Bound to Emancipate comparatively explores the situations of lower-class women in 1920s and 1930s South China through the discourses of emancipation (Guangzhou) and protection (Hong Kong) that shaped national politics. The book’s focus on women in emerging service occupations, from muisai (female bondservants) to teahouse waitresses (nüzhaodai), reveals British and Chinese social reformers’ ambivalence towards women, and also the contradictions within modernity projects of revolutionary Guangzhou and British Hong Kong. The introduction provides an overview; details the study’s specific class, regional, and comparative emphasis; and discusses the political discourses affecting women. The remaining chapters demonstrate how the emancipation and protection of women were tied to social problems, political control, and emerging political identities. One of the volume’s primary contributions is its comparison of “women’s emancipation” in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. Even though together they constitute South China in the local imaginary, these areas have been treated as almost completely separate in the gender literature due to their contrasting political systems.

Chapters Two and Three contrast the discourses of protection and emancipation that liberated and limited lower-class women’s choices. In Hong Kong, British and Chinese elites debated how best to protect female bondservants and prostitutes to better manage them. While the British wanted greater control, local Chinese elites sought less local British interference. The rhetorical use of Chinese “tradition” in political debates rendered muisai as victims. Prostitutes in Hong Kong were seen as “promiscuous young women” due to the sexualized nature of their occupation and therefore threatened colonial rule unlike the muisai system. Even though female bondservants and prostitutes originated as trafficked women, prostitutes, because they serviced colonial soldiers, were seen as posing serious risks to colonial subjects’ health. “Cleanliness,” “purity,” and “morality” became embedded in the discourse on colonial legitimacy.

Despite the differences between Hong Kong’s discourse of protecting women and Guangzhou’s of “women’s emancipation,” lower-class women in China (ch. 3) were also segregated by a national revolutionary discourse that was not so much for women’s benefit. In Guangzhou, national discourse rendered women as “enslaved” by old social customs (fengsu) of the patriarchal household. The women to be emancipated from such bondage included female
bondservants, concubines and child brides (tongyangxi). Debates over this issue emphasized gender, rather than class and race as they were in Hong Kong. When Guangzhou became a revolutionary center, women’s emancipation became part of a modernization that encompassed demands for “equal rights, educational opportunities, [and] free marriage” (p. 74). Women’s (weak) bodies became the markers of the (weak) national body. Reforms over health and hygiene followed. Early in the decade, the economic structure, not women’s immorality, was seen as causing prostitution. Turbulent debates over what a “modern” women’s body should be paralleled infighting among political levels.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six delineate how lower-class women in South China both evoked “new forms of intimacy and gender relationships” and “challenged the boundaries of society’s moral tolerance” (p. 30). Chapter Four describes how women working in teahouses sought financial independence and sexual agency. Blind singers (guji), singers (nüling), and waitresses (nüzhaodai) moved into teahouse service labor when movements to abolish the muiptsai system pushed them out of their occupations as courtesans. Blind singers were seen as unemancipated, but sympathetic women; singers as women in transition whose appearances mixed modernity and tradition; and waitresses as urban, modern women. This hierarchy reflected the broader ambivalence within modernity projects: politicians wanted to reform weak female citizens and to oust morally unacceptable women from the marketplace, yet commerce required vulnerable women to perform publicly. Chapter Five extends the discussion of “old customs” (fengsu) in the 1920s to 1930s Guangzhou debates over fenghua (proper manners in society). The Fenghua Protection Movement emerged due to the perceived risk lower-class women in service labor posed to public morality. Public focus turned to the negative aspects of “women’s emancipation,” and political elites increased control of women’s bodies. Women’s individual morality, rather than economics, became the cause of prostitution. Similarly in Hong Kong (ch. 6), the Po Leung Kuk strongly shaped boundaries between the British colony and China by building a divisive hierarchy among women. Females considered “fit” were protected and returned to Hong Kong society as productive workers and obedient wives. Females considered “unsuitable” were returned to their xiang (homeland) in the Chinese hinterland. This distinction among women represents the emergence of a distinctive Hong Kong identity (1930s), the reshaping of urban citizenship, and a notion of charity as social control.
Chapters Seven and Eight consider working women’s perspectives from within the Po Leung Kuk (Hong Kong) and labor activism (Guangzhou). In the Po Leung Kuk (ch. 7), female staff wrote letters and reports while female inmates gave testimonies. Female staff were to be role models of “good” women. Yet, letters and reports show rivalry and jealousy among women who did not consider themselves to be emancipated. Images of inmates included abused victims, chaste women, and deviant women. The Po Leung Kuk primarily saved the first two categories of women along with those in the third category who could convince the staff that they had become prostitutes but were also victims. For those deserving protection, emancipation was about putting women inmates back into jia (patriarchal households). For women service workers and labor activists in Guangzhou (ch. 8), employment linked to issues of civilization, equal rights, and productivity. This connection helped female teahouse workers in labor movements gain freedom from patriarchal relationships. Yet, these efforts pitted them against male labor unions who saw them as competition and anti-nüzhao critics who saw them as immoral.

Labor movements of the 1920s did not show much concern with women’s threat to sexual morality; however, by the mid-1930s, earlier concerns about male unemployment had transformed into anxieties over women workers’ alleged moral degradation of the workplace. Even though women’s employment was critical to the South China government’s revolutionary politics, provincial leaders supported male workers and reinforced gender inequality.

The concluding chapter underscores one of the book’s key contributions: a regional analysis of women’s emancipation in South China of the 1920s and 1930s that compares colonial Hong Kong and revolutionary Guangzhou and tracks changes in discourses across time. The chapter also reiterates the similarities and differences between discourses of emancipation (Guangzhou) and protection (Hong Kong). In Guangzhou, discussions of gender took a back seat to concerns of class. In Hong Kong, gender and class issues were raised by different actors in separate contexts. In both places, “women’s emancipation” was never just for women’s benefit, but mostly about national modernity projects and political struggles. This well-written, thoughtfully researched book presents new insights on the meaning of “women’s emancipation” from a comparative, gender, and regional perspective during a particular era. The volume’s comparative use, in regional context, of its documentary and secondary sources makes for a refreshing approach to this issue. However, greater cross-referencing across chapters would have provided readers with even more comparative analysis of the ways “women’s emancipation” was
conceived and utilized in both Hong Kong and Guangzhou. More attention to chapter source referencing would strengthen this volume’s comprehensive scope. These small suggestions should not distract from the appeal this work will hold for feminist and comparative gender scholars, labor historians, and China studies researchers.

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