

**Elizabeth J. Remick**

*Regulating Prostitution in China: Gender and Local Statebuilding, 1900–1937.*

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This is a truly interdisciplinary work of political science and history that demonstrates the degree to which gender shapes the form and function of local states. Using three case studies of Hangzhou, Guangzhou, and Kunming from the turn of the twentieth century until the war with Japan, Remick traces differences in local state governments to the respective states' approaches to regulating prostitution, and shows how these approaches grew out of the sociopolitical history of each given city.

Chapter 1 assesses prostitution and its regulation through late imperial and modern Chinese history. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the state interfered very little in the business of prostitution, which was largely private and socially accepted even if the women who worked therein were considered improper. By the very late Qing, however, reform-minded officials began a regime of light regulation. The model they imported had originally come from Paris, from whence it was imported into Japan in the 1870s as part of the young Meiji state's selective adoption of foreign institutions. The Qing state borrowed the Japanese version, and new regulations regarding prostitution that emerged in the era of the New Policies included licensing requirements, light taxation, the creation of brothel districts, mandated health inspections for venereal disease, and restitution homes (*jiliang suo* 濟良所) for women who wished to leave the business. Citing Kristin Stapleton's volume *Civilizing Chengdu: Chinese Urban Reform, 1895–1937*,<sup>1</sup> Remick notes that Chengdu was one of the earliest cities to begin regulating prostitution in 1903.

Case studies of the three cities comprise the next three chapters. Remick chooses Hangzhou to illustrate the most common model in provincial capitals, light regulation. In Hangzhou this system brought in little revenue and affected few changes in local government beyond initiating the establishment of a *jiliang suo* and health clinics for venereal disease inspections. The health inspections were more stringently enforced after the 1927 founding of the Nationalist government in nearby Nanjing, when discussions of a modern state's responsibility to protect the people's health influenced local society. Overall, however, Remick concludes that prostitution was generally accepted in Hangzhou, leading officials to react slowly and mildly to Nationalist government

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1 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000.

mandates. This in turn meant that the local state captured very little income from the business and therefore had little incentive to further police it.

Guangzhou provides a stark contrast not only to Hangzhou but also to most other cities in China. Officials in Guangzhou chose a revenue-intensive strategy of regulation, and collected as much as thirty per cent of the city budget through taxes on prostitution. These taxes paid not only for prostitution regulation itself, but also for road construction and the military (p. 126). This created an incentive structure wherein city officials, keenly aware of how much the Bureau of Police, Ministry of Education, and other government offices depended on this income, repeatedly used economic arguments to refute anti-prostitution citizen activism. It also attracted local militarists who took all prostitution tax revenue in 1923 and 1924 (p. 127). The amount of revenue that the prostitution tax generated in Guangzhou led to the creation of a complex tax collection structure that included tax farmers for this specific tax, much less focus on health inspections (in fact these were never undertaken in Guangzhou), and a wealthier state with a greater capacity to modernize. Remick argues that all of this stemmed from a gender politics that led city officials to treat prostitution like just another business.

In Kunming, prostitutes were confined to walled-in areas known as *jīyuan* 集團, from which they could only leave at certain times and for specific purposes, while wearing a long white belt that distinguished them from “good” women – this latter requirement was the sole victory of moralizing women activists who had proposed much more stringent sartorial regulations, p. 169. Customers purchased tickets in order to enter, and police officers collected this money directly, taking their cut before paying the women who in turn had to pay for rent, water and electricity to the police therefrom. The coercion-intensive model was quite specific to Kunming because of the highly militarized society of Yunnan province and the high degree of social control of the police, which was in turn reinforced by the fact that the police ran the *jīyuan* and had the power to put women into it. In this highly controlled context, health inspections took place twice a week, and the state collected a significant amount of revenue that supported the municipal hospital, police, the prostitutes’ health inspection clinic, the women’s reformatory, and other charitable work. Remick calculates that in the mid-1920s, taxes collected from prostitution constituted between seven and sixteen per cent of city expenses (p. 186). As in Guangzhou, this income led officials to refuse reforms proposed by civilian protestors.

The final chapter is a close examination of the *jiliangsuo* prostitute rescue homes, with a comparison of how this institution operated in the three case study cities. In all three cities, the *jiliangsuo* were run by the police either with

or without the cooperation of local elites, and worked to return women to their “proper place” within the patriarchal family structure. While Remick did find some cases of women leaving a *jiliangshuo* in order to return to prostitution or pursue other work, by far the most common way for a woman to leave was through marriage, most often arranged by the institution staff. In one fascinating case in Hangzhou in 1935, a New Life Movement style mass marriage ceremony with over five thousand onlookers took place for nine women after a multi-day matchmaking event that attracted hundreds of would-be suitors. In this sense the *jiliangshuo*, originally designed to rescue women from an institution of oppression, in fact served to reinforce patriarchal notions of family ownership over women. This does not seem too surprising, given that the two predominant models for the restitution homes were Christian rescue groups run by missionaries, and Confucian gentry-run charitable halls, both of which operated on a moralistic logic. Remick overstates the influence of the former and fails to emphasize the degree to which the secular, state-run *jiliangshuo* resembled imperial-era benevolence halls.

In the epilogue, Remick links this period of Chinese history to contemporary debates about prostitution and whether or not it should be legalized. She notes that regulation requires a lot of work on the part of the state, costs a lot of money, and implicates politicians in the unsavory matter of sex work. Most importantly, it often does very little to protect prostitutes from exploitation unless they already have strong civil and legal rights, and even the most rigidly controlled systems cannot stop illegal (i.e. private) prostitution. People who consider the Netherlands to be the perfect example of successful regulation should keep this point in mind. Nonetheless, as imperfect as it is, regulation may just be the best method currently available. Moreover, as the cases of Guangzhou and Kunming attest, levying a tax on prostitution can generate significant income for the state and this money can be used to fund a variety of social services.

Though it is thoroughly researched and meticulously argued, this book does have some minor flaws. Remick asserts that many state institutions of prostitution regulation ceased functioning during the war with Japan (1937–1945). Although she does offer some concrete examples of stark change (such as the VD inspections in Kunming *jiyuan* that stopped during the war, p. 183), such blanket statements seem suspicious. It is possible that institutions may have moved during the war, operated in a different fashion that is less traceable in archival documents, or resumed normal operations after a brief hiatus. Moreover, Remick notes that in occupied areas the Japanese perpetuated state-run prostitution throughout the war, in addition to the infamous comfort women system, and if we treat what happened to Chinese people in China as part of the

Chinese experience then we cannot write the occupied areas out of the history of Chinese prostitution regulation.

Another curious note is the appearance of what Remick terms “different kinds of commercial sex” in the 1920s and 1930s (pp. 48, 184). In an uncharacteristic lapse in analytical style, Remick attributes this simply to customers taking interest in new forms of sex work, but does not link it to the increased policing of prostitution. Might sex workers have chosen different forms of work that allowed them freedom from a heavily regulated brothel or closely bound *jiyuan*?

The introduction is somewhat repetitive, but this book is a conceptually bold and analytically masterful study of the impact of gender ideals on state function. It demonstrates incontrovertibly that we must include gender analysis if we wish fully to understand the Chinese state.

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