Elaine Jeffreys’ *Prostitution Scandals in China: Policing, media and society* is a substantially-researched monograph, highly recommended for readers interested in contemporary China and Chinese politics, particularly on the issue of prostitution and its relationship vis-à-vis the Chinese state, society and mass media. Together, an increasingly-commercialised Chinese media expanding its role from simply being a government mouthpiece to becoming a government watchdog and a fast-expanding community of ‘netizens’ as whistle blowers are redefining not only the boundaries between the state, media and the people but also concepts of citizenship, citizens’ rights and democracy in China today.

Based on media exposés uncovering corruption and malpractice among officials, police and the rich and powerful in contemporary Chinese society and their collusion with illegal or criminal businesses like the sex industry, the author’s analysis of the tension between the state, media and the public is highly nuanced. She successfully unpacks the complex dynamics between a one-party state keen to portray itself as modern, forward-looking and pragmatic, a police force that is responsible for curbing prostitution and yet is in collusion with the sex industry and an increasingly vocal citizenry with diverse opinions on the issue (ranging from decriminalisation, legalisation, rationalisation and prohibition to the outright abolition of the sex trade).

The author is ambivalent towards an increasingly profit-oriented mass media that thrives on sensationalism masquerading as investigative journalism. Whilst acknowledging that this may pressurise the government and police into taking action against corruption, sexual exploitation and human rights violations because of public outrage, she also highlights how reports of these ‘scandals’ violate the privacy of men and women working in the sex industry and their patrons to the detriment of their rights and well-being as citizens. On the other hand, she is unequivocal about the positive impact of increased media exposure of China’s domestic policies on public health, women’s rights and its treatment of sexual minorities, making China more accountable to the international community.

Consisting of nine chapters organised thematically, this book provides a plethora of case studies based on newspaper reports, both print and online. Each case has been meticulously researched with a comprehensive analysis of public reactions, government responses and actions taken. This provides a wealth of information on Chinese laws and
government policies for tackling the rise of prostitution catalysed by the post-1978 economic reforms.

The author’s analysis of the Chinese sex industry which consists not only of women sex sellers and men buyers and vice versa, but also of male to male prostitution between men who may not self-identify as homosexuals, highlights the challenges faced by the Chinese state in tackling an increasingly-diverse, sophisticated and globalised industry. The widening disparity between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in contemporary Chinese society, particularly between the less educated and poor migrant population from rural areas and the ‘nouveau riche’ of the politically powerful urban class is one of the key factors fuelling the industry’s expansion. Furthermore, the diversity of opinions and moral standpoints on prostitution as reflected in the mass media points to an increasingly complex nexus between class and gender in China today.

By dissecting the Chinese government’s ambivalence towards the interrelatedness of the sex industry, homosexuality and STIs/HIV/AIDS control, the author reveals the inherent contradictions in Chinese policies aimed at tackling these issues. However, the urgency of the need to curb the spread of STIs/HIV/AIDS is forcing the government to rethink some of its approaches towards prostitution.

Moreover, the promotion of tourism and foreign investment at the local level, which tends to be accompanied by an expanding sex industry, undermines state directives to eliminate organised prostitution. Despite the official proclamation that prostitution exploits women and thus is opposed to the socialist ideals of gender equality and women’s emancipation, in reality local government officials are aware of the impossibility of abolishing the sex industry and have taken a more subtle approach in tackling the issue.

The book contains an exhaustive bibliography that includes both academic and non-academic sources. For those unfamiliar with the field of studies on prostitution, this may be a difficult read because many aspects of the ‘prostitution debate’ are substantially condensed. Nevertheless, the presentation of the different positions of academics well-known in the fields of prostitution, public health and HIV/AIDS in China does give some indication of the breadth and depth of the issues involved. For those who want to understand the inherent contradictions between the reality of the sex industry and official policies, the ambivalence of the Chinese state and the public towards prostitution, as well as the positive and negative effects of increased media attention on the issue, this book is a great resource.

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