Recently in Shanghai a kind of debauched woman (dangfu) who is like a prostitute but not a prostitute (siji feiji) has appeared. These women assume the dress of female students and incite licentiousness throughout the city. . . This is most harmful to the future of women’s education.

_Tuhua ribao_, 1909

Historians of sexuality and historians of education are driven by different questions and situate their work in different academic discourses. The premise of this paper is that bridging this gap through a cultural history of education and attention to the everyday historicity of the lives of female students is crucial to understanding shifting gender norms and sexual practices in China at the turn of the twentieth century. These norms and practices were not only shaped within the pleasure quarters or among members of the courtesan class. They were deeply affected by the new possibilities that opened up as young women attended public schools, studied abroad, and established independent careers as teachers in the late Qing and early Republican periods.

This chapter examines the historic challenge the turn-of-the-twentieth-century movement towards formalized education for girls and women posed to Chinese principles of gender differentiation and sexual normativity. From the ancient period these principles had been reinforced by distinct male and female educational trajectories. According to the “Nei ze” (Domestic regulations) section of the _Li ji_ (Record of rites), education would ensure gender separation and reproduce gendered identities. While boys would leave home to attend school at age ten, girls would remain in the household and receive instruction in the womanly arts from female tutors (mu).¹ In

the following centuries, particularly in the late imperial period, many elite young women were trained in much more than the “Nei ze’s” restricted curriculum of proper feminine deportment, weaving, and sewing. It was not until the first private schools for girls and women were founded in the late nineteenth century, however, that the model of education put forward in the Li ji was directly challenged.2

The ensuing early-twentieth-century debates over whether or not these early educational developments should be encouraged, suppressed, or officially regulated by the Qing state took place in the context of a radical reassessment of the merits of Confucian learning and the increasing valorization of new wenming (“progressive,” and often imported) ideas.3 The polemics surrounding women’s education, thus, became one of the crucial sites where ritual teachings (lijiao) fundamental to the Confucian moral universe collided with new wenming values.

The self-appointed defenders of ritual teachings included late-Qing officials and cultural conservatives. Committed to perpetuating what they presented as eternal female virtues, they advocated restricting women’s learning to those skills that had defined the correct comportment of daughters, wives, and mothers since the ancient Three Dynasties period. Despite its eternalizing rhetoric, however, this strident defense of traditional female virtues was the product of its specific historical context: of the push for women’s public education inspired by wenming ideas, and of the emergence of the new social category of nü xuesheng (female student) which embodied these ideas. Rather than serve as an impenetrable bulwark against wenming values, the late-Qing lijiao discourse was constituted by them.

Official documents on the content and objectives of women’s education were most explicitly centered on the question of female virtue. As the epigraph to this paper suggests and as the following pages will more fully assert, however, those with a stake in the new pedagogy were as concerned with the sexuality of the female student as they were with her morality. Their efforts to uphold ancient feminine

2 Missionaries had set up schools for girls and women in China from 1844 but the first school established by Chinese was founded in 1898.
3 On these developments, see Benjamin A. Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 596-625.