

## Introduction

### *Prostitution, Gender, and the State in Early Twentieth-Century China*

PROSTITUTION was a huge business in China during the first four decades of the twentieth century. Tens of thousands of women worked in brothels as courtesans and in public venues as streetwalkers. In many cities, going to brothels for banquets, entertainment, gambling, alcohol, opium, and sex was one of the most popular forms of recreation for men with even only a little money, and brothels were one of the most important places to conduct business, along with teahouses and restaurants. Famous prostitutes were important leaders of fashion and culture in many cities. Large red-light districts supported hundreds of businesses in major cities, and prostitution, opium, and gambling were the lifeblood of organized crime. Not surprisingly, people in China frequently debated the merits of prostitution, in print, in public, and in private. Some thought it was just good clean fun, and others found it shamefully immoral. Some viewed it as wasting male patrons' valuable family resources, others as an economic lifeline for poor women. Some argued it was a vile exploitation of women, while others claimed it was a benign part of the natural order of things between men and women. Still others saw it as a symbol of national weakness, decadence, or effeminacy. Indeed, many people believed it was simply not a problem at all. These arguments were debated in newspapers, magazines, protests, moral cleanup movements, study groups, churches, and schools.

Debates also played out in municipal council and provincial legislature meetings, and in discussions among provincial and municipal officials. Because prostitution was such an important and visible part of daily life and the economy, it became a major public policy issue. Politicians staked their credibility and their moral fitness to lead on their ability to deal with the problem of prostitution. "Dealing" with it might mean cleaning up their cities by preventing prostitutes from soliciting on the streets, or safely managing the massive floating cities of brothel boats on rivers and lakes so as to save prostitutes and clients from death by drowning or fire. It could also

involve stopping rowdy soldiers from rampaging through brothel districts; banning child prostitution; preventing the spread of syphilis and gonorrhea from prostitutes to clients and then on to “innocent” wives and children; or protecting the virtue of “good” women amidst all this sexual excess. It might even mean banning prostitution altogether.

These problems of public order, public health, and the proper ordering of gender relations dogged early twentieth-century cities. In part to solve these problems, officials in the first decade of the century turned to regulating prostitution. In doing so, they transformed prostitution not simply into a problem of public order but into a target of social reform, an object of the nascent public health system, and, in some cities, a crucial source of state revenue without which there could not have been a fully articulated modern local state. In short, local officials’ decisions to regulate prostitution shaped the structures, functions, and capacities of local states in important ways.

This book is a study of regulated prostitution in China and its relationship to local statebuilding during the first half of the twentieth century. Following the lead of European states and Japan at the turn of the twentieth century, cities around China began to register, tax, monitor, and sometimes give venereal disease inspections to prostitutes. In spite of constant political attacks and resistance from many quarters, this local approach to dealing with prostitution continued throughout the period 1906–1937 and again between 1945 and 1949, even as it took different forms in different cities. Prostitution at that time was an integral part of the system of gender relations, prostitute being one of only a few fates available to women and girls besides wife/mother/concubine, servant, or factory worker. State intervention in the form of regulating prostitution connected the local state, politics, and gender relations. How local governments chose to shape this institution that was so integral to, and constitutive of, the system of gender relations transformed local states themselves. This tells us that gender needs to be written into the story of statebuilding in China, even though women, usually barred from political life at that time in China, were not visible political actors.

Rather than being a “peripheral” social issue, prostitution and its regulation were at the heart of the modern statebuilding project under-

taken by Chinese local governments starting with the New Policies (1901–1911) during the last years of the Qing dynasty and continuing through the Republic (1912–1949). Chinese officials followed the lead of the most powerful countries in the world in claiming that regulation was the best, most modern, and most scientific way to deal with prostitution. That is, far from being some kind of “feudal remnant” as opponents later claimed, prostitution regulation was for the modernists one of the keys to an orderly, healthy society and a strong state. It therefore was adopted as part of the modern policing model in provincial capitals and other major cities after the turn of the century. In practice, local officials made different choices about the precise sort of regulatory regime to implement. Their choices had significantly different effects on the structure and function of local government, including varying levels of fiscal and coercive power, the provision of social services, and other crucial markers of local state capacity. The most extreme example of this is that in the 1920s, the Guangzhou municipal government was able to build China’s most modern local government using the city’s massive prostitution tax revenues, which equaled 30 percent of city revenues in some periods. Other cities, lacking this resource, could not afford the roads, schools, and other social services that Guangzhou developed.

In order to show how local governments’ different ways of regulating prostitution affected local statebuilding outcomes, the book first identifies three main subtypes of prostitution regulation in China. These include the most common approach of light taxation and monitoring, which I call the light regulation approach; a revenue-intensive approach characterized by heavy taxation; and a coercion-intensive approach of police-monopolized state-run brothels. Case studies representing each of these three regulatory approaches—Hangzhou (light regulation), Guangzhou (revenue-intensive), and Kunming (coercion-intensive)—illustrate the different consequences and implications of each for statebuilding. All three forms of prostitution regulation led to local statebuilding; but the three different approaches produced different outcomes. The kinds of statebuilding associated with each approach were, respectively, confined to the regulatory system itself; widespread across all the local state apparatus; and concentrated within the broader coercive apparatus of the local state.

WRITING GENDER AND PROSTITUTION INTO THE  
STORY OF MODERN CHINESE STATEBUILDING

Using a gender lens to examine local statebuilding in China, we can begin to understand how the state and systems of gender relations, here manifest in the practice of prostitution, are intertwined in measurable material and institutional ways. (Below I discuss why prostitution is a stand-in for gender in this study.) What I mean is that when we examine the history of regulated prostitution most broadly, we can see that the modern state has, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, been concerned with establishing a particular system of gender relations. And, as officials have made decisions about reordering the system of gender relations, the state itself has been transformed.

Regulated prostitution was part of the modern state model passed from Europe to China; this means that concerns about gender and (particularly women's) sexuality were an integral part of the modern state from its origins in Napoleonic France until it made its way to China during the early 1900s via the New Policy-era police reforms.<sup>1</sup> After all, what could be more state-like than Paris's enormous Morals Police bureaucracy, prostitutes' prisons, and hospitals? Protecting public health and keeping order in the streets by controlling prostitutes were modernist statebuilding goals. European state-makers created modern states based on particular assumptions and understandings about gender; and one of the many things they sought to control in the new modern way was gender and sexuality, as Foucault (1988–1990) has so famously pointed out. When Chinese state-makers started regulating prostitution as they adopted modern police systems, they were also drawn into the business of having the state intervene actively, openly, and in new ways in gender relations and issues related to women's sexuality.

Prostitution was also a state concern in China in the early part of the twentieth century because prostitution and its regulation were political, politicized, and public, rather than marginal private matters. Prostitution was public in that, in many places in the country, the business was openly conducted and thriving. Urban men of the middle and upper classes routinely went to brothels not only for sex, but also to do business and socialize with each other while gambling, eating, and drinking. Some prostitutes were leaders in fashion and purveyors of taste. The press reported

frequently about prostitutes and prostitution both in news stories and as the topic of public debates. In public discourse, talking about prostitution—what “caused” it and what should be done about it—was a vehicle for discussing a whole host of hot topics of the day: the sources of China’s national weakness, feminism and gender roles, colonialism and imperialism, reform vs. revolution, and so on. Prostitution was “a metaphor, a medium of articulation in which . . . changing elites and emerging middle classes discussed their problems, fears, agendas, and visions” (Hershatter 1997, 4). But importantly, the discussions were decidedly political and had political causes and consequences. Military and civilian officials, as well as provincial and municipal legislators, often had opinions about prostitution and tried to act on those opinions when they had the political power to do so. In short, people talked about, wrote about, read about, and even saw prostitutes with regularity, and prostitution was the subject of political discussion and the object of political action.

The fact that concerns about prostitution and gender are shot through conceptions of the modern state, local politics, and political discourse tells us that we need to think about how to write gender more explicitly into political history, in China and elsewhere. In Chinese studies, gender is usually written out of political history; even in supposedly more “liberated” Republican political history, men are (generally speaking) the actors, and we rarely hear anything about women, or about gender as a broad political concern. This makes one wonder, as Cynthia Enloe, the feminist scholar of international relations, always asks about international politics, “Where are the women?” (Enloe 1989). And, since we do not hear much from women, what were the male actors saying and doing about gender? What effects did their actions regarding gender have on the construction of the modern local state in China?

Feminist histories of late Qing and Republican China do have some answers about the first two questions. Some women were visible in the public sphere as activists and revolutionaries (Gilmartin 1995), and as fighters for women’s rights and suffrage during the Republican era (Edwards 2008). But more often than not, women were the objects of political campaigns, not the instigators of them. Recent studies have shown that the warlord and Guomindang regimes were deeply implicated in reordering gender

relations, whether it was through defining civil and property rights based on gender (Bernhardt 1999), restructuring and redefining the family (Glosser 2003), controlling women's dress (Friedman 2002), creating schools for girls, regulating women's labor and banning women from taking certain kinds of presumably sexualized work (Chin 2012; Hsu Hui-chi 2008), or banning foot binding and other kinds of cultural practices viewed as particularly connected to women, such as popular religion (Nedostup 2009; Poon 2004). Furthermore, outside the official sphere, many of the leading nationalist advocates for women's equality were men, such as Liang Qichao, Hu Shi, Kang Youwei, and Lu Xun.

But how state actors dealt with gender issues also had an important political impact. In late Qing and Republican China, not only did the state intervene in gender-related issues through policymaking, but the state itself was transformed by the decisions related to gender. That is, in making choices about men and women's relative power, and about how to create a properly ordered gendered society, the state gained or lost certain capacities, and gained or lost certain bureaucratic structures and functions, including some in areas not directly connected to the gender-related policies.

To consider some concrete examples beyond the regulation of prostitution, there are logical institutional consequences from all sorts of gender-related official decisions. If local government officials decide to educate girls as well as boys when they set up public schools, then they must either devote more resources to larger coeducational schools or establish separate schools for boys and girls. If they decide that it is right, proper, or simply necessary for women to work outside the home, then they have to provide public supports to help women with traditionally female domestic duties such as child care. If they decide to criminalize new kinds of female sexual behavior, they must establish women's prisons or reformatories or expand existing ones. The point is that if we look at statebuilding through the lens of gender, we can see that local states would be structured and would function differently, if officials made different choices about gender.

One could similarly look at statebuilding from any number of other perspectives; for example, we might ask how local states would look different if officials made different choices about class, race/ethnic identity, sexual orientation, or other categories. Certainly these viewpoints will not

tell us everything there is to know about statebuilding, but they do fill in some gaps in a literature that focuses on the power of capital and the importance of warfare in making states, in the case of Europe (Tilly 1992), and on moral, material, and coercive power in the case of China (Wong 1997). In early twentieth-century China, local government's treatment of prostitution had important fiscal consequences, bureaucratic consequences, and social reform consequences. These are all things that political and social historians should care about, and why prostitution deserves to be a focus of study in Republican-era politics in China.

#### WHY IS PROSTITUTION ABOUT GENDER?

So far I have asked readers to accept my claim that prostitution is in some sense “about” gender, and that prostitution can be a stand-in for gender in my discussion of the interactions between state and gender; but this claim deserves further investigation. We usually assume that prostitution is about sex, but is it necessarily about gender? I would not argue that it always is, in all times and places; but in late Qing and Republican China, prostitution was a very important component of the overall system of gender relations, and regulating it was one way that the state influenced gender roles and gendered behavior. What it meant to be a prostitute in late Qing and Republican China was connected with, and partly constitutive of, the larger system of gender relations.

There are many ways to think about and define prostitution, which we usually take to mean the practice of trading sex for money or other kinds of material gain. Whether we think it is good or bad, or neither, our evaluation of it tends to be influenced by what we think “causes” it—that is, what makes people sell sex. Less talked about is what makes people *buy* sex, but more on that later. The actors in this study variously talked about prostitution as being a sign of a woman's moral weakness, personal degradation, or individual criminality; as an economic expedient that desperately poor women were forced to undertake at their most vulnerable times; or as an inevitable outcome of the capitalist (or, sometimes, feudal) system of patriarchal marriage. Today, these same understandings persist, now accompanied by newer framings of prostitution as a positive, transgressive form of sexuality, or as a form of labor (“sex work”).<sup>2</sup>