The second essay, which I found to be the most interesting and best developed, addresses the issue of the sex trade as an industry. Hershatter comments (pp. 39-40) that at some points, Shanghai had "more prostitutes than cotton spinners." For a city widely known for its textile industry, this is an extraordinary statement and one that the author backs up with some (probably underreported) astonishing figures: in 1935, 1 in 13 women was a prostitute while the postwar figure varied from 1 in 15 to 1 in 20. Sex was — and is, if Hershatter’s analyses of prostitution today is any indication — big business in Shanghai. What is even more astonishing is the author’s conclusion that prostitution was not the least desirable job available to women and, in the late 1940s, women came to the city from the countryside because they envied prostitutes their lives (p. 195). Not only did the industry include the actual buying and selling of sex but such support industries as restaurants, hotels (the emergence of which significantly changed the industry), and the service industry which transported, clothed and maintained the women. For high-priced courtesans the investment by the madam was a significant one because their training frequently began when they were young children.

The third essay examines the degradation of women whose bodies were used for the pleasure of others. According to the author, the perception of women as victims and victimizers shifted back and forth. Until quite recently, the moral outrage at the sex trade had nothing really to do with the debasement of women but, rather, how prostitution fit into the evolution of urban society. The debate rarely concentrated on the women themselves but on the spread of disease, or the breakdown of public order, or the status of women as part of the national political agenda. In fact, for most of the period under study, prostitution itself was not illegal.

This is a significant and pioneering work so, perhaps, it is unfair to end a review with two criticisms. The footnotes and appendices are so detailed that it is impossible to follow them and the text at the same time. The introduction is also too long and over argued. Instead of presenting a concise summary of her plan and her thesis, Hershatter rambles on at such length that she appears to be unsure of what she is about to do.

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Wars between nations always make extraordinary demands on loyalty and crystalize political and intellectual stands in terms of patriotism and treason, justice and evil, black and white. It was especially true for the Chinese in the 1930s and 1940s when Japan invaded China and brutalized her citizens. Regardless of the politicized history by both the KMT and the CCP in postwar years, few intellectuals, champions of nationalism in modern China, could escape the power of nationalism. There was little room for the “grey zone” in the wartime world of moral absolutism. Yet, debunking idealized polarities, the author examines precisely such a “grey zone:” Shanghai intellectuals’ responses to the Japanese occupation.
According to the author, these writers were neither selfless resisters nor shameless collaborators. Their responses to the enemy were full of complexities and moral ambiguities. They were classified into three categories of passivity, resistance and collaboration, respectively represented by the famous poet and writer Wang Tong-zhao, the dramatist Li Jian-wu, a group of writers associated with the journal, Gujin. Treating literature as a response to a specific historical situation, the author does a masterful job analyzing political nuances and symbolic meanings of their literary pieces. Persistence of loyalty and love, e.g., became codified words for resistance and resonated among the audiences.

The book’s main contribution is its analysis of the moral agony and guilt among all of the intellectuals and of how each of them rationalized their existence under the enemy rule rather than joining the war of resistance. The chapter on passivity of Wang Tong-zhao seems most interesting. Wang is portrayed here as a May Fourth humanist fully committed to the ideals of individual liberty, human dignity and pacifism. His resistance to Japanese aggression in China was conceived in terms revolt against oppressive authority and therefore, he remained opposed to both the Japanese invaders and doctrinaire nationalism (resistance organized by the KMT or the CCP). He also saw no conflict between pacifism and China’s war against Japan, distinguishing the latter as a just war. But later the same person also characterized Chinese resistance as “answering violence for violence” and “equally unjust war of brutality and vengeance” (p. 51). Torn between his universalist commitment and nationalist emotions, Wang tried to reconcile this conflict by cultivating personal integrity and by adopting social disengagement. Throughout the Japanese complete control of Shanghai, Wang went into a reclusive existence. How does such an attitude and life justify the author’s characterization of Wang’s philosophy as “Resistance enlightenment?” Neither Wang nor the author has much to say on that.

In the chapter on resistance, the analysis is not limited to the playwright, Li Jian-wu, but covers a wide array of intellectuals in Shanghai, most notably the dominant communist influence among literary circles. Li Jian-wu felt guilty of living under the enemy rule because he had to support his family. Li’s way of coping with the sense of guilt was to utilize theater to carry out his limited resistance.

Those who did not actively or passively defy the Japanese but associated themselves with Wang Jing-wei’s sympathizers are grouped together as literary collaborators. But like others, they also had a sense of guilt and shame. Their rationalization was escapism, considering themselves Yimin (people of the past age) and turned to writing historical themes. However, these people displayed a variety of attitudes that defy simple classification. As the author shows, some willingly defended collaborators in history as a way of vindicating themselves. And yet, some, like Wen Zai-dao, first wrote anti-Japanese materials and forced only by Japanese torture and threat to kill his wife to change sides.

Wen’s example also calls into question the use of the word “choice” in the subtitle. Choice is predicated on freedom of action. Most Shanghai intellectuals, like Wen, could hardly make choices out of free will. In a sense, all of them collaborated with the Japanese occupation by tolerating the regime and all of them resisted Japanese invasion by feeling guilty, to various degrees, of their existence. If we forget about their different forms of responses to the Japanese occupation and look at their inner conscience, the moral universe seemed indeed polarized into loyalty and betrayal leaving almost no place for a grey zone.