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Involution or pursuit of profit?
—A reassessment of Chinese sericulture during the 1840s–1940s

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Abstract With new data and a new methodology, this paper reassesses the forces that led to the rise of Chinese sericulture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The study challenges the prevailing view that Chinese peasants switched to sericulture in order to gain a higher aggregate family income at the cost of a lower net income per workday. Based on a case study of Wuxi, the research indicates that until the late 1920s, sericulture had provided peasants not only higher aggregate income, but also higher returns on labor. Peasants were more pulled by higher profit than by high population pressure to switch to sericulture.

Keywords involution, incentive, total net family income, net income per workday

JEL Classification N33, N55

摘 要 应用新的资料和新的研究方法，对导致19世纪下半叶和20世纪初中国蚕桑业急速增长的原因进行重新探讨，对以往一些认为中国农民之转向蚕桑业是因为农业内卷化的流行观点提出了异议。在对无锡近代蚕桑业发展的实证研究基础上，提出一直到20世纪20年代，蚕桑业的单位劳动收益全都高于水稻，蚕桑业生产带给农户家庭的不只是家庭总收入的提高；无锡农民在19世纪下半叶之所以转向蚕桑业，这不是农业内卷化的结果，而是追求高利润的结果。

关键词 内卷化，动机，家庭总纯收入，单位劳动日的纯收入

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1 Introduction

The silk industry, long a mainstay of the traditional economy in China, has been commonly regarded as the bellwether of the fortunes and fate of the Chinese economy in the modern era. The eclipse of China’s silk industry due to Japanese competition in the early twentieth century has been taken as a classic example of China’s failure to modernize. Recently, sericulture has figured prominently in hypotheses about the “involutionary” characteristic of the Chinese rural economy, whereby the growth of sericulture in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in China has not been seen as a sign of economic development, but rather as the evidence that China does not have the ability to transform and modernize the traditional peasant economy. This paper, based on a case study of sericulture in Wuxi, a district adjacent to the rapidly modernizing city of Shanghai, seeks to demonstrate that the rise of sericulture in China during the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stemmed from the increasing profits generated by sericultural production (mulberry cultivation, silkworm raising and raw silk reeling). The rapid escalation of demand for Chinese raw silk in the world market substantially increased the returns on investment in sericultural production, prompting peasants to substitute some rice farming for mulberry cultivation and abandon cotton spinning and cloth weaving for silkworm raising. Rather than leading to an involutionary dead end, sericulture afforded Wuxi peasants new opportunities to increase both their total household income and the returns on their labor efforts.

It is important to reassess the dynamics of Chinese sericultural development in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for the general debate on the Chinese rural economy of this period. The rural economy of China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been a heated topic since the 1930s. It has prompted tremendous debates involving many scholars (Perkins, 1969; Myers, 1970; Riskin, 1987; Brandt, 1989; Faure, 1989; Rawski, 1989; Huang, 1990; Gottschang, 1992; Little, 1992; Feuerwerker, 1995). The central debate has hinged upon what drove rural commercialization and specialization, where they led the Chinese rural economy, and what the nature of that economy was. This study will reassess the core evidence that has been used to support the idea of “rural involution” or “producer-consumer dualism” in Chinese sericultural production, investigating the forces that led to the rise and fall of sericulture. The central issue this paper concerning is whether or not Chinese peasants remained trapped in a fundamentally “pre-modern” pattern of

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1 E.g. Lore Brandt, David Faure, Albert Feuerwerker, Thomas Gottschang, Ramon Myers, Philip Huang, Daniel Little, Dwight Perkins, Thomas Rawski, and Carl Riskin etc.