

Regulating Prostitution in China: Gender and Local Statebuilding, 1900–1937. Elizabeth J. Remick. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780804788366.

Elizabeth Remick's second book, *Regulating Prostitution in China*, provides an exploration of the country's first attempt at establishing a modern regulatory framework for sex work back in the early 20th century, a subject that is of great interest to China watchers today. Roughly two years ago, China's health authorities made an unusually frank admission that the country was in the midst of sex ratio crisis that could have profound implications for social order. Data showed that roughly 118 boys were born to every 100 girls owing to the widespread One Child Policy era practices of aborting female fetuses and abandoning baby girls. For Chinese parents, boys are thought to be a better bet as family providers, but there is a broader consequence to this thinking. The national gender imbalance has grown so severe that perhaps as many as 30 million Chinese men have no realistic prospect of finding a mate of the opposite sex. This can only have a negative impact on their mental health, which raises the question of how the state should attempt to mitigate the effects of this self-inflicted disaster. One possible solution would be to allow unmarried Chinese men to sponsor foreign brides, while another is the return of legalized prostitution.

Remick is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Tufts University, where she has been researching the topics of prostitution and local government in 20th century China for roughly 15 years. In its broadest conception, *Regulating Prostitution in China* marries these two interests by looking at how prostitution was regulated and fit into local state building efforts in first half of the 20th century. China's chaotic nature during this period of imperial collapse, revolution, warlord rule, and foreign military intervention posed challenges for her research

while at the same time creating unique conditions that allowed a wide range of experimentation for her to explore. On the former, as every scholar working on this period is all too aware, China's long run of war and disorder has left most documentary records fragmentary at best. On the latter, the absence of a strong national government gave local authorities the latitude to implement and replace many different approaches to managing prostitution. Remick's work took her to three cities, Huangzhou, Guangzhou, and Kunming, that adopted different strategies representative of the main trends throughout the country during this era.

What Remick does not do within these pages is provide a social history of prostitution, an endeavor that she plausibly argues would be exceedingly difficult. Researchers working on prostitution in cosmopolitan Shanghai—with its rich municipal police archive, vibrant press, and multitudes of western observers—have faced great limitations in their quest to focus on the lives of women working in the industry. The challenges they experienced are magnified in the provincial centers Remick has selected. Remick writes, “prostitutes (as subalterns) tended to leave very few traces behind... [forcing scholars] to rely heavily on government documents, tabloid newspapers (*xiaobao*), politicized memoirs, guidebooks, and so on, all sources that do not provide prostitutes with a place to speak.” (20) Those more interested in the social aspects of prostitution than the regulatory side would be better served by Gail Hershatter's *Dangerous Pleasures: prostitution and modernity in twentieth-century Shanghai* (University of California Press, 1997) or Christian Henriot and Noël Castelino's *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: A Social History, 1849-1949* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Prostitution was a big business in China in the early 20th century that employed tens of thousands of women. Brothels were common, serving not just as venues for forms of vice such

as gambling, drug use, and sex, but also as a meeting place where businessmen met to cut deals. The double standard within China's gender norms in fact required prostitution to exist. As Remick writes, "A 'real' man was expected to marry a woman of his parents' choosing out of duty, and to have sexual relationships with other women—concubines and prostitutes—for emotional and sexual satisfaction. In short, the way for a man to show others he was a man was to visit prostitutes." (9) This arrangement put the authorities in a position where they were forced to deal with the social consequences of the industry and put forward a program to contain its impact on public order and the health of the community. Finding the right way to either suppress or mitigate the damages of prostitution was inextricably bound to the larger aim of the late Qing Dynasty and the Republican government to establish the international legitimacy of a modern Chinese state. Just as in the West and Japan, China had its own cast of reformers who wanted to take a social science approach to the issue and were genuinely concerned with the welfare of prostitutes. At the same time, it had others who used regulation as a means of profiting from prostitution and establishing control over women, how they dressed, where they worked, and how they could behave in the public sphere.

Remick identifies three main systems for the regulation of prostitution. The first is what she calls "light regulation", prevalent in Hangzhou, then the "revenue-intensive" approach of Guangzhou, and finally the "coercion-intensive" model in Kunming. She provides detailed and fascinating case studies for all three in succession. As Remick discovered, Chinese officials weren't accountable to the people at the ballot box, so they never felt any need to explain why they chose certain actions, simply presenting decrees the public was expected to obey. While the "why" question remains largely unanswered, we are able to see the impact of these decisions.

Hangzhou authorities opted for what we would now consider a "harm reduction" approach that
© 2018 *The Middle Ground Journal* Number 16, Spring 2018 <http://TheMiddleGroundJournal.org>
See Submission Guidelines page for the journal's not-for-profit educational open-access policy

brought registration for prostitutes, venereal disease testing, and brothel inspections, a financial burden to the municipal government that was covered in part through light taxation. Most progressively, light regulation regimes, the most common of the era, established prostitute rescue institutions to protect women from the most abusive of arrangements. Remick explores this fascinating subject in more detail in chapter 5. Guangzhou, by contrast, coupled high taxation with low regulation as morality and public health concerns were pushed to the backburner for the sake of revenue generation. Kunming's coercive approach had prostitutes register with the police and work under their supervision. It placed heavy health regulations on the industry and segregated brothels from the community.

Each of these policies had a major impact. Guangzhou developed the most sophisticated local government in the country in no small part because of its revenue intensive approach. By one point the municipal government generated 30% of its revenue from prostitution, creating a new source of funding for projects such as public education and public works. The light regulation approach in Hangzhou required investments in public health and policing, but it did not generate as much revenue and had a more limited impact on local state building. The coercive approach in Kunming required a strong police infrastructure, in effect turning law enforcement into an active manager of the system of legal prostitution and the persecutor of competitors that sought to work outside it. This created a huge burden for the police force, which had to take on major new duties beyond its traditional responsibilities to the community.

In the end, each of these models had major shortcomings, though studying them certainly does provide a valuable antecedent for many of the debates ongoing in China today about public health and women's rights. The CCP took great pride in eradicating what it considered the

“feudal” practice of prostitution after it took power, but the world’s oldest profession has returned over the past 30 years as the country has grown richer and somewhat more liberal. Bribery has corrupted police and politicians who allow brothel managers to flout the law. Whether outright prohibition is still viable remains to be seen, particularly now that some local courts have ruled that forms of paid erotic massage that blur the line do not actually constitute acts of prostitution. Remick is pessimistic that a return to legal, regulated prostitution would solve China’s current woes given that it only works well in societies where prostitutes enjoy full legal rights and police protection. A Dutch solution, for example, would probably not succeed in a contemporary Chinese context. Nevertheless, Remick cites Winston Churchill’s famous description of democracy “as the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried” in her conclusion that a return to regulation “may indeed have some benefits... [if] approached with extreme caution.” (231)

Jie Gao, Murray State University