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Contributions to *East Asian History*
Division of Pacific & Asian History, Research School of Pacific & Asian Studies
Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia
Phone +61 6 249 3140  Fax +61 6 249 5525

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Cover photograph Sing-song girls of Hangchou (from Grace Thompson Seton, *Chinese Lanterns* [New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1924])
SELLING SMILES IN CANTON:
PROSTITUTION IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC

Virgil Kit-yiu Ho 何傑堯

This article does not claim to be a comprehensive history of prostitution in Canton. It is concerned, rather, with the differing social perceptions of prostitution and prostitutes and presents an alternative, though possibly no less realistic, view of the job and life of those in that profession in Canton in the 1920s and '30s.

1. An Enigmatic 'Problem'

In order to discredit their predecessor-regime, official Chinese Communist historians hold that the problem of prostitution in Canton during the Republican period, as in the rest of China, indisputably grew worse.¹ Most social historians of this subject also generally believe that due to the lowering of 'moral' standards in relation to sex, the persistence of the system of concubinage, the inferior social and family position of Chinese women, and the growing pauperization of rural and urban dwellers, the 'problem' of prostitution became further aggravated during this period.²

It is arguable, however, whether the lowering of moral standards and the growth of permissive attitudes toward sex and love necessarily led more and more young women to prostitute themselves. Prostitution as a profession was still socially and morally despised—a deep-seated perception which was not easily altered by any change in attitudes toward sex. Nor was the concubine system, women's low social position, or poverty 'new' to Chinese society. Prostitution, moreover, exists in every human society, both affluent and poor, past and present. The fundamental question is, therefore, whether, compared with the past, the problem of prostitution really grew worse during the Republic or not?

It is impossible to know exactly how many brothels and prostitutes exist-


ed in Canton at any given period. Surviving sources tend to indicate, however, that their number in Republican Canton was falling rather than rising, especially as compared to the situation in Imperial times. A late seventeenth-century Cantonese scholar wrote that “before his time,” the extent of both the lavishness and the prosperity of the floating-brothel business in Canton had surpassed even that of Ming-dynasty Nanking.  

The author of an early nineteenth-century travelogue was told by local Cantonese that the number of these brothels, though then by no means few, was only about one-tenth of what it had been “thirty years ago.”  

Hence, it seems that their number had been steadily decreasing since early Ch'ing times.

Official statistics for Republican Canton, though unreliable, show that the number of licensed brothels actually remained quite stable. In 1913, there were 169 such brothels in Canton; in 1926, an official survey indicates that there were 131. Of these, seventy were high-class establishments. This was, nevertheless, a significant drop compared with the some 400 in the mid-nineteenth century. An allegedly “systematic” survey of 1934 shows that there were about 300 brothels of all classes in Canton, though the number of high-class establishments had fallen to seventeen. But the greatest sign of improvement was in the reduced number of floating brothels. A mid-Ch'ing senior official was perplexed by the proliferation of all classes and sizes of these operating on Canton's waterfront. According to his rough estimate, some 8,000 women earned their living by this kind of prostitution, though the possibility should not be ruled out that this rather alarming estimate was based on the popular misperception that most Tanka women worked as prostitutes. Nevertheless, an official record of 1924 shows that there were fewer than 100 licensed floating brothels in Canton, while according to the “first systematic” census taken in Canton in 1932, of the 100,000 “boat people” only about 1,000 (700 women and 300 men) were said to be working on the 300 or so floating brothels.

The number of prostitutes in this period also shows no sign of rapid increase, especially compared with the mid- and late-Ch'ing periods. A Republican writer estimated that high-class courtesans alone in Canton in mid- and late-Ch'ing times had numbered in the region of 5,000. On top of this were countless numbers of lower-class 'mobile' courtesans ' 思流明案' (liu ch'ang 流娼) mainly from other provinces. Records of the Canton Municipal Government, however, if they can be relied on, indicate that the number of licensed prostitutes in the Republican period remained between 1,000 and 1,500. Even taking into account the presence of an estimated 2,600 unlicensed prostitutes in the city, the total number was still quite insignificant compared with the Ch'ing period, when 'flowery business' (hua shib 花事) was remorsefully claimed by some Republican writers to have been at its peak. Fires which broke out in the brothel quarter during the late-Ch'ing and the early-Republican periods, coupled with the intermittent military carnage of the 1910s and 1920s, were seen to have been detrimental to the brothel business in Canton.

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5 Umeda Ikuzō, “Kanton no iji oyobi eisei” [Medical care and hygiene in Kwangtung], in Shina [China], ed. Tcadô Bunkai Chôsa Hensanbu, vol.4, no.9 (1913), p.16. But this figure can only serve as a reference, rather than as credible evidence, for the situation.
6 Juan Fang-fu, Sex in China (New York: Plenum Press, 1991), p.72. He does not cite a source on this point.
10 Ethnic prejudice towards the Tanka (boat-people) women persisted throughout the Republican period. These women continued to be mistaken for prostitutes. Nevertheless, an official record of 1924 shows that there were 131 such brothels in Canton; in 1926, an official survey indicates that there were 131. Of these, seventy were high-class establishments. This was, nevertheless, a significant drop compared with the some 400 in the mid-nineteenth century. An allegedly “systematic” survey of 1934 shows that there were about 300 brothels of all classes in Canton, though the number of high-class establishments had fallen to seventeen. But the greatest sign of improvement was in the reduced number of floating brothels. A mid-Ch'ing senior official was perplexed by the proliferation of all classes and sizes of these operating on Canton's waterfront. According to his rough estimate, some 8,000 women earned their living by this kind of prostitution, though the possibility should not be ruled out that this rather alarming estimate was based on the popular misperception that most Tanka women worked as prostitutes. Nevertheless, an official record of 1924 shows that there were fewer than 100 licensed floating brothels in Canton, while according to the “first systematic” census taken in Canton in 1932, of the 100,000 “boat people” only about 1,000 (700 women and 300 men) were said to be working on the 300 or so floating brothels.

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The large number of unlicensed prostitutes in Canton increased the difficulty of obtaining reliable information on the overall prostitution situation. If the official statistics for licensed prostitutes were marked by obvious flaws, so much more difficult was it to make a realistic estimate of the number of unlicensed prostitutes. Both writers of that time and present-day historians, however, prefer to believe that the problem of clandestine prostitution was serious, and getting steadily worse. But their arguments were not, and are not, supported by any convincing evidence.

Police records that have survived provide hints of the state of unlicensed prostitution in Canton. In 1923, some twenty unlicensed street-walkers were arrested and fined by the police\(^\text{20}\); in 1928, this number rose to about 1,200, and constituted the second largest category of apprehension.\(^\text{21}\) This remarkable increase might have been due simply to the growth in the number of unlicensed prostitutes in Canton; no doubt, too, the police force was more efficient in making arrests (with a reward system that helped to boost the enthusiasm of the rank and file), and the municipal administration was keeping better records.

There would seem to be no way to obtain a truly accurate picture of prostitution in Republican Canton. Official and unofficial statistics, though not without their weaknesses, suggest a different situation from the emotionally charged accounts of Republican writers and modern historians. Whether prostitution in Republican Canton was a ‘permanent sore’ or not is a question that remains unanswered.

2. Conflicting Perceptions of Prostitutes

For reasons of political and ideological necessity, Chinese Communist historians have commonly described prostitutes as victims of the “semi-feudal,” “semi-colonial,” and exploitative capitalist Republican society.\(^\text{22}\) Poverty and abduction are given as the two main reasons girls entered the profession.\(^\text{23}\)

Republican Cantonese writers, however, also fostered this pitiable image of prostitutes. Prostitution was no longer seen as a delightful pastime, but as “a symbol of a nation’s impoverishment, corruption, and decadence.”\(^\text{24}\) In Ou-yang Shan’s 歐陽山 Tsai shen-ching-li 在深井裡 (In the deep well), the torments suffered by the prostitute were perhaps representative of the perception held by many post-May Fourth ‘conscientious’ writers. Village-girl Liu Fei-yun lives with her alcoholic and abusive uncle. One day, when her uncle threatens to sell her as a whore destined for Singapore, she escapes to Canton where she finds herself alone and helpless. Consequently, she becomes a prostitute in order to support herself and, later, her pseudo-mother and a syphilitic ‘sister’. Her life as an unlicensed prostitute is depicted as being hard. She is usually rewarded for a day without business with a severe beating by the ‘madam’ of the brothel.

\(^\text{13}\) Wang Shu-nu, Ch’ang-pei, pp.302–7.
\(^\text{14}\) Chao I, “Yen-pao tsu-chih.”
\(^\text{16}\) From a survey by the Social Bureau of the Canton municipal government in 1926, cited by Wang Shu-nu, Ch’ang-pei, p.333. The number of prostitutes in Canton in 1931 was unofficially estimated to be about 5,000. Hua-tzu jih-pao (Hong Kong) (hereafter HTJP), 14.4.1931, p.1.4. Another unofficial estimate in the late 1920s was 10,000. Nan-yangshang-pao (Singapore) (hereafter NYP), 20.9.1928, p.24.
\(^\text{17}\) A well-known Cantonese writer, Chiu-chung-feng-fu, deeply lamented the demise of the brothel ‘high culture’ and the fading of that traditional link between well-educated courtesans and scholars in imperial China. In his Ling-nan feng-yueh shib [A history of prostitution in Ling-nan] (Canton, c.1930s) (hereafter LNFY) he recorded, out of nostalgia, the romantic life stories of some of the well-known Cantonese courtesans of the Ch’ing period. See also Chiu-chung-feng-fu, “Chu-chiang hua shih” [A history of prostitution in the Pearl River area], Kuang-chou li-pai-liu [Canton Saturday] (hereafter KCLPl), vols 16, 20 (1934), pp.13–16.
\(^\text{22}\) The prostitute subjects in such novels often end up abandoned by their clients or lovers, or, if they work clandestinely, imprisoned. Tien Chung-liang, Tien Chung-chi and Sun Ch’ang-hsi, eds, Ch’ung-kuo hsien-tai hsiao-shuo shih [A history of the modern Chinese novels] (Shan-tung: Shan-tung Wen-i Ch’u-pan-she, 1987), p.166.
\(^\text{24}\) Gronewold, Beautiful merchandise, p.2.
One day, a hairy and robust vegetable hawker, who is well-known for his harshness in abusing girls, comes to patronize Liu again. As soon as he sees her, he grasps her skinny body tightly, “like a crab squeezing its prey.” With all his weight he presses down on her. He rubs his dirty feet over her face, tugs at her tongue with his blackened fingers, and twists her into a ball. When Chao Szu, a worker who tries to persuade Liu to leave this “deep well,” sees this, his pity for her turns into rage, and he throws out the vegetable hawker. But Liu is not pleased because a regular client has been lost, and cries out in despair.

She closes the wooden door hurriedly, tears open her shirt, and takes off her trousers. Then she comes close to me and shouts: “Look! Take a good look at the scars on my body! Do you think you’ve done me a good thing by booting him out? Right! He’s gone now. But for me it means another round of whipping, another torture-session of burning [by my madam ...].” After a while she is exhausted ... . She lays her head on my thigh, and bursts in tears.25

Physical emaciation and ravaged health was held to be another ‘necessar)’ consequence’ of working as a prostitute. Although Liu is just twenty, she is so worn that she looks old far beyond her years. At the end of the story she is described as “having a pale and aged face,” while “no part of her body is not worn out and weak.”26 She also suffers from tuberculosis. But even in this very bad state of health she goes on working. Her physical debilitation aggravates the inevitable process of spiritual corruption. She loses any sense of purpose and forgets any dreams for her future. She becomes a neurotic, staring at her reflection in the mirror, then smashing it, and biting her wooden comb until it breaks.27

Liu’s “last assignment” is to be “hired out” to four Shanghaiese workers for a month. She is obliged to sleep with them day and night. In the end, she disappears from her “workplace,” and probably dies of tuberculosis.

Life as a derelict prostitute is already pitiable enough. But in order to highlight the plight of these women, Ou-yang Shan describes the degraded working environment of Liu in great detail:

Whenever I walk into that room [where Liu sleeps with her clients], it smells pungent and stinks ... of herbal medicine and medical sulphuric cream. The floor is strewn with drops of thick phlegm, empty tincans, charcoal ash, and blood-stained paper. Table and chairs are covered with dust, dirty clothes, hair, pieces of broken glass, and a wooden comb with
Ou-yang's intention, in short, was to 'teach' his readers that to be a prostitute in this period was the most miserable fate that could befall a woman.

In a short play written by a high-school student in Canton, the torment of its protagonist was similar to Liu Fei-yun's. The setting of the play is a cold mid-winter evening in the countryside in the North. The prostitute Lien Lien is being dragged by her hair from a brothel by a vindictive fat madam who is punishing her for being infected by venereal disease, which drives many regulars away. She has been mistreated on this account for some months already before being thrown out now. Her two thin undergarments and short skirt are hardly sufficient to keep her warm in the bitter cold. For three days she has no food. Shivering in the icy weather, she feels she has lost everything, even her sense of existence.

Suddenly she spots a man walking towards her. Overcome by desperation as much as joy she tries everything she can, from flirting to begging, to get him to stop. The young man ignores her until she offers to sit naked on the snow-covered pavement for five minutes in return for twenty cents. In addition, the man will flagellate her for half a cent per stroke. When the abuse is over, blood oozes from the new wounds on Lien's already scarred back. With over one yuan in her hand, however, she feels the world is once again good to her. Her mind is now so full of images of hot food that she pays no attention to the pain that wracks her back. She hurries to a restaurant which is a-twinkle with neon-lights.

Some people saw prostitutes simply as victims of an unjust social system, who were to be portrayed as pathetic, rather than wicked or despicable, characters. Biographies of courtesans in 'random notes' of the late Ch'ing and in a 1931 courtesan's guide, show that morally these women often surpassed ordinary men in happier circumstances. Such literature is full of praise for their extraordinary sensitivity, strong commitment to love, cultural refinement, and spirit of filial self-sacrifice which prompted them to work as courtesans in order to save their families from destitution. This favourable portrayal of prostitutes was probably intended to depict the hardship they suffered in their profession as even more unbearable and pitiful—and thus render more convincing and justifiable an attack on the society that tolerated this. Liu Fei-yun, the derelict street-walker in Ou-yang Shan's 歐陽^{28}山 Tsai shen-ching-li在深井里 is also portrayed as a compassionate and patriotic woman: she is the only passenger on a public bus who gives money to students asking for donations to support the anti-Japanese resistance campaign in 1932. And, as already mentioned, she continues to prostitute herself, despite her serious ill-health, in order to maintain her syphilitic sister and elderly 'mother'.

A similarly favourable view of prostitutes was expressed in a compilation of Yueh-ou 祐 오 style vernacular love-songs written in the 1920s. As their nineteenth-century prototypes had done, many of these songs praised the
devotion and sincerity of courtesans towards their lover-clients, who, by comparison, were far less honest.\textsuperscript{34} More interestingly, the turbulent political situation of the first decade of the Republican era seemed to help to elevate the image of prostitutes, who were sometimes considered morally superior to, and socially more useful than, warlords bent on destruction. This is illustrated by the following words from a song entitled “Working as a whore like us”:

\ldots after they [the warlords] have gained power, they rage about waging war [against other warlords] \ldots They always slip away as soon as their stomachs have been satisfied with [our] food \ldots Although we are considered decayed flowers and rotten willows, we can still speak out. We may be doomed to be whores, [but our sense of] sisterhood still allows us to resolve disputes by discussion.\textsuperscript{35}

Prostitutes were seen to be more ‘constructive’ than military men because at least they provided the public with entertainment and supported the virtuous axiom of freedom of speech. In another song on a similar theme, prostitutes are said to be more dignified than obsequious officials, and their way of earning an income more conducive to moral pride.\textsuperscript{36}

Even a swindling prostitute’s misdeeds were more justifiable than a warlord’s. One of these prostitutes, when asked whether she had ever felt remorse over her misbehaviour, answered confidently:

I have been involved in this business for years. Swindling is my way of doing business and that’s how I can earn the money that keeps me alive. [But] all the men whom I have squeezed enjoyed [my services]. I’ve never heard a word of complaint \ldots Swindlers abound in this world. Am I the only one? \ldots At present, are those men who are armed with swords, go about in motor-cars and wear the fearsome visage of a warlord, really gifted with the military talent of Sun-tzu or Wu Ch’? They do not know how to defend their country against foreign aggression, how to stop civilians from being massacred, how to deal with the issue of unequal treaties, and yet they never feel ashamed of living in spacious Western-style residences \ldots Aren’t these men also profiting by harming others?\textsuperscript{37}

These words stunned the moralist writer so much that he could hardly make any further comment. Prostitutes might be seen as ‘sufferers’ of abuse and exploitation, but they were not necessarily perceived as socially and morally inferior to other low-class people.

With the increase in the number of clandestine prostitutes in this period who were believed to be engaged in that occupation for reasons of debauchery or greed, many Cantonese no longer saw prostitutes as victims of society. A contemporary writer, K’ung Fu-an, noted that most pre-Republican prostitutes were to be pitied because they were generally forced into the profession by economic hardship or other reasons beyond their control. In Republican Canton, however, many women prostituted themselves simply to earn more money, or to chase their illusive dream of modern ‘moral freedom’. This was far less deserving of sympathy.\textsuperscript{38}

K’ung’s view accorded with that of a writer on the subject in Shanghai.

\textsuperscript{34} See, for example, “Hsin-yu kao” [Notes for the Hsin-yu year (1921–22)], \textit{HYOCH}, pp.2–4. For nineteenth-century examples see Clementi, \textit{Cantonese love-songs} (English text), p.5.

\textsuperscript{35} “Tso wo-ti ni-fen lao-chu,” “Hsin-yu kao,” \textit{HYOCH}, p.11.

\textsuperscript{36} “Kuan li tu wu chu tso” [You don’t even want to be an official], “Kuei-hai kao” [Notes for the Kuei-hai year (1923–24)], ibid., pp.10–11.

\textsuperscript{37} Ching Fo, “Mai-shen-che yen” [Tales of a prostitute], \textit{Kuang-chou tsa-chib} 30 (1934), pp.3–4.

In the latter's view, all prostitutes in Shanghai, with the exception of the most servile low-class harlots, were vicious and should be treated with caution instead of sympathy. He repeatedly warned his readers that most prostitutes were money-grubbing, and that they should guard against being deceived because all of these women were insincere and dishonest about affairs of the heart.39

It is perhaps due to this jaundiced view of contemporary prostitutes that Canton saw an upsurge of interest in the romantic life-stories of virtuous high-class courtesans and the refined tradition of superior brothels in imperial Kwangtung. This was reflected in a proliferation of articles, poems, and books on the subject. K'ung Fu-an was one of these writers of nostalgia. In the preface to his book on prostitution in Ch'ing-period Kwangtung, he stated that in view of the disappearance from “present-day” brothels of the kind of beauty who was well-versed in the arts of singing, composing poems, painting, calligraphy, and conversation, his book was intended to record the life-histories and accomplishments of famous Cantonese courtesans and anecdotes about them, before they faded from the popular memory.40

In the period under review, the public image of prostitutes became more complicated, varied and unpredictable, yet at the same time more realistic. Prostitutes were simultaneously despised, respected, and pitied.

3. Alternative Perceptions of the ‘Suffering’ of Prostitutes

‘Ruthless Exploitation’ under the Heel of the Madam

Exploitation and misery were not seen as the exclusive preserve of low-class prostitutes. Ch'ing-period ‘random notes’ on high-class prostitutes tended to reinforce the miserable image of all classes of these workers in Canton. For instance, in the biographies of twelve high-class courtesans of the late Ch'ing period, most were described as suffering from serious emotional trouble as a result of their quasi-captivity,41 interference by the ‘madams’ in their love affairs,42 or being forced to have sexual intercourse with clients they disliked.

However, a madam’s intervention in the love-affairs of her girls was not always attributable to covetousness. In the 1920s, and probably in the Ch'ing period, there were parasitical, often suave, crooks who preyed on well-to-do prostitutes,43 and it might have been out of concern to prevent their girls from being cheated that madams interfered in the affairs of their ‘daughters’, for whom they had often developed an affection based on years of mutual dependence.

Contemporary moralists’ writings on the subject of prostitution tended to perceive brothel madams as a species of sub-human blood-suckers who resorted to all forms of abuse to maintain absolute control over their girls, exploiting them ruthlessly44—a picture which was neither fantasy, nor
In most brothels, an intimate pseudo-family atmosphere was deliberately created, the inmates usually using kinship terms of address among themselves. Gronewold, *Beautiful merchandise*, pp. 8-10; Yu Chiao-ch'ing, "Ch'ao-Chia feng-yueh-chi," p. 21.


Ibid., pp. 193-4.


For instance, when Feng Tsai 她采, a highly popular singsong girl in late-Ch'ing Canton, fell in love with a scholar she refused to entertain anybody else, threatening suicide as a warning against intervention by her madam. Later, when the madam tried to force her to sleep with a rich patron she refused by attempting to hang herself, though she was in fact saved. Eventually Feng was allowed to leave the brothel and, with her substantial savings, opened her own establishment, making a monthly payment to her former madam in return for her freedom. *LNFY*, pp. 54-8.

Kuang-chou bsin jib-pao (Canton), 22.2.1933, p. 15.

During this period, many better-off courtesans who dressed fashionably did their daily shopping at expensive department stores, and enjoyed afternoon tea at luxury hotels in the Central district of Hong Kong. Sung Yu, *Tang-bsi chin-fen*, pp. 207, 329-30.

Nor was coercion exercised by a madam always effective in forcing 'girls' to act against their will. Ta An, once the most 'eminent flower' in Canton, for instance, was only willing to entertain romantic and famous scholars. Once her madam received 500 taels of gold in return for Ta An's company. Ta An, however, refused. When her madam insisted, she went on a hunger strike. Similarly, Yu Liang, another famous courtesan, refused to eat after her madam repeatedly intervened in her love-affairs with poor scholars. Her hunger-strike was effective because the madam was penitent. In some cases, frustrated courtesans threatened to commit suicide, an effective measure of self-defence which served as a warning to mischief-making madams. An over-abused prostitute could simply run away and seek help from the police. This indicates that not all prostitutes were restricted in their movements, though virgin prostitutes, because of their high market-value, might be closely watched, while control over 'wilful' prostitutes could be difficult.
Inhuman Working Conditions?

Exploitation and the maltreatment of prostitutes, while by no means eradicated during this period, were not necessarily becoming more common and widespread either. It seems that high-class prostitutes in Republican Canton, as in other Chinese coastal cities, could be so much better-off than most contemporary women that it casts serious doubts on whether they were exploited or maltreated in the true sense of these words.

First, with regard to their working environment, surviving sources show that high-class brothels in late-Ch'ing and Republican Canton were clean and lavishly decorated floating establishments. A late-nineteenth-century European traveller recorded the glamour of these 'flower boats':

These boats resemble enormous Venetian Gondolas. The greatest part of the hold is taken up by the saloon, furnished with the best style of furniture. In the middle is placed a large round marble topped table; the chairs are of Chinese ebony elaborately carved, whilst the saloon is lighted up by European swinging lamps …. The front of the boat is equally carved and gilded, and the whole line of splendidly illuminated boats offers in the evening an enchanting view.53

Cantonese brothel-goers also found them comfortable and luxurious. One recorded that most of the famous courtesans lived in their private compartments on these boats, and access to them was strictly limited to "very close friends." Their rooms were clean, and decorated according to their personal tastes. In one case, all the window frames were elaborately carved; the curtains were made of strings of pearls; ivory sculptures were displayed, and the table held a bowl of ink and other accessories for brush-writing. It was said of this particular woman that:

When one enters [her room], all that is vulgar is banished in an instant. No client who is not a literatus or scholar has ever been admitted.54

In another case, the enormous income earned by a popular late-Ch'ing courtesan enabled her to lead an extravagant life. Her bedroom was particularly lavishly furnished:

In her compartment, all the screens are embroidered, [and] windows elaborately [carved]. The tables and chairs of sandalwood are finely carved …. On a shelf are displayed antique bronze sacrificial tripods. [There is also] a screen of marble, a Yu-Ku-style cauldron [from the Sung Dynasty], a fine red vase, and other [precious items], each of them worth a few hundred taels of gold! Her flat wooden pillow is decorated with gold-plated rhinoceroses whose sparkle would startle anyone. Beneath the bed is … a [sculptured] gold-lion and a seal carved from a piece of precious stone …. On the wall are hung a number of music-box clocks …55

By the late 1920s, the working and living environments of these popular courtesans were apparently no less extravagant. A contemporary brothel-goer reminisces that once he visited a prostitute whose room was luxuriously and elegantly decorated, the walls hung with scrolls and brush paintings presented to her by "well-known men."56 A European traveller once again

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54 *LNY*, p.40.
55 CKMH, p.23.
56 Tsung Shih, "Yen-hua," p.244.
was very impressed by the tidiness, cleanliness, and luxury of the city's floating brothels:

The floor of the principal room where 'transactions' take place is covered with a precious carpet. The furniture is usually in excellent taste. Lamps of rare design with crystal ornaments are suspended from the ceiling.  

Inside a 'blue house' on land,

It was cool and immaculate. A bright matting covered the floors. There were hangings, severe and straight, of green and white cloth threaded with gold ... The upper part of the walls, including the doors, were of lattice work with beautiful wood carvings. Many scrolls were hung on the walls which no doubt expressed charming and virtuous sentiments ... Against the walls were cabinets containing rare procelains and there were rugs of silk and camel's hair everywhere ... She opened a door in the corridor. It was a small room of sandalwood, a room that might belong to a palace. She turned and resumed the conversation in which she had been so well trained.

In a short article intended to 'reveal' the misery of low-class prostitutes in Canton, the author used emotive language in order to impress his readers. But surprisingly, the conditions of the low-class brothels he describes in this article were not as bad as those portrayed in Ou-yang Shan's novel Ts'ai shen-ch'iing-li. There was nothing in these brothels which truly upset its author, except that the areas in which they were located were crowded with men who had flocked there to "look around." Its author visited three of these brothels at random. The first was said to be "plainly decorated and poorly lit," while the other two were both "nicely appointed and clean."  

Even the tiny floating brothels on which the "water-chicken" (low-class Tanka prostitutes) worked were said to be beautifully decorated and impressively clean. A 1926 Canton guidebook also commented that some of these lower-class floating brothels were "unusually clean and tidy, well decorated and furnished." The reputedly decent and hygienic environment of most brothels in Canton, in great contrast to the filthy and degraded establishments in Victorian London, may have been due to the supposedly frequent inspections conducted by the local Health Authority (once a week for low-class brothels, and bi-weekly for others) as stipulated by the Prostitution Control Regulations.

What captured the attention of many contemporary 'ordinary' writers on prostitutes was their lavish clothing. Writing in the late-Ch'ing period, Yu Chiao-ch'ing 許姣清 was impressed by the gorgeous, and fashionable silk clothes of some high-class courtesans, which were in sharp contrast to the simple cotton garments worn by ordinary women. In an extreme case, a popular courtesan wore only silk, and all her hairpins were made of precious stones. By the 1930s, prostitutes in most treaty-ports were keen followers of Western fashion. Even streetwalkers in Canton usually dressed lavishly. And contemporary cartoonists' impressions of prostitutes were of stunningly fashionable women whose appearance hardly shows any sign of misery or traces of maltreatment.
The basic working environment of most prostitutes in Canton in this period, therefore, appears not to have been as grim as we are sometimes led to believe. Of course, a relatively comfortable work-place and fancy clothing did not necessarily mean that life as a prostitute was easy or enjoyable. When we examine other aspects of a prostitute’s life, however, it seems unlikely that outright exploitation and maltreatment were the only things she experienced.

**Rules of Respect**

In late Imperial times, maltreatment of prostitutes by their customers at high-class brothels was apparently uncommon. A traveller recorded that:

> It must be said to the honor of the Chinese that they behave, even in the flower-boats, with the utmost decency . . . I never saw a single improper gesture, nor even a simple caress, as would be tolerated in Western society.69

As a Cantonese ‘brothel-song’ tells us, clients were always stopped from taking advantage of a girl at will.70

Maltreatment of prostitutes by customers in most brothels, perhaps with the exception of the very low-class establishments, might be effectively minimized in the first place by a number of unwritten customs and rules that a brothel-goer was expected to observe, and in the second by the long process of courting, especially between high-class courtesans and their clients. Shanghai’s brothels in this period provide us with interesting examples of a kind of establishment which was possibly also found in Canton. A manual for Shanghai’s brothel-goers in the late 1930s warned readers not to violate any of the “ten commandments” which governed the behaviour of clients in high-class bordellos. These rules imposed restraints on a client’s conduct, ranging from his use of language when conversing with a courtesan, to minute details of table manners. For instance, readers were strongly advised not to hug their knee-caps with their arms, or support their chin on their hand while sitting. Inside a brothel, they should not step on a doorsill (k’an 般). While dining, they should avoid breaking dining utensils or cutlery; chopsticks should not be placed across the top of bowls. Inside a courtesan’s room, the visitor was advised not to move about freely, nor open any drawer without permission. Violation of these rules would attract a reprimand and the contempt of both prostitutes and brothel staff.71 It is not surprising to find, therefore, that Republican Peking’s brothels were highly acclaimed for their orderliness and tranquillity compared with their counterparts in the United States.72

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69 Schlegel, *Canton flower-boat*, p.4.
70 Ibid., p.5.

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**Figure 4**

An advertisement for one of the many ‘flower-bouquet’ restaurants in Canton. Most initial, if protracted, courtships between rich patrons and the courtesans of their choice took place in restaurants such as this. (Hsiang-hua hua-pao, vol.1, no.3, 1928)
exploitation of prostitutes? Some, especially high-class ones, were seemingly not as exploited as is generally believed. In order to win their bodies, a client was required to follow an established pattern of courting ‘customs’ which were both expensive and demanding. A client would first be required to meet a high-class prostitute for the first time at an elaborate ‘flower restaurant’ where he would be entertained by conversation and singing for something under one hour—an expensive ‘initiation’ that not all brothel-goers could afford. After more rounds of such meetings, a client determined to go further would start visiting the ‘lady’s’ brothel in which he would hold expensive tea parties and banquets in order to get close to the courtesan. After a few such occasions, if the courtesan agreed, the client would approach her madam and negotiate a price for spending a night with her. On the appointed evening, a small banquet would be held at the brothel attended by close friends of the client. According to the reminiscences of one brothel-goer, this party usually always had the atmosphere of a family gathering, rather than a straightforward sexual transaction. And only some hours later, after it was over and his friends had left, could the client retire to bed with his long-sought-after lady.

An ‘intimate patron’ of a high-class courtesan was ‘obliged’ to ‘give face’ to her and her brothel by occasionally holding big banquets there, especially during calendrical or religious festivals. Moreover, he needed to keep his ‘lady’ happy by buying her gifts. In early Republican Peking, “it is not uncommon for an official to spend as much as $700 to $800 in gifts, banquets, and forms of entertainment before he could go further than ordinary relations with one of these famous girls.” In one case, a rich businessman in Canton spent three years patronizing a popular courtesan before he eventually won her body; and once she even refused to entertain him though he eventually paid her 3,000 yuan just to attend his banquet. The long process of familiarization between courtesan and client probably helped reduce the psychological pressure suffered by a prostitute through having to have sex with an otherwise total stranger. This ‘privilege’ of long courting was apparently denied to a large number of contemporary ordinary Chinese women. Hence, it is interesting to note that from the point of view of ‘poor’ brothel-goers, it was they who were ‘exploited’ by prostitutes in this long process of financially exhausting courtship. Prostitutes were believed to be adept at playing tricks on them which squeezed the last penny from their wallets.

**Figure 5**

*Sing-song girls of Hangchou (Grace Thompson Seton, Chinese Lanterns)*

*Some prostitutes were so spoilt by their customers that the quality of their services, it was lamented, had plummeted compared with late-Ch‘ing times. Their work-load seemed to have become much lighter than that of their predecessors. Sometimes the roles were reversed and it was the clients who served their beloved courtesans.*

**A Life ‘Selling Smiles’**

Some prostitutes were so spoilt by their customers that the quality of their services, it was lamented, had plummeted compared with late-Ch‘ing times. Their work-load seemed to have become much lighter than that of their predecessors. Sometimes the roles were reversed and it was the clients who served their beloved courtesans. The proud manner of some of these high-class courtesans rendered abuse against them unlikely. As a contemporary recorded:
Prostitutes of this class never ask your name—a basic courtesy. They do not know how to entertain their clients with singing. When I ask them questions, they reply in terse monosyllables. Very seldom do they take the initiative to talk to you. Some of them do not even utter a single word during the whole banquet. Occasionally, if you venture to touch their hands, they avoid you. Immediately the banquet is over, they rudely ask their clients to pay. When given copper coins, they throw them onto the floor to test their genuineness. Even towards a client who has patronized her ten times before her attitude is just the same. Her icy manner makes you feel as if you are sitting in a snow-bound room.

A contemporary brothel-goer wrote that a highly popular courtesan, Leng Hung (Cold Red), whose cold manner and impudent attitude towards customers, combined with her suggestive expression, had “captured” a great number of fans. She was so icy and dour that just to be able to see her smile was regarded as a brothel-goer’s once-in-a-life-time experience. Hence, the common description of the prostitute’s lot as a ‘life selling smiles’ was not always true. ‘Smiles’, it seems, were only sold to those who could pay well. A vernacular Cantonese song tells how even low-class Tanka prostitutes, too, could be snobbish, money-minded, and very impolite to customers. Niggardly or improperly behaved clients were always refused and scolded as ‘doomed prisoners’ or ‘sick cats’, and sometimes even punched. A local writer recorded that Cantonese prostitutes were well-known for their aloof attitude and recalcitrant demeanour. At the slightest excuse, they could ‘explode’ in front of their customers. ‘Flower feasts’ were always impolitely and hurriedly served, and the prostitutes arrived and left at will without notifying their clients. Nor did they even bother to remember the names of their regular clients, which was considered an insult to a brothel-goer. The writer lamented that some prostitutes did not even provide their customers with the basic service, which was bartering smiles for money. Another Cantonese reiterated that most prostitutes in the city had become so arrogant that when they attended ‘flower feasts’ they stayed only briefly, entertained their clients perfunctorily, and left earlier than they should. He proposed, somewhat sardonically, that these girls should be punished accordingly.

A social novel about the life of two courtesans in 1920s Hong Kong shows that some prostitutes could be very wilful. Once, one of them becomes angry with one of her regulars who she mistakenly thinks is chasing another girl. She takes revenge on him by deliberately losing heavily in a mahjong game in which he asks her to play a few rounds for him. Then, without a word to him or his friends, she simply leaves. That evening, the deeply embarrassed customer waits for hours at her brothel for her return, in the...
hope of begging her pardon. Anticipating this, the prostitute stays elsewhere that night.87

In the 1930s, popular courtesans were trailed by faithful fans who tried all means to win their favour. In dancing-halls frequented by their sex-idols, plenty of these 'chicken chasers' (chui-chi-k'o 追雞佬) could be seen.88 One 'random note' about a beautiful but choosy prostitute tells how, when a rich client was successful in winning her after a long and expensive courtship, the news dismayed many of those hopeful clients whom she had turned down.89

Most such prostitutes not only took great pride in their popularity, but capitalized on it as well. Once, two of the most popular courtesans in Canton, namely Red Flower and Angel, competed with each other for fame. With the financial support of certain clients, Red Flower spent several thousand yuan on a grand-scale banquet to which all the prostitutes in Canton were invited. In response, Angel organized a similar feast at the same restaurant. On the day of the feast, so many clients and other courtesans sent her baskets of flowers as a greeting that the whole neighbourhood was fragrant with their scent.90 For prostitutes who flourished, their ill-famed job could apparently still be an enjoyable one which bestowed on them the kind of power, frivolity, and prestige about which most contemporary women, as well as men, dared not even dream.

**Opportunities for Wealth and Power**

Some prostitutes were able to enjoy a wide range of 'privileges' normally denied to ordinary people. With military officers being regular customers of brothels, these girls seemed to be protected from harrassment by unscrupulous privates, abusive clients, or riff-raff generally.91 In fact, prostitutes could be as bullying as military-men. Like common soldiers, they often refused to pay fares on public transport or buy ticket to cinema shows.92 They were also allowed to undermine the dignity of 'powerful' men such as posturing militarists and government officials because these men 'enjoyed being hit' by their favourite courtesans, even in public.93

The common perception of the prostitute as a poor, exploited 'money-tree' (yao-ch'ien shu 摟錢樹) whose income was reaped by her madam was not universally true. Some high-class prostitutes were able to save enormous amounts of money with no interference from their madams. Late-Ch'ing 'random notes' on prostitution were full of descriptions of the affluence of famous courtesans in Canton. The popular Pu Hsiao-ku, for instance, was so well-off that she was able to turn down almost all invitations from her clients, including the rich and powerful. To free herself from the vociferous protests of her madam she purchased a number of mansions by the river, in which she spent the rest of her life "reciting Buddhist scriptures and burning incense."94 Another famous courtesan became betrothed with a dowry of her own savings of a few thousand taels of gold, though her lover in the end was
too proud to marry her because her personal wealth was much greater than that of his family.95

Cantonese prostitutes in the Republican period were seemingly no worse off, and this was manifested in a number of ways. Some prostitutes were so wealthy, for instance, that they became the prey of good-looking scoundrels.96 One affluent clandestine prostitute was swindled of a box of expensive jewellery.97 A journalist ridiculed the fact that a prostitute earned much more than a teacher.98 Cantonese brothel-goers were also well-known for their profligacy in placating prostitutes which allegedly dwarfed even that of the big spenders' in central China.99

The affluence of some prostitutes and their semi-luxurious lifestyle was reflected in the kinds of goods advertised in a magazine which published mainly photographs and profiles of popular courtesans in Hong Kong. Advertisements for jewellery shops, Western-style clothing shops, fashionable hair salons, and high-class Western restaurants suggest that its readers, who were mainly prostitutes and brothel-goers, were potential, or regular, consumers of these luxury goods and expensive services.100

Another indication of the affluence of some prostitutes in Republican Canton was that they patronized male entertainers. Along with other rich women, they delighted in ‘chasing’ famous Cantonese opera stars—an expensive ‘hobby’ because these actors were already quite rich. This phenomenon had become so common that it was adopted as the theme of a Cantonese opera, a comedy about a well-off prostitute, Hua Ying, who tries to woo a famous opera actor Chiu Tsai. Hua is a fanatical fan of Chiu. Once, on finding out that Chiu is lodging at a local hotel, she bribes the hotel receptionist to give her a room next to his. In order to seduce him, she sings aloud a love-song. Noticing that Hua is dressed lavishly and bedecked with sparkling jewellery, the licentious and swindling Chiu gives in to temptation, and she offers him a diamond ring for sleeping with her. Chiu takes the ring, but then slips away. Realizing she has been cheated, Hua sets off in search of her truant idol.101

Such stories were not uncommon. Whenever the superstar Ma Shih-tseng returned to Canton from overseas performances, for instance, it was said that the concubines of wealthy men and well-off courtesans, wearing lavish clothes and heavy make-up, would greet him at the pier. Some of them, it was said, even rolled bunches of bank notes into a ball, and threw them at him by way of ostentatious greeting.102

It was held to be fashionable for famous Shanghai prostitutes, and most probably their Cantonese counterparts too, to keep secret lovers for their own pleasure. They provided these ‘little ghosts’ (bSiao-kuei 小鬼) with flats, expensive clothing, good food, and pocket-money. In return, the ‘lover-slaves’ were required to provide sexual services exclusively for their mistresses.103 These well-off prostitutes were probably the first group of Chinese women to struggle and earn their way up the social ladder by hard work, albeit in an ill-famed profession. However, unlike daughters and wives
in respectable families, they retained a high degree of control over their wealth, and were apparently quite free to spend it in whichever way they liked. By patronizing secret lovers, a certain amount of lost pride, dignity, and self-confidence might be regained, and a feeling of power in the ability to manipulate and to exert absolute control over at least some men could be enjoyed, something denied to most women in male-dominated China.

**Means of Self-Protection**

When they were not ready or willing, many prostitutes were seemingly able to turn down the sexual demands of their clients, as a consequence of this madams might sometimes inflict punishment on their girls. This, however, was not always the case. A madam was keen to preserve the ‘good atmosphere’ of her establishment and scars on a prostitute’s body might substantially lower her attraction and market value. If a prostitute was ‘forced’ by her madam to sleep with a client whom she disliked, she could be very resourceful in getting out of it. One of the most common excuses was menstruation, because menstrual blood was generally considered as polluting, and the mere sight of it was said to bring bad luck to men.104 Sometimes an excuse was not even needed. A contemporary source tells that Cantonese prostitutes were well-known for insisting on their right to refuse a client even though he had paid for her body. In bed, a prostitute might still refuse his carnal demands and be vocal about her refusal. Sometimes, she might simply run away, leaving her disappointed client to spend the night alone.105 Since this trick usually worked well, some experienced prostitutes used it as a means to solicit more tips (páisbúi 白水) from the client before consenting to his sexual demands.106

A prostitute’s ‘right of refusal’ was a common characteristic in Canton’s brothels, and was adopted as the theme of at least two vernacular songs. In one of them, the frustrations of a spurned customer are vividly described. The song also shows the extent of a prostitute’s haughtiness (chía-tzu 架子), especially to clients she disliked.

My reason for visiting a brothel is to seek happiness, not to watch your impudent behaviour. When a customer asks you to come [and entertain him], he surely has in his heart-mind a desire to enjoy ‘the wind and moon’ [i.e. the carnal pleasure of love-making] . . . I would rather you were aloof and taciturn during the banquet than recalcitrant in bed . . . How could you be so happy when serving us wine, but becomes so aloof on going to bed? . . . What can a man do about it? . . . You neither pay me any attention nor howl [at me], but just lie there motionless . . . [When] I . . . try to touch your breasts, you suddenly scold me: “What an annoying

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man you are!

Interestingly, when such a thing happened, a customer could only put it down to bad luck; he was the one who suffered, not the prostitute.

In this period, prostitutes in Canton were theoretically protected by law from maltreatment by their madams. A police regulation stipulated that inspectors were to pay unexpected visits to brothels to ensure the proper treatment of prostitutes by madams and customers. The effectiveness of such enforcement, however, is not known. But if this rule was indeed properly enforced, then general assumptions about the maltreatment of prostitutes must be reconsidered.

Police records show that not all prostitutes would quietly endure maltreatment. For example, once when an off-duty soldier visited a low-class brothel, he demanded to examine the whore's genitalia before having sex with her. When this was refused he lost his temper and threatened to whip the woman. She yelled for help, whereupon policemen were called in and the soldier arrested. Apparently even a low-class prostitute knew quite well how to protect herself in the face of unreasonable demands.

In another incident, two prostitutes scorned a policeman who had collected a bribe from their brothel. The humiliated officer then beat them up and ordered the closure of the whorehouse. Their madam, however, reported the incident to the police headquarters, and the culprit was duly reprimanded.

It must be noted that not all prostitutes were, however, reluctant to sell their bodies. A contemporary writer complained that Canton's prostitutes had become even more hasty in asking their clients to 'buy' their bodies, sometimes only after one or two meetings. To those girls who joined the profession as 'free-body persons' (tzu-yu shen 自由身), they could be very selective in choosing 'ideal' clients, and went to bed with them perhaps even with some pleasure.

It is worth mentioning in passing that prostitutes as a group did not necessarily lack organization, thereby leaving them open to quiet exploitation by the authorities, as some historians allege. On the contrary, they could on occasions be very well-organized in defending themselves against unreasonable and excessive demands. In traditional China, brothel-owners set up their own trade association. In the 1900s, for example, 'flower boat' owners in Canton staged at least two industrial strikes against an "unreasonable" increase in the "flower-feast surcharge" imposed by tax brokers. The bawds of brothels in one district in Canton had also petitioned the authorities over replacing the old practice of levying random surcharges on brothels, and the monthly and festival surcharges solicited by yamen clerks, with a fixed and regular tax.
In July 1927, the arrest of a few blind sing-song girls on the charge of clandestine prostitution caused an uproar among their fellows in Canton. In less than twelve hours hundreds of them were mobilized and marched to the local police station where their 'sisters' were being detained. They demanded their immediate release, and an undertaking by the head of that police station that similar incidents would not occur in future. They sat in protest before the police station until these demands were eventually met.117

In December 1928, low-class brothels at the eastern end of the city went on strike against the proposal by a tax brokerage company to impose an additional surcharge on brothels. Although the proposed rate of increase was quite small (an additional ten cents on each bill), the reaction was unexpectedly strong. All brothel-owners in that area gathered together, and decided to go on strike until their demands were acceded to. Plans for a public demonstration were also devised. Realizing the determination of the brothel-owners over this issue, the tax brokerage company was finally forced to yield.118 These incidents show that prostitutes were able to mobilize themselves effectively whenever outside encroachment became unsustainable. Moreover, it implies that prostitutes saw their profession, albeit one of 'ill-repute', as legitimate and acceptable. The fact that an officially registered trade union existed for the 'flower business' (hua-chieh kung-bui 花界公會) also indicates the extent of the integration of this 'disreputable' profession into society. Their collective action against excessive encroachment was therefore seen as perfectly legitimate.

There were two possible factors that contributed to the growth of cohesion among prostitutes in Canton. First, the geographical distribution of brothels, which tended to foster group cohesion and facilitated collective action when needed.119 Second, since prostitutes were often invited by clients to attend parties held in different brothels or restaurants, there was an opportunity for them to get to know other 'sisters'.120 Prostitutes could, moreover, organize parties for themselves. In the late Ch'ing period, for instance, the courtesan Chun T'ien 俊添 was well-known for her enthusiasm in organizing singing and drinking parties for all 'ladies' on every full-moon evening.121 By the late 1920s, it is not known if this kind of regular gathering was still held. Calendrical and religious festivals, however, continued to provide the occasion for congregation at local shrines.122 It is clear that prostitutes could and did gather when they wished to do so.

Happy Hookers

Although contemporary Cantonese literature about prostitution contained scenes of sobbing prostitutes recounting their life-stories, it would be a mistake to leap to the conclusion that all prostitutes were treated cruelly. As we have seen earlier, not all shared the same experiences. Some prostituted themselves of their own free will in the expectation of earning quick money or of climbing the social ladder. A prostitute's 'tear jerking' account could, of course, be simply fictitious. This is best shown in a story about a late-Ch'ing
provincial official who had served in Canton. Once, this official boarded a ferry which he did not realize was a clandestine floating brothel. Nor did he know that one of the most famous and beautiful courtesans in eastern Kwangtung, nicknamed Chuang-yuan-fu-jen 状元夫人, was also on board. Realizing that this official was a high-ranking one, Pu seduced him without any difficulty. When they arrived in Canton, however, Pu would not release her client and tried to persuade him to marry her:

Her tears poured down like never-ending rain. Although he tried a hundred ways to have her sent away, she still refused to leave. In the end, she only agreed to return home after five hundred taels of gold had been offered to her. He remained unaware, however, of her skill in soliciting money [from other rich clients] in just the same way.123

Some prostitutes were certainly well aware that exaggerating the ‘misery’ of their lives could help them win the sympathy of their customers.

In an article intended to reveal the conditions of the lowest class of prostitutes in Canton in the early 1930s, the author recalled that upon entering a brothel they were immediately received by two seductive girls. When the girls learned of the ‘academic’ purpose of their visit, however, they looked unhappy, presumably realizing they were unlikely to extract any money from the visitors. After both of them were given one yuan as ‘greeting money’, however, they started to recount tales of their miserable life as low-class whores. At the end of the interview, one of them was so gratified that she could not stop smiling.124 It is, of course, possible that these prostitutes exaggerated their sorrows to satisfy the curiosity of the inquisitive client anxious to ‘prove’ his assumptions about the doomed life of these suffering girls.

There could have been other ‘practical’ reasons for a prostitute to flaunt her tragic life-story, such as securing return visits by innocent and compassionate clients anxious to monitor her treatment. Moreover, there was always the chance that a greatly affected client might proffer marriage.125 In Shanghai, it was well-known to experienced brothel-goers that certain madams cheated inexperienced clients by pretending to maltreat their favourite girls, in the hope that they would be driven by conscience to pay handsomely for their release.126 Cantonese prostitutes were doubtless equally skilful at playing the same trick. Of course, not all the miserable life-stories were necessarily fabricated. To believe them, however, also ran the risk of perpetuating a misconception.

Not every prostitute perceived herself as leading a painful life in a living hell. In the same serialized Cantonese opera script discussed earlier, the female protagonist enjoys her life as a popular and well-off prostitute. Introducing herself to the audience, she sings:

Some prostitutes are so anxious to keep alive in their hearts integrity and shamefulness, which render them perpetually unhappy. However, I always think differently. [In my opinion], life is lamentable [and short]. [Thus, when one is] happy, one must not think about sad things [because] it is useless to be madly preoccupied with [apprehensive thoughts about one's future]. Of all kinds of

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123 Yu Chiao-ch'ing, "Ch'ao-Chia feng-yueh-chi," p.32.
125 Most courtesans looked forward to being redeemed through marriage to their ‘ideal’ clients, which was one of the most welcome ways to leave the profession. Chou Yu-liang, “Chu-chiang” [The Pearl river], Ch’ing-lou yun-yu, vol.2, pp.87-90.
126 Hai-shang-hsueh-wu-sheng, Chi-nü, pp. 68–9. A similar situation existed in traditional India. According to the Karma Sutra, the first object of a courtesan is to obtain money from her customer. An entire chapter is devoted to “ways of extracting money from a lover, such as falsely allegenig that her property had been lost, or simulating illness and charging the cost of imaginary treatment.” Hilary Evans, The oldest profession (London: David & Charles, 1979), pp.80–1.
women, prostitutes should be the most romantic and felicitous. [It is because she can afford] to buy expensive and beautiful clothes, and to match them with accessories of gold and jade … [Moreover, she] feeds herself with good food, and lives in spacious quarters. Furthermore, she is always accompanied by [numerous] ‘temporary husbands’ who provide her with happy diversion every night. She is free to come and go from her brothel without any family [restraints]. As for money, she can earn and spend it [easily and freely], and there are always clients who are anxious to offer such emoluments and only worry that their presents might arrive late.127

Surely there is a sense of pride and achievement, rather than complacency, in this monologue.

Some prostitutes took pride in their relatively superior economic and living conditions. They also enjoyed showing off by parading themselves in public decked out in expensive clothing.128 A scholar noted that a prostitute’s “rich apparel of brilliant silk makes her much better dressed than any class of women save the rich. On the streets she is the object of attention for those who wish to see the latest style in feminine dress.”129 This would seem to corroborate the common Cantonese saying “Laugh at a penniless man, but not at a prostitute” (hsiao p’in pu-bsiao cb’ang 虚貧不笑娼).

A contemporary Yueb-ou song reveals that being a prostitute was sometimes perceived as even more fortunate than being a daughter of a rich family:

Compared with a girl from a wealthy family, I am cheaper than mud. But such girls are not easily married off. If they marry a debauched husband, shame will be brought upon their families—far worse than our degraded brothel life. It matters little if we choose not to marry [because] we can still pass our days combing our hair and being served bowls of boiled rice and tea … Alas! these words are not intended to inflate my worthiness, but having realized that human relationships in this world are so fickle, I don’t wish to be involved anymore.130

In another Yueb-ou song, prostitutes were seen as fortunate women with ample chances to become familiar with different types of men from whom to choose a husband.131 Unlike most ordinary women, they could avoid the emotional pain caused by ‘blind marriage’. In the song “Repaying the flower-debt” (Huan bua-chai 還花債), a prostitute is described as willing to sell her body while still young and attractive, for at this golden age of life she will be admired, appeased, and wooed by a large number of ‘followers’ who will bring her both companionship and money.132

Some prostitutes might dislike their job at first, but once used to brothel-life, enjoy it. In the social novel Tang-hsi chin-fen (mentioned earlier), for instance, Yin Shan is sold into a brothel by her foster-mother. She adapts quickly to the comfortable life there, gains weight, and looks more attractive than before because of the better diet and easier lifestyle. Her elder sister, also a prostitute, is soon spoilt by this comfortable life and becomes very choosy about her food. When Yin Shan has sex with her first ‘customer’ she enjoys the experience thoroughly. Throughout the story she enjoys her sexual encounters with most of her regular clients, an enjoyment that colours
an otherwise monotonous life. A former Shanghainese prostitute reminisces that prostitutes used a number of arguments to justify their existence to themselves. “The crazy thing was that it wasn’t men having fun with us, but us having fun with them—and they still had to pay good money.” A perceptive traveller recorded that “like the coolies, these women of the ‘flower boats’ face life with a cheerful demeanor, as if, true fatalists, they are not going to be any more miserable than necessary over the lot to which the gods have assigned them.” Although not a respectable profession, it was undoubtedly one of the most lucrative alternatives to starvation and poverty. To some, this ill-famed profession brought them an exciting and easy life in a dynamic city. In a survey conducted in Shanghai in 1948, more than half of the 500 prostitutes interviewed were satisfied with their job mainly because it provided them with a relatively secure livelihood in a period of economic uncertainty. Fewer than a quarter were unhappy with their current circumstances.

The positive side of the prostitute’s life is also ironically acknowledged by Ou-yang Shan in his anti-prostitution novel Tsai sben-ching-li. To the chief protagonist, being a whore is better than living impoverished and abused in her village. At one point, she defends her “preference” to remain a whore.

[Morally] we may be shallow and cheap. However ... there are countless numbers of wives in respectable families who, after giving birth to children, have to endure being beaten by their husbands, and work labouriously all day long with too little food to eat. Are these women not more to be pitied than me! Their bodies also become infected by all kinds of diseases which will eventually kill them. ... Do these women deserve all this? ... [Although] they are more passive, kind-hearted and virtuous than we are, compared with them we are still free to eat [what and where we want], to wear [whatever we like], [and] to die [unencumbered].

This view may have been shared by many prostitutes in this period.

A research project conducted in 1934 on boat-people in the county of San-shui cited randomly chosen cases of three prostitutes who “always wore a broad smile” and served their patrons well. All three had chosen to become prostitutes and seemed to enjoy their job. In one case, the young woman had been married to a fisherman. But she grew to despise him for earning too little and left him to work as a prostitute.

It must be noted that not all prostitutes necessarily ended up as the derelict and pathetic streetwalkers they were commonly depicted to be in contemporary ‘highbrow’ literature. Marriage to a rich man as either a concubine or a wife offered a prostitute an invaluable chance of climbing the social ladder. It was noted that “the prestige of being associated with a wealthy and powerful family gives her a position far above anything she has probably known in the past,” while the offspring she bears “are all accepted as legitimate children and heirs of their father.” Late-Ch’ing ‘random notes’ on famous Cantonese courtesans show that many were redeemed by marriage to rich patrons and led a comfortable life thereafter. Even in Ou-yang Shan’s Tsai sben-ching-li, an originally low-class prostitute manages to...
climb the social ladder from being first the concubine of a warlord, eventually becoming an executive member of the official Women’s Association.\textsuperscript{142} At the end of another social novel, the prostitute Yu Shan is married to a rich businessman as his first wife, and lives happily in a two-storey Western-style villa. The marriage is described as bringing good luck to her husband whose business begins to prosper.\textsuperscript{143}

It is also interesting to note that not every prostitute-turned-concubine was necessarily oppressed by the principal wife,\textsuperscript{144} though some, due to their physical attractiveness and stronger intimacy with their husbands (fostered by the long pre-marital courtship), could be quite powerful even, for example, accompanying their husbands to social functions, a role usually reserved for the principal wife.\textsuperscript{145} In an allegedly true story about power getting out of hand, an affluent businessman Mé takes the prostitute Pei as a concubine. After moving into his house, Pei becomes increasingly dominating to the point where Mé’s principal wife, who is more submissive in character, is forced out of the house. Meanwhile, Pei conspires with her paramour to kill Mé, but fails, and in panic she elopes. Eventually, Mé is happily reunited with his wife.\textsuperscript{146}

\textit{Prostitution as a Pleasant Pastime}

Undoubtedly, some Cantonese did denounce prostitution as a strong corrosive influence on moral character and physical health, or capable of corrupting otherwise happy families, and, above all, society. Brothel-going could certainly lead to financial bankruptcy, and to the transmission of venereal diseases to spouse and offspring.\textsuperscript{147}

Not every Cantonese, however, shared this critical view of brothel-going. On the contrary, most seemed to hold an ambivalent, if not openly favourable, attitude towards prostitution as an agreeable form of entertainment. Some even considered it a necessary social evil.

With the exception of some moralistic treatises, contemporary Cantonese literature on prostitution rarely attacked brothel-going as an unworthy form of entertainment. Brothels were commonly regarded as a pleasurable ‘playground’ for men if they knew how to refrain from over-spending, how to avoid being cheated by covetous prostitutes, and how to keep away from disease-infected girls. Although sounding a warning against swindling whores, one writer still held that no young men should avoid visiting a brothel, though they should not indulge heavily in the practice. To visit a brothel occasionally with close friends, and chat and dine with attractive and hospitable prostitutes, was considered an enjoyable and memorable experience. It could even enrich one’s knowledge of one’s society to know about the brothels where most social functions took place.\textsuperscript{148} A Cantonese reminisces how at the age of fifteen he was taken by his uncle on a trip to Canton. Anxious to show him the ‘big-city life’ the uncle went with him to a gambling house and then to a floating brothel whose beautiful and talkative courtesans, luxurious decor, and gay ambience deeply impressed the young

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure10.jpg}
\caption{A young Hong Kong courtesan wearing semi-Western apparel and accessories poses in a flirtatious manner probably learned from Western movies. (Hsiang-hua huapao, vol.1, no.1, 1928)}
\end{figure}
country visitor. Brothels were apparently an agreeable enough place for teenagers to visit in the company of an adult without giving cause for concern.\footnote{149} Even officials in the Revolutionary government of the mid-1920s were often regular patrons of high-class brothels, and seem to have found no ideological clash between brothel-going and their political activities.\footnote{150}

The popular perception of brothels is explicit in the lyrics of a *Yueh-ou* song:

Paying visits to these stunning beauties is not necessarily a bad thing. One will not be driven mad by these beauties if one’s mind is enlightened [after listening to this song and appreciating its lesson].\footnote{151}

The message was: “Do not betray the love of a sincere prostitute, or over-indulge in brothel-going.”

A nineteenth-century French anthropologist had stated that visiting a brothel in China, unlike in Europe, was not regarded as a furtive or secret affair, but a normal activity that was engaged in openly and publicly.\footnote{152} A similar view was expressed by a Chinese diplomat who defended the decent image of ‘flower boats’ in the same period:

The flower boats serve this purpose just as little as the concert halls of Europe. This is a favourite amusement of Chinese young men. These parties are arranged especially in the evening in the company of ladies who have accepted invitations to them. These ladies are unmarried [sic]: they are musical and are invited for this reason … . This is a pleasant way of beguiling slowly passing time. On the boats is to be found everything that an epicure can possibly wish for; and in the cool of the evening, with a cup of deliciously prefumed tea, the women’s harmonious voices and the sound of musical instruments are not considered a nocturnal debauch.\footnote{153}

A brothel-goer was therefore looking for something more than just sex. Like hetaera in ancient Greece,\footnote{154} Chinese courtesans provided their customers with the kind of intellectual female companionship for which their wives were not normally trained. High-class brothels were the place where literati and officials relaxed, congregated, and made political or business deals.\footnote{155}

By the 1920s, few brothel-goers visited brothels for the intellectual company they provided, though a great many were in search of more than sex alone. Some went there to entertain their guests with a banquet, to listen to the singing of the courtesans,\footnote{156} to chat with the prostitutes, many of whom were articulate conversationalists, or to meet their colleagues and business partners there as an informal club house.\footnote{157}

Food played a significant role in Cantonese brothel culture. Most high-class brothels were also quasi-restaurants, with professional chefs catering for the clients. Most meetings between high-class prostitutes and their patrons took the form of small feasts or more sumptuous banquets.\footnote{158} Even the names of most of these establishments sounded more like restaurants than brothels.\footnote{159} It was said, moreover, that the cuisine served on ‘flower boats’ was often superior in quality and less expensive than many high-class restaurants. Most of these ‘boats’ were scenically located by the banks of the

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{149}{Preface, p. 4, and p. 110.}
\item \footnote{147}{KCMKJP, 15.7.1926, p. 11; Franck, *Revuem*, p. 275. They also regularly patronized famous courtesans in Hong Kong. Wu Hao, *Feng-yueh Tang-hsi* (Tales of brothel tales) (Hong Kong: Po-i Ch’u-pan-she, 1989), p. 17.}
\item \footnote{148}{“Kuei Hai kao,” *HVOCH*, p. 14.}
\item \footnote{145}{Evans, *Oldest profession*, pp. 34–40.}
\item \footnote{143}{Jeanne Larsen, *Brocade river poems* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. xv–xvi; van Gulik, *Sexual life*, pp. 178–9. In Imperial Nanking, high-class brothels, until the Ming dynasty, were located opposite the Examination Hall. This class of brothel was a popular playground for literati, bureaucrats and the rich. Tung-kuo hsien-sheng, *Chi-chia feng-yueh* [Tales of prostitution] (Shansi: Pei-Yueh Wen-i Ch’u-pan-she, 1990), pp. 24–8.}
\item \footnote{146}{Most courtesans at high-class brothels were trained as singers and musicians. Tsung Shih, “Yen-hua,” pp. 234–6.}
\item \footnote{147}{Lee Bing-shu, *Modern Canton* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1936), p. 96; Henriques, *Prostitution*, vol. 1, p. 260; K’ung Fu-an, “Chu-chiang hua shih,” pp. 13–14. This aspect of the sub-culture of businessmen is vividly reconstructed in Sung Yu’s *Tang-hsi chih-fen*.}
\item \footnote{148}{Liu Tsai-su, *Kuang-chou*, pp. 113–15. Food, wine, and singing was an important part of the entertainment in Shanghai’s bordelloes too. Hai-shang-hsueh-wu-sheng, *Chi-nu*, pp. 18–33.}
\item \footnote{149}{With the exception of a few such ‘obvious’ names as “Ming Hua” (Famous flower), “Huan Hua” (Happy Flower), “Teh Hsiang” (Catching Fragrance), Tsu-hang-shih, *Kuang-chou*, ch. 4, pp. 5–6.}
\end{itemize}}
Pearl River, providing an ideal for retreat from the heat of the summer nights. Such attractions must have helped to reinforce the favourable perception of brothels as ‘resort’ within the bounds of the crowded city of Canton.

Low-class brothels were not necessarily viewed less favourably. Vernacular poems sometimes captured the happy experiences of visitors to these establishments, in which no feeling of guilt at all is detected. The poem entitled “Shui-chi t’ing” 水雞艇 (Water-chicken boats) is a good example.

How happy one is before the [water-chicken] boat! To cruise on this boat of pleasure and enjoy the scenery all around [is a memorable experience]. The boat is beautifully decorated and polished to a sheen ... [which] heightens the romantic atmosphere ... . The singing clocks, the hanging scrolls of calligraphy and painting are [all] delightful ... [A pair of brightly lit lanterns] helps dispel [any feelings of] human misery ... In the hot season when you put on your silk clothes ... your prettiness excites me [further]. From the corner of your eyes comes a message of romantic love ... and I feel I have encountered Hsi Shih ... .

The pleasure of cruising on the same kind of low-class floating brothel was vividly recorded in another poem.

What beautiful scenery! It helps a man to rid himself of his sorrows. On a fine evening when the full moon in the sky ... [and] the weather is hot, people go out to look for a cool place [in which to relax] ... I come to Shakee where ... a cluster of small boats is anchored along the pier ... . I also notice the ‘sisters’ dressed in beautiful clothes and seated in the bow of these vessels ... Without any feeling of shame, they call out [to the passers-by] on land ... Sometimes, [bewitched customers] press their ‘breads’ [breasts] ... which are ... soft, smooth, and rich in oily cream. Then will one hear the cry: “Don’t touch!” ... My friends! Remember my words whenever you are free, and take a trip on one of these boats. [It costs] ... no more than places on land. [You might] even hook a few beauties. [You can], moreover, escape the heat [of the summer evening] ... which is better than spending your silver in a brothel on shore. ... But most importantly, you must refrain from over-indulgence.

The pleasure was indisputable, and the experience was certainly not seen as shameful or regrettable.

There were other indications of the predominantly favourable social perception of prostitution. It seems that very few writings on the subject in Republican Canton challenged the legitimacy of brothels as a venue for both serious social functions and open leisure activities. In the Cantong Yearbook for 1935, the chapter on prostitution made no mention of the ‘immorality’ of brothel-going, concentrating instead on the municipal government’s concern for the deplorable physical conditions of certain low-class establishments, the alleged maltreatment of some prostitutes by their madams, and the illegal employment of young girls as maids in brothels. In the early 1930s, when the government launched a series of publicity campaigns against the ‘bad social customs’ in Cantonese society, the problem of prostitution, though labelled as a major vice, was only lightly targeted in comparison with other vices.
Local guide-books also published information about brothels. In two of these, the addresses and telephone numbers of a selection of different classes of brothel, their prices and services, were listed. This information was clearly intended to facilitate visits to such establishments which, in the eyes of the editors, provided a less harmful and immoral form of entertainment than gambling. 165

To some, as a Yueh-ou song noted, patronizing a brothel helped one to forget the reality of growing old:

In no time one grows old, and can scarcely blink before the autumn wind comes blowing. Man's affairs of a full twenty years are as drifting weed on the surface of the water .... Though like a fallen chrysanthemum shivering in icy weather, one can still withstand the seasonal cold like an aged pine. ... [One is] hardly a fool for knowing how to enjoy [life], losing oneself in the embrace of a levy of beauties humming a few lines of a Yueh-ou ..., and choosing a companion who can strum a tune on the p'i-p'a. 166

Prostitution had a psychologically soothing function, and brothels provided a happy refuge for escapists. A contemporary journalist noted that the more successful tabloids and pictorials in Canton concentrated on news and anecdotes about the cinema world, sing-song girls, prostitutes and brothels to pander to the taste of the general reader. Though information of this kind was "not useful for 'mending' the affairs of this world," it did provide readers weary of reading about massacres or robberies with an alternative source of diversion and a temporary escape from the harsh realities of social disorder and political instability. 167

Chin Man-ch'eng 金滿成, a disciple of Chang Ching-sheng 張競生 (alias Dr Sex), argued that prostitution would persist for as long as the younger generation ignored his advice regarding sexual liberation and free love. Prostitution provided men with those same kinds of pleasure, that they were not free to enjoy elsewhere. 168 Brothels, therefore, provided these young men with the venue for experimenting with romance and exercising their 'freedoms' in this respect.

Surprisingly, prostitution was a favourite pastime for 'modern' students. This might have been an extension of the practice among traditional literati of patronizing courtesans. 169 Unlike their predecessors of Imperial times, however, this new generation of literati-customers were looking for straight-out sex rather than intellectual companionship. In Ou-yang Shan's Tsai shen-ching-li, the protagonist has many regulars who are college students in Canton, and even entertains them at school dormitories. 170 In another short story about the extra-curricular activities of a university student in Canton, philandering and visiting brothels are among his major pastimes. He is so experienced in brothel-going that he is nick-named "the great athlete of sleeping with beauties" (mien-hua chien-chiang 眠花健將). 171 A contemporary journalist recorded the conversation of his neighbours—four local students—while they were playing mahjong on three consecutive evenings. They were so excited by the game, as much as by the recollections of their last visit to a brothel, that they began to discuss the visit with raised voices.

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165 The section on "gambling," the editors stated, was deliberately made incomplete and uninformative since it was an activity that "shatters morality and impairs men." There was no such moralistic warning in the section on prostitution, however, which suggests that it was considered relatively harmless. Tzu-hang-shih, Kuang-chou, ch.4, pp.5-7; Liu Ts'ai-su, Kuang-chou, pp.111-16.

166 "Jung-mi-i lao" [How easy to get old], "Kuei-hai kao," HYOC, pp.6-7.


168 Chin Man-ch'eng, Yung-hu ke-ming ti ch'ing-jen chih [Support the revolutionary system of love] (Shanghai: Mei-ti Shu-tien, 1928), p.50.


in lurid detail. A newspaper report ascribed the proliferation of clandestine prostitutes to their popularity among students, who could enjoy their services without having to visit a brothel. Every weekend, when a boarding-school in Canton released its students for a break in the city, many of them would stay at local guest-houses where the receptionist, at their request, would arrange the company of a clandestine prostitute. The ‘problem’ was reported to have become so serious that as many as sixty students were found to have venereal disease. In the hope of containing the situation, teachers were deployed to inspect the local guest-houses frequented by their students. Thus we are provided with an alternative picture of the sub-culture of contemporary students, not all of whom were as morally superior as was generally believed.

Interestingly, some Cantonese were tempted to regard prostitution as a ‘necessary evil’. One writer saw the social value of prostitution in the fact that it helped minimize incidents of rape. In his view, the practice of the rich keeping concubines disadvantaged the poorer class of men because it substantially reduced the number of marriageable women available to the latter. These were fortunate if they could save enough money to pay for a prostitute and relieve their sexual impulses, but rape was the only way out, it was argued, for those too poor to afford anything else. Although exaggerated, this reveals an alternative view of the social function of prostitution in male-dominated Canton.

Some viewed prostitution as a ‘necessary evil’ in a religious or moral sense. To them, brothels and prostitutes were ethically justified as part of the Heavenly design of karma in which both were living out their predestined ‘punishments’. In a nineteenth-century Cantonese ballad, for example, a murderous step-mother and her accomplice are said to be reborn as whores who would suffer the ultimate humiliation of remaining uninterred after death. In most nineteenth-century Yueh-ou love-songs, prostitutes were seen as condemned sinners repaying their ‘flower debts’ incurred in previous lives, and therefore undergoing a form of retributory punishment. This karmic view of prostitution was still in currency during the Republican period. In the 1920s’ version of Yueh-ou songs, both prostitutes and brothel-goers suffering from ‘fornication-related’ misfortunes such as bankruptcy or infection with venereal disease were seen as sinners being punished for sins committed in previous lives. Sometimes, we are told, a prostitute, instead of being on the receiving end of retributory punishment, metes it out to the brothel-goers, especially rich but parsimonious patrons who earned their wealth by exploiting others.

[You may] blame me for trying again to “disembowl you with a sword” (i.e. solicit an unfairly large sum of money from a customer) . . . [But since there are] so many whom you have castrated (i.e. squeezed), [now] is the time for me, your slave, to do the same to you. Need I remind you that the few yuan [you have paid me] were hardly earned by you in honest ways. [Such money] can be only scattered into the ‘flower forest’ to buy suggestive smiles from us. But no money gained
immorally can be kept for long… . Though nobody can do anything now about [the way you earned it], Heaven will settle the account with you."177

The brothel had become an 'execution ground' for retributory punishment in the karmic order. And the existence of prostitutes was justified by their dual role as both sufferer and executor in this divine scheme of justice.

In short, Cantonese perceptions of prostitution were far from being one-sidedly negative. Some viewed it as an agreeable form of entertainment; others saw it serving positive social functions; while others still justified it on ethico-religious grounds. Condemnation was never entirely absent, but such disapproval was inadequate to alter the generally favourable view, and the widespread patronage, of prostitution in Canton.

4. Official Perceptions and Control

Ambivalent attitudes towards prostitution were shared no less by the city authorities. Although denounced as one of the "bad customs" (pu-liang/feng-su 不良風俗) in an official campaign for social reform in 1930, the issue of prostitution was a low-profile one.178 Throughout this period, the Cantonese authorities never attempted to eliminate prostitution altogether, or even to take drastic action to suppress the 'vice'. A few nominal measures were, however, implemented: a handful of reform shelters for ex-prostitutes were established in the naïve hope of controlling the profession;179 girls under sixteen were prohibited from working in brothels; health inspectors were randomly sent to local brothels to check the hygiene conditions and whether the girls were being treated humanely. There were also occasional calls for the registration of prostitutes.180 These measures, however, were chiefly concerned with the maltreatment of prostitutes and the provision of a more hygienic service to brothel-goers, and hardly amounted to a sincere attempt to eradicate the practice.

The government had no long-term plans for the 'relief' of prostitutes. The founding of the 'Door of Hope' (Chi-liang-so 裕良所) was proclaimed as a first step towards the suppression of prostitution, but this institution was hardly successful in fulfilling this aim. First, it was not devoted entirely to the care of prostitutes. Lost children, runaway domestics (mui-tsai 妹仔), 'procured' girls who had been recovered, and homeless women were also received there. Second, in the early 1920s, there was only one such refuge in Canton. Its insignificant monthly budget of 400 yuan limited the number of inmates to fifty and restricted the quality of rehabilitation work.181 The entire institution was run by only one supervisor, one accountant, one inspector, and one teacher.182 By the end of the 1920s, the number of its inmates at any one time had grown to about 400, and the annual budget to
were photographed; not only were the pictures displayed in a special room where anyone could inspect them, but many were also posted outside the gate where they could be seen by passers-by. Interested men could propose a meeting with particular inmates. For further details, see Gamble, Peking, p.262.


190 Kuang-chou-shih shib-cheng t'ung-chi hui-k'an (1923), pp.21, 40-1, 76. Between 1921 and 1923, the total revenue from prostitution-related business increased by almost 20%. Li Tsung-huang, Hsin Kuang-tung, p.13.


192 The most popular public projects funded by prostitution-related revenues were carriage-way construction and vocational education. Kuang-chou nien-chien (1935), pp.74-5.

193 Lee Bing-shuey, p.95. But it must be added that the government was not ruthless or rash in mobilizing this source of revenue. In 1927, for instance, the Finance Department turned down a request by certain tax farmers to raise taxes on broths. HTPP, 12.5.1927, p.22. A similar lenience had occasionally been shown by the late-Ch'ing administration. The loss of income caused by natural disasters invariably led to a reduction in the taxes levied on brothels (at the latter's request). Kuang-tung Ch'ing-li Tsai-cheng-chü, "Shui-ju pu: Cheng-tsa ko-chuan," pp.38-41.

about 7,500 yuan. However, its effectiveness as a true institution of relief remains dubious. Even the official view of this institution was critical and unfavourable. It was criticized for its inadequate funding and poor management, which rendered it a quasi-prison and discouraged prostitutes from seeking assistance there. Once admitted, an inmate was not allowed to leave the premises until discharged. And instead of being given any real vocational training, inmates, in "compulsion of their freedom," were eagerly married off to men seeking mates.

One of the major reasons for the lack of determination to eliminate prostitution was the lucrative tax on the profession. Since 1904, an excise had been levied on brothels in Canton, an operation in which tax-farmers were actively involved. Originally, the excise was intended to finance the organization of the River Police Department, but it was gradually channelled towards the funding of a variety of government projects, such as the building of schools and the repair of dykes.

By the early 1920s, prostitution-related revenue had become a major source of income for both provincial and municipal governments. In 1922, the 'flower-feast surtax' was the fourth largest source of revenue for the municipal government. It brought to the treasury coffers a handsome injection of 650,000 yuan, 8% of the municipal income for that year. There was a surcharge on the number of rooms in a brothel (hua-liu fang-chuan [花樓房捐]), and an additional surcharge on top of the flower-feast surtax for funding ditch-dredging projects. The flower-feast surtax was so lucrative that in 1922 and 1923 it was usurped by militarists from the municipal government, and it took months of negotiation before it was finally reclaimed.

Throughout the 1920s both the leftist and rightist regimes in Canton continued to enjoy the pecuniary benefits from this source, despite the occasional call for the elimination of prostitution. In 1925, the flower-feast surtax accounted for some 450,000 yuan, or 13% of the municipal treasury's total surtax income. In 1926, the amount collected had increased to 680,000 yuan, or 18% of the total surtax income. It was in that same year that the government proposed issuing licenses to streetwalkers as a means of raising revenue. But in the face of 'ferocious criticism' by the various women's associations in Canton the plan was eventually abandoned.

Nevertheless, from 1928 until the fall of Ch'en Chi-t'ang [陳濟棠] in 1935, the annual revenue from the 'flower feast surtax' alone remained at about 450,000 yuan. Prostitution-related revenues continued to be used for funding infrastructure projects and vocational education, which inevitably hindered the official determination to suppress prostitution.

The lure of this source of revenue explains the survival of the "beautiful-courtesan contest" (hua-pang hsuan-chu [花榜選舉]) into this period. Such contests were particularly favoured by 'scholar-gentlemen' (ming-shib [名士]). From the meagre surviving sources, it is known that the first contest of this kind in which the participants were required to be both beautiful and
accomplished in the arts was held in 1904, sponsored and organized by a newspaper company. The frequency of these contests is not known, but they were apparently held from time to time. In 1925, at the peak of the leftist rule in Canton, a scholar-gentleman organized a successful contest of this kind. Three years later, a tax-farmer in Canton requested official approval to organize another contest, though it was to be conducted differently: votes in the form of tickets were to be distributed to the brothels with girls taking part in the contest. Participants would then implore their clients to purchase from them as many tickets as possible, because the one who sold most would win the title. In spite of being “heatedly criticized” by two local women’s associations, the municipal authorities acceded to the proposal after the tax-farming company had agreed to pay the municipal government 2,000 yuan in return. The practice won a certain amount of public support, and a magazine article defended such contests as morally acceptable, its author comparing them with international beauty contests, and argued that both were ethically justifiable. Popular supportive views of this kind probably helped the government rationalize its tolerance of the ‘vice’.

The late-Ch’ing administration had openly expounded its view of prostitutes as taxable ‘goods’. An official publication concerning Kwangtung financial policy published in 1909, stated that:

It is known that prostitutes are the most indecent and degraded [group] in the whole of society. They can eat and dress well without tilling [the soil] or weaving. If [they are] not controlled strictly, [the consequences] may be far more serious than just inflicting harm on the moral standards of our society . . . . Viewed superficially, prostitutes are those who cream off the ‘profits’ [from society]. Nonetheless, their existence in a city which is full of local and expatriate merchants can also bring prosperity . . . . Thus, prostitution cannot at this stage be suppressed. Moreover, it is almost impossible to prohibit it because the already serious problem of clandestine brothels will only be aggravated, and further damage social morality. Hence, it is better to tax [these women] so that some control can be kept over them, and allocate the revenue for local use.

Although such pragmatic views on prostitution are not found in official publications of a later period, the fundamental perception of sex-workers as an exploitable ‘asset’ and a necessary evil was deep-rooted. It was a rationalization that allowed the government free rein to use prostitutes as a source of revenue for the funding of local projects. When the Canton Bund was completed in the late 1910s, for example, a local official devised and implemented a plan to boost land values in the newly reclaimed area, successfully persuading entreprenuers to build there a number of Western-style multi-storied buildings, a theatre for Cantonese opera, and an amusement park. Certain brothel-barons agreed to move most of their establishments, then located within the walled city, into this area; this confirms the fact that throughout the period there was no plan to banish brothels to relatively remote parts of the city in order to suppress them, as the government
attempted to do with gambling houses and opium dens. Unlike the latter two, brothels in Canton, being considered acceptable business enterprises, were allowed to continue operating during the brief official campaign against social vices in the mid-1930s.

The lack of organized public opinion could have been another factor contributing to the half-heartedness of official policies aimed at eliminating prostitution. The criticisms of intellectuals regarding its ‘pernicious’ social consequences never gained impetus, and it is doubtful whether they had any impact on the public at large. At most, these moral preachers may have caused short-lived embarrassment to the authorities. Although certain organizations were persistent in taking a lone stand for the elimination of the vice, their voice was so weak and their effect so small that they find no mention even in contemporary writings on the subject.

More importantly, any criticism of prostitution on social grounds was swamped by the popular acceptance of it as an agreeable form of entertainment, as discussed earlier, and it was generally understood that prostitutes themselves were opposed to official plans for the abolition of their profession. In a Yueh-ou song entitled “Fei-ch’ang” (The abolition of prostitution), the narrator, as if a prostitute herself, summarizes the apprehensions of her co-workers on this issue:

When there’s nothing else to abolish, then it’s “eliminate the prostitutes.” But where can we sisters be settled, there are so many of us? They say if we learn skills at school our chances of getting a new job and travelling a different road for the rest of our lives will be easier, but I’ve spent the first half of my life in this ‘smoky, flowery’ place ... and am good at almost nothing but finger-guessing games and singing. Suddenly there’s this talk about making us reform, but where can we find enough customers to marry us, just like that? There may be one or two patrons who can understand us and show pity, but not all can take us home. Perhaps we should shave our heads and become nuns ... . But our ‘carnal’ thoughts are far from extinguished, so it would be hard to live out our days as ‘vegetarians’ ... . We fear that employers will despise us and refuse us jobs, not to mention the miniscule monthly income which will scarcely buy flowers [for our hair] ... . We still have charm ... and are young—how could we bear loneliness night after long night ... ? While nobody can help plucking a beautiful flower when he sees it, how can we be sure that those butterflies will never come back? And by then we would be ‘unlicensed’ ... . As for brothels, I dare not say they do no harm, but since men are merely looking for happiness and distraction ... they don’t take them seriously. And when business in all trades is bleak, [brothels] can foster prosperity.

The unwillingness of the prostitutes to abandon their lucrative jobs, the popular perception of the social usefulness of brothels, and the growth in the number of unlicensed prostitutes (which merely indicated the depth of this entrenched social practice), all provided the government with excuses for not tackling the ‘problem’ with determination.

The great popularity of brothel-going among military officers and
government officials certainly undermined any serious attempt to abolish prostitution. There was a long tradition of military and civil officials patronizing brothels,205 a tradition still very much alive in the 1920s. After Ch’en Chiung-ming’s troops had taken Canton in 1911, for instance, the concentration in the city of army officers and infantrymen was said to have helped revitalize the declining brothel business in Ch’en Tang and the East Bund, where many brothels had been destroyed by fire in 1910. High-class brothels in Ch’en Tang were usually crowded with inebriated senior army officers who delighted in firing their pistols into the air. Ch’en Tang being in close proximity to Shameen, the Legation Quarter located there complained about this to the Canton Government, and as a result Ch’en Chiung-ming ordered the closure of all brothels in the city.206 Needless to say this injunction caused great inconvenience to local brothel-goers, who had to travel to Fo Shan to meet their favourite prostitutes who had been forced to move there to ply their trade.207 With the retreat of Ch’en Chiung-ming from Canton in 1912 brothels reopened,208 and it is said that the new military bosses from then until the mid-1920s were once more dedicated patrons of brothels.209 In this period, military victory celebrations were often held in high-class floating brothels anchored along the scenic Pearl River.210 Politicians, military officers, social notables, and powerful businessmen also mingled in these brothels where political deals were settled, and first-hand information on political plots, military movements, and monetary speculation was traded.211

After the outbreak of the Tsinan Incident in 1928,212 General Li Chi-shen 李濟深, as an official gesture of mourning for those killed, placed a one-month prohibition on government employees attending banquets in “public places,” including brothels. But even for that short period the order was openly defied, and Li had to deploy plain-clothed detectives to patrol the red-light districts. In a number of raids on brothels more than twenty army officers and bureaucrats were arrested, amongst them the Mayor of the city of Kiangmen. Those arrested were stripped of their honours and dismissed from office.213

The author of a short article in a Cantonese magazine of late 1930 lamented the fact that certain officers of the respectable Nationalist Revolutionary Army—his neighbour being one—were enthusiastic frequenters of brothels. They saw themselves as folk heroes, loved and surrounded by beauties, while their frivolity and free-spending, and the protection they afforded from harassment by local bullies, made them especially welcome.214

In sum, the limited knowledge we have of prostitutes and prostitution during the period under review has been distorted by the views and misconceptions of those who wrote on the subject from particular political or moral standpoints. It is a complex subject which defies generalization at any time or in any place, and Republican Canton is no exception.

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205 For more details, see Wang Shu-nu, Chang-chi, pp.41–3.
207 Ibid., p.17.
210 A contemporary short story adopts this social phenomenon as its opening scene. Chiu-chung-feng-fu, “Ping-szu chih hai” [The threat of dying soldiers], in Kuang-chou she­but tsah chih (Canton, c.1920s), vol.1, pp.1–2.
211 Nan-tien shu-yueh, p.360. An old resident of Canton recalled that most high-class brothels had ‘secret rooms’ in which army officers could exchange intelligence or make clandestine deals in weaponry or bribes. Tsung Shih, “Yen hua,” pp.231–3.
212 On 3 May 1928, fierce fighting broke out in Tsinan between the Nationalist troops, who had just taken the city in late April, and the 5,000-strong expeditionary force sent by the Japanese government to protect Japanese civilians there. The fighting, which lasted for eight days, caused great devastation to the city, and thousands of Chinese civilians and soldiers were killed. See Akira Iriye, After imperialism: the search for a new order in the Far East, 1921–1931 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp.193–205.
213 NYT, 4.6.1928, p.1.3; NYSP, 14.6.1928, p.11.
214 Wan Ying, “Ping-ho luan-t’u,” pp.90–2, 95–8. Brothels were probably crucial in minimizing the abuse of ordinary women by soldiers in Canton. Even in times of relative peace there was a heavy concentration of 15,000 troops in the city. British Consulate, Canton, “Political summary for the May quarter, 1928,” F.O.228/3826 (Public Record Office, London), p.51. In Canton, soldiers were known to be keen patrons of prostitutes, which may explain the low incidence of reported abuse by the military against ordinary women.
5. Postscript

One of the consequences of the economic, and to some extent social, liberalization policy in place since the late 1970s is the re-emergence of the ‘problem’ of prostitution in Kwangtung. Nowadays, clandestine prostitutes conduct their business rather openly not only in big cities and towns, but also in villages in the Canton Delta affected by the economic boom. Unlike the former regime, the Communist government is uncompromising on prostitution, to go by the official propaganda and literature. Both prostitutes and clients are occasionally arrested, and sent off to prisons for ‘thought re-education.’

With the influence of corruption being felt on nearly all levels of society, however, such measures are clearly insufficient to deal with the ‘problem’. In Canton, for instance, clandestine prostitutes, both female and male, are easily available in practically all hotels. Hotel staff are allegedly bribed to “smooth the negotiations.” In hotels owned and managed by the People’s Liberation Army the presence of prostitutes is even more obvious and solicitation more open, not only because the police dare not search Army premises, but many senior army officers are said to be major patrons of these women.

Interestingly, popular attitudes towards prostitution today bear a striking resemblance to those that prevailed in the Republican period. A middle-ranking cadre in a north-western county of Kwangtung province runs a karaoke restaurant whose waitresses engage in prostitution as a lucrative sideline. The business of this restaurant is said to be “very good,” and the cadre, far from feeling there is anything wrong in running a clandestine brothel, is convinced of the beneficial contribution his establishment is making to the local economy. In a large town some seventy kilometres from Canton, another enterprising local businessman recently ‘imported’ twelve blonde young Russian girls whose job is to conduct ‘public relations’ at a local night-club. At a ‘suitable’ price, these ‘exotic’ foreign girls entertain rich clients in ‘special rooms’. Their popularity is tremendous, and every evening expensive limousines queue for a place in the night-club’s car-park which is far too small for its prospering business. The clients, mainly rich entrepreneurs and influential cadres, not just local but from the entire Delta region, spend vast sums on ostentatious banquets as the ‘companions’ of these girls. Local police do not, and cannot, interfere with this high-class bordello on account of the influence its patrons wield.

Most contemporary Cantonese seem to be indifferent to the expansion of clandestine prostitution in Canton. A resident recalled that when prostitutes started to reappear some years ago many local people were hostile towards them. But as time has gone by, people have become used to their presence and have ceased to criticize them and their trade. A certain university professor was probably reflecting commonly held views when he described prostitution in which transactions are conducted fairly and voluntarily as far less harmful to society than gambling, drug addiction, or official corruption.

Virgil Kit-yiu Ho
Institute for Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology
University of Gothenburg, Sweden, and St Antony’s College, Oxford

215 Information contained in the Postscript was gathered by the author while on anthropological field work in the Canton Delta between 1989 and 1993.

Bibliographical references to the abbreviations used above may be found in the notes indicated: CKMH (n.30); FHKKTK (n.164); HTJP (n.16); HYOCH (n.33); HYTS (n.9); KCILPL (n.17); KCMKJP (n.93); KTHS (n.29); LNFY (n.17); NYSP (n.16).