

Prostitution and Statebuilding

About: Elizabeth J. Remick, *Regulating Prostitution in China: Gender and Local Statebuilding 1900–1937*, Stanford UP

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Elizabeth Remick’s study uncovers gender relationships in early 20th century China and investigates an often-neglected aspect of prostitution: its role in the formation of modern local-states.

In the last few decades, scholarly research about prostitution as a means of employment, as an industry and a social phenomenon, have become an increasingly noteworthy field in various disciplines such as history, sociology, and anthropology. In the context of the area studies of China, most of the research on prostitution derives from the sociology of gender or sexuality studies¹. 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. Gail Hershatter points out:

‘Prostitution is always about the sale of sexual services, but much more can be learned from that transaction: about sexual meanings, about other social relations, about sex as a

¹ Pan, Suiming, *Subsistence and Experience: Investigation on An Underground Red-light District*, China Social Sciences Press, 2000.

medium through which people talked about political power and cultural transformation, about nationhood and cultural identity.²

Following this line of argument, Remick's book sheds new light in the field of prostitution studies.

Field of Study

It is thus 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 which gender is considered appropriate 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.

Prostitution Regulation in Republican China

To contextualise the situation of prostitution in a modernising China, the author first provides an overview of the general prostitution policy implemented in the Republican Era of China, tracing its origins back to the Paris and Tokyo models of regulations of prostitution that were implemented in the nineteenth century. By comparison, Republican China's prostitution regulatory model added several new features: it implemented a licensing system of

² Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*, University of California Press, 1997.

officially recognised brothels and banned private hence illegal prostitution (*sichang*). The criminalisation of private prostitution, 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 *jiliang suo*, 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 in return also inadvertently created a more tolerant cultural space for fluid gender relationships in 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 monopolistically controlled 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.

Prostitution and State Theory

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. This has often been neglected by previous state-formation theorists and political sociologists. As argued by the anthropologists of state studies,

'The boundary between state and non-state realms is drawn through the contested cultural practices of bureaucracies, and people's encounters with, and negotiations of, these practices. Everyday statist encounters not only shape people's imagination of what the state is and how it is demarcated, but also enable people to devise strategies of resistance to this imagined state.'³

Remick reminds us that during the modernisation process of the Chinese state, social groups, even as controversial as the local prostitutes, were not only passive recipients but active agents who, through their everyday interactions and negotiations, shaped the results of the local state. Another inspiration brought by Remick's book is to disaggregate the state discourse on what is 'modern' and 'moral' into its daily practices. The Republican China's state imagined a 'modern' China to be a clean, disciplined and prostitution-free country. The political reality they were facing, however, was that they needed the tax paid by the local prostitutes to reinforce and expand the power and infrastructure of the local governments. This reveals to what extent the state discourse could be entirely detached from its governance practices.

Considering it as an exemplary work historical investigation and theorisation, Remick's work on prostitution regulation does not only provide valuable insights for researchers interested in the relation between gender, modernisation and state-building, but also serves as interesting read of localised history of modern China for general readers.

Reviewed: Elizabeth J. Remick, *Regulating Prostitution in China: Gender and Local Statebuilding 1900–1937*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014. 288pp.

Further reading:

- Liu, Min, *Migration, Prostitution and Human Trafficking: The Voice of Chinese Women*. 1st edition. New Brunswick, N.J, Routledge, 2011.
- Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*, University of California Press, 1997
- Pan, Suiming, *Subsistence and Experience: Investigation on An Underground Red-light District*, China Social Sciences Press, 2000.
- Remick, Elizabeth J., *Regulating Prostitution in China: Gender and Local Statebuilding 1900–1937*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014.

³ Sharma, Aradhana, and Akhil Gupta (ed.), *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2006.

- Sharma, Aradhana, and Akhil Gupta (ed.), *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2006.
- Zheng, Tiantian, *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Postsocialist China*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2009.