

Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: A Social History, 1849-1949 (1)

Review Number: 290

Publish date: Tuesday, 1 October, 2002

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ISBN: 9780521571654

Date of Publication: 2001

Price: £64.00

Pages: 486pp.

Publisher: Cambridge University Press

Publisher url: <http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521571654>

Place of Publication: Cambridge

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Few settings in China's modern history have been explored in greater depth than Shanghai. Moreover, sexuality has been a 'sexy' topic in Chinese history for the better part of the past decade. And significantly, the French original was published hot on the heels of another major publication by Gail Hershatter (2) on exactly the same topic. All this naturally prompts the question as to why we need yet another book on aspects of sexual life in China.

The original manuscript was Christian Henriot's *thèse d'État*, extending to no fewer than 1200 pages. To reduce such a wealth of information to a publishable monograph undoubtedly required mature editorial judgement and structural discipline. The author begins his quest by placing the topic within a historiographical framework. Within the first few paragraphs, the author rejects the idea of prostitution as an exotic theme of research, emphasising instead its quality as a marker of modernity. Drawing his inspiration from works by Louis Chevalier (3) and Alain Corbin (4) on prostitution and crime in nineteenth-century France, the notion of prostitutes as a socially and politically subversive element needed to be tested against the background of Shanghai society, over a century of momentous change. The eventual result of the revolutionary turmoil would be the forced closure of the city's brothels by a victorious Mao Zedong in 1949. While the phenomenon itself – and prostitutes as a social group – differed in many ways from the European experience, any study into prostitution in Shanghai promises deepened insight into the history of the city's women, its criminal underworld and spheres of entertainment. Henriot's challenge was to integrate these specific aspects into a cohesive and dynamic reflection of the social transformations Shanghai (and by extension also China, as the French title suggests) was undergoing. The desire to capture the wider social reality of the period under scrutiny is already evident from the structure.

The monograph is subdivided into four parts and fourteen chapters. Each part, except for the analytical third part, follows an internal chronology from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the civil war in 1949. The chronological evolution of prostitution can be summarised as a cycle of commercialisation and social decline. Whereas nineteenth-century prostitution was a socially varied phenomenon, encompassing extremes at both ends of the social scale – poor wretches eking out a living alongside murky alleys and canals, in

contrast to the well-paid and highly respected courtesans – the twentieth century brought more 'modern' leisure-time pursuits and a faster pace of life. Just as leisurely opium smoking gave way to the fast injection of morphine or heroin and 'trendy' cigarette smoking, the urban young opted for a quick fix in sexual gratification. 'Modern' attitudes played as much a role in the decline of the late imperial courtesan as the devastating blows to social order by warfare, mass migration and political upheaval. Part one begins with the beginning, that is, with the gradually eclipsing world of the courtesan. Akin to the Japanese *geisha*, courtesans (*shuyu*) were appreciated for their grasp of poetry, polite manners, elegance and beauty, not primarily for their sexual services. Courtesans, in a word, were invited for their arts and for the prestige their presence brought to the client, not for their bodies. This elegant, slightly surreal setting, which provided a maximum degree of safety and dignity for the venal workers, could not withstand the emergence of a new, faster and more commercialised environment.

Part two is therefore devoted to the emergence of urban fast-sex. Whereas prostitution during the nineteenth century saw the apogee of the distinguished courtesan, financially less fortunate classes of clients required the services of less fortunate classes of prostitutes. The ranks of the latter were being swelled by country girls being lured into the metropolis in the hope that the streets be paved with gold. The reality was rather more prosaic, with most girl-prostitutes ending up trapped in the wetland mud huts outside Shanghai or in the floating life of the canal boats, known in a French euphemism as 'jonques de tolérance'. Brothels and hotels offering shelter to the courtesans' poor cousins, referred to as 'pheasants' (*yeji*) soon mushroomed along the main roads. Within the walled Chinese city, the 'ten thousand flowers' (*wanhua*) would appear every day after sunset in private doorways and public establishments, often opium houses, to 'seduce innocent travellers', as contemporary scholar officials disapprovingly observed. In unison with all the other economic migrants arriving in the metropolis, prostitutes grouped themselves into regional communities, the most prominent being those of Ningbo, Zhejiang and Guangzhou (Canton). Cantonese prostitutes would distinguish themselves as the only group willing to serve Westerners.

Henriot (p. 83) contradicts the received wisdom that clients sought out their girls because of their place of origin. Instead, demand arose because of one simple imperative: sexual desire. In the decades straddling the new century, only one category of venal women escaped rapid commercialisation, thus retaining a relatively safe and separate identity. The singing *changsan* courtesans averted the sexualisation of their trade by virtue of their vocal talent, as well as by nurturing relationships with 'respectable clients'. Just as the socially more elevated courtesans had done in previous decades, *changsan* frequently attained a more normal life style through marriage. Meanwhile, ordinary prostitutes were increasingly mired in misfortune. An intermediate category of venal servants, the 'tea house girls' (*yao'er*), fell victim to an assimilation process which by the 1930s would amalgamate all classes into one broad mass of prostitutes. The two concluding chapters of Henriot's second part deal exclusively with the social identity of the prostitute and of the abuse and diseases female sex workers had to suffer.

Part three contains a detailed analysis of the socio-economic dimension of the sex trade, focusing in turn on the organised trafficking of provincial girls into the metropolis, their reception and accommodation in Shanghai, as well as the financial organisational logistics of the brothel business. Chapter eight in particular, the second within this part, is of interest because of the author's attempt to create a geography of prostitution for each period of Shanghai's expansion. The clear maps make this particular chapter a fascinating 'walking tour' of Shanghai, illustrating in concrete terms what the preceding chapters set out in general.

The final, fourth part deals with four separate aspects of attempts at abolition of the sex trade. True to the chronological pattern of the first two parts, abolitionist arguments are followed up from the late imperial twin-effort at tackling disease and immorality, over specific movements led by Shanghai residents and Nanjing officialdom to government programmes for the rescue and reintegration of prostitutes during the 1930s. The increasingly overt exploitation of prostitutes was a symptom of the unbridgeable hiatus which had opened up between the moneyed classes and the destitute, whose numbers swelled with every new military conflict and every natural catastrophe in the hinterland. Shanghai's municipal legislation, both in the International and in the French concessions, reflected concerns which were being voiced throughout

Republican China, where common prostitution was portrayed as concomitant to most other social evils – including the irrepressible habit of opium smoking. And akin to the campaign against drugs, it was the American (Protestant) missionaries who campaigned most vociferously for the criminalisation of the perceived 'vice'. The outcome of the attempted closure policy during the early 1920s was predictable, although even the hardened municipal police was confounded by the rapidly shifting realities of the 'salt meat market'. Forced out of the relative safety of their brothels, prostitutes remained the chattel of their employers, but were subjected to the double hazard of crime-ridden streets and police brutality. Brothel owners and pimps meanwhile made use of their wealth and connections in order to abscond to new pastures – mainly within the less zealous French Concession. Blinded by their 'sincere faith', Henriot concludes (p. 309), the American abolitionists created a fertile environment for crime and corruption without being able to eradicate the venal trade itself – conditions which quickly led to the end of the abolitionist experiment.

Whereas the evolution of prostitution is charted into the most minute details, the second half of the title remains relatively orphaned. True, the reader does obtain glimpses into sexual behaviour, concentrating on the practices of the male elite, but more by accident than by design. We learn a lot about the consequences of commercial sexuality, from venereal disease to undesired pregnancy, but next to nothing about the fulfilment of the desires so vividly described in Robert van Gulik's *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (E. J. Brill; Leiden, 1961). Henriot is keenly aware of the limitations imposed by the nature of his sources, rightly pointing out that Qing (1644-1911) publications usually lacked the descriptive wealth of the sexual manuals and novels penned during the Ming period (1368-1644). We do learn of certain fantasies by (male) customers, such as sharing the venal scene with another prostitute – or even with another man. We also hear of ancient (Daoist) taboos, such as mingling one's sperm with that of other men inside sexually adept and popular prostitutes (pp. 52-3). Nevertheless, in order to do justice to his title, the author could have attempted to summarise his findings in a complete chapter dedicated to (heterosexual and homosexual) erotic practices.

In the field of commercial sexuality, on the contrary, Henriot satisfies our curiosity to a much greater extent. So, what really went on inside a Shanghai brothel during the late nineteenth century? And what made the experience so specifically 'Chinese'? The answer is as prosaic as it is correct: Brothels during the late imperial period were primarily places of relaxation, in particular for the wealthy and educated, where men would gather in order to exchange views and anecdotes with each other and with the 'belles de Shanghai'. In a social universe where the genders were firmly segregated, brothels provided a unique opportunity for young men to meet women, to engage in harmless pursuits, such as bashful flattery and the recitation of poetry, as much as in the gratification of sexual desires. Houses of prostitution thus essentially fulfilled the same social functions as public houses for the consumption of tea or of opium.

Opium – this all-important social lubricant during the nineteenth century – unfortunately only receives the author's scantest attention. Opium smoking in brothels is mentioned several times, yet without actually explaining its relevance. Mythologised as an aphrodisiac by generations of Chinese and European men, opium has a cooling rather than exciting effect upon the libido. In our age of Viagra, this may appear as a handicap rather than as an advantage, but opium smoking had an important role to play in commercial sexuality, by preventing premature ejaculation. The need for prolonged sexual intercourse becomes evident when we remember that brothels were the only public spaces where young men could gather any sexual experience at all. Rather like in the societies of ancient Greece and of modern Thailand (and to a certain extent also of Victorian England), accosting respectable girls for erotic romance was inconceivable, at least within the more elevated strata. A calmed libido thus ensured longer hours of sexual play and practice. For older clients, smoking opium in an aesthetically appealing ambience was often reason enough to solicit brothels, with sexual intercourse receding as a primary objective. In the famous words of the Australian prostitutes interviewed by the Royal Commission on Opium (1904) 'The man who has the opium habit is not like another man; he does not care for women'.⁽⁵⁾ As Henriot points out (p. 52), this was also the case with homosexual men, who used visits to the brothel as a social alibi, rather than having any doubt cast on their 'manliness'. Since prostitution services within a brothel were usually free of time pressure, the opium-induced tranquillity provided considerable relief for the female staff. The substitution of alcohol by opium reduced the level of aggression and therefore effectively protected the women.

Christian Henriot seeks to justify the publication of his monograph so shortly after the comprehensive study by Gail Hershatter by virtue of differing historical methodologies. Henriot regrets (pp. 13-14) the tendency in his rival's approach to 'represent' the phenomenon of prostitution through the eyes of the post-imperial intelligentsia rather than analyse it as 'history from below', as an exercise in social historiography. Henriot thus criticises the relative lack of archival awareness in *Dangerous pleasures*. Having worked one's way through Hershatter's volume, however, it is hard to escape the feeling that the two authors are reaching the same conclusions: that the existence of hierarchies within the profession was highly indicative of the composition of Shanghai society at large, and also of the tremendous changes the latter underwent during the first decades of the twentieth century. More critically, Henriot does not intrinsically differ in the use of his sources. His attempt to represent social conditions and change with the prostitute as the historical agent more often than not falters due to an old historiographical truth, namely that the archives of the poor are silent. Interviews with 'liberated' prostitutes after 1949 of course exist, but have to be approached with caution due to the political bias they were frequently expected to display. Earlier first-hand evidence can also be found in Chinese sources, but much of the early statements fall into the category of anecdotal 'wild history' (*yeshi*). Instead, Henriot chose to employ pronouncements by Chinese literati on the topic – from Wang Tao to medical missionaries, from *Shenbao* articles to the *Funü yuebao* – stressing the caveat that such sources only 'represent' the views of the privileged few.

Rather than seeking to contrast the two monographs in terms of methodological intention, it could be said that the two authors differ in the use of their chronological framework. In this respect, Henriot's work appears more disciplined, and his argumentation ultimately also more coherent. For readers with a lot of time, or for educational purposes, both monographs ought to be used in conjunction with each other rather than competitively. True differences with previous research do emerge when Henriot's position on 'women's history' is taken into account. The upsurge in historiographical interest in prostitution can be regarded as an offshoot of the wider feminist discourse over the past thirty years. Henriot refutes the idea that 'women' should be seen as a separate historical subdivision of society, not least because trade in destitute men and children was a constant reality in late imperial China. The author implicitly also condemns the view of the prostitute as the generic victim of exploitation, expounded by critics as diverse as foreign missionaries (exploitation through 'evil') and communist intellectuals ('class' exploitation). Without attempting to romanticise, Henriot (e.g. p. 325) depicts a situation of choice within hopelessness: not unlike sending boys of impoverished families to the imperial palace in order to seek their fortunes as eunuchs, many villagers saw prostitution as the only ray of hope for their girls and young women.

All in all, *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai* can be regarded as a brave attempt to illustrate the evolution of a complex phenomenon through the personal experience of prostitutes and clients alike. A special word of praise to Noël Castelino, who produced an impeccable, almost entirely literal translation of *Belles de Shanghai*. Cambridge University Press, on the other hand, may be asked why the glossary of the original was sacrificed, as well as the characters for Chinese names and titles in the bibliography. The absence of characters is deplorable, reducing the usefulness of the translated version, in particular because many of the Chinese phrases cited in chapters dealing with pre-modern China do not correspond with today's vernacular language. This omission ought to be rectified in any future reprint.

Notes

1. Original title: *Belles de Shanghai: Prostitution et sexualité en Chine aux XIX^e – XX^e siècles* (CNRS Éditions; Paris, 1999) ISBN 2-271-05331-5.
2. Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous pleasures: Prostitution and modernity in twentieth-century Shanghai* (University of California Press; Berkeley, 1997).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses* (Plon; Paris, 1958).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Alain Corbin, *Les filles de noce: Misère sexuelle et prostitution* (Aubier-Montaigne; Paris, 1978).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Report of the Royal Commission on Opium ('Extracts from the minutes of evidence given before the Royal Commission on alleged Chinese gambling and immortality ... '), (Eyre and Spottiswoode; London, 1894), vol. 1, appendix V, pp. 167-8.[Back to \(5\)](#)

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