CHAPTER SEVEN

Modernizing Sex, Sexing Modernity: Prostitution in Early-Twentieth-Century Shanghai

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In early-twentieth-century Shanghai, prostitution was variously understood as a source of urbanized pleasures, a profession full of unscrupulous and greedy schemers, a site of moral danger and physical disease, and a marker of national decay. It was also discussed as a painful economic choice on the part of women and their families, since it was sometimes the best or only income-producing activity available to women seeking employment in Shanghai. The categories through which prostitution was understood were not fixed, and tracing them requires attention to questions of urban history, colonial and anticolonial state making, and the intersection of sexuality, particularly female sexuality, with an emerging nationalist discourse. Prostitution is always about the sale of sexual services, but much more can be learned from that transaction: about sexual meanings, about other social relations, about sex as a medium through which people talked about political power and cultural transformation, about nationhood and cultural identity. In some respects, China’s modern debates about prostitution echoed those of Europe, where scholars such as Judith Walkowitz (England) and Alain Corbin (France) have traced the themes of medicalization and the desire to return prostitutes to an (imagined) safe family environment. In China, prostitution was also invoked in urgent public discussions about what kind of sex and gender relations could help to constitute a modern nation in a threatening semicolonial situation. What it meant (to participants and observers) for a woman in Shanghai to sell sexual services to a man changed across the hierarchy and over time, as understandings of prostitution were shaped, contested, renegotiated, and appropriated by many participants: the prostitutes, their madams, their patrons, their lovers and husbands, their natal families, their in-laws, the police, the courts, doctors, the city government, missionaries, social reformers, students, and revolutionaries. Studying pros-
stitution and its changes thus illuminates the thinking and social practices of many strata of Shanghai society. And since the debates about prostitution often took place in regional or national publications, such a study also suggests the contours of conflicts about gender and modernity in twentieth-century Chinese society.

From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Shanghai was a treaty port—a place where Westerners governed part of the city, and where Western and Japanese businessmen, sailors, industrialists, and adventurers made their homes and sometimes their fortunes. Shanghai was also China’s biggest industrial and commercial city, a magnet for merchants from around the country and for peasants of both sexes seeking work, and the birthplace of the Chinese Communist Party. Shanghai embraced populations from various nations, regions, and classes, and harbored political agitators ranging from Christian moral reformers to Marxist revolutionaries, all presided over by three different municipal governments (International Settlement, French Concession, and Chinese city).

Drawn mostly from the daughters and wives of the working poor and déclassé elites, prostitutes in Shanghai were near the bottom of both contemporary and retrospective hierarchies of class and gender. Yet their working and living situations, as well as their individual standing and visibility in Shanghai society, were strikingly diverse. Shanghai’s hierarchy of prostitution was structured by the class background of the customers, the native place of both customers and prostitutes, and the appearance and age of the prostitutes. The hierarchy changed dramatically over the first half of the twentieth century, as courtesan houses and streetwalkers alike faced competition from “modern” institutions such as tour guide agencies, massage parlors, and dance halls. Any account of prostitution in this period must track a variety of working situations across classes and over time.

Prostitution was not only a changing site of work for women but also a metaphor, a medium of articulation in which the city’s competing elites and emerging middle classes discussed their problems, fears, agendas, and visions. In the late nineteenth century, prostitutes appeared in elite discourse as the embodiment of sophisticated urbanity. By the 1940s, prostitutes served as a marker to distinguish respectable people, particularly the “petty urbanites,” from a newly threatening urban disorder. Every social class and gender grouping used prostitution as a different kind of reference point, and depending on where they were situated, it meant something different to them. The shifting and multiple meanings assigned to the prostitute demand that we move beyond transhistorical references to “the world’s oldest profession,” or dynasty-by-dynasty catalogues of written references to courtesans, and begin instead to historicize and localize sex work.

Across the century I am investigating here, the changing figure of the prostitute performed important ideological work in elite discussions, particularly as she was transformed into a victimized, disorderly, dangerous embodiment of social trouble. This transformation, and the regulatory regimes it generated, had multiple consequences for the daily lives, identities, and actions of Shanghai prostitutes (indeed, even helped to determine who was considered a prostitute). Changes in migration patterns and economic opportunities may have increased the number of prostitutes and the alarm over them. But changes in elite notions about the link between women’s status and national strength helped create the language through which a rise in prostitution acquired meaning—even gave it the modern term for prostitute, jinü (prostitute female), which displaced the earlier mingzi (famous prostitute). And the elite shaped the institutions which emerged to classify, reform, or regulate prostitution, all of which in turn became part of the material conditions of prostitutes’ lives. Shanghai prostitution is a rich venue in which to explore the interlocking of material and ideological changes, since neither can be regarded alone as determinative in the last instance of the conditions of prostitutes’ lives.

Although the sources delineate an elaborate hierarchy of prostitution, two representations of sex workers dominate the written record: the courtesan and the streetwalker. Courtesans appeared in nostalgic memoirs, guidebooks, and gossip newspapers as the “mosquito press” as named individuals with specified family origins, brothel affiliations, famous patrons, and career trajectories. This was a literature of pleasure, devoted to the appreciation of beautiful courtesans and the depiction, often in titillating detail, of their romantic liaisons with the city’s rich and powerful. This literature also contained warnings about the capacity of courtesans to engage in financial stratagizing at the expense of the customer.

Side by side with this literature of appreciation, the local news page of the mainstream dailies and the foreign press carried accounts of the activities of lower-class streetwalkers, who were portrayed as victims of kidnapping, human trafficking, and abuse by madams, as well as disturbers of urban peace and spreaders of venereal disease. Streetwalkers were sometimes identified in the press by name, age, and native place, but they appeared only as transient visitors of urban ordinances against soliciting. Initially, the two types of sex workers were seldom mentioned in a single context, although each embodied a set of dangers posed to and by women in an unstable urban environment. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, courtesans and streetwalkers came to share a wider variety of newly created discursive spaces: as shared objects of journalistic investigation, medical examination, reform, and regulation. In the process, the figure of the streetwalker loomed ever larger, supplanting the courtesan as the emblem of the sex trades.

This essay makes six approximations of Shanghai prostitution, drawn from guidebooks and the press in the first four decades of the twentieth century. “Approximations” is meant to suggest two things. First, each of these
portraits is rough around the edges, with inconsistencies left in rather than smoothed out, because each is drawn from sources that are being read both with and against the grain. In addition, some of these portraits overlapped and coexisted in time, and it is not only impossible but also undesirable to try to reconcile them and produce a single seamless account of Shanghai prostitution. The dissonances between them are arguably where the most interesting mapping can be done.

FIRST APPROXIMATION: THE URBANE COURTESAN

Among the richest sources on Shanghai prostitution are guidebooks, written by elite authors, devoted either wholly or in substantial part to descriptions of prostitution. The guidebooks have titles such as *Precious Mirror of Shanghai, A Sixty-Year History of the Shanghai Flower World, Pictures of the Hundred Beauties of Flowerland, A History of the Charm of the Gentle Village*, and, most colorful of all, *A Complete Look at Shanghai Philandering*, by an author who took the pseudonym "Half-Crazy One." These guidebooks offer a wealth of information about the operations of brothels, simultaneously providing clues to the anxieties and aspirations of the authors. They include biographies of famous prostitutes; anecdotes about famous customers; exhaustive glossaries of the specific language of the trade; meticulous descriptions of brothel organization; instructions on the proper behavior required of customers when a prostitute made a formal call, helped host a banquet, or presided over a gambling party; lists of fees, billing procedures, and tips; explanations of festivals and the obligations of a regular customer at each season; accounts of taboos and religious observances; and warnings about various scams run by prostitutes to relieve customers of extra cash. The guidebooks can be read in conjunction with the mosquito press, tabloid newspapers that typically devoted a page or more to gossip about courtesans.

Most guidebooks are engaged in a literature of nostalgia. Guidebooks written in the 1920s locate the golden age of prostitution a quarter to a half century earlier. In fact, several of the main guidebook authors explicitly say in their prefaces that they are recording the definitive historical account of a world about to disappear because of reform movements to abolish prostitution. One author even compares himself to the famous Han dynasty historians Ban Gu and Sima Qian. And, like classical historians of the Han and later, many of these authors reprint almost verbatim material from earlier guidebooks. Also like classical Chinese historians, many of these authors compare the current age unfavorably to the past. Just as historians frequently mourned the failure of contemporary rulers to measure up to the sagacious rulers of yore, guidebook authors deplored the decline in entertainment skill, refinement, and classical training of upper-class prostitutes.

This literature of nostalgia emerged in a time when urban China, and Shanghai in particular, was undergoing rapid and disquieting change. As many China historians from Joseph Levenson on have noted, the question "What is Chinese about China?" emerged as a serious and troubling one for members of the elite in the face of the Western assault in the nineteenth century. Part of their answer was to glorify vanishing Chinese cultural practices (now coded as relative rather than universal). And a part of that glorification was to explicate meticulously the cultivated and refined social practices of courtesans. The production of this literature peaked in the years immediately after national civil service exams were abolished in 1905—in short, in years when definition of membership in the elite, and the understanding of China's place in the world, were both in flux. Seldom mentioned in this literature, the West is nonetheless a kind of unspoken standard against which these authors produce an account of the world they have lost.

Although nostalgia for times past was a prominent theme in the guidebooks, their authors were not insensitive to the possibilities available in contemporary courtesan houses. Both guidebooks and mosquito newspapers offered catalogues of the pleasure, explicit and implied, to be found in the high-class brothels. Most obvious were the pleasures of the gaze and the ear: looking at and listening to beautiful, cultivated women, showcased in exquisitely appointed settings, who could sing, compose poetry, and converse with wit. One famous prostitute, whose professional name was Lin Daiyu—taken from the name of the heroine of the classical Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*—was described in an 1892 guidebook as "just like a begonia after the fresh rain . . . she really is very delicate and attractive." Descriptions of individual courtesans stressed their refinement and cultivation: a typical passage from one mosquito newspaper, the *Crystal*, read: "When guests leave, she burns a stick of incense, makes a cup of Longjing tea, and does watercolors." Another woman was described thus: "She reads a lot and writes well, and knows foreign languages and Shakespeare." Here the image of the courtesan looks both ways—to the literature of nostalgia and to the West. The courtesan is not only defined with reference to *Dream of the Red Chamber*, but also draws part of the repertoire of self-presentation—clothing, bodily stance, hobbies, markers of cultivation—from the West. Urgent conversations among Chinese elites about self-definition are refracted in representations of prostitution.

For the cultivated literati who patronized these houses, the pleasures of looking and listening were intimately related to the pleasures of skilled description and repartee among themselves. Many of the early guidebooks feature elegant poems written by customers in appreciation of courtesans. Perhaps the most intricate ritual of describing and judging was a series of
elections sponsored by the mosquito press, held irregularly from the 1880s to 1920. Local literati were invited to vote to enter the names of their favorite courtesans on the “flower roll,” a list which paralleled that of the successful candidates on the imperial civil service examinations. The woman who received the most votes, like the man whose exam received the highest grade, was called the zhuguan, and other titles were awarded as well. After the fall of the dynasty in 1911, the nomenclature was modernized, and leading courtesans were awarded titles such as “president,” “prime minister,” and “general” instead. In the testimonials which accompanied their votes, patrons marshaled their powers of eloquence to extol the virtues of their chosen favorite, in the process exhibiting their authorial skill to their fellow literati. Courtesans were willing to participate in the elections because they brought prestige to them as individuals and business to their houses.11

Any discussion of guidebooks and pleasures should point out that the books themselves offered pleasure. In a study of courtesan novels, a related genre, Stephen Cheng argued that readership in the twentieth century shifted from “literati interested in sentimental love stories” to “shopkeepers, merchants, and clerks who either frequent or are surreptitiously interested in the pleasure quarters.”12 I suspect that guidebook readership underwent a similar transformation, and that for the new urban classes part of the pleasure was in vicarious access to the lives of the rich and famous, patrons and courtesans alike, in deliciously gossipy detail. Reading the guidebooks and mosquito press was part of being “in the know” about who and what was important in Shanghai. Reading about courtesans as the epitome of urbanity was an activity that itself conferred urbanity.

The sections that described summoning a prostitute out on a social call, going to the courtesan house for tea, hosting a banquet, and celebrating festivals can be read as a kind of etiquette guide to correct behavior for the uninitiated guest. Correct behavior included but was not limited to the formal fulfillment of the financial duties already mentioned. It also included the ineffable art of self-presentation. A successful customer enjoyed two benefits: he increased his likelihood of winning a courtesan’s favor, and, equally important, he avoided ridicule by the group of courtesans who observed him at the brothel. Someone who failed to meet the requirements by not spending enough money or by spending too much money, by dressing inappropriately, by assuming intimacy too quickly—generally, by saying or doing the wrong thing—would be ridiculed, significantly, as a country bumpkin.13 If the courtesan embodied urban sophistication, then, the new customer went to the brothel not only in search of the pleasures described earlier but also to create and exhibit his own urbanity. In the rapidly changing Shanghai environment, positioning oneself favorably in the urban hierarchy, and being validated by both courtesans and other customers, was not merely a matter of entertainment.

SECOND APPROXIMATION: THE SCHEMING BUSINESSWOMAN

The guidebooks were also a repository for a vast and varied cautionary literature, in which the dangers enumerated ranged from the annoying to the deadly. Side by side with the loving and admiring descriptions of individual prostitutes were warnings that prostitutes had one purpose only: to relieve customers of their money. To this end, with and without the collusion of the brothel owner, they would perpetrate various scams. A woman might repeatedly claim to be a virgin in order to collect a defloration fee multiple times. Prostitutes of all ranks, customers were warned, were experts at what was called “the axe chop” (kan futou), requesting clothing or jewelry from a frequent customer.14 They were said to be as skillful in matching their requests to the customer’s resources as a doctor writing a prescription of exactly the appropriate strength. The prescription was “flavored” with “rice soup” (a slang term for flattery), tears, “vapor” (slang for jealousy), and sweet sugar syrup. One of the later guidebooks carries an illustration of a woman reclining under a quilt while a mustachioed man sits next to her on the bed. She is ticking off on her fingers items depicted in a cartoonlike balloon above her head: a fine house, a car, and a diamond ring.15

The hospitable and affectionate demeanor of such women, the guidebooks said, was only a cover for their calculating and deceptive nature, which was reflected in the terms by which they classified guests behind their backs. A “bean curd” guest, for instance, was one who would do the woman’s bidding. A “nut” guest needed one hard knock before he would “put out.” A “soap” guest or a “stone” guest needed time and energy, but would eventually yield something. The worst were “flea” and “fly” guests, who buzzed around the brothels but vanished as soon as one “swatted” them for contributions.16

In efforts to increase her “take,” the guidebooks said, a woman might practice the “bitter meat stratagem” (tovu ji) of pretending to be at odds with her madam. She would then beg the customer to buy her out and take her as a concubine.17 In fact, the whole procedure of buying a beautiful courtesan as a concubine, which one might expect to find in the litany of pleasures, seems to fall almost completely in the “danger” category. The guidebooks and mosquito papers explain that many courtesans aspired to marriage to a powerful man—or more accurately to concubinage. Principal wives were usually acquired for a man by his family on the basis of matched backgrounds and with the aim of enhancing family assets and status, and a courtesan could not contribute much on any of these counts. Concubines, by contrast, were usually picked by the men themselves with an eye to sex, romantic attraction, and good conversation, as well as the production of male heirs. But, surprisingly, women who made such a match did not settle down into a relatively secure life, but often stayed in a relationship just long
enough for the suitor-husband to clear their debts, pay them a “body price,” and equip them with jewels and other valuables. The process of marrying under these circumstances was called “taking a bath,” and one can find stories of famous courtesans, including Lin Daiyu, who “bathed” many times in the course of their long careers. Many of the women, impatient with the confinement and emotional discomfort of being a concubine, left their husbands and used their newly acquired resources to open their own establishments. When they chose sexual partners for love rather than material advantage, they were said to prefer actors or their own drivers to well-heeled literati and merchants. “They please customers for money,” wrote a 1917 guidebook, “but what they really like is actors.”

The exhaustive attention to scheming courtesans is perhaps best understood as a warning about the dangers of the urban environment, where some women were unconstrained by the financial and social controls of respectable marriage. Each of the schemes described in this literature centers on a moment when the prostitute slips beyond the control of the customer, taking his assets with her. Chinese writings did not always equate fidelity with marriage or disloyalty with prostitutes; novels and memoirs provide numerous accounts of both scheming wives and virtuous courtesans. But in the early twentieth century, the inability of a customer to secure the loyalty of a courtesan, even by becoming a regular patron or making her a concubine, signified an anxiety-provoking dissolution of conventional gender arrangements.

All of these stratagems, of course, can be read against the grain not as dangers but as possible points of negotiation or resistance on the part of the prostitutes, who tried to maximize both their income and their autonomy vis-à-vis madams as well as customers. “Axe-chop” income, for instance, went into the pocket of the courtesan, not the owner. When a courtesan became a concubine, the madam was usually paid a fee, but so was the woman herself, and she might use marriage as an interim measure to terminate an unsatisfactory relationship with the madam and accumulate financial resources. More broadly, the historian hears another message—although it is perhaps not exactly what the authors intended—that life in the demimonde, for a woman with an established clientele and acute business skills, allowed more space than marriage for a woman to arrange her own time and control her own income, and that women in the profession of prostitution recognized this, valued it, and acted accordingly.

THIRD APPROXIMATION: THE DISEASED AND OPPRESSED STREETWALKER

If we track these same sources—guidebooks, mosquito papers, the newspapers of record—through the 1920s and 1930s, some voices grow louder, others become muted. Although the courtesan does not completely vanish (she appears in the literature of nostalgia and in classificatory lists through the 1940s), she is no longer the emblematic figure of the sex trades. She has been replaced by the disease-carrying, publicly visible, disorderly, and victimized “pheasant.”

The deadliest danger to be found, according to the guidebooks, was venereal disease. Usually the warning about venereal disease was a code for class; very little disease was said to be found in courtesan houses, and guidebooks that dealt exclusively with high-class establishments sometimes did not mention it at all. But most guidebooks devoted space to a detailed discussion of the lower reaches of the hierarchy as well. Below the courtesan rank, these guidebooks admonished, venereal disease became distressingly common. “[The prostitute’s] body today is wanted by Zhang, tomorrow is played with by Li, and this goes on every day, without a night off, so it is impossible to avoid disease,” wrote a 1939 author. “If you want to visit prostitutes [piqiao], high-ranking courtesans [changsan] are somewhat more reliable.”

If a customer insisted on frequenting houses below the courtesan rank, a 1932 guidebook advised him, he ought to take a number of precautions: when paying a call, he was told to squeeze the woman’s hand and discreetly check whether it was inflamed; in bed, he should first inspect her elbow joint for lumps, and if he found one, he should “pull up short at the overhanging cliff.” One of the most explicit passages elaborated, “When the front lines where the two armies connect are tense, the customer could press down on the stomach and lower regions of his opponent. If she cried out in pain, it meant that she had venereal disease, and he must immediately throw down [his] spear, don’t begrudge the funds for the payment of soldiers or continue to press forward with the attack.” Insofar as venereal disease warnings remained tied to the class of the prostitute, they could be read as indications that an elite man should seek out only courtesan houses, rather than as a generalized comment on the dangers of frequenting brothels or the wages of sin.

Prostitutes of lower-than-courtesan rank were typically portrayed as victims rather than perpetrators in this type of account—forced by their madams to have repeated sexual relations until and even after they became infected. This note of victimization was amplified daily in the Shenbao, Shanghai’s earliest Chinese newspaper. In the pages of the Shenbao appeared a group of poor, oppressed, exploited, often battered prostitutes. They were not courtesans but were usually the type of streetwalker colloquially known as “pheasants.” They were often barely out of childhood, although occasionally they were married women. Stories about them stressed their rural origins and the fact that they had either been kidnapped and sold into prostitution or else had been pawned by destitute parents. (No embodiments of
urbanity they.) In either case, the reports emphasized that they did not wish to be prostitutes, a sentiment reinforced for the reader by the repetition of a standard litany of oppression. Pheasants were most often seen in one of two situations: fleeing from a cruel madam and being sent by the municipal authorities to a relief organization; or being hauled in by the police for aggressively soliciting customers, fined five or ten yuan, and released, presumably to ply their trade again. Coverage of their activities lacked the loving detail lavished on courtesans. A typical article might read in its entirety: "Pheasant Dai Ayuan, from Changzhou, was arrested on Nanjing Road by Patrolman #318 from the Laozha police station and fined 5 yuan." Occasionally, corroborating the guidebook accounts, an article might mention that a streetwalker had venereal disease and had been cruelly treated by her madam. The victim status of these women, however, in no way modified their characterization as dangerous to city dwellers who recklessly sought them out.

Warnings about venereal disease were not confined to guidebooks or the daily press; they became a dominant theme in a growing medical literature that treated prostitution as a public health problem. This theme appeared in documents written by foreigners in Shanghai as early as the 1870s, and was common in Western sources by 1920, as part of a general colonial concern with the "cultural hygiene" of governed peoples. But by the 1930s and early 1940s it appears frequently in Chinese sources, usually with reference not to courtesans but rather to "pheasants" and other lower-class prostitutes. By 1941, in fact, a series of articles in the Shenbao stated that according to local experts, at least half of the Shanghai population was infected with venereal disease; that 90 percent of the disease was first spread by prostitutes; and that 90 percent of the lowest-class Chinese prostitutes and 80 percent of the foreign prostitutes had venereal disease. The new forms of disguised prostitution were said to be no safer: 80 percent of the guides in guide agencies were said to be infected, while masseuses were not only diseased but also clothed in filthy uniforms. Only in a handful of high-class brothels were the Chinese and foreign prostitutes said to "understand hygiene" or stop working if they became infected. Many of the movements for regulation and reform of prostitution attempted by local governments were explicitly linked to the fear of venereal disease. Venereal disease in turn was linked to China's struggle for survival, which was figured in strictly Darwinian terms. As Lin Chongwu put it in 1936, "The harm of prostitution is none other than its being a site of the spread of disease, which has serious consequences for the strength or weakness of the race. The strength of the race depends on the abundance of good elements. According to the laws of heredity, weeds cannot be sprouts." In the race for survival of the fittest, prostitution and venereal disease were seen to diminish the chances of success, and in themselves became markers of China's subaltern status.
FOURTH APPROXIMATION: PROSTITUTION
AS A MARKER OF BACKWARDNESS

The idea that prostitution was a national disgrace and contributory factor in China’s national weakness may first have gained currency among Chinese Christian elites. In a 1913 Chinese-language guide to Shanghai which bore the didactic English subtitle “What the Chinese in Shanghai Ought to Know,” a Christian, Huang Renjing, commented on the propensity of Chinese men to conduct business and politics with one another in courtesan houses:

Famous persons from all over the country go to brothels. They are the leaders of our people. When leaders are like this, one can imagine the situation among industrialists and businessmen . . . . The development of the West is due to the skill of the craftsmen and the diligence of the merchants. They are not like the degenerates of our country, who make use of brothels to reach their goal [i.e., who entertain business associates and political cronies at parties in brothels]. I hope that our people will learn from the Westerners, not to go to brothels, and forbid prostitution. It is possible to catch up with the Westerners. The reason they developed from barbarism to civilization at this speed is that most of them do not go to brothels. They have virtue; we Chinese should learn from them.31

Chinese Christians, like their secular May Fourth counterparts, linked prostitution to China’s political vulnerability in the international arena. “The amount of money wasted in Shanghai on prostitution in half a year,” observed one Chinese Christian acerbically, “is enough to redeem the railroads which have been mortgaged to the Japanese.”32 Another commented that Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese war, fought mostly on Chinese territory in Manchuria, was attributable to the fact that 80 to 90 percent of the Japanese soldiers had had no contact with prostitutes.33 Here is a “nesting” of subaltern statuses, where sex work in China is taken as paradigmatic of a social decay which is then invoked to explain China’s position vis-à-vis colonizing powers.

Like the foreign missionaries whose categories they adopted, Chinese Christians located the ultimate cause of prostitution in individual moral weakness. Male and female sexual desire, economic need, and social custom were powerful but secondary factors. One Chinese Christian essayist argued that women became prostitutes not only because they were poor but because their parents, preferring money to virtue, were willing to sell them into prostitution. Traffickers preyed on women who were not only economically vulnerable but themselves morally deficient: “Anywhere there are weak, helpless, poor, stupid, or licentious women who might be caught, the agents of prostitution will be ready to go.” Commercialized sex was facilitated by all those “local evil elements” who were willing to sacrifice their scruples for the sake of profits: traffickers and madams, certainly, but also “the landlords who ask a high price for the brothel’s rent, the doctors who give prostitutes papers to prove that they are healthy, the lawyers who use clever arguments to defend the business, the pharmacy salesmen who sell forbidden drugs to prostitutes, the local officials and policemen who accept bribes, the tax collectors who have the right to reduce their tax, and some other institutions they deal with who are in charge of trade and transportation.” In this analysis, men’s patronage of brothels could not be explained by reference to ineradicable sexual desire; the essay cited French and American medical authorities who held that men could live perfectly well without sex. Therefore, prostitution could not be justified by arguing that it sacrificed a few women to protect mankind from uncontrollable male sexuality. In this rendering, prostitutes were both victims and morally deficient; customers went to the brothels because of their moral failings and ultimately became victims of both further moral decay and venereal disease.34

International practices shaped by the colonizing powers were not generally invoked as causes of prostitution. For missionaries and their Chinese converts, the continued existence of prostitution pointed to weaknesses in Chinese culture, weaknesses which might be ameliorated by preachers of the social gospel but could be cured only by Christian morality, which would improve the climate for individual moral choices. The necessity of Christianity, in turn, helped to make respectable the entire network of missionary presence supported by imperialist state power.

Like the Christian commentators, other Chinese critics often invoked prostitution as emblematic of weaknesses in Chinese culture, but in their case the solution was often linked to nationalism rather than Christianity. This was part of a larger argument in which gender relations were imbriated with national strength, since it was argued that a system which permitted the treatment of women as inferior human beings would inevitably be a weak nation. Chinese elites of the May Fourth generation argued that China, which mistreated “its women,” thus figuring China as male, then was treated like a woman by stronger nations: subordinated, humiliated, with pieces of its territory occupied by force, rights to its use bought and sold with impunity. These critics set themselves in opposition to many elements of Chinese culture and politics, sometimes proposing an agenda for radical political transformation, at other times adopting the language of the social purity campaigns taking place in Britain and the United States.

Writing in the Crystal, one such Chinese author summarized three common explanations for prostitution. The first was that women lacked other employment opportunities, the second that prostitutes were victims of madams and male brothel keepers, and the third that prostitution was often a route up the social ladder, allowing a poor woman to become a wealthy concubine. Each of these explanations mandated a different solution: more jobs for women in the first case, abolition of madams in the second, and a
lifelong ban on marriage for prostitutes in the third. Yet the author concluded that all three approaches shared a common theme: prostitution was a product of the social system, and any measure that tried to eliminate it without larger social change in the status of women was of necessity superficial.35

Many May Fourth commentators linked the elimination of prostitution to a complete program of social reform, in which a strengthened Chinese government and socially conscious members of the elite would both play crucial roles. The government was enjoined to revive industry and commerce so that poor people could support themselves without selling their daughters; to forbid gambling, opium smoking, and drinking so that males would not take up these habits and force their wives and daughters into prostitution; and to forbid trafficking. Other measures could conceivably have involved both state and private efforts: sponsoring public lectures about the dangers of prostitution, expanding charitable organizations, promoting vocational education for women. Still others seemed to rely on nonstate initiatives: promoting proper amusements, or perfecting the marriage system so that people did not seek prostitutes because of unhappy family situations.36

Always implicit and sometimes explicit in such ambitious programs was the goal of a new culture that would support a strong state (and vice versa), with the elimination of prostitution helping to mark the move from backwardness to modernity.

Even when it was not cited as a direct cause of national weakness, prostitution was linked to it by analogy or simple proximity. A newspaper article titled “The Evil of Evil Madams” editorialized in 1920:

> In today’s China, there are many who induce others to do evil, but each time avoid the consequences of their crime. Military officials induce the troops to harass people, while civil officials induce their underlings to harm the people. As soon as these activities are exposed, the troops and underlings are condemned, but the officials are calm and in fine shape . . . Furthermore, they shield their troops and underlings and cover up in order to avoid being implicated in the crimes themselves . . . To push the argument further, evil madams who induce prostitutes to solicit customers are in the same category. They force prostitutes to do evil, and also cause people to be harmed by their evil.37

To read this passage as a simple rhetorical flourish intended to dramatize the “evil of madams” is to miss an important and barely subtextual message. The practices associated with prostitution are here being invoked as part of a sickness in the culture, expressed in the exploitative and self-protective activities of anyone with power. In this rendering, prostitution was not so much causative as constitutive; prostitutes took their place alongside all those harassed by civil and military authorities, and madams became part of a pervasive and nested regime of power that was manifestly bad for “the people” and the nation.

FIFTH APPROXIMATION: PROSTITUTION AS A MARKER OF MODERNITY

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, municipal governments waged intermit-tent campaigns to ban unlicensed prostitution. Each of these campaigns, too complex to be taken up here, generated furious production of commentary by intellectuals, many of them associated with feminist causes, the communist movement, or both. Although I cannot yet attempt a detailed account of those commentaries, even a preliminary perusal of the 1930s literature turns up a striking shift in the way intellectuals positioned prostitution in China. While still treated as a serious social problem with specific local features, it had moved from a marker of China’s cultural failings and national weakness to a sign of China’s participation in universal human history.

A 1936 polemic by Mu Hua against licensed prostitution, for instance, began by invoking the standard May Fourth explanations for prostitution: economic difficulties, trafficking, the atrophy of moral values, the marriage system, and the low level of education. But it moved quickly to universalize the problem by juxtaposing Auguste Bebel’s statistics on Parisian prostitutes with a survey of prostitutes who applied for licenses in Suzhou. Mu’s conclusion to this section emphasized the primacy of economic causes regardless of venue: “In sum, [the cause is] just poverty! The door of the brothel is open for the wives and daughters of the poor.” In this move, China is not positioned in a world economy or a colonial system—a positioning which might mark China as simultaneously wronged and backward.

This universalizing narrative was rooted in biology and culture as well as economics: “The male of the human species has a sexual desire which is not less extravagant [wangsheng, literally, "prosperous"] than that of the beasts, while the biological burden and the capability of the female in sexual intercourse are very different from that of the beasts.” Women’s difference from beasts is not specified here, as the author races on, invoking Bebel and echoing Engels, to sketch out the establishment of private property, the rise in the status of men and the imposition of restrictions on wives, and the establishment of prostitutes as objects of enjoyment. With marriage and prostitution linked in a single system, it remains for capitalism to create a situation where more and more men cannot afford marriage and turn to prostitutes. Here Mu Hua makes an unmarked move back to particular local Chinese conditions, arguing that

because of the immaturity of industry and the desolation of commerce, with most households in economic distress, women in industry and commerce and maids in households make a meager income insufficient to carry the burden of supporting the household, and only by selling sex as a sideline can they supplement their insufficient wages. So the supply of prostitutes matches male sexual needs, leading to even greater inflation in the market in human flesh.31
What is striking about this passage, which echoes many standard depression-era descriptions of the Chinese economy, is precisely that it is left geographically unmarked and historically genericized. Coming as it does directly after Bebel and Engels on the universal evolution of marriage systems, it points away from anything that might be designated as specifically Chinese, even as it describes local problems. The insertion of China into a seamless world predicament is completed when Mu, after quoting the selling prices of women and children in various Chinese provinces, declares:

In this capitalist era, prostitutes themselves are a commodity, and because of an oversupply of the commodity, the middlemen have to lower the price, and adopt the approach of selling more when the profit is meager. So flesh is cheap, and a transaction costs a few dimes, while on the other hand new selling techniques are developed... If we cannot use foodstuffs to fill their mouths, we cannot devise ways to have them sell their lower bodies.  

Like the earlier May Fourth commentators, Mu Hua indicates that a comprehensive state initiative is needed to remedy this situation, and warns that if the state permits licensed prostitution, it will damage its own prestige. Unlike the May Fourth precursors, however, Mu's narrative strategy puts across the message that Shanghai is just like Paris: both are mired in the problems of capitalism, with China as a full participant in capitalist ills. Prostitution and its attendant problems have become a badge of modernity.

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Elite arguments against prostitution in the 1930s were not without cultural specificity. At one point in commentator Lin Chongwu’s essay, after he has invoked the case of Solon and the authority of Parent-Duchatelet, Franz Hugel, Flexner, Rousseau, and Lincoln, his argument takes a sudden particularistic turn. He exhorts the state to promote traditional Confucian virtues for women, such as honesty, honor, propriety, and justice, so that women can resist the lure of Western ways:

The European wind assails the East, leading to female vanity, beautiful clothes and makeup, powder and perfume, living in a fool’s paradise and coveting pleasures, love of pleasure and fear of labor... If one can’t be frugal, how can one be honest?... Abandoning a sense of chastity and shame... as this goes on, it leads to selling sex for a living. "If this is how it is in the higher reaches of society, how much more so in the lower reaches?" So promotion of virtue should start with the families of government officials—giving up pearls and jade, turning away from gold and diamonds, with coarse dress and simple adornment... This will promote the cultivation of female virtue.  

In spite of the Confucian overtones and undertones, however, Lin’s discussion is firmly grounded both in the twentieth century—where China is one nation struggling against many—and in a universal moral discourse, where Rousseau and Lincoln are cited as sources of the belief that human trafficking cannot be permitted in a civilized society. When Confucian imperatives are set literally paragraph by paragraph next to Parent-Duchatelet, Charlemagne, Saint Augustine, and Max Rubner, an invocation of unique cultural values becomes its opposite: an application to join a human march toward a civilized, moral society, in which both prostitution and the intent to eliminate it are credentials for membership.

**SIXTH APPROXIMATION: PROSTITUTE AS OBJECT OF STATE REGULATION**

Prior to 1949, the police and the courts periodically undertook to regulate prostitution, at least at the margins where it involved the sale into prostitution of "women of good families," or street soliciting, which was seen as a threat to public order. Prostitution per se was not illegal in Republican China, but trafficking was. Because of the structure of Republican laws about prostitution, women could obtain legal protection in exiting a brothel if they asserted that they had been removed from a respectable family and sold into prostitution. When leaving a brothel meant an improvement in a woman’s material or emotional situation, then, she had to portray herself as a victim seeking reunification with her family in order to attain that goal. Thus, abduction and sale was a common story told by prostitutes who brought suits for their freedom, in spite of the considerable evidence suggesting that abductions accounted for a minority of trafficking cases, and that most involved the sale or pawning of a woman for the benefit of her family.  

Street soliciting was forbidden in Shanghai under municipal ordinances, and at certain points in the Republican period, brothels and prostitutes were required to obtain a license. When prostitutes were brought before the courts or questioned by the police for violating these regulations, they commonly made one of two arguments on their own behalf. The first was that they were working as prostitutes against their will. For instance, in 1929 an eighteen-year-old named Tan Youxi was picked up in a sweep by Chinese plainclothesmen aimed at clearing the streets of prostitutes. Facing a court-imposed fine, she testified that she had been kidnapped in Suzhou two months before and sold into a pheasant brothel. Although the trafficker had long since disappeared, the brothel owner was charged with buying a good woman and forcing her to become a prostitute (po liang wei chang). The owner was detained pending investigation in spite of his argument that Tan had willingly signed a contract and was entitled to half of what she earned.  

Tan’s assertion that she had not entered prostitution of her own free will, which may well have been accurate, was also strategic, serving to shift the court’s attention from her to others. The second argument made by streetwalkers was that they had reluctantly chosen prostitution in order to support dependent relatives. This type
of self-representation appears, for instance, in the transcripts of police interrogations of three prostitutes after their unlicensed brothel was raided in 1947. All three women cited dire economic necessity and the need to support dependents as their reason for taking up sex work. Yang Xiaolong, age thirty-two, who came from Suzhou, told the police: "My mother recently died, my father is old, and we have many debts. Forced by the situation, in February of this year I came to Shanghai, and willingly placed myself [ziou] at the above address, the home of Shen and Sun, as a prostitute... As soon as I clear my father's debts, I plan to change occupation, either becoming a servant or returning home. The above is the truth." Although Yang apparently had no husband, her co-worker, twenty-five-year-old Zhang Xiuying from Yangzhou, found that marriage was no guarantee of financial security:

I have an old mother at home and one son. My husband joined the army four years ago and has not returned. I had no means of livelihood, so on January 14 of this year I left home and came to Shanghai, looking for a former companion.[] Zhang Yuehua, and asked her for an introduction to a job. For a while I could find no regular work. The friend, with my agreement, introduced me into this brothel to be a prostitute in order to survive. Fees were split evenly with the madam, and room and board was provided by the brothel owner. I was definitely not tricked or forced into become a prostitute, but actually was driven to it by family poverty. The above is the truth. I ask for understanding in your judgment of this case and will feel very lucky.

Twenty-six-year-old Chen Abao, unlike the other two, had previously done other work in Shanghai:

I was formerly a wet nurse... After February I returned home, because my husband in the countryside was very ill. At the end of last year my husband passed away, leaving an old father at home, and a young son and daughter. Life was difficult in the countryside, so I recently came to Shanghai, borrowed a room at 7 Furun Li, and entered into a system of dividing the profits with the madam [luo-banniang], becoming a prostitute in order to live. This is the truth.

Reviewing the testimony of the three women, the chief of the morals correction section of the police concluded: "The reason they became unlicensed prostitutes was because all were forced by life circumstances. They were not kidnapped or forced into it by others."56

These stories suggest that many women entered prostitution without encountering any traffickers, much less the kidnappers emphasized in so many of the sources. Some were older than the archetypal kidnapping victims; they had filial obligations to marital as well as natal families, and were often the sole support of children or elderly dependents. The decision to take up sex work was sometimes made by the prostitutes themselves, within the context of family as well as individual economic needs, and they often earmarked income for the support of their families. Under arrest, they could have won lenient treatment and constituted themselves as in need of state protection by arguing that they had been abducted. Instead, they situated themselves in a different nexus of respectability, one in which filial obligations required that they temporarily take up a distasteful occupation. The circumstances under which their confessions were made caution us against reading them as unproblematic statements of "fact." But their statements do complicate the portrait of women violently abducted and forced to sell sexual services. And the particular ways in which they formulated their statements suggest that they were not innocent of the craft of representation or its immediate practical uses in deflecting the expansive reach of the state. If they were participants in their own representation, then perhaps elites did not have a monopoly on the discursive construction of events, and we need not accept a single totalizing account as the only available material for "history."

Although the legal records indicate that prostitutes acted resourcefully on their own behalf and for their families, municipal regimes in Shanghai from the 1920s through the 1950s continued to see prostitution as dangerously adrift from their proper social moorings, both agents and victims of a broader social disorder. Regulation of prostitution was always part of a broader project in which state authorities extended their reach into new realms in urban life. The Nationalist regime and its twentieth-century municipal governments sought to enlarge their domain of regulation to include the family, echoing both their Confucian antecedents and the modernizing regimes of Europe. In their view, encoded in regulations on trafficking and prostitution, women in families were indicative of a well-ordered society. The sundering of family networks through trafficking and sex work bespoke a larger crisis in the social order, one that would entail the reinserterion of women into families as part of its resolution.

This belief about the proper place of women was not challenged in 1949. In its early years the government of the People's Republic of China began a campaign to end prostitution, armed with organizing techniques that enabled it to succeed in extending the reach of the state into realms where earlier municipal governments had failed.57 In Shanghai this campaign did not get underway until 1951, and continued with decreasing intensity until prostitution was declared eradicated in 1958. A major feature of the campaign was the detention of prostitutes in the Women's Labor Training Institute. Although they were not permitted to leave the institute at will, neither were they prisoners: the explicit strategy of the municipal government was to cure their venereal disease, equip them with job skills, reunite them with their families, and/or find them appropriate husbands. The key to the success of this entire project, in the view of government officials, was teaching the women to think—and to speak—as recently liberated subalterns. To that end they were organized into study sessions, the most important goal of which was to instill a sense of class consciousness. They had to be made
to hate the old society and recognize their oppression in it, and they had to recognize that their own past actions were less than glorious, were now in fact illegal, and must not be repeated. In short, their own understanding of their recent past had to be aligned with that of the state by encouraging them to speak that past—not in unison but in harmony with one another—in a language provided by the state. Their words were often published because they were considered to have didactic value for the larger urban population, most of which was engaged, to one degree or another, in a similar reinterpretation of the past.

In the post-Mao years, prostitutes have once again become visible in Shanghai. Although the organization of the contemporary trade bears little resemblance to the world of Republican-era brothels, regulatory discourse features many of the same themes that characterized earlier campaigns. Recent state policy toward prostitution centers on the task, in a rapidly changing reform economy, of returning women to stable work and family situations. In this way, the state argues, China can both modernize and resist the disruptions engendered by "bourgeois liberalization." In each of these cases modernity is seen as simultaneously displacing women (who are both victimized and set loose) and requiring that they be restituted (both protected and contained) with the help of strong state authority. At stake is the very control over what modernity looks like and means, as well as what "women" are and should be.

These different approximations of prostitution coexisted in treaty port Shanghai, and some aspects of them can be reconciled. One might, for example, point out that the mosquito press and the guidebooks both describe women at the top of the hierarchy of prostitution, whereas the Shenbao and other similar newspapers are describing women at the bottom. Both types of women sold sexual services, but there the similarity ended. Streetwalkers, unlike courtesans, worked in miserable and dirty conditions, under duress, for cash, in the process posing a danger both to social order (dealt with by the police) and to public health (as hinted at in the accounts of venereal disease). If we take these wildly differing accounts at face value, we have to question whether the single category "prostitute" assumes a similarity where one should not be assumed, whether in fact we should stop talking about "prostitution" as a unitary occupation and instead use subcategories such as "courtesan" or "streetwalker."

Ultimately, however, I would prefer to abandon attempts at reconciliation and look instead at the dissonance. Prostitution was an extraordinarily flexible signifier for many different kinds of Chinese engaged in many different conversations. The dissonant chorus they produced raises questions about both the contemporary meaning of the category "prostitution" and the concerns of the patrons and the wider urban population. Above all, we must approach with caution the notion that we can retrieve from history a single set of descriptive or explanatory "facts" about prostitutes.

The perpetual reconfiguration of the discourses on Shanghai prostitution certainly reflected the changing occupational structure of Shanghai, where commercial and industrial sectors grew in tandem with a deepening rural crisis, encouraging the migration, both voluntary and coerced, of peasant women and girls. These interlocked phenomena led to a swelling of the lower ranks of prostitution, changing the sexual service structure to one regarded as more disruptive of social order, and more dangerous to social and physical health.

Yet a research strategy that treats discursive construction as the unproblematic reflection of (prediscursive) social change misses something. One must also look at the eye of the beholder, considering the changing self-definition of urban elites, the effect of the May Fourth movement and the growing revolutionary movement, the development of reformist conversations on the position of women in general and prostitutes in particular, and the effect of language and categories drawn from Western missionary sources as well as Chinese radical politics. The discourse on prostitution should also be counterposed to parallel and intersecting struggles over the meaning of marriage, barely alluded to in this essay. It is interesting, for instance, that courtesans were initially regarded as social as well as sexual companions, and portrayed as offering a range of companionship and choice not to be found in arranged marriages. In the social ferment that followed the May Fourth movement, however, intellectuals began to articulate, if not to practice, a notion of marriage as a companionate partnership between equals. If marriage was companionate and desired as such, then courtesans were no longer important as educated women with refined skills, as a means to relieve the tedium of an arranged marriage, or as entertainers. All that was left for the world of the prostitute was sex. Simultaneously, prostitution was redefined as an exploitative transaction where the main connection—an oppressive one at that—was between the prostitute and her madam, not the prostitute and her customer. Because of these connections, prostitution must be looked at in conjunction with marriage and marriage customs.

Finally, the study of prostitution raises the problem of how we simultaneously retrieve and create a historical past. Because the sources on prostitution are so thoroughly embedded in discourses of pleasure, reform, and regulation, they cannot be used in any straightforward way to reconstruct the lived experiences of these women. The voices of a variety of men—the patron, the reformer, the lawyer, and the doctor—are far more audible than the voices of the prostitutes. In the writings of female reformers, representations of prostitution were shaped, if not by gender differences, then most assuredly by class. Their writings were rich in the rhetoric of social pu-
rity and pity for fallen sisters. Continually obscured in all of this are the voices of the prostitutes themselves—voices which, while they surely would not have been unified, given the variety of arrangements under which women sold sexual services, would certainly sound different from what we are able to hear at a safely historical distance today.

How can the sources, generated in circumstances of intense public argument about the "larger" meanings of prostitution, be read for clues to the lived (and mediated) experiences of prostitutes, a group that was subordinate and relatively silenced on almost any axis the historian can devise? The voices and actions of Shanghai prostitutes are not completely inaudible or invisible in the historical record. Their experience was bounded by legal, medical, moral, and political discourses that must have affected how they saw themselves, what alliances they sought inside and outside the brothel, what options they had. Prostitutes appear to have engaged in everyday practices which helped them negotiate the dominant discourses and improve their own living and working conditions—using concubinage and the courts, for instance, in ways that belied their portrayal as victims or as threats to the regulated social order.

In each of these representations of prostitutes, whether seen through the particular cautionary lens of the guidebooks or through their direct (though certainly mediated) speech to legal authorities, we discover instances of agency, even resistance. A courtesan who works to enlarge her tips and gifts from customers, even when not paid to the brothel is challenging the authority of the madam over her income, and in a certain sense over her body. A courtesan who leaves the brothel with an attractive but impoverished young man who cannot pay the requisite fees—or a courtesan who chooses "actors and drivers" as her companions rather than the free-spending merchants the madam would prefer—is doing the same. A streetwalker who represents herself in court as the victim of traffickers resists being classified as a bad woman, a threat to social order, a spreader of disease.

Nevertheless, these are acts that can also be thought of as "working the system," and ultimately legitimating dominant norms. They not only leave unchallenged but actually reinscribe a larger ensemble of social arrangements in which prostitutes are multiply subordinated. In order to collect tips and private gifts, for instance, a courtesan must cultivate the patronage of customers in ways that can perpetuate her dependence and vulnerability to them. When a prostitute wins release from a brothel on the grounds that she was illegally brought there, she helps to legitimize the court's authority to determine circumstances in which women may be legally placed in brothels, or more generally have claims on their sexual services transferred. Furthermore, in order to leave the brothels, many of these women avered a desire to be returned to patriarchal family authority, a desire they may well not have felt (given their family circumstances) but which represented their best chance of being seen by the courts as victims rather than offenders. It is important that we recognize these instances of women's agency, resist the desire to magnify or romanticize them, and admit, finally, that our readings of them are tentative and are limited by the many silences and irreducible ambiguities in the historical record.

By reading and listening in multiple registers, we can begin to understand the voices and actions of prostitutes in relation to those who were more visible and audible. In the process perhaps we can learn where the voices of prostitutes formed a chorus, where a counterpoint, where an important dissonant note in the changing discourses on prostitution. At the same time, we can trace the discursive uses others made of the prostitute. These are most apparent in arguments about the shifting meanings of urbanity, respectability, government, even nationhood, as elites and less exalted city dwellers sought to define for themselves what it meant to be an urban Chinese in the twentieth century.

NOTES


2. See, for example, the very useful but interpretively limited work by Wang Shunu, Zhongguo changji shi [History of prostitution in China] (1993; reprint, Shanghai: Sanlian shuju, 1988).
3. For an eloquent demand that historians attend to discursive constructions of gender and their historical effects, see Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
4. Huang Renjing, Huren baosan [Precious mirror of Shanghai; English title: What the Chinese in Shanghai ought to know] (Shanghai: Huamei shuju [Methodist Publishing House, 1915]; Wang Liaoweng, Shanghai liushinian huoji shi [A sixty-
year history of the Shanghai flower world] (Shanghai: Shixin shuju, 1922); Zhan Kai, Routxiang yunshi [A history of the charm of the gentle village], 3d ed., 1st ed. 1914, author’s preface dated 1907 (Shanghai: Wenyi xiaoqian su, 1917), juan 3; Banchisheng [Half-crazy one], Haishang yeyou bellan [A complete look at Shanghai philandering] (1891), juan 4.


8. Jingbao [The crystal], August 15, 1919, p. 3.


10. For such a kind of poetry, see Chi Zhizeng, “Huyou mengying” [Dream images of Shanghai travels], ed. Hu Zhuseng (March 1893), all pages; edited version of unpublished manuscript (shaokeng) in Wenzhou Museum, pp. 4-8; Li chuang wo dusheng [Student who lies on the goosefoot bed], ed., Huitu Shanghai zaji [Miscellaneous Shanghai notes, illustrated] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenbao shuju shi yingben, 1905), juan 6, p. 7, and juan 7, p. 7.

11. On the elections, see Chan Qingshi [Attendant who repents emotion], Hai-shang chunyang pu [An album of Shanghai ladies] (Shanghai: Shenbao guan, 1884), juan 4; Ping Jinyi, “Jiu Shanghaide changji” [Prostitution in Old Shanghai], in juu Shanghaide yanduchang [Opium, gambling, and prostitution in Old Shanghai] (Shanghai: Baijia chubanshe, 1988), 156-67; Chen Rongguang [Chen Boxi], Lao Shanghaide [Old Shanghai] (Shanghai: Taidong tushujih, 1921), 45-95; Huayu xiaochu zhuren, juan 1, p. 2; Qi Xia and Da Ru, vol. 1, unpaginated, and vol. 2, unpaginated; Yu Muqia, Shanghaisheng nei [Shanghai’s interior] (Shanghai: Pudong chubanshe, 1935), ji, pp. 37-38; Zhou Shoujuan, Lao Shanghaide sanshi nian jianwen tu [A record of things seen by an Old Shanghai hand in the last thirty years] (Shanghai: Dadong shuju, 1928), 2:2-4; Xu Ke, Qingshang leichao [Qing unofficial reference book] (Shanghai: Shanhu yinshuguan, 1928), 8:1-4.


13. For examples of this kind of writing, see Sun Yusheng [Haishang juewusheng], Jinnu shenghuo [The life of prostitutes] (Shanghai: Chunming shudian, 1939), 8; and Jingbao, November 90, 1919, p. 3.


18. On her career and her frequent abolutions, and those of some of her fellow courtesans, see Jingbao, September 21, 1919, p. 3; Wang Liaoweng, 50-56; and Zhou Shoujuan, 1:172-77.

19. Qi Xia and Da Ru, n.p. For a list of forty-seven liaisons between prostitutes and actors, see Chen Rongguang, 125-28.

20. Sun Yusheng, 159.

21. Wang Dingjui, Shanghaidemengji [Key to Shanghai] (Shanghai: Zhongyang shudian, 1932), 75.

22. See, for example, Sun Yusheng, 170-71.

23. Various explanations for this term can be found in the guidebooks. One article notes both the audacious dress and their habit of “going” about from place to place like wild birds. “The Semi-Monde of Shanghai,” China Medical Journal 37 (1923): 785-86.


25. Shenbao, November 12, 1919, p. 11.

26. See, for example, Shenbao, May 7, 1919, p. 11.

27. For a discussion of this literature, see Christian Henriot, “Medicine, V.D., and Prostitution in Pre-Revolutionary China,” Social History of Medicine 5, no. 1 (April 1990): 95-120.


29. Shenbao, October 31-November 5, 1941.

30. Lin Chongwu, “Changji wenti zhi yanjuan” [Research on the prostitution problem], Minzhong xihua 6, no. 2 (June 1936): 221. On the emergence of race as a prominent category of analysis during this period, see Frank Dikötter, The Discourse of Race in Modern China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

31. Huang Renjing, 134-35.


34. Shenbao, May 19, 1919, p. 11.


37. Shenbao, November 10, 1920, p. 11.

38. Mu Hua, “Gongcheng zhidu de baiji qiji lunjude huangmu” [The harm of the licensed prostitution system and the absurdity of its grounds of argument], Nizi yuekan 4, no. 4 (April 1936): 22.
39. Ibid.
40. Mu Hua uses Bebel to make this point, but other authors prefer Havelock Ellis, Ellen Key, Anton Gross-Hoffinger, Max Rubner, and Bertrand Russell. Whether the discourse cited is tied to political economy or sexology, the universalizing impulse is similar. See, for example, Guo Chongjie, “Lun suqing changji” [On ridding the country of prostitution], Shehui banyue kan 1, no. 6 (November 1936): 23–28; and Lin Chongwu, “Changji wenti zhi yanjiu,” 215–223.
41. Mu Hua, 23.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 25.
44. Lin Chongwu, 222.
45. Ibid., passim.
46. Individual cities sometimes undertook to ban prostitution, but their ordinances were effective only within city limits, usually with the result that prostitutes moved to neighboring cities. Article 288 of the 1929 Provisional Criminal Code of the Republic of China stipulated imprisonment and fines for “whoever for lucrative purposes induces any woman belonging to a respectable family to have illicit intercourse with any person for hire,” with stiffer penalties for “whoever makes the commission of the offence under the last preceding section a profession.” Anatol M. Ktenes, Shanghai: Its Mixed Court and Council (1925; reprint, Taipei: Ch’engwen Publishing, 1988), 413–14. The 1935 Criminal Code, while omitting a specific reference to respectable families, likewise made it a crime to remove “any person who has not completed the twentieth year of his or her age” from family or other “supervisory authority.” The punishment was more severe if the person was removed without his or her consent or if the person was taken away “for the purpose of gain or for the purpose of causing the person who has been taken away to submit to carnal knowledge or to do a lascivious act.” Shanghai Municipal Council Legal Department, trans., The Chinese Criminal Code (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1935), 86–88.
47. For statements that kidnappings accounted for a minority of trafficking cases, see “The Prostitution Problem in Shanghai,” China Critic, April 1, 1937, p. 7; Shenbao, November 1, 1941, p. 3. A 1951 survey of 501 prostitutes found that only forty-seven, or 9.4 percent, had been tricked or kidnapped. Yang Jiezen and He Wanren, Shanghai changji guifao shihua [A history of the reform of Shanghai Prostitutes] (Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian, 1988), 61.
48. According to a 1937 China Critic report, the relevant laws in the International Settlement were bylaw no. 36 and article 43 of the Police Punishments for Violation of Morals. In the French Concession, the relevant laws were consular ordinance no. 185 and the provisions of chapter 16 (221 and subsequent articles) and chapter 17 (237 and subsequent articles) of the Chinese Criminal Code, which was applied by Chinese courts in the Concession. “The Prostitution Problem in Shanghai,” China Critic, April 1, 1937, p. 7. After the Second World War, the Shanghai municipal government issued regulations prohibiting inducing others to become prostitutes in order to make a profit, or having sexual relations with people for profit. It is unclear how these regulations squared with the municipal government’s elaborate schemes to license brothels and prostitutes. The relevant police regulations were nos. 64 and 65, Shanghai shi dang’an guan [Shanghai Municipal Archives], Qudi jiyuan an [Cases of banning brothels], File 011–4–163, 1946–1948, case 4.
49. Shanghai, July 15, 1929, p. 7.
51. For details of this campaign, see Gail Hershatter, “Regulating Sex,” 167–85.
52. This sentence is from Ibid., 176.