

# The East Asian Modern Girl

Women, Media, and Colonial Modernity  
During the Interwar Years

*The East Asian Modern Girl* reports the long-neglected experiences of modern women in East Asia during the interwar period. How could a modern girl in Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria, Japan, Shanghai, or Hong Kong earn a living? And how was she depicted in popular fiction, calendar posters, film or advertisements in the early 20th century? The studies in this edited volume reveal differentiated forms of colonial modernity, influences of global media and the struggles of women at the time.

The advent of the East Asian modern girl is particularly meaningful for it signifies a separation from traditional Confucian influences and progression toward global media and capitalism, which involves high political and economic tension between the East and West. This book presents geo-historical investigations on how the appearance of the modern girl eventually contributed to greater post-war transformations.

With contributions by I-fen Chen, Ayuu Ishida, Jina E. Kim, Pei-yin Lin, Jiyoung Suh, Hsiu-hui Sun, Sumei Wang, Yongmei Wu and Ching Yau.

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SUMEI WANG

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During the Interwar Years

EDITED BY SUMEI WANG



THE EAST ASIAN MODERN GIRL

WOMEN, MEDIA, AND COLONIAL MODERNITY  
DURING THE INTERWAR YEARS

MODERN ASIAN ART AND VISUAL CULTURE

**Volume 6**

*Edited by*

Kuiyi Shen (Managing Editor)

Patrick Flores

Sonal Khullar

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Women, Media, and Colonial Modernity  
During the Interwar Years

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SUMEI WANG



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Cover image:

Detail of fig. 9.15, Poster for Wuxi Maolun Silk and Satin.  
See p. 191 for full image.



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# Note to Readers

In this book, the Revised Hepburn, McCune-Reischauer and Hanyu Pinyin systems were adopted for the romanization of Japanese, Korean, and Mandarin Chinese texts accordingly.

East Asian names from Japanese, Korean, or Chinese literature are family names first. In terms of English publications, the authors' names are presented as their original format. As the scope of this book involves different Chinese speaking regions, the romanization of Chinese names are subject to local languages and practices. For example, Cantonese has been the language commonly used in Hong Kong and Taiwanese people usually follow the Wade-Giles system to romanize their names.

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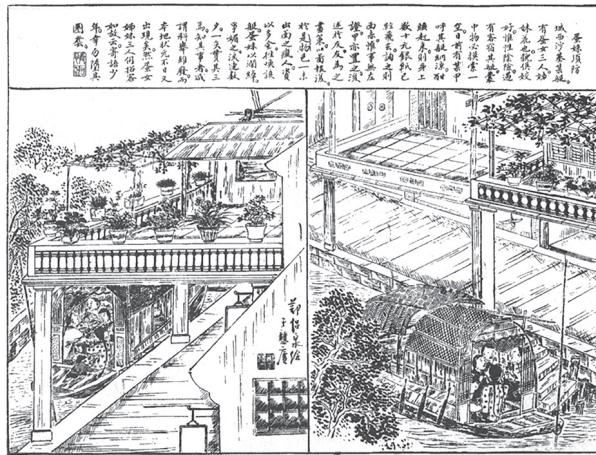
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# “Women such as the Dan” and a Hong Kong Colonial Modernity\*

CHING YAU



“Under the influence of special powers of the British, French and American concessions (in Shanghai), there are many more brothels of the afore-mentioned prostitutes and private ones than in other Mainland commercial cities; it is easier for the women who hindered social morals (*fanghai fenghua*) to settle in. As local governments announced laws that prohibited prostitution, goddesses who sell their bodies came to seek shelter in the Shanghai concessions.”<sup>1</sup>

Through studying the primary literature, including a selected range of newspapers from the 1850s to 1930s such as *Chinese Serial* (*Xia Er Guan Zhen*), *Universal Circulating Herald* (*Xunhuan Ribao*), *Da Gong Bao*/*Ta Kung Pao*, *Overseas Chinese Daily News* (*Wah Kiu Yat Po*), *Shanghai News* (*Shen Bao*), and the *Humor Times* (*Huaji Shibao*, a supplement of *Shibao*), several pictorials (*huabao*) from the 1880s to 1910s like *Dianshizai Pictorial* (*Dianshizai huabao*, hereafter *DSZ*), *Shangqi huabao*, *Shishi huabao*, *Picture Daily* (*Tuhua ribao*),

two films from 1941 and 1960, two guide books (one from Shanghai and one from Hong Kong), and Wang Tao’s travelogue from 1860s, and via a wealth of secondary literature,<sup>2</sup> this chapter traces certain historical developments of prostitution in early 20th century Hong Kong, the major treaty port and British colony in South China, in order to understand the intersections among and between class, ethnicity, and sexuality vis-à-vis the colonial structures of power as various modernizing discourses and practices competed against each other. By focusing on the transformation of a profession that has been highly hierarchical since premodern times, this chapter sheds light on how, on the one hand, the colonial apparatus worked to intervene in the pre-existing relations of power in a Chinese society in order to advance its own military, material, and discursive objectives, and how, on the

other, Chinese stakeholders and working women negotiated with and managed the colonization processes for their own benefit and survival.

Gail Hershatter outlines the complex diversity and hierarchy of prostitution as well as various regulatory and abolition attempts in semi-colonial Shanghai from late-Qing to the Republican era. Her definitive historical account of Shanghai prostitution, in which she mentions that Henderson confines his regulatory measures to apply only to Western-serving “Cantonese women,” also known as “salt-water sisters” (*xianshui mei*), inspired this chapter at the outset.<sup>3</sup> If, as Hershatter writes, “prostitution is one of the keys to modern Shanghai,”<sup>4</sup> then could it also be claimed that prostitution is one of the keys to modern Hong Kong? More detailed research on working girls in a less literati-elite dominated culture in other colonized



areas of China might help further reveal how Chinese sexuality was modernized differently and unevenly in different parts of China, as well as how the diverse and intricate sexual traditions contested, collaborated with, and/or were re(de)defined by programs of Western colonial modernities, partly via legal reform, public health, and spatial management. Philip Howell, through a study of the “class and caste distinctions within the non-Chinese clientele” for prostitution and their spatial ordering in British Hong Kong, sheds illuminating light on the ways in which colonial governance was formulated carefully via a negotiation between a repressive disciplinary apparatus and an awareness of its own inability to fully comprehend and control a racial other.<sup>5</sup>

While there has been great interest in the interplay of class, race, and gender when studying imperial projects, scholarship tends to focus on how Victorian sexuality and, by extension, the bourgeois self were constructed by processes of racialization and otherization in relation to their colonial counterparts.<sup>6</sup> This chapter therefore supplements existing studies and focuses on the receiving end of colonial policies for regulating prostitution, by unearthing and closely examining Chinese representations of the sexuality of service women, whether Chinese- or non-Chinese-catered; in other words, how prostitution was experienced on the “ground level” of the colony. In tracing the formation of local discourses, practices, and counter-strategies, I suggest that while Chinese women were (re)classified and disciplined by colonial modernizing devices, the practice in reality was often quite different from and much messier than the narrative imagined and represented by the colonial forces. Some women from disenfranchised positions also managed to actively take advantage of the globalizing capitalist sexual economy facilitated by colonialism in order to gain class mobility.

### “PROVISION OF CLEAN CHINESE WOMEN”

While there is no simple definition of prostitution in pre-modern Chinese culture, legal and medical discourses in the British empire of the 19<sup>th</sup> did work very hard to define commercial sex work.<sup>7</sup> The Crimean War caused great public concern in the 1850s UK about the health of its armed forces. One of the most widespread illnesses among servicemen was syphilis, coined at the time as the “venereal disease.” Regiments that tried to impose regular checkups on their men soon abandoned such policies, because it “destroyed the men’s self-respect.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, the problem was displaced onto prostitutes, who were blamed for giving men the disease. This strategy of gender displacement found easier justification via racial hierarchy in the colonies. Historians like R. J. Miners and Elizabeth Sinn note that Hong Kong Governor Sir John Pope Hennessy (1834–1891), the Irish Roman Catholic who has been conventionally regarded as a “humane” colonial governor due to his reform policies including appointing the first Chinese member to the Legislative Council, allowing Chinese to be naturalized British subjects, and lifting the ban that forbade Chinese from buying land and running businesses in the Central district,<sup>9</sup> said in 1880 that the main objective of the licensed prostitution system under the Hong Kong Contagious Diseases Ordinance is for “the provision of clean Chinese women for the use of British soldiers and the sailors of the Royal Navy.”<sup>10</sup>

From the earliest days of the colony, the male population of Hong Kong greatly outnumbered the female residents. Those who came to find work, leaving their families in South China, were predominantly men, as were the Europeans who were in the army and navy and on merchant ships. In 1872, when the first proper census was carried out, there were 3,264 European men compared to 669 European women, a ratio of practically five to one; Chinese men outnumbered women by 78,484 to 22,837, or a ratio of seven to two. This imbalance lessened, but continued to exist for the next seventy years: by 1931,

Chinese men outnumbered women four to three, but the European ratio was still only seven to two.<sup>11</sup>

Although the number of prostitutes and brothels in the late 19<sup>th</sup> through early 20<sup>th</sup> century Hong Kong may vary from different historical accounts, this colony, designed as a strategic station serving a worldwide maritime empire, was known for its prevalence of brothels.<sup>12</sup> Sex work in early modern Hong Kong was not only a primary economic activity but also a “loving activity,”<sup>13</sup> a site of major male courtship, and an emotional leisure pursuit for urban men of upper and middle classes, both Chinese and non-Chinese. A casual look at early Hong Kong media reveals that the pleasure industries enabled the most popular social activities in the colony. In August 7–20, 1926, for example, in one of Hong Kong’s major newspapers *Overseas Chinese Daily News* alone, there were 14 news reports on working girls and their activities, including a report of Magpie Festival celebrations around both (Chinese-serving) Shek Tong and (Western-serving) Lyndhurst Terrace brothels.

One of the names for syphilis in 19<sup>th</sup> century China was “Canton Sore,” among many, as the disease was reputed to spread primarily from sexual contact with foreign military and merchants in South China, first via Macau and Hong Kong, and then further inland into the Guangdong area.<sup>14</sup> When the Chinese blamed foreign contact for upsetting racial cleanliness, the British pictured the indigenes as carriers of disease and thus claimed the containment of contagious diseases to be a challenge for colonial governance. Both views revealed anxieties over interracial contact amidst the increased globalizing cultural interaction after China was forced to open up to face Western modernity.<sup>15</sup>

Governor John Davis in 1845 sought to deport all prostitutes in Hong Kong to Mainland China, but as there was constant and unstoppable traffic between Hong Kong and South China through the unguarded border, the number of prostitutes increased despite the policy. Therefore, the British parliament instead changed its strategy towards a containment policy and passed the Hong Kong Contagious Diseases Ordinance in 1857, instituting

a system for the registration and inspection of brothels, a lock hospital for compulsory medical examination of sex workers, and punishing those who contracted venereal diseases.<sup>16</sup> This earliest British Contagious Diseases Ordinance in the world predated its domestic variation by eight years (UK’s Contagious Diseases Act of 1864, only in 11 towns with military districts, extended to one more town in 1866, and extended to 6 more in 1869, making 18 in total, unlike the region-wide Hong Kong version) and the Indian ordinance by more than a decade (1868).<sup>17</sup> Under the Ordinance, registered prostitutes were required to attend a weekly inspection at the lock hospital; those found to be diseased were detained until cured. Brothels could be closed down if a soldier or sailor suffering from venereal disease identified the girl he had patronized. To cover these medical costs, licensed prostitutes and brothels paid taxes (*huajuan*). Henderson followed suit in 1877 to implement similar measures for prostitutes in Shanghai who served Westerners.

Designed as a tax-free Chinese-populated pro-commerce treaty port, Hong Kong had to negotiate its colonial legislation with the European business community as much as with the local Chinese leadership and society. The abundance of ads for herbalists and unprescribed medicine overtly targeting common folks with sexually transmitted diseases in almost all Chinese newspapers of the time suggests that Chinese sex workers and their clients by all means possible avoided going to the medical authorities and being reported, again revealing anxieties around interracial contact from Chinese readers probably including workers and clients.<sup>18</sup> Although the Registrar General had the legal power to compel all prostitutes to be medically examined, compulsory medical inspections were imposed only on the European-catering brothels.<sup>19</sup>

Responsible for collecting *huajuan*, the police acted as middlemen or pimps for the brothels, leaving only one third of the money to be used for running the hospital. Moreover, members of a Western traders’ association wrote to the British parliament, arguing that taxation was unconstitutional under British rule. The parliament reacted in 1847 to stop

the taxation on any hospital that had existed for only two years and was forced to shut down due to a lack of funds. The Hong Kong government was instructed in 1867 by the Secretary of State to replace the ordinance of 1857 with a new one modelled on the Contagious Diseases Act (CD Act hereafter), which had been passed by the British parliament. The new ordinance granted the police even more power to investigate any house suspected of being a brothel without a warrant and to arrest any suspected prostitute.

### “NIGHT AND LIGHT”

“Men who wished to use these services had to bring flowers to indicate their interest. So Lyndhurst Terrace also became a market for flower sellers. The popularity of brothels resulted in a concomitant increase in the number of flower stalls from Lyndhurst Terrace as far as the Hong Kong Club and Bijou Scenic Theatre on Wyndham Street. Wyndham Street also became famous for its flower sellers.”<sup>20</sup>

Under this legislation, brothels were confined to certain localities within separate districts for those catering Euro-Americans and those catering Chinese; penalties were imposed for keeping a brothel outside these areas or without a license. The stringent “night and light” bill during 1842–1897 stipulated that all Chinese had to carry a night visa known as their street papers and a lantern when they went out at night. Curfew from 8 pm to 6 am claimed to defer crime before electric lamps were introduced in 1890. Female Chinese streetwalkers without a light at night were automatically assumed to be unlicensed prostitutes (*yexing wu zhao*), placing all single women in public space as suspects. A police officer who swore in court that he had reason to believe a woman was a prostitute would be taken as sufficient evidence to order an examination; the burden of proof was on the woman to show that she was not a prostitute. While legal records had documented licensed brothels and the ways they were clearly segregated, it is worth noting that after

twenty-three years the Hong Kong CD Act was in place, the first daily newspaper founded and edited by Chinese in Hong Kong, the *Universal Circulating Herald*, reported on March 4 and then again on March 23, 1880 that more than 90 brothels were recently shut in Hong En Li at the “western part of town” due to their unlicensed status, but some more remained open and were blackmailed.<sup>21</sup> Documented cases of punishing unlicensed brothels or women in this newspaper from the 1880s show that although the licensing tool was intended to maintain the colonial and gendered ownership by imagining a racialized and genderized order of space, many women and houses still chose to cross the line.

Similar to the Shanghai hierarchy of prostitution that was “structured by the class background of the customers, the native place of both customers and prostitutes, and the beauty and age of the prostitutes,”<sup>22</sup> the working women in Hong Kong were as defined by their beauty, age, and skills as by the race of their clients and their own ethnicities. In contrast to the Shanghai scene though, where the foreign-serving Chinese girls were considered much less literary and thus had much less bargaining power and were either pitied or put down in media representations, some of the foreign-serving women in colonial Hong Kong, while looked down upon by the local-serving community, had access to much more power politically and financially than other working girls. As one key principle underneath the regulatory regime for prostitution in Hong Kong was politically and racially motivated, it produced, among other things, a racial hierarchy starkly represented by spatial differentiation. Brothels were classified into those catering Europeans with subclasses of those with European, Japanese or Chinese prostitutes, brothels for Indians, and brothels for Chinese, again subdivided into first-class, second-class, and third-class houses. Colonial policies managed race translated into class, which in turn translated into spatial control. Women serving Euro-American clients worked around the Lyndhurst Terrace area in Central—the political and commercial center of Hong Kong. The Chinese street name of Lyndhurst Terrace Bai Hua

connotes the proliferation of florists serving the brothels and their clients.<sup>23</sup>

Prostitutes were commonly called “Honey,” and their services were publicized through newspaper advertisements.<sup>24</sup> Some Chinese women serving foreigners worked in Wanchai, and many of them were active from Spring Garden Lane to Swatow and Amoy Streets. “Big Number Brothels” with house plates of large Arabic numbers catering mainly to sailors that arrived from Macau, Portugal, the Philippines, Japan, Britain, and America lined the streets. After June 30, 1932 when foreign brothels were forced to close shop in Hong Kong, some workers continued to conduct business illegally along Johnston Road in this area.

At the bottom of the class ladder according to the colonial government were the Chinese-serving Chinese women who originally worked in brothels around the Tai Ping Shan area from Hollywood Road to Po Hing Fong in Sheung Wan mid-levels where the Chinese population concentrated. Heng Fa Lau opened in Sheung Wan in 1846 and Yin King Lam in the 1870s. After the Chinese brothels in the Tai Ping Shan area were devastated by a typhoon in 1874 and by an epidemic in 1894, they moved to Queen’s Road, Hollywood Road, and Possession Street, also known as Shui Hang Hau, with proximity to the Chinese commercial district (Nam Pak Hong) in Bonham Strand West. With the relaxation of the night curfew in 1897, Shui Hang Hau gradually became a prosperous red light area. While the west part to Central became more densely populated, frequented by Chinese and their women, a new area further west between Sai Ying Pun and Kennedy Town, named Shek Tong Tsui, originally a granite quarry and near the public mortuary, was being developed. The 1903 Ordinance ordered most Chinese-serving brothels to move away from foreigners and from the licensed brothels catering Europeans, from Shui Hang Hau in Sheung Wan to Shek Tong Tsui, so that Possession Street could be reclaimed as an “ordinary area.”<sup>25</sup> By 1906 all pleasure venues for Chinese and their related businesses were relocated. Brothel keepers were required to ensure that their houses were not visited by clients other than Chinese.

The segregation policy, intended as a colonial technique to keep the natives at the bottom of the class and racial ladders, in turn perpetuated a class scheme of its own, however temporary, that was relatively unregulated by colonial interference, enabling an organic proliferation of pleasure industries in the area, including Tai Ping Theatre in 1904, Tai Pak Lou Amusement Park in 1918, and Sun Sun Cinema in 1920, plus many restaurants, clubs, sing-song houses, and entertainment establishments.<sup>26</sup> Rendered a highly successful red light district and hosting up to thirty-eight drinking houses and sixty to seventy brothels with over 2,000 prostitutes that were staffed by thousands of men and women in its heyday in the 1920s, these together formed an overall scene that could be characterized as following the cosmopolitanization and diversifying development of the industry in Shanghai and Guangzhou. Cantonese prostitutes (*Yueji*) working in the grand and high-class serving Cantonese brothels in Shanghai, mostly clustered around the Laoqichang area,<sup>27</sup> were seen as compatible to the elitist Changsan from Soochow.<sup>28</sup> Important business and/or political transactions were conducted and negotiated in these Cantonese-speaking venues.

The largest brothels in Shek Tong Tsui West, each with its own band of musicians and a grand hall for receiving customers, charged 3.6 taels of silver per night per visitor. A customer who wished to gain favors of a favorite girl needed to entertain all girls in the brothel with banquets in this hall, which became the house’s main income; hence, the popular girls enjoyed certain autonomy including decorating their own rooms. The deposit for the banquet could be used at the discretion of the girl concerned. The next class of brothels was known as “two-four” brothels, as they charged 2.4 taels. Down the list were the semi-private ones operating out of residential buildings. Houses in other areas, for example those in Ma Tei Fa Kok, were smaller and much less elaborate, less sophisticated with no dining required, and thus were considered inferior in comparison. Workers in Yau Ma Tei competed to be in Shek Tong Tsui. This could be seen as a local hierarchy in spite of/alongside the colonial hierar-

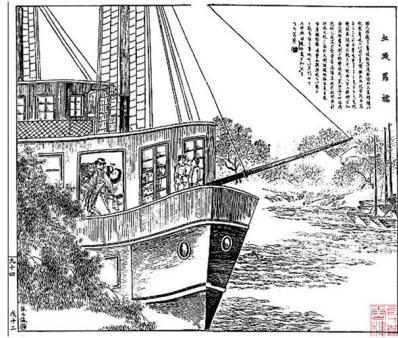
chy. Needless to say, when it comes to any communication with governance, the colonial hierarchy mattered more. An interesting note is that brothels' applications for phone lines, for example, were often rejected except the ones with special connections in the government.<sup>29</sup>

Legislative Councillor Shouson Chow tabled a motion in 1923 to relocate the University of Hong Kong (at Pokfulam), practically a five-minute walk uphill from Shek Tong Tsui, because it was considered too close to the red light district. The Council rejected the motion concluding that: "University students are expected to have self-discipline... Those with weak wills would suffer, even if they are far away from brothels. But if the Shek Tong Tsui area causes noise, the brothels should be relocated."<sup>30</sup> As the university was designed as the gateway to enter modern subjecthood for local elites, the intermingling between university students and the oldest profession on earth would be deemed inappropriate, if not immoral. The Council's conclusion indexes how colonial governmentality relied on a naturalized hierarchy justified by a (self-contradictory) combination of Darwinian evolutionary principles and Christian ethics. This ranking system imagined the colonial-chosen and educated—presumably male—college student to be the strongest, fittest, and most well-disciplined, while the Chinese-pleasure-serving Chinese prostitute was deemed the weakest and thus should be relocated and/or disposable.

### "SLEEP WITH WOLVES"

Westerners were often entertained by Cantonese prostitutes when they traveled because the Cantonese women spoke the Western language, were willing to comply and habitually inclined to please [...] God forbid that a weak girl as such had to sleep with wolves. What sins had she committed in her past life to deserve this?<sup>31</sup>(figure 8.1)

The presence of foreign traders in the China Coast cities of the Nineteenth century gave rise to a distinct class of Chinese women who were euphemistically



8.1 Blood on ladies' clothes. *Dianshizai huabao*, Xu 12 (1891), 94.

described as 'living under the protection of a foreigner.' Because such arrangements did not conform to accepted moral standards in the European community, it is not strange that historical documentation of these alliances is not always available... at times, their 'protectors' made provision for a favourite by the creation of a Trust or the gift of real estate.<sup>32</sup>

Having lost two "Opium Wars" and the first Sino-Japanese war, and then shortchanged at the Paris Post-WWI Conference as the only participant not signing the Versailles Treaty, China's modernizing experience in the interwar years were, first and foremost, defined by its colonized conditions and a sense of international humiliation. Thus, while xenophobic and anti-colonial sentiments helped to strengthen nationalist discourses in modern China, nationalist discourses were also appropriated to perpetuate ethnic hierarchy inside China. The Universal Circulating Herald in 1874, the year when the newspaper was first published, included a news story that spelled out the public women working in Central, as defined by their skin colors, with a more derogatory endnote regarding "women such as the *Dan*."<sup>33</sup> This seems to show that *Tanka* were among the first Chinese women who served a non-Chinese clientele alongside non-Chinese women in the earliest colonial days. Among all the streetwalkers of diverse races ("colors"), the early Chinese press ranked the *Dan* the last.

When Henderson introduced the lock hospital in Shanghai in 1877 to inspect and certify prosti-

tutes, he chose to confine his measures to apply only to “Cantonese women” who served Western sailors, aka known as “salt-water sisters,” or ethnically known as *Dan* or “boat people” (*Tanka*), since he felt that including all the known prostitutes, whose clientele was Chinese, would be “impossible, as it would be impolitic.”<sup>34</sup> Western policymakers seemed to believe that these *xianshui mei* were reputed to be “more hygienic than some others, partly because of the Cantonese love of cleanliness, and partly because they wish to attract foreigners.”<sup>35</sup> From the Chinese consumer’s perspective as represented by the *Playboy’s Bible* (*piaojin*) though, there was a crucial differentiation between the highly skilled *yueji* who were known for their cleanliness and the *xianshui mei* who served “foreign sailors and lower working class people” and “only for spending the night and fucking,” many of whom were considered to be carriers of syphilis: “The disease, infecting the clients, could get out of control.”<sup>36</sup> While the former from a colonizer’s perspective chooses to believe that foreign-friendly girls must have better hygiene, the Sino/Canton-centric latter defines the Western/navy-serving ethnic other as physically and generically viral.

The conflation of *xianshui mei* with *Yueji* was not uncommon among non-Cantonese descriptions of this ethnic community. Historian Hon-ming Yip has characterized *DSZ* as signifying a kind of visual modernity of the period, with content depicting “strange and peculiar objects and phenomena” “in producing astonishing effects,” during a time with strong anti-imperial sentiments amidst Western encroachment upon China.<sup>37</sup> A news story in *DSZ* depicts a tragedy of a Cantonese prostitute named Double Gui stabbed by a drunk Westerner client on board a ferry (figure 8.1). The story begins with: “Westerners were often entertained by Cantonese prostitutes when they traveled because the Cantonese women spoke the Western language, were willing to comply and habitually inclined to please,” and ends with: “God forbid that a weak girl as such had to stay with wolves. What sins had she committed in her past life to deserve this?” The fact that this narrative was considered by *DSZ* to be

worthy of depiction reflects how interracial sexual contact was considered a sticky affair at the time; taking in Western clients was an unconventional—unfavorable and perceived as dangerous—act for Chinese prostitutes, and “Cantonese women” were pitied due to that compliance.

There is no consensus how the “boat people” came into a distinctive ethnicity of its own. Anthropologists, ethnographers and cultural history scholars have long debated the ancestry of the “Boat people of South China,” as to whether they are barbarians as recorded by *Chronicles of Hua-yang* (*Hua-yang guo zhi*) and *Book of the Later Han* (*Hou-han Shu*), or part of the ancient Yue or Bai Yue aboriginal tribes from the Lingnan region according to *Sui-shu*, or as descendants of political refugees fleeing suppressions from various dynasties as early as Tsin, whether they should be considered as part of the Han people, whether these migrant populations pre-existed their socio-economic and geographical coming into being and were produced as a class of people who transformed into an ethnicity or caste in time,<sup>38</sup> or whether they have been so heavily assimilated into mainstream Southern Chinese communities that they have lost most of their ethnic characteristics.<sup>39</sup> The complexity of the historical and cultural formations of this group is beyond the scope of this chapter. At least scholars seemed to agree that the boat people were historically and culturally constructed as a minority other and were heavily looked down upon by the onshore society. Hereafter, I refer to them as a caste, an ethnicity, and a subculture, for lack of a better definition.

The rice-growers who traced their arrival from the Tang and Sung dynasties and referred to themselves as natives, or Puntis, settled in cities in South China where they controlled much of the region’s commerce. Proud of their origins and with strong traditions of family and clan, the Puntis regarded themselves as “pure”/“Han” Chinese whose Cantonese dialect most closely resembled “the original language of Central China” and competed with the Hakka, primarily from Fukien and Kiangsi in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and with the Hoklo of southern Fukien for territory and resources. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Pearl

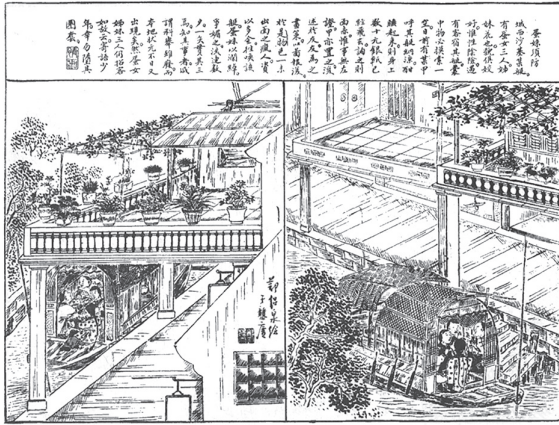
River Delta was exacerbated by a population grown so dense that it went far beyond the carrying capacity of this fertile but intensely cultivated region. “The intense commercialization of such heavily populated areas as the Pearl River Delta led, over time, to the rise of landlordism as increasing numbers of unsuccessful owner-farmers were forced into tenancy. The result was a highly stratified society in which, during the late eighteenth century, the rich operated side by side with growing numbers of people struggling desperately to make ends meet.”<sup>40</sup> One way for the poorest of the poor to survive, after having been pushed off the land, was to live permanently on board a ship. This may have added to the Southern ethnic *Dan* populations who had long been living off of maritime resources and contributed to the production and/or assimilation of the boat people into becoming a Cantonese subculture.

In marked contrast to the onshore society, *Dan* people along the South China coast possessed no large lineage organizations and were distanced from the prevalent value system of the continent, which placed a premium on long-term residence and close ties to one’s native place. Alongside the Entertainer and the Prostitute castes who were all barred from the civil service examination in the Qing dynasty, *Dan* were a community without gentry and lacked the literati connections that would have pulled them into the administrative hierarchies. As J. M. Carroll writes, “Scorned by the onshore society, the *Tanka* were a pariah group, relegated throughout much of the Qing to the status of ‘mean people’ for whom the door to an official career was formally closed.”<sup>41</sup> These differences also put them beyond the reach of government authorities who sometimes did not attempt to collect taxes from them. They became a subculture that lay largely outside of government control. Piracy became one of their common temporary survival strategies. With a marine lifestyle that made them socially remote, the men took captives as concubines or wives. Mostly working the sampans, the women were active, mobile with unbound feet, sometimes fought side by side with their husbands, and were known to be flirtatious and feminine, tough, and aggressive all at the same time.

Historian C.T. Smith was for a long time one of the few English-writing scholars who has studied a group of upwardly mobile women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Hong Kong, whom he coined as “protected women”:<sup>42</sup> “.the *Tanka* were a marginal group who experienced certain restrictions within the traditional Chinese social structure. Custom precluded their intermarriage with the Cantonese and Hakka speaking population. Settlement on shore and participation in the examination system was limited. Finally, the *Tanka* were not as closely bound to the observance of the finer distinctions of Confucian ethics as the traditional Chinese.” Many of these outcast women along the Pearl River Delta opted to go to colonial Hong Kong for a change of scenery. “Most of the Chinese who came to Hong Kong in the early years were from the lower classes, such as laborers, artisans, *Tanka* outcasts, prostitutes, wanderers and smugglers.”<sup>43</sup>

Many early European traders—Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and British in the 18<sup>th</sup> century—reached China through Guangzhou, also known as Canton, the metropolis along the South China Coast and a highly specialized center replete with warehouses, anchorages, and shipbuilding facilities. A close association between the *Tanka* and the foreigner had existed ever since the arrival of Europeans on the China Coast. This association significantly changed the hierarchy of prostitution in colonial Hong Kong. A notable example was the scandal of Daniel Richard Caldwell, the Registrar General and Protector of Chinese (later renamed Secretary for Chinese Affairs) in the 1850s, who was accused of being involved with pirates and of marrying a Chinese prostitute. He was found to be associated with an infamous brothel known as “Brothel Number 3” and suspected of being a brothel owner and of trading business licenses to other brothels.

The tricky position *Tanka* women occupied amongst the three parties and competing traditions and value systems in a colonial setting could be seen in the three contrasting interpretations of the “origins” of their most commonly used nickname, “*xianshui mei*/salt-water girls.” First, for the Cantonese who identified themselves as inheriting a



8.2 Watch out for the Dan Girls. *Shangqi huabao* (1906), 6.

mainland central Han tradition, *Tanka* was an ostracized non-Han caste, referred to by their nickname for its water and sexual implications. Second, for non-Cantonese Chinese, the unconventionality of *Tanka* women epitomizes the lack of cultural capital in South China's barbarian culture. A writeup entitled "Investigative essay on *xianshui mei*" in *Ta Kung Pao* 1923 traces the nickname's origin to a Dutch pronunciation as "prostitute," while further noting that Cantonese girls did not comb their hair or bind their feet; hence, they lacked taste, but just like "sour plums" (a common slow-eating snack that is also salty) could offer "special flavor."<sup>44</sup> I argue that the Cantonese/Han/Sino/Confucius/land-centric value systems underlining these two interpretations have not only responded to, but also actively contributed to the sexualization of the *Tanka* women in the colony, as they have conveniently placed this marginalized caste very close to the cultural position of the foreigners, commonly known in Chinese lingo as barbarians in colonial times, if not "wolves," hence naturalizing the possibility of the third saying. Third, for the European migrants yearning for company, *xianshui mei* was allegedly a spinoff of "handsome maid" transliterated into Cantonese. They were seen as lower-class Chinese women who happened to be at their service, whether sexual or not.

For the late Qing scholar Wang Tao, who worked for London Missionary Society in Shanghai and

was exiled to Hong Kong due to his involvement in the Taiping Rebellion, he took notice of the special scenery populated by this uncultured yet seductive caste of women living between two races, whose prosperity surpassed those of the same ethnicity working in other areas of the Pearl River Delta:

The highest point of Upper Ring (Sheung Wan) is Tai Ping Shan. Here the streets are lined on both sides with gaudy houses porting brightly painted doors and windows with fancy curtains. These are the brothels, which are literally packed with singsong girls. It is a pity that most of them have large natural feet, and that those with tiny bowed feet account for a very small percentage, perhaps only one or two out of a hundred. About half of the girls can be considered attractive. There is a class of girls called 'salt-water maids,' most of them living in Central Ring. As many of them are kept by Europeans, they have become quite wealthy and own houses of their own. The finest among them are attractive in their own way with roundish faces and seductive eyes....<sup>45</sup>

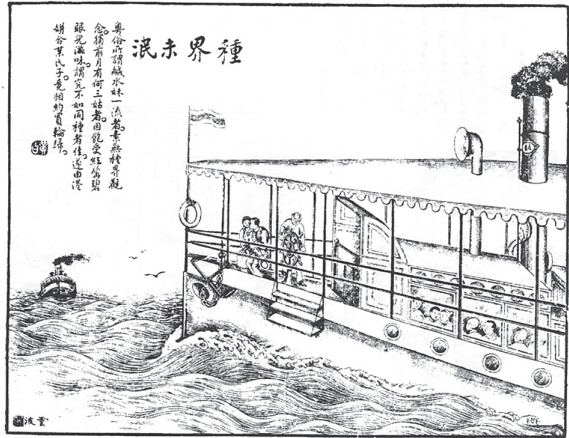
Away from other Chinese girls who were working in Sheung Wan (and later in Shek Tong Tsui or Yau Ma Tei), this class of Chinese girls working and living among European colonial society was a designated curio item and took on a special caste of their own—crass/uncivilized ("a pity that most of them have large natural feet"); their non-conventional mobility seemed to add to their sex appeal, even for a Chinese literary elite like Wang Tao. In contrast, along the Pearl River in Guangzhou, where most of the *Tanka* women "originated" from, they were looked down upon by the "natives" Cantonese as well as the visiting Chinese consumers.

The stereotype among Chinese that all *Tanka* women were prostitutes was not uncommon. In a tabloid-type pictorial that specialized in exposing the exotica in *Shangqi huabao* (1906), an article entitled "Watch out for the *Dan* Girls" tells how three *Dan* sisters, in spite of their pretty faces, are "cunning and dangerous" and always steal from the clients on their boats (figure 8.2). They are known to be so, but clients still show up frequently. The



story ends with: “Advice to youngsters: Do not fall into their traps.”<sup>46</sup> This piece of city gossip regarding girls stealing from clients turned into a narrative perpetuating the stereotype of *Tanka* women as routinely immoral, an Other to be generally avoided. A less sensational case could be found in *Shishi huabao* (1912), about a woman’s “moral sense of observing racial boundaries not entirely dead” (figure 8.3): “The so-called Salt-water Girls, a stream/genre in Cantonese customs, lack the concept of racial boundaries. Yet a woman called Auntie Ho who had enough of the red-haired green-eyed, decided that her own race was better, returned with a son of a certain clan via a Hong Kong pimp on ferry.”<sup>47</sup> While this story again reinforces the negative (*liu* connoting a stream/genre here with derogatory implications) stereotype of the *Tanka* girls of not observing the moralized racial boundaries (with Auntie Ho only an exception due to her experiences), it also speaks of the cultural difference of their serving Caucasians in Hong Kong in contrast to serving Chinese elites in Guangzhou, and the ways in which colonial modernity has redefined racial boundaries, stratification, and opportunities for class mobility.

*The Humor Times* in Shanghai 1915 counts the various nicknames of *Tanka* girls in Guangzhou as “water chickens,” “mud crabs,” and “salt-water girls” and describes how they are “shamelessly flirtatious” and compete for business publicly like “chickens fighting in water.”<sup>48</sup> Contrasting the representations of the *Tanka* women in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, one can see how the colonial regime took full advantage of the Hong Kong Chinese sexual hierarchy and turned it upside down. The fact that these “salt-water girls” served foreigners granted them opportunities of upward mobility unavailable to other Chinese/Cantonese working women, despite the traditional Chinese convention of viewing proximity to foreigners as unpreferable if not dangerous, or a “punishment” comparable to “sleeping with wolves.” “In this they were unlike typical prostitutes who were so unaccustomed to the appearance of Western men that ‘they were all afraid of them’.”<sup>49</sup>



8.3 Racial boundaries still exist. *Shishi huabao* (1912), 7.

A short chapter in Reverend C.T. Smith’s *A Sense of History: Studies in the Social and Urban History of Hong Kong*, which went missing in the book’s translated Chinese edition,<sup>50</sup> entitled “Ng Akew, one of Hong Kong’s ‘Protected’ Women” highlights this rise of a number of *Tanka* from their previously circumscribed social position who had acquired financial security, property, and wealth leading to assumed leadership, if not respectability, in the commercialized colony. According to this pioneering but strangely untranslated study, many of the “protected” women were of the *Tanka* population.” In 1882, Eitel in his history of Hong Kong stated that “the half-caste population of Hong Kong were, from the earliest days of the settlement of the Colony and down to the present day, almost exclusively the offspring of these Tan-ka[sic] people.”<sup>51</sup> Sufficient historical data on one case named Akew Ng or Hung Mow Kew (Akew with Red-Haired People), defined by her clients’ ethnicity, bought and “protected” by James Bridges Endicott, captain of an opium-smuggling ship of the American firm Russell and Company, bore witness to the opportunities created by the inter-relations of foreigners and Chinese via the sex trade. Akew Ng bore three sons and two daughters, owned houses in Central,<sup>52</sup> bought real estate of her own, ran loan schemes, bought prime property for other women, probably used for entertain-

ment business and/or brothels, and kept a young Australian named Philip Davis, who visited Akew in the form of a “banquet” and passed himself off as a son of Akew. Historical accounts as such testify to the multiple ways previously disenfranchised women took advantage of the sex trade and colonial capitalism to acquire financial and sexual independence otherwise unavailable to them. This may speak partly at least of the formation of the Eurasians who had become business and political elites in Hong Kong for decades to come. The case of Akew provides the essential background to further understand how modern Chinese prostitution as well as Caucasian-Oriental relations have been articulated through and focused on the figure of boat people woman in the Euro-American popular imaginary, epitomized by fiction and film such as *The World of Suzie Wong*, among others.

#### “SUPREMACY OF THE MORAL LAW”

“You, as prostitute, your body is owned by yourself. You are free to come and go, and could appeal to the authorities (for protection) in case you are forced or kidnapped in any way [because] the policy of the United Kingdom is based on the principle of loving its people.”<sup>53</sup>

British colonial modernity in Hong Kong could be characterized by its consistent maneuver of libertarian-packaged legal institutions to its own advantage. The colonial government at the outset was operating under many unenforceable laws, one of them being The Buildings and Nuisances Ordinance, for example, which allegedly ruled that around 70,000 Chinese were living illegally on crown land.<sup>54</sup> Sir Henry Pottinger, the Colony’s first Governor (1843–1844), obliged by the Charter of Hong Kong of 1843 to establish two civilian bodies for his administration, appointed a small number of people to both bodies, which never met due to the lack of quorum. Chinese uprisings against early colonial rule of this “noisy, quarrelsome, discontented little island”<sup>55</sup> seemed quite common:

On January 15, 1857, Chinese terrorists attempted to murder the entire foreign community by lacing the Colony’s bread with arsenic. The theory was that the Chinese ate rice whereas the British ate bread. The plot misfired because the conspirators forgot that the Indian community, who tended to take their breakfast before the British, also ate bread and consequently there were a lot of sick Indians; but nobody actually died. The British were outraged. The main suspect was the Chinese baker.... It soon became obvious that Ahlum was innocent. It seems, for instance, that his children had eaten the bread and had become violently ill. The not-so-compassionate attorney-general, Thomas Chisholm Anstey, argued that the kids were only suffering from sea-sickness and that, in any case, the baker and his entire staff should be hanged whether they were guilty or innocent. ‘Better hang the wrong men,’ he said in open court, ‘than confess that British sagacity and activity have failed to discover the real criminals.’

Narratives that speak to the interstices between racist yet moralizing colonial laws and the messy/undifferentiated Hong Kong realities they struggled to control were abundant in *Universal Circulating Herald* in the 1870s, revealing further complications to the colonial apparatus at work and its reception by various conflicting stakeholders. It was reported on May 26, 1874 that the Prosecution system (Director of Public Prosecutions) was “deemed wrong/corrected” by a gendered Western missionary (“missionary/a Western woman”) having direct access to the colonial governor.<sup>56</sup> Taking this special access for granted, the reporter clearly sided with the missionary by representing the intervention as justifiably rescuing the woman from “the sea of sorrow and elevating her into paradise,” although the Director of Public Prosecutions had prior released the woman to the buyer who claimed to marry her. Two other news stories on June 4, 1875 and August 4, 1874 show that activities at the Chinese-serving brothels including drinking were also heavily policed in spite of the claimed limits of the CD Acts, especially on issues of trafficking and alcohol-related misdemeanors; a Chinese brothel-

owning couple was imprisoned, while “trafficked” women were sent to a reform agency.<sup>57</sup> In all three stories, the issue at stake seemed to be whether the women had been “trafficked,” whereas the normatively assumed boundary between good women and fallen women — who thus need to become good or be rescued — is not at all clear from the narratives: whether the missionary intervened in a trafficked case or marriage; or why three among the twenty-plus women in the second story who had “husbands in Hong Kong” were sent to the reform agency and not home.

The Slave Trade Act was passed in 1824 and British Slavery Abolition Act in 1833. The discourse of picturing prostitutes as being similar to slaves taken from Africa to the U.S. was gaining much currency in the late 19th century, when England moved from slavery to “free labor.”<sup>58</sup> In Britain during the 1870s and 1880s the system set up by the CD Acts came under attack by medical practitioners, labor organizers, and moral reformers, aka “libertarian activists and feminists,”<sup>59</sup> who considered that the licensing of brothels by the state implied official condonation of immoral behavior. The National Vigilance Association was organized to “purify” society and condemn “deviant” behavior, such as drinking and patronizing prostitutes.<sup>60</sup> In 1870 the Ladies’ National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts published their first manifesto signed by 124 women, including Josephine Butler, Florence Nightingale, and Harriet Martineau.<sup>61</sup> They condemned the CD Acts on substantial grounds: unequal treatment of men and women; degrading to women by subjecting them “to arrest, forced surgical examination” and imprisonment with hard labour; the “offence” i.e. prostitution, not clearly defined; and threatened civil liberties: “So far as women are concerned, (the Acts) remove every guarantee of personal security which the law has established and held sacred, and put their reputation, their freedom and their persons absolutely in the power of the police.”<sup>62</sup>

The “repealers” (aka abolitionists) pointed to the problem of “false allegations”: the system granted the police much room to be corrupt in

exercising their arbitrary power; a mere court appearance (guilty or non) was often enough to ruin a woman’s reputation, which made her unable to find work or marriage, triggering her downwardly mobile process into prostitution. They challenged the assumption that men hiring prostitutes was “necessary and venial” and advocated a social purity in which “men should keep their sexual instincts under control and live by Christian moral standards” instead.

What we have to do seems to me now to be this: to form a nation within the nations—a nation which will recognise the supremacy of the moral law, and which will contend for the dignity and autonomy of the individual, against the socialism (whether represented by imperialism or democracy) which takes too little account of the individual, and is too ready to coerce, oppress or destroy the human being which it calls ‘Society’ or ‘The State.’ The soul of human being was created free and responsible before God: and every human law which has in it any of the divine character of his law recognises the inviolability of the individual.”<sup>63</sup>

Feminists such as Butler channelled Victorian aspirations to modern subjecthood, which were promised by mutually reinforcing institutions of the law and Protestantism, into a campaign against “the legalisation of vice” that endorsed men as “impure” and “the institution of the slavery of women.”<sup>64</sup> They also questioned the Acts’ underlying principles: their health benefits. It was not clear at the time that syphilis was contagious in its second stage; as there was no measure to protect the sex worker from being infected by her clients, “curing” the sex worker did not prevent her from being infected right away and passing it on. As a result of a long campaign, the system was brought to an end in the UK in 1886.

The Hong Kong government pulled all strings possible to resist change, even though pressured by the British Parliament to conform.<sup>65</sup> Governor Hennessy wrote to the Colonial Office that they should give the local government complete power

to deal with the question and the alleged spreading of venereal diseases among the British troops. By the 1920s, a rather complex system of regulation had been put in place by the Hong Kong colonial government, while an almost identical system of control had been abolished in Britain thirty years earlier. While both the regulationists and the abolitionists sought to mobilize colonial fervor to either support the CD Acts (in facilitating governance) or advocate to abolish it (on the basis of its “barbarity”), these regulatory institutional devices were propagated in Hong Kong as the Empire’s tools in offering care for local women and girls, guaranteeing if not granting them mobility, free will, and legal protection. Both sides used modernist, liberal humanist language to justify the policy they advocated. While Angelina Chin notes that both the British government and the abolitionists used (Chinese) “tradition” in their political rhetoric of regulation,<sup>66</sup> what may be equally if not more ironic is that both sides (regulationists vs. repealers/abolitionists) also used libertarian lingo, hailing high “free will” and “dignity and autonomy of the individual” to ground their arguments, despite their contradictions with the stark realities produced by racist colonialism. The Secretary for Chinese Affairs (the official who had formerly been entitled the Registrar-General) kept a full list of tolerated houses, their mistresses, and their inmates.

The Secretariat fixed charges which the mistresses might levy on their girls for board and lodging. All those wishing to practice the profession had to be questioned by the authorities to ensure that they were entering the profession of their own free will. She was then given a license card with her number, name, and address and photograph attached. The card, written in Chinese and issued by the Hong Kong government, stated that: “You, as prostitute, your body is owned by yourself. You are free to come and go, and could appeal to the authorities (for protection) in case you are forced or kidnapped in any way.” This is because “the policy of the United Kingdom is based on the principle of loving its people.”<sup>67</sup> The irony of discursively granting Chinese women bodily autonomy and

mobility (against Chinese violence such as kidnapping), amidst colonial control via spatial segregation of racialized bodies, seems to have gone unnoticed in official history.

### “THE DELICACY REQUIRED IN RULING AN ALIEN CIVILIZATION”

Upon the end of WWI, agitation on the subject of regulated prostitution was revived, both locally and abroad. A large number of new brothels opened in areas that had formerly been free of them. Complaints were voiced by the upper-class Chinese community about the number of brothels being opened in “respectable” areas of the city. Brothels in Hong Kong were hiring European (and Australian and American) prostitutes, whose presence was considered demeaning to Europe. British and American Christian feminists hailed the colonial licensing and taxing policies as guilty of profiting from the business (hence, similar to pimping), with prostitution seen by the British agents of social change as providing an all too convenient service to the colonial army—evidence of the immorality/inhumanity of the colonized and the “shame” of the Empire. During 1905–1935, it was reported that half of all tax revenue came from the sex industry.<sup>68</sup> Although “the poor state of communication between London and Hong Kong gave the governors, traders and missionaries immense independence,”<sup>69</sup> the continued existence of a system of licensed prostitution in Hong Kong came to the notice of the moral reform societies in Britain, which had succeeded in abolishing such houses at home and were determined to end the system overseas as well.<sup>70</sup>

Pressure was also brought to bear upon the Colonial Office by written appeals from various societies and by questions and speeches in parliament. The League of Nations appointed an Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children, which published reports highlighting the connections between state regulation of prostitu-

tion and the procurement of women. A Commission from the National Council for Combating Venereal Disease arrived in Hong Kong in 1921. According to the commissioners, no serious attempt had been made by the government to improve the standard of health of the native population in 85 years of British rule; the infant mortality figures were disgraceful; the Tung Wah Hospital was very dirty and badly equipped; Po Leung Kuk, a place of refuge for Chinese girls, was largely used as a recruiting ground for cheap supplementary wives by members of the committee.<sup>71</sup> This report by Mrs. Neville-Rolfe and Dr. Hallam provided material for questions in the House of Commons, particularly from newly elected women MPs. With an even grimmer picture of Singapore rendered by the Commission, the Secretary of State appointed a new Advisory Committee on Social Hygiene, which recommended that all known brothels should progressively be closed down commencing with those frequented by Europeans, and that all sly brothels be shut. The Labor Government ordered the closure of brothels in Singapore starting in 1927 and those in Hong Kong to follow suit soonafter.

Sir William Peel, who became Hong Kong Governor in 1930, agreed to shut down the brothels containing European prostitutes first, which was a shameful eye sore for imperial modernity. Peel had sent his views to the Colonial Office in August 1930, three months after his arrival. He stressed that the abolition of licensed prostitution and tolerated houses was opposed by the military and naval authorities, senior government officials, and leading members of the Chinese community. Abolition would probably lead to an increase in the number of sly brothels and streetwalkers, as well as a greater incidence of venereal disease. It would also make it impossible to deal effectively with the international trafficking of women: control at the point of entry was out of the question in Hong Kong where thousands arrived daily; thus, licensing was the only way of checking that they were entering the profession of their own “free will.” In 1931 Peel again wrote to the Colonial Office with a long memorandum:

I fear the danger of shaking the loyalty of the Chinese community as a whole and their confidence that the government will respect Chinese customs generally. The risk may have to be run, but I think it is a real one. It must be remembered that the Chinese do not view prostitution as we do. They look upon it with a more lenient eye, though excess is reprobated just as excess in other forms of self-indulgence is reprobated. Prostitutes are not social outcasts to the same extent as in ‘Western’ countries. A prostitute often becomes a highly respectable concubine..... I realise that this is a very difficult defence to make, especially as the English public do not always realise the delicacy required in ruling an alien civilisation.

Whether blaming the natives or recognizing the natives’ culture for their differences, the Commissioners’ Report from the National Council for Combating Venereal Disease and Peel’s letters both agreed that many Chinese prostitutes became “supplementary wives,” “concubines,” or mistresses of foreigners.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, more important than the substantial government revenue the sex industry had been generating, the social and private lives of many Chinese and Euro-American elites were heavily intertwined with the colony’s pleasure sector, as could be seen in the story of Ng Akew. From the earliest day of colonial rule through all the way to the 1940s, Ng Akew’s story was not uncommon. The aforementioned scandal of Daniel Richard Caldwell’s was another example.

In November 1931, Peel was advised to attempt “to elicit the support of more enlightened Chinese opinion” with the goal of abolishing all prostitution. The Hong Kong Executive Council reluctantly agreed that further registration of new prostitutes should not be allowed and that six months notice should be given to Chinese and Japanese brothels catering for Europeans. The closure of Chinese brothels catering Chinese was undertaken much more slowly, and the last of the remaining houses was not closed down until June 1935, driving “some ten thousand registered prostitutes” to find alternative employment or go underground.<sup>73</sup> The Executive

Council directed that houses containing one prostitute might be left undisturbed by the police so long as they did not constitute a nuisance to the neighborhood, but that the keepers of larger establishments should be prosecuted and deported if found guilty.

After prostitution was banned in Hong Kong, as Peel had prophesied, a large number of dance academies, bathhouses, massage parlors, gentlemen’s clubs, tourist agencies, flower-margins drinking houses, girls’ tea stands, and other pleasure sites proliferated.<sup>74</sup> Professions of public women further diversified into boat-rowers, dance hostesses (*wu nü*) and socialites (*jiaoji hua*), singsong girls/songstresses and blind songstresses (*genü, guji*), winehouse and teahouse waitresses (*nü zhaodai*), call girls, escorts, and guides, bargirls, beauticians, masseuses, and sellers at street stalls, among others, as seen in guide books, newspapers, fiction, and film. Almost all media responses to the abolition noted that prostitution did not subside; women just turned into secret prostitutes or private prostitutes. Papers like *Ta Kung Pao* reported on how the abolition was welcome by the public and described the private workers as an “evil power,” whereas *Shen Bao* (Hong Kong edition; *SB* henceafter) ran long commentaries on how the abolition attempts reinforced women’s oppression and starvation in a society where the rich enjoyed “many wives” and the poor suffered from “unjustifiably high rent” “without regulation.”<sup>75</sup>

### “FOLLOW YOUR DREAM”

Prejudice towards the *Tanka* women in the Chinese society persisted with an added fervor from capitalist envy. Virgil Ho takes notes from 1920s–1930s popular literature: “A Cantonese song tells how even low-class *Tanka* prostitutes could be snobbish, money-oriented and very impolite to customers.”<sup>76</sup> Miserly or improperly behaved clients were always refused and scolded as “doomed prisoners” or “sick cats” and sometimes even punched, which spoke again to the working girls’ bargaining power and physical independence. *SB* ran a news story in July 1938 of a successful labor strike organized by song-

stresses in Shek Tong to protest against the extra charges drinking houses imposed on them.<sup>77</sup> Women were subject to more exploitation from the marketplace once driven underground.

The fact that a major newspaper like *SB* rendered the songstresses’ labor movement in a sympathetic light in 1938, while speaking on behalf of the sex workers and the disenfranchised against the rich and the colonial abolitionists, points to an alternative modernity and morality being formulated other than that advocated by British feminists, reform societies, and/or the colonial apparatus. By the time prostitution was banned in 1930s Hong Kong, a discourse called socialism that imagined a different relationship of the self to the State than the libertarian and the Christian, one that Butler repetitively identifies as the worst kind (“which takes too little account of the individual, and is too ready to coerce, oppress or destroy the human being”), was gaining more popularity than ever in China, especially in South China and by extension Hong Kong, which had become a major site of leftist cultural production in the 1930s and 1940s. *Follow Your Dream*, made by leftist filmmaker Lu Duen, one of the few pre-WWII Hong Kong films extant and recently restored by the Hong Kong Film Archive, traces how an educated young “lady from a respectable family” (*da jia quixiu*), fleeing the Japanese invasion from Guangzhou to Hong Kong, gradually took up the advice of her housemate, an English-speaking call-girl who teaches the protagonist the way to use her “carry-on luggage” i.e. her body parts, to support her entire family. The film witnesses how she struggles to accept the offer from her English-speaking playboy student to join him “at hotel” in order to cover her mother’s medical expenses, but in the end, she is proud of her financial independence and ability to support her boyfriend and his family while the boyfriend goes back to China for patriotic/revolutionary purposes. Her carefully thought over decision and ability to instrumentalize her body are represented in the film as autonomous and enlightened — in other words, modern — not unlike her boyfriend who chooses to use his body to fight against the Japanese invaders.

The correlation of “foreignness” with sex work again re-surfaces—a correlation not uncommon in the history of Hong Kong. In *Follow Your Dream*, most importantly, it was the colonized, English-speaking (suggesting English-serving) call girl who teaches the good Chinese girl from the Mainland how to survive. What was formerly seen as an ethnic-bound service (*Tanka/Dan*) is represented here as a much more widespread and commonplace survival tactic for Chinese girls fleeing Japanese invasion and the Chinese civil war in spite of their class and ethnic backgrounds in Hong Kong during the interwar years, where all of them worked discreetly after June 1935.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter I have considered the co-construct- edness between coloniality and modernity in early 20th century South China, arguing that the colonial modernizing processes are a combination of racializing, sexualizing, as well as disciplining and desexualizing, as the colonized populations in Hong Kong have experienced them. Seen through the lens of prostitution in the early history of Hong Kong, colonial modernity has intervened and transformed pre-existing structures of power and value systems, redefined racial boundaries and social stratification, and produced new classes of populations. The bourgeois self constructed by European modernity partly overrode Chinese conceptions of respectability and civility as it actively constructed and required the company and service of a racial sexual other in the colony—the choice of whom was pre-determined by the existing ethnic hierarchy. Instead of a top-down one-way coercion, I have shown that colonial narratives possibly produced new opportunities seized by disenfranchised women to gain upward mobility and acquire a modernity previously unavailable to them, while anti-colonial, sinocentric, nationalist sentiments, and/or capitalist envy helped to perpetuate pre-existing ethnic hierarchy. Findings from studying popular literature and films have also shown that

colonial attempts at appropriating modernist discourses through regulating then abolishing prostitution in Hong Kong ended in failure as they produced the opposite effects of the claimed objectives.

Through tracing possible narratives from existing archival materials, scholarly research, and Chinese media representations, I patch together distinct developments of Chinese prostitution from late-Qing dynasty through the interwar years in Hong Kong, including anxieties around interracial sexual contact, the increasing medicalization and liberalization of anti-prostitution discourses, the co-existence of a Shanghai- and Guangzhou-informed cultural hierarchy of Chinese public working women and a spatially differentiated colonial racial hierarchy, and last but not least, the assimilation of ethnicized *Tanka/Dan* women into becoming an integral part of colonial modernization processes, similar yet different from more researched regions such as Shanghai. Colonial governance supported by missionary incentives and in collaboration with selected local elitists was fraught with conflicts and contradictions, many of which mobilized different discursive tools of modernity, be they capitalist, individualist, libertarian, and/or feminist, among various stakeholders in the colony and within the governing apparatus itself, while they were in turn contradicted by undercurrents marked by emerging socialist and nationalist discourses. The historical layering of these conflicts and contradictions may help to illuminate the complexity of competing racist, ethnic, modernist, and sexual discourses at work even in post-colonial Hong Kong today.

\* This chapter is part of a much larger research project that studies prostitution in South China during late-Qing and pre-1949 Republican China. Special acknowledgement goes to the Center for Chinese Studies, National Central Library, Taiwan for granting me research support for four months in 2016, and to Hong Kong Literature scholar and archivist Lu Wei-luan for providing me with precious primary materials including her personal copy of a Hong Kong guide book. Access to the Sun Yat-sen Library of Guangdong Province, Special Collections at

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- 1 Hai Shang Jue Wu Sheng, *Jinu de sheng huo* (also known as *Piaojin*) [*Playboy's Bible*], (Shanghai: Chunming Bookstore, 1940), 3.
  - 2 Most notably: Cheng Po-Hung, *Early Prostitution in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 2010); R.J. Miners, “State Regulation of Prostitution in Hong Kong, 1857 to 1941,” *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24 (1984): 143-161; P. Howell, “Prostitution and racialised sexuality: the regulation of prostitution in Britain and the British Empire before the Contagious Diseases Acts,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18 (2000): 321-339; Carl T. Smith, “Ng Akew, one of Hong Kong’s ‘Protected’ Women,” in *A Sense of History: Studies in the Social and Urban History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Educational Publishing Co., 1995), 266-275, among others.
  - 3 Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 1999), 227.
  - 4 Gail Hershatter, “The Hierarchy of Shanghai Prostitution, 1870-1949,” *Modern China* 15, no. 4 (1989): 463-398, 464.
  - 5 Philip Howell, “Race, space and the regulation of prostitution in Colonial Hong Kong,” *Urban History* 31 (2004), 229-248.
  - 6 See, for example, Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (London: Routledge, 2003); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995); Paul McHugh, *Prostitution and Victorian Social Reform* (London: Croom Helm, 1980); Ann L. Stoler, “Making empire respectable: the politics of race and sexual morality in twentieth-century colonial cultures,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne. McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 344-373; Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
  - 7 Both “prostitution” and “sex work” are problematic terms and could be misleading in Chinese cultural contexts, with the former placing too much emphasis on the sex act and the latter too much on labor. For lack of any better wording and in light of past scholarship, I use them interchangeably.
  - 8 Roderick Moore, “Josephine Butler (1828–1906): Feminist, Christian and Libertarian,” *Libertarian Heritage*, no.10 (1993): 2. London: Libertarian Alliance, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://www.libertarian.co.uk/lapubs/libhe/libhe010.pdf>.
  - 9 “Hennessy’s policies were often admirable, humane and ahead of their time.” Arthur Hacker, “When Eccentrics Ruled the Roost,” *Asiaweek*, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/97/0620/hkhistory.html>.
  - 10 R.J. Miners, “State Regulation of Prostitution in Hong Kong, 1857 to 1941,” *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24 (1984): 145; Elizabeth Sinn, “Women at Work: Chinese Brothel Keepers in Nineteenth-Century Hong Kong,” *Journal of Women’s History* 19, no. 3 (2007): 91.
  - 11 Norman Miners, *Hong Kong Under Imperial Rule, 1912–1941* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1987), 191.
  - 12 It has been noted that “Census figures from late nineteenth century indicated that approximately one in four Chinese women in the colony were prostitutes.” Jason Wordie, *Streets: Exploring Kowloon*. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 94. I have not been able to verify these census figures, but have found that the first Chinese newspaper in Hong Kong, *Chinese Serial*, had reported on the census of “the Victoria City” (Qun dai road) (roughly referring to the Central area of Hong Kong) conducted at the time, showing that a high percentage of buildings were used as brothels. *Xiang Gang Kesui Hukou Ce* (May 1855). Similarly, Elizabeth Sinn notes that both of the following two estimates might have been inflated: the “Appendix” section of *Report of the Commissioners Appointed by His Excellency John Pope Hennessy, CMG . . . to Enquire into the Working of the Contagious Diseases Ordinance, 1867* (Hong Kong: Noronha & Sons, Government Printers, 1879) quoted Charles May, the first police magistrate, who estimated in the 1870s that in Hong Kong only one out of six women lived with one man either in marriage or concubinage, implying the rest were prostitutes, and a Chinese doctor Pang Ui-shang, who claimed that 25% of the female population were “respectable women,” but she further commented that “they assure us of the prevalence of prostitution in nineteenth-century Hong Kong.” “Women at Work: Chinese Brothel Keepers in Nineteenth-Century Hong Kong,” *Journal of Women’s History* 19, no. 3 (2007): 88.



- 13 Wang Hongtai. "Qing lou: zhong guo wen hua de hou hua yuan" [Brothels: the rear gardens of Chinese culture], *Dangdai* 137 (1999): 23.
- 14 A more commonly used umbrella name for venereal disease links it directly to prostitution: *hualiu bing*.
- 15 For example, Edward Henderson, Police Surgeon and Municipal Health Officer for Shanghai (1870–1898), "repeatedly referred to the lack of cleanliness among native prostitutes; his comments were consonant with the foreign representation of China and Chinese as filthy, disease ridden, and potentially dangerous to Europeans." "Henderson's discourse on dirt was not confined to Chinese, but was extended to other people of color; he denounced as 'the worst in every way' those Shanghai brothels 'where Malays, negroes, etc. are the principal visitors'." (Herhsatter, *Dangerous Pleasures*, 227).
- 16 *Correspondence relating to the Working of the Contagious Diseases Ordinances of the Colony of Hong Kong*, C3093, 21 in *Parliamentary Papers* (1881) vol. LXV: 599.
- 17 Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).
- 18 Examples could be found from *Universal Circulating Herald* (*Xunhuan Ribao*) on February 23 and March 5, 1885.
- 19 cf. *Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Working of the Contagious Diseases Ordinance 1867* (Hong Kong: Noronha 1879), Appendix; also CO 129/259, 132f.
- 20 Cheng, *Early Prostitution in Hong Kong*.
- 21 Similar reports could be found on March 4, March 23, August 18, and September 17, 1880, as well as on January 18 and January 13, 1886.
- 22 See Hershatter, "The Hierarchy of Shanghai Prostitution, 1870–1949," *Dangerous Pleasures*, 464.
- 23 Susanna Hoe, "Stella, Gladys, Phyllis, and Brothels," in *The Private Life of Old Hong Kong: Western Women in the British Colony, 1841–1941* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991), 247–265.
- 24 Cheng, *Early Prostitution in Hong Kong*.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 26 *A Dancing Handbook* published in Hong Kong in 1946 recalled the pre–WWII heyday to be the times immediately following the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese war in 1938, where there were nine dance houses. Zhang Baichuan. *Wu ren shou ce* [*A Dancing Handbook*] (Hong Kong: Wurenshouceshe, 1946), 2.
- 27 *Picture Daily* (*Tuhua ribao*) 42, September, 1909, 42; 303, May 1910.
- 28 Hai Shang Jue Wu Sheng, *Playboy's Bible*, 160.
- 29 Cheng, *Early Prostitution in Hong Kong*, 47.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 31 *DSZ* 60 (1885), text translated from pictorial.
- 32 Smith, "Ng Akew, one of Hong Kong's 'Protected' Women," 266.
- 33 *Universal Circulating Herald* 84, May 19, 1874, 3.
- 34 Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures*, 227.
- 35 Hershatter, "The Hierarchy of Shanghai Prostitution, 1870–1949," 473.
- 36 Hai Shang Jue Wu Sheng, *Playboy's Bible*, 161.
- 37 Hon-ming Yip, "Between Drawing and Writing: Prostitutes in the *Dianshizhai Pictorial*," in *Overt and Covert Treasures: Essays on the Sources for Chinese Women's History*, ed. Carla W. Ho (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2012), 487–488.
- 38 I adopt here C. T. Smith's characterization of *Tanka* boat people as a "caste." Smith, "Ng Akew, one of Hong Kong's 'Protected' Women," 266–275; "Protected women in 19th-century Hong Kong," in *Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude and Escape*, ed. Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1994), 221–237.
- 39 See, for example, Ho Ke-en, "The *Tanka* or Boat People of South China," *Proceedings of the Symposium on Historical, Archaeological and Linguistic Studies on Southern China, S.E. Asia and the Hong Kong Region* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1967), 120–123; Zhang Shou Qi, *Dan Jia Ren* [*The Dan Family*] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua Bookstore, 1991); Zhan Jian Gu. "Shi shuo dan ming bian qian yu dan min zu shu" [On the transformation and categorization of ethnic *Dan*], *Mintzu yanjiu* 1 (2012): 81–91; Feng Guo Qiang, *Zhu san jiao shuishang zuqun de yuyan chengchuan he wenhua bianqian* [Language heritage and cultural change of the water community in Zhusanjiao area] (Taipei: Wanjuan, 2015).
- 40 Dian H. Murray, *Pirates of the South China Coast 1790–1810* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 12.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 15–16.
- 42 Smith, "Ng Akew, one of Hong Kong's 'Protected' Women," 266–275.
- 43 John M. Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 36.
- 44 *Ta Kung Pao* 2550, August 23, 1923, Changsha edition.
- 45 Wang Tao, "My Sojourn in Hong Kong," *Jottings of Carefree Travel* (1862), trans. Yang Qinghua, in *Renditions* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1988), 21.
- 46 *Shangqi huabao* 6, 1906. Reprinted in *Xinwen Jiubao: Qingmo Mingchu Huabao zhong de Guangdong* [From the old news: Guangdong in the late Qing pictorials] (Guangzhou: Lingnan Meishu, 2012), 1705.
- 47 *Shishi Huabao* 7, 1912. Reprinted in *Xinwen Jiubao*:

- Qingmo Mingchu Huabao zhong de Guangdong [From the old news: Guangdong in the late Qing pictorials] (Guangzhou: Lingnan Meishu, 2012), 1720.
- 48 *The Humor Times*, March 1915, 9.
- 49 Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers, eds., *Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude, and Escape* (London: Zed Books, 1994).
- 50 Carl Thurman Smith, *Lishi de juexing — Xianggang shehui shi lun* [The awakening of history — a social history of Hong Kong], trans. Song Hong Yao (Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 1999).
- 51 See Smith, “Ng Akew, one of Hong Kong’s ‘Protected’ Women.”
- 52 “In 1868, Akew was the principle of ten ‘single women’ who bought a part of Inland Lot 450. The ten held the land as a Trust, but its purpose was not given in the Memorial. The property may have been used as a Club House. Or was it some form of a Tontine insurance scheme? This property located on Graham Street between Hollywood Road and Staunton Street was held under the trust until 1913, when the remaining survivor of the ten trustees sold the property.” (Smith, “Ng Akew,” 273–274; cf. Memorials 4,561 and 52,376) See also Lily X.H. Lee, Y. Chen, and Clara W. Ho, eds. *Zhongguo fu nü zhuan ji ci dian. Qing dai jian, 1644–1911* (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2010), 119–120.
- 53 The words printed on the prostitute’s license.
- 54 Arthur Hacker, “When Eccentrics Ruled the Roost,” accessed October 1, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/97/0620/hkhistory.html>.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 *Universal Circulating Herald* 90, May 26, 1874, 3.
- 57 *Universal Circulating Herald* 98, June 4, 1874, 3; 149, August 4, 1874, 3.
- 58 Hoe, “Stella, Gladys, Phyllis, and Brothels,” 247–265.
- 59 “...it was not until October 1869 that a group of libertarian activists, including doctors, academics and feminists, held their first meeting in Bristol during a Social Science Congress in the city. The result of the meeting was the launch of the National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts.” Moore, “Josephine Butler (1828–1906): Feminist, Christian and Libertarian.”
- 60 Angelina Chin, *Bound to Emancipate: Working Women and Urban Citizenship in Early 20th Century China and Hong Kong* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).
- 61 J. E. Butler (1870) “An Appeal to the People of England on the Recognition and Superintendence of Prostitution by Governments,” in *The Sexuality Debates*, ed. Sheila Jeffreys (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 111–150.
- 62 J. E. Butler (1871) “Letter to My Countrywomen, Dwelling in the Farmsteads and Cottages of England,” in *The Sexuality Debates*, 151–169.
- 63 J. E. Butler (1879) “Social Purity,” in *The Sexuality Debate*, 170–189.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 In 1893, after the new secretary of state, Lord Ripon “sent instructions to Hong Kong that the registration of brothels and the periodic examination of their inmates, whether nominally voluntary or not, must cease forthwith,” the Hong Kong governor responded with a petition from leading Chinese, who argued that the status quo should be maintained because with the abolition of registration, prostitutes would have no channel to complain about abuses, and brothels would spread into ‘respectable’ areas.” Chin, *Bound to Emancipate*, 56.
- 66 Chin, *Bound to Emancipate*, 54.
- 67 Same as note 54, this chapter.
- 68 Melissa Hope Ditmore, ed., *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), Volume 1, 212–213.
- 69 Arthur Hacker, “When Eccentrics Ruled the Roost,” accessed October 1, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/97/0620/hkhistory.html>.
- 70 David Lambert and Alan Lester, eds., *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 71 Founded as a charity organization in 1878 by Chinese elite merchants to supplement and support the colonial rule, Po Leung Kuk ran a shelter/detention center specifically for prostitutes with the objective of stamping out the kidnapping and sale of women.
- 72 Henry J. Lethbridge, *Hong Kong, Stability and Change: a Collection of Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- 73 Peter Hodge, *Community Problems and Social Work in Southeast Asia: the Hong Kong and Singapore experience* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1980).
- 74 *Dancing Handbook* stated that there was a most prosperous scene with an unprecedented number of dancing houses and dance academies alongside drinking houses in post-WWII Hong Kong.
- 75 *Ta Kung Pao*, May 22, 1940, 2; “Zai yazha zhong di nüren” [Women under oppression], *Shen Bao*, 416, April 30, 1939, 7. “Ziyou tan: san duo,” *Shen Bao* 416, April 30, 1939, 8.
- 76 Virgil K.Y. Ho, *Understanding Canton: Rethinking Popular Culture in the Republican Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 256.
- 77 *Shen Bao*, July 24, 1938.