

The Transnational Migration and Gender Construction of “Self-combed Women” in South China: A Historical Study Centered on Ouyang Huanyan

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the transnational migration of “self-combed women” (self-combed women) to Southeast Asia from the early to mid-20th century. Taking Ouyang Huanyan’s personal experiences within the Lee Kuan Yew family as a starting point, it explores the labor roles and cultural influences of female migrants within overseas Chinese communities. Through the intersection of gender history and overseas Chinese history, and combining oral history, microhistory, and cultural memory research methods, this study reveals the process by which self-combed women constructed their identities, participated in family structures, and carried on cultural inheritance within overseas Chinese communities. The study finds that self-combed women were not only representatives of the transnational labor force but also crucial participants in the construction of gender order and culture within overseas Chinese communities. This research addresses the lack of a female perspective in traditional overseas Chinese history, deepens understanding of the historical role of female migrants, and provides an illuminating case study for women’s history and cross-cultural research.

Keywords: self-combing women; Transnational migration; Gender history; Female labor; Overseas Chinese society

1. Introduction

Self-combing women is a unique lifestyle chosen by women in the Pearl River Delta region of modern China (such as Shunde and Nanhai). It refers to women who, through specific rituals (such as combing their hair into a bun, symbolizing “self-combing and not marrying”), voluntarily give up marriage,

live and work independently, or live with other self-combing women (forming “gupowu”), in order to gain economic and life autonomy and break away from the dependent status of women in traditional marriage. It is more common in the areas with developed handicrafts such as silk reeling from the Ming and Qing Dynasties to the Republic of China. It is a kind of struggle and breakthrough of women against

traditional gender roles in a specific social and economic context.^[1]

In the early to mid-20th century, the “self-combing women” group in South China entered society as unmarried and independent people, becoming a unique phenomenon in the female culture of the Pearl River Delta. Under the multiple influences of changes in economic structure, family system constraints and transformation of gender concepts, they not only played an important role in the local textile industry and family service industry, but also migrated across borders on a large scale due to the labor demand of the Nanyang economy. However, in the grand narrative of overseas Chinese history, the experience of this female group is often marginalized. Existing research mostly focuses on male merchants and political elites, and lacks an in-depth exploration of the life history of ordinary female transnational immigrants. In the research related to self-combed women. For example, Fang Jingwen’s paper compared and explained the mutual assistance model of old-age care between eunuchs and self-combed women, but did not discuss other broader aspects such as the reasons why self-combed women started to comb their hair.

^[2] Ji Xiaohua used self-combed women as a case study to analyze the changes in the economic status of women in Guangdong in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China, but did not further explain the life of this group itself^[3]. Shao Yifei started from the self-combed women in Guangzhou and explored the origin, composition and basic characteristics of the self-combed women’s customs, but lacked an explanation of the special group of self-combed women who “went to Southeast Asia”^[4]. In addition, most of these papers focus on the customs, characteristics, and old-age care issues of the group, and rarely have specific analyses based on individual cases.

This project will not only make up for the lack of female perspectives in traditional overseas Chinese history, but also the limited understanding of the immigrant group in traditional research on self-combed women. Ouyang Huanyan, a Guangdong-born, self-combed woman employed by Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew family, embodies this historical process. She served the family for forty years, raising children and maintaining family affairs. Her experience reflects the multiple roles of migrant women in transnational diaspora societies: labor, cultural heritage, and social networks. This case study not only reveals how the transformation and adaptation of self-combed women in a foreign land but also offers a new perspective for understanding women’s self-identity and social value in a cross-cultural context.

Using gender history and overseas Chinese history as theoretical frameworks, this study will integrate oral history, microhistory, and cultural memory analysis to

explore Ouyang Huanyan’s life history and the collective experiences underlying it. The study aims to fill the gap in female perspectives in overseas Chinese history, deepen historical understanding of women’s transnational migration, labor, and family roles, and provide new empirical evidence and case analysis approaches for gender history and migration research.

2. The Origin of the Self-Combing Women

2.1 . Economic Transformation and Women’s Entry into the Workforce

The self-combing women are a special group of women who emerged in the Pearl River Delta region in modern times. Due to the patriarchal system and the need for labor in their families, they symbolically declared their lifelong ceremonial unmarried by holding a self-combing ceremony, thereby breaking away from the constraints of the traditional marriage system.^[5] This phenomenon is not only an individual’s resistance to the old social marriage system, but also reflects the combined effects of the social structure and economic model of a specific historical period.

From an economic perspective, from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, Western merchants began to establish machine silk reeling factories in the Pearl River Delta, gradually replacing the traditional hand-reeling with low output and unstable quality. In 1881, there were 11 silk reel factories in Nanhai and 5 to 6 in Shunde; in 1883, there were more than 20 silk reeling factories in the Pearl River Delta region. In 1886, the Navy Office consulted Guangdong Province and encouraged merchants to open silk reel factories. By 1894, there were 75 silk mills in the Pearl River Delta region, with 22,260 silk reels, a total capital of approximately 1.025 million taels, 24,930 workers, and an annual output of 22,000 dan of silk. The mid-1920s was the peak period for the development of the machine silk reeling industry in the Pearl River Delta. At that time, there were more than 200 machine silk reeling mills, about 100,000 silk reels, and an annual output of nearly 60,000 dan of silk.^[6]

With the concentration and scale of the industry, traditional family handicrafts were gradually replaced, and a large number of women entered the factories and became an indispensable source of labor. This process not only changed women’s daily lives, but also affected their status in the family and society. The wage income brought by modern production enabled women to have a certain source of cash and consumption power, thus having a stronger voice

in marriage choices, family relationships, life planning, etc. From the perspective of the marriage system and concepts, relative economic independence also provided women with more freedom in marriage choices.

2.2 . Social Constraints and the Dilemma of Marital Autonomy

According to oral records, some women who had been combed by themselves had some room to resist their parents' marriage requirements. For example, Feng Xi, a woman who had been combed by herself in Xiqiao Village, said: "My parents want me to get married, but if I don't go, they can't do anything."^[7] Because there was no free love in the old days, most marriages were arranged by parents, so newlyweds almost never met each other for the first time until the wedding. Therefore, women generally feared and resisted the marriage system. They worried that they would fall into family conflicts due to the lack of marriage autonomy, especially the oppression caused by conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law or personality incompatibility between spouses. According to Li Yinhuan's mother-in-law, some women "feared marrying those big men and being angry with their mother-in-law, and also feared marrying someone with a bad temper and being angry with themselves."^[7] Therefore, many people chose to avoid potential risks by being self-reliant: "No need, I'd better support myself and not be angry."^[7] These oral records show that being combed by myself was not a single personal choice, but was closely related to the social culture and concepts of the time. The arranged marriage model that prevailed in old society made women lack the right to dominate marriage. The potential for family conflict and mother-in-law-daughter-in-law relationships in marriage further reinforced women's fear and rejection of the institution of marriage. Therefore, the practice of self-combing was not only a form of rejection of marriage at the time, but also a way for women to find a way to survive structural oppression.

While the practice of self-combing women combing their hair and refusing to marry can indeed be seen as a form of awakening female consciousness, in reality, especially before liberation, many self-combing women were not entirely voluntary. Clan order and the responsibility of the eldest daughter constrained women's marital choices: for poorer families, those with fewer children, and those with only daughters, self-combing women were an important source of income. Many women were forced to shoulder the burden of family labor due to a lack of labor in their families. For example, the Liang Lisheng sisters, due to their family's financial difficulties and labor shortage, shouldered heavy farm and household chores from a

young age. Their mother died young, and with five sisters and an older brother, they were unable to raise their children, and even sold her and her younger sister to other families. After she ran back, she had to do heavy work. From a very young age, the two sisters carried dozens of kilograms of dried pickles to the mountains to sell for rice, while the fourth sister, who was only four or five years old, stayed at home and had to cook for the whole family. After World War II, the sisters helped their father farm and borrow rice from others to avoid starvation. According to Liang Lisheng's sisters, due to the lack of labor in the family, "my father told us not to get married, and if we don't get married, we will help him support the family."^[7] Some cases also show that the act of self-combing is often restricted by clan customs. For example, in some families, if the eldest daughter does not comb her hair, she may be regarded as hindering the marriage of other sisters, and thus forced to take the responsibility of combing her hair. As Liang Lianjiao's mother-in-law said, "Only after I comb my hair can my sister get married."^[7] This phenomenon shows that although the new behavior of self-combing provides women with more choices, they still cannot make choices completely according to their own will and are still restricted by family responsibilities and social and cultural factors.

Therefore, self-combing is sometimes not a woman's active pursuit of independence, but a passive undertaking. In summary, the emergence of self-combed women is not only closely linked to the industrialization of the Pearl River Delta's silk industry in modern times, but is also closely intertwined with traditional clan systems, family economic structures, and marriage institutions. Their "self-combing" is often seen as a conscious choice for independence and freedom, but sometimes it was a forced consequence of assuming family responsibilities. The historical experience of this group reveals the complex situation and multiple identities faced by women during social transformation. When some self-combed women faced restrictions in their local living space, they set their sights on further afield—"going to Southeast Asia" became another possible path.

3. Self-combed Women Going to Southeast Asia

3.1 Migration Routes and Historical Context

The migration path of the self-combed women from the Pearl River Delta to Southeast Asia can be roughly divided into several stages and routes. First, most of them departed from towns with developed handicraft industries in

Guangdong Province, such as Shunde, Nanhai, Panyu, and Dongguan, particularly Shatou Village in Jun'an Town, Shunde. They transited through Guangzhou or ports at the Pearl River Estuary, then boarded ships to Hong Kong or sailed directly to Southeast Asia—primarily Singapore, Malaya (present-day Malaysia), and sometimes Thailand. Some first arrived in Hong Kong or Macau before traveling to Southeast Asia.^[8] The migration period was concentrated between the early 20th century and the 1930s. With the changes in local industries and the impact of global economic situations such as the Great Depression, this migration wave became increasingly larger.

The migration of self-combed women to Southeast Asia was related to multiple social backgrounds, among which economic factors, favorable policies and local social structure restrictions were the main reasons. The sericulture and silk reeling industry in the Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong was very prosperous in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China. From the late Qing Dynasty to the early Republic of China, the sericulture and silk reeling industry in the Pearl River Delta, especially in Shunde, Panyu and Nanhai, was extremely prosperous.

However, with the changes of the times, these handicraft industries began to be impacted in the early 20th century: international market price fluctuations, rising raw material costs, competition from foreign silk and man-made fiber products, changes in transportation and port systems that increased export and trade costs, and rising domestic labor costs and management costs.^[6] All these led to a gradual reduction in the number of jobs in the silk reeling industry and related female workers, a decline in income, and the local female workers faced unemployment or unstable income. The economic downturn forced some female workers to seek new ways out, and Southeast Asian countries with high demand for cheap labor in industries such as housekeeping and textiles became their preferred choice.

The self-combed women in Southeast Asia not only sent money back home to support their families, but also established mutual support women's communities overseas. Chinese employers or overseas Chinese networks usually provide introductions, recruitment or intermediaries. Many women went there through the help of relatives or friends or agents, and worked for the same employer for a long time, and even had relatives and friends help them perform self-combing ceremonies overseas.^[7] The language, culture and fellow-township relations between the Pearl River Delta and overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia also facilitated the migration of women. This shows that the transnational migration of self-combed women was not an isolated act, but a collective practice under the combined effect of local economic recession and the social support system of overseas Chinese hometowns.

3.2 Case Study: The Life and Role of Ouyang Huanyan

In this migration wave, the case of Ouyang Huanyan is representative. Ouyang Huanyan was born in a poor farming family in Jun'an, Shunde, Guangdong. Her father died early, and only six of the nine children in the family survived.^[9] Affected by the family's financial difficulties, she took on housework and helped make a living since she was a child. At the age of 14, she went to Singapore to work with her cousin. Her twin sisters Ouyang Huanrong and Ouyang Huansong also went abroad to do housework for wealthy Chinese families there.^[9]

This phenomenon of "self-combing women" was quite common in Guangdong in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China. Its formation had a profound social background: influenced by traditional patriarchal culture and family system, women often had low status after marriage and suffered restrictions or abuse from their husband's family. At the same time, polygamy was prevalent, so if unmarried women chose to marry, they might face long-term inequality in life and status in the future. Faced with this reality, some women choose to remain single for life and symbolically break the shackles of marriage through the "self-combing" ceremony to protect their dignity and economic independence.^[9]

After arriving in Southeast Asia, Ouyang Huanyan worked as a housekeeper in Tan Kah Kee's family. She was known for her diligence and prudence, and was responsible for daily housework and taking care of the young girls in the family.^[9] During the Anti-Japanese War, the Chen family planned to flee to Chongqing. She refused to go with them, but still took on the responsibility of protecting the children. This experience highlights the trust and stability of the social role that self-combed women gained in overseas families.^[1] The long-term labor and cross-cultural environment in the context of war honed her adaptability, enabling her to maintain cultural ties with her hometown in a foreign country, and at the same time demonstrated the important role of women in the overseas labor market. Subsequently, Ouyang Huanyan entered the Lee Kuan Yew family and was initially responsible for chores such as laundry and grocery shopping. As the demographic structure of her employer's family changed, her labor role gradually shifted to childcare, thus gaining a relatively stable family status and becoming an indispensable quasi-member of the family. During her long-term work, she not only mastered skills such as cooking and housekeeping, but also adapted to the multicultural life of Nanyang, including eating habits, language communication and cross-cultural etiquette. She established a deep emotional connection with the Lee Kuan Yew family, especially with

Lee Weiling, the daughter of the Lee family. This reflects the stable social role and emotional bond that the self-combed women have formed in overseas families. Her 40-year service in the Lee family not only witnessed the social and political changes in Singapore, but also reflected the social value of women in transnational migration and domestic labor.^[9]

Ouyang Huanyan's experience has significant similarities with other self-combed women who went to Southeast Asia: they achieved economic independence through transnational migration, accumulated skills in domestic labor, and formed a mutual assistance community of women^[9]. For example, they often recommended new female workers to employers through older and more experienced self-combed women, forming a "grandmother" and "sister" type of mutual assistance network, which not only ensured labor safety but also continued cultural identity. However, her case also showed its uniqueness and historical value: as a long-term maid employed by Lee Kuan Yew's family, she was directly involved in family education and daily life management, and witnessed and influenced the growth of a generation of Singaporean leaders. This case provides a unique case for studying the transnational migration of self-combed women, women's labor, social status and cultural identity.^[9]

Her story shows that in a specific historical context, women can achieve economic independence and improve their social status to a certain extent through transnational labor migration, while establishing cross-regional and cross-cultural community connections.

3.3 Gender, Resistance, and Transnational Identity

Gender Analysis of the Transnational Mobility of Self-combed Women The historical experience of self-combed women going to Southeast Asia is not only a part of economic migration or labor history, but also an important case for gender history analysis. In *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis*, Joan Scott proposed that gender is both a symbolic system and an organizing principle of social power relations.^[10] From this perspective, the transnational mobility of self-combed women not only reveals how women adopt strategic practices under the discipline of traditional patriarchy, but also shows how women can be more independent and adaptable. They engaged in a complex process of reconstructing gender roles within the colonial labor market and the diaspora society. During transnational migration, the "unmarried" status of the self-combed women became a "passport" to the labor market. Within the overseas Chinese community, they were viewed as "clean and efficient" laborers without

family burdens, better suited to long-term service to their employers' families. This identity provided women with stable employment opportunities and the possibility of transnational migration, but it also further deepened their ties with their original families and traditional marriage. For example, Ouyang Huanyan's long-term employment with the Lee Kuan Yew family not only freed her from the constraints of her impoverished family in her hometown but also secured a stable social role spanning four decades. The stability of this social role, reflected in the combination of "unmarried status" and "long-term employment," embodies the gendered positioning of women in transnational migration: they were defined as female laborers capable of "wholehearted service." This positioning encompassed both active choices and passive structural constraints.

However, migration did not necessarily entail a one-dimensional discipline. Through labor and mutual aid networks abroad, self-combed women created new social spaces, gradually forming transnational female communities. These communities often took the form of "Gupowu," where women who had combed their hair lived together, supported each other, or established stable labor chains through referrals from fellow townspeople, thereby gaining a sense of belonging and cultural identity in a foreign land. This networked community not only provided practical support but also served as a crucial venue for cultural transmission. For example, many women who had combed their hair continued to maintain Cantonese cuisine and festival customs in their employers' homes, passing on this culture while raising their employers' children. The deep emotional connection between Ouyang Huanyan and Li Weiling is a striking example of how women who had combed their hair not only supported their families as laborers but also served as cultural intermediaries, perpetuating the lifestyle and cultural values of their homeland within transnational families. Thus, the transnational practices of women who had combed their hair were not merely a means of making a living but also a crucial means of maintaining cultural identity and establishing new community relationships. This dimension made them not only laborers but also agents of cross-cultural exchange.

The act of combing one's hair itself can be seen as a form of women's resistance to the traditional marriage system in a patriarchal society. Through rituals, women who had combed their hair symbolically rejected marriage and "withdrew" from the marital bonds arranged by their patriarchal families. This "withdrawal" is not entirely a voluntary choice, but a compromise between economic difficulties, clan responsibility and personal struggles. Therefore, before migrating, the self-combing women already possessed certain characteristics of "gender mar-

ginal people”: they neither entered into marriage nor fully conformed to the traditional social roles of “wife” and “mother” for women. Instead, they sought a new balance between economic independence and family responsibilities. It is worth noting that not all self-combing women make their own choices. Many were forced to comb their hair because of the needs of their family livelihood or clan customs. Since most women in Guangdong villages in the early 20th century were uneducated “housewives”, in some places, more women combed their hair because of their parents’ orders than those who chose to do so themselves. For example, Zhang Yinxiao from Lingxi Village recalled that when she was 21 or 22 years old, many people came to her house to ask for marriage, but her father rejected them all on the grounds that “no one would take care of her if she got married”, which caused her to feel resentful for the rest of her life.^[7] Many women also regretted not getting married and having children in their later years because they lacked offspring to take care of them. This shows that self-combing involves both the initiative of resisting patriarchy and the passivity of family responsibilities.

In fact, this behavior of women breaking away from their traditional identities is not limited to southern China. Similar practices of “rejecting marriage” also exist in other societies. The “Sworn Virgins” in the Balkan Mountains (Montenegro and northern Albania) are an important example.^[11] Under this system, women are mostly determined by their families or voluntarily swear to remain chaste, thereby changing their social roles and becoming social men.^[11] The external sign of this change is wearing men’s clothes completely or at least partially. These girls and women not only dress masculine, but also behave like men, obtain male roles and status, participate in public life, move freely, and win respect that is exclusive to men in a patriarchal society. Sworn virgins can inherit property and family blood feuds; they can do all kinds of work that only men can do; they are allowed to drink, smoke, curse, carry weapons and participate in wars, and even become family leaders.^[11] The practice of sworn virginity is also closely related to the long-standing blood feud culture in the Balkans. Under the blood feud system, women are usually considered “half-lives” and their death is not equivalent to a man’s “full life” in the calculation of blood feuds. Therefore, a family may choose to make a woman a sworn virgin to ensure that she is considered “full-life” in blood feuds, thereby safeguarding the family’s honor and rights. The social norms of the time strictly regulated the behavior of men and women, but at the same time, this extreme patriarchy and institutional rigidity, which was reflected in the fact that women could not move freely or make decisions independently, also gave rise to a solution

- women could dress like men and become men without losing their female identity. In other words, it was easier for women to change their gender than to ignore social norms, because the latter might affect the power relationship structure within the community.^[11]

Although the two “non-marriage” strategies differed in different historical contexts, their behavior can be seen as anti-patriarchy and a certain awakening of female consciousness. Both groups sought to escape patriarchal arrangements by refusing marriage: the self-combed women retained their female identity, reshaping their social status through transnational migration and economic independence in the labor market; the “sworn virgins” abandoned their female identity and assumed male roles to gain village community recognition and family inheritance rights. However, from the perspective of women’s awakening, these approaches each had their limitations. The self-combed women’s “non-marriage” allowed them to gain employment opportunities, but also locked them into long-term roles of service; while the vowed virgins achieved relative equality with men, this came at the cost of their female identity. Neither group fundamentally altered women’s social status.

The two groups also differed in their spatial and social organizational structures: the self-combed women’s “non-marriage” was closely linked to transnational mobility, allowing them to enter colonial economies and form large overseas female communities; whereas the vowed virgins remained almost entirely within the village community, maintaining family continuity through “gender transgression.” The former demonstrates how women reshape themselves through global capitalism and diaspora networks, while the latter illustrates a gendered strategy of sacrificing individuals for family honor within a closed society. While neither choice is entirely driven by personal will, both represent a weak yet resolute act of resistance by women born within patriarchy.

4. Conclusion

The migration practices of self-combed women are both a strategic response to the traditional patriarchal marriage system and a means for them to achieve economic independence. Within the diaspora community, their “unmarried” status garners greater trust from employers and serves as a passport to the labor market. Unlike the Balkan “sworn virgins” who swore an oath to change their gender roles, the self-combed women retain their female identity but achieve a relatively independent social status through overseas labor. This strategy inherently reveals their reconstruction of gender and family roles—neither conforming to the traditional roles of “wife” and

“mother” nor expanding their living spaces by supporting their families and achieving economic independence. As the literature indicates, the self-combed women generally sought a living abroad, rejected arranged marriages, and formed female mutual support networks in transnational life, demonstrating their tenuous but resolute resistance to patriarchy and their pursuit of autonomy.

The case of Ouyang Huanyan confirms multiple aspects of this conclusion. Her experience demonstrates that despite decades away from her homeland, she retained traces of Southeast Asian life, such as her dietary habits and language skills, upon returning. During her time as an employee of the Li family, her role transcended employment, becoming both a family member and an emotional link within the overseas Chinese family. Micro-details of her time in the Li family, such as being respectfully addressed as “Gu Tai” rather than “outsider,” demonstrate the gradual social recognition of self-combed women within the overseas Chinese community. This case vividly demonstrates that self-combed women were not only transnational laborers but also crucial participants in the gender order and cultural heritage of overseas Chinese society.

In summary, the transnational migration of self-combed women reflects the complex interweaving of women’s pursuit of autonomy and family responsibilities within patriarchal traditions. Their work and life in foreign countries not only changed the fate of individuals and families, but also helped to shape the family structure and cultural atmosphere of overseas Chinese communities. These experiences reveal gender and immigration dynamics in the overseas Chinese community in the 20th century from a micro perspective, and provide valuable perspectives and materials for the study of modern Chinese women’s history and global Chinese immigration history.

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