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THE FABRICATION OF GOOD GOVERNMENT: IMAGES OF SILK  
PRODUCTION IN SOUTHERN SONG (1127-1279) AND YUAN (1279-1368)  
CHINA<sup>1</sup>

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In China, *Gengzhi Tu* or the *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* as a distinct and separate genre was inaugurated in 1145 by Lou Shou, an official in the Southern Song bureaucracy.<sup>2</sup> In that year he gave a set of two scrolls of poems and paintings to Emperor Gaozong. One was on the topic of cultivating rice and the other on the weaving of silk fabric. These scrolls formed a suite. The imagery and poetry, consisting of a breakdown of the procedures of production in a step by step manner, must be understood in their official context. The circumstances of Emperor Gaozong's court at that time were rather dire. The year 1145 represents a mere eighteen years since Emperor Gaozong managed to create a semblance of a government in southern China. The Northern Song had fallen prey to invaders who swept down from Manchuria. Emperor Gaozong's brother, Emperor Huizong, and other members of his family were taken captive in 1126. Emperor Gaozong fled south into exile in an attempt to continue the reign of the Zhao house, even if it were in a rump China.

In the years from 1127 to 1145, Emperor Gaozong had shakily consolidated his power. He initiated his Southern Song regime in the capital Linan in 1138, situated in modern Hangzhou.<sup>3</sup> These years were troubled by high taxation and high inflation of food and commodities, including silk and rice. In addition, as thousands of people fled from the north to the lesser industrially developed south, the infrastructure was insufficient and a shortage of commodities fueled the rampant inflation.<sup>4</sup> There were government policies to promote the development of sericulture to pay for the costs of the new government as well as to pay for peacekeeping tribute for the invaders. In view of such straightened economic conditions, Emperor Gaozong had a formidable task to present himself as the only valid alternative to the northern invaders, while he maneuvered to sustain claims to continue the Song lineage.

Lou Shou entered this arena in 1145 with his gift of the two scrolls. They in effect provide a poetic and pictorial space to present a fictive peaceful and normative substitute for a highly sensitive issue. The taxation of the people in the form of the products of their labor, although a new genre in art, was a topic that had a long history in political discussions. Prior to the fall of the Northern Song, officials in the bureaucracy were concerned with the most humane yet profitable policies to manage the labor of those who worked the loom and soil. Wang Anshi, one such powerful official, saw raising revenue as the primary function of government.<sup>5</sup> He promoted government monopolies and supported government intervention in all economic activities. Those who opposed him argued he did this at the expense of the welfare of the people. Opponents who were followers of Fan Zhongyan, contended policies established by Wang Anshi were exploitative and inhumane.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that both Fan Zhongyan and Wang Anshi were interested in the government's responsibility to the common man in providing economic, moral and educational advancement, yet Fan Zhongyan argued the government

should only minimally interfere with the people. He preferred a stronger role for local governance and wanted local leaders to maintain civic responsibility over the community. He himself provided a concrete model for such endeavors, through the creation of his charitable estate. This estate, ideally self-sufficient, would provide money or grain to poorer members in the Fan household or in the local community to ensure that no one go hungry or be denied access to education. On the other hand, Wang Anshi's policies established regulatory structures on the local level, which did not explicitly promote social welfare.<sup>7</sup>

This historic background is a way to see the *Pictures of Weaving* as something more than a visual primer for advanced techniques of silk production. Until the present, the paintings have been assumed to be a didactic medium for the presentation of an instruction manual or as images of daily life. Some writers, not understanding their context, have seen them as educational propaganda.<sup>8</sup> This paper challenges these assessments. Lou Shou's nephew, Lou Yue, recorded his uncle did more than paint the laboring people.<sup>9</sup> He, too, established a charitable trust, based on the example provided by Fan Zhongyan. Lou Yue claimed that his uncle created a charitable estate and comparing it in a depreciative manner wrote, "Although it [the estate] does not equal that of Wenzheng [that is Fan Zhongyan], in the cold the poor ones of the clan have something to depend on for support."<sup>10</sup> He also wrote that because his uncle was concerned for the welfare and the suffering of the people, he had the *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* made. The paintings in conjunction with their presentation to Emperor Gaozong can be seen as a visual and poetic argument for a type of governance of the common people based on the ideals of Fan Zhongyan. The paintings offer advice, not only on how to gain greater harvests from the silkworms, but on how to govern properly.

One scroll of the *Pictures of Weaving*, which is also simply titled *Sericulture*, painted by Cheng Qi in the Freer Gallery, Washington DC, is considered to be the closest version in form and content to Lou Shou's original conception.<sup>11</sup> This scroll is dated to around 1350.<sup>12</sup> Lou Shou's scrolls were extremely popular and as they were copied numerous times, the originals are now lost. As they have comedown to the present, the scrolls depict approximately one year of labor. Each step of the production of silk is arranged in a linear fashion within a seasonal sequence. Handscrolls are a type of painting that are unrolled from left to right, and are opened to a length that equals about one or two feet or whatever feels comfortable to the viewer who holds it. For the Cheng Qi scroll, the viewer would probably look at one or two steps at a time. The painting begins in spring with the washing of the silkworm eggs to stimulate birth and ends with winter approaching and women weaving cloth. This paper will examine four procedures, their images and poems in order to investigate associations that they incorporate.

First a few preliminary remarks are needed. Each step in the Cheng Qi scroll has two passages of poetry. For example, in the "Reeling Silk" portion (fig. 1a), the poem written in cursive script, above the girl's head is an intrusive eighteenth century poem and is not addressed in this essay.<sup>13</sup> The other poem to the right of the girl is presumed to be related to Lou Shou's poetry. In the Lou Shou poems, there are two sets of characters. The larger is in an archaic script, and antiquates the characters in a way that is similar to the manner in which the Old English script traditionalizes signs in our own time. The smaller characters are the modern, that is fourteenth century standard script, which renders the poems legible to a wider audience.

The “Reeling Silk” step is number sixteen in the scroll. In the architecturally framed vignette, a woman labors at the reeling machine. This is the point in which each silk cocoon is de-gummed and filament by filament unwound onto a spool. The significance of this particular scene is that it displays a Song dynasty technological advancement.<sup>14</sup> In addition to unreeling the silk filaments, the machine takes several cocoon fibers up to the spool and twists them together to form yarn. This was a development that saved much labor and time. Next to the woman at the machine stands a younger girl, who with basket in hand, is ready to drop additional cocoons into the boiling pot. Behind her, a large container is full of cocoons, suggesting an abundant harvest, while skeins of silk yarn hang from the rafters, indicating the industriousness of the workers. It is easy to see this painting as an image that documents the working of a specific machine. It certainly does this. The poem, however, provides a fuller range of associations for this activity. It reads as<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the village, the sweet fragrance of cooking cocoons;  
Which families’ girls have taken on this task?  
The charm of the brimming pot fills the kitchen;  
Pat, pat, hands check the boiling water.

From above the pot, the color looks right;  
Turn the roller, how the yarn is long.  
Around evening, they get a short rest;  
The chatter of the working girls floats over neighbors’ walls.

As in the painting, the poem emphasizes prosperity. The fragrance of the cocoons is sweet and pervasive, the pot brims with cocoons, and the yarn is long. Leaving aside the question regarding which families’ girls do this work for the moment, the poem addresses the idea that the girls get a break from the task in order to engage in chit-chat that circumvents walls. The underlying message of the image with the poem, in this case, is to indicate that the reeling device allows for the task to be done in a manner that permits rest. The girls are not so overworked that they cannot talk with each other at day’s end. Technological advances are seen as a means to provide for the benefit of the workers. They are part of a neighborly community that walls do not obstruct.

Proceeding to step eighteen of the scroll, the family offers thanks to the Silkworm Goddess (fig. 1b). Mother and daughter look on reverently as the father and son bow to an image in a hanging scroll painting. In front there is an altar set up with ample amounts of silk yarn, food and drink. The trunks to the side hint to future surplus, as they will store any extra cloth. The poem is as follows

Before spring, the silkworm markets are started up;  
The labors that have flourished have been delivered to western Sichuan.  
This region is blessed by the Goddess of the Silkworm;  
Again we offer thanks, the harvest of silk is abundant.

Leather wraps creamy-white skin;  
We have not shamed the able spirits.  
Although the future is always uncertain;  
Sharing with the people brings blessings.

The first two couplets are concerned with the relationship between a benevolent goddess and those who receive her favor. The image in the painting, would, given the poem, appear to be the Silkworm Goddess, who is a mythical figure and may be referred to as the First Sericulturist. The painting, however, does not seem to be a typical representation of her.<sup>16</sup> As she has bestowed a profitable harvest to the family, they offer gratitude. In the second half of the poem, the reference to leather wrapping skin is a way to honor, in the form of last rites, those who have died on the battlefield.<sup>17</sup> Their souls are at rest. The poem brings together at least three seemingly disparate ideas. The Silkworm Goddess provides for those who work hard and are grateful, the proper honoring of the dead soothes their spirits and finally, the act of sharing with the people brings merit. This is a subtle way to argue for charity. It assumes a cosmologically directed ordinance. Just as the goddess gives to those who are in need, the living take care of the spirits of the dead, and prosperous folk share with people who are less fortunate. In all these cases, the poem indicates that the recipients of the benevolent acts are grateful and at peace. This is an argument for the reader of this poem to consider the advantages that result from acts of charity. Welfare cultivates stability. This is very much in keeping with the ideas embodied in Fan Zhongyan's charitable estates. Community leaders should, in times of distress, provide for those neighbors who are lacking.<sup>18</sup>

In another step, the preparation of the warp threads, three women of varying ages arrange the spools of silk thread in a warp frame (fig.1c). Two women wind the long rows of thread onto a large roller that is weighted down by a rock. The other woman toward the back keeps the individual threads in an orderly arrangement with her pole. The poem that accompanies this step is particularly significant, as the arrangement of warp threads has a metaphoric association with the running of state.<sup>19</sup> The poem is

The threads of silk are numerous;  
 (Yet) a qualified ruler manages it well.  
 Black shoes do not stir the dust;  
 Slowly stepping, crossing back and forth.

So tangled in care, concentration is lost;  
 So lost in love, your head is again turned.  
 The monarch's words truly are like silk;  
 Also giving to those who are skilled at matters of state.

In the first half of the poem, the activities of the good ruler are compared to the skill of the women who arrange the warp. As they slowly step, crossing back and forth like a shuttle, they do not stir up dust. Dust has specific Daoist associations with dirtiness of the world, or corruption. In this case, the ruler is honest, and is able to manage the preparation of the warp, which is to say, the affairs of state. In the second half of the poem, a warning is given. Just like the silk weaver, if the ruler is distracted, the work becomes tangled. The word for tangle, likewise, is a metaphor for social disorder.<sup>20</sup> The words of the monarch are like the arrangement of silk yarn in fabric. He provides order, but only if he is responsible, carefully deliberating his actions. In addition to slowly stepping, he gives to those who are skilled at matters of running the state. These would

be the bureaucratic officials. The monarch is to determine which of his officers are adept at administrative tasks and grant promotions or reward them with special duties.

Fan Zhongyan argued that the officials were to serve society, not their own individual, petty interests.<sup>21</sup> This poem acknowledges an arrangement in society in which the government, that has provided weavers with the stability to be prosperous and produce silk, receives it from them in the form of taxes. During the Song, part of an official's salary was paid in silk. The last couplet in the poem is in a form of a pun or double entendre. It could also be understood as "The monarch's words truly are like silk; he also pays talented and learned men." In this case, the talented and learned men are the officials who are good at statesmanship. Fan Zhongyan placed great significance on the officials. He had claimed "To rule the empire, administrators and prefects are the most important officials."<sup>22</sup>

The final poem considered in this paper is very next step (fig. 1d). Two strands of silk yarn are twisted together with the use of a wheel to make the weft. This vignette is given a smaller space in the scroll and is very nearly in the same room of the weaving of fabric. The poem reads as

Soak the weft, give it to the weaver;  
In the chilly air, a maiden with her hair in two coils.  
Lovingly marries threads of silk into one;  
Inventing an endless medley of designs.

Working in water, her hands smooth and white like bamboo shoots;  
She turns her wheel as the moon sinks.  
In society, little Rose;  
In the sky above, thunder's wheels rumble and roll.

This poem is about the passing of the weft threads to the weaver who will weave them into the warp threads to make fabric. At the same time, it is about the passage of a young maiden, Rose, into the state of marriage. As we may recall, in the first poem, the question was asked, "Which families girls take up this task?" The scroll, in addition to showing the production of fabric throughout the year, also displays the development of females in their ability to master the skills as they grow up. In the early stages of the scroll, little girls sleep in the room where the baby silkworms molt. As the viewer progresses through the scroll, the child matures into a young woman who is capable of weaving, a labor one's wife performs. In the weft poem, the maiden's hair, now in two coils, after marriage will be fashioned into one.<sup>23</sup> As she gathers the yarn to make the thicker weft thread, she too will fit into the pattern of marriage. A hard worker, Rose is given a name. She is identified as a young woman, who is an integral part of society.

Several themes not intrinsically related to the production of silk are incorporated into these poems. The poems, though they make references to the equipment used and the benefits derived from it, are not merely about the technology. There is no "Ode to the Loom." The four images and their accompanying poems illustrate the relationship among advances in technology, the welfare of the people, civic-minded responsibility and proper governance. Issues that had been and still were being discussed by the officials in the Southern Song. A follower of Wang Anshi was the major chief councilor during the

Southern Song restoration until 1155.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, that did not prevent Emperor Gaozong from enjoying the scrolls presented to him by Lou Shou in 1145. He had several copies of the scrolls made, which were given to other officials.<sup>25</sup> The scroll became, as it probably was intended, a primer for sericulture techniques that would increase productivity within a larger mission of the promotion of responsible government. Its targeted audience was not the weavers, but the officials who administered policies on the local level. Fan Zhongyan contended it was precisely these local officials who were in a position to “spare the people from suffering.”<sup>26</sup>

The *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* need to be considered in their original context. The paintings at their inception were a philosophical argument, complete with factual observations of the life and living habits of the people in a prosperous community, and should not be limited to genre or technical painting. Lou Shou presented the scrolls as a reminder of a system in which the government should be responsible for the welfare of its citizenry. The policies advocated by Fan Zhongyan were offered as a means to efficiently and humanely achieve this goal. It argued for benevolence toward folks less fortunate and for the need of the Emperor to be responsible.

Emperor Gaozong on some level appeared to appreciate the gesture from Lou Shou. He publicly endorsed it in his actions. After re-establishing the ceremony of offering gratitude to the Silkworm Goddess in 1145,<sup>27</sup> he devoted two plots of his residential palace to personally monitor the harvests of rice and silk.<sup>28</sup> This is not to suggest Emperor Gaozong personally hoed the field while the Empress wove silk. Rather it underscores the necessity of the appearance of a concern for the welfare of the people and an awareness of harvest conditions. Given the political discussion of the government’s role to provide for the people, he strove to acknowledge this responsibility in a public manner. The people and officials then would be more inclined to support his claims to sovereignty in these early years of his reign. In such terse circumstances, it is not surprising that in 1234, an art theorist recognized the *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving* as one of the thirteen major subjects in art.<sup>29</sup> The popularity of the subject indicates the deeply charged significance both the Emperor and the officials attached to the activity of weaving.

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<sup>2</sup> Zhu Xinyu, ed. *Zhejiang Sichou Shi (A History of the Silk Production of Zhejiang)*, Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe, 1984, p.34.

<sup>3</sup> Julia Murray, *Ma Hezhi and the Illustration of the Book of Odes*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.10-11.

<sup>4</sup> Quan Hansheng, “*Nan Song Chunian Wujia de Da Biandong (The Great Shift in Prices in the Southern Song)*” in *Zhongguo Jingji Shi Luncong (Discussions on Chinese Economic History)*, Hong Kong: Xinya Yanjiu Suo, 1972, p. 235-263.

<sup>5</sup> I base my following discussion of the political ideologies from three sources. Peter K. Bol, “*This Culture of Ours*”: *Intellectual Transitions in T’ang and Sung China*, Stanford: Stanford University

Press, 1992, particularly pages 213-253; James T.C. Liu, *Reform in Sung China: Wang An-shih (1021-1086) and his New Policies*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959; and James T.C. Liu's article "An Early Sung Reformer: Fan Chung-yen" in John K. Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1957, pp. 105-131.

<sup>6</sup> Liu, *Wang An-shih*, p. 103-105.

<sup>7</sup> For an interesting document addressing Wang Anshi's regulatory system, *baojia*, or 'mutual responsibility' and the difficulties officials had in enforcing it, see Patricia Ebrey, *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, New York: The Free Press, 1993, p. 186-187.

<sup>8</sup> Wu Hung briefly characterizes the scrolls as "instructive or propaganda texts" within a courtly context, and does not consider any bureaucratic associations of government reformation. I contend this reformative aspect, which could be construed as propaganda, should be seen as critical of irresponsible government. See Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> See Linda K. Walton, "Kinship, Marriage and Status in Sung China," *Journal of Asian History*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1984, pp. 35-77.

<sup>10</sup> See Lou Yue, *Gongkui Ji* (Congshu Jicheng edition), 60.808; as quoted by Linda K. Walton, *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Cheng Weiji, (chief compiler), *History of Textile Technology of Ancient China*, (trans. Gao Guopei et al.), New York: Science Press, 1992, p. 458 and Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), vol. IV, part II, 1965, pp. 166-169.

<sup>12</sup> This date, which is beyond the scope of this paper, needs to be reconsidered. Within the painting, there are stylistic references that indicate a later date, such as the head to body proportions, the highly reductive detailing in the brushstrokes.

<sup>13</sup> For a historical discussion of the various components of the *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving*, see Paul Pelliot, "A Propos du *Keng tche t'ou*," in *Memoires concernant l'Asie orientale*, vol. 1, 1913, p. 65-122, and Needham as in note 11.

<sup>14</sup> Angela Sheng, "Textile Use, Technology and Change in Rural Textile Production in Song, China (960-1279)," University of Pennsylvania dissertation, 1990, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International photocopy, pp. 35-37.

<sup>15</sup> At this point in my research, I present the translations of these poems as work in progress. I do not feel that I have exhausted all the references in the poems, yet I contend enough is evident to sustain the main point of my thesis. The content of the poems is an endorsement of the ideas of Fan Zhongyan.

<sup>16</sup> Dieter Kuhn in "Tracing a Legend: In Search of the Identity of the 'First Sericulturalist'," in *T'oung Pao*, LXX, 1984, Livre 4/5, pp. 213-245, provides images of the Silkworm Goddess, which differ significantly from the image in the hanging scroll. He does, however, indicate that the Silkworm Goddess may have had alternative variants in popular culture. More research is needed regarding the image in the painting.

<sup>17</sup> I acknowledge this may be a conjecture on my part, yet I base this association on the phrase 'leather wraps creamy-white skin' which would have called to mind the phrase 'leather wraps corpses' from *The Book of the Latter Han*. For this reference, consult *Ci Yuan (The Origin of Words)*, Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshu Guan, vol. II, 1989, p. 3449. The battlefield would be an appropriate connection, because during the Southern Song, there were constant skirmishes at the borders in efforts to check advances of the northern invaders.

<sup>18</sup> See Liu, "Fan Chung-yen," p. 112.

<sup>19</sup> See reference in *Ci Hai Xubian (Supplement to the Sea of Words)*, Taipei: Taiwan Zhongguo Shuju, 1974 ed., p. 3450.

<sup>20</sup> For anarchist connotations of tangle, consult *Ci Hai Xubian*, p.191, as in note 19. I realize this poem has extremely rich associations, that I briefly touch upon. In part this is due to constraints of space, as well as a need to conduct further research. I am particularly indebted to Martin Powers for the translation of this poem.

<sup>21</sup> Bol, pp. 168, 170.

<sup>22</sup> Liu, "Fan Chung-yen," p. 116.

<sup>23</sup> This association is supported by visual evidence in several Song paintings where the younger women have their hair in two coils and the older ones have one. Nonetheless, issues of social status and class distinctions may also inform the hair-styles of women and young maidens. More research is needed on this point.

<sup>24</sup> Bol, p. 214.



<sup>25</sup> James F. Cahill, "Political Themes in Chinese Painting," in *Three Alternative Histories of Chinese Painting*, Lawrence: Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1988, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> Liu, "Fan Chung-yen," p. 116.

<sup>27</sup> Dieter Kuhn, p. 224.

<sup>28</sup> Gong Weiai, "Imperial Policy and National Finance: The Role of Hsiao-tsung in the Consolidation of Southern Sung Finance," in *Guoji Songshi Yantao Hui Lunwenji (International Conference on Song History)*, Taipei: Zhongguo Wenhua Shixue Yanjiu Suo, 1988, p. 144.

<sup>29</sup> Ho Wai-kam in "Aspects of Chinese Painting from 1100 to 1350," in *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting: The Collections of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and The Cleveland Museum of Art*, Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1980, pp.xxv-xxxiv, p. xxvi.

#### Chinese Character List

Cheng Qi 程棨

Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹

Gaozong 高宗

Gengzhitu 耕織圖

Hangzhou 杭州

Huizong 徽宗

Linan 臨安

Lou Shou 樓璘

Lou Yue 樓鑰

Sichuan 四川

Song 宋

Wang Anshi 王安石

Yuan 元

Zhao 趙

Figure 1a: Reeling Silk

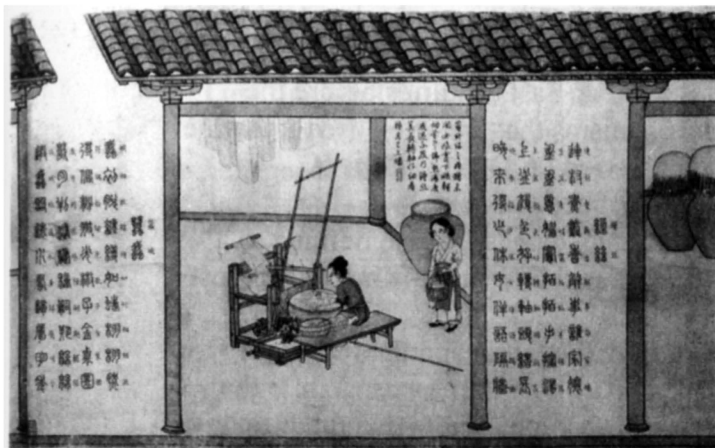


Figure 1b: Offering Thanks



Figure 1c: Preparing the Warp

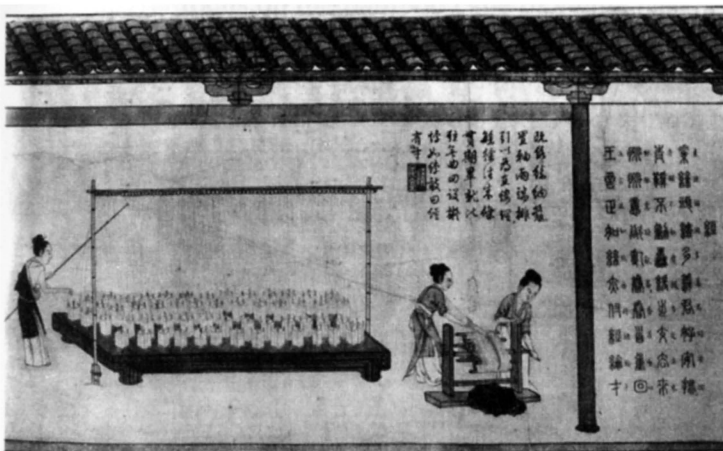


Figure 1d: Twisting the Weft



Cheng Qi, attribution, Details from *Sericulture* handscroll, circa 1350, Washington, DC.: Freer Gallery of Art.