Chinese prostitution in the modern period has been recently a compelling topic for historical research, resulting in a growing pool of information on this once obscure, but not unimportant, aspect of China’s past.¹ This article will hopefully make a modest contribution to the existing body of knowledge on this subject, with special reference to two of the yet fully (or unsatisfactorily) explored areas: Why did Chinese girls and women in the modern period become prostitutes, and was there a correlation between the socio-cultural attitudes towards this profession and the entry of these ‘fallen angels’ to this trade? In relation to this, the present paper hopes to alert us to the inadequacy of reconstructing a history of Chinese prostitution without considering how the phenomenon was popularly perceived. The picture of prostitution in this period, despite all the hard work of historians (including this paper of course), remains an incomplete one; there are many questions yet satisfactorily answered.

The Official Views

In their urgent quest for modernity, Chinese officials and intellectuals in the late imperial and Republican periods tried eagerly to clear China of her stigma as a ‘backward’ country with an obsolete ‘feudalistic’ culture that fettered her to long stagnation compared to the West and Japan. Since the early 1900s, many institutional changes were introduced to promote the international image of China and to generate the momentum of change in society. For instance, judicial reforms brought to an end, at least officially, judicial torture and some particular...
forms of capital punishment such as slicing and decapitation that had been denounced as ‘cruel’ by progressive reformers. Old customs such as foot-binding and common forms of entertainment such as gambling, opium smoking and prostitution were condemned as immoral and anti-social, acts that dragged China into persistent turmoil and backwardness. Almost suddenly, the roots of China’s age-old problems became ‘clearly’ identifiable, and the path to modernity unambiguous.

Officially published documents on the subject of prostitution do not provide us with a reliable account of the practice of prostitution during the early decades of the twentieth century. Intellectuals or officials who expressed their conscientious concerns regarding the ‘moral crises’ in their society and country were not always dispassionate in their observations, despite their good motives. Moralistic voices on prostitution were more apt to draw their audience’s attention to the ethical issues of prostitution than to give an accurate description of the nature and breadth of this phenomenon. To reconstruct a relatively complete picture of prostitution in China, one must look beyond these conscientious voices that are passing onto us pre-selected images and presumptions of this ‘vice’.

In reporting the conditions of prostitutes, Cantonese officials and intellectuals had a lot in common, for both were keen on depicting the picture from a moralistic standpoint, at the expense of unveiling the complexity of the phenomenon. Examples are abundant. In a Kuomintang campaign against ‘bad customs’ in Guangdong in 1930, prostitution was denounced alongside gambling, opium smoking, superstition (including Christianity), breast-binding, keeping female bondservants, alcoholism, and so on. Prostitution, compared to other ‘malicious customs’, was seemingly not so high on the agenda. In the only article that addressed prostitution directly, which was compiled in a commemorative work published for this campaign, the official condemnation against harlotry was presented in little over one page. Prostitutes were portrayed as unwilling and abused victims of the ‘flesh trade’:

When we examine their reasons [for becoming prostitutes], we find that family poverty, abduction and procurement, and unwittingly going astray are the most common reasons... These young girls are taught the skills of enticing their clients as if they were setting up traps to harm people and society... In brothels run by the procuresses, [the conditions of these girls] are even more pitiable and inhumane, although this is rarely known to people not in this trade. For instance, if a prostitute is poor in business [and hence] fails to earn any money for a few days, she will be punished with whipping and abusive reproaching by her procuress. Since these prostitutes are afraid of their procuresses as if they are tigresses, they dare not rebel, but reveal their bitterness only quietly in private.