

The Language of Slavery in Late Imperial China: Translation, comparison, contextualization

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When I started to explore the conceptions and practices of human bondage in late imperial China, almost no one would have ventured to use the interpretative framework of slavery in that context. Things started to evolve in the past decades, under the combined effects of the relative toning down of Marxian-inspired analytical frameworks and under the influence of gender approaches on Chinese studies. Subsequent changes occurred even more recently under the influence of global studies and of a renewed interest for the history of colonial slave-trading in early-modern Asia. Envisioning “slavery” as a relevant analytical framework to explore bondage, coerced labor and forced migration in early-modern Asia proved to be a powerful driving-force for new empirical research and renewed perspectives. But it also raises new conceptual and methodological issues. In this regard, language recently became a privileged focus for scholars who study human bondage in non-colonial contexts. I will briefly raise this issue again in my conclusion. But for the next fifteen minutes or so, I will try and outline answers to the questions asked by this workshop.

[1.] In simple terms, the main question of this workshop could be rephrased as follows: How did historical actors, individually and collectively, appropriate the “slave” category in different contexts? Why did they do so? And what do appropriation and (self-)identification with the slave category tell us about the contextual conception of slavery and subjugation, and about the construction of identities?

These questions are relevant only in times and places where the words “slave” and “slavery” were shaped, reframed, and referred to existing practices; Or in contexts where the category was imposed from outside. China was neither significantly involved in the Atlantic slave trade – although it had been part of long-distance forced labor migrations long before the outbreak of the “coolie trade”; Nor was it colonized – despite territorial encroachments and Western interventionism from the 1840s onward. Its language therefore remained immune to the penetration of the Western “language of slavery” until the mid-nineteenth century. The period following the Opium Wars is not my field of expertise, but I examined the dissemination of “antislavery” discourses in the last decades of the imperial period as part of a research on the Chinese “abolition of slavery” (1905-1910).

Briefly, we can note that a ubiquitous “rhetoric of slavery” emerged in the turmoil of the last decades of the imperial regime. It was spurred by an increased circulation of information (through newspapers) and intellectual exchanges, and out of confrontation with the “civilizing” discourses of Western expansionism. It is worth underlying that this “rhetoric of slavery” was mobilized by the whole political spectrum of the time and was used to support a wide variety struggles, except one: The struggle against the age-old Chinese bondage institution (the so-called Chinese *nubi*, or “bondservitude”

“system” [*nubi zhidu* 奴婢制度]). One paradox of the “New Policy” reform era (1901-1911) is that, in a gesture intended to equal European abolitions, it abolished the servile institution and all forms of transactions in human beings without widespread public support or prior debates calling for such a reform. Tenuous “antislavery ideas” were principally conveyed by an omnipresent “rhetoric of slavery” directed against forms of domination of more immediate concern to the Chinese: The autocratic imperial political regime, subordination to foreign powers (Western as well as Manchu), the exploitation of Chinese indentured laborers abroad, or the “servile mentality” and submissiveness accused to strangle the traditional social body. Present in nationalist, constitutionalist, revolutionary, utopian, and feminist pamphlets, this rhetoric was almost always expressed with reference to abolitions in the West, in particular to the American Civil War and the tutelary figure of Abraham Lincoln.

To give but a few examples, one can mention, among others:

- **Sun Yat-sen's** (1866-1925) address to Chinese students in Tokyo, whom he exhorted to seek freedom as the American slaves had done earlier;
- **Liang Qichao** (1873-1929), who repeatedly referred to the American abolition movement and to the rhetoric of slavery to exhort people “not to be the slaves of circumstances”. On various occasions, he ascertained that if Lincoln had been satisfied with the circumstances of his time, he would not have achieved “the great task of emancipating slaves”. He also blamed the “slavery of the mind”, a Chinese born defect far more tragic to him than “slavery of the body”;
- Or the reception of the work and figure of **Harriet Beecher Stowe** (1811-1896): The first translation of Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1901 was not intended to raise public awareness of China's persisting slaving practices, but to be an inspiring voice against foreign tyranny, white colonialism and Western “heartless racism”. One year later, a biography was published in *Xuanbao* not as an antislavery manifesto, but as a feminist pamphlet describing Mrs. Beecher as a feminist heroin.

[2.] As for the second question (“How did global perspectives on slavery differ? did non-European nations and empires have different languages/conceptions and did their interaction with other regions create new conceptual linkages?”), no new conceptual linkage can be identified until the moment knowledge about European slavery and abolitions started to circulate widely (as mentioned above). Rather than a new “linkage”, what can be underlined in this context is the dissociation of two words/categories that were used as close synonyms until then: The legal category of *nubi* 奴婢 (abolished in 1910); And the age-old term *nuli* 奴隸, that was progressively infused with a new meaning and came to be used to translate “genuine” slavery – i.e. Ancient slavery (Mediterranean as well as Chinese), European colonial slavery, and the “universal” and paradigmatic abstraction that was elaborated from it (contemporary concept of slavery).

To decide whether late imperial China had a “concept of slavery” (different or not) first requires some elements of historiography, for it raises the issue to know whether there was “slavery” or “slave-like” practices in Ming and Qing China. As mentioned earlier, with few exceptions, no one today would use the word slavery to describe and analyze human bondage in that historical context. Yet, to many Europeans who traveled to China from the sixteenth century onward, slavery obviously existed in China, although it was “different”, “milder” or “more humane” than the slavery striving in the colonies. After the Opium wars, this dominating view was progressively replaced by a harsher condemnation of

Chinese native slavery, embedded in a broader narrative of China's "backwardness" that persisted until the 1930s and 1940s, only to wane after WWII.

On the Chinese side, European slaving practices were "discovered" with the arrival of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century. They were soon violently condemned and differentiated from native practices, for they participated in the disruption of the local order, contributed to introducing many despised Japanese on Chinese soil, and moreover because they involved the trafficking of Chinese subjects abroad and treatments regarded as contrary to the (Confucian) moral requirements associated with the Chinese bondage institution. In terms of language, however, no clear distinction was made between European "slavery" and local practices, as could be illustrated through comparison of Chinese practices with descriptions of European slaving in late sixteenth-century Macao.

Over the course of the late nineteenth century, the more the Chinese learned about Western slavery, the more they appropriated and singled it out as an epitome of European inhumanity and racism. Despite the 1910 abolition and despite the efforts of some intellectuals to place Chinese bondage history in the perspective of a world history of "slavery", the Chinese *nubi* category was progressively dissociated from the concept of slavery. With the diffusion of the Stalinian "Five stages" model in the 1930s and its adoption as historical orthodoxy in the PRC, "slavery" was definitely regarded as irrelevant, both as an abstraction and as a historical reality (except for ancient pre- or early-imperial times). Although extreme labor and exploitation were extensively studied by Chinese and Japanese scholars during the twentieth century, none of its worse manifestations could thenceforth be considered slavery. In the context of the so-called "feudal" order of late imperial China (characterized by a widespread state of general "serfdom"), such manifestations could at best be labelled "slave-like" or "remnants of slavery". See for instance the introduction to *The Slave Society* (1973) by Shi Xing.

This is (more or less) where we still stand today, and the words written by Thomas McCloy more than a century ago still accurately describe the situation. This brief historiographical outline also reminds us of what Moses Finley underlined and of what Joseph Miller conceptualized more recently: Concerns about slavery and its identification in history are always mirroring present concerns.

[3.] If there is no such thing as slavery to be observed in late imperial China, it is worth noting that despite the distinction between ancient/universal *nuli* "slavery" and Chinese "feudal" *nubi* bondage, the distinctive features of the latter's status are almost always expressed with reference to the classical language of slavery. In most academic works, *nubi* are described as individuals treated like a commodity or property, subject to paramount legal discriminations, deprived of the prerogatives of "free" subjects, and reduced to a condition that placed them at the very bottom of the social hierarchy and subjected them to inhumane treatments, relentless exploitation and extra-economic oppression.

Thus, there are good reasons to consider Chinese *nubi* as "slaves". As mentioned earlier, travelers to the Middle Kingdom all witnessed slave practices. More important, as a social and legal category, *nubi* was the conceptual matrix from which all bonded statuses and identities were defined. Everything related to "unfree labor" was, directly or by analogy, linked to *nubi* status. Situated at one end on the continuum running from what we would call "slavery" to "freedom," the category played a central role in the conceptualization of "unfreedom" in imperial China.

In many respects, however, the *nubi* category clearly resists to "traditional" definitions of slavery: None of the elements of definition we consider central in slavery were exclusive hallmarks of *nubi* identity

(be it the conception of human beings as “property”, extreme legal discrimination and labor exploitation, a distinctive condition, salability, or the “alien” origin of slaves). In late imperial China, dependency, hierarchy, salability and interpersonal obligations were the norm, not the exception. Identities were elaborated at the intersection of absolute categories (gender, age and generation, occupation, honorability, etc.), but they were always relative and context specific, varying from one asymmetric relationship to another (making *nubi* less readily identifiable as “slaves”). One major characteristic of *nubi*, however, is that they were placed in a distinct position of absolute inferiority and dependency. The language of *nubi* identity articulated various notions, concepts and categories, none of which was distinctive, but that combined together to produce such a distinctive, absolute social and legal marginality. Among the most important, one can mention the following.

Nubi first belonged to the legal category of “dishonored” or “demeaned” people (*jianmin* 賤民). *Jianmin* were composed of a variety of groups of outcastes whose common feature was to be excluded, individually or collectively, from the reference community of the “honorable” or “innocent” people as the consequence of a primordial stain or fault. The hermetic line separating “honorable” from “demeaned” people was marked by the prohibition to take the imperial examinations. The stains bearing on *jianmin* were of various nature. In general, they were either the byproduct of activities/professions regarded as impure (contact with dead bodies, sexual services, etc.), or the result of a conviction pronounced by the judiciary. Many outcaste groups, for instance, were (supposedly) descendants of families of traitors and renegades. *Nubi* were conceptually considered as criminals, the enslavement of individuals being, in theory, a monopoly of the judiciary. Although soon after the foundation of the Ming dynasty private enslavement flourished, the idea that their “debasement” was the result of a “fault” or social failure remained central in justifications for their enslavement: Idleness, laziness, deviance, or a dissolute life were constantly underlined by clan regulations as causes of enslavement and of the subsequent exclusion of *nubi* from the genealogy and the descent line. It is also worth noting that contracts of sale of children “as slaves” all included acknowledgements of their parents’ “failure” to make a proper/honorable living and to support their family (said otherwise, poverty and destitution were common justifications for the selling of one’s children).

Unlike other “outcaste” groups, however, *nubi* were not only excluded from the realm of honorable people; they were also re-integrated into others’ families as “junior and inferior” members of their master’s household. Their reintegration rested on a narrow analogy with the most asymmetric interpersonal relationship, i.e. the father-children relationship. Within their master’s household, *nubi* were treated like their master’s children and were therefore subject to extreme legal discriminations. However, the analogy was modulated in such a manner as to maintain them in a position of permanent inferiority and outside of the kinship group. Based on age, generation and gender, “juniority” and inferiority were neither permanent or absolute among members of the household and family, as they were in the case of *nubi*. In addition, their integration as “children-like” members of the household remained incomplete. Unlike children, for instance, *nubi* were not extended the privilege of having their crimes concealed by other members of the family and of the household (a privilege based on the principle of household solidarity). The incompleteness of their integration was also marked by their exclusion from access to the household patrimony. Under the law, household patrimony was collectively owned and managed by the household head. Among relatives who lived in the same unit of co-residence, theft, in a legal sense, was therefore not possible. When *nubi* “misappropriated” household belongings, unlike other members of the household they committed “theft”. Besides, whereas the status of two individuals was determined by their direct relative position, the position of

nubi was always indirect and mediated through the relative position of their master vis-à-vis the person they interacted with (within the household/kinship group, and under specific circumstances without). It is also worth noting that this exclusive and individual master-slave relationship built on a selective analogy with the parent-child relationship produced a paternalistic discourse of benevolence, mutual-aid, and reciprocity. In many cases, such a rhetoric was no more than a utilitarian and imperfect fiction aimed at extending the power of the father to the slaves by confining them to a single identity and to an exclusive relationship. But it also created loopholes that were used either by masters or by the slaves themselves. In the late Ming period, for instance, since the enslavement of ordinary/honorable people was still prohibited by the law, many resorted to fake adoptions to acquire slaves. On another hand, the language of reciprocity was used at court by the slaves who, expecting to unknot the ties of bondage, accused their masters of not having fulfilled their obligations (and sometimes succeeded).

One last important notion in the construction of *nubi* identity stemmed from the idea that performing work for others was a source of social demeaning and dependency. The Chinese notion that can be translated as “service” (*yi* 役) was not a defining feature of “slaves”. It also applied to workers hired for a daily, monthly or yearly term. However, examining the uses of this notion unveils a close conceptual relationship between performing labor for others and what we would name “servitude.” Being hired affected the social identity of hired laborers in a similar way as being bought transformed commoners into absolute social “inferiors and juniors”, although it did only temporarily.

[4.] To summarize, there are good reasons to consider Chinese *nubi* as “slaves”. Although none of the above-mentioned criteria/concepts/notions/categories alone would be distinctive of *nubi* status, we can find many points of comparison with “slavery” in the way they intersected (with others) to affect the identity and condition of dependent individuals. Yet, is the question to know whether it should be compared with or assimilated to an abstract “slave” category the right one?

On the one hand, refusing to use the analytical framework of “slavery” and to translate (as I did for years by using “neutral” or “emic” terms) comes with many drawbacks. In particular, it contributes to essentializing and “exoticizing” China. Notwithstanding the fact that it produces narratives that are unintelligible outside of the smaller community of Chinese studies. On the other hand, re-appropriating the analytical framework of “slavery” can prove significantly fruitful. As an example, the absence of slavery in late imperial China has long overshadowed practices that are considered closely related with slavery, like the existence of widespread, long-distance networks of human trafficking (the topic of my current research project). It also contributed significantly to establishing a new dialogue with historians of slavery and coerced labor. However, translation remains unsatisfying, for it always transposes preconceptions and structures onto the historical societies we study. In other words, translating also comes at the cost of excessive distortion.

Until recently, I felt trapped in what seemed to be an aporetic situation. With a handful of colleagues who share similar concerns about “translation”, we therefore designed a new research project (“Grammars of Dependency”) whose main goal is precisely to try and overcome the issue of hasty translations and misleading comparisons. To do so, we decided to seriously question the universality of the analytical language of slavery and overcome the epistemology of the modern West by reframing asymmetrical power relations in a different way. Collectively committed to the task of “provincializing” and historicizing not only Europe, but also slavery and its present language(s) (like the “free-slave” binary opposition), we focus on the semantic of the sources and the vocabulary of the actors in various

historical contexts, on their own right and in their own terms. In practice, what we do simply consists in collecting verb-phrases and particles positioning someone or a group of people in relation to others within the taxonomical order of a society (rather than comparing categories). This enterprise of “radical contextualization” is no less difficult, for even our point of attention (“coerced labor”) is as problematic as “slavery” from a conceptual point of view; and for we know that the issue of translation cannot be completely avoided. We nonetheless posit that a new language (in which Western abstractions would not overshadow other context specific conceptualizations) is necessary to speak about coerced labor and bondage throughout history. One of our ambitions is that historians of bondage, coercion and dependency all learn to think with the categories and concepts of unfamiliar contexts (and, maybe, start revamping their own vocabulary). This is probably an unrealistic intellectual challenge, but this is what makes it all the more stimulating.