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Modernity and Female Sexuality: Portrayal of Prostitution in Shanghai Media

The 1920's: a time period often mystified as a dazzling age of flapper girls, cabaret's, drinking, and lots of sex. This revolution of modernity was felt not just in Western cities like Chicago and New York, but in cities around the world, one of them being Shanghai. Republican era Shanghai was an epicenter of budding modernity, most notably reflected in the changing attitudes and behavior of Chinese youth, specifically Chinese women. The Chinese "Modern Girl" was a picture of sexual fluidity, financial independence, and liberation from the domestic responsibility's characteristic of the traditional cultural ideal of womanhood - that of a good wife and mother. ¹ Arguably, the most controversial aspect of this new age of femininity was the openness of a women's nonmarital sexual activity which, already regarded as a threat to patriarchal power, was highly criticized. ² Yet, it is easy to wonder why this form of female sexuality was so scrutinized by the public during an era where female prostitution was a prominent marker of Shanghai society?

Historical Context

¹ Stevens, Sarah E. "Figuring modernity: the new woman and the modern girl in Republican China." *nwsa Journal* (2003): 82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4317011>.

² Hershatler, Gail. "State of the Field: Women in China's Long Twentieth Century." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 4 (2004): 1010-1014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4133198>.

During Republican era Shanghai, there was a conservative estimate of about 50, 000 prostitutes, with the ratio of prostitutes and population in 1926 alone being 1:147.³ The vice industry was a large part of Shanghai's urban society and faced a variety of discourse throughout the first half of the 20th century. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries prostitutes "appeared in elite discourse as the embodiment of sophisticated urbanity" yet by the 1940's, they were seen as an unrespectable threat to social order and public health.⁴ Discourse surrounding prostitution most notably differs in the portrayal of upper class prostitution versus lower class prostitution; the former is portrayed as sophisticated whereas the latter is portrayed as predatory and harmful. The biggest difference between the two classes themselves is that upper class prostitutes are skilled entertainers with a fronting occupation separate from their sexual services, while the lower class are stereotypical "streetwalkers" who openly advertise their services.

Thus, I hypothesize that the reason for the differing portrayal follows the same basis for the condemnation of the "modern girl" archetype: openness and shamelessness of female sexuality defies traditional gender norms such as purity and domesticity, and therefore is demonized in the public view. This research paper aims to uncover how the contrasting portrayal of higher-class and lower-class prostitutes in the Shanghai Media reflect and perpetuate a misogynistic view of female sexuality in the face of emerging Chinese modernity and the departure from traditional gender norms. In order to do this, this paper will analyze numerous pieces of media such as newspaper articles and images from the republican era which discuss both classes of prostitution.

Class Hierarchy of the Shanghai Sex Industry

³ Yu Wei, M.D. & Amos Wong, M.D, The International Journal of Sexology: A Study of 500 Prostitutes in Shanghai, No. 21 (1949): 234-238

⁴ Hershatler, Gail. "Courtesans and Streetwalkers: The Changing Discourses on Shanghai Prostitution, 1890-1949." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 2 (1992): 246. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704057>.

Before analyzing the various pieces of media and their portrayal of Shanghai prostitution, the complex class structure which informs said portrayal must first be understood. The highest class of prostitutes is *the “sing-song” girl* or “entertainer.” They would work in establishments of public entertainment called *shu ch’ang*, and were mostly made up of opera singers. They are described as selling their “skill” in public places, and in their private residences selling their “beauty.”⁵ The practice of selling sexual services was referred to as an “open secret,” meaning their work as a singer for entertainment and as a prostitute were kept entirely separate, and their selling of sexual services was never openly advertised, but still known. The next class of prostitutes was the *ch’ang san class*, where girls were paid by establishments to press guests to buy drinks, and then later were paid for “accommodating” them for the night. In the beginning of the century, the “sing song” girl was the highest class, but then eventually joined this class, and the *ch’ang san* for a period of time was regarded as the highest class of prostitutes.⁶ Both of these classes were known for their extravagance, and had a valid job to front for their secondary job of prostitution.

The following class of prostitutes is *the domino class*, which is a type of middle class, yet not as common or important to the makeup of the sex industry as the next class: the “*pheasants*” or “*wild birds*.” The “*pheasants*” are the largest class of prostitutes in Shanghai and are the first of low class in this hierarchy. They beckon customers on the side of streets or in tea shops, bringing them back to their brothels, and were regarded “simply as a means for passion gratification” without much thought paid to their lackluster working conditions.⁷ As this class was exclusively devoted to the on-demand satisfaction of male sexual desires, there was no attention paid to “singing, banqueting, or other ancillary forms of entertainment” like that of the

⁵ “The Demi-monde of Shanghai.” *China Medical Journal* 37 (1923): 782-788.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

two upper classes.⁸ There exists other denominations of lower class prostitution, but the most notable is that of the “*pheasant*.” For the purposes of this research paper, the hierarchy of Shanghai prostitution will be split into two: the upper-class and the lower-class, the former referring to the “*sing song*” girl and the latter referring to the “*pheasants*” and the other unnamed lower classes.

Media Analysis

In my analysis, I will first focus on the pieces of media which refer to upper-class courtesans and sing-song girls, then I will follow suit with media discussing lower-class prostitutes, finally drawing a comparison of the two.

Upper-Class Prostitutes

Starting with an article from *The Sun*, titled “China’s Winsome Sing Song Girls,” there immediately exists a subtitle called “picked beauties of the land,” referring to an illustration of a dancing sing song girl and her maid. These girls are described as being “demure” and “lavish of attire,” as well as “well-born, always educated, bejeweled, and seductive.” The author of the article refers to the girl as an “entertainer” and sing-song girls in general as “paid entertainers” and not prostitutes, and later in the article chastises those who would mistake them for being a part of the “prostitute class.” The author also draws a comparison of the Chinese sing-song girl and the Japanese geisha, equating them in “culture, wit, accomplishment, and poise.” Aside from using language to depict sing-song girls as sophisticated and awe-inspiring, the author makes a point to note how the sing-song girl “understands her place” and describes the “sing song girl houses” as being “in out-of-the way- corners” with obscure entrances. This particular language conjures an image of subservience indicative of the traditional expectations of women in

⁸ Hershatler, Gail. "The hierarchy of Shanghai prostitution, 1870-1949." *Modern China* 15, no. 4 (1989): 463-498.

Shanghai. This article furthermore provides unfavorable descriptions of “street girls” in comparison to the sing song girl, but that will be discussed later on when analyzing the media about lower class prostitutes.⁹ I will note that this particular media source is American, and thus their depiction, while consistent with that of Chinese media, may also be influenced by Western perspectives on gender.

Another popular form of media used to portray Shanghai prostitution was through illustrations and photographs. Images depicting upper-class prostitutes and courtesans were often in portrait style, with the courtesans in lavish costumes and outfits.¹⁰ Some of these photographs saw the courtesan sitting in poised positions, clothed in traditional clothing which covered the entire body, arms, legs, and often times the neck and head, with only the face and hands being visible.¹¹ Other images of upper-class courtesans depicted them indulging in some sort of academic pursuit to showcase their intelligence, such as an image of one young courtesan reading a book¹², another of a courtesan and her attendant engaging in a game of chess.¹³ There are more photographs seen of courtesans in modern clothing of the era rather than traditional dress¹⁴, but it is important to note that all images of upper-class prostitutes consist of them wearing conservative clothing, with their entire body covered, regardless of what style the clothing is in.

⁹ Greene, Marc T. "China's Winsome Sing Song Girls: PICKED BEAUTIES OF THE LAND." *The Sun* (1837-), Jan 27, 1935.

¹⁰ Hershatter, Gail. "LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS." In *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*, 1st ed., ix–x. University of California Press, 1997. Fig. 7.

¹¹ Hershatter, Gail. "LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS." In *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*, 1st ed., ix–x. University of California Press, 1997. Fig. 5. and Fig. 6.

¹² Hershatter, Gail. "LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS." In *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*, 1st ed., ix–x. University of California Press, 1997. Fig. 9.

¹³ Hershatter, Gail. "LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS." In *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*, 1st ed., ix–x. University of California Press, 1997. Fig. 10.

¹⁴ Hershatter, Gail. "LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS." In *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*, 1st ed., ix–x. University of California Press, 1997. Fig. 11 and Fig. 12

Not only were sing-song girls depicted as sophisticated, and an exemplar of refined Chinese culture, when they faced a threat to their trade, their fair treatment was actually advocated for in the media. Take for example, a snippet from a newspaper article discussing the sing-song girls' demands for the abolishment of a 20-cent levy from restaurants and private clubs in response to the high cost of living and increased rentals.¹⁵ A similar situation can be seen in an article discussing a newly imposed "flower tax" by the Nanking Government on all sing song girls earnings, and their counter demand for an increase in the prices of their "entertainment" in order to supplement.¹⁶ A conclusion can be drawn that the actions of upper-class prostitutes in the media were regarded as legitimate business, and issues regarding their work and pay was treated as such, usually favoring their demands.

Lower-Class Prostitutes

As we shift to discussing the quite contrasting depiction of lower-class prostitutes in the media, I will begin by looking at the same article by *The Sun* which began the analysis on upper-class prostitution. This article warns readers to not mistake sing-song girls as prostitutes like that of "unfortunate little slavies of street girl"¹⁷ already creating a distinction between the two classes in which the lower-class is seen as inferior. In another article by the *South China Morning Post* discussing unemployment and prostitution, it postulates that the reason for the large increase in street prostitution was "undoubtedly a result of the decline in the general level of morality." Referencing to the immorality of street prostitutes existed not just in tabloids but also published articles containing statements from government officials, however these often emphasized the more general threat that they faced towards the nation itself. Lower-class

¹⁵ "WEST POINT STRIKE: SING SONG GIRLS DEMAND FAIR TREATMENT COMMISSION ISSUE." *South China Morning Post* (1903-1941), Jul 19, 1938.

¹⁶ Our Own Correspondent. "NANKING IMPOSES "FLOWER TAX." : TEN PER CENT OF EARNINGS OF SING-SONG GIRLS BITTER OPPOSITION SHANGHAI, JUNE 30." *South China Morning Post* (1903-1941), Jul 01, 1930, pp. 10.

¹⁷ Greene, Marc T. "China's Winsome Sing Song Girls: PICKED BEAUTIES OF THE LAND." *The Sun* (1837-), Jan 27, 1935.

prostitutes were referred to as “inflicting serious harm on society and the nation” due to the spread of venereal diseases and even being taught skills of seducing clients as if “they were setting up traps to harm people and society.”¹⁸

Unlike the numerous photographs which exist depicting the refined and lavish nature of upper-class prostitutes, most of the visual media which exists depicting lower-class prostitutes are illustrations and caricatures. In one illustration, a “pheasant” is depicted stopping a man on the street, supposedly soliciting him by grabbing his arm.¹⁹ Another illustration shows a “pheasant” and her attendant waiting on the side of the street at night, the girl standing in a seductive pose.²⁰ One cartoon features a man, who is described as “a stray lamb who has lost his way,” as his drawing is surrounded by depictions of a naked prostitute, and the ways in which she had seduced him through dance, flirtation, and even bathing. The man is also holding a 10-dollar bill, implying his wallet has too fallen victim to the seduction of the prostitute.²¹ Every illustration which depicts lower-class prostitutes has the women drawn either completely naked, with comically large breasts, or tight clothing giving the illusion of a naked body. Most of these depictions also fail to draw full facial features if any, essentially dehumanizing and objectifying the girl. This depiction is in sharp contrast to the photographs of the courtesans who were shown conservatively, and in full dress.

Conclusion

¹⁸ HO, VIRGIL K.Y. “‘TO LAUGH AT A PENNILESS MAN RATHER THAN A PROSTITUTE’: THE UNOFFICIAL WORLDS OF PROSTITUTION IN LATE QING AND EARLY REPUBLICAN SOUTH CHINA.” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): 104-105

¹⁹ Hershatter, Gail. “LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.” In *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*, 1st ed., ix–x. University of California Press, 1997. Fig. 1.

²⁰ Hershatter, Gail. “LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.” In *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*, 1st ed., ix–x. University of California Press, 1997. Fig. 2.

²¹ Hershatter, Gail. “LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.” In *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*, 1st ed., ix–x. University of California Press, 1997. Fig. 3

The media that exists discussing prostitution during Shanghai's republican era is highly polarizing. Media about upper-class prostitutes celebrate the cultural richness of sing song girls and their sophistication, depicting them in lavish garments, and more importantly as a picture of traditional and conservative femininity. This contrasts the less than favorable portrayal of lower-class prostitutes as immoral, a threat to the strength of the nation, and especially as over sexualized seductress's who prey on men. The trend which I found most striking during my analysis was just how prominent the contrasting portrayal of the prostitute's sexuality was, particularly in the visual media. Sing-song girls were extremely modest, always covered, and never attached to any discussion of sex or sexuality. This modesty was praised in the media and likened to sophistication, refinement, and high status. Whereas depictions of lower-class prostitutes were shockingly overtly sexual, almost to a comical degree, and this sexuality was depicted as immoral, harmful, and being used in predatory ways.

It is the attachment to open sexuality which seems to garner negative perception, further seen in the description of sing-song houses being obscure and hidden away from main roads, contrary to the *pheasant* who is depicted as standing on the side of the road for all to see, her body suggestively outlined through her tight clothing. The sexual openness of lower-class prostitutes – as seen in the eyes of Shanghai media – parallels the sexual openness of the “modern girl,” as both challenge traditional beliefs surrounding the role of women and their sexuality. The connection can be drawn that this negative response to the challenging of traditional gender beliefs serves as a microcosm for anxieties about modernity itself and is potential danger to the traditional values rooted in Shanghai culture.

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