"From a Throne of Glory to a Seat of Ignominy"

Shanghai Prostitution Revisited
(1849-1949)

CHRISTIAN HENRIOT
Institut Universitaire de France

The title of this article refers to a paper published by Lemièrè, the French lawyer who took the defense of courtesans in 1920 after the outlawing of prostitution by the Shanghai Municipal Council in the International Settlement (Lemièrè, 1923; Shenbao, July 8, 1920; Shanghai Municipal Council, 1920: 259-60). Lemièrè evoked the fate of the upper strata of Shanghai’s ladies of the night who fell from the top of the “world of flowers” to the depths of common prostitution. This transformation occurred not overnight by bureaucratic fiat, but in a process of commercialization and diversification of prostitution from the middle of the nineteenth century to 1949. In the course of that century, Shanghai gave birth to an ever more sophisticated and affluent consumer society in which all the categories of courtesans and prostitutes inescapably melted into the same standardized mold of sex trade.

Although sexuality and prostitution have long been a major topic of historical research on Western societies, China historians have so far expressed little interest in this field.¹ Most references to sex and prostitution in China are to be found in general works on the history or sociology of prostitution. None can be considered a historical study.² There have been two exceptions in recent historiography, but

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their sources are limited to Western-language material (Gronewold, 1982; Scherer, 1983). Chinese historians have by and large neglected this topic. Only in the last few years have papers and books on the history of prostitution appeared. These are essentially based on uncritical use of secondary sources of the 1920s through 1940s. These works also remain prisoners of a common moralistic-cum-political framework that seriously biases their interpretations of prostitution.¹

One of the main challenges for the historian of prostitution in China is to identify and gain access to relevant and reliable materials. What one encounters first and foremost is a myriad of guides, “handbooks for brothelgoers” (piaojie zhinan), memoirs and biographies of courtesans by literati, mosquito newspapers (i.e., small popular newspapers), and so on. The historian has to make do with what is available. Nevertheless, this documentation is less than satisfying and needs to be supplemented whenever possible with archival material and first-hand accounts. The principal danger for the researcher lies in a misreading of secondary sources that can lead to a biased reconstruction of reality. Although one can glean bits of information here and there, what these sources provide are forms of discourse, not evidence of historical practices.² In this article I shall argue that the organization of prostitution was not as rigidly stratified as the notion of hierarchy (suggested in such sources) implies, that the perdurance of names concealed a very much transformed reality, and that the composition and size of the population of prostitutes have to be reassessed.

UP AND DOWN THE LADDER OF PRESTIGE

What has been presented as the hierarchy of prostitution needs to be reinterpreted. There existed indeed various strata in the world of prostitution that were distinguished by prestige, lifestyle, and economic level, as noted by Gail Hershatter (1989: 464-71; 1991: 259-65; 1992a: 249-51). Nonetheless, there was not a rigid hierarchy and certain of Hershatter’s conclusions regarding the structure of the courtesan community, the chronology of its evolution, and the final depiction of Shanghai prostitution as “essentially a luxury market in courtesans [that] became a market primarily geared to supplying
sexual services for the growing number of unattached commercial and working-class men of the city” require reexamination (Hershatter, 1989: 493; 1991: 280; 1992a: 251). I shall argue instead that different categories of courtesans and prostitutes overlapped, that a full-fledged sex market with flourishing popular prostitution existed since the middle of the nineteenth century, and that the various types of courtesans were collectively pulled down the ladder of prestige to become common prostitutes by the early twentieth century.

For almost a century, the world of prostitution in Shanghai was dominated by a particular group, the courtesans. This term refers to several originally distinct categories. The evolution of this group and of all the other types of prostitutes reflects the tremendous transformations Chinese society underwent, especially in Shanghai, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century. To encapsulate these changes in a few words, a status-dominated society was increasingly replaced by a money-dominated society. The growing commercialization of the local economy combined with the restructuring of the various social strata—in particular the emergence of middle-class urbanites—caused a general decline of the role and status of courtesans. It generated the development of more original forms of prostitution, even if all became more homogeneous in their function. They merely provided sexual services. Whereas sex continued to be a marketable commodity, the kind of female companionship courtesans once provided did not.

Elites did not patronize the same establishments as ordinary city dwellers and courtesans had no relations with their sisters working in the opium dens or in the common brothels. Yet the status and role of courtesans was altered by the development of new social groups, which, though less educated and affluent than the literati or wealthy merchants, were eager to distinguish themselves from ordinary people. Although only wealthy literati and merchants could afford to patronize courtesans regularly, many less affluent customers, such as Wang Tao, also patronized courtesans. These less affluent customers had received a traditional education and reproduced the lifestyle of the elites in terms of leisure and entertainment. In short, customers of courtesans shared a common literary culture and status, although not all were equally wealthy. With the development of Shanghai, money became much more important than education in aping the lifestyle of
the higher strata of urban elites. Although the elites and their expectations, tastes, and so on remained, they were overwhelmed by the considerable increase of other well-off customers with different expectations, such as easy sexual gratification. By dint of their sheer numbers, the arrivistes altered the nature of the market for courtesans at a time when unrelated social upheavals brought many women in need of money into the trade. This change of behavior and expectations caused the fading away of a form of male entertainment that had become obsolete.

The world of prostitution in Shanghai in the middle of the nineteenth century was not very complex, even though it included categories difficult to define. Wang Tao, famous as one of the earliest Chinese reformers (Cohen, 1974), less so as an assiduous patron of courtesans, has left one of the most detailed and systematic descriptions of prostitution between 1848 and 1880 (Yu Baoshen, 1878a, 1878b, 1878c, 1878d; Wang Tao, n.d.; 1870). His writings do not convey the image of a rigidly stratified prostitution. The idea that prostitution was structured like a pyramid seduces the mind of the historian, but does not reflect the daily experience of the Shanghainese in the last century. What is striking in Shanghai in the late nineteenth century is the relatively wide scope of prostitution available according to place, time, money, and taste. The inclination of the Chinese for classification and ordering tends to exaggerate distinctions that are often just formal. It is more appropriate to think in terms of types of prostitutes, rather than ranks.

The sources I have used for this period do not mention any specific name to designate what I have here called courtesans. The term shuyu is said to have appeared in Shanghai only in 1851, following its use by a famous courtesan, Zhu Sulan. It did not become widespread, however, until 1860 when courtesans established their dominance over the world of prostitution (Wang Tao, n.d., 202; Tang Weikang, 1987: 265). The word shuyu refers to the apartment of the courtesan, the place where stories are told or read. Indeed, the primary function of courtesans was to entertain their customers with stories, music, and opera. They were first of all storytellers. Obviously 1851 is a fictitious date. Under the name shuyu or another, courtesans existed in Shanghai well before that year. They were heirs to a long tradition of educated,
sometimes learned, courtesans (Henriot, 1994). Shanghai’s shuyu had their source in Suzhou, the main commercial metropolis of the Lower Yangzi area before 1821, a place famous nationwide for the beauty of its women (Johnson, 1986).

Shuyu defined themselves as artists whose vocation was to entertain their customers, either at the client’s home at banquets and receptions, or in the city’s traditional entertainment places—theaters, shuchang (music halls), teahouses, restaurants—or in their own apartments. They provided company at banquets, served wine, and distracted guests with their songs (Wang Tao, n.d., 202). In principle, they did not prostitute themselves: “they sell their art, not their body” (mai yi bu mai shen or mai kou bu mai shen). Indeed, it was impossible to buy them or even obtain their favors just by offering money or gifts. This rule was not absolute, but, as with the Japanese geisha of the same period, a customer had to court the courtesan with whom he wished to establish a close relationship. According to rare testimonies left from the time, shuyu enjoyed a relative degree of independence and the power to select their more intimate customers: the more so as they became famous and became the object of competition among customers.

Wang Tao reports that when a customer invited courtesans of an inferior rank6—for example, a changsan (literally, a “long three”—the shuyu present immediately set themselves apart to avoid mixing with the disdained others. If the customer invited a changsan to sit next to him, the shuyu would leave the table (Yu Baosheng, 1878: 1/7; Wang Tao, n.d.: 201). Although Wang Tao’s text is difficult to date, he seems to be referring to the 1860s. We can infer from this that at that time there were at least two categories of courtesans, one of which (shuyu) was eager to be distinguished from those they considered prostitutes. It should be noted that shuyu did not consider themselves to be common prostitutes and that the changsan later adopted the same discriminatory attitude toward the next lower ranking category of prostitutes, the yao'er (“one-two”). This also shows that elite customers patronized various groups of courtesans and prostitutes. The dividing line between the various categories was not precise and became even less so over time.

The development of other categories of courtesans cannot be dated with certainty. It appears that from the beginning, say by the 1820s, there were probably one or several groups of courtesans who were
sexually more accessible than the so-called shuyu. Courtesans as a whole formed a community in which the shuyu emerged as primus inter pares. The other groups split up, creating various categories of courtesans of a lower rank. Besides the shuyu, Chinese sources often mention categories of courtesans who are differentiated by the amount of money they charged for their services. This is the case for the changsan, a name derived from the “long three,” a mah-jongg tile, but which actually referred to the three-yuan charge for an assignation outside (tangchài) and three yuan to spend the night (Shanghai zhinan, 1919: 5/18). It is also the case for the er’er (double-two), ersan (two-three) and yao’er (one-two). The first two categories were ephemeral and assimilated later either into the changsan or the yao’er, as only these latter two groups remained. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the various groups progressively merged together in a downward movement that led to a greater “sexualization” of the courtesans. It is difficult to document this process because no sources remain for the years 1821-1850 that could serve as a reference point, and hardly any material remains concerning the following period, 1851-1875, which witnessed the basic transformation of the landscape of prostitution.

Terminology can provide a partial answer. In the older sources—the writings of Wang Tao—the changsan are called changsan shuyu, which suggests that they belonged to the same community, but that they were characterized by a greater accessibility and a fixed tariff that did not exist among the “genuine” shuyu. This is also true for the yao’er, who are called pipa jiaoshu, which means they formed a category of changsan who could play the pipa, but did not qualify in singing and opera. The same reasoning could be applied to the other categories of “fixed tariff” courtesans such as the er’er and ersan. What can we infer from this? Elite customers who patronized the shuyu appreciated their musical and conversational talents, but they also expected or hankered after sexual gratification, even if they had to go through a subtle game of seduction and courtship to get it. Therefore, they had to be patient, and given the limited number of women available, success was not guaranteed to all. This would explain why other categories appeared quite early, whose courtesans offered quite comparable artistic skills while being more accessible.
The social and economic evolution of Shanghai, especially the side effects of the Taiping rebellion, contributed to an acceleration of this process. In the early 1860s, Shanghai received a large influx of refugees from the various surrounding cities affected by the rebellion, in particular from Suzhou (Johnson, 1986: 275-77, 307, 316; Leung Yuen-sang, 1990: 153). Among these were well-off families whose men belonged to the educated elites, both gentry and merchants. Many refugees, however, did not have an advanced education and expressed an interest in courtesans who were not as demanding as the shuyu, but nonetheless enjoyed a certain prestige. In plain economic terms, the large influx increased the demand for courtesans, while the supply side was limited. The women who entered the trade had not received the same training as the shuyu, the more so as many were forced into the profession by circumstances. The Taiping pushed many women from good families (liangjia) into houses of courtesans and prostitutes (Yu Baosheng, 1878b: 2/1; Shenbao, May 5, 1872 [lunar calendar]).

Another contemporary source records that by the time they migrated to the foreign settlements, especially after 1865 when they moved en masse, the changsan formally abolished the rule of the "double-three" to adopt the same practice as the shuyu, although they remained more accessible than the latter ("Demi-monde," 1923: 785). The actual downgrading of the shuyu, even if it meant a gain in respectability for their rivals, the changsan, represented the first step down the ladder of glory. While formally imitating the shuyu, the changsan remained much more accessible and became increasingly so. Although the latter were slightly elevated, courtesans as a whole lost their most sophisticated segment. In the 1860s, the distinction between shuyu and changsan still corresponded to an actual difference in the status and roles of the two groups. After 1875, there was a downward trend that resulted in a de facto fusion and, even if the term shuyu was still in use, it contained less and less real content (Wang Jimen, 1922: 6). There actually remained only one group of courtesans, the changsan, whose numbers increased tremendously. Although this latter group was able to maintain its name and status well into the 1920s, its members progressively became high-class prostitutes. Although no precise date can be given for this transformation, it seems that the process of sexualization of courtesans accelerated during World War I and was completed by the early 1920s.
Even before the opening of the city to foreign trade, Shanghai already had a very lively nightlife and a flourishing sex market. The Chinese population resided mainly in the walled city and its suburbs along the Huangpu River, precisely where amusement places were concentrated. The houses of courtesans were located exclusively within the wall in the residential districts, mostly in the southern part of the city. Wang Tao also notes the existence of less prestigious houses in the northeastern quarter. His account conveys the impression that the number of courtesans in Shanghai in the 1850s and 1860s was limited (Yu Baosheng, 1878a: 1/1-3). Wang mentions a dozen houses that the local population called tangming (lodges)—“deep and obscure” places whose luxury impressed first-time visitors. These “lodges” housed thirty to forty women in separate rooms. Wang described them as jiyuan (brothel), a word he never applies to houses of courtesans. Nevertheless, there is no particular condemnation or criticism on his part. Yao’er are referred to only in the second volume of Wang Tao’s Haizou yeyou lu (Notes of a Libertine from the Seaside) in which the author also notes the existence of 24 houses of ersan (two-three) about whom he establishes an implicit link with the former tangming. Both categories, ersan and yao’er, are ranked below the courtesans (Yu Baosheng, 1878a: 1/3).

A similar though more popular genre was represented by the caotai (straw stage), a kind of cabaret. These establishments, which were said to have appeared about 1820, had as their principal attraction actresses of popular theaters, less refined than those patronized by the elites. The number of women in each house was also thirty to forty. When a customer entered, he was served tea, fruit, and melon seeds while the women came down to present themselves. Once the customer had made his choice, he went up to the prostitute’s room. According to Wang Tao, one could find the same services as in the tangming, but for less money. Those who went to houses of prostitution solely or mainly for sex patronized these establishments (Yu Baosheng, 1878a: 1/4).

Finally, in this intermediate category of houses of prostitution, Wang also lists a numerous category, the siju (private residence), which offered a more intimate and quiet atmosphere than the caotai. Siju, which usually had large apartments where banquets could be
held, first appeared about 1875 and developed quickly. By the time Wang wrote of them (i.e., no later than 1878), there were no less than 300 such houses in the walled city, an impressive number although it does not imply a large number of women. Initially, each establishment had only one or two inmates; by the end of the century, some had up to four or five. There were also “independent” or occasional prostitutes called zhujia (individual family) who rented rooms in discreet places. They received a small and carefully selected number of customers rich enough to guarantee their living (Yu Baosheng, 1878a: 1/2; Haishang, 1891: 1/2).

Last, there appeared sometime in the last quarter of the century a new type of prostitute that caused a commotion among the local ruling elite. Wang Tao refers twice to these brothels he condemns as the “most detestable in the eyes of customs in Shanghai.” In these houses, women served as intermediaries between prospective customers and women from “good families” (liangjia). They served as maisons de rendez-vous, such as existed in nineteenth-century Paris or London, where one enjoyed greater privacy than in the more controllable hotels of the city. These establishments, called taiji (wings), seem to have operated first as real maisons de rendez-vous for lovers in search of a meeting place. They later evolved into houses of prostitution, although they continued to profess their inmates to be girls or women from honorable families. They were strictly prohibited by the Chinese authorities and had to move to the settlements (Yu Baosheng, 1878b: 1/2, 2/4; Shenbao, September 5, 1899). In the twentieth century, they became large-scale “slaughterhouses.”

At this intermediate level between courtesans and prostitutes, there was therefore an exceptional range of choices. A variety of establishments were patronized by various strata of the local society, from literati to wealthy merchants and other financially well-off customers. The question is, how did these establishments, which are no longer talked about after the turn of the century, change and metamorphose into new forms? My own guess, on the basis of an analysis of the evolution of the names of these houses in the sources, is that there was a contraction and simplification of the fabric of prostitution. Whatever the names used, these were approximately equivalent categories that were “pulled downward” and assimilated into the houses of popular prostitution that developed in the settlements at the end of the century.
Some of them maintained a separate identity, like the yao’er, whereas others lost any specificity and merged into the ranks of common prostitutes.

Popular prostitution represented the largest pool of sex workers in the nineteenth century. After the opening of Shanghai to foreign trade, the city attracted all sorts of people from every part of China. For a few decades, the city became a kind of “new frontier.” Local society became less well policed and controlled and more heterogeneous, with an influx of various groups of people living precariously with few resources (Goodman, 1995). Wang Tao mentions the presence of numerous youmin (vagrants) and wulaizi (“the rootless”), with no stable employment or income, who spent their evenings drinking and whoring.10 Many were Cantonese, Fujianese, and Ningbonese, immigrant communities par excellence. They formed small gangs that often preyed on houses of prostitution, stirring up disputes and brawls. Madams protected themselves by giving them money at the beginning of each season (Yu Baosheng, 1878a: 3/5). By its nature as a harbor city and a commercial center, Shanghai was also home to a large transient population of seamen, merchants, peddlers, and so on.

Most houses of popular prostitution were located outside the city wall, in the suburbs where commercial activities related to riverine and maritime trade had developed. Along the river, from north to east, there were many houses made of “mud and woven bamboo” that housed beautiful girls, some of them from Suzhou. There were also boats of prostitutes, moored in the Huangpu River, that came close to the bang of sampans anchored along the riverside. They were the remnants of an illustrious past when all prostitution in Shanghai took place on boats (Xue Liyong, 1988). Wang Tao clearly expresses his distaste for these women who, according to him, would disgust even sedan-chair carriers (Yu Baosheng, 1878a: 1/2, 3/2). Floating brothels faded away in the middle of the 1860s. They were still mentioned in French sources as the “jonques de tolérance,” which the authorities prohibited after several complaints by residents (Maybon and Fredet, 1929: 264, 291; Compte rendu, 1863-64, 1864-65).

The walled city also housed still other forms of popular prostitution. Xuexiang Lane, in a relatively central area, quiet during the day, became radically transformed in the evening. A large number of
prostitutes assembled on the doorsteps, calling and winking at passersby. Around the hotels of the city, there were also streetwalkers, called “ten thousand flowers” (wanhua) (Yu Baosheng, 1878a: 1/3, 2/4). These were undoubtedly the precursors of the category of prostitutes known as yeji (wild hens), whose ranks swelled significantly after 1890. At the end of the century, the walled city also housed a large number of opium dens called huayanjian or yanhuaqian (literally chamber of smoke and flowers) where customers were attended by young women who also provided sexual services. Originally, these were just opium dens that, to compete with each other and attract customers, had recruited or bought women to replace male servants. These women were forced to prostitute themselves, hence their name huayanjian. Opium dens were one of the most popular venues of prostitution, and managed to thrive despite regular police raids (Yu Baosheng, 1878a: 2/4; Chi Zhicheng, 1989: 4; Shenbao, October 11, 1899).

Close to the walled city, brothels lined the Yangjingbang, the canal that separated the two settlements, for half a li. In the evening, lanterns along the canal looked like a myriad of stars. Wang Tao indicates that many of the inmates were from Jiangbei. In the 1870s, Shenbao reported that Yangjingbang was one of the most prosperous districts of Shanghai, surpassing even Qinhui (Nanjing’s famous prostitution quarter under the Ming). It seems that many of these establishments were huayanjian (Shenbao, October 2, 1872; February 3, 1873 [lunar calendar]). Further to the north, near the Great Road, as Nanjing Road was then called, one could also find another center of prostitution. This was a later development (1860-70). Every evening, “when the sun sets in the west and the moon rises in the east, powdered women stand by their doorstep, waving and making eyes at the merchants who have come from the surrounding towns.” According to Wang Tao, who paints a dark picture of these establishments, the inmates were mostly ugly women, older than thirty (Yu Baosheng, 1878a: 1/2).

To these usual forms of prostitution, Wang Tao adds information about surprisingly unconventional behavior by Confucian social norms. They represent a small window on popular culture and life about which so little is known. Close to the South Gate was an area where it was not unusual to see men roaming the streets and knocking on doors looking for women. Wang does not explicitly say the objects
of the hunt were prostitutes, but instead uses the word *qing nüzi* (young girls). Were these occasional prostitutes, taking a chance to make ends meet in the absence of husbands or family? In the Western Garden (today's Yuyuan), female fruit sellers used to visit the various teahouses to sell their merchandise. Ruffians sometimes dragged them to their side and fondled them. When their fruit was all sold out, these girls sometimes went back home in the company of a man. The same holds true of the female servants in the teahouses. They came and left as a group, but the more attractive ones stayed on in the evening and worked as prostitutes (Yu Baosheng, 1878a: 1/3, 5).

In the twentieth century, the multiplication of terms to designate the various categories of prostitutes conceals the downgrading of the upper and intermediate groups that had existed before World War I and the general standardization of varied practices now reduced to sexual services only, even if brothels still served as meeting places for friends to dine, play cards, and mah-jongg. From the 1920s onward, Shanghai saw the development of a sophisticated consumer society in which the circulation of persons and goods accelerated. Prostitutes, who were as much "beautiful merchandise" as individuals with little power over their own fate, were swept along by the mainstream of commercialization of entertainment activities. The sex trade, a venal occupation par excellence, became more standardized in its practices at the same time that there arose new forms of prostitution.

The few yao'er houses that remained in the International Settlement were wiped out by the prohibition of prostitution in the period 1920-25. Even if some authors still referred to yao'er in the 1930s, this was a confusion that resulted from the plagiarism of older works. The yao'er were unable to survive the competition with the changsan who offered a better environment and more artistic skills for almost the same cost. Caught between the level of courtesans—who were themselves caught in a process of "sexualization"—and popular prostitution, the yao'er could not maintain a specific identity without contributing to their own extinction. They were assimilated into the ranks of yeji or *xianrouzhuang* (literally, salt-meat shops). The case of the yao'er is representative of a social transformation that no longer left a niche for elaborate forms of prostitution and, with the relative exception of the changsan, made all other categories of venal women into common prostitutes.
Hardly anything distinguished a xianrouzhuang, a yeji, a xiang-daoshe (escort), or massage parlor prostitute. The only difference lay in their commercial practices. For instance, xianrouzhuang, which developed from the former taiji (maison de rendez-vous) of the late nineteenth century, usually did not send its inmates out to solicit customers on the street and still pretended to offer to their customers young women from “good families.” In reality, they operated as brothels, exchanging girls when one of them could not cope with a sudden influx of customers with its own inmates. There was hardly a more cynical way of designating prostitutes than this type of establishment where a customer could opt for some “flavor” and get a slice of “salted meat” (Wang Dingjiu, 1932: 27-28). Many of these establishments moved to the French Concession after 1920. There remained perhaps two dozen of them in the 1930s and 1940s, although sources on their number vary greatly. The difference with yeji houses was certainly small. This might explain the census variation (Wang Dingjiu, 1932: 20; 1934: 667; Haishang, 1940: 149).

The vast legions of prostitutes, however, were to be found elsewhere in the large category of yeji. Chinese authors seem to have derived vicarious pleasure from writing about the myriad of supposed subdivisions within the category of yeji, but in truth there were no significant differences. Only the modes of soliciting and occasionally price actually varied. Although, as noted above, women solicited in the street as early as the mid-nineteenth century, the yeji phenomenon took off only in the 1890s. The term itself does not appear in a 1891 book on prostitution. It applied to all sorts of unattached workers, before being applied to poor women who occasionally prostituted themselves, then to the prostitutes who solicited customers from their doorstep or in the streets (Shanghai zhinan, 1919: 5/19; Wang Jimen, 1922: 23; for the various categories that existed, see Henriot, 1992b: chap. 8). Yeji prostitutes were attached to one brothel and showed up in the late afternoon in various places of Shanghai, usually the most lively areas around amusement centers, department stores, teahouses, and so on (Henriot, 1995). Pressed by their madams to find customers, they sometimes adopted aggressive ways of soliciting. The various guides to Shanghai warned potential customers to be cautious when meeting a yeji and not to respond to their calls in any way.
The relentless commercialization of prostitution in the twentieth century found its ultimate expression in a form of prostitution that took off in Shanghai in the 1940s and is now very common in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Establishments called xiangdaoshe (escorts or guide agencies) provided women à la carte and at any hour. They originally started as legitimate agencies that hired women to guide tourists. The first such agency opened its doors in 1922-23, but it went bankrupt. The idea reemerged in the 1930s though in a different form: the new agencies provided female companions to visitors to take them to Shanghai’s famous places, while also taking care of their sexual needs (Lu Dafang, 1980: 11-12; Ji Longsheng, 1942: 103; “Prostitution,” 1937: 8). In the 1940s, as most of the “escorts” were refugees who hardly knew Shanghai, their role was limited to accompanying customers to hotels, restaurants, and amusement centers. The formula was modern and symptomatic of changing lifestyles in the great metropolis.

The initial investment in a guide agency was small: a room, with a sofa and a few chairs, a telephone, an operator, and a dozen or so girls. There was no need to provide room and board to the prostitutes. Only a license was required. About 1937, there were already 100 such agencies in the International Settlement. This system reached its peak in the 1940s; police files abound with records of the arrests of “guides.” Some agencies experienced a prodigious expansion, such as the infamous Taotao, which had about thirty women before the Sino-Japanese war and housed more than 200 in 1942 (Jin Buhuan, 1962: 178-79; “Prostitution,” 1937: 8; Ji Longsheng, 1942: 103). The mode of operation of the guide agencies, which lived on the pool of thousands of poor or unattached women in Shanghai, contributed to dissolving the sometimes close relations that united a madam with her “daughters.” The late 1930s and 1940s saw an evolution in the direction of a growing enfranchisement of prostitutes. Although relative—inasmuch as many cases of quasi-enslavement persisted and economic dependence remained—this enfranchisement left prostitutes freer to move around and quit.16

The landscape of prostitution would not be complete without mentioning the “scraps” of the sex trade, women who could not leave soon enough or had entered the trade at a later age. They formed a group about which little is known, because those who wrote about them evidently never dared to approach them. Therefore, there is an uncer-
tainty in the record that is impossible to overcome. One can even wonder whether such a category as dingpeng ("nail sheds," so named, perhaps, because sex was conducted there with all the speed, force, and charm of hammering nails) ever really existed as police archives never mention this name. Even in terms of location, dingpeng seem to bear no relation to the brothels made of "mud and woven bamboo" mentioned by Wang Tao a few decades before. The dingpeng were said to be located nearby the Western Gate and in a few streets of the French Concession. In the twentieth century, one can also add to this category the huayanjian, of which a dozen establishments remained. According to all guides, these brothels were patronized by the poorer segments of society such as beggars and coolies (Zhang Qiugu, 1920: 3/8; Shanghai zhinan, 1919: 5/20; "Demi-monde," 1923: 787). This may have been another prejudice.

Chinese authors hesitated over the classification of prostitution, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. On the one hand, a very diverse offering is suggested by the multiplicity of terms used to designate prostitutes. This abundance, however, was the result of a superposition of expressions of the past and the present. Ceaselessly, new names appear to describe new behavior, new modes of prostitution more than new ranks of prostitutes. This is the case, for example, of the tangpai and the zhujia yeji. On the other hand, the biases or illusions of Chinese authors tend to mask reality. They saw in the intermediate categories women from various backgrounds, especially honest women who tried to make ends meet: textile workers, cast-off concubines or wives, students, bond servants on the loose, and so on. In fact, police archives and later authors make clear that these intermediate categories did not exist. All these women were indeed full-time prostitutes, whatever their supposed or real social origin. The profusion of categories was a willful illusion, a mystification of reality that corresponded to a relentless pursuit of a "golden age" by men unsettled by the ongoing upheaval of Shanghai society.

REGIONAL GROUPS OF PROSTITUTES

Most Chinese writers have reported on the existence of regional groups of courtesans and prostitutes. Western historians have gener-
ally concluded that regional groups were the result of a recruitment process that reflected the demand of the regional communities that formed the Shanghai population (Hershatter, 1989: 471-73; 1991: 263-64; Goodman, 1995; Honig, 1986: 71). This interpretation is not incorrect, but it tends to be exaggerated. Among courtesans, there existed in the mid-nineteenth century various groups formed on the basis of their regional origin. According to Wang Tao, in order of quality, there were courtesans from Suzhou, Nanjing, Yangzhou, Ningbo, Huzhou, Hubei, and Jiangxi (Wang Tao, n.d.: 105). The diversity of provincial origins was doubtless a reflection of the heterogeneity of that Shanghai population up to the 1870s (Goodman, 1995). Each regional community had its own group of courtesans. Later on, the Jiangsu-Zhejiang component of the population increased much more rapidly than the other provincial groups, which became small minorities.

Most of the regional groups of courtesans disappeared to the advantage of those from Jiangsu and, secondarily, from Zhejiang (Wang Jimen, 1922: 9). One group, the Suzhou shuyu/changsan, managed to impose its songs and dialect as the lingua franca of courtesans. Even if this diversity originally corresponded to the variety of native-place groups in the city, it also related to the variety of offerings in terms of entertainment. Each group of courtesans was renowned for one or several particular qualities and their members served not only customers of the same geographical origin, but also all kinds of customers in search of varied distractions. The fading away of these regional groups tends to support the argument that the Chinese elite were not so much attached to one or another group of courtesans as to a style, that of Suzhou women, heirs to a long tradition, many of whom settled in Shanghai after the Taipings destroyed their city.

In his memoirs, written between the late 1840s and the 1880s, Wang Tao mentions the geographical origin—a key element of the identity of an individual in China—of 106 courtesans. Wang is able to give for most of the women the exact name of their place of birth, usually a village, which makes it paradoxically difficult for the historian to identify these places. My own incomplete reconstruction shows that fifty-four courtesans were born in Jiangsu, of which sixteen came from the Suzhou area, ten from elsewhere in Jiangnan, and eight from Jiangbei (half of them from Yangzhou). Eight courtesans hailed from
Zhejiang; seven came from various other parts of China (Guangdong, Hunan, Hubei, southern Shandong); and thirteen came from villages I am unable to locate. It is probable that these villages were in nearby provinces (Jiangsu, Zhejiang), otherwise Wang Tao would have noted the name of the province.

These figures have no statistical value, but they highlight the well-known phenomenon of domination of Jiangsu women over the world of courtesans, noted by all the observers of the time. The largest group, the courtesans from Suzhou, eventually supplanted all their rivals and dominated the shuyu group. As we have suggested, courtesans from other regions of China adopted the Suzhou dialect, whose softness to the ear is said to have been a key element of their success (Wang Tao, n.d.: 105; Chi Zhicheng, 1989: 5). In all Chinese cities the world of prostitution was divided into various strata. Quite systematically, Jiangnan women formed the core of the upper strata (Xu Ke, 1920: “changjilei,” 15; Société des Nations, 1924: 57, 62). The domination of Jiangsu women went unchallenged well into the twentieth century. According to a police report on the applications of courtesans to set up shop in the French Concession in 1923, 82% of the women came from Suzhou. Together with those originating from Shanghai, Wuxi, and Changzhou, the proportion of Jiangnan natives represented 93% (Direction des services administratifs, 1923).

Zhejiang courtesans, the only group along with those from Canton and Suzhou that Wang Tao distinguishes in his memoirs, are a good counterexample. Although some of them preserved a Zhejiang identity (songs, food, etc.), most of them adopted the Suzhou style (dialect, songs, clothing, etc.) to attract customers. It is evident that they never managed to establish their own identity and survive as a specific group in spite of the power and influence of Zhejiang natives in Shanghai. In the twentieth century, sources mention Ningbo prostitutes in the hotels of Zhejiang and Daxin streets. Customers had to be introduced to patronize them. The women, like other courtesans, earned their income mainly from banquets and gambling that took place in their rooms (Wang Dingjiu, 1934: 674; Jin Buhuan, 1962: 166; Haishang, 1940: 161).

Was there a real regional segmentation of courtesans and prostitutes? Were there specific networks of recruitment? My answer is no. Ningbo courtesans in the twentieth century represented too tiny a
number of women to support the idea that there was a specific demand from their tongxiang (fellow townsmen). If such a demand for tongxiang prostitutes existed, it was not important and did not generate specific recruitment. In other words, Zhejiang members of the elite satisfied their need for female company with women from places other than Zhejiang. Conversely, there was a great number of Zhejiang women among prostitutes, especially the yeji, but they served no community in particular. They had come to Shanghai in the same circumstances that had thrown many Jiangsu women into prostitution. Archival sources in the 1930s and 1940s provide ample evidence of houses with prostitutes and madams of mixed origin.

Cantonese courtesans and prostitutes may have been one exception to this fluidity of supply and demand, the only “foreign” group of courtesans that remained in Shanghai.¹⁸ There were three or four houses near Nanjing Road about 1890 (Yu Baosheng, 1878a: 3/3). They later moved northward to Hongkou where the vast majority of the Cantonese population was concentrated. More than others, they were indeed patronized by customers from Guangdong province, though not exclusively so. This was related to the great lifestyle and language differences between Guangdong and the lower Yangzi area. It was also linked to the wealth and influence of Cantonese merchants, at least until the end of the nineteenth century. By the 1920s, Cantonese prostitutes occupied an intermediate level between courtesans and ordinary prostitutes. They provided services similar to those of the changsan, although they did not organize banquets in their apartments. In the 1930s and 1940s, they became common prostitutes, though an introduction seems to have been necessary to gain access to them (Shanghai zhinan, 1919: 5/20; Wang Dingjiu, 1934: 675; Haishang, 1940: 160).

Shanghai was a magnet for the whole lower Yangzi area. Its prostitution market attracted women from the surrounding provinces. Although women from Jiangsu and Zhejiang were sometimes sold in faraway regions (mainly Manchuria), the opposite is not true. In terms of geographical origin, Shanghai prostitutes came mostly from Jiangsu (40% to 50%) and from Zhejiang (about 30%), whereas those from Shanghai ranked third (15%). Women from other provinces were hardly represented, the only exception being Guangdong (5%) (Police Reports, 1941-42; Police Reports, 1946-48). On the respective contri-
butions of Jiangnan and Jiangbei, I have collected two series of data that contradict the statements often made in Chinese guidebooks, which have been reproduced uncritically by historians about a hierarchy based on geographical origin, with Jiangbei women at the bottom (Hershatter, 1989: 472; Sun Guoqun, 1988: 22-35). Although such a distribution partially holds true for courtesans—indeed there were courtesans from Jiangbei—it is without foundation for the rank and file of prostitutes.

My first series is drawn from an analysis of the individual files of 220 prostitutes arrested after 1950 and 72 cases from police reports from the 1945-49 period (He and Yang, 1988: 64; Police Reports, 1946-48). Although the distribution by geographical origin varies, in both sets of data Jiangnan women (38%-39%) were much more numerous than Jiangbei women (13%-23%). The balance is accounted for by Zhejiang women (51%-38%). The second series is drawn from the archives of the Shanghai Anti-Kidnapping Society (Zhongguo jiujii furu zonghui) that saved more than 10,233 persons from the hands of traffickers and brothelkeepers between 1913 and 1936 (Zhongguo jiujii furu zonghui, 1936; Henriot, 1992b: chap. 5). My own data from this source cover the years 1913-20. They confirm the clear dominance of women from Jiangsu (206) and Zhejiang (72) in a sample of 358 cases. Women from Jiangnan and Jiangbei represented 32.9% and 24.6% of the sample, respectively.

Although these samples are limited, they are rooted in the crude reality of life and reflect reality better than the subjective impressions of writers, who are shut in their studio and who write according to their prejudices. In fact, the negative image attached to Jiangbei people was applied indiscriminately to all sorts of activities, even if those who practiced them were not necessarily from that region (Honig, 1989: 251). This holds true for prostitutes. The ranks of yeji were said to be filled by Jiangbei women just because yeji were the most despised category of prostitutes in Shanghai. They solicited on the streets, harassed customers, and provoked scuffles. Contemporary Chinese writers had no qualms about labeling them “Jiangbei.” It is important to distinguish this discourse from the social reality it concealed. Archival material, especially the police reports, make plain that prostitutes from all categories (yeji, escorts, taxi dancers, and others) were a mixed lot in which Jiangnan women predominated. This should not
be a surprise. The traffic in women closely followed commercial routes and availed itself of the more convenient means of transportation (Henriot, 1992b: chap. 12).

**NUMBER GAMES**

The question of numbers is probably impossible to elucidate, if only because the term prostitution covers a wide range of activities. How are we to draw a line between professional and occasional prostitution? The administrations that tried to assess the number of prostitutes and submit them to some sort of registration failed on all accounts. At most, their records provide us with an approximation of the number of professional prostitutes who worked in brothels. The historian has no other choice than to put together all the figures that exist and reconstruct the size of this population through careful computing and cross-reference with other materials.

The nineteenth century has left few data. In 1869, a survey by Henderson, the health officer of the International Settlement, reported 463 brothels with 1,612 prostitutes. Henderson also cited a report by Massais, his counterpart in the French Concession, that counted 250 brothels with 2,600 women (Henderson, 1871: 11). This represented only a portion of the Chinese prostitutes in the two settlements. Courtesans were not included: there were 200 to 300 shuyu and less than 500 changsan about 1875 according to an unverifiable source; 400 shuyu according to a Chinese historian who does not cite his source ("Demi-monde," 1923: 783-84; Tang Weikang, 1987: 266, 270). Moreover, because the distinction between shuyu and changsan became blurred after 1875, this complicates the sorting out of the figures. As mentioned earlier, other prostitutes fell into a variety of categories. If one takes into account the various categories that were located in and outside the walled city, there were probably no less than 1,000 to 1,500 prostitutes about 1875. This means that Shanghai altogether had already 5,500 to 6,500 prostitutes in the late nineteenth century. Although subjective, with more than 4,200 prostitutes actually identified in the settlements, it is not unreasonable to imagine that there were at least 1,000 prostitutes in the walled city and its suburbs where a population of several hundreds of thousands lived about 1875.
Because of a survey conducted in 1915, the population of prostitutes in that year is better known, although there is no indication as to how the census was taken. The figures come from an article based on a survey by the Shanghai Municipal Police. According to the survey, which did not include the French Concession, there were 9,791 prostitutes in the International Settlement, including 1,229 changsan, 505 yao'er, 1,080 huayanjian, 4,727 yeji, 250 Cantonese prostitutes, and 30 dingpeng. Adding up the number of reported prostitutes by category yields a total of at most 7,821; it is not clear how the author eventually reached the total of 9,791. These figures have been reproduced several times in various articles and were attributed also to the year 1918. Whatever their vagueness, these figures are not especially large. The population of yeji was probably larger than 5,000. As for the French Concession, I have no data between 1869 (250 brothels) and 1920 (222 brothels).

Between 1920 and 1925, the prohibition of prostitution had the effect of "revealing" the extent of prostitution in Shanghai. The Vice Committee established by the Shanghai Municipal Council in 1920 identified 633 brothels with 4,575 women. According to the same report, the French Concession had 114 brothels with 478 prostitutes. This was far from reality. When the registration of brothels was carried out, the police counted 1,771 houses, while the French archives give a figure of 222 houses (Shanghai Municipal Council, 1920: 254A; 1921: 45C; Direction des services administratifs, 1936a). In both cases, the difference is one to three or one to two. If one applies the ratio of seven women per house used by the Vice Committee, the total figure for prostitutes is 12,400 and 1,550, respectively, or almost 14,000 individuals. This figure still needs to be upgraded as many so-called "sly prostitutes," especially yeji, evaded registration. The total for the concessions must have been between 15,000 and 20,000.

For the last three decades of the Republic, it becomes even more difficult to assess the number of prostitutes. In 1928, a young Chinese student in sociology wrote that there were 805 brothels in the two settlements with 5,100 prostitutes (Feng Dja-chien, 1929: 195, 202). This appears to be an underestimate as, two years earlier, another source gave 4,000 to 5,000 prostitutes for the French Concession alone (Zuili, 1926). There, the number of registered houses steadily declined from 196 in 1922 to 108 in 1930, 50 in 1936, and 43 in 1938. The
number of prostitutes followed the same path, from 1,200 in 1930 to 434 in 1937 (Direction des services administratifs 1936a, 1936b; Diplomatic Archives, 1933). For the International Settlement one can find the most fanciful estimates, such as the one by Luo Qiong (1935), who counts 100,000 prostitutes in 1935, a figure that is more a projection of his anxiety than of reality. In 1931, the Shanghai Municipal Council provided the League of Nations delegates with a low estimate of 5,000. In 1937, the Chinese representative to an international conference on trafficking in women gave the number of 9,000, while a report by several women’s organizations of Shanghai put the figure in the International Settlement at 25,000 (League of Nations, 1937: 11; “Prostitution,” 1937: 7).

None of these figures is reliable. Although the police in the French Concession were quite efficient in keeping an accurate record of the number of brothels and their inmates from the late 1890s to the 1920s, they were overwhelmed by the increase of prostitution in the 1930s. Thereafter, police records of the number of registered prostitutes no longer reflect reality. The number of arrests for unlicensed prostitution and soliciting becomes a better indicator of the actual number of prostitutes. Indeed, studies of prostitution in Paris, Sao Paulo, and other cities suggest that arrests for soliciting can be used as a crude indicator for the actual number of prostitutes (see e.g., Corbin 1990: 130-31). If one takes the ratio produced by most of these studies—for each arrest there are four women involved in prostitution—then the implausibility of the existing estimates of the number of prostitutes in Shanghai becomes apparent. For instance, in the French Concession in 1931 there were about 1,200 licensed prostitutes and about 2,000 (437 licensed and an estimated 1,370 clandestine) in 1937. Annual arrests were about 5,000. That would mean that, on average, each prostitute was arrested at least 2.5 times a year. The police simply did not have the human resources to handle such a heavy load. Or, take the figure of 25,000 prostitutes in the International Settlement. With arrests there running about 9,000 per year, that would mean that roughly one out of three prostitutes was arrested during the year; again, an unlikely situation. Based on the number of arrests in the International Settlement (I have figures for the years 1914-40) and in the French Concession (1933-34), I would tentatively estimate the population of prostitutes in the 1930s to have been close to 30,000 (League
of Nations, 1937: 33; Shanghai shi tongji, 1936: 127). The Sino-Japanese conflict brought so much turmoil and population movement that the data are contradictory. In 1939, the Shanghai Municipal Council annual report gave the figure of 4,617 shuyu, a great leap forward over the 562 recorded in 1931. This reveals rather that many prostitutes found a legal right to practice. In 1942 and 1943, two Japanese reports gave the figures of 5,253 and 7,028 prostitutes, respectively (Shanghai Municipal Council, 1939: 223; Yu Wei, 1948: 10). These were the registered prostitutes who represented only a small fraction of the actual population. Neither the Japanese nor the puppet authorities were successful in forcing prostitutes to submit to registration.

The Civil War period was characterized by a spectacular expansion of prostitution. Shanghai was flooded with hundreds of thousands of refugees, many of whom were women who had no other choice than to turn to prostitution to survive. Figures on prostitutes in this period are few. In 1948, the Chinese authorities made an attempt to register prostitutes as the first step in a plan to abolish prostitution over a few years. At most, 10,000 women turned themselves in. In fact, the ranks of prostitutes actually swelled to 50,000, according to the physician in charge of the Anti-Venereal Disease Center, or 100,000 if occasional prostitutes are included (Yu Wei, 1948: 10). Given the figure of officially registered prostitutes (10,000), a population of 50,000 prostitutes is not unreasonable. The figure of 100,000 is too approximate to be convincing. All in all, the population of prostitutes, although it increased in absolute terms, remained fairly stable over time as a percentage of female population in Shanghai.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{CONCLUSION}

Prostitution in Shanghai was characterized from the beginning by a wide array of categories of courtesans and prostitutes. The ranks of the latter, even in the mid-nineteenth century, largely overwhelmed those of the upper strata, because prostitutes served the needs of almost all sectors of the male population. Given the prodigious sex imbalance in Shanghai at that time, the sex market was primarily geared to supplying sexual services to the thousands of male residents of the city—permanent residents, sojourners, seamen, and so on. Social class
was not a criterion for brothel choice, except for the elites. Brothels were patronized by all social groups. The idea of a "luxury market in courtesans" was forged by the literati whose deep distaste for common prostitutes led them to obliterate them from their writings. Exceptions such as Wang Tao are very few. Later authors of the twentieth century, who extracted their information from literati memoirs, unconsciously or not censored the less appealing aspects of prostitution to focus on the more glamorous courtesans and reconstruct a biased reality. They were even more inclined to do so in the 1920s when they were witnessing the inevitable and irreversible crumbling of what they perceived as a "golden age." Common sense should dictate that a pyramid without a base is bound to collapse. Courtesans could not exist without the armies of common prostitutes who made a living in the vice dens of the city.

Shanghai in the second half of the nineteenth century experienced a prodigious growth and diversification of its population. The opening of the city to foreign trade brought merchants, coolies, craftsmen, adventurers, and ruffians eager to make a living, and hoping to make a fortune. Popular prostitution could only prosper in such a context. There existed all sorts of rather undifferentiated places where the commerce of sex was conducted. Some were elaborate; others served only as meeting places; most provided only one kind of service. Tangming, siju, caotai, taiji, riverside, and Yangjingbang brothels, hotels, teahouses, and the like existed along the same continuum whose common point was the sex trade. Wang Tao, a well-informed and seasoned piaoke (brothelgoer), makes plain in his memoirs that apart from the shuyu, all the other types of courtesans/prostitutes were easily accessible. The thriving business of prostitution was also related to the relative scarcity of entertainment in the walled city.

The organization of prostitution in the nineteenth century was never characterized by a clear-cut hierarchy of specific categories. There remains indeed much to be learned on the actual landscape of prostitution in that period as sources available so far only date back to the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, from the evidence presented above, the world of prostitution in Shanghai consisted of various overlapping categories that sometimes were distinguished from each other by only minor commercial practices. Members of the elites, but also probably a rather large number of slightly well-off individuals,
patronized these establishments quite indiscriminately. Depending on circumstances, time, taste (e.g., type of music), money, and objective (merely sex or company for conversation, etc.), men opted for one or the other category of courtesan/prostitute. From the 1850s onward, the category of courtesans was in a constant state of flux characterized by merging and splitting. Although it is not easy to sort out the links between the various groups, it is obvious that they were separate branches from the same trunk. As time went on, branches were pruned. There eventually remained only the denuded trunk when courtesans fell into the ranks of common prostitutes. Price made a difference, some prestige remained, but they had become no more than sex objects.

Chinese courtesans belonged to a cultural tradition and a social structure that could not survive the onslaught of modernity. As in ancient Greece or modern Japan, a group of women especially devoted to the entertainment of male members of the elites—who had full freedom to have several wives and concubines in their houses—could exist only in a society characterized by a rigid separation of the sexes and a severely restrictive definition of the role of women. China continued in this mode until late into the nineteenth century, whereas in the West such a social structure disappeared centuries earlier. The increasing prosperity related to the opening of Shanghai to foreign trade, the social transformation induced by the growth of population, the slow but growing emancipation of Chinese women, and the fading away of the predominantly literati elites were accompanied by a subtle change of attitudes toward courtesans and of expectations by customers.

In this new social system, only common prostitutes could exist, even if a division of prostitutes into various categories remained. Although there also remained an elite interested in the charms of "genuine" courtesans with whom sex was secondary to courtship and companionship, the market—newly affluent people—dictated a trend that over a period of fifty years brought the demise of this elaborate way of life and robbed the courtesans of their specificity in the world of commercial sex. Other types of female entertainers, especially taxi dancers, took over to provide the kind of emotional satisfaction Chinese males—elites and nonelites—were in search of. This change started early and developed rapidly under the combined effect of foreign influence and internal social disorder. Nonetheless, this grad-
ual transformation points to the fundamental role the courtesans played in the social habitus of the Chinese elites and explains their resilience in a drastically changing world.

Much has been written in the last decade about the role of ethnicity, guanxi and tongxiang relations in Chinese cities. This writing has demonstrated that a strong sense of identity among local communities of sojourners gave birth to a myriad of organizations (huiguan, gongsuo, tongxianghui, etc.) that served as the main channels for the integration and control of the population. The role of native-place identity is a crucial factor in the study of Chinese society. In the case of prostitution, however, this factor has been stressed beyond its actual importance. Courtesans came mostly from the Jiangnan area, especially from Suzhou. This resulted from a long regional tradition of artistic skills and sense of conviviality dating back several centuries, not because of the preferences of Jiangsu natives in Shanghai. As a contrasting case, Zhejiang courtesans simply vanished even though Zhejiang natives formed the most influential and affluent community in Shanghai. Elites were much more sensitive to the quality of the music, songs, and opera that courtesans were able to perform than to their native place. For common prostitutes, native-place identity was also irrelevant. They came to Shanghai under a wide range of circumstances, rather than through specific recruitment channels or organizations. Other than economic conditions, geography more than anything dictated the routes. Nearby Jiangnan natives had an advantage in terms of transportation, information on city employment, and volume of intraregional migration. In numbers they ranked first among prostitutes, followed by Jiangbei and Zhejiang natives. Here again, perceptions were formed more by prejudice than reality.

The study of prostitution in Shanghai illustrates the tremendous transformation of Chinese urban society from the opening of China to Western merchants to the fall of the Republican regime. Prostitution, because of its close relations with various segments of society, is a sensitive barometer of social and economic change. The renewal of urban elites, the diversification of urban society, and the growing commercialization of entertainment industries eroded the social and symbolic space where courtesans had embodied the Chinese elites’ way of life. Whereas sex continued to be a marketable commodity under other forms, the kind of female companionship courtesans once
provided did not. Prostitution could not escape the general process of standardization inherent in modernity.

NOTES


3. For a systematic critical review of the current historiography of Chinese prostitution, see Henriot (1992b: chap. 1).

4. It is obvious that many Chinese writers simply plagiarized each other over time, producing a confusing image of prostitution. Wang Jimen, who writes in 1922, draws part of his information from Wang Tao, who wrote between 1853 and 1880, whereas many works published in the 1930s and 1940s relied on Wang Jimen and other texts of the 1920s. Sometimes entire pages are reproduced verbatim.

5. Although the term courtesan described a different historical reality in the West, I prefer to use this term to designate the women who formed the upper strata of the "world of flowers," rather than the usual "sing-song girl." By the time the latter expression became widespread, sing-song girls had indeed become common prostitutes. Chinese courtesans in the nineteenth century deserve a less biased terminology.

6. I mean here an inferior rank in the eyes of the shuyu. Elsewhere in the article, when this expression is cited, usually in relation to Wang Tao's judgments, it refers only to a difference in skills, not to a classification.

7. Jiaoshu was the other term used to designate the changsan. On the "qualifications" for being recognized as a shuyu, see Henriot (1994).

8. By the end of the prohibition of prostitution between 1920 and 1925, the Shanghai Municipal Council resuscitated the term shuyu to avoid a loss of face when it allowed so-called bona fide courtesans to operate legally. The name endured until the Sino-Japanese War. Nevertheless, all that remained behind the prestigious name was a purely sex trade.

9. From the dates mentioned in the text, the first volume covers the years 1846 to 1853 and the second runs from 1853 to 1878, although most of the dates refer to the year 1860 to 1861. The third volume is concerned with the period 1864 to 1875 (Henriot, 1992b: 302).

10. In Hankou, the great metropolis of central China, wului also created troubles and were a matter of concern to the local elites (Rowe, 1989: 217-44).

11. There were two terms for this category: yeji and yaji (peasant). Both terms were undifferentiated in the Shanghai dialect. The terms appeared by the late 1930s.

12. The following works all confuse yao'er and xianrouzhuang: Shanghai shenmi zhinan (n.d.: 23), Wang Dingjiu (1932: 20; 1934: 667), and Haishang (1940: 149).

13. I do not include here taxi dancers who belonged to a peripheral form of prostitution (see Henriot, 1992b: chap. 9).

14. Upon the suggestion of Jingbao (The Crystal), a mosquito newspaper, this infamous name was replaced by hanzhuang—a term free of pejorative connotation—after 1924. This did not, however, change reality.

15. There was reason for the warnings. French police archives provide many and sometimes hilarious examples of yeji raids on customers.
16. It is obvious from police archives that in the late 1930s and 1940s, madams had no need to resort to kidnapping and violence to get sex workers. They only had to tap the growing pool of unattached or refugee women. Police reports of the 1940s make plain that in most cases madams and prostitutes had a purely commercial relationship.

17. There can be varying definitions of Jiangnan and Jiangbei. In this article and in my other work, I have adopted a strictly geographical definition—that is, southern or northern Jiangsu—although I am aware it is a defective one. On what constitutes Jiangnan and Jiangbei, see Honig (1993), Johnson (1993), and Finnane (1993).

18. I shall not discuss here the specific case of Cantonese prostitutes who served foreign customers until the 1920s. See Hershatter (1989: 472-73) and Henriot (1992b: chap. 8).


20. This article is said to have been published for the first time by the Zhonghua xinbao (China New Daily) in 1915. It is cited in several works: Lao Shanghai (n.d.: 122), "Demi-monde" (1923: 785-88), Tang Weikang (1987: 264), and Ping Jinya (1988: 159).

21. The figure of 60,000 given by Hershatter (1989) for 1920 does not seem to correspond to any precise original source. Willey (1929) does not give this information, although he is referred to. The article by Yi Feng (1933) is the only one to give such a figure (60,141), but does not cite his sources. Wang Shunu took up this figure, although the more detailed inventory of prostitutes he gives (65,766) exceeds the initial figure. Given the methods employed by the police to identify and count the brothels in 1920, it is unbelievable that two out of three prostitutes went unnoticed (Hershatter, 1989: 466; 1991: 265; 1992b: 145; Wang Shunu, 1934: 331; Yi Feng, 1933: 39).

22. I can only sketch my calculations here. For a full explanation, see Henriot (1992b: chap. 10). Given the female population at each period (1875, 1914, 1920, 1947) under consideration, there was 1 prostitute for 30 adult women in 1875, 1 for 43 in 1915, 1 for 35 in 1920, and 1 for 28 in 1947 (1 for 14 if the 100,000 figure is used). The proportion to adult male residents was 45, 48, 45, and 34, respectively.

23. What ensured the survival of the stereotype of the learned courtesan was not just related to the power with which the Qing literati imposed their representations on society, but to the general and understandable distaste of the elite for discourse on the subject of prostitution. Very little was said or written about prostitution, and what was written tended to be euphemistic. There was therefore no public discourse in which alternative views of prostitution could have arisen.

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Christian Henriot is Professor of Chinese history and Director of the Institut d’Asie Orientale in Lyons. In 1994 he was elected to the Institut Universitaire de France. Among his publications are Shanghai 1927-1937: Elites locales et modernisation en Chine nationaliste (1991), and Belles de Shanghai: Prostitution et sexualité en Chine au XIXe-XXe siècles (1849-1949) (1996).