the head of the household and from servile status. In 1759-1760, the 1588 statute was revised to address the situation of workers hired without a contract, further narrowing the legal definition of *gugong*. People contractually employed for more than a year were still considered as *gugong* under the law, but in the absence of a contract, five years of effective work were deemed necessary to be legally considered as *gugong*. Following a minor revision in 1767, the statute was last revised in 1788, but this time, new criteria for the identification of *gugong* were established. Instead of the duration of employment and the existence of a contract, the legal definition of *gugong* rested on the sole fact of performing a "service" in exchange for wages. "To serve" (*fuyi*) implied "to be commanded and summoned" (*shihuan*) in a relationship characterised by a manifest degree of hierarchy, subordination and social distance between employer and employee, which, according to the text of the statute, consisted of not working side by side with one's employer, not addressing them in equal terms (*pingdeng xiangcheng*) and not eating at the same table. To some extent, after 1788, role performance gained precedence over other factors in determining whether hirelings were to be considered as servile or not. By altering the previous correlation between performing "hired labour" and performing "service", this last reform may well have further removed a number of hired workers from the legal category of *gugong*⁵².

⁵¹ . On the legal proximity and differences between *nubi* and *gugong*, see C. Chevalyre, "Status, power, and punishments", op. cit., 5-8.

⁵² . See C. Chevalyre, "Serving and working for others", op. cit., 193-194.

The “Yongzheng emancipation” and the redefinition of *gugong* status in the eighteenth century undoubtedly affected the dynamics of the labour market, but they may have been less radical and disruptive than is sometimes said. With regard to the so-called “emancipation” of outcast groups, Huang Pei, William Rowe, Anders Hansson and others whose works are often quoted in the matter have all underlined that these were limited and largely unsuccessful measures primarily intended to eliminate discrimination against specific local groups “registered as hereditary pariahs”, whose status as “mean people” was questionable in law and whose origins were mostly unclear⁵³. Huang Pei suggests several explanations as to the emperor’s motives, including “public order” (as they formed a dangerous “body of discontents in society”), “public morals” (as they were associated with unclean occupations) and “justice and equality” (which were essential, according to him, to the Legalist and Buddhist emperor)⁵⁴. Commenting on Huang’s explanations, William Rowe expounds as follows:

While there probably was indeed something of this in Yung-cheng’s project, what he was actually doing was a bit more complex. Far from denying the propriety of personal servitude, Yung-cheng explicitly identified it as an expression of ‘differentiation between superior and subordinate’ (*pien shang-hsia*), and naturalized it as a reflection of the cosmic order (*t’ien-ching ti-yi*). Noting that breaches of ritual deference (*li*) between bondservant and master had been a major contributor to the collapse of his own dynasty’s predecessor, he at the same time sought to inject into his overly lax Han subjects a dose of more rigid ideas of deference [...]. The key, however, was to differentiate those individuals who truly belonged in this servile relationship from the many more who did not⁵⁵.

The causes and effects of the “emancipation edicts” of the Yongzheng era have been the topic of numerous interpretations (of which Matthew Sommer, who rightly sees the term “emancipation” as an anachronism, provides a detailed overview)⁵⁶. It seems quite certain, though, that these reforms were first and foremost concerned with moral standards. While redrawing the boundaries and definition of debasement, the emperor did

⁵³ . S. Mann, *Precious Records*, op. cit., 37; M. Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, 262.

⁵⁴ . P. Huang, *Autocracy at Work*, op. cit., 228-229.

⁵⁵ . W. Rowe, “Social stability and social change”, in W. Peterson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 9, Part one: The Ch’ing Dynasty to 1800*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 500. See also W. Rowe, *China’s Last Empire*, op. cit., 98-99.

⁵⁶ . For a detailed overview, see M. Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society*, op. cit., 261-264. See also A. Hansson, *Chinese Outcasts*, op. cit., 165-168.

not call into question its propriety and legality any more than he attempted to eliminate “personal bondage”, although he expressed reservations as to the hereditary transmission of *nubi* status and the abusive practice of imposing *nubi* status on tenants.

As to the incremental (and somewhat chaotic) reform of the hireling’s status, some scholars have interpreted it as “a drive to eliminate the status category ‘hired laborer’” entirely⁵⁷. However, the sources hardly support such a definitive assertion. Undoubtedly, the reform narrowed down the number of wage workers of dependent or servile status; probably in part because, starting in the sixteenth century, the “law found itself caught between old principles and new social realities”⁵⁸. Yet the social stigma and legal discrimination attached to *gugong* status were not eliminated by the reforms. They continued to apply to the hardly quantifiable proportion of workers hired to “serve”, whose subordination to their employer was in fact strengthened. Commenting on the process and its final outcome in 1788, William Rowe – who characterises *gugong* as a form of “agrarian servitude” – came to the following conclusion: “the Ch’ing had moved to further strengthen the power of the head of the household (*chia-chang*) over those whose relation to him was pseudofamilial, while at the same time endorsing and extending the trend in agriculture toward a fully marketized relationship between landlord and free hired labor”⁵⁹. In the twilight of the Imperial era, people considered as *gugong* under the law were still held in a relationship of strong asymmetric dependency, as illustrated by the fact that when the Sino-Manchu government endeavoured to abolish the status of *nubi* in 1910, it prescribed that former *nubi* be legally considered as *gugong* rather than commoners, so as to maintain hierarchy and subordination to their former owners⁶⁰.

These two measures of “social reform” may be seen as having some “progressive” features⁶¹. As part of a broader trail of “policies redefining status hierarchies”, they probably led to a decrease in the number of bound workers and to a “slow erasure of status barriers”⁶². Yet they hardly appear as a set of coordinated policies designed to eliminate the bonds of servitude and the category of “mean people” altogether. The documents produced in the process display *no* sense of a necessity to free the labour force, either as a response to changing practices or to stimulate the economy. What

⁵⁷ . S. Mann, *Precious Records*, op. cit., 37-39.

⁵⁸ . P.C.C. Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1985, 97-98.

⁵⁹ . W. Rowe, “Social stability and social change”, op. cit., 500.

⁶⁰ . C. Chevalyere, “Under pressure and out of respect for human dignity”, op. cit., 163-164.

⁶¹ . M. Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society*, op. cit., 261-262.

⁶² . S. Mann, *Precious Records*, op. cit., 37, 43.

mattered, and what the debates focused on, were the rectification of “morals and mores” (*fengsu*) and the criteria for belonging to the *gugong* and “mean” categories. As Susan Mann once noted, “The Manchus, whose political system relied on a clear distinction between slaves and commoners tried to [...] clarify the precise distinction between *liangmin* and *jianmin*”⁶³. Rather than challenge the existence of bondage, the Qing emperors of the eighteenth century were primarily committed “to protect[ing] the sanctity of the bond between master and servant” (*zhupu mingfen*, literally the “status distinction between master and slave”). Doing so first required the “correct[ing of] instances where such servile arrangements were improperly imposed”⁶⁴.

This is not to say that the now-dominant narrative of the expansion of “free” and independent labour is entirely untrue, but that the Qing emperors neither intended nor managed to eliminate debasement, servitude and bound labour. If the “imperial court and the bureaucracy moved to merge more of debased and servile people into the broad population of free subjects of the throne, [...] by the end of the imperial era it had still not eliminated the two categories altogether”⁶⁵.

The mishaps and promises of global comparison

But why is this narrative gaining so much traction in scholarly literature? The history of early-modern China has been extensively revised in the past decades. With regards to labour history, the paradigm has radically shifted from depicting the Chinese workforce as generally oppressed by feudal exploitation to uncritically embracing the standards of the modern free labour market. The reconstruction of wages, as a proxy to estimate incomes, living standards and the cost of labour, is undeniably an enterprise of the utmost importance from a comparative and global perspective⁶⁶. But the emphasis on wages also tends to overemphasise the figure of the presumably autonomous wage earner. To be somewhat provocative (and certainly a little unfair), it could be argued that, through sustained comparison with Western Europe and England, early-modern China may have been made a little too much like England. In the process, recent scholarship seems to have partly lost sight of the persistence of bonds of dependency enforced by law and customs, as much as the plurality of entangled logics of labour deployment across the vast and diverse Qing

⁶³ . Ibid., 38.

⁶⁴ . W. Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, op. cit., 99.

⁶⁵ . Ibid., 97.

⁶⁶ . See R. Allen et al., “Wages, prices, and living standards in China”, op. cit., 8-38.

empire (like convict, military, and tributary labour), households and other sites of work and production⁶⁷. It also seems to have neglected a basic observation made by NHC and global labour historians, namely that capitalist transformations and economic growth are hardly exclusive of coercion, and that coercive, precarious and informal work have persisted in the long run and are still pervasive, if not dominant, in China and in many parts of the globalised world we live in⁶⁸.

Coercion in work relations is not a trivial matter that only interests social historians. On the contrary, labour regimes, labour deployment strategies and means of workforce (im)mobilisation have significant effects on living standards, on the cost of labour, on productivity and reproduction, and thereby on growth and development. To understand these effects, the study of labour requires proper and “radical” contextualisation⁶⁹. In the case of early-modern China, there are several objective reasons for social and economic historians to re-examine the field of labour and coercion together.

With regards to enslavement, for instance, a decrease in the enslaved population after the mid-seventeenth century seems like a very probable scenario. It does not mean, however, that enslavement was only a residual practice under the Qing dynasty. Enslavement was a part of the socio-military organisation of the Eight Banners and remained so long after the conquest of China, when “slaves” were still funnelled into Banner households through capture and condemnation⁷⁰. As historian Zhang Ning has aptly demonstrated, the westward expansion in the eighteenth century also produced tens of thousands of war captives, and probably many more, who were given as “slaves” to military officers and sold on the market⁷¹. But the trade in human beings for enslavement and other purposes (including forced labour) did not thrive only within the Manchu society. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1851-1864), sometimes praised for having prohibited slavery, also enslaved captives on a large scale⁷². Indeed,

⁶⁷ . One exception being Christine Moll-Murata. See, for instance, C. Moll-Murata, “Tributary labour relations in China during the Ming-Qing transition (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries)”, *International Review of Social History*, 61, 2016, 27-48, and C. Moll-Murata and U. Theobald, “Military employment in Qing dynasty China”, in E.-J. Zürcher (ed.), *Fighting for a Living. A Comparative Study of Military Labour 1500-2000*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2014, 353-392.

⁶⁸ . On precarious and informal work in post-Mao China, see S. Swider, “Informal and precarious work: The precariat and China”, *Rural China: An International Journal of History and Social Science*, 14, 2017, 19-41.

⁶⁹ . C. De Vito, J. Schiel and M. van Rossum, “From bondage to precariousness. New perspectives on labor and social history”, *Journal of Social History*, 54-2, 2020, 1-19.

⁷⁰ . M. Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001, 227-230.

⁷¹ . N. Zhang, “Entre ‘loi des Miao’ et loi sur les Miao: le cas du trafic d’êtres humains dans le Guizhou au XVIII^e siècle”, *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident*, 40, 2016, 95.

⁷² . K. Deng, *China’s Political Economy in Modern Times: Changes and Economic Consequences*, London and New York, Routledge, 2012, 45.

as recent studies have shown, enslavement and trafficking flourished in late-Imperial China and persisted long after their legal abolition in 1910⁷³.

Interestingly enough, incentives to re-contextualise labour and to revisit the topic of coercion in early-modern Chinese history have recently emerged from research obviously adhering to the free labour market thesis. Cheng Yang's prize-winning dissertation on the "occupational structure" of Qing China is, in this respect, both a remarkable piece of research and a good example of the unquestioned preconceptions I mentioned above⁷⁴. Based on a large dataset obtained by meticulously collecting occupational information from the criminal records of the Board of Punishments (the *xingke tiben*, or "routine memorials"), Yang produced an unprecedented amount of data about labour and occupations in Qing China, the lack of which is a major weakness in Chinese economic history. In the process, he also forcefully showed the value and potential of judicial archives for future research into the social and economic history of work⁷⁵.

Yang's approach consists of "measuring the composition of the labour force by economic sectors and subsectors", first by recording the ways in which people declared their main occupations in the course of a criminal trial, and then by aggregating and classifying this information using the "PST [Primary-SecondaryTertiary] System of Classifying Occupations"⁷⁶. The method undeniably offers valuable indicators about the evolution of the occupational structure of Qing China, as well as prospects for better comparisons with other contexts. From a social history standpoint (and perhaps also from an economic one), however, the method that consists of transposing Chinese occupational categories into a taxonomy elaborated for modern England raises questions as to the levels of distortion involved in the process.

In Yang's taxonomy, for instance, "agricultural labourers" (which are distinguished from "tenants" and "landowning farmers") are defined as workers "hired through labour contracts" who sometimes benefited from "free housing, food and occasionally clothes"⁷⁷. The language of hiring, contract labour and benefits clearly suggests autonomy and symmetry between "employers" and "employees". Yet, as explained above, "contract workers" were not a homogeneous group in the eighteenth and nineteenth

⁷³ . J. Ransmeier, *Sold People. Traffickers and Family Life in North China*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2017; C. Chevalyere, "Human trafficking in Late Imperial China", in R. Allen (ed.), *Slavery and Bonded Labor in Asia*, op. cit., chap.6.

⁷⁴ . C. Yang, "The occupational structure of Late Imperial China", op. cit.

⁷⁵ . Ibid., iv.

⁷⁶ . Ibid., 4; E.A. Wrigley, "PST system of classifying occupations": <https://www.campop.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/occupations/britain19c/papers/paper1.pdf> (accessed 10 October 2022).

⁷⁷ . C. Yang, "The occupational structure of Late Imperial China", op. cit., 39fn.

centuries. Some of them, if not the majority, were not in a relation of subordination with their employer anymore, but others probably remained *gugong* in a legal sense and were thus discriminated against, especially if one considers that the higher the “benefits” a contract worker received from the head of the household and the longer the relationship lasted, the more they were vulnerable to subordination and coercion (and, potentially, to enslavement)⁷⁸.

A similar observation could be made about the use of “domestic service” as an operational category. In Yang’s classification, its actual composition is hardly explained. It is likely, though, that it was made up in large part of *nubi*, firstly because the meta-category of which “domestic service” is part (“services and professions”) is described as encompassing occupations related to the care of children and “minor professions” perceived as “being of very low socio-cultural status”, which is precisely how “mean people” (*jianmin*) are usually depicted in Chinese sources, and secondly because the Chinese verb and noun forms that individuals were likely to use in a judicial process to characterise their occupation as “service” (like *yi* or *fuyi*) were definitely markers of a subordinate status within the household, either as *nubi* or as *gugong*, as mentioned previously. Yet to the wider community of historians, the “domestic servants” category might be more evocative of the lower “socio-cultural status” attached to the (early-) modern British “servants” and French “*domestiques à gages*” (who, as mentioned by Grosier, may quit service “when they are displeased with their masters”) than of people who could be legally bought and sold, as *nubi* were.

Yang’s approach is therefore illustrative both of the consensus on the “free” nature of the early-modern Chinese labour market and of the potential distortions that this narrative has introduced in the rendition of labour relations. However, the figures that he provides for the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century could also be taken as an incentive to revisit the topic of coercion, since they suggest that bound labour may have been maintained at a high level, or at least at a higher level than expected. Yang’s 1761-1770 sample, for instance, records 0.5% of the male workers and 12.1% of the female workers as “domestic servants”⁷⁹. Even though the whole category was not made up exclusively of *nubi*, as it might be, this still means that they represented at least a few percent of the workforce by the end of the eighteenth century, when they are supposed to have been only marginal and residual. The high gender imbalance within this category confirms that women were overwhelmingly represented among the enslaved, but the

⁷⁸ . C. Chevalyere, “Slavery in Late Ming China”, op. cit.

⁷⁹ . C. Yang, “The occupational structure of Late Imperial China”, op. cit., 195, 207, 212.

total figure would put the enslaved population at a similar level as my own estimates for the late Ming period, when *nubi* were likely to be at their highest in early-modern history⁸⁰.

Concluding remarks and perspectives

While there are objective reasons that should encourage historians to collectively revisit the history of labour and coercion and to re-examine the narrative of the advent of “free” and independent labour in Qing China, the question is how to achieve this task without forcing on China’s Late-Imperial past the potentially distorting analytical categories of the modern West and, at the same time, without confining ourselves in the comfort of China’s alterity? To do so would require us, as a first step, to distance ourselves from whatever preconceptions we have about the nature of Chinese society and to recognise that, however useful they may be when comparing different contexts, the *etic* categories that we regard as universal are actually historical constructs with a limited ability to convey meaning without proper contextualisation⁸¹. Wondering about how to “best understand China’s economic performance from the Song to mid-Qing period”, Kishimoto Mio came to a similar conclusion: “The answer to that question would not be to emphasize [China’s] ‘modern’ character, nor to categorize it as feudal or Asiatic, but rather to seek to analyse Chinese economic behaviour from an *emic* perspective within the specific economic and cultural environment of late-Imperial China”⁸².

Turning back to the “*emic* perspective” may not be sufficient, though, if we lose sight of the possibility of establishing comparisons, and if it “only” means increasing the number of cases studies that take Chinese meta-categories and labels of bound labour – like *nubi* and *gugong* – as their starting point. In doing so, we might end up in the same impasse as labour historians have found themselves in since the global turn, namely producing “siloeed” empirical research on singular categories. Such “siloeed research” has been extensively used to challenge the traditional assumptions of social and labour history (like their Eurocentrism and their presentism)⁸³ and to redefine their categories and typologies. But at the same time, the assumptions, biases and typologies that global historians have rightfully attempted to challenge have remained the main reference points in conceptual discussions and global comparisons. Instead of

⁸⁰ . C. Chevalyre, “The abolition of slavery and the status of slaves in Late Imperial Chin”, in G. Campbell and A. Stanziani (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Bondage and Human Rights in Africa and Asia*, New York, Palgrave, 2021, 60.

⁸¹ . R. Sarti, “Can historians speak?”, op. cit., 349-351.

⁸² . M. Kishimoto, “Property rights and factor markets”, op. cit., 482.

⁸³ . E.g. J. Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History. A Global Approach*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2012, chap.1.

analysing the features of such and such category of bound labour, early-modern China could become an interesting playground for historians to experiment with a more “transversal approach to social history”. As suggested by the chairs of the “Worlds of Related Coercions in Work” research programme⁸⁴, such a transversal approach could take coercion not as another label (coerced labour) or as another analytical subject (the coerced worker), but as a “perspective” from which to begin a relational and dynamic study of the “social settings in which histories of work and production are linked with those of violence, expropriation and marginalization” and the search for autonomy. Taken as a set of social practices and processes that are potentially inherent in every work and power relation, coercion opens a window to the infinite variations of the social arrangements that are made and remade through conflict, negotiation and cooperation⁸⁵. For the study of early-modern China, an exploration of “coercion at work” aimed at unveiling “microhistorical morphologies of coercion” grounded in a bottom-up approach offers an opportunity not only to revise past and present preconceptions derived from the comparison with Europe as to the importance of bound labour in Chinese society, but also to revisit the social worlds of Late-Imperial China in a more comprehensive manner.

⁸⁴ . COST action #18205 “Worlds of Related Coercions in work” (WORCK): <https://work.eu/> (accessed 11 April 2023).

⁸⁵ . All quotations in this last paragraph are from J. Heinsen and J. Schiel, “Labour and coercion”, op. cit.