

Prostitution in Shanghai in the period 1911-1940

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With 4,500 licensed prostitutes in the International Settlement in the 1920s, and at least 100,000 unlicensed prostitutes located throughout Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s, it is clear that prostitution was very prevalent between 1911 and 1940.¹⁵⁰ When studying prostitution, the chief problem the historian is faced with is the difficulty of accessing the voice of the prostitutes themselves. Gail Hershatter draws on Gayatri Spivak's idea of the subaltern, when she notes that the subaltern cannot represent itself in discourse, and so must be inferred by the records around them.¹⁵¹ Prostitution in Shanghai was understood through a variety of different, unfixed categories; as a marker of national decay, the profession of schemers, a source of urbanised pleasure, a disease both moral and physical, as a painful economic choice women had to make.¹⁵² This essay will examine different categories in prostitution, how these were viewed, and if the hierarchy of prostitution was a fluid one. It will then examine attitudes towards ancillary forms of prostitution, such as the professions of masseuses and taxi dancers. It will then discuss the position of the authorities in relation to prostitution. Finally, it will examine how the sale of sexual services was perceived politically. This essay will focus exclusively on the perception of women in prostitution, as there are few written records in English regarding men who were prostitutes.

The richest sources which can be found on prostitution are guide books written by elites for a literati audience. They contained biographies of famous prostitutes, mappings of brothel organisations, tipping procedures – everything a potential customer would need to understand how to behave

150 Gail Hershatter, "Courtesans and Streetwalkers: The Changing Discourses on Shanghai Prostitution, 1890-1949", *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 3:2 (1992), 249.

151 Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (California, 1999), pp 2, 26.

152 Hershatter, "Courtesans and Streetwalkers", 245.

correctly around a courtesan. It is clear from these guidebooks that courtesans were viewed as conveying urban sophistication. Hershatter argues that men went to brothels to display and create their own urbanity, as being validated by courtesans and customers placed one high in the social hierarchy. Much business, particularly in the early twentieth century, was carried out in brothels and they could be regarded as a semi-public space.¹⁵³ The text *Flowers of Shanghai*, published in 1894, describes how male sojourners in Shanghai often lacked homelike lodgings and so adopted courtesan houses as places for romantic liaisons as well as places where they could meet with friends and establish social networks.¹⁵⁴ Christian Henriot details the hierarchy of prostitutes, delineating between courtesans at the top of the scale; the shuyu, viewed themselves as artists whose vocation was the entertainment of customers. They provided female company at banquets, served wine and sang. In the late 1800s, they essentially merged with the changsan, also known for their entertainment roles. Meeting a changsan also required a formal introduction, and this group maintained its name and status well into the 1920s.¹⁵⁵ The public were fascinated by these high-class prostitutes. Portraits taken with new technologies were circulated to advertise their personas and services. They became Shanghai's first public celebrities, with their behaviours, relationships and dress the subject of the emerging tabloid, or mosquito, press. The mosquito press helped to transform the view of the courtesan from a "secluded beauty" to a public beauty figure. They became the embodiment of the new urban lifestyle.¹⁵⁶ Courtesans were much written about in the early years of this period, in guide books and the mosquito press as urban entertainers, and they were then viewed as public figures. It is clear they were viewed with great respect, as shown by the social rules regarding how one interacted with them.

Hershatter argues that the works written about courtesans from the mid-1910s onwards is a "literature of nostalgia", as they locate the golden age of prostitution twenty years previously, and lament the prostitutes today com-

153 Hershatter, "Courtesans and Streetwalkers", 252, 255-6, 258.

154 Samuel Y. Liang, "Ephemeral Households, Marvelous Things: Business, Gender and Material Culture in 'Flowers of Shanghai'", *Modern China*, 33:3 (2007), 377-8

155 Christian Henriot, "'From a Throne of Glory to a Seat of Ignominy': Shanghai Prostitution Revisited (1849 – 1949)", *Modern China*, 22:2 (1996), 136, 138.

156 Paul J. Bailey, *Women and Gender in Twentieth Century China* (Basingstoke, 2012), pp. 41, 89.

pared to the past.¹⁵⁷ Courtesans used to move from a district if prostitutes lower on the hierarchy, such as streetwalkers, became prevalent in that area, so as to disassociate with them. A decline in older courtesan districts over time reveals the changing status of prostitutes. Fuzhou Road, once a major preserve of courtesans, had prostitutes of every rank living there by the 1930s.¹⁵⁸ This illuminates attitudes towards prostitution. Courtesans began to be viewed as similar to the lower-class women who were associated exclusively with sex and not with companionship. Christian Henriot has taken issue with the hierarchy of prostitution which Hershatter presented, arguing that although there were various strata, the depiction of a luxury market in courtesans transformed into a market which was geared towards providing sexual services to unattached men of all classes needs to be re-examined. He argues instead that the different categories had overlapped and that a full sex market had existed since the mid-19th century. From the 1920s onwards, Shanghai had seen the development of a consumer society, where entertainment activities were increasingly commercialised, and the sex trade became more standardised in their practises. There was no longer a niche in the market for elaborate forms of entertainment and prostitution. Sex continued to be a marketable good throughout the twentieth century while female companionship, a crucial part of the courtesan's role, did not, and so except for the changsan, all other categories became common prostitutes and were viewed as such.¹⁵⁹

In response to Henriot's claims, Hershatter points to similarities in their arguments. Henriot wrote that he disagreed with the argument that what had been a luxury market became geared to merchants and working-class men, yet also argues that the number of changsan courtesans increased and became more sexualised.¹⁶⁰ It is clear from both authors' arguments that the number of prostitutes geared at providing exclusively sexual services rose, and that this lowered the perception of prostitutes overall. The article "The Demi-Monde of Shanghai: As Known to the Chinese" was published in *The North China Herald* in May, 1923, in order for the paper's readers to "have a Chinese view of these public characters". The article divides prosti-

157 Hershatter, "Courtesans and Streetwalkers", 253.

158 Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures*, 38.

159 Henriot, "Shanghai Prostitution Revisited", 133-4, 143.

160 Gail Hershatter, "From a Throne of Glory to a Seat of Ignominy": Shanghai Prostitution Revisited (1849 - 1949): A Response", *Modern China*, 22:2 (1996), 166.

tutes into many sub-categories; sing song girls, shu yu, Ch'ang San, Yao er, the camouflaged t'ai chi, and those in the lowest strata; Yeh Chi, P'eng Ho T'ai, Hwa Yen Chien and the Hsien Shui Mei, or 'Salt Water Sisters.' The source describes the downgrading of the shu yu, who became obligated to sell themselves to grooms and actors instead of the "rich patrons" of the past and gained a "bad reputation" as a result.¹⁶¹ This is in line with Hershatter's thesis that previously high-end courtesans continued to lose their prestige throughout the early 1900s. There is a multiplicity of terms used to describe prostitution in this instance and in other literature of the time. Henriot, however, argues that the groups are not as clearly defined, and that the terms used were coined in the 1800s.¹⁶² As this article was written for an English-speaking audience, it may be that the terms used are outdated, and that their "Chinese sources" is based on the literature of nostalgia discussed earlier.¹⁶³ He states that the multiplicity of terms used in literature around prostitution masked the general downgrading of intermediate groups of prostitutes that may have existed before World War One. It is clear that the view of prostitutes was generally lessened in this period.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the subject of literature around prostitution changed and courtesans were no longer the most talked about figure. They were replaced by those below them on the hierarchy. Lower class streetwalkers were viewed very differently from their higher-class counterparts. They often operated in brothels colloquially known as the "salt and pork shop" and were associated with the on-demand satisfaction of male sexual desires with little attention to other entertainment. Local guide books reminded visitors that salt pork is rarely fresh, smells foul and has lost its flavour. This association is clearly a derogatory one. The largest group of poor prostitutes were known as "pheasants", or yeji. They were forced to work the streets. These prostitutes were generally depicted in two situations: fleeing from a cruel madam and being sent to a municipal relief organisation, or being hauled in by the police for aggressively soliciting customers. They were generally depicted as victims of kidnapping, human trafficking and abuse by madams, as well as the spread of disease and urban dis-

161 "The Demi-Monde of Shanghai", *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette* (Shanghai, 1923), May 12, 1923, pp. 404-7.

162 Christian Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: A Social History, 1849-1949* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 85.

163 "The Demi-Monde of Shanghai", 404.

order.¹⁶⁴ The portrayals of prostitutes in the media reflect these concerns. The cover image of Sun Yusheng's *Jinu de shenghuo* (life of prostitutes) depicts a young, beautiful woman, presumably a prostitute, kneeling before her madam. The older woman has a baton and is pointing angrily at the girl, who has a scared expression on her face.¹⁶⁵ The depiction of the prostitute is clearly sympathetic, showing her to be subject to the whims of her madam. The narrative of victimhood is further revealed in a letter to *The China Press* in 1925. A man writes in, concerned that the "moral reformers" who wish to prosecute prostitutes leave those who ply their trade in the city go unmolested, while it is their "poorer sisters" who are made targets. The writer, P. O. Q, discusses prostitution in language that leaves no doubt that he does not condone it morally; "fallen", "nefarious", "notorious" clearly indicate this. He does, however, argue that these "unfortunate and unhappy women... are the victims of 'society'" and that they have paid the price of their crimes in "misery, disease and despair."¹⁶⁶ This letter conveys two of the attitudes towards prostitution; firstly, that it was condemned on moral grounds and seen to cause social disorder, and secondly, that women involved in the sex trade were victims of larger societal ills. While many in society saw Asian prostitutes as victims to be pitted, foreign prostitutes, particularly Anglo-American women, were not viewed the same way. The "American Girl" icon, a white female prostitute, combined shame with national pride. Around 1919, this icon was infused with colonial nostalgia, with racially exclusive brothels hinting at past days before the Chinese became involved in running the International Settlement. They were viewed with an unsympathetic eye in the foreign community as they were believed to be undermining the legitimacy of the foreign powers. In particular, interracial sexual liaisons were feared.¹⁶⁷

After World War One, ancillary forms of prostitution emerged. These evolved from occupations which were not originally intended to be a form

164 Hershatter, "Courtesans and Streetwalkers", 247, 250, 261-3.

165 Gail Hershatter, "Modernizing Sex, Sexing Modernity: Prostitution in Early Twentieth-Century Shanghai" in Susan Brownell and Jeffery N. Watterstrom (eds.) *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: a reader* (California, 2002), Figure 5, p. 209.

166 P. O. Q, "Correspondence", *The China Press* (Shanghai, 1925), Sept 15, 1925, p 10.

167 Eileen P. Scully, "Prostitution as Privilege: The 'American Girl' of Treaty-Port Shanghai, 1860-1937", *The International History Review*, 20.4 (1998), 868, 871-4.

of sexual labour.¹⁶⁸ Nominally hired to perform other services, their income would be inadequate unless they slept with their customers.¹⁶⁹ There were 3 main forms of this; waitresses, masseuses and taxi dancers or professional dancers. Large numbers of refugees came to Shanghai – White Russians, Chinese women fleeing first the warlords then the Sino-Japanese war. They were forced to go into trades that could be learned on the job or professions which needed no special training. Shanghai was the first city to experience masseuses as a disguised form of prostitution, introduced by Russian emigres who were on the road after the 1917 revolution. These parlours quickly grew in numbers, and were used as a way to circumvent the prohibition of prostitution by the Shanghai Municipal Council. The girls working there survived on tips and were often forced to offer extra services to customers to earn enough to survive.¹⁷⁰ Dance halls were another form of disguised prostitution. Contemporary to American ones, the practise involved buying a ticket and giving it to a girl in exchange for a dance. Different groups had varying perceptions of dance halls. Frequented by Chinese youth and students, they were enjoyed as a cheap form of socialising. Chinese authorities, on the other hand, were against them as they saw them as encouraging immorality and promiscuity among the youth. In 1829, the Public Safety Bureau of the Chinese Municipality banned cabarets and dance halls throughout Shanghai, causing them to relocate to the concessions. Then they attempted to regulate them, such as in 1933 when it was decreed that taxi dancers and dance hall proprietors had to register with the police. They also tried to limit access to the dance halls, working with universities in police raids to try to catch and prevent students from going. However, not everyone in the universities agreed with this attitude, and some professors even frequented dance halls themselves.

The ways which authorities in Shanghai dealt with prostitution are revealing of how they viewed it. The French Conseil Municipal tolerated prostitution once it did not create a public scandal and created tax revenue. In February 1929, the General Secretariat demanded an explanation of charges of racketeering made by the Association of Houses of Tolerance against the police. The letter sent clearly reveals that prostitution was viewed as a valuable source of revenue. "activities... should not force them to go else-

168 Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai*, pp 99, 101-2.

169 Hershatter, "Courtesans and Streetwalkers", 251.

170 Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai*, pp 99, 101-2.

where to the detriment of public finances... we are trying to make the sing-song [courtesans] come back to the concession.”¹⁷¹ As previously discussed, the Chinese authorities viewed prostitution as a threat to public order, and furthermore, feared the spread of venereal disease. They wished to implement health checks on prostitutes, but both concessions were initially disdainful of this. While the French Concession, in 1932, did decide to carry out public health checks and vaccinations, Henriot questions how efficient they were. In the International Settlement, the Moral Welfare Committee, later the Moral Welfare League (MWL) put pressure on the Shanghai Municipal Council to abolish prostitution in its limits, believing that a “policy of eliminating brothels was bound to bring a drop in... activity.” The Vice Committee was formed, consisting of nine members, three chosen by the MWL, three chosen by the Municipal Council and the final three chosen by the committee.¹⁷² The Committee’s report and recommendations, as reported in *The Shanghai Times* in 1920, are revealing of the anxieties these reformers had about prostitution. The report recommends that no brothels are allowed to be near schools, to advertise, or to sell liquors or wine. Clearly, these were thought of as issues which needed to be prevented. Recommendations 12-15 deal with the Health Department and the treatment of venereal disease. It is evident this was a central focus for the Committee as disease was dealt with thoroughly. There are also two clauses that deal with soliciting outside brothels – one stating that parks and public areas should be well lit and “that the law against street soliciting be strictly enforced including proceedings against the brothel keeper”.¹⁷³ As a result of this report, there was a five-year ban on prostitution in the settlements. Merchants asked the Shanghai General Chamber of Commerce to intervene and ask for a dispensatory status for courtesans in reaction to this. Elsewhere, most of the ire directed at the ban was caused by the disturbances the houses of prostitution, now spread all over the city, caused. By 1924, it was clear that the ban had failed, and the Shanghai Municipal Council gradually allowed brothels licences, first to courtesans then to sing-song girls.¹⁷⁴ Street soliciting continued to be viewed as a problem. In 1934 *The China Press* reported that “customer-dragging business of prostitutes” is becoming more of

171 Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai*, pp 289, 315.

172 Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai*, pp 295-9, 315.

173 “Vice in Shanghai”, *The Shanghai Times* (Shanghai, 1920), Mar 19, 1920, p 7.

174 Henriot, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai*, pp 306-9.

a “nuisance” throughout Shanghai. Despite some cases coming to court, prostitutes still linger in many roads around the International Settlement.¹⁷⁵ There were clearly different views of prostitution within the International Settlement, ranging from the belief that it should be abolished to the view of it as a necessary nuisance.

Prostitution was also viewed as a sign of China’s backwardness. Political figures linked prostitution to the country’s vulnerability internationally. Other critics linked it to nationalism, arguing that a country which permitted this treatment of women would always be a weak nation. The May Fourth movement linked the elimination of the sex trade to complete and widespread social reform. Reformers argued that industry needed to be revived so that the poor of China would not have to sell their women into prostitution, and that this would mark the move from backwardness into modernity.¹⁷⁶ This was part of the development of a women’s mobilisation movement around May Fourth including issues such as marriage reform, concubinage and legal reforms regarding property rights, as well as prostitution.¹⁷⁷ The magazine *Young Companion* also linked the question of women’s liberation and prostitution, although in a different way, pointing to examples of women acting against societal codes and ending up abandoned by their loves or as a prostitute. The message was clear – the incorrect type of liberation could be dangerous.¹⁷⁸ Prostitution was viewed as a necessary economic choice on the part of women, and reformers thought the way to avoid it was to provide alternative options for women. In the publication *New Youth*, Li Dazhou wrote that the root of the problems facing women was society, organised in such a way that women were forced into prostitution.¹⁷⁹ Almost ten years later, it is reported in the *Chinese Recorder* that

175 “Prostitution On Streets Of City Hit Again”, *The China Press* (Shanghai, 1934), Sep 20, 1934, p. 9.

176 Hershatter, “Modernising Sex, Sexing Modernity”, 210-212.

177 Gilmartin, ‘Gender, Political Culture, and Women’s Mobilization in the Chinese Nationalist Revolution, 1924-1927’, in Christina Gilmartin et al *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 199.

178 Dong, “Who is Afraid of the Chinese Modern Girl?” in Alys Eve Weinbaum et al. (eds.) *The Modern Girl Around the World: consumption, modernity, and globalization* (London, 2008), p. 197-8.

179 Dazhou, “The Postwar Women Question”, *New Youth* 6:2, Feb 15 1919, in Lan and Fong (eds.), *Women in Republican China: A Sourcebook* (New York, 1999), part 36.

the way to abolish prostitution is to "devise means to train such women for occupations that will enable them to learn a living."¹⁸⁰

Women in prostitution were viewed in a variety of ways between 1911-1940. Courtesans, while initially viewed with respect, were brought down the social hierarchy by the increasing commercialisation of sex. This reflected a wider lessening of prostitutes' status as leisure became commercialised. While Hershatter and Henriot disagree on the extent to which prostitutes were viewed in a hierarchy, they do appear to agree that the luxury market of prostitution was transformed into one geared towards the sale of sex exclusively. Lower class prostitutes were widely seen as an indication of urban disorder, and were thought to be victims of their economic circumstances. They were, however, still viewed as immoral. The way which hidden prostitution was treated furthered this view, as Chinese authorities attempted to regulate dance halls and masseuses. The different authorities viewed prostitution differently; as a source of revenue, as a public safety issue, as something to be abolished. The May Fourth movement also viewed prostitutes as victims of their economic circumstances, and believed alternative jobs would have to be offered to women to abolish it, and make China a stronger nation. Overall, while some prostitutes may have been held in high esteem, in general women in prostitution were viewed as an undesirable aspect of Chinese society and as victims of their economic circumstances

180 "The Women's Movement in China", Chinese Recorder 58, (Shanghai, 1927), p 656.

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