

Student A:

I found it interesting that both Bray and Ulrich discussed the negative responses of elite men to the changing roles of women. Bray notes that elite men in China tended to deplore the reduced role of women's work in the economy, especially weaving, because, for them, weaving symbolized womanly virtues such as thrift and hard work. Ulrich quotes Bushnell at length to show how the idea of homespun was tied to nostalgia for preindustrial working patterns. Both Ulrich and Bray seem to be looking for a way to depict pre-industrial society -- or pre-proto-industrial society, in Bray's case -- as an environment in which the doctrine of separate (but equal) spheres for men and women really did apply, and which men, at least powerful ones, were almost as unhappy as women to see disappear. Is this a kind of conservative feminism? A longing for a traditional utopia in which "men tilled, women weaved," and everyone knew their place?

In any case, Bray explains elite men's ambivalent or negative responses to women's changing roles in terms of a desire to preserve the moral order, as does Ulrich, though less explicitly. I like this part of Bray's argument, especially the way it links economic and social history, but I wish she (and Ulrich) had spent more time discussing the reasons why social and economic change led to a decline in women's roles -- not just the fact that it did. Maybe the reasons are obvious: e.g., because women had less power than men, they were more vulnerable to economic and social change. But simply saying that women's roles changed during industrialization because industrialization gave them less important roles seems not very explanatory, almost tautological. Why weren't women able to create for themselves new roles within the industrial system, roles that would have preserved or perhaps even increased their power? If the explanation is that women were more tied to the home, I would have liked to have seen that explored in more depth. Bray is careful to undermine the stereotype of the Chinese woman with bound feet trapped in the home, but if in fact it was that confinement that was the critical factor in disempowering women during industrialization or proto-industrialization, then it deserves more attention.

>From a methodological perspective, I found it interesting to compare Bray's piece and Ulrich's two pieces in terms of the actors or objects on which they focused. In *A Midwife's Tale*, a single person, Martha Ballard, becomes the thread along which bits of social history are strung. In the segment of *The Age of Homespun* we read, it is an object, or rather a technological system -- the spinning wheel and associated equipment. In Bray's book, large-scale economic and cultural factors are central; individual people and tools are understood as parts of a changing proto-industrial society. My sympathy is with Ulrich's micro-scale approach, and I liked the sentiment behind her comment that social history, "in abandoning the individualistic and institutional biases of conventional narrative sometimes substitutes one form of exclusion for another, freezing people into a collective anonymity that denies either agency or the capacity to change" (p. 20). Both of the pieces we read from her seem like clear efforts to counter that tendency.