Courtesans and Streetwalkers: The Changing Discourses on Shanghai Prostitution, 1890–1949

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PROSTITUTION IN EARLY twentieth-century Shanghai was variously understood by contemporaries as a source of urbanized pleasures, a profession full of unscrupulous and greedy schemers, a source 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, and it can certainly be construed as a form of work ("sex work," in current North American parlance), since women seeking employment in Shanghai were as likely to find it in a brothel as in a factory. The categories through which prostitution was understood were not fixed, and an attempt to trace them touches on questions of urban history, colonial and anticolonial state-making, and the intersection of sexuality, particularly female sexuality, with an emerging nationalist discourse.

From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Shanghai was a treaty port—a place where Westerners governed part of the city, 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

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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 (in the International Settlement, the French Concession, and the Chinese city).

Prostitution in Shanghai mirrored this urban variety; the hierarchy of prostitution paralleled the city's elaborate social structure.[1] 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 changing 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 respectable "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.

Throughout the twentieth century, elite men (and occasionally elite women) wrote a great deal about prostitution, but the types of attention they devoted to it changed over time. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, a literature of pleasure described high-class courtesans. Guidebooks, memoirs, and gossipy newspapers known as the "mosquito press" were all 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.[2] This literature also contained warnings about the capacity of courtesans to engage in financial strategizing 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 ac-

[1]This point is developed further in Gail Hershatter, "The Hierarchy of Shanghai Prostitution, 1919–1949," *Modern China* 15 (October 1989): 463–97.

[2]The term "mosquito press" was used in English; the Chinese term was *xiao bao*. See E. Perry Link, Jr., *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley, 1981), pp. 118–24.

tivities 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. One might conclude that there was one discourse on upper-class prostitution and another on lower-class prostitution. But as Shanghai moved through the second quarter of the twentieth century, the themes of victimization and sexual danger gradually increased in volume, all but drowning out the discourse of pleasure by the 1940s.

What accounts for the intensity of this condemnation? Beginning in the 1920s, reformers regularly decried prostitution as exploitation of women and a national shame, indeed as one of the keys to China's national weakness, 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 4th generation thus linked mistreatment of women with national humiliation, in which stronger nations treated China, in effect, like a woman: subordinated, humiliated, with pieces of its territory occupied by force, rights to its use bought and sold with impunity. These critics, who had seen and protested against China's treatment at Versailles in 1919, 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.

At the same time, the popular press, some of which had always emphasized the conflictual and exploitative aspects of prostitution, began as a whole to pay more attention to the less privileged and protected sectors of the trade. This was part of a more general development of a muckraking reportage that focused on a wide variety of social ills, including but not limited to begging, public sanitation, mistreatment of domestic workers, and prostitution. Targeted at an emerging middle-class urban audience, these stories addressed and attempted to resolve anxieties about social and sexual disorder. During the same period, the police and the courts, extending their authority into new realms in urban life, undertook to regulate prostitution, at least at the margins where it involved the sale into prostitution of "women of good families" or street soliciting, seen as a threat to public order.

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. 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 prosti-

tution 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, the city government, doctors, missionaries, social reformers, students, and revolutionaries. Studying prostitution and its changes is thus a good entrée, perhaps one of the best, into the thinking and social practices of many strata of Shanghai society, indeed of twentieth-century Chinese society.

This essay is somewhat more modest in scope: I examine guidebooks and the press, mostly in the first three decades of this century, in order to illustrate changing portrayals of prostitution and to plumb this material for clues about what this portrayal might have meant for prostitutes, for customers, and finally for late twentieth-century historians. I first delineate the changing hierarchy of prostitution, then compose several snapshots of Shanghai prostitution as recorded in contemporary sources, both across genres and across time. I briefly suggest some ways in which discourses on prostitution changed over the first half of the twentieth century. I read these discourses, both with and against the grain, for clues to the lives of this large and diverse group of women who, like most women and indeed most non-elite groups of both sexes, seldom represented themselves in the historical record. The term "discourse" is used in a broad sense here to mean not only the language used to describe prostitution in the sources, but also the social institutions and practices that helped to constitute (and were constituted by) that language, including the brothel, the court, families, and marriage. A study of language and institutions, both of which come to the historian not unmediated but encoded in texts of various sorts, tells us something about how prostitutes, customers, regulators, and reformers perceived and experienced their relationship to the world and to each other. The object here is not to excavate some subdiscursive "real" portrait of sex work in that city, or even to give a comprehensive account of all the ways it was talked about and by whom. Rather, the essay suggests a range of questions—about China, women, and visions of modernity—that can be addressed by listening hard to the dissonance in the chorus of audible sounds about prostitution.

NUMBERS AND HIERARCHY

Shanghai prostitution is important to the historian at least in part because of the numbers of women involved.[3] The estimates run from

[3]The statistics and classifications here are adapted from Hershatter, "The Hierarchy of Shanghai Prostitution," where complete citations are available.

4,500 licensed prostitutes in the International Settlement in the 1920s to 100,000 licensed and unlicensed prostitutes throughout the city in the 1930s and 1940s. The higher numbers would mean that one in every nineteen women was a prostitute, more if the cohort under consideration is narrowed to women between the ages of fifteen and thirty. These figures suggest that Shanghai, China's largest industrial city, arguably had more prostitutes than cotton-spinners.

Nevertheless, these numbers were collected by an inconsistent group for changing reasons from a population that had every reason to lie. Counting, like classifying and regulating, is not a neutral activity. The creation of statistics, in Shanghai as elsewhere, was part of a state-building process, and as such it was often resisted by the people it sought to incorporate. What was being counted, why, and by whom also changed frequently in Shanghai. Therefore the question of what the numbers signify cannot be answered without looking at changing conceptions of what prostitution was and where it stood in relation to questions of public health and social order. That requires an examination of the hierarchy of prostitution.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the prostitutes written about at greatest length were those who entertained the local literati.[4] Famed as singers and storytellers, they were commonly addressed with the respectful term *xiansheng,* most frequently translated into English as "sing-song girl." Members of this class regarded themselves as skilled entertainers rather than providers of sexual services; they prided themselves on "selling their voices rather than their bodies."

By the 1920s the sing-song girls had been absorbed into a less exalted group, the *changsan* class of prostitutes. The term *changsan* ("long three") is derived from one of the thirty-two ivory tiles used in *majiang.* Traditionally, *changsan* prostitutes charged three *yuan* for drinking with guests and three more for spending the night with them. Throughout the Republican period, *changsan* women were at the top of the hierarchy of prostitution. Like sing-song girls, they performed classical songs and scenes from operas, dressed in elaborate costumes, and specialized in hosting banquets and gambling parties for merchants and well-placed officials. It was difficult to make the acquaintance of a *changsan* without an introduction from one of her regular guests. Though a *changsan* might

[4]Further discussion of this material can be found in two of my published articles on prostitution. See Hershatter, "The Hierarchy of Shanghai Prostitution," pp. 468–71, and Gail Hershatter, "Prostitution and the Market in Women in Early Twentieth-Century Shanghai," in *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society,* ed. Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey (Berkeley, 1991), pp. 260–62. All translations in the present essay are my own.

become the regular sexual partner of one or possibly more men, gaining access to her sexual services was an elaborate process fraught with social peril. Next in the hierarchy were the *yao'er* prostitutes, also named for a *majiang* tile ("one two"). Sources agree that the singing of *yao'er* prostitutes was not as good nor their sexual services as expensive as those of the *changsan.*

The largest group of brothels in the next rank down were called "salt pork shops" (*xianrou zhuang*). Unlike all the ranks above them, they were devoted exclusively to the on-demand satisfaction of male copulative needs, with little attention to singing, banqueting, or other ancillary forms of entertainment. Women were the "salt pork"; a 1930s guide reminded its readers that "meat eaters value freshness. Salt pork has not only lost the true flavor of meat, but always smells foul to a greater or lesser degree. Friends without strong stomachs don't dare to encounter it in person."[5] In the late 1940s the clientele of the salt-pork shops were mainly laboring people.

By far the largest group of prostitutes in Republican Shanghai were the "pheasants" (*yeji* or *zhiji*). The term "pheasant" was a general category in Shanghai used to refer to anything or anyone transient, including rickshaws and steamships on irregular runs. Pheasant prostitutes were streetwalkers whose name described both their gaudy dress and their habit of "go[ing] about from place to place like wild birds." Every evening groups of them could be seen on both sides of the main streets, aggressively seeking customers. Guidebooks of the period repeatedly warned Shanghai visitors to beware of the pheasants, whose eager assaults on passersby could shade over into pickpocketing. Mixing his ornithological metaphors, one author warned that a pheasant fastened onto her prey "like an eagle seizing a chick."[6]

Although pheasants worked the streets, they were by no means independent of the brothel system. Most had been sold outright to a brothel, and they operated under the control of madams, often under more restrictive conditions than their higher-status sisters. Brothel attendants supervised them as they went about finding customers, who were then brought back to the brothel. In at least one respect they were certainly worse off than other prostitutes: because they did not remain in brothels, they frequently came into conflict with the local police who enforced municipal ordinances against street soliciting. One guide advised Shanghai visitors that the only way to shake off a determined pheasant

[5]Wang Dingjiu, *Shanghai menjing* (Key to Shanghai) ([Shanghai?] 1932), s.v. "Piao" (Visiting prostitutes), pp. 27–28.

[6]Tang Youfeng, *Xin Shanghai* (New Shanghai) (Shanghai, 1931), pp. 152–53.

was to drag her into the street, because then she would become fearful of police intervention and desist in her efforts.

The hierarchy of prostitution changed in the 1930s and 1940s, with the proliferation of modern ancillary occupations such as tea hostesses, taxi dancers, masseuses, and female guides. All these women were nominally hired to perform other than sexual services, but the income they earned was simply inadequate, unless they slept with customers for additional money. As paid companions, entertainers, and sex workers, each of these new types of prostitute appropriated some aspect of the older courtesan traditions; but they did so in Westernized dress, mimicking a different, newer elite from the one that shaped courtesan practice. Theirs was a "modern" form of prostitution, with emphasis on functional and efficient delivery of services to members of the commercial and industrial classes.

As Shanghai became a major economic, political, and cultural center during the first half of the twentieth century, the market in prostitutes grew and changed in nature.[7] What had been essentially a luxury market in courtesans became a market primarily geared to supplying sexual services for the growing numbers of unattached (though not necessarily unmarried) commercial and working-class men of the city. The increase in demand apparently was accompanied by a boom in supply, fed by a burgeoning population of refugees and peasants in distress with daughters whom they could not support. It appears that the "popularization" of prostitution was accompanied by degenerating conditions of work for the individual prostitutes, or at least that more and more women participated in the less privileged and more vulnerable sectors of the trade, including unlicensed prostitution of all types and the "modern" forms of disguised prostitution.

This change in the political economy of prostitution was reflected in the changing discourses on prostitution, but those changing discourses cannot be understood as a simple response to growing numbers of lower-class and disguised prostitutes working the streets and amusement halls. They also must be read, as suggested earlier, as a road map to the changing concerns of a changing elite.[8]

[7]See Hershatter, "The Hierarchy of Shanghai Prostitution," pp. 493–94.

[8]Mapping the changes in twentieth-century elites is a subject far too large for this essay. Many useful approaches to the topic are presented in Joseph W. Esherick and Mary Backus Rankin, eds., *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (Berkeley, 1990); for comments on the fusing of merchant and gentry elites in Shanghai, see ibid., p. 20.

SNAPSHOTS OF PROSTITUTION IN SHANGHAI

Two types of sources are helpful in mapping these concerns. Guidebooks and the so-called mosquito press dealt primarily but not exclusively with courtesans as social companions. The mainstream press reported on prostitutes of all ranks, usually as victims of oppressive social relations or threats to social order.

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 derive from a much older genre of reminiscences about prostitution but appear to have been published for a growing urban audience. They have titles such as "Precious mirror of the Shanghainese," "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."[9] Guidebooks included biographies of famous prostitutes; anecdotes about well-known customers; exhaustive glossaries of the language of the trade; meticulous mappings of brothel organization; descriptions of the proper behavior required of customers when a prostitute made a formal call or helped to host a banquet or gambling party; descriptions of fees, billing procedures, and tips; lists of festivals and the obligations of a regular customer at each season; accounts of taboos and religious observances; and tales of various scams run by prostitutes to relieve customers of cash.

The guidebooks can be read in conjunction with the tabloid newspapers of the mosquito press, which typically devoted a page or more to gossip about courtesans. One of the most famous was *Jingbao,* which was published every three days, beginning in 1919, for more than two decades.[10] *Jingbao* overlapped with the guidebooks in content but devoted a great deal of column space to tracking relationships between courtesans and the city's elite, as well as quarrels among courtesans and business successes or reversals. Most of the detailed descriptions con-

[9]Huang Renjing, *Huren baojian* (Precious mirror of the Shanghainese), subtitled in English *What the Chinese in Shanghai Ought to Know* (Shanghai, 1913); Wang Liaoweng, *Shanghai liushinian huajie shi* (A sixty-year history of the Shanghai flower world) (Shanghai, 1922); Zhan Kai, *Rouxiang yunshi* (A history of the charm of the gentle village), 3d ed. (Shanghai, 1917); Banchisheng [pseud.] (Half-crazy one), *Haishang yeyou beilan* (A complete look at Shanghai philandering), 4 *juan* (1891).

[10]*Jingbao* (The crystal) was published in Shanghai from 1919 to 1940. Link calls *Jingbao* "the premier example of the mosquito press for two decades" (p. 119). He gives its circulation in the 1920s as over ten thousand (p. 120).

cerned courtesan brothels, but many also included substantial attention to the configuration of the hierarchy as a whole.

Most guidebooks were engaged in a literature of nostalgia. Guidebooks written in the 1920s located the golden age of prostitution a quarter to a half century earlier. In fact, several of the guidebook authors explicitly said in their prefaces that they were recording the definitive historical account of a world that was about to disappear because of reform movements to abolish prostitution. One author even compared himself to the famous Han dynasty historians Ban Gu and Sima Qian.[11] And like classical historians of the Han and later, many of these authors reprinted almost verbatim (and without citation) material from earlier guidebooks. They also resembled classical Chinese historians in their predilection for comparing 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 mourned 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.[12] Part of their answer was to glorify Chinese cultural practices (now coded as relative rather than universal). And a part of that glorification was to meticulously explicate the cultivated and refined social practices of courtesans (as in, "The West has prostitutes—we have 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 was nonetheless a kind of unspoken standard against which these authors produced an account of the world they had lost.

The account of brothel organization suggests that at the top of the hierarchy, any picture of overweening madam and exploited, victimized prostitutes (the dominant portrayals in both reform-minded contemporary sources and any accounts collected after 1949) should be modified significantly. Courtesan houses were of two types. In one, a large house was rented by a male or (more commonly) a female brothel-keeper, who

[11]Qi Xia and Da Ru, eds., *Haishang hua yinglu* (A record in images of Shanghai flowers), rev. ed., 3 vols. (1915; Shanghai, 1917), vol. 1.

[12]Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate* (Berkeley, 1972).

sublet individual rooms to about a dozen courtesans. Meals, including lucrative banquets hosted by customers, were prepared by servants in a common kitchen. Particularly famous courtesans were actively recruited by the owner, who secured their services for one season at a time and welcomed them with elaborate ceremonies. The owner and the courtesans split the income from calls, banquets, and gambling parties, but the courtesan had to pay for her own meals, her personal servants (as opposed to the brothel staff), furniture, and electricity. A courtesan who attracted a great deal of business was sought by many brothels and might move frequently. One whose business did not go well, in contrast, might suffer the humiliation of losing her room at the end of the season. In the second, simpler type of upper-class brothel, a single courtesan, usually a famous one, rented her own dwelling and hired her own servants, installing herself at the pinnacle of a small hierarchy.[13]

These descriptions of brothel organization were intended as a guide to the consumer and a textual spectacle for the urban reading public. But they provide pieces of information to the historian as well, suggesting that courtesans were a group of active, autonomous businesswomen, each her own chief marketing agent as well as her own chief product. They marketed primarily social company rather than sexual services; the latter might be bestowed if the courtesan wished, but not in direct exchange for money or goods. Courtesans had a keen eye to their own financial security and the size of their business. Those who were most popular with customers retained a great deal of bargaining power with regard to brothel owners and might even become madams themselves. The courtesan world was a mobile one: courtesans seemed to change establishments at will, cooperating first with one madam or sister courtesan and then with another, adopting new professional names, changing brothels, moving up in status from courtesan to courtesan/owner to madam, even migrating between cities.

Often the most powerful woman in a brothel was not the courtesan or the owner but one of the older female servants. Many of these servants possessed considerable financial resources. Since courtesans billed their regular customers at the end of a season—three times a year—in the interim they had to front their own money for clothing, food, and entertainment expenses. The servants acted as bankers, making loans to

[13]For descriptions of brothel organization, see Huang Renjing, pp. 128–30; *Jingbao,* November 27, 1919, p. 3; Ping Jinya, "Jiu Shanghaide changji" (Prostitution in old Shanghai), in *Jiu Shanghaide yanduchang* (Opium, gambling, and prostitution in old Shanghai), ed. Shanghai shi wenshi guan (Shanghai, 1988), p. 160; Sun Yusheng [Haishang juewusheng, pseud.], *Jinüde shenghuo* (The life of prostitutes) (Shanghai, 1939), pp. 18–33; Wang Liaoweng, pp. 13–14.

courtesans, who often fell deeply into debt.[14] Some guidebooks indicate that becoming a banker/servant may have been part of the career path of aging courtesans who could no longer attract customers.[15]

The guidebooks and mosquito press offer catalogs of the pleasure, both explicit and implied, to be found in the courtesan houses. 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."[16] Descriptions of individual courtesans stressed their refinement and cultivation. A typical passage from *Jingbao* read, "When guests leave, she burns a stick of incense, makes a cup of Longjing tea, and does watercolors."[17] The tabloid described another woman thus: "She reads a lot and writes well, and knows foreign languages and Shakespeare."[18] Here the image of courtesan looked both ways—to the literature of nostalgia and to the West. The courtesan was not only defined with reference to *Dream of the Red Chamber* but also drew 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 were refracted in this world as well.

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 featured elegant poems written by customers in appreciation of courtesans.[19] Perhaps the most intricate ritual of describing and judging was a series of elections sponsored by the mosquito press, held

[14]Chunming shuju, ed., *Shanghai heimu yiqian zhong* (One thousand scandalous stories of Shanghai) (Shanghai, 1937), "Changsan," pp. 2–3; Sun Yusheng, p. 27; Wu Hanchi, ed., *Quanguo gejie qiekou da cidian* (National dictionary of secret language from all walks of life) (Shanghai, 1924), p. 6.

[15]Some of the most noted courtesans, however, remained active into their forties and beyond. See the comments on Lin Daiyu below.

[16]Huayu xiaozhu zhuren [pseud.] (Master of the flower rain villa), *Haishang qinglou tuji* (Records and drawings of Shanghai houses of prostitution) (1892), *juan* 1, p. 1.

[17]*Jingbao,* August 15, 1919, p. 3.

[18]*Jingbao,* August 27, 1919.

[19]For examples of this kind of poetry, see Chi Zhizheng, "*Huyou mengying*" (Dream images of Shanghai travels), ed. Hu Zhusheng (March 1893, Wenzhou Museum, photocopy of edited manuscript), pp. 4–8; Li chuang wo dusheng, ed. (Student who lies on the goosefoot bed), *Huitu Shanghai zaji* (Miscellaneous Shanghai notes, illustrated) (Shanghai, 1905), *juan* 6, p. 7, and *juan* 7, p. 7.

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 paralleling 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 *zhuangyuan,* 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 that 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, on the other hand, were willing to participate in the elections because they brought more business to their houses.[20]

Part of the pleasure in frequenting brothels had to do with business. In the reception rooms and private dining and gambling spaces of the *changsan* houses, businessmen met to cultivate the relationships leading to lucrative deals; politicians made alliances with other politicians. These gatherings might be private, but they were in no sense furtive. Courtesans were considered a feature of the urban entertainment scene, even arguably a source of civic pride. The fact that so much of the local commercial and political scene was conducted in the brothel suggests that it should be regarded as a type of semipublic space in Shanghai, one central to the social habits of the city's elite over the first half of the twentieth century. It also suggests that the brothel was much more than a venue for social and sexual encounters with courtesans.

Curiously, in the guidebooks the sexual act itself commanded none of the poetic language characteristic of novels. It was referred to simply as *luo xianghao,* "staying with an intimate," or *zhenge xiaohun,* "a true melting of the soul."[21] A regular sexual relationship with a courtesan was presented as a desirable goal, but the contours of desire itself were not part of the guidebook discourse.

The mosquito press, in reporting the successive liaisons made by

[20]On the elections, see Chan Qingshi [pseud.] (Attendant who repents emotion), *Haishang chunfang pu* (An album of Shanghai ladies), Shenbao guan, 4 *juan* (1884); Ping Jinya, pp. 166–67; Chen Rongguang [Chen Boxi], *Lao Shanghai* (Old Shanghai hand) (Shanghai, 1924), pp. 90–95; Huayu xiaozhu zhuren, *juan* 1, p. 2; Qi Xia and Da Ru, eds., vols. 1 and 2; Yu Muxia, *Shanghai linzhao* (Shanghai tidbits) (Shanghai, 1935), *ji,* pp. 37–38; Zhou Shoujuan, *Lao Shanghai sanshi nian jianwen lu* (A record of things seen by an old Shanghai hand in the last thirty years), 2 vols. (Shanghai, 1928), 2: 2–4, 38–51; Xu Ke, *Qingbai leichao,* vol. 38 (Qing unofficial reference book) (Shanghai, 1928), pp. 1–4.

[21]See, for example, Qi Xia and Da Ru, eds., vols. 1 and 2; Sun Yusheng, pp. 44–47, 94, 105–9; Wang Zhongxian, *Shanghai suyu tushuo* (An illustrated dictionary of Shanghai slang) (Shanghai, 1935; rpt. Hong Kong [c. 1970s]), p. 12; Yu Muxia, *ji,* pp. 43, 45.

courtesans, indicated the degree of control courtesans had over sexual and romantic relationships. Lovers might—or might not—overlap with clientele or even with husbands. Courtesans were known for their romantic alliances with male opera singers. Lin Daiyu, the famous courtesan named after the heroine of *Dream of the Red Chamber,* in her late forties began a liaison with an opera singer who was not yet twenty, laughingly telling friends, "I take it as a drug for my health."[22] The newspapers were full of stories of courtesans eloping with gilded youths, often over the objections of the man's family, or over the objections of the madam, who seldom wanted to lose a valuable courtesan she had trained.[23] For this reason, the guidebooks cautioned, madams did not like to see handsome young men as customers in the brothels. These stories seem to have been intended mostly to give readers a vicarious sense of being privy to the intimate lives of courtesans and customers. But they can also be read as delineating an arena within which a woman could choose her own companions—space most definitely not open to women outside of prostitution.

Finally, any discussion of guidebooks 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."[24] Guidebook readership may well have undergone a similar transformation. 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 almost 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 mentioned above. It also included the ineffable art of self-presentation. A successful customer enjoyed two benefits: he increased his likelihood of winning a prostitute's favor, and, equally important, he avoided ridicule

[22]*Jingbao,* March 3, 1919.

[23]See, for example, *Shibao,* July 10, 1929, p. 7.

[24]Stephen H. L. Cheng, "*Flowers of Shanghai* and the Late-Ch'ing Courtesan Novel" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, December 1979), p. 252.

by the courtesans. Someone who failed to meet the requirements by not spending enough money, by spending too much money, by dressing inappropriately, by assuming intimacy too quickly—generally, by saying or doing the wrong thing—would be ridiculed as a country bumpkin.[25] 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.

The guidebooks were a repository for a vast and varied cautionary literature, in which the dangers enumerated ranged from the annoying to the deadly. Accompanying 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-keeper, they would engage in various practices. 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 ax chop" (*kan futou*), requesting clothing or jewelry from a close customer.[26] They were said to be as skillful in matching their requests to the customer's resources as a doctor in writing a prescription of exactly the appropriate strength. The prescription was "flavored" with rice soup (a slang term for flattery), tears, vinegar (slang for jealousy), and sweet sugar syrup.[27] 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 cartoon-like balloon above her head: a fine house, a car, and a diamond ring.[28]

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 "beancurd" guest, for instance, was one who would do

[25]For examples of this kind of writing, see Sun Yusheng, p. 8; *Jingbao,* November 30, 1919, p. 3.

[26]Wu Hanchi, ed., pp. 9, 13; Wang Houzhe, *Shanghai baojian* (Precious mirror of Shanghai) (Shanghai, 1925); Ping Jinya, p. 160; Shuliu shanfang [pseud.], "Shanghai qinglou zhi jinxi guan" (A look at Shanghai brothels present and past), *Jingbao,* March 18, 1919, p. 3.

[27]Some authors (for example, Wang Zhongxian, p. 42) use the term *mitang* (rice soup). This is a homophone for the more frequently used *mitang,* soup of deception or enchantment potion, found in Sun Yusheng, pp. 120, 130; Wang Houzhe; Wang Dingjiu, p. 16; Yu Muxia, *shang,* p. 16.

[28]Wang Zhongxian, p. 42.

the woman's bidding. A "walnut" guest needed one hard knock before he would supply a woman with goods. 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.[29]

In efforts to increase her take, the guidebooks said, a woman might practice the "stratagem of [purposely] injuring one's body" (*kurou ji*), in which she pretended to be at odds with her madam. She might present their conflict as a verbal disagreement or might go further and suggest that the madam was physically mistreating her. She would then beg the customer to buy her out and take her as a concubine.[30] 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 into the "danger" category. The guidebooks and mosquito newspapers report that many courtesans aspired to marriage with a powerful man—or, more accurately, to concubinage. Principal wives usually were 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, in contrast, usually were 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, a woman who made such a match did not settle down into a relatively secure life but often stayed in a relationship just long enough so the suitor-cum-husband could clear her debts, pay her a "body price," and equip her with jewels and other valuables. The process of marrying under these circumstances was called "taking a bath," and stories were told of courtesans, including Lin Daiyu, who bathed many times in the course of their long careers.[31] Many of the women, impatient with the confinement and the emotional discomfort of being concubines, left their husbands and used their newly acquired resources to open their own establishments. When they chose sexual partners for love, rather than for material advantage, they were said to prefer actors or their own drivers to well-heeled literati and merchants. "They please customers for money," declared a 1917 guidebook, "but what they really like are actors."[32]

All of these stratagems, of course, can be read not as dangers but as

[29]Wang Liaoweng, p. 135.

[30]Sun Yusheng, pp. 68–69; Wang Houzhe.

[31]On her career and the frequent ablutions of Lin Daiyu and some of her fellow courtesans, see *Jingbao,* September 21, 1919, p. 3; Wang Liaoweng, pp. 50–56; and Zhou Shoujuan, 1:172–77.

[32]Qi Xia and Da Ru, eds., vol. 1. For a list of forty-seven liaisons between prostitutes and actors, see Chen Rongguang [Chen Boxi], pp. 123–28.

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 both madams and customers. "Ax-chop" income, for instance, went into the pocket of the courtesan, not the owner. When a courtesan became a concubine, the madam customarily was paid a fee, but so was the woman herself; she might use a marriage as an interim measure to terminate an unsatisfactory relationship with the madam and to accumulate financial resources. More broadly, the historian hears another message, although it is perhaps not exactly what the authors intended—life in the demimonde, for a woman with an established clientele and acute business skills, allowed more space than marriage for her to arrange her own time and control her own income. Women in the profession of prostitution recognized this, valued it, and acted accordingly.

A final danger found in the guidebooks was that of venereal disease. Usually the warning about venereal disease was coded 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. "Her 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 [*piao*], *changsan* are somewhat more reliable."[33] If a guidebook customer insisted on frequenting houses below the courtesan rank, he was advised to take a number of precautions: when paying a call on a prostitute, squeeze her hand and discreetly check whether it is inflamed; in bed, first inspect her elbow joint for lumps, and, if you find one, "pull up short at the overhanging cliff." In one of the most explicit passages to be found in the guidebooks, a 1932 work advises, "When the front lines where the two armies connect are tense," you can press down on the stomach and lower regions of your opponent. If she calls out in pain, she has venereal disease, and you must "immediately throw down your spear, don't begrudge the funds for the payment of soldiers or continue to press forward with the attack."[34] Insofar as warnings of venereal disease remained tied to the class of the prostitute, they could be read as indications that an elite man should seek out only *changsan* houses, rather than as a generalized comment on the dangers of frequenting brothels or the wages of sin.

Prostitutes of lower than courtesan rank typically were portrayed as

[33]Sun Yusheng, p. 159.
[34]Wang Dingjiu, p. 25.

victims rather than perpetrators in these accounts—forced by their madams to have repeated sexual relations until and even after they became infected.[35] This was perhaps the single note of victimization consistently heard in these guidebooks. Little was said in the guidebooks about women being sold outright into prostitution or entering into contracts against their will. For an elite audience, precise mechanisms of entry into the profession were not of interest. Not only inside the brothel, but also in matters of national significance, the women were portrayed as agents, not as victims. During the May 4th movement of 1919, for instance, students and other urban dwellers all over the country protested the negotiations at Versailles that ceded German rights over Chinese territory to Japan, rather than returning control to China. Echoes heard in the demimonde included courtesans closing down their establishments for a day to protest the "national shame," leafleting in support of a citywide strike, setting up a refreshment stand for protesting students, and joining the boycott of Japanese goods.[36] In short, courtesans were written into the civic and national drama as legitimate actors, not victims. The overwhelming picture that emerges from a reading of the guidebooks and the mosquito press is a world of women with a great deal of room to choose their own companions and arrange their own working conditions, though obviously within many constraints, living lives of occasional penury but not serious material deprivation. Such a woman might break the heart of a son of the Shanghai elite, but her existence would not cause him any serious moral, political, or legal problems. Courtesans were not objects of pity.

A survey of Shanghai's earliest and most respected Chinese newspaper, the *Shenbao,* yields a very different picture, however. Instead of cultivated, autonomous, upwardly mobile, romantically active courtesans, in the pages of the *Shenbao* in 1919 appeared a group of poor, oppressed, exploited, often battered prostitutes. They were not courtesans but usually were of the pheasant class—streetwalkers. They were often barely out of childhood, although occasionally they were married women. Stories stressed their rural origins and the fact that they were either kidnapped and sold into prostitution or pawned by destitute parents. (No embodiments of urbanity, they.)[37] In either case, the reports emphasized that the women did not wish to be prostitutes, and from

[35]See, for example, Sun Yusheng, pp. 170–71.

[36]*Shenbao,* May 10, 1919, p. 11; *Jingbao,* June 3, 1919, p. 3, and June 12, 1919, p. 3.

[37]This type of story about prostitutes is analyzed more fully in Gail Hershatter, "Sex Work and Social Order: Prostitutes, Their Families, and the State in Twentieth-Century Shanghai," paper presented at the Conference on Family Process and Political Process in Modern Chinese History, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Taipei, January 3–5, 1992.

what was said about the circumstances of their daily lives, it is not difficult to imagine why. They 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 read in its entirety: "Pheasant Dai Ayuan, from Changzhou, was arrested on Nanjing Road by Patrolman number 318 from the Laozha police station and fined five *yuan.*"[38] Occasionally, in corroboration of the guidebook accounts, an article mentioned that a streetwalker had venereal disease and had been cruelly treated by her madam.[39]

Obviously, one way to reconcile these two very different snapshots is to point out that the mosquito press and the guidebooks were describing women at the top of the hierarchy of prostitution, and the *Shenbao* and other similar newspapers were 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 circumstances, under duress, for cash, in the process posing both a danger to social order (dealt with by the police) and a danger to public health (hinted at in the accounts of venereal disease). So if we take these wildly differing accounts at face value, we have to question whether the single category of 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.

But there is another, even trickier, question to ask about these sources: Do the different "facts" they report reflect a difference in preoccupations on the part of the writers, the readers, and the newspaper editors? Among the literate Shanghai population who wrote and read these newspapers, was one segment concerned mostly with the pleasures to be found in frequenting courtesans, while another segment focused on the social and medical dangers that prostitution posed to women and to society as a whole? Or was there one group writing and reading both kinds of accounts, who thought courtesans were a source of pleasure and streetwalkers a source of danger?

Further research on Shanghai society and the place of prostitution in it may permit a further mapping of authors and readers. Ultimately, however, it is probably wise to abandon attempts at reconciling discourses and to look instead at their differences. Prostitution was an ex-

[38] *Shenbao,* November 12, 1919, p. 11.
[39] See, for example, *Shenbao,* May 7, 1919, p. 11.

traordinarily flexible signifier for many different kinds of Chinese engaged in many different conversations. The result was a cluster of discourses—what might be described as a dissonant chorus that raises questions both about the contemporary meaning of the category of prostitution and about the concerns of the patrons and the wider urban population. Above all, the sources compel skepticism about the notion that we can retrieve from history a single set of descriptive or explanatory facts about prostitutes.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the guidebooks, mosquito press, and newspapers of record maintained their coverage of prostitution, but with marked changes. Some voices grew louder, others muted. Although the courtesan did not completely vanish, appearing in the literature of nostalgia and in classificatory lists through the 1940s, she was no longer the emblematic figure of the sex trade. She was replaced by the disease-carrying, publicly visible, disorderly pheasant. Discussions of prostitution became medicalized, and its treatment increasingly was coded as a public health problem. This theme can be seen 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.[40] But by the 1930s and early 1940s it appears frequently in Chinese sources—typically with reference not to courtesans, but to pheasants and other lower-class prostitutes. By 1941, in fact, the *Shenbao* ran a series of articles that described the hierarchy of prostitution, refiguring it as a hierarchy of venereal disease. The articles stated that, according to local experts, at least half of the Shanghai population was infected with social diseases; that 90 percent of venereal disease was first spread by prostitutes; 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 tour 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 to stop work if they became infected.[41]

Parallel to the medicalization of prostitution was the emergence of a legal discourse, which did not deem prostitution illegal but regulated it in a way that offered protection to "women of good families" and focused on validity of contracts, partly as an indicator of who such women

[40]For a fuller discussion of these Western sources, see Gail Hershatter, "Regulating Sex in Shanghai: The Reform of Prostitution in 1920 and 1951," in Frederic Wakeman and Wen-hsin Yeh, eds., *Shanghai Sojourners* (Berkeley, 1992).

[41]*Shenbao,* October 31–November 3, 1941.

were. A woman of good family, legally speaking, was one whose family did not intend to sell her, who found herself in a brothel without a contract that legalized her presence there. Frequently cases were reported in the press of a woman or members of her natal or marital family going to court to assert that she had been sold into prostitution against her will. Only a woman who could prove that she had been forced into prostitution could hope to get legal help in fleeing the brothel system.[42] Prostitutes of any rank could and did sue to be released from an illegal contract or to alter their status. By the late 1920s, prostitution, both high-class and low-class, was a litigable sphere, no longer a matter only of pleasure or money but of contestable contractual obligations and legal regulation. Beyond indicating the emergence of a legal discourse, these accounts also treat relationships between prostitutes, on the one hand, and madams or traffickers, on the other, as points of conflict, regardless of whether the sex worker was a courtesan or a pheasant. Prostitutes almost invariably were portrayed as victims in these relationships. More generally, prostitutes increasingly appeared in written sources as victims of a variety of oppressors: the labor market, a society that devalued daughters, the madam, inconstant patrons and lovers, and occasionally the state.

The third theme of increasing prominence, sounded by reformers and by government agencies, was the need for regulation of the sex trade as a whole, usually without regard to rank in the hierarchy. Because of their threat to public health and order—and also, no doubt, because of their increasing numbers and potential for generating revenue—prostitutes in the Republican period attracted the intensified interest of a state that was itself growing increasingly intrusive and tutelary.[43] The state—in this case, the multiple municipal governments of Shanghai—began systematically to regulate, tax, or attempt to eliminate prostitution. As early as 1920, the International Settlement government, pressured by foreign missionaries to abolish "commercialized vice," licensed all brothels and then progressively withdrew the licenses; the result of this foreign-run campaign was, as predicted by its opponents, an upsurge in unlicensed prostitution.[44]

During the 1910s and 1920s, the idea that prostitution was a national disgrace and a contributory factor in China's national weakness gained currency among Chinese elites, including Chinese Christians

[42]See, for instance, *Shenbao,* May 11 and 13, 1920, p. 11; *Shibao,* April 8 and 12, July 15, and November 16, 1929, p. 7.

[43]The phrase is David Strand's. See David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley, 1989), p. 66.

[44]Hershatter, "Regulating Sex in Shanghai," pp. 153–98.

and their secular May 4th counterparts. In a Chinese-language guide to Shanghai, which bore the didactic English subtitle *What the Chinese in Shanghai Ought to Know,* Chinese Christian Huang Renjing commented: "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 hope that our people will learn from the Westerners, not 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."[45] Chinese elites 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."[46]

The most rapid and dramatic transformation of the discourse on prostitution occurred after the Communists took control of Shanghai in 1949. In the 1950s, the new Communist leadership saw the elimination of prostitution as a potent symbol of China's emergence as a strong, healthy nation. A description of their successful campaign to eliminate prostitution in the 1950s is beyond the scope of this essay, but even a cursory examination makes clear its implications for the discourse on prostitution.[47] The language the Communists used to describe the elimination of prostitution was that of reeducation, of redemption from imperialism, of creation of a new woman, free from her past shameful history as China was free from her national shame. Like earlier reformers, functionaries of the Communist government regarded prostitution as a social illness. Unlike earlier reformers, though, they had much greater control of state power and an expansive definition of the scope of activity for that power. They appropriated some aspects of older discourses on prostitution—the public health threat posed by venereal disease, for instance—and literally drowned out the rest, using public media to discredit discourses of pleasure and entertainment; closing the brothels and forcibly altering the social environment in which they flourished; creating a Women's Labor Training Institute to house (that is, confine), medically treat, reeducate, and find jobs for ex-prostitutes;

[45]Huang Renjing (n. 9 above), pp. 134–35.

[46]*Chinese Recorder,* August 1920, pp. 579–80.

[47]This campaign is discussed in Hershatter, "Regulating Sex in Shanghai."

even acting as a matchmaking bureau to find respectable mates for ex-prostitutes, thus "renaturalizing" them into the familial order. In other words, this government moved energetically into alteration of the labor market, the law, the police, the press, the brothel, and even marriage and the family, in a way that rapidly and forcibly altered the discourse on prostitution.

The transformation of the discourse on prostitution over the period from 1919 to 1949 was uneven and incomplete. In 1919 one could find stories of victimization and venereal disease in the press. And in 1929, even in 1939, one could still find stories of attractive, entrepreneurial, successful, socially and geographically mobile prostitutes. These accounts, however, shared space with a growing body of literature focused on litigation, violence, victimization, medicalization, and taxation.

TOWARD A CONCLUSION

The dissonant chorus of voices on prostitution appeared to grow more unified over time, with emphasis on the dangers rather than the pleasures of prostitution. The historian has to ask, Why? 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 such that it was regarded as more disruptive of social order, 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 those who wrote about prostitution, considering the changing self-definition of urban elites, the effect of the May 4th 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 from Chinese radical politics. The discourse on prostitution should also be counterpoised to the parallel and intersecting struggles over the meanings of marriage and family, barely alluded to in this essay. It is interesting, for instance, that courtesans were initially regarded as social as well as sexual companions and were portrayed as offering a range of companionship and choice not to be found in arranged marriages. In the social ferment that followed the May 4th 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 great 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 dialogue with marriage.

Similarly, reformers and state authorities repeatedly counterpoised prostitutes to women-in-families. The nationalist regime and its twentieth-century municipal governments sought to extend their domain of regulation into 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 social order, a crisis that would entail the renaturalizing of women into the familial order as part of its resolution. This belief about the proper place of women was not challenged in 1949; the prostitution reform campaign of 1951 conducted by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) shows that administrators from that period shared the same assumptions about the need to restore women to the family and thus order society.[48] Encoded and enforced as government policy, these "merely" discursive constructions of prostitution had a profound impact on the daily lives of prostitutes.

The argument here is that material and ideological changes cannot and should not be examined separately and that neither can be regarded as "determinative in the last instance" of the conditions of prostitutes' lives. Changes in migration patterns and economic opportunities might 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 to shape the language in which increased prostitution acquired meaning, even giving it the modern term for prostitute, *jinü* (prostitute female), which replaced the earlier *mingji* (famous prostitute). And the elite helped to shape the institutions that emerged to reform or regulate prostitution—all of which, in turn, became part of the material conditions of prostitutes' lives. Changes in the legal and reform discourses on prostitution may also

[48]See ibid.

have led (though evidence on this is mixed) to a decline of the upper-class brothel as an institution.

Finally, one encounters major limitations in using the discourses of pleasure, reform, and regulation as a blueprint for reconstructing the lived lives of these women. Virtually all of the sources that survive for the historian to study were written by men for a male audience. They were male representations of a particularly female experience. The voices of the patron, the reformer, the lawyer, and eventually the doctor are far more audible than the voices of the prostitutes.

A "different voice" among this male chorus was provided by some of the women who wrote for women's magazines, particularly in the 1930s—some of the main reformist voices of that era. But their representations of prostitution were bounded, if not by gender differences, then most assuredly by class. Their writings were rich in the rhetoric of social purity and pity for fallen sisters.[49] In fact, their voices testify to extreme degrees of victimization, testimony later expanded upon and given official approval by the PRC-era municipal government. So if the male voices provide a gender-bounded discourse of pleasure (male) and danger (to males), the female reformist voices provide a class-bounded discourse of victimization (of lower-class women by men) and redemption (of prostitutes by their upper-class sisters). Continually obscured in all of this are the voices of the prostitutes themselves—voices which, while surely not unified, given the variety of arrangements under which women sold sexual services, certainly would sound different from what we are able to hear at a safely historical distance today.

Of course, the much sought voices of the prostitutes themselves, if we could hear them, would not be unmediated; their daily lives, struggles, and self-perception were constructed in part by the other voices and institutions. 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, and what their options were. And yet Shanghai prostitutes did not exist under a single, omnistructuring dominant discourse, either. The various discourses on prostitution were themselves in competition and in flux. Between and within them, prostitutes appear to have engaged in everyday practices that resisted the dominant discourses and improved 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. By reading and listening against the grain, we can

[49]See, for example, Chen Luwei, "Shourong jinüde jingguo" (The process of taking in prostitutes), *Shanghai funü* 1 (April 1938): 21–22.

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 that 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.