

REVIEW ARTICLE

PROSTITUTION IN MODERN SHANGHAI:
TWO RECENT STUDIES

BY

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Gail Hershatter. *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xii + 591 pp. + illustrations. \$45.00. ISBN 0-520-20438-7.

Christian Henriot. *Belles de Shanghai: Prostitution et sexualité en Chine aux XIXe-XXe siècles*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 1997. 501 pp. FF225. ISBN 2-71-05331-5.

Prostitution is a difficult subject for scholarly research. Even in an open society contemporary sociological research on urban prostitution, with every available tool of field work and all imaginable theoretical sophistication, may have tremendous difficulties in obtaining straightforward information, such as the approximate numbers of prostitutes and details of their professional "tricks," not to mention registering the "true voice" of prostitutes and of their clients. Even deciding which "sex worker" is a prostitute and which is not can be a major problem. Victorian or *belle époque* bourgeois morality is obviously outdated in any useful discussion of prostitution. However, even the influential Foucauldian discourse on power and control, or the militant feminist view, seem no longer totally satisfying in dealing with the subject. This is the more so when the subject is prostitution in modern China, since these discourses developed from Western experience, whereas nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Shanghai had a very different history and cultural-sociopolitical setting. Typical Chinese views related to prostitution, on the other hand, are not of much help either. The much mythicized ideal romance between courtesans and cultural-political elites, on the one hand, and the May Fourth nationalist discourse surrounding the notion of strengthening the nation, in which prostitution was condemned as a corruptive element, on the other, further complicate

the issue rather than clarifying it. Neither of these views are able to shed new light on the problem of prostitution in modern urban China.

For these and other reasons, few works on prostitution manage to go beyond a kind of voyeurism that many readers still expect to find. Defining the question of prostitution and specifying its social and cultural implications without falling into banality remains a difficult and delicate task. Until the publication of these comprehensive studies by Hershatter and Henriot, works on the history of Chinese prostitution have never reached a truly scholarly level. These two books represent two admirable academic attempts to tackle this almost impossible question.

These two books claim to adopt two different approaches or methodologies: Hershatter deliberately chooses a discourse analysis approach and does not disguise her position as a leftist feminist. Her main concern is the question of prostitution itself over a longer period. She goes far beyond the late nineteenth-century and deals also with the post-Maoist period until the early 1990s, which constitutes Part V of her book, entitled "Contemporary Conversations."

Henriot, on the other hand, adopts a more straightforward sociohistorical approach. His study is essentially limited to the late Qing and early Republican periods. The setting of late nineteenth- to early twentieth century Shanghai is the essential concern for him, and prostitution is just one aspect of Shanghai society during this historical period. Contrary to Hershatter, he deliberately avoids the feminist approach. His other concern, probably inspired by Alain Corbin,¹ is the question of modernity, urbanization, and sexuality in China.

Yet, despite their apparent differences, both authors come up with similar findings on quite a number of points, at least for the common period up to 1949. Probably due to the similar nature of sources

¹ Alain Corbin suggests that one could look at the history of sexuality as what happened in "la chambre du couple" through the phenomenon of prostitution. He finds in different discourses and images on the regulation of prostitution in nineteenth-century France changes in forms of sexual desire and anxieties. He also finds that, in the same period in urban France, seeing a prostitute was increasingly considered as a last resource to quench the thirst of "fully relational sexuality which develops in the urban society"; see his "Commercial Sexuality in Nineteenth-century France: A System of Images and Regulations," *Representations* 14 (1986): 209-219, and also *Les filles de nocé. Misère sexuelle et prostitution (19e siècle)* [Paris: Flammarion, 1982 (first edition 1978), Aubier Montaigne], 8, and 481.

used (guidebooks, newspapers, the “mosquito press,”² etc., written essentially by Chinese literati and journalists), both authors are much interested in the taxonomy of Shanghai prostitution, as well as the details of the different categories of prostitutes and brothels and how they functioned in modern Shanghai. Both provide ample information on, for example, the luxury, pleasure, and seduction involved in the institution of courtesans as well as on crimes, violence, and diseases surrounding popular prostitution. Both agree on the gradual disappearance of the former institution in favor of the growth of the latter.

Both authors make great efforts to present detailed accounts of the various systems of prostitution in Shanghai—so much so that they seem to be competing to give an ever more complete picture and ever more detailed accounts. In both books, these details constitute Parts II (entitled “Pleasures” in Hershatter’s book and “Marché de la prostitution et sexualité de masse” in Henriot’s) and III (“Dangers” for Hershatter and “Espace et économie de la prostitution” for Henriot), or almost 150 pages plus 50 pages of notes in the English work and more than 200 pages plus 24 pages of notes in the French work. The number of pages alone reveals how overwhelming the details could sometimes be. Similarly, both authors go on to discuss various regulatory measures and their failures in the early half of the twentieth century in their fourth parts (“Interventions” in Hershatter’s work, “Les tentatives avortées du régle-mentarisme à Shanghai” in Henriot’s) of more than 80 pages each. Both find similar reasons for the failure of such regulatory attempts, though Henriot puts more emphasis on the conflicting perceptions of prostitution of the Chinese community and foreign administrators responsible for the abolitionist campaigns.

Although the two authors often treat the subject along similar tracks, available sources allowing little alternative, one learns different things from them. Hershatter’s strongest and most original points are in the latter part of her book (Chapter 12 of Part IV, and Part V) where she analyzes concerted campaigns by the communist state to combat prostitution, with very interesting personal interviews with regulators and reformers of the post-communist periods. Most notably, she describes the movements of the 1950s that were said to be successful in eradicating prostitution from Chinese soil (in

² “Mosquito press” is an English term for *xiao bao* 小報 (small press) in Chinese, which is a kind of tabloid press.

1958 precisely) and the various discourses in the 1980s and 1990s surrounding the so-called “re-emerging” urban prostitution. Hershatter’s persistent efforts in trying to reveal the suppressed voices of prostitutes as nonpassive actors throughout the book appear to be more effective in this last part. Although, again, she does not manage to capture directly the voice of former prostitutes, since she was barred from interviewing them (p. 319), she presents fascinating accounts of reform programs for prostitutes in the early 1950s in ways that strongly suggest, for example, their resilience or even resistance, and of the prostitute’s emotional attachments, such as their links to their madams and their offspring.

Her analyses of more recent discussions on the subject also aim at overthrowing conventional views about contemporary Chinese prostitution. Her findings strongly suggest that prostitution had never been eradicated in post-1949 China; moreover, these recent discourses tend to hint that the prostitute is more an autonomous breadwinner than a miserable victim of the social system. In her own words, “If the subaltern voices of Chinese prostitutes could be heard more clearly outside of detention centers, it is possible that they would give more prominence to a labor framework than the people who regulate and study them do” (p. 392). In retrospect, then, prostitution in the late Qing and Republican periods in Shanghai, or indeed even in any earlier period in any place, can be written differently. This is the inspiring methodological lesson that one can find in her book.

Henriot is less concerned about the theoretical or ideological debates surrounding prostitution than about the socioeconomic setting of modern Shanghai. This pushes him to meticulous research on the socioeconomic aspects of prostitution in Shanghai, using not only guidebooks, newspapers, and the “mosquito press” but also archival materials, especially those of the Shanghai Municipal Council, the French Concession, the police, the Anti-Kidnapping Society, and diplomatic archives. An impressive list of the archival materials he has used can be found in the bibliography from pp. 455-458, summarized on p. 26. His impressive archival research, besides being amply presented in the thirty-seven tables, eleven maps, and five graphs compiled from his prodigious data (unfortunately, not listed anywhere in the book) are evident throughout this work. Thanks to Henriot’s research we have some concrete figures about the trafficking of prostitutes in early twentieth-century Shanghai (Chapter 7), the geographical distribution of various types of brothels inside

Shanghai (Chapter 8), and some notion of prices relating to prostitution in early twentieth-century Shanghai (Chapter 9). Archival information on the social and regional origin of some prostitutes; on the diseases they suffered, especially sexually transmitted ones; on the reasons they took up or left prostitution (though never quite complete, as the author honestly admits) allow us to glimpse the world of Shanghai prostitutes, at least those who could not escape the investigation of police or other authorities. One of his interesting findings, for instance, is that the majority of prostitutes were from Jiangsu (Jiangnan region) and Zhejiang, and kidnapers of young women were mostly from similar regions (Anhui, Jiangnan, and Zhejiang). From there, we are told, many young women were seduced to Shanghai to become prostitutes by their *tongxiang* 同鄉 (compatriots) (pp. 196, 199, 211). Though these figures are not complete, they constitute a convincing picture that may not be so different from today's situation. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Henriot has provided the most detailed descriptive account and richest quantitative data ever published on prostitution in modern Shanghai.

However, as mentioned above, the subject of prostitution is complex and difficult. Hershatler and Henriot have skillfully dealt with certain aspects of the problem but may have left readers with doubts on other questions.

Hershatler's work, though deliberately opting for a discourse analysis approach, in fact never quite gives up the traditional textual and sociological analysis, with its Marxist slant. In her work we still find lengthy descriptive narratives about Shanghai prostitutes, which she probably thinks are revealing of their true lived experience—or does she? For instance, after the very entertaining chapter on “Careers” (Chapter 6), in which the author tells us vividly detailed stories about “bad girls, good girls, and dead girls,” (three stereotypes of early twentieth-century Shanghai prostitutes), the reader is told that one cannot possibly hear the subaltern voice of the prostitute through these stories. What, then, should the reader make of all these details? How did such “discourses” shape subjectivity? The author herself seems to be somewhat undecided about the significance and usage of these sources.

Similarly undecided is her perception of the prostitute as a victim or as an autonomous “sex worker.” The accounts she provides on pre-1949 prostitution tend to portray the prostitute more as a victim of a male-dominated oppressive society, and those on contemporary

prostitution are more suggestive of an autonomous sex worker. It is unclear whether this is truly Hershatler's view (if so, she needs to give an explanation) or whether she is only manifesting the different nature of her sources as discourses. Her choice of a discourse analysis approach, which is a legitimate one for a topic like prostitution, unfortunately seems to have made her writing somewhat ambivalent and hesitant, which obscures and downplays many of her original ambitions.

On the other hand, some of Henriot's assertions appear to be too simplistic, possibly due to the confidence he feels about his archival sources. His main point on “sexualization,” for instance—that the courtesan institution, where seduction was more important than sexual intercourse, gradually gave way to commercialized sex in modern Shanghai, reflecting a change in sexual behavior—invites questions. First, we know from Song, Ming, and Qing sources and from recent studies that the so-called “commercialized sex” provided by popular prostitutes had always coexisted with the courtesan system in most urban centers, while wealth was undermining social status in Chinese towns and cities since at least the Song. In what ways, then, was Shanghai's modern experience different from earlier history? Why did so-called popular, commercialized sex completely replace the traditional courtesan system in modern Shanghai when it did not in earlier periods? Direct evidence provided in Henriot's book about this radical change, relying heavily on Wang Tao's writings, is in fact rather thin, and there is no convincing explanation for such a change.

While at first glance it seems common sense to argue that as the old literati culture died out (“la fin d'un monde” as Henriot calls it), there was decreasing demand for the kind of nonsexual services that courtesans provided, research conducted in contemporary Taipei suggests a much more complex situation. A recent (1996) sociological survey on the Taipei sex industry reveals that male political and business elites frequent expensive “wine houses” (*jiujia* 酒家) precisely for the company of hostesses, whom these men find to have lubricating effects on business talks. A client in an interview admits that it always takes him some time to get to know his preferred hostess well enough to have sex with her. The process of seduction, then, remains important. The interviewed man explains: “If a man desires a female, he only needs to go to a brothel, and it is not expensive. But he is not interested ... Men these days have high standards. . . the more [women] tantalize you, the more you desire

them, and you don't want the vulgar and the cheap." Similarly, interviewed professional *jiujia* hostesses, who reject being called *jinü* 妓女 (prostitute), detest men asking for sex at first encounter whom they have the right to refuse.³ Such relationship is not so different from what Henriot describes as specific to the courtesan system of the nineteenth century: "...pas une simple affaire d'argent; c'est une opération de conquête et de séduction" (p. 67). Does this mean sex is less important in such relationship? Not necessarily so; interviewed hostesses admit that they are ultimately "sexual objects" to their clients.⁴

What kind of "sexualization" process can one then generalize from this contemporary Taipei experience? This survey on sex industries in a highly commercialized and modernized Chinese urban area shows that first, so-called "modernization" or the "commercialization of the economy" does not necessarily wipe out the courtesan institution or reduce the courtesans to "simple objects of consumption" (p. 85), though it might very well have modified the institution as social needs of male elites changed. Indeed, there are still quite a few well-known examples of ex-hostesses being married to rich businessmen in Taiwan. Second, it is perhaps a myth that sex was only secondary in the courtesan institution (even for the prestigious *shuyu* 書寓⁵ category). Courtesans, after all, are sexual objects that cannot simply be defined quantitatively by the frequency of sexual intercourse with their clients. Henriot's too restrictive definition of "sex" and some of the clichés about sexual preferences of traditional Chinese literati that he holds to be true (pp. 63-65, for instance) renders his theme of sexualization in the context of the presumed disappearance of the courtesan system to be overly simplistic.

A final regret is that neither author makes full use of the rich literary work of Han Bangqing.⁶ Both cite this work in their bibliography but do not seem to find it particularly important. Han, a typical *fin-de-siècle* Shanghai literatus, was an expert on Shanghai

³ Shu-ling Hwang, 黃淑玲 "Taiwan tezhong hangye funü: shou hai zhe? xingdong zhe? piancha zhe?" 台灣特種行業婦女：受害者？行動者？偏差者？, *Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies* 台灣社會研究季刊 22 (1996): 119-120.

⁴ Hwang, "Tai-wan tezhong hangye funü," 122.

⁵ The term literally means "storytellers' residence" and was used by extension to refer to courtesans who were first and foremost professional storytellers.

⁶ Han Bangqing 韓邦慶 (1856-1894), *Haishang hua liezhuan* 海上花列傳, first complete publication in 1894. For the book's brief publication history see the postface of its modern publication by Renmin wenxue chubanshe (Beijing), 1982, pp. 650-652.

courtesans, an opium smoker, a failed examination candidate, and a brilliant literary talent. His work on Shanghai courtesans should be as important to the study of nineteenth-century Shanghai society as Cao Xueqin's *Story of the Stone* is to eighteenth century society. In his work, much of the complexity, sophistication, corruption, violence, and emotions involved in the courtesan system of the nineteenth century is ingeniously knitted into a captivating story with many technical details that only a connoisseur of courtesans could provide. Despite its literary nature, this work easily could have been used as a reliable historical source for nineteenth-century prostitution in Shanghai.

Hershatter and Henriot should be thanked for giving us two most useful contributions on Shanghai prostitution. These authors have made great progress compared to earlier writers on the subject, both Chinese and Western, and will certainly inspire more research on related topics.