
Prostitution studies has become an increasingly noteworthy field in various disciplines such as history, sociology, and anthropology. In the context of the area studies of China, the majority of research concerning prostitution derives from the sociology of gender or sexuality studies. While much of this literature concentrates on the marginalised living experiences of sex workers and their adverse social environment, there has been little discussion of how prostitution makes positive contributions to local society and polity. Even fewer researchers have explored the role of prostitution in the process of a nation’s economic and political modernisation. Apart from sex workers’ everyday encounters with the police force, which embodies state power and regulations, it is rare to see prostitutes being theorised as political actors, especially in the context of China.

Thus, it is challenging yet reasonable to connect the field of prostitution studies with the study of modern nation-state formation. Elizabeth Remick’s *Regulating Prostitution in China: Gender and Local Statebuilding 1900–1937* is one of the most insightful examinations of the role of prostitution in the formation of modern local-states. This book is prefaced with a powerful illustration of *why* and *how* we need to ‘write gender and prostitution into the story of modern statebuilding’ (p. 4). Remick reasons compellingly that local states’ regulation of and intervention in prostitution exposes several things: first of all, it reveals the general morals, values and attitudes that a society holds towards its gender relations and especially its ‘tolerance’ regarding women’s sexuality. Second, it sheds light on how a state, in its formative stage, imagines and constructs its ‘modernity’, by mimicking and adopting certain institutional arrangements for prostitution in urban areas. Lastly, Remick also correctly points out that prostitution is at the heart of any society’s gender relationships, as it condenses the performance of gender, power and desire, and their intersection with class. In other words, through various dynasties of China’s imperial history, there are certain questions related to prostitution that are often extremely telling about ever-evolving gender roles and relationships in pre-modern and modernising China, such as who are allowed to be prostitutes (men or women), and how prostitutes (in their various ranks and statuses) are perceived by the public, and how sexual relationships are performed by the prostitutes and clients.
In the empirical chapters of the book, the author first provides an overview of the general prostitution policy implemented in China’s Republican Era and traces its origins back to the Paris and Tokyo models of prostitution regulation implemented in the nineteenth century. By comparison, Republican China’s prostitution regulatory model added several new features: it implemented a licensing system of officially recognised brothels and banned private hence illegal prostitution (sichang). Such institutions, the author argues, restricted women’s autonomy and agency to a much higher degree. China had a comparatively small police force taking charge of urban prostitution districts due to a public funding shortage. It also created the institution of jiliangsuo, a state-run ‘prostitute rescue organisation’, where former prostitutes and women abandoned by their husbands were educated in embroidery, sewing and weaving and then introduced to a husband when they were ready for marriage.

The three subsequent sections of the book examine three different regulatory models of prostitution and their respective consequences for the development of local states in China’s Republican Era. These three models are Hangzhou’s light regulatory approach, Guangzhou’s revenue-intensive approach, and Kunming’s coercion-intensive approach. The light regulatory approach consisted of ‘weakly enforced regulations, spotty health inspections and very small tax revenues’ (p. 95) and it exerted limited impact on shaping the local state. Meanwhile, the latter two approaches transformed the local state more significantly. The revenue-intensive model in Guangzhou, where the local state dealt with prostitution like any other normal business and taxed it heavily, ended up creating lucrative fiscal income that accounted for one third of the local education expenditure, or three quarters of public health expenditure. Such fiscal revenue generated by prostitution proved to be indispensable for the expansion of local state-building, both in terms of infrastructure and institutions. The interdependence of state and prostitution inadvertently created a more tolerant cultural space for fluid gender relationships and the sex industry. In the last model, the coercion-intensive one, prostitution was confined to an assigned city district, completely separated physically from the general population, and was monopolised by the state. This model not only imposed strict and comprehensive control over the management of prostitutes on a daily basis, but also led to the development of a complete set of bureaucratic institutions that were in charge of prostitution, as if it was inherently part of state affairs. This model, together with its high level of militarisation and its emphasis on social control, became the most moralised prostitution policy that actively disciplined the dangerous and disruptive female sexuality of its time.

In short, this book opens up a new line of historical and sociological investigation which considers prostitution as an important aspect of society that requires, inspires, and sponsors the
development of modern nation-states. It sets an excellent example of how to raise interesting and original questions from limited historical data. I highly recommend it for postgraduate teaching or research related to gender relations and local politics especially during China’s modernisation process. It will benefit students not only of history but also of other disciplines including political science, sociology and social policy.

(Yunyun Zhou, University of Oxford)