

The Guangzhou Abolition of Prostitution Movement and Thought in the Republic of China from the 1920s to 1930s

Rui Li (Raymond)¹
University of Guelph

The issue of prostitution is a social issue many people are ashamed to discuss but is closely related to feminism. In the early twentieth century in China, the growing problem of prostitution gradually entered the sphere of public opinion. Since the May Fourth Movement (1919)² happened in China, the feminist discourse has gradually been known by Chinese intellectuals.³ Along with

¹ Rui Li (Raymond, he/his/him) is a Master's student in the History department at the University of Guelph, who focuses on Modern East Asian Women's History, and the Modern History of Northeast Asia. His supervisor is Dr. Norman Smith, this article also received comments and feedback from Dr. Catherine Carstairs. Raymond received his first Master's degree in History from the University of Macau, during which his research focused on the History of Sino-Western Exchanges in the early modern period. Raymond's current email address is rli16@uoguelph.ca. His ORCID is 0000-0002-4393-4431.

² The May Fourth Movement was a significant cultural and political movement that emerged in China as a response to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, which imposed harsh conditions on China, including the transfer of former German concessions in Shandong to Japan. The movement was a call for democracy, science, and enlightenment and gained momentum among intellectuals, students, and workers. It emphasized cultural and literary reform and promoted a new vernacular literature accessible to the masses. The movement contributed to the growth of socialism and communism in China and helped to establish a new cultural identity based on the principles of democracy and enlightenment.

³ This opinion is from a book by Gail Hershatter. See Gail Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018).

this was a public mass debate about whether the prostitution industry, which had existed in China for thousands of years, should continue or be abolished. These intellectuals' reflections and explorations are disseminated to the public through the mass media as the carrier of social opinion, thus leading to social changes and even social progress in disguise.

Guangzhou (also known as Canton and Kwangchow) had long been one of southern China's industrial and commercial centers. After the Wuchang Uprising in 1911,⁴ Guangzhou declared its independence from the Qing Empire on December 9 and detached from the control of the Qing government. In the following year, the newly established government of the Republic of China (ROC) began to control Guangzhou. Before 1919, Guangzhou's prostitution industry was intermittent, depending on the personal attitudes of the warlords who controlled Guangzhou at that time.⁵

Before 1920, the Old Guangxi clique warlords who occupied Guangzhou had a policy of encouraging the prostitution industry in Guangzhou to maintain their large military expenditures and maintain the government. However, in November 1920, Chen Jiongmeng (1878-1933), a local Guangdong warlord, expelled the Old Guangxi clique warlords and gained control of

⁴ The Wuchang Uprising was an armed rebellion that took place in October 1911 in Wuchang, China. It was led by a group of revolutionary army officers who aimed to overthrow the Qing Dynasty and establish a republic. The uprising quickly spread to other parts of China, and within a few months, the Qing Dynasty was overthrown, marking the end of imperial rule in China. The Wuchang Uprising is widely regarded as a significant event in Chinese history, as it paved the way for the establishment of the Republic of China and the modernization of the country.

⁵ Jianxin Peng, "Minguo Guangzhou shidian shixu de jinchang [Intermittent Prohibition of Prostitution in Republican Guangzhou]," *Minguo Chunqiu*, no. 5 (1997): 45-47.

Guangzhou.⁶ Under the administration of the Government of the Republic of China in Guangzhou, which was established in the same year, the Guangzhou municipal government was founded on February 15, 1921, and Guangzhou became the first city of China in the modern sense. Since then, a modern municipal government has been in operation. Under the rule of Chen Jiongming and the new modern municipal government, they launched a new movement to abolish prostitution in Guangzhou.⁷



Fig. 1 Photo of Guangzhou City Hall (1923)⁸

⁶ This war is also known as the First Guangdong-Guangxi War, the general course of which can be found in Diana Lary, “Warlord Studies,” *Modern China* 6, no. 4 (1980): 439–70. Also see Leslie Chen, *Chen Jiongming and the Federalist Movement: Regional Leadership and Nation Building in Early Republican China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 2000); Arthur Waldron, “Warlordism versus Federalism: The Revival of a Debate?” *The China Quarterly*, no. 121 (1990): 116–128.

⁷ Jinzhu Fu, “Chen Jiongming yu jindai Guangdong nüquan yundong [Chen Jiongming and the Modern Guangdong Feminist Movement],” *Journal of China Women’s University* 21, no. 1 (2009): 99–103. In the fight for women’s rights and status, Chen Jiongming was a realist. He followed a progressive model of fighting for women’s rights and believed that in order to break with the traditional society, women’s rights should be realized.

⁸ Unsigned newspaper photo, “Guangzhou mofan qushu [Model Office

Not much research has been done on the abolition of prostitution in the period after the establishment of the modern Guangzhou municipal government and before the Japanese empire took over Guangzhou. In an article published by Peng Jianxin in 1997, he chronologically organized the official-led actions to abolish prostitution in Guangzhou from 1911 until 1948.⁹ However, this article had many flaws, as it only used a few government-issued laws and reports and ignored the fact that different governments took turns at the municipal authority of Guangzhou during this period. Furthermore, in an article published in 2006, two Chinese scholars focused their research on the movement to abolish prostitution in Guangzhou in the 1920s.¹⁰ Zhang and Chen's article described the actions of various sectors of society and the government concerning the prostitution industry during this period, starting with the march for the abolition of prostitution in Guangzhou in 1922 and ending in 1926. Authors noted the frequent changes in the ruling power of Guangzhou during this time, but they focused only on this four-year period, which made it impossible to synthesize the abolitionist movement in a longer timeline.

In contrast to the above two articles, Virgil Kit-yiu Ho focused more on the views and opinions of prostitution in Cantonese-speaking societies, including Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Macau, during this period. In an article published in 1993, Ho compiled a series of different views of public and private prostitution from contemporary literature, newspaper reports, and government reports

of Guangzhou City],” *Republican Daily News Canton*, August 18, 1923, 6.

⁹ Peng, “Minguo Guangzhou,” 45-47.

¹⁰ Xiaohui Zhang and Yu Chen, “Ershi shiji ershi niandai de Guangzhou feichang yundong [The abolition prostitution movement in Guangzhou in the 1920s],” *Guangxi Social Science*, no. 11 (2006): 107-11.

between the 1920s and 1930s.¹¹ In his article, he claimed that the vast majority of the general public was indifferent to the continuation or abolition of prostitution. Intellectuals with higher education, especially Western education, dominated the majority of public opinion. In his 2001 article, Ho explored why women become prostitutes, especially private prostitutes, from the general public's perspective.¹² In his view, people in Cantonese-speaking societies in twentieth-century China possessed mixed attitudes towards prostitutes and prostitution. His article showed that attitudes towards prostitutes do not conform to any simple generalization or dogmatic view of the world of prostitution, revealing both the stereotypical image of the profession and reformers' writings on the subject.

Therefore, a study of the general public perception of the situation and conditions of this profession was acceptable.

There are many works in English on prostitution and feminist theory. Gail Hershatler's *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century*, published in 2007, provided a literature review of the history of women in China in the twentieth century. In the book, Hershatler also discussed her research and views on the history of the prostitution of women in China in the twentieth century.¹³ She argues that prostitution is closely related to government revenues and local economic development and that financial implications need to be taken into account when considering the abolition of prostitution. In *Women and China's Revolutions*, published in 2018, Hershatler attempted to place women at the center of a historical narrative to

¹¹ Virgil Kit-yiu Ho, "Selling Smiles in Guangzhou: Prostitution in the Early Republic," *East Asian History* 5, (1993): 101-32.

¹² Virgil Kit-yiu Ho, "'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): 103-37.

¹³ Gail Hershatler, *Women in China's long twentieth century* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

reconstruct the history of the Chinese revolution in this period, especially the feminist revolution.¹⁴ She used two key themes to expand her discourse. The first was the importance of women's visible and invisible labour, which included labour that sells the body, represented by prostitution; the second was the symbolic work carried out by gender itself.

In *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, published in 1994, Tani Barlow included essays that discuss the relationship between gender and modernity in twentieth-century China. These essays discussed the relationship between women and domestic space, the femininity reflected in the texts, and how the historical process of sexualization in twentieth-century China operated during its modernization.¹⁵ Susan Mann focused on how the legacy of Chinese imperial values has shaped notions of gender and sexuality in twentieth-century modern China. She traced, in turn, state policy and even its views on prostitution as well as the concept of sexuality in twentieth-century Chinese history in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History*, published in 2011.¹⁶ Based on the previous scholars' studies, this paper will use *The Republican Daily News Canton*, other newspapers, and government reports as primary sources to restore the series of actions to abolish prostitution and related public opinion in Guangzhou from the 1920s to 1930s.

Public Opinion Base for Prostitution Abolition and the March

On January 15, 1921, two authors, Chen Qiulin and

¹⁴ Gail Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018).

¹⁵ Tani E. Barlow, ed., *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

¹⁶ Susan L. Mann, *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Chen Yansheng¹⁷ published an article in *Guangdong Qunbao*, a newspaper founded by so-called early Chinese Marxists in Guangzhou, discussing the abolition of prostitution.¹⁸ These two writers mentioned three dangers of prostitution in their article: first, prostitution and human degradation, second, prostitution and social chaos, and third, the harm of prostitution to the future of the Chinese nation. In addition, the article asserted that the abolition of prostitution would contribute to the stabilization of the family and social order and the improvement of the quality and purity of the national race.¹⁹

On the 29th of that month, another so-called Marxist, Chen Duxiu (1879-1942),²⁰ who was then the chairman of the Guangdong Provincial Education Committee, also gave a speech entitled “The Women’s Problem and Socialism” at the Guangdong Women’s Normal School.²¹ For this Marxist, the root cause of women’s oppression was the creation of private ownership. With the creation of private ownership came exploitation and class and gender

¹⁷ Their dates of birth and death are unknown, but they were both members of the Chinese Kuomintang.

¹⁸ Chen Qiulin and Chen Yansheng, “Changji de weihai [Harms of Prostitution],” *Guangdong Qunbao*, January 15, 1921.

¹⁹ Fapu Wei, “Makesi zhuyi zaoqi chuanbo de difangxing yangben yanjiu [A Local Sample Study of the Early Spread of Marxism],” *Guizhou Social Sciences* 354, no. 6 (2019): 29.

²⁰ Chen Duxiu was a Chinese revolutionary socialist, educator, philosopher and author, who co-founded the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with Li Dazhao in 1921. From 1921 to 1927, he served as the Communist Party’s first General Secretary. Chen was a leading figure in both the Xinhai Revolution that overthrew the Qing dynasty and the May Fourth Movement for scientific and democratic developments in the early Republic of China.

²¹ Guihua Ma and Miao Chen, “Wusi shiqi hou Chen Duxiu funü guan lunxi: jiyu dui makesi zhuyi funü jiefang zhongyao lilun de chuanbo yu yundong shijiao [An Analysis of Chen Duxiu’s View of Women after the May Fourth Period: Based on the Perspective of Spreading and Applying the Important Theory of Marxist Women’s Liberation],” *Journal of Kashgar Teachers College* 36, no. 1 (2015): 20-23.

oppression, as well as the oppression of women by the patriarchy. In his speech, he declared that “the life of the real Chinese people has been improper since ancient times, either this one oppresses that one or that one oppresses this one; the government and capitalists oppress the men, the men oppress the women, and yet among the women, there is some mutual oppression...” Chen proposed to solve women’s problems from a socialist point of view. He then tried to launch a movement to call for the abolition of prostitution and prepared for a march as soon as possible.

The two statements made by the so-called Marxists show two very different reasons for abolishing prostitution. First, Qiulin and Yansheng’s article undoubtedly demonstrated the logical relationship between feminism and nationalism. They believed that the abolition of prostitution affected the morality of society and the reputation of the country. The abolition of prostitution was necessary for the nationalist pursuit of the country’s prosperity and recovery. In this discourse, feminism was only a tool used by nationalists; On the other hand, Chen Duxiu’s viewpoint differed from the previous one. He believed that the problem of prostitutes could only be solved through socialist social activities because it was essentially a form of class oppression by society. Both men and women needed to promote feminism under the socialist perspective, and males and females should unite to resist the authority and the patriarchy. However, although their theories differed significantly, their goals were the same: the abolition of prostitution. As a result, a march for the abolition of prostitution was ready.

On March 31, 1922, some students began to post leaflets advocating for the abolition of prostitution in various parts of Guangzhou. According to the statistics, although most of the posters were torn down by the opponents immediately after the advocates put them up, they managed to put up more than 2,800 posters in the

city.²²

The next day, the march began. According to *Lai Fu Bao*'s report:

On April 1, the citizen of Guangzhou held a march to abolish prostitution, with more than 100,000 workers, students, businessmen, and doctors.²³

The result of the census organized by the Guangzhou municipal government in 1925 noted that there were 762,198 people in the city, and since the social situation in Guangzhou was stable from 1921 to 1925, it is reasonable to assume that there were more than 700,000 people in Guangzhou in 1922.²⁴ Therefore, if *Lai Fu Bao*'s figures were accurate, the march involved about one-seventh of the city's population, showing the event's importance. Even though there were still many opponents, the proposal to abolish prostitution had gained the support of many citizens. *Shizhao Yuebao*'s report was more detailed:

The number of male and female students (in the march) was the largest. Three motorcycles and some Scouts were the pioneers of this march. They separated the pedestrians from the road to avoid congestion. Military bands, students from normal schools and orphanages played along the way, and small planes distributed dozens of leaflets on the "Chastity Movement" over the city. The various

²² Unsigned journal article, "feichang yundong [the abolition of prostitution movement], *Nanda (Guangzhou)*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1922: 46-47.

²³ Unsigned newspaper article, "Shishi caiji: guonei zhi bu [News collection: Domestic section]," *Lai Fu Bao*, no. 198, 1922: 15. The translation is made by Rui Li, directly from the original file, hereinafter.

²⁴ Yanxing Zhou, "1925-1926 nian guangzhou shi hukou diaocha shulun [The commentary of population census in Guangzhou city from 1925 to 1926]," Master diss., Jinan University, 2007.

drawings and paintings, as well as some role-playing behaviours, were very vivid. These would allow the public to understand the dangers of Syphilis and the need to advocate for the abolition of prostitution.²⁵

The march participants were still mainly students, but they had received widespread support from Guangzhou's society. The protest, which included both musical performances and role-playing, naturally attracted many people to watch along the route, which increased the impact of the content advocated by the march. Some businessmen and government departments also contributed heavily and provided some scarce means of transportation at the time, such as motorcycles and airplanes, to show their support. It is worth noting that the then governor of Guangdong Province, Chen Jiongmeng, and the mayor of Guangzhou City, Sun Ke (also known as Sun Fo, 1891-1973), were both very supportive of the march's demands, apparently.²⁶ All of the above shows that the march was a success, and the demand for the abolition of prostitution was deeply rooted in people's minds.

At the same time, Sun Ke said that the relevant regulations needed further discussion. In 1922, there were approximately 2,000 official prostitutes (under municipal government control) and an estimated several hundred private prostitutes in Guangzhou. The government's tax revenue from official prostitution was between \$600,000 and \$700,000 per year, accounting for a quarter of the city's annual revenue.²⁷ Therefore, Sun suggested that a large-

²⁵ Unsigned newspaper article, "Guangzhou zhi feichang xunxing [Guangzhou's march abolition of prostitution]," *Shizhao Yuebao*, vol. 17, no. 5, 1922: 9.

²⁶ Mi Bi, "Guangzhou de feichang yundong [The abolition of prostitution movement of Guangzhou]," *Funiu Zazhi*, vol. 8, no. 7, 1922: 44.

²⁷ Bi, "Guangzhou de feichang yundong," 44.

scale abolition of prostitution would not be possible until the following problems were solved: First, how should the government fill the relevant tax vacancies? Second, after the abolition of prostitution, how should the government raise funds for the resettlement and re-education of the prostitutes concerned? Third, after abolishing official prostitutes, how could the government solve related security problems and ensure these individuals would not become private prostitutes? Subsequent events show that Sun's fears gradually became a reality.

Widespread Private Prostitution and Compelling Women into Prostitution

In late April 1922, the Guangzhou municipal government introduced an executive order to regulate the prostitution industry, but its wording was vague. Apart from the closure of some public brothels, it only proposed the regulation that "girls under the age of 15 were strictly prohibited from becoming prostitutes." In practice, the above measures had had little effect. The number of official prostitutes fell, but the number of private prostitutes increased. As a student from Nation Guangdong University, Shen Hongci²⁸ said, "The proposal is still a proposal, and the prostitutes are still prostitutes."²⁹ While the number of prostitutes was increasing, the number of related cases, such as compelling women to become prostitutes and

²⁸ Shen Hongci was a student representative of National Guangdong University (Now called Sun Yat-sen University) and was known for his passionate participation in student movements and his anti-communist stance. Shen was later framed by students who supported the Communist Party, resulting in him being deported from the country by the R.O.C. government. In 1937, a scriptwriter named Sam Hung-Tsz appeared in British Hong Kong, whose Chinese characters were exactly the same as Shen Hongci's. It is not known if he was the same person.

²⁹ Hongci Shen, "Feichang yundong [The abolition of prostitution movement]," *Republican Daily News Canton*, April 14, 1924: 2; Hongci Shen, "Feichang yundong [The abolition of prostitution movement]," *Republican Daily News Canton*, April 15, 1924: 2-3.

trafficking them, was also growing.

Unable to become official prostitutes, some women were forced by their families into private brothels in exchange for money. In a report published in 1924, the author told a strange story that took place in a private brothel:

There was a man named Feng Shimou, a native of Shunde County. In September last year, he was introduced by a friend and sold his wife, Luo Simei, to a brothel called Sai Hong Lou, located near Tangyulan. They signed a half-year contract, stating that he would repay the principal and interest upon maturity. Simei was a girl from the Luo clan in Daliang, Shunde County, whose beauty still survived on her face. She felt that her husband was living in hardship and did not have any occupation, so she voluntarily pledged herself to a brothel out of grief. After a while, her husband may have a job and hope to redeem her from the brothel in the future. After getting the mortgage money, Feng went to the casino every day and spent all his money in a few days. The woman was so distressed that she fell into a coma after hearing the news. Unfortunately, at the end of last year, she contracted syphilis and sought treatment from doctors in Guangzhou, but it did not help. A few days ago, the doctor approved her to go home and recuperate on her own, but on the boat home, she died... In recent days, there were often prostitutes claiming to have seen a ghost in the brothel. Last night, a customer came to the brothel to find a prostitute, and at midnight, the customer suddenly shouted that he wanted to kill Feng Shimou as if a

ghost possessed him.³⁰

The first half of this sad report should be a true reflection of the event. In the Chinese patriarchal society, a wife was only a commodity that could be used as collateral for her husband. In this patriarchal society, women's husbands, fathers, brothers, and even female family members could sell women into prostitution. In 1923, there was a case of a maid being sold as a prostitute by her mistress:

Last night, a police detective arrested a newly-adult private prostitute, Lin Mei, at Xin Chang Fa Inn in Xidi. During the interrogation, the prostitute mentioned that she was sold to the Wei clan in Xiangshan County as a maid when she was three years old because her parents were impoverished. In May of this year, she was given to an agent, Dou Pisi, by her mistress, Wei Wushi, and taken to Hong Kong to be sold to a brothel as a prostitute. Later, she was brought to Guangzhou by an agent because of her fierce resistance and was sold into a brothel as a prostitute. Because of the lack of business recently, she was taken by the agent to various inns every night and forced to work as a private prostitute.³¹

The mistresses of large prominent families also had the power to dispose of servants. This was an excellent example of how the oppression of women during this time came from men and the patriarchal ideology of society as a whole. In the 1920s, when the Guangzhou municipal government began to control official prostitution, more and

³⁰ Unsigned newspaper article, "Jiyuan you gui looming [A ghost in a brothel tries to kill someone]," *Republican Daily News Canton*, February 18, 1924, 7.

³¹ Unsigned newspaper article, "Beibi dangchang [Forced to become a prostitute]," *Republican Daily News Canton*, November 13, 1923, 7.

more women were forced to become private prostitutes, which led to a growing number of similar cases.

Private prostitutes covered a wide range of businesses, including privately run brothels, prostitutes who travelled to various hotels and inns, and those who worked as hostesses and provided sexual services in casinos and opium smokehouses, which also drew the attention of the police. Among them, the activities of private prostitutes in casinos appeared in the newspaper report:

Private gambling was everywhere in the city, bringing disaster to the public. It has been banned by order of the municipal government. Our newspaper office has received many reports, and we were overwhelmed by the number of information, so we now summarize our survey of casinos in the city as follows.

Third, near the Lü Dongbin Temple at the foot of the Guanyin Bridge in District 8, a small casino with many gambling tables outside the casino blocking the road. From 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m., the crowds of gamblers were noisy, and there were often scenes of men and women [meaning private prostitutes] having sex in the street.

Fifth, near Jinyutang on Changtang Street in District 1, there was a small casino where all kinds of games were available. There was a singing show with female actors and actresses in the evening. Many private prostitutes went around the gamblers to solicit business, which is dazzling.³²

Private prostitution often went hand in hand with private

³² Unsigned newspaper article, “Guangzhou shi duchang zhi diaocha [Guangzhou city’s casino survey],” *Republican Daily News Canton*, August 10, 1923, 6.

casinos, and many prostitutes would find their customers among the winning gamblers. Related to this was the opium smokehouse, and the active presence of private prostitutes in the smokehouse also drew the government's attention:

Recently, it was reported in the newspaper that there were waitresses at various chat rooms [alias opium smokehouses] in the city. Therefore, the municipal government ordered the director of the police office to ask each precinct to find out if there were similar opium dens where waitresses were employed and prohibit them.³³

The number of private prostitutes and the forms of their existence had increased as Guangzhou's municipal government had gradually tightened its control over official prostitution. However, the number of private prostitutes could not be specifically counted, but it had reached a considerable number in newspaper reports.

In summary, the official action to abolish prostitution in this period was mainly based on public opinion and the advocacy of some social groups and intellectuals. The official series of activities were only limited measures made under the pressure of social opinion and within their control, i.e., the management of official prostitution. As for the private prostitutes, the officials only dealt with some notorious cases.

Strictly speaking, the initial movement for the abolition of prostitution developed from the bottom up, as described in the previous part of this article about the March for the Abolition of Prostitution. This movement was created out of moralistic demands by the intellectuals and some students and with the public hope that the government would take practical actions to abolish

³³ Guangzhou Municipal Government, "Jin yanguan nüzhaodai [Prohibit the employment of waitresses in opium smokehouse]," *Republican Daily News Canton*, March 13, 1924, 7.

prostitution through social pressure such as public opinion propaganda and marches. This was because the intellectuals and government officials did not know enough about the prostitution industry.

The vast majority of intellectuals opposed prostitution because they blamed it for the spread of STDs, felt that it was contrary to good morals, and claimed that it affected the country's "face," which impacted China's possibility of becoming a modern nation. With such a public opinion base, the root of the prostitution problem was still untouched. Nevertheless, as the student mentioned above, Shen Hongci stated in his commentary,

They [referring to some public intellectuals and government officials] advocated the abolition of prostitution for four general reasons: first, it was a continuation of slavery; second, it was detrimental to the institution of the state; third, it disturbed good society; fourth, it disturbed good families... Now the official prostitution is abolished, but private prostitution was still prevalent, so is this not the same as not abolishing it?³⁴

Prostitution in the 1930s and the Government's Further Actions

As Shen mentioned, the initial series of actions by the municipal government did not solve the problems caused by prostitution. On the contrary, private prostitution had flourished under related activities, but a few years later, official prostitution was not wholly abolished but developed to a certain extent. A 1934 article described the prostitution industry in Guangzhou:

Since I arrived in Guangzhou, I have always intended to investigate the situation of prostitutes in Guangzhou to inform the public. Now, I will

³⁴ Shen, "Feichang yundong," 2.

describe the information that I have investigated to report to those interested in improving or concerned about our society.

First, the location and number of prostitutes. There are three areas where official prostitutes gather in Guangzhou:

A. The Xifen section, including Chentang and Tangyulan. Chentang has 17 upper-class brothels with 367 prostitutes; Tangyulan has 13 brothels with 278 prostitutes;

B. The Xiguan section, including Daheji, Huangsha, and Dongshawei. Daheji has 19 brothels with 240 prostitutes, 100 Erer boats, and 24 Shiliu boats, which are traded in the currency of Western countries and are exclusively for foreigners;³⁵ Huangsha has 24 brothels with 99 prostitutes; Dongshawei has 16 brothels with 43 prostitutes;

C. The Southeast section, including both Hechang boats of Dongdi and Yihe street of River south. There are eight upper-class brothel boats with 21 prostitutes in Hechang boat, and there are three lower-class Sanda

³⁵ Erer boats and Shiliu boats were different types of boats on which prostitution is carried out, and the various boats mentioned below all belong to this category. Prostitution on boats was mainly carried out by women of the Tanka people, a group of people who lived on boats almost all their lives on the southeast coast of China, especially in the Pearl River Delta. Although this group also spoke Cantonese, they were very different from the land-based Cantonese speaking people. The Tanka people had a matriarchal tradition before, but most of their women were engaged in prostitution. For the study of Tanka people engaged in prostitution, see E. N. Anderson, "The Boat People of South China," *Anthropos* 65, no. 1/2 (1970): 248–56.

boats with 21 prostitutes; there is one brothel with nine prostitutes on Yihe street of River south.

The number of official prostitutes in the city is 1,172, surveyed in the 19th year of the Republic of China [1930]. Now [1934] ... the total number of [official prostitutes] in the city is 16 less than in the 19th year [1930], but the increase in the lower class [prostitutes] is more harmful to the society.³⁶

The above survey was only about the official prostitutes, and the author could not investigate the situation of private prostitutes due to the limitation of conditions. However, according to existing data, the official prostitutes were numerous.



Fig. 2. Tanka People Living on the Coast of Macau³⁷

³⁶ Yuanyuan, "Guangzhou de changji [Guangzhou's prostitutes]," *Renyan Weekly Journal*, vol. 1, no. 16 (1934): 325-26.

³⁷ Lossing & Barritt., and Perry, Matthew Calbraith, 1794-1858. Narrative of the expedition of an American squadron to the China seas and Japan, performed in the years 1852, 1853, and 1854, under the command of Commodore M. C. Perry, United States Navy, by order of the government of the United States. *Tanka Boat, Macao [Graphic] / Lossing=Barritt*. Prints. [New York: D. Appleyard and Co., 1856], n.d. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.31889113>.

From 1922 until 1930, and even before 1934, the number of official prostitutes did not decrease significantly. Driven by public opinion, the city government half-heartedly imposed certain regulations and restrictions on the official prostitutes, but they still could not get away from the significant financial revenues that they generated. Yuanyuan also mentioned that:

For government-related tax revenues, Chentang could earn \$382,500 a year; the civilian correctional surcharge (a tax on clients) was \$273,700, and Dongdi and Nandi earned \$110,700 a year. The total of the above was \$763,200. That was a huge revenue, beneficial for municipal finance.³⁸

The Guangzhou municipal government, which often suffered from fiscal shortages, could not easily give up such vast revenue. The “civilian correctional surcharge” mentioned in the quotation was a tax imposed by the Guangzhou municipal government on the official prostitution industry in 1923 to cover the financial gap. However, under the pressure of public opinion, the municipal government of Guangzhou turned its attention to private prostitutes. As a result, the police bureau started to crack down on related businesses, and they were more proactive than ever.

With the announcement of a strict ban on private prostitution by the ROC government in Nanjing in 1930, this predicament added some public support to the Guangzhou municipal government’s actions. The Nanjing government gave orders that police stations should take the initiative to investigate hotels and inns but should act with caution. If the police found a prostitute soliciting customers, a first offender should be detained for 15 days and sent to parents or family members; in addition to being

³⁸ Yuanyuan, “Guangzhou de changji,” 326.

detained, repeat offenders should be sent to a government-run almshouse. The municipal government was pinning its hopes of reducing private prostitution on the police.

In addition to filling its lack of knowledge about private prostitution, the government also wanted to know more about the prostitution industry in Guangzhou to take more effective action. In 1930, in compliance with this order, the Guangzhou municipal government sent investigators to examine the lives of prostitutes and the prostitution industry. A journalist for *The Republican Daily News Canton* interviewed an investigator:

Journalist (J): What was the life situation of the investigated prostitutes?

Investigator (I): The investigators reported three classes of prostitutes (both official and private): upper, middle and lower. In terms of life, upper-class prostitutes were relatively free and easy, while middle- and lower-class prostitutes worked very hard and were often oppressed.

J: After the investigation, what can the director do to help them?

I: We have already worked out a way to provide relief. First, it is forbidden for older prostitutes to buy and adopt young girls as prostitutes. This is because now, older prostitutes often buy girls and train them to become prostitutes, and when they grow up and become prostitutes again, they can provide for the older prostitutes. If this phenomenon is eliminated, there will be no new prostitutes; Secondly, we need to set up more handicraft factories to recruit middle- and lower-class prostitutes for learning work. Moreover, we need to set up some educational institutions to

teach them general knowledge so that when they learn a new craft, they can maintain their independent lives; Thirdly, we need to pay attention to the health issues of various private prostitutes and even official brothels. Many brothels in the city (both official and private) are often cramped and have dirty air. Therefore, we plan to visit the brothels and the health Bureau to monitor the health issues.³⁹

From this interview, it is clear that the municipal government was still taking some substantive action against prostitution. Measures ranging from cracking down on inheritance relationships within the prostitution industry to providing re-education and training for lower and middle-class private prostitutes who have lost their jobs are much stronger than in the previous decade. For the municipal government of Guangzhou, these private prostitutes did not generate tax revenue for themselves and harmed social security. Therefore, with the assurance of tax revenue from official prostitutes, the municipal government catered to the central government's directives and the pressure of public opinion from all walks of life in Guangzhou and began a further movement to abolish private prostitution. The above measures were commendable improvements, but in any case, prostitution still existed in Guangzhou and had not yet been eradicated. The reasons for this failure are many and varied, but there are three main ones.

The first was the issue of female trafficking. Human trafficking has long been one of the most severe social problems in traditional Chinese society, especially for women and children.⁴⁰ Among those problems, the

³⁹ Unsigned newspaper article, "Jinü shenghuo diaocha hou zhi jiuji [Relief after the investigation of the life of prostitutes]," *Republican Daily News Canton*, July 5, 1930, 2a.

⁴⁰ Bonny Ling, "Prostitution and Female Trafficking in China: Between Phenomena and Discourse," *China Perspectives*, no. 1-2 (113) (2018):

trafficking of women also included trading women from family members to their own families. Agents generally sold women to wealthy and influential families as maids or to brothels as prostitutes. After establishing the Republic of China in 1912, the traditional Chinese clans gradually withered away, so most women began to be sold to brothels all over the country. Although various governments during different periods had enacted laws and regulations against trafficking, they had not been able to address the problem of trafficking of women effectively. Moreover, the complex and insurmountable problem of trafficking women had led to a steady source of prostitution, which was one of the reasons why the prostitution industry in Guangzhou could not be banned entirely.

The second issue was the education and employment of women (prostitutes). In traditional Chinese smallholder society, most women did not have an education. All they had to do was learn to farm in the countryside in imperial China. However, since China ended its imperial era and began experimenting with a modern republican country, modern cities have gradually developed as they converged with the world market and new municipal theory. This period's political and social turmoil, coupled with the warlords' wars throughout Guangdong,⁴¹ led to the migration of many rural people to its modern capital city, Guangzhou. Few women who moved to the cities had received education or vocational skills training. Therefore, they chose to become prostitutes to survive when they could not support themselves. Because, in this case, prostitutes do not need to go through systematic training or formal education to become prostitutes, and they could

65–74.

⁴¹ At *The Republican Daily News Canton*, news of the war in various parts of Guangdong Province could be found every day, and the level of chaos in the province during this period was evident. As a result, Guangzhou, the more stable capital, became the choice of many people to move to.

make considerable income in a short time. Insufficient education and lack of work skills were also important reasons for the problem of prostitution in Guangzhou.

The third issue was economic and financial. The existence of official prostitution and the associated taxation system provided a solid foundation for the presence of the prostitution industry. Such taxation guaranteed survival for prostitutes and brothels, even if it was a form of oppression. However, as long as the government needed this revenue, the prostitution industry developed, and the brothel owners would not give up the high profits this industry brought. Moreover, because the municipal government could not give up this promising source of tax revenue, the financial issue became the direct cause of the failure to abolish the prostitution industry in the 1920s and 1930s.

Although there were many other reasons for the issues of prostitutes in Guangzhou, such as the new women's pursuit of infidelity, these were not the main reasons for the continued existence of prostitution in Guangzhou during the Republic of China. The Guangzhou municipal government's series of strict controls and bans on official and private prostitution in the 1920s and 1930s could not be considered a success.

Abolition of the Prostitution Movement and Emergence of Feminist Thought

Although prostitution has been with humankind for a long time, with the development of human civilization and the emergence of feminist and gender equality ideas, this long-established and ancient occupation needs to be gradually pushed out of the stage of history. In the 1920s, the rule of the Qing Empire ended in Guangzhou. The concept of a modern city and civilization had not yet taken root, so the resistance to abolishing prostitution was still strong. However, because of its geographical location near British Hong Kong and the long tradition of Cantonese migration overseas, some of the feminist movements in

Western countries before World War I and newly emerging theories were gradually introduced to Guangzhou. In the news reports of this period, some writers mentioned that British women fought for the right to participate in politics and won some seats in the House.⁴² Some articles relayed the news of the establishment of women police in the UK in 1914 and advocated for equal employment for men and women.⁴³ The influx of foreign news about feminism did not immediately change the status of women in China, but it did have a catalytic effect, adding some hope for change to this traditional and conservative society.

Prostitution was a widely recognized job in traditional Chinese society. Although it had a bad reputation and was often subject to moralistic criticism, such as harming the social and moral climate and disrupting traditional families, many people still benefited from it. For many women, and even some men who used women in prostitution for income, it was their only way to make a living. Therefore, the Guangzhou municipal government's practice of controlling official prostitutes and only banning private prostitutes had a specific public opinion base, and some intellectuals approved of this practice.

In the 1920s and 1930s, a widely accepted reason for abolishing prostitution in Guangzhou was that it was detrimental to the international reputation of China as a newly emerging nation-state. Some intellectuals claimed that prostitution was a tool to cut off the nation's development potential and harm the purity of the nation. Those prostitutes were a group of "reprobates" who disturbed the morality of society. "Only by abolishing the institution of prostitution can we have new development

⁴² Yongsheng, "Funü diwei [Women's Status]," *Republican Daily News Canton*, April 14, 1924, 7.

⁴³ Unsigned newspaper article, "Shijie funü zhi diwei [The women's status of the world]," *Republican Daily News Canton*, April 13, 1924, 4.

and hope for the future of our country and nation.”⁴⁴ This was a nationalistic ideology that promoted eugenics in terms of its logic.⁴⁵ According to the theory of nineteenth-century social Darwinism, the existence of prostitutes would destroy the noble bloodline of the nation and thus fail to accomplish the goal of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Therefore, in the view of some intellectuals, “the females’ issue in China was a major problem for the whole national society. The problem of prostitution the women was not only a problem of women’s happiness but also a problem of the soundness of the whole national life. Therefore, the nation must investigate the reason for this problem, study the matter, and find a solution so that the evil social events can be pushed forward to a bright future.”⁴⁶ Thus, the modern transformation of the prostitute’s body became an essential part of the construction of the Chinese nation-state, and the national identity of the prostitute could not match the nation-state imagined by these intellectuals.

Although most advocates for the abolition of prostitution based their position on a nationalist ideology, there was still a small group of intellectuals who held a different view. For example, Chen Duxiu, as mentioned above, believed that the essence of prostitution was not just the oppression of women by men but the oppression of women by patriarchal society as a whole.⁴⁷ Prostitution results from a patriarchal social order that subordinates

⁴⁴ Chen Qiran, "Changji de cunfei wenti [The issue of preservation and abolition of prostitutes]," *Renyan Weekly Journal*, no. 38, 1935: 748-49.

⁴⁵ On the case of the implementation of eugenics in Puerto Rico and related theories, see Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 74-108.

⁴⁶ Chen Qiran, "Changji de cunfei wenti," 749.

⁴⁷ Jinzhu Fu, “Chen Jiongming yu jindai Guangdong nüquan yundong [Chen Jiongming and the Modern Guangdong Feminist Movement],” *Journal of China Women’s University* 21, no. 1 (2009): 100.

women to men and makes gender inequality a reality in all aspects of social life. Chen believed that in primitive societies, men and women were supposed to be equal and that women were in a free position and sometimes in a position of respect. The rise of inequality between men and women co-occurred with the great division of labour and the development of productivity, the emergence of surplus commodities, the disintegration of the original commune, the private ownership of the means of production, the establishment of the system of exploitation, and the transition of society from matriarchy to patriarchy.⁴⁸ Chen Duxiu meant that the social status of women in different societies and periods of history changed according to the changes in the society's political and economic relations. Chen also believed that the suffering of prostitutes is closely related to economic problems. Only with the implementation of socialism could this problem be solved.

These were some of the mainstream views of the intellectuals in Guangzhou in the 1920s and 1930s on the abolition of prostitution. However, in terms of quantity, most of the intellectuals were nationalist eugenicists.

Conclusion

Prostitution had always existed in traditional Chinese society, even in small villages, but after the founding of the Republic of China, society was transitioning from traditional to modern, and the problem of prostitution gradually became magnified and complicated. With the establishment of a modern Guangzhou city and its municipal government, prostitution gradually became a severe problem for Guangzhou's intellectuals and government officials. The patriarchy oppressed these

⁴⁸ See Chen Duxiu, "Funü wenti yu shehui zhuyi [Women's issue and socialism]," *Guangdong Qunbao*, January 31, 1921; Chen Duxiu, "Women weishenme yao tichang laodong yundong yu funü yundong [Why we should promote labor and women's movements]," *Laodong yu Funü*, 1921: 2.

prostitutes, not only through men but also through women who bought and sold other women at will and forced them to become prostitutes, always in low social status.

However, the series of measures taken by the Guangzhou municipal government in the 1920s and 1930s encountered many obstacles. First, the government tried to control the size of official prostitution, but financial pressures prevented them from abandoning this lucrative tax-generating industry. Then, the government tried to abolish private prostitution as much as possible, starting with a strict ban on private prostitution to meet public opinion. However, the movement was not successful because it could not solve the problem of female trafficking and the re-employment of unemployed prostitutes.

Finally, Chinese intellectuals' conservative concepts and nationalistic ideology were so deep-rooted that they advocated the abolition of prostitution only for eugenics, which could not touch the core of the problem of prostitution, and the movement to abolish prostitution could not be completed. The Marxist view of feminism, which exists on a small scale, has not been widely discussed because it is not widely accessible to the public. Thus, both the actions of the municipal government and the views of the intellectuals in Guangzhou are good examples of the emerging feminism's limitations in China in the 1920s and 1930s.

With the occupation of Guangzhou by the Japanese Empire on October 21, 1938, the municipal government of Guangzhou lost control of the city and then shifted to other parts of the province and established a government in exile. Since then, a series of policies implemented in Guangzhou city no longer exists. Although the ROC regained control of Guangzhou in 1945, it faced urban reconstruction and civil war issues, and the municipal government had no more ability or money to focus on the abolition of prostitution. However, this abolition of the prostitution movement still provided some basis for future policies.

Glossary

Here is a Chinese and English character comparison list of translations for the Mandarin and Cantonese pronunciations used in this article. These include names of famous parties and personalities, pseudonyms of authors of newspapers and journals, names of newspapers and journals, names of places in Guangzhou province, names of places in Guangzhou city, etc.

Changtang Street	長塘街
Chen Duxiu	陳獨秀
Chen Jiongming	陳炯明
Chen Qiran	陳其然
Chentang	陳塘
Daheji	大河基
Daliang	大良
Dongdi	東堤
Dongshawei	東沙尾
<i>Funü Zazhi</i>	《婦女雜誌》

Guangdong	廣東
<i>Guangdong Qunbao</i>	《廣東群報》
Guangxi	廣西
Guangzhou	廣州
Guanyin Bridge	觀音橋
Huangsha	黃沙
Jinyutang	金魚塘
<i>Lai Fu Bao</i>	《來復報》
<i>Laodong yu funü</i>	《勞動與婦女》
Lü Dongbin Temple	呂祖廟
May Fourth Movement	五四運動
Nandi	南堤
Old Guangxi clique	舊桂系

<i>Renyan Weekly Journal</i>	《人言周刊》
Sam Hung-Tsz	沈鴻慈（粵）
Shen Hongci	沈鴻慈（普）
<i>Shizhao Yuebao</i>	《時兆月報》
Shunde	順德
Sun Ke	孫科
Tangyulan	塘魚欄
Tanka people	蠶家人
<i>The Republican Daily News Canton</i>	《廣州民國日報》
Xiangshan	香山
Xidi	西堤
Xiguan	西關
Xinhai Revolution	辛亥革命