Bound to Emancipate

Working Women and Urban Citizenship in Early Twentieth-Century China and Hong Kong

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To our Red Sun
In 1933, Cheung Yi, an eighteen-year-old woman from a rural village in Guangdong Province in South China, decided to go to the British colony of Hong Kong to look for work. When the local government abolished the institution of mui tsai (female bondervants), Cheung Yi was released from the rich peasant household where she had worked. Because of the campaign to promote natural (unbound) breasts a few years earlier, her breasts were not bound, unlike those of her mother and aunts. Nevertheless, the 1930s job market was a perilous place for a young woman. After a fruitless month searching for a job in Hong Kong, she was desperate to find a place to stay and some means to earn a living. By chance, she made the acquaintance of a thirty-year-old man who invited her to his apartment and promised her a job.

Then events took an unfortunate turn. The man’s wife came home and was outraged to find Cheung in her house. She reported Cheung’s case to the Po Leung Kuk (PLK), a rescue institution for young women and children in Hong Kong. The local police escorted Cheung to the PLK. Instead of granting Cheung shelter and material support, the PLK official categorized her as a prostitute for being single and casually associating with men. The PLK official characterized Cheung as incorrigible and ordered her deported back to China.¹

We do not know what happened to Cheung Yi after she returned to China. It is possible that she went to the South China city of Guangzhou and found a job as a niú zhàodài (teahouse waitress) soon after. Perhaps, one day a local policeman came to the teahouse, holding a tabloid magazine with a front-page photograph of Cheung wearing high heels and
Chapter I

Nevertheless, the highly visible employment of lower-class migrant women in the public space raised disturbing questions in the two modernizing cities of Hong Kong and Guangzhou about morality and the criteria for urban citizenship, questions that continue to reverberate in certain ways today. From the late 1920s to the mid-1930s, labor activists, women’s rights groups, commentators, intellectuals, nationalists, revolutionaries, and government officials debated the merits and liabilities of employing lower-class single women in service industries. Many social commentators, urban police, and missionaries who saw themselves as guardians of social morality were fearful that women’s freedom to move about and work could disrupt the social order and the institution of the family. While these social participants held a conservative ethos of chastity, domesticity, and respectability as the ideal of modern femininity, the ubiquity of women laborers and the growing tabloid literature led to a spread of lurid narratives of sexuality. The explosion of concern about women’s employment reveals a profound contradiction at the heart of the emerging order: while women were indispensable in reviving the depressed service industry and attracting male customers, the sudden visibility of women working in public space posed a threat to moral standards and gender relations. Successive attempts by the political regimes in the two cities to regulate the various forms of service labor forced women service workers to move repeatedly between jobs, so that few enjoyed stable lives. As a result, these women moved more frequently across the Guangdong region (including Hong Kong and Macau) and among different jobs than did women who worked in factories, who generally stayed in one location.

In the early twentieth century, when the bourgeois residents of Hong Kong and Guangzhou started to conceptualize the cities as their permanent home and erected boundaries against the surrounding rural environs, they stigmatized the migrants and the lower class as a whole in order to bolster their exclusivist notions of urban citizenship. Mannerisms and appearances in public became yardsticks for social critics to measure people’s class and place origins. Single women, especially, became targets of public assessment, because they were the new consumers and mobile agents who quickly adopted the latest fashion and socialized freely in the public space. It was also the time when Hong Kongers began to develop their own local identity through differentiating themselves from the “uncivilized” masses of mainland China. (These discourses and practices would be echoed in migration policies that subsequently divided rural and urban China through the Mao years and the reform era, as well as arguments that continue to differentiate Hong Kong from the rest of China today.) The criteria for such urban citizenship, however, began to change in the 1930s, as a result of the ubiquity of women employees in business...
and the organizing efforts by women service laborers. By the late 1930s, these women were beginning to be accepted as members of society, and their presence in public venues was sometimes even regarded as indispensable to the goals of gender equality and modern life. An examination of various efforts by the Guangzhou and Hong Kong city governments to regulate prostitutes, mui tsai, teahouse singers, and waitresses shows the ways the increased numbers and visibility of lower-class women and their casual interactions with men in urban South China triggered new concerns about identity, consumption, governance, and mobility in 1920s and 1930s Guangzhou and Hong Kong.

This book engages three conversations in existing historiography. The first concerns “women’s emancipation” as a Chinese feminist project in the early twentieth century. “Women’s emancipation” is a key term for studies that concentrate on the active role of Chinese women in modern history. However, as the story of Cheung Yi tells us, emancipation did not necessarily guarantee more freedom or other benefits for women. We need to go beyond the conventional story about Chinese feminism and ask how the concept of women’s emancipation was applied to lower-class women, especially those who, newly arrived in the cities, were engaged in stigmatized sexualized labor and who were treated by urban elites as too uncivilized, rural, stupid, and immoral to become citizens. In Guangzhou, although lower-class women were encouraged to work and migrate, the way they dressed and acted in public was subject to political scrutiny and persecution. Even though in Hong Kong the government, the missionaries, and some of the business owners were eager to rescue women and “emancipate” them from prostitution and abuse, the outcome of their intervention, as seen in Cheung Yi’s case, was to segregate the “incorrigible” women from the rest of society and to prevent them from affecting the social morals of the city. Thus, for lower-class women like Cheung Yi, “women’s emancipation” was not a concept of empowerment but a strategy to restrict their movements and shape their public behavior to fit the requirements of a modern urban citizenry. It is necessary to expand the definition of “women’s emancipation” by examining what this rhetoric meant to lower-class women, especially those who were engaged in stigmatized sexualized labor, and the ones who were perceived as uneducated or morally threatening.

Second, much scholarship on modernity in Republican China (1912–1949) has focused on political, commercial, or industrial centers such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin. What does the discourse on women’s emancipation in Republican China look like if we focus on urban South China, particularly Guangzhou and Hong Kong, two cities dominated by different sets of social elites? My examination of the development/construction of jiefang within the South China political landscape challenges familiar historical narratives of women in twentieth-century China and illuminates the complexity of how jiefang was constructed, not only from national centers but also from the political and geographical margins, where part of the region was governed by a different regime. Guangzhou and Hong Kong are both important cities in the Pearl River Delta region, which has been one of the most prosperous regions in China and in the past few decades, since Deng Xiaoping’s economic reform, has been transformed into one of the major manufacturing centers of China and the world. This project tries to understand urban South China as one phenomenon of modernization. Linked by migration, Guangzhou and Hong Kong had strong ties with each other: they shared cultural and linguistic characteristics that differentiated the region from the rest of China; moreover, their coastal locations subjected them to significant foreign influence. Most important of all, both served as destinations for immigrant working-class men and women from the rural areas of Guangdong. An examination of migrant lower-class women in South China not only tells us about an understudied region in a period of dynamic change but also develops a regionally specific understanding of conflicting approaches to women’s rights in Republican China.

Third, this study integrates an investigation of colonialism into Chinese history by comparing colonial Hong Kong with Guangzhou. While Guangzhou and Hong Kong were interconnected nodes in a single regional economy, the colonial polity of Hong Kong shaped the discussion about women in strikingly different ways from the debates in Guangzhou, where “women’s emancipation” was part of the revolutionary discourse. When we imagine a new kind of territorialized space of urban South China and include Hong Kong in the regional framework, the resulting picture allows us to see that “women’s emancipation” was a concept partly developed through policies of charity and hygiene in colonial Hong Kong, where women’s emancipation was understood as an essential component of liberal reform appealing to Western feminists and missionaries alike. Even though there were no enforced policies that banned migration between the two regions during the period under study, politicians and Chinese middle-class elites in Hong Kong actively defined the border separating the colonized territory of Hong Kong from that of the sovereign state of China by “deporting” sick, disabled, and putatively immoral elements of the population to remote areas of South China. This fully colonized condition was distinct from the situation in such semicolonized cities as Guangzhou, where no foreign administration was in place to actively interfere with the policies and social customs.
of the residents. At the same time, the proximity and similarities of the two cities turned them into rivals for the title of the most modern city in South China.

To answer these questions, I examine how women’s emancipation was interpreted and used by various political and social participants, including Communist activists, Guomindang (GMD) sympathizers, Chinese social elites, British colonialists, Western feminists, social commentators, and nonelite women. I draw upon newspaper reports and articles, magazine and tabloid articles, novels, guidebooks, government documents, and colonial ordinances, as well as women’s testimonies, letters, and records from rescue institutions.

LINGNAN AND THE PEARL RIVER DELTA REGION

Breaking away from a nation-based conceptualization of China that focused on provincial and administrative borders, William Skinner in the 1960s developed an alternative way to understand the regional development of China by dividing the country into economically sufficient hexagonal macroregions. His model is especially useful in studying the distinctiveness of the Pearl River Delta region, where Guangzhou and Hong Kong are located. According to Skinner’s model, this region is the core of the Lingnan macroregion, which is situated south of the Nanling Mountains and roughly coterminous with Guangdong and Guangxi. The Nanling Mountains form a natural geographical barrier between the Lingnan region and most of the rest of China (see map 1.1). Unlike most commercial cities and towns in China, which prospered along the Yangzi River before the twentieth century, this region for the most part relied on the Pearl River and the southwest coast for trade and transportation. Linguistically, with the exception of a few subregions and minorities, most people in the Lingnan region speak Cantonese, setting them apart from the people north of the mountains.

When the Han Chinese migrated to the area in great numbers to escape from the Mongols and displaced the aboriginal Tai people during the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) dynasties, the Pearl River Delta region became one of the most fertile rice-producing areas in China. The Han Chinese first settled in the hill regions of the Nanling Mountains because, at the time they first arrived, the Pearl River Delta region existed only as small islands in the bay. Through their water-control, irrigation, and land-reclamation technologies, these Han Chinese refugees eventually filled in most of the open sea among the islands and turned the sandbars in Xinhui, Nanhai, and southern Panyu counties into “enclosed fields” (tuition) for wet-rice cultivation. These settlers eventually established themselves as economically well-off lineages that dominated the “enclosed fields” during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. Gradually, more new lands, known as the “sands” (shatian), which consisted of Xinhui, Xiangshan, Shunde, Panyu, and Dongguan counties, emerged as a source for the extraction of wealth by the politically dominant lineages of the delta as well as the in-migrating elites in Guangzhou in the nineteenth century (see map 1.2).

Another important development of the region was commercialization, which began in the mid-sixteenth century with the creation of new markets and the growth of international trade. Later, in 1759, the Qing government declared Guangzhou to be the only legal Chinese port used for overseas trade. By the nineteenth century, a new merchant class had developed in the city. While some of these merchants came from families or segments of delta lineages that had been powerful in the region, others were new migrants from other provinces who profited from the salt trade and other forms of commercial activity. Eventually, these urban immigrants gained authority and recognition in commerce as well as in the academy, distinguishing themselves from the traditional lineage elites and other urban residents.
The economy of the Pearl River Delta region underwent rapid changes after Western incursion in the nineteenth century. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, unequal treaties lowered the tariffs on textiles and other goods, causing a large number of workers to become jobless. The opening of other treaty ports in China also transformed the coastal trade in Guangdong and displaced lower-class people who depended on this trade for their livelihood. The Taiping Rebellion, which erupted in 1851, was a result of popular discontent with the Qing government in the wake of China's defeat in the First Opium War (1839–1842).

The sociopolitical upheavals in the mid-nineteenth century also caused many middle- and upper-class merchants to move to Hong Kong Island, a new British colony that could offer relative security to businesses. Like the merchant class in Guangzhou, these new immigrants tried to establish their dominance in the colony through trade, service, and charity. Interestingly, in spite of their background, these new elites often had to position themselves as a traditional Chinese gentry class to assert their respectability to the colonial regime.

The two cities continued to be connected economically even after the mid-nineteenth century—Hong Kong served as an entrepôt that took over much of Guangzhou’s international trade, but Guangzhou continued to serve as a transshipment center between the mainland and Hong Kong. As Edward Bing-Shuey Lee indicated in the 1930s, the transportation network that connected Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and other neighboring towns was quite developed. People could also travel between the two cities by steamers or other boats along the Pearl River. Also, the Canton-Kowloon Railway was completed in 1910, and it became an important means of transportation for people and goods.

LOWER-CLASS SERVICE LABORERS

Trafficking of girls became widespread in rural South China because of the changing rural economy at the time of the Opium War and the Taiping Rebellion. Many poverty-stricken families sold their daughters to rich families or to traffickers. Some of these girls were first taken to Guangzhou or Hong Kong, then sent to Singapore or North America to serve the growing population of Chinese male laborers; others were sold locally to work as household servants (mui tai) or as prostitutes or servants in brothels. This phenomenon continued for a few decades. In addition, as a result of the collapse of the silk industry after the Pearl River Delta region was hit hard by worldwide depression, a large number...
of rural women who had gained economic independence through sericulture joined the trafficked women in Guangzhou and Hong Kong to find employment in factories or households.

Statistics from government records in the 1930s and 1940s suggest that the majority of women in the service industries hailed from Guangdong counties abutting the two cities, such as Xinhu, Shunde, Zhongshan, and Dongguan, while others came from more distant provinces throughout China. Very few of these women were originally from the two cities. Many of the women were from poor family backgrounds, with minimal education, and were supporting families back in their hometowns (xiang) with their earnings in the cities.

In April 1935, *Huazi ribao*, a Hong Kong newspaper, published a report showing a range of new female occupations not available just a few years earlier; these included teachers, civil servants, saleswomen, theater ushers, hairdressers, dancers, and nurses. It was the first time that so many types of service jobs in public spaces joined manufacturing labor as options for women. Women filled such jobs partly because the supply of male workers was inadequate and partly because the nature of these jobs in the service industries was depicted as similar to domestic labor and therefore suitable for women’s temperament. Women sought work in the service sector to escape the horrendous working conditions and the sense of social alienation found in factory work. Nevertheless, most urban dwellers were ambivalent about the increase in women working in public spaces. In certain sectors, women were criticized for being less skilled or physically equipped to do the job than their male counterparts, but at the same time, they were expected to take on gender-specific duties, such as caretaking or listening to the customers. Obscure class distinctions were also made in the work women performed; women who were more educated could become teachers, and those who dressed fashionably and exhibited proper social manners could serve as saleswomen in department stores, but women from more disadvantaged backgrounds and who did not have the appropriate training were more likely to become hairdressers in small salons or waitresses in teahouses.

To examine the effect the concept of “women’s emancipation” had on lower-class women, this inquiry will focus on five “occupational identities”: *mui tsai* (bondservants), *guji* (blind singers), *niling* (female singers), *niu zhaodai* (waitresses), and prostitutes. All five categories shared some characteristics: first, the main criteria for their employment were their appearance, service, and/or performance rather than their productivity and the quality of the goods they produced; second, those who took on these identities were predominantly young, single, lower-class women who had little education; third, in the 1920s and 1930s, all these “occupations” were subject to heavy regulation; and finally, because of government intervention and the nature of these jobs, there was little permanence and high turnover. As for the young lower-class women, their lives could take several detours, and they could easily transfer from one identity to another. The following is a brief description of these occupations: *mui tsai* (in Mandarin, *biniu*) were household servants who had to perform household drudgery until the owners married them off, sold them, or perhaps took them as concubines or child brides (*tongyangxi*). These girls were often sold at a young age to middle- or upper-class families by their poor parents. In return, they received food, shelter, and sometimes an education. They were the epitome of victims because of their age and their lack of agency.

*Guji* (blind singers) were the first group of women who sang in public in the 1910s, when owners of restaurants and teahouses first hired them to attract customers. They were also known as *shiniang* (female masters) or *mangetei* (blind little sisters). These singers learned to sing as children, usually performing on the streets and accompanying themselves on simple musical instruments. They were generally perceived as victims to be pitted and objects of sympathy because of their physical disability. Even though they performed for a living, they were, as a rule, regarded not as workers but as dependents living on the mercy of the teahouse owners and their adopted parents, who had bought them at a young age and trained them to become entertainers. Performance was a display of their vulnerabilities.

*Nuling* were singers whose emergence should also be seen as continuous with older cultural traditions of courtesans, who were sometimes asked to sing, dance, or play instruments for their patrons. *Niling* began to replace *guji* in the early 1920s as a result of rising living standards and changing service expectations on the part of the middle class. *Niling* were desirable because they were more beautiful and could make seductive eye contact with customers. And unlike *guji*, who were blind and usually controlled by madams or pimps, these singers were able to negotiate their working conditions directly with teahouse owners and managers. The evolution from *guji* to *niling* shows the changing aesthetic standards and desires of customers and the growing independence of working women in the 1920s.

*Nii zhaodai* were waitresses hired in teahouses, restaurants, and opium dens. They were indispensable in rescuing the waning teahouse industry by attracting male customers who were curious or wanted increased social interactions with women. The popularity of *nii zhaodai* added yet another feature to the modernizing teahouse industry. To fulfill male customers’ expectations or to get better tips, *nii zhaodai* often dressed fashionably and acquired social skills that had not been common in the industry before that time. Because some of the *nii zhaodai* had previously been courtesans
or prostitutes, they were seldom shy about displaying their beauty and greeting customers. Although their emergence generated income and increased competitiveness for teahouse owners, they threatened the male waiters who had previously dominated the service sector.

Prostitutes, like mui tsai, were mainly lower-class migrants from rural China. Some of them came from the pool of trafficked women, but instead of being brought to households, they were sold or transferred to brothels. Although the women did not usually start to work in brothels before they were in their teens, many of them were, like mui tsai, acquired at a very young age to be trained. Those who participated in prostitution were seen as victimized by patriarchy, the economy, and the corrupt society, but if they stayed in the industry willingly, their sexual morality was called into question.

We can place these “occupational identities” in a spectrum of commodified charity and women’s sexualized labor in order to understand how these women were perceived and treated by the urban public, ranging from victims of abuse to morally degenerate agents corrupting men and destabilizing marriages. On one end, mui tsai and guji were the most pitiful objects of charity because they were young or disabled and thus lacked agency; employers and customers who gave them money were motivated by a sense of compassion. The main goal of social elites and politicians who called for their emancipation was to rescue them from depravity and oppression and to protect their innocence. On the opposite end, prostitutes and nü zhaoai were perceived as dangerous women who used their sexualized bodies to seduce or manipulate the customers. Instead of being objects of sympathy, they were “trained” to anticipate the emotional or sexual desires of their customers. Between these two extremes there were the nüling, whose customers sympathized with them for their poor backgrounds even as they admired these women for their feminine voices and appearance. In the 1920s and 1930s, we also see the gradual disappearance of mui tsai, guji, and other victimized images of women along with the increasing popularity of the sexualized nü zhaoai. This shift indicates the gradual recognition of women who participated in the service/performance industry in public as laborers rather than recipients of charity.

Historians and anthropologists who have examined lower-class female labor in South China generally concentrate on the women who worked within households and the patriarchal system that oppressed them. Other anthropologists have delineated marriage resistance or delayed-transfer marriage among women involved in the silk-producing areas in the Pearl River Delta. These studies tend to treat social customs and practices related to mui tsai and other lower-class women as examples of women’s victimization or subjectivities but not in relationship to the concept of jiefang. Placing these categories together allows us to study the porous boundaries that separated them and understand the processes of jiefang/“emancipation” that transformed these stigmatized young women from pitiful objects or sexual predators into indispensable female laborers and useful citizens.

**GENEALOGIES OF “EMANCIPATION”**

In her book *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (2004), Tani Barlow deploys the term “future anteriority” to refer to the imagined future of women in the discussion of feminism and modernity among intellectuals in the twentieth century. She writes,

Emphasizing future anteriority shifts attention away from ideal typical or representative women per se to writing and thinking focused on decoding women and their proposed future role. It takes less seriously the content of general claims and more seriously the politics of claiming. Potentially, this shift of emphasis adds flexibility and usefulness to investigations because it allows feminist scholars and advocates to identify what might have been the stakes in an immediate or singular moment.

I find her theoretical rendition of the term particularly useful for my analysis of how the concept of “women’s emancipation” was applied to lower-class women in South China. Like Barlow, I am less interested in understanding the social reality of how women actually were than in grasping the ways British and Chinese authorities, elites, missionaries, feminists, service laborers, and inmates of rescue institutions took up “women’s emancipation” to posit “what women will have become” in their visions of modernity. The examination of the wide range of approaches to women’s emancipation gives us a sense of how politics was played out by political elites who had high stakes in the semicolonial and colonial regimes. Despite their different origins and usages, the Chinese concept of jiefang and the English concept of “emancipation” were connected, both reflecting a concern with modernity that almost all political participants shared. The campaign for the abolition of prostitution and mui tsai, the reform of social customs, and the limitations on how and where women could work legally were “translation” efforts by residents of the two cities to interpret these concepts and put them into practice. To some urbanites, letting women work in the service and entertainment industries meant moving toward gender equality and the advancement of an urban lifestyle; to others, banning underage girls working in households was a policy essential to any civilized society; to many politicians, the first step toward developing a clean, modernized city was to eliminate
any kind of moral distractions that would keep order from the city. Although lower-class women also imagined what “they will have become,” what they had in mind turned out to be not quite the same as what the social elites had envisioned. Some probably thought that jiefang meant a free pass to travel, work, or experiment with sexual freedom; others simply wanted to escape unsatisfactory work environments or relationships but had no desire to become independent. Juxtaposing these various issues and visions of modernization can shed light on the contradictions of progressive politics in the Republican era.

Late Qing Discourse

Jiefang acquired a new meaning in the early twentieth century. Before that time, it had no other meaning than “to release.” According to Zhongwen da cidian, the second meaning of jiefang is “to eliminate various forms of bondage [shufu] that restrict one’s morals, habits, natural inclinations, and let each individual be able to enjoy his/her inherent [rights to] freedom and equality.” 19 Another authoritative Chinese dictionary, Cihai, lists one definition of jiefang as “a struggle against some form of oppression in order to obtain freedom.” Some examples given include “emancipating China” and “emancipation of the nation (minzu jiefang).” 20 The new political definition incorporated the element of self-determination and subjectivity. This new meaning was likely to have been devised as part of the nationalist rhetoric during the May Fourth Movement, when revolutionaries and intellectuals used “slaves” metaphorically to symbolize the status of Chinese people under imperialism as practiced by the West, Japan, and/or the Manchu Qing dynasty. The call for minzu jiefang referred to the yearning for national freedom from imperialist and feudal control.

Nevertheless, in order to understand the strength with which this new meaning prevailed as the more popular usage in politics, we have to trace it back to the late Qing political discourse about nation and citizenship. Westerners were the first to take up the issue of “liberation” in China. Many missionaries formed schools and savings institutions in nineteenth-century treaty ports. They also formed societies that campaigned against foot binding and the keeping of mui tsai. The rationale behind their projects came from their view that Chinese women were ignorant, irrational, deficient, superstitious, passive, and oppressed by “backward” Chinese patriarchal traditions. As men and women from a more “civilized” part of the world, Western missionaries felt a responsibility to save the Chinese from barbaric traditions and to improve their lives by “enlightening” them, saving them from destitution, and converting them to Christianity. It was also around this time that slavery became a moral issue in international politics.

The late Qing elites involved in the discussion of women’s status at that time were not interested in popular sovereignty or individual rights per se; they were mainly concerned with creating a stronger citizenry of political participants. One of their main themes was the proper place of women in the nation-building endeavor. Rebecca Karl (2002) argues that for male nationalists, women’s lack of education and fitness deemed them unfit for citizenship. Elite women, too, came to link themselves politically and socially more closely to the elite men than nonelite women because they received education at home. In her study of the perceptions of women’s citizenship in the late Qing, Joan Judge (2002) points out that some moderate reformers proposed that women should assume the role of “mothers of citizens” and occupy a key position in educating children to become citizens. As “mothers of citizens,” women could be politicized for the cause of the nation while maintaining the Chinese family system. For most late-Qing educated women and moderate reformers, motherhood for future citizens, rather than direct political participation, was the key to nation building. 21

Some reformers also believed that the nation would not be strong if it were burdened with uneducated women who were confined to the home. In the 1890s, Liang Qichao called for the advancement of women because he believed that both China’s political weakness and women’s subordinate status resulted from the fact that men produced but women only consumed. Liang also equated the lives of Chinese women with the miserable lot of slaves and domesticated animals, arguing that China could not survive the Western challenge and become a powerful state in the world community until its female “parasites”—symbolized by their bound feet—were transformed into independent and productive citizens. By implication, he suggested that women should assume responsibility and stop serving others. His argument did not take into account the household labor women performed and the agency women had within the household. Overall, influenced by social Darwinism, Liang and other like-minded reformers believed that the only way to prevent China from perishing was to strengthen women’s intellect and physique through education and development of their natural bodies. Women’s self-emancipation, not to mention that of lower-class women, was not a priority for them. 22

After the failure of the reforms in the Qing court in the 1890s, the few who held that women, as female citizens (nuzi guomin), should break with all past notions of womanhood and have equal standing and responsibilities were radical anti-Qing activists, such as Qiu Jin and Chen Xiefen. In 1905, they formed the Encompassing Love Association, whose mission statement declared their aim “to improve the status of China’s two hundred million women and to recuperate their natural rights, so that all women, imbued with concern for the nation, will be able to fulfill
their responsibilities as citizens.” They criticized the belief in freeing women to transform them to be mothers of citizens. Qiu Jin believed that Chinese women lived as slaves (null). She called for “women’s emancipation” from the traditional gender roles defined by society and contended that women should have the same rights and duties as men. One of the first writers to use the phrase “slaves of slaves” to refer to the condition of women in China was Chen Xifen. In her essay, “Nüjie zhi kewei” (Women in Danger), published in 1904, she stated,

Today, when our nation is already subjugated and our whole race is in peril of becoming slaves held in common by every land, these men [that is, Chinese men] who have called themselves “honorable” can indeed be ashamed! For thousands of years, we [women] have been slaves of men, but until now, women have not been aware of this. Still, women want to follow men and become the slaves of foreigners’ slaves.

This phrase was used to indicate that women were the slaves of Chinese men, who were themselves the slaves of foreigners. Unlike the reformers who were concerned with future citizens, Chen Xifen and other women stressed women’s immediate duty in the political and social realm. Nevertheless, even for Chen Xifen, there was a hierarchy among women in regard to who should be emancipated first. She continued, “I hope that the educated [women] will teach the uneducated; the enlightened will awaken the unenlightened; the capable will help the incapable.” Interestingly, she believed that the “unenlightened” would need the help of the “enlightened” but that the educated would be able to achieve enlightenment by themselves. In other words, education was a prerequisite to the attainment of gender equality.

May Fourth Discourse

Refuting the common belief that the May Fourth Movement served as a clear-cut divide between “traditional” and “modern,” recent scholars have argued that the seeds of women’s emancipation were sown in the late Qing. Nonetheless, the May Fourth Movement did mark the merging of women’s issues with party politics, and its emphasis on individualism represented a departure from the late-Qing discourse on citizenship and enlightenment. The May Fourth Movement started from a popular protest that took place in China in May 1919 in response to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, which transferred Germany’s territorial rights in China to the Japanese. The movement converged with the earlier New Culture Movement, which, along with advocating the establishment of a new culture that embraced science and democracy, urged that the traditional family system be uprooted and Confucian patriarchy be overturned.

With reference to women, the term funü jiefang (women’s emancipation) generally implied emancipation from patriarchy, in addition to feudalism and imperialism, bringing a new gendered aspect to the concept of jiefang. Women were particularly targeted in this process of politicization and “emancipation,” for they were perceived as tied down by tradition and family. Images of an enslaved/bound woman’s body often appeared in literary journals in the 1910s and 1920s to mobilize intellectuals in such national centers as Beijing and Shanghai to remind them of the oppressed condition of China. The concept of jiefang was high on the nationalist and modernizing agenda of progressive intellectuals, missionaries, and political activists. Intellectual women themselves, too, responded to the concept of jiefang and articulated their desire for social space, new womanhood, and sexual liberation through participation in new opportunities for education and employment and a choice of marriage partners. Overall, the discussion during the May Fourth period took the concept of jiefang to a new level. First, “emancipation” became an important term in signifying the level of national civilization; second, there were intellectual attempts to incorporate the issue of class difference into the discussion and extending the concept to lower-class women; and third, employment and sexual freedom became important aspects of women’s rights, which, paradoxically, also exposed the limitations of jiefang.

The political protest of the May Fourth Movement was triggered by the unfair treatment of China in the Versailles Conference and the Wilsonian ideal of national self-determination. Li Dazhao, one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), criticized the Japanese intellectuals’ idea of Pan-Asianism and called for a different kind of national strengthening, which he branded the “New Asianism”:

This kind of New Asianism is different from [the Pan-Asianism] that has been proposed by [Japanese intellectuals], who suggested that China and Japan should form an alliance and maintain the status quo [of Japanese dominance]. Instead, we are suggesting we should use minzu jiefang [emancipation of the nation/race] as the foundation to remake ourselves. Any Asian nation being subjugated to foreign control should emancipate itself and carry out national self-determination [minzu zizu zhuyi]. After that, we can all form an alliance, so that we can all be on an equal footing with Europe and the U.S.

Li Dazhao argued that in order for a nation to achieve true emancipation (jiefang), it has to be able to determine its own fate. If China were liberated only by Japanese domination, the country would not become free. Li saw the ability to achieve self-emancipation as a prerequisite for jiefang. We see this point being applied to intellectuals’ personal lives as
well, as many of these May Fourth youths sought the right to decide for
themselves in courtship, marriage, and career.

It was also during this period that intellectuals became very concerned
about China's status within the global hierarchy of barbarism and civi-
lization. Comparisons on such social customs as marriage, hygiene, and
child-rearing methods were often made between China and other coun-
tries. The emancipation of women became one of the benchmarks by
which China's rise to a more civilized status could be measured. B. E.
Lee, an editor in the English Editorial Department of the Commercial
Press in Shanghai, wrote an article in English titled "How Can We Honor
Women?" Published in the Chinese Recorder in October 1919, it compared
the status of Chinese bondsmen (including nui isai) to that of black
slaves in the United States:

First, girl slaves must be emancipated. We all know how often they are ill-
treated. But even though they are not ill-treated, it is a sin against humanity
to keep slaves. Lincoln said, "Slavery is a violation of eternal right." As a hu-
man being, born exactly the same as her mistress, why should she be taken
as a slave? . . . Democracy cannot tolerate such an idea. The Americans gave
up their lives for the freedom of the colored people; can we suffer the girls of
our own race to be tortured under the yoke of slavery?

His citing of Lincoln and in another sentence using the phrase "civili-
ized West" as a reference indicate that China should follow an interna-
tional standard, which condemned slavery as a sign of backwardness.
Deficiency in the Chinese nation was obvious in the comparison. Lee
further argued that slavery was antithetical to the universal principles
of democracy and humanity, which define a civilized nation. Thus, slavery
needed to be outlawed immediately if China were to transform and catch
up with other countries.

Along the same lines, Deng Chunlan, an activist in the May Fourth
Movement who later became one of the first women to attend a previ-
ously all-male university, in her article "My Plan for Women's Emancipa-
tion and My Plan for Self-Improvement," published in Young China in
October 1919, explicitly compared the situation of women in China and
slavery in other contexts:

And there are those who say that the emancipation of women will be as
difficult as the emancipation of black slaves in the United States, the emanci-
pation of serfs in Russia, and the recent Chinese revolution against the Man-
chus. Again I beg to differ. The emancipation of black slaves in the United
States naturally encountered resistance from the white masters who were to
be dispossessed; the emancipation of serfs in Russia naturally encountered
resistance from landlords who were to be dispossessed; the anti-Manchu

revolution in our own country naturally encountered resistance from the
Manchus who were fighting with everything they had. . . . Of course they
[the 200 million Chinese men] cannot say that they have anything to lose by
emancipating us women, so what would be the difficulty?

In tying all these forms of "Chinese slavery" to serfdom in Russia and
black slavery in the United States, these intellectuals were also acknowled-
ging the class dimension in the women's movement. In future, jiefang
will no longer be restricted to elite women who have access to education
but will also be made available to lower-class women, who at present
would not become intellectually enlightened. In other words, there was
a convergence between the actual "enslavement" of young women and
girls in social reality, such as bondservants and prostitutes, and the
metaphorical use of "slavery" that symbolized Chinese subjugation to
imperialist powers. Deng further elaborated on the legacy of "slavery" in
foreign countries and the necessity to mend the socioeconomic gap after
the act of emancipation:

The emancipation of women is both essential and quite feasible. But even af-
fter women are emancipated, the woman question will still not be completely
resolved. President Lincoln of the United States could order to emancipate
the black slaves held in the southern states, and the Emperor Alexander II
could write an order emancipating serfs who had been enslaved for hun-
dreds of years. But the question of blacks remains a problem in America
even today, and the question of peasants and land was a major reason for the
recent Russian Revolution.

Although Deng was vague in defining the class background of women,
her comparisons with serfs and slaves hinted that "emancipation" was
both a class and a gender issue. Overall, May Fourth intellectuals agreed
that the process of true emancipation would take a long time, and as the
examples of the black slaves in the United States and the serfs in Russia
indicated, social equality would not be attained with any single legislative
change. More fundamental socioeconomic changes were needed before
gender equality could be achieved.

In Henrik Ibsen's play A Doll's House, which appeared in a Chinese
translation in 1918, Nora's final act of slamming the door and leaving be-
hind her husband and family duties provided a model for May Fourth in-
tellectuals to endorse the pursuit of freedom from family and prescribed
social duties. Many intellectuals saw the patriarchal family system as a
major barrier to women's emancipation. The solution for women was to
leave the confining household, like Nora, and find their own happiness
independently. Yet, the means of women's emancipation became an is-

issue. Lu Xun, for example, in his famous speech "What Happens after
Nora Leaves Home expressed the concern that women who acted as Nora did would have no means of survival other than prostitution. He considered economic independence one of the most pressing matters in relation to women's status. Communists took this theory further and argued that the unequal class structure was as much to blame as the patriarchal family system. Chen Duxiu, another founder of the Chinese Communist Party, wrote in his article "The Woman Question and Socialism,"

Because women cannot hire others, they must be the ones hired by others. They will certainly be subsidiary to capitalists. Thus, they will become slaves of the capitalists. Women were slaves to their families; once they leave their families, they will become slaves of the capitalists. No matter what, they are still slaves; the woman question is still unresolved.

Nevertheless, even the more radical Communists who called for dismantling class hierarchy in order to free women were not ready to validate any kind of employment for women. Most of them saw prostitution not as a form of labor but merely as a form of class and gender oppression. Thus, even when these activists advocated women's emancipation, they did not see prostitution as an option for women to attain financial independence.

Another restriction regarding women's emancipation was sexuality. Most May Fourth intellectuals vocal on women's sexual freedom were mainly interested in improving the quality of heterosexual marriage. Influenced by the eugenics discourse, they believed that women's freedom to choose their spouse could ultimately improve the genetic constitution of their children and henceforth strengthen the nation. Alternative forms of sexual union or sexual expression were seldom considered as choices for women. However, women's sexual morality became a concern when the eroticized image of the "modern girl" assumed primacy in popular entertainment. The modern girl's association with trivial pursuits of leisure and material goods and her casual liaisons with men were often denounced as morally degenerate. When lower-class women tried to emulate the modern girl in the public setting, it was clear that these women had departed far from the ideals of "emancipated woman" projected by the May Fourth intellectuals. This kind of unexpected transformation in women left many reformers and activists ambivalent.

EMANCIPATION IN SOUTH CHINA

Hong Kong also shaped the trajectories of "women's emancipation" and created distinctive opportunities and limitations for lower-class women. The following is a delineation of the political circumstances of the two cities under which various campaigns and discourses of emancipation were produced.

Jiefang in the Context of Modernizing Guangzhou

After the 1911 Revolution and the subsequent failed Second Revolution, which led many revolutionaries to flee the country, the province of Guangdong was ruled by Yunnanese militarist Long Jiguang from 1913 to 1916. Long was then driven out by the Guangxi militarists, and the province was financially drained to fund military campaigns against rival forces. Toward the end of 1920, Chen Jiongming, a Republican revolutionary and a previous Qing legislator, defeated the Guangxi clique and became the governor of Guangdong and Guangxi. From then until the breakup of the United Front between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party in 1926, Guangdong became the center of national politics. Sun Yat-sen, the revolutionary leader who played a significant role in the overthrow of the Qing dynasty but fell out of power in the newly founded Republic, was invited back to Guangzhou in late 1920 and reestablished the GMD. However, Chen Jiongming disagreed with Sun: while Sun wanted to form a centralized government with a one-party system, Chen advocated federalism and a peaceful reunification for China and thus was lukewarm to the idea of the Northern Expedition against the warlords. As a result of their differences, Chen eventually broke with Sun and in 1922 led a revolt. Sun escaped to Shanghai and delayed the Northern Expedition. However, a few months later, the GMD retook Guangzhou and forced Chen to flee to Huizhou in eastern Guangdong and then later to Hong Kong. While in Shanghai, Sun negotiated with the Communist International and reorganized the GMD, absorbing many new members from other regions. With critical support from the CCP, Sun returned to Guangzhou and made it the headquarters of the GMD's national government. Jiefang became one of the modern terms the GMD used to express its revolutionary aspirations and resistance against traditions and colonialism. The enslavement of women was a metaphor that symbolized the semicolonial circumstances of the nation. One of the early objectives of the GMD was to free China from the control of the warlords. In 1922, before the revolt of Chen Jiongming, at the first representative meeting of the GMD, Sun promulgated the party constitution. He stated that the principle of equality should be upheld in law, economy, education, and society. He also urged the government to establish laws to protect
gender equality, uphold women’s inherent rights, forbid the selling of human beings, enforce free marriage, and protect oppressed women who wanted to escape from marriage. In 1924, the first celebration in China of International Women’s Day was held at Guangzhou No.1 Public Park. It was organized by the Central Women’s Department and attended by students and workers. At the celebration, He Xiangning, who headed the department, called for equality, education rights, and workers’ rights and explained that the reason for celebrating Women’s Day was the necessity to mobilize women to fight against imperialism and feudalism in order to “emancipate” women themselves and the Chinese nation (minzu).\textsuperscript{36}

During his tenure as governor of Guangdong in the period from 1920 to 1922, Chen Jiongming was eager to develop Guangzhou into a modern city. Thus, despite his ideological differences with Sun, he backed Sun Fo, Sun Yat-sen’s son, for mayor of Guangzhou and supported his modernization efforts.\textsuperscript{37} Nevertheless, Chen imagined Guangzhou not as the base of a national government but as the capital of South China. He was interested in reforming local politics, including organizing provincial and local assemblies, instituting local elections, and supporting self-government societies.

When Sun Fo became the mayor in 1921, many urban transformations were already under way. Sun symbolically changed the name of the city from Guangzhou-cheng to Guangzhou-shi, differentiating the modern city-market in the 1920s from the earlier walled city of dynastic China. Furthermore, he constructed new roads, restructured recreational spaces such as parks and fairgrounds, built factories and housing, and improved public facilities such as the water-supply and sewage systems. The GMD also expected this new model of municipal government to be applied to the rest of the nation at large.\textsuperscript{38} Many of these projects aimed at sanitizing and organizing social spaces, disciplining the population through changed social customs, investigating social habits, and redefining recreation and work. Overall, he wanted to turn the citizens of Guangzhou into a manageable populace, with a modern urban lifestyle. It is probable that some of these initiatives deeply influenced the fengsu (social customs) reform campaigns that set in a few years later.

At the same time, Guangzhou and its surrounding areas were also important to Communist organizing. Jiefang was the central slogan upheld by the Chinese Communist Party.\textsuperscript{39} It was in Guangzhou that Chen Duxiu, serving as education minister at the time, cofounded with his peers Lao-dong min fu, the first Communist journal that explored the interconnections between class and gender. However, the journal folded after twelve issues because it failed to develop strong support within the Guangzhou Communist organization. In its Second National Congress held in Guangdong in July 1922, the Chinese Communist Party passed a resolution acknowledging fueni jiefang as an integral part of the proletarian revolution, at the same time stating that only when the proletariat won political power could women’s talents be recognized and given free rein.\textsuperscript{40} In May 1922, the CCP also held the first All-China Labor Congress in Guangzhou.

The most influential women’s organization was the Guangdong Women’s Emancipation Association (Guangdong fueni jiefang xiehui), which was formed in 1924. Among its main missions were the protection of laborers and reaching out to the laboring class and educating its members about revolution. Two-thirds of its members were workers or peasants. Its proclamation located the origin of women’s oppression in the unequal class structure, which placed imperialists, capitalists, and warlords in the oppressor class on top and female workers at the bottom. The association published the Monthly Newsletter of Women’s Emancipation Association (Guangdong fueni jiefang xiehui yuekan), which later was renamed Brightness (Guangming) and, in 1926, Women’s Lives (Fueni shenghuo); all these became important publications dealing with issues of labor and women. Thereafter, many branches of the association were established in counties in the Guangdong area, reaching a total membership of three thousand.

In the following two years, activists in the Guangdong area established many women laborers’ associations in Guangzhou and neighboring counties. In October 1924, the Guangzhou Women Operators’ Union was set up after a protest led by the leader of the operators, Tan Zhushan, against wage-deduction practices by the Guangzhou telephone company. The group successfully demanded that the company rescind its order to penalize workers. This union was the first female association set up in Guangzhou, with an initial count of one hundred members. In May 1926, the Sewing Workers’ Union was formed. It held a protest in the same year and attracted more than seventeen hundred members. It was also during those years that the municipal government and local elites became concerned about social customs and women’s bodies.

The CCP narrative shifted to the countryside after 1927, when GMD-CCP tensions led to a split in the revolutionary ranks.\textsuperscript{41} There is a gap in CCP historiography about Guangzhou women after the purge of CCP leaders, while “women’s emancipation” continued to be linked to class struggle. As Harriet Evans asserts, the texts written about and for women “produced fixed and hierarchically arranged meanings of jiefang, which consistently denied identification of women as agents of gender transformation and which insisted on the absolute privileging of class over gender in analyses of gender inequalities.”\textsuperscript{42} In Guangdong, the CCP disapproved of any organizations that prioritized women’s rights over class struggle.\textsuperscript{43} In the Guangdong fueni yundong shiliao (Materials for the History of the Guangdong Women’s Movement), published in the 1990s, several organizations that did not prioritize class struggle over gender
issues were condemned for being bourgeois and rightist, especially after the initial split between the GMD and the CCP in 1926.46

A problem with this CCP-centered narrative, in its detailed delineation of class and labor tensions in urban South China, is its concentration on a narrow range of women—those who worked in factories or were involved in the forming of labor unions and intellectual leaders who supported women’s rights. It does not tell us how the concept of “women’s emancipation” applied to those who were engaged in stigmatized sexualized labor and who were commonly portrayed as uncivilized, rural, immoral, and incapable of self-emancipation. Sometimes these women were incorporated into the larger category of women oppressed by the socioeconomic system and patriarchy, but the CCP account did not offer a solution to those who could not become independent or who found the means of emancipation in sexualized labor.

Further, we need to take into account the fact that Guangdong Province as a whole, far from both Beijing and Nanjing, had a historically contentious relationship with the center. After 1928, with the end of the Northern Expedition, when political power was transferred to the GMD Nanjing government, the Guangzhou/Guangdong government was run by a militaristic regime headed by Li Jishen from 1927 to 1928, then by Chen Jitang until 1936. Chen Jitang held Guangdong as a semi-independent region rivaling the Nanjing central GMD regime and free from its control. He enacted a three-year plan to revamp provincial fiscal and monetary policy as well as to modernize the province’s industry, roads, agriculture, and local governments between 1933 and 1935.48 While the Nanjing government initiated the New Life Movement to reform men’s and women’s social behavior in 1934, the Guangdong government attempted similar reforms under different titles. In the early 1930s, the Guangzhou government launched a campaign to protect social morals to control women who were perceived to be degenerate.

By the summer of 1936, Chiang Kai-shek demanded Chen Jitang’s political submission. Chen and his allies refused and attacked GMD troops in Hunan and northern Guangdong. Ultimately, the attack failed, and by September, the separatist regime finally collapsed.46 The discussion of “women’s emancipation” seemed to have subsided during this period in South China. Nevertheless, as Japan encroached on China after 1937, the definition of “emancipation” was remade into a gender-free rhetoric to mobilize both men and women to fight against the wartime enemy.

Colonial Discourse of Emancipation in Hong Kong

Unlike the situation in Guangzhou, the concept of “emancipation” in Hong Kong was intertwined with various colonial projects of charity and rescue. Historical literature about Hong Kong identifies lower-class women by regulatory labels issued by the colonial regime or else by portraits fashioned by active political participants, such as missionaries and reformers in Britain and Hong Kong. Christian missionaries and expatriates played a major role in the earliest attempts to abolish mui tsai and prostitution. The British called these women and girls slaves, similar or equivalent to slaves from Africa taken to the United States. Coincidentally, this term gained much currency in the late nineteenth century, when England moved from colonial practices of slavery to free labor. In other words, in the British context, “slaves” were human beings who had been deprived of individual rights and freedom. In political discussion, the rhetoric of emancipation was also British based, inherited from a long series of anti-slavery laws, including the British Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 and the Slave Trade Act first established in 1824. The abolition of prostitution was initiated by British activists against the Contagious Diseases Act in Britain and the colonies. Later in the 1930s, when the issue surfaced again, it was also British women who first brought it up in the League of Nations.47

In the discussion of trafficking, mui tsai, and prostitution, the colonial government, missionaries, and expatriates blamed Chinese customs or society for the enslavement of women and girls in Hong Kong. The resistance of Chinese elites to abolishing mui tsai and prostitution shifted the focus of colonial efforts from a total abolition of buying and selling women to the protection of women. From the late nineteenth century on, social policies aimed to “rescue” and “release” (shifang) women to their husbands and families.

The concept of shifang revealed the philosophy behind British colonial rule: even during the 1930s, when abolition proceeded apace, mui tsai and prostitutes were not called upon to emancipate themselves. Like jiefang, or emancipation, the compound noun shifang also contains the character fang (freedom), but the character shi generally refers to a release from another person or institution.

Whereas jiefang can be either transitive (freeing an object) or intransitive (freeing oneself), shifang generally deprives the object of agency. Therefore, in the context of women’s emancipation in South China, shifang funi can only mean the release of women by authorities, while jiefang funi or funi jiefang can also indicate women’s self-emancipation. In Hong Kong, the objective of the colonial government was not to make women political agents but to bolster the authority of the British Empire and colonial regime. It chose a more conservative policy of shifang by “protecting” girls and women and releasing them back to their parents or husbands. The agent who “emancipated” women was the Hong Kong Po Leung Kuk, a relief and quasijudicial organization sponsored by the Hong Kong government.
Nevertheless, the term *jiefang* was not absent in Hong Kong. The more radical rhetoric of *jiefang* was often found in political statements and in articles depicting unity between Hong Kong and Guangzhou laborers. To most Chinese who lived in Hong Kong and held nationalist sentiments about China, *jiefang* meant emancipation from colonial control. Labor movements in Hong Kong tended to be closely associated with Chinese nationalism and anticolonial movements. In the Seamen’s Workers Strike of January 1922, tens of thousands of strikers and their families left Hong Kong for Guangzhou, where the local government hosted them.\(^{48}\) Among these laborers were cooks and servants, many of whom were women; women’s contribution to this movement, however, is nowhere to be found in official accounts. The well-known Guangzhou–Hong Kong strike from June 1925 to November 1926 was another event depicted in the history written by Chinese nationalist scholars as a patriotic act of Hong Kong laborers against imperialism. In Communist historiography, it was described as a *jiefang* movement initiated by the working class.\(^{49}\) The strike in the two southern cities was thus directed against the British administration. During this period, some women joined the strike, and others were forced to substitute for the male strikers in factories and service industries, but as in the Seamen’s Workers Strike and other labor movements in Hong Kong, official histories of that period noted women’s participation only to bolster the immensity of the strike, but they never paid attention to the characteristics of women’s labor.

Because of the association of *jiefang* with anti-British movements, the Hong Kong government and the local conservative elites tended to avoid the term and chose other less controversial words, such as *shi* or *shifang* (release) when dealing with women and girls who were taken to the Po Leung Kuk in the 1920s and 1930s. In addition, *shifang* was often followed by going home (*hua*), indicating that home was regarded as a location where these women could redeem their freedom rather than as a site of oppression.

★ ★ ★

If we juxtapose Guangzhou and Hong Kong, we can see that the political tensions in each city led to different regulatory policies. In Hong Kong, the colonial government was sympathetic toward oppressed women but was never interested in turning women into independent agents. In Guangzhou, “emancipation” was part of the process of modernizing the city and revolutionizing the nation; it also comprised an important political tactic of the Communist Party, which privileged working-class women in its movement against social inequalities. Nevertheless, even as many of the new urban classes relied on the labor of women who were in

the entertainment and service industries, these women’s “emancipation” was advocated by urban dwellers only when the women adhered to acceptable codes of behavior. The Guangzhou government was forced to launch a campaign to protect social morals (*fengxiao*) in the early 1930s in order to exert control over women perceived to be degenerate.

The criteria for such urban citizenship, however, slowly changed in the 1930s as a result of the ubiquity of women employees in business and women’s activism in the labor movement. By the late 1930s, women service laborers, such as *ni laobai*, were beginning to be accepted as members of society, and at times their presence in public venues was even regarded as indispensable to the goals of gender equality and modern life. Overall, the increased numbers and visibility of lower-class women in urban South China triggered new concerns about urban identity, consumption, governance, and mobility in 1920s and 1930s Guangzhou and Hong Kong.

**IMAGES OF ENSLAVED AND EMANCIPATED LOWER-CLASS WOMEN IN URBAN SOUTH CHINA**

In the early twentieth century, “emancipation” was envisioned as a metamorphosis through which a woman in the city abandoned her servile habits of the past. Two imaginary figures appeared repeatedly in discussions of women’s emancipation. One was the enslaved woman, whose “preemancipated” existence, soon to become extinct, at the same time often elicited sympathetic love and nostalgia. The other was the woman of the future, who represented the ideals of the emancipated, modernized urbanite.

The image of the enslaved woman was a piece of memory symbolizing the colonial and feudal oppression women faced in imperial China. Nevertheless, precisely because it was relegated to a reminder of the past, it was indispensable in political rhetoric as well as in popular culture to remind people how much they had progressed and what they would become. In the rhetoric of rescue in South China, the “enslaved” woman was sometimes represented as a *mai tai*, oppressed by the family system and her masters, or as a prostitute who was sold to brothels. For the campaigners for natural feet and breasts, she could manifest as an immobile woman with her feet and breasts bound. In tabloids, she might appear as a blind singer in a teahouse, barely pocketing enough tips to make a living. In all these scenarios, the “enslaved” woman had to be modernized and transformed; yet, this image of the past continued to come back to haunt the society from time to time, reminding the (male) viewer that revolution and emancipation had not succeeded and were still continuing.
By appearing as the viewer’s disowned past, her image gained popularity, guaranteeing the viewer security of his self-identity as the “modern” citizen through reinforcing the “enslaved” other. However, this backward “enslaved” other ideally should either be eliminated or hidden behind closed doors, or else it would serve as a reminder that “slavery” was still around the corner in the viewer’s everyday social reality. Ironically, in order for the viewer to legitimize his own superior social status, the “enslaved” woman was needed to be on display as a preemancipated model of the “other,” presenting herself as a victim of kidnapping or a blind woman forced to sing in teahouses; at the same time, in the “modernized” society, her vulnerabilities became the target of charity, condemnation, and regulation. In contrast, the ideal “woman of the future” who emerged in the early 1920s was a revolutionary who would pave the way for the country’s future. There was no need to fight for her rights, since her status was the same as that of men. This representation often appeared in the writings of citizens who had high hopes for China to become superior to foreign powers. In one 1930s newspaper article, for instance, the author compared China with the Soviet Union; she was not pleased with the Communist Party members in the USSR, because the men among them wanted to marry beautiful women, whereas in China men and women were no longer concerned with sexualized beauty. She exclaimed, “Is it a matter of cultural difference? I believe [such pursuit of beauty] is not needed in China [in the future] because we have already surpassed it.”

In the futuristic picture of China, citizens were degendered and had renounced their sexual and material pursuits.

However, this image of the revolutionary woman suggested only one of the many possible futures for the “emancipated” woman. Unlike the oppressed woman who was static and immobile, the “emancipated” woman was versatile, signifying multiple versions of urban modernity. To the Chinese revolutionaries who engineered the emancipation movement, the liberated woman was one who had a natural body, with no distortions, and a free mind full of independent thoughts. The figure of the “emancipated” woman became recognized in local elite discourse as the new urban model. Meanwhile, through this form of emancipation, the image turned into a real woman who had acquired agency. This woman escaped the script given to her and wrote a new one of her own. The lower-class women who self-identified as “emancipated” could experiment with femininity outside the official definition through improving and decorating their bodies, as well as taking jobs in the urban space. Nevertheless, there was no shared predisposition about what to do with the women who went beyond the limits of, or who did not qualify for, the kind of emancipation the authorities wanted. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, political regimes, urban planners, new elites, reformers, male workers, and revolutionaries in Guangzhou and Hong Kong began to feel troubled by the definitions of “emancipation” some lower-class women adopted.

**ORGANIZATION**

This study compares the two cities by moving back and forth between Hong Kong and Guangzhou in different chapters. The next two chapters delineate the historical regulatory discourses of lower-class women in Hong Kong and Guangzhou and their relationships with women’s emancipation respectively. Both Hong Kong and Guangzhou participated in a regional conversation about mui tsai and prostitution in the 1920s and 1930s. The concern over these two issues was shaped by worldwide attention to trafficking, a national concern in China over the status of women, and an increase in the numbers of lower-class migrant women in the region. Although abolition of these institutions appeared to be a form of emancipation for women, the regulatory discourse showed that the governments of Guangzhou and Hong Kong had different intentions. Moreover, the discussion was reflected by local circumstances in each place.

Situated in a colonial framework, missionaries and British politicians condemned mui tsai along with other “Chinese customs or traditions,” such as foot binding and concubinage, which were seen as examples of barbarity practiced by the Chinese in the colony. These critics put mui tsai in the same category as slaves in other cultural contexts and demanded their liberation. The colonizers’ depiction of local customs as barbaric angered Chinese business elites in Hong Kong, who started reclaiming the mui tsai system and certain forms of sale of children as benevolent Chinese cultural practices, which the British failed to comprehend. In stark contrast to the revolutionaries in China, who argued that every Chinese woman was a slave (null), these Chinese elites in Hong Kong claimed that there was no slavery in Hong Kong and rejected the association of the mui tsai system with slavery, characterizing it instead as a form of charity. As for prostitution, while the Chinese elites believed that it could damage the city’s social morality, the British colonialists blamed Chinese prostitutes in Hong Kong for corrupting the health and prestige of the British Empire. These discussions suggest that the project of abolishing mui tsai and prostitution in Hong Kong was never purely about “the emancipation of rural migrant women” but rather was tied to such social problems as hygiene, social customs, and morality, which were integral to the identities of the British and Chinese politicians and social elites as role models and moral guardians for the lower-class population in the newly colonized city of Hong Kong.
Without the interference of colonialism, government officials, feminists, and reformers in Guangzhou found common interests in prosecuting *mui tsai* and prostitution and abuses of women, all categorized as practices associated with old *fengsu*. The government and political activists tied all practices that restrained women to "slavery," defined as unfair treatment of women in households and in society, which marred Guangzhou’s standing as a progressive social and political vanguard. Prostitutes, *mui tsai*, and women with bound breasts became prototypes of "slaves," shackled to feudal conventions. By the late 1920s, the Guangzhou government subsumed practices that restrained women’s freedom under the category of “old social customs” (*fengsu*), including breast binding, foot binding, and ear piercing, and launched campaigns against them with one stroke. However, the case of prostitution shows that emancipation was restricted to women who were chaste or victimized.

Chapter 4 delineates the impact of consumerism and the rise of women service laborers in both cities by looking at *niling* (singers) and *nii zhaodai* (waitresses), two occupations that became popular along with the teahouse in the 1920s and 1930s. The service sector, here represented by the teahouse industry, introduced a new public venue for entertainment and intimacy between the two sexes, fed the growth of a popular press, popularized a form of pleasure previously available only to elite men, and provided unprecedented opportunities for lower-class single women to pursue financial independence and sexual agency. Between 1927 and 1929, stories and images of *niling* and *nii zhaodai* who worked in teahouses became pervasive in *huabo* (pictorials) in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. These women represented the first popular idols in the entertainment industries of the two cities. Through their eroticized appearance, performances, and manipulation of desirable feminine traits, *niling* and *nii zhaodai* introduced to society new forms of intimacy and gender relationships even while they challenged the boundaries of society's moral tolerance and gender reform. The way teahouse laborers and other single women presented themselves in public set the stage for increased government regulation of social morality in the 1930s.

Chapter 5 returns to Guangzhou and analyzes how, by the end of the 1920s, public displays of sexual intimacy and sensationalized tabloid literature gave rise to social disapproval of women who worked as popular entertainers. The 1927 split in the United Front between the GMD and the Communists also contributed to a conservative turn in the regional politics of Guangdong. The term *fenghua* (a pejorative term for immoral customs or social practices) was increasingly used in government and legal documents to condemn the deterioration of morals, while the goal of social reform shifted from eradicating old customs, such as foot binding, breast binding, and the keeping of *mui tsai*, to maintaining manners appropriate to proper urban society. In 1935, the Guangzhou government and conservative intellectuals started a campaign to ban extravagant clothing and seductive behavior. These new policies reversed many of the changes promoted during the earlier reform, which encouraged women to act independently and dress freely. The authorities attempted to police new proper gender norms by redisciplining women’s bodies. In the mid-1930s, the GMD began the New Life Movement in many cities, and the campaign to protect morals in Guangzhou has been interpreted as a branch of this larger political movement. However, the campaign was more likely to have been a result of the rise of local anxiety about women’s increased public presence.

In contrast to Guangzhou, where all women were mobilized to engage in bodily reforms, Hong Kong targeted only some women who were required to rectify their past behavior. Chapter 6 is a case study of the Po Leung Kuk, a rescue institution in Hong Kong founded by local Chinese middle- and upper-class men that was devoted to providing shelter for destitute women and children. By producing categories of disempowered and dangerous women, the PLK functioned as an institutional tool for the colonial state in dealing with the contradictions between emancipation and morality. A study of the methods by which the PLK incorporated both Chinese and Western forms of charity, each of which sought to quarantine and reform women who deviated from social norms, leads to a reconsideration of the nature of charity as exemplified in the operations of the PLK. The expansion of the PLK’s functions from protection of the destitute to classifying women in society reflects an early twentieth-century shift in the discourse of sexuality from a taboo topic contained within marriage to a social problem tied to public hygiene and public order. At the same time, the organization mapped out a notion of citizenship available only to those inmates who agreed to reform and work hard. Those who were not capable of change or resisted it would be excluded either from the opportunities accruing to independence or from the newly defined geographical boundary of the urban space.

Chapters 7 and 8 examine the letters and testimonies by women at the PLK in Hong Kong and the labor movements of the women teahouse workers in Guangzhou in order to show how women perceived their own limited agency in the two cities. Chapter 7 delineates the use of women’s letters, reports, and testimonies recorded at the PLK as historical materials that speak to women’s agency. These documents reveal how lower-class women themselves adopted and contributed to discourses of “freedom” and how they responded to the categories assigned to them. PLK staff disciplined those who behaved improperly by subjecting them to scrutiny at informal hearings, using their testimony to classify them as “good” or “bad.” The testimonies reveal that assertion of virtue was desirable within
the PLK. Nevertheless, because the PLK tried to arrange marriages and employment for the women whom its officials categorized as “reformable,” many lower-class women saw the organization as providing their best chance at access to a better life. The testimonies suggest that women adopted conventional expectations of womanhood both to escape from unwanted situations and to advance in society by actively adopting and reinterpreting notions of acceptable womanhood and deviancy. Although the PLK had tremendous authority over women’s destinies, some women maneuvered to attain their goals.

Three tea-house labor movements in 1922, 1927, and 1935 illustrate the rise of working-class consciousness among women service laborers. Their participation in labor activism offers clues to the type of “women’s emancipation” envisioned by the women service workers themselves. Unlike male-dominated labor movements, which generally focused on working conditions and wages, the three instances of labor activism were more concerned with women’s right to work and control their labor. The labor movements were attempts by teahouse workers to emancipate themselves from patriarchal or matriarchal employment relationships and to become free agents. At the same time, these labor movements, which often entailed conflicts between nü zhadai and the male union, reveal contradictory visions of what the city or nation should become. In the debates among labor activists, feminist groups, politicians, and commentators, gender equality, productivity, and social morals were articulated as important criteria for attaining modernity. The nü zhadai movement of 1935 shows how these service laborers successfully fought for social acceptance as urban workers. Their success implies a changing social view toward sexualized labor as well as the rise of working-class consciousness among women service laborers.

NOTES

1. Po Leung Kuk records (hereafter PLK records): Zhihū lu [Records of Daily Events], 1935 3–10 68. For details about the Po Leung Kuk and this case, see chapters 2 and 6.

2. See G. William Skinner, “Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China,” Journal of Asian Studies 24 (2011 [1964]): 1–3. Skinner divided China into nine macrorregions: Manchuria, North China, Northwest China, Upper Yangzi, Middle Yangzi, Lower Yangzi, Southeast Coast, Lingnan, and Yun- gui. In his hexagonal model, economic systems function independently and develop within each of the major physiographic macrorregions into which China may be subdivided. Each macrorregion is an integrated rural-urban system with a more densely populated lowland core and a peripheral hinterland.


5. Miles, The Sea of Learning, 14.


10. For information about the transactions and transfers of young women, see James Hayes, "Women and Female Children in Hong Kong and South China to 1949: Documents of Sale and Transfer," in Collected Essays on Various Historical Materials for Hong Kong Studies, edited by J. S. P. Ting and S. L. K. Siu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Urban Council, 1990). For a social history of mui tai, see Maria Jaschok, Concubines and Bondservants: The Social History of a Chinese Custom (London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books, 1988). Maria Jaschok’s was the first work in English to provide a history of mui tai, indentured female servants who worked in households in Hong Kong.


12. Huazǎ ribao, April 25, 1935. The listed occupations for women were civil servants; teachers and staff; leaders of girl guides; farmers; saleswomen; doctors; Chinese doctors; lawyers; obstetrician-gynecologists; dentists; nurses; preachers; nannies; reporters; maids; weavers; makers of rubber; vendors of matches, stamps, and ointments; sewers; knitters; shoemakers; button makers; cigarette saleswomen; mat makers; silk workers; cement workers; sewage carriers; boat women; tea sellers; medicine wrappers; cosmetics saleswomen; emboiderers; tea-house hostesses; hairdressers; shoe shiners; laundry women; movie actors; singers; theater actresses; nuns; fortune tellers; prostitutes; hawkers; and models.

13. In Niži zhiye gaike [Guidebook for Women’s Occupations], the author depicted women as soft, gentle, and more patient than men and therefore generally suited to such jobs as teaching, waitressing, and household labor.

14. Mui tai had actually existed for centuries, under different names in different areas of China, but the history of mui tai in other areas and other periods is understudied. They were mostly known by the term’s Mandarin form, bǐnǐ, throughout China. The Cantonese term mui tai literally means “little sister.” The English transliteration of the term was often used in British correspondence with Hong Kong, but it was not as popular as the formal Chinese term, bǐnǐ, in local discussion and in the writings published or translated by local activists. Mui tai is also the most common term used in Western scholarship. Although mui tai is the term I use here, it may not be the most common term used in Hong Kong or South China at that time.
15. When a girl was transferred, it was usual for a title of ownership to be signed and given to the head of the household that bought the girl. Thereafter, the girl would be the property of the household and required to perform duties without wages until the owners sold her again, married her off, or changed her status to that of concubine or paid servant.


20. Chai, Xianggang juhong: Zhonghua shuju (Xianggang) youxian gongsi (Shanghai: Shanghai chishu chubanshe, 1989).


22. Liang Qichao, "Lun niuxue" [On Women's Education], Shihua bao 23, no. 2a (1897).


27. However, women's suffrage was still denied by the Republican government; see Elizabeth Croll, Feminism and Socialism in China (New York: Schocken Books, 1980).


31. Deng Chunlan, "My Plan for Women's Emancipation and My Plan for Self-Improvement," in Lan and Fong, Women in Republican China, 123 (originally published in Young China 1, no. 4 [October 1919]).

32. Deng, "My Plan."


34. Chen Duxiu, "The Woman Question and Socialism," in Lan and Fong, Women in Republican China, 216 (originally a speech delivered before the Guangdong Federation of Women's Circles and published in Guangdong Masses Newspaper on January 20, 1921; also published in Awakening, a special supplement to the Republican Daily).

35. Within two years, in 1921, Sun had become president of the southern government and tried to consolidate his regime and achieve unity with the north. In October 1897, He Xiangning was married to Liao Zhongkai, another revolutionary. In 1902, she followed her husband to Japan to study. There she met Sun Yat-sen and joined the revolutionary movement. In July 1908, she participated in the establishment of the Chinese Revolutionary League. After the Revolution of 1911, she went to Guangzhou with Liao Zhongkai. She was elected as the Kuomintang Central Committee women's minister and Central Committee member in Sun's GMD. She called on women to join the revolution and organized the Women League of All Circles.


38. In local historiography, "women's emancipation" was defined as the policy pushed by the CCP in the early 1920s, when Guangdong was the center of national politics. Much of the CCP's narrative of femin construction in Guangdong region can be found in the Guangdong funü yundong zhi shiliao (Materials for the History of the Guangdong Women's Movement), ed. Guangdong Sheng Funü Yundong Lishi Ziliao Bianzuan Weiyuanhui (Guangdong: Guangdong Provincial Archives, 1992).

39. Mao Zedong and Li Dazhao argued that women were oppressed not by men but by class exploitation. They also emphasized that the success of the revolution was contingent upon women's participation, because women comprised half of the population; thus, they suggested raising women's economic, social, and educational status and abolishing laws that tied women down. Although the ultimate goal was to dismantle the class structure, it was necessary first to fight against imperialism and feudalism. See Christina Gilmartin, Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics and Mass Movements in the 1920s (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 109-12.
41. The CCP and the left wing of the Guomindang had decided to move the seat of the Nationalist government from Guangzhou to Wuhan. China was then run by three governments: the warlord regime in Beijing, the Communist and left-wing Guomindang regime at Wuhan, and the right-wing GMD military regime at Nanjing. For details, see Ding Shenzun, ed., Guangdong mingao shi [Guangzhou Republican History] (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2004), ch. 5.


43. The Guangdong nüjie lianhe hui, formed in 1919, emphasized the importance of women’s right to work and coeducation and women’s right in political organizing. However, it was criticized in CCP records for its association with housewives (taitai ji jiating funü) and its tendency to invite them to social gatherings to show off (chu fengtou). As for the Funü yundong datong meng, formed in 1924, although its leading member, Xiang Jingyu, once advised the members to reach out to workers and peasants, the organization was criticized for elitism and caring only about women’s political participation while ignoring “women’s emancipation.”

44. In an article published in Guangzhou mingao ribao on December 1, 1929, the writer noted that she did not understand why women activists were interested only in politics in which educated women could participate but never cared to ask about emancipation (jiefang) of all women from different class backgrounds.


48. The strike paralyzed much of the city’s transportation and communication network. It resulted in the Hong Kong government’s increasing the wages of laborers.

49. The strike was triggered by the May Thirtieth Movement in Shanghai, named for the date of a demonstration to protest the death of a worker killed by a Japanese foreman. In the Shanghai protest, a British officer and his constables fired at demonstrators, resulting in deaths and injuries. See the introduction to Tsai, Hong Kong in Chinese History.

50. Xianggang gengshang ribao, October 19, 1935.

Even though Hong Kong is marginal in the historiography of China, the concerns over issues of mui tsai and prostitution were raised earlier in the colony than they arose on the mainland. Mui tsai and prostitution were heavily regulated from the beginning of British colonialism in the 1840s until the 1950s, when legislation abolished both of them. Even though women moved across borders and occupational categories, political participants, with the purpose of managing them, often interpreted these women’s lives through the skewed perceptions of “victims” or “fallen women.” Thus, between the late 1910s and the 1930s, they gradually became central issues of political debate and colonial management. In 1923, 1929, and 1938, reformers, who had begun to voice their disaffection with the existence of the mui tsai system in the 1870s, instigated major campaigns focused on registration. Prostitutes were subject to British reformers’ attention and official regulation from 1840s, with legislation in 1857 and 1867 and abolition in the period from 1932 to 1935. An examination of these conflicts and the legislation suggests that the ways political groups classified these two groups of lower-class women had a profound effect on their images and daily lives and ultimate fates. Such classifications separated a group of lower-class single women of common origins into two distinctive discursive categories: the mui tsai were treated as chaste “victims,” and the prostitutes were seen as free-floating transmitters of venereal disease.

In the colonial regulatory discourse of women, “emancipation” was never a core concept; rather, these concerns grew out of the need of the British colonials to maintain control of the locals and to prove that the
As early as 1923, Lu Xun argued that women must have financial independence to survive after they leave the patriarchal household. Otherwise, they would have to return to their husbands' homes or fall into depravity. Even though in the 1920s and 1930s a large number of women participated in the service and performance industries, they were not included in conventional historiography, mainly because politicians at the time and historians thereafter seldom considered the category of "service laborers" when they thought of the working class. Nevertheless, labor movements of women service laborers did exist. Stories of activism among women teahouse employees in Guangzhou, for example, can be found in newspaper and magazine reports in 1922, 1927, and 1935. Although there was scattered service labor activism in Hong Kong and smaller towns in the Guangdong Province, only the movements in Guangzhou received extensive media attention, possibly because the problem of women's employment in this city was often tied to other, larger political issues of national modernity, such as civilization, equal rights, and productivity. While nüling formed a union in 1927 to negotiate their work assignments and wages with teahouse owners and madams, it was nú zhaozai who initiated campaigns to fight for women's representation in the teahouse service industry. Through transgressing the domestic boundary set for "women from good families" (liangjia fumü) and adopting identities previously regarded as "degraded" (xiajian), the women who performed service labor slowly marked their place in the urban public space. They also redefined the meanings of service labor by forming women's unions and actively molding their relationships with
their customers and their employers. Thus, the strength of women service laborers as shapers of their social milieu and their effect on the teahouse industry’s gender configuration were testaments to their qualities as social agents. In the 1935 movement they finally received recognition from the Guangzhou government and the general public as “laborers.”

An analysis of the three teahouse labor movements rests on three points. First, these labor movements added a new gender perspective to labor history. Before the 1920s, labor was implicitly gendered male. The two decades of the 1920s and 1930s witnessed the rise of working-class consciousness among women service laborers. Such consciousness could be interpreted as a new definition of “women’s emancipation” that women service laborers envisioned. Unlike male-dominated labor movements, which generally focused on the bargain between employers and employees, the three instances of labor activism were more concerned with women’s access to labor and the same working rights that men enjoyed. In addition, before these labor movements made themselves felt, most service laborers—*mui tsai*, prostitutes, and performers—worked under the “protection” or ownership of their madams or masters. The laborers had very little agency and lived at the mercy of others. The labor movements were attempts by teahouse workers to transform themselves into free agents through “emancipation” from patriarchal or matriarchal relationships.

Second, these labor movements, especially the conflicts between supporters of *nī zhāodài* and the male union, reveal contradictory visions of modernity. While women activists fighting for working rights articulated their desires to reach an international standard of modernity that incorporated women’s rights, the male labor union believed that true modernity could be attained only if women stopped competing with men in the teahouse labor market, because they felt that women employees would bring down efficiency and social morals and tarnish the men’s image as professionals. In the process of the labor movements and negotiations, these political participants were also shaping what a modern city should become. Gender equality, efficiency, productivity, and social morals were important criteria for attaining modernity.

Third, the labor union and anti- *nī zhāodài* critics stigmatized women in service industries by portraying such women laborers as immoral or unnecessary. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, there was a common assumption that women’s service work was degrading and linked with prostitution. As figure 9 shows, the rise of “public women” in the cities gave moralists an opportunity to condemn urban temptations. Some spoke against the employment of women and regarded such laborers as decorations (“like vases”) because they did not possess the necessary strength and skills for the job, instead using their looks and social skills to please customers. More sympathetic commentators called working as *nī zhāodài* a temporary means of survival or a transitional job for women who wanted to lift themselves out of prostitution. The political participants in the debate over the *nī zhāodài* issue in 1935 Guangzhou refigured stigmatized identities as work and reconstructed public women as productive citizens and necessary laborers. Overall, however, the concept of women’s virtue remained strong in the discourse of service labor in the 1920s and 1930s. Even though women teahouse workers gained legitimate status in 1935, they had to accept government regulations and make compromises on the way they dressed in public.

**THE FIRST MOVEMENT (1922): REDEFINING “PROFESSIONAL TEAHOUSE EMPLOYEES”**

The issue of hiring *nī zhāodài* was first raised in January 1922, when two restaurants in Foshan County started hiring a large number of women workers. This event caught the attention of a group of male workers, who lobbied for an order banning *nī zhāodài*, because the leadership believed that they threatened the livelihood of male workers. One restaurant owner was even pressured to sign an agreement with the male workers pledging that he would stop hiring female employees. The owner refused to sign, arguing that, since the designation “teahouse employees” (*huòji*) commonly referred to chefs and *shifu* (tea masters) at the counters, hiring women merely as servers and cashiers should not be considered a violation of hiring regulations. His logic was that “teahouse employees” should be people who possessed professional skills, and women clearly did not have them. Although the male workers yielded in this conflict, the men’s group immediately filed a complaint with the Guangzhou government and petitioned for legislation to stop women from working in teahouses.

A self-identified *nī zhāodài* who wrote a series of articles in *Huazhì ribao* in 1922 noted a commotion shortly afterward. She witnessed a protest that was instigated by a male worker who was charged with personal assault because he “disturbed the customers” of a teahouse that hired women. After his arrest, male workers gathered outside the police station and demanded his release. When the police failed to respond, they took the issue to the provincial office. An administrator at the office, described by the author as a “conservative” *bāoshòu* man who was “sympathetic to the male workers and liked to listen to what they said,” ordered the police to release the arrested man. Witnessing the collusion of male workers and the government, the author angrily tied the employment of *nī zhāodài* to the slogan of “emancipation” (*jiefang*) promoted by the government:
[The male workers] continued to show their fists . . . and make noises everywhere nonstop. They surrounded several teahouses. . . . [These teahouses] even post notices that they will stop hiring women. Yes, we are so weak, and we don’t have group backup. Even though [the government] has a resolution to promote emancipation, no principle is observed. We are just trying to find work, but we are being bullied. If we think further, it is more annoying. We can’t ask anyone, and if we sit here and rely on others we will just starve to death.9

The government did not take immediate action in 1922 because of the rapid spread of nü zhaoài to other eating venues, such as noodle shops, congee shops, and shops selling lotus, eggs, and sweets. It tried to impose a ban again in 1924.7 Nevertheless, the ban lost its effectiveness soon after, since evidence indicated that women were still employed under a different title as cashiers (changgui).8 Whether the writer was indeed a nü zhaoài who worked in the early 1920s or not, her statement shows that people in the city were familiar with the May Fourth slogan of emancipation and believed that employment was an important means toward that end. The main objective was to obtain the legitimate right to work alongside men in the teahouses. Nü zhaoài also gathered with other women, and together they joined a branch of the Women’s United Association (Nüjie lüeh Ke lùh), an association affiliated with the Guomindang (GMD), to resist the abolition movement.9

The brief reports and anecdotal entries in the newspapers make it hard to tell whether the male workers had any political affiliations. Their strong control over the hiring practices of the teahouse owners seemed to make them function more like a guild, but some of their activities, if depicted accurately, resemble mob behavior. Whereas the male workers seemed to form a close-knit group, the women service labor movement was led by a loose alliance of feminists, mainly middle-class women and intellectuals, who did not fully articulate the specific concerns of the women service laborers. The minimal action the government took shows that it needed no strong justification to ban women’s employment. However, in 1922, sexual morality was not taken up as a central issue in this debate. The main concern of the male workers was with keeping their jobs and maintaining their professionalism in the industry. It is also possible that in the early 1920s, most politicians and activists in Guangzhou were not yet concerned with moral deterioration.

THE SECOND MOVEMENT (1927): REDEFINING THE TERMS OF EMPLOYMENT

The second instance of women teahouse employees’ organizing was the nüling movement in 1927. At that time, Guangzhou’s economy was recovering from the Guangzhou–Hong Kong strike of 1925. After the strike, many women moved between Guangzhou and Hong Kong to work in the service industries. Most nüling in Guangzhou were working on a freelance basis for different restaurants and teahouses. Owners of major restaurants and teahouses set up a changshu tuan (singers’ organization/guild) to control musicians and arrange singing schedules for nüling. At that time, most nüling were affiliates of the changshu tuan because they relied on it for work assignments. The leader of the changshu tuan, the owner of Jiuru Teahouse who was nicknamed “Big Buddha” (dafaoye), recruited many nüling as his “foster daughters.” Many nüling submitted to his control because he managed the flow of nüling in major eating venues.10

The nüling union was founded around 1926 or 1927 for the purpose of negotiating with male teahouse owners and changshu tuan about nüling wages and work assignments. However, it disbanded after a year. Even though the struggle was short-lived, the case illustrates an early attempt by women teahouse laborers to organize for their collective interests.11 However, the union did not ally itself with other feminist or labor groups. The conflict was between the vertical network of changshu tuan dominated by teahouse owners and the horizontal network of the nüling union.

The stories about the nüling union were found in huabao (pictorials). Most of the stories concentrated on the rivalry of two leaders, Bai Yumei and Wu Yaoqing. Wu Yaoqing was the first president of the union elected by the entire membership. Soon after, however, because of insufficient funds and poor management, many members developed doubts about the benefits of the union. Bai Yumei, another nüling who was eager to take Wu’s place, took advantage of this chance to mobilize other members to call for Wu’s resignation. As a result of the infighting within the union, Wu went to Hong Kong and reluctantly passed her position on to Bai.

At that time, nüling were hired under the contract system (buogong zhi). Usually nüling signed contracts with one or two teahouses and agreed to sing regularly in those teahouses every week. In return, they were paid fixed wages according to their popularity and the hours they worked. As soon as Bai took over, she canceled the contract system and charged singers a four-cent commission for each banquet in which they participated.12 Zhaijiang xingqi huabao published the story of Ah Mou, a woman who became a nüling when she could not survive the competition as a nü zhaoài. By chance, she met Ah Hei, who was a close relative of Bai. Ah Hei was a local bully, and he used Bai’s name to force members of the union to sing, and he extracted money from them. Ah Mou enticed Ah Hei to praise her in front of Bai and received favorable job assignments and terms. Soon after Ah Mou became Ah Hei’s mistress, the union members were dissatisfied with Ah Hei’s favoritism and complained to Bai. Facing
the pressure of union members, Bai fired Ah Hei officially, but the writer said that she continued to employ him under the table.13

In the fall of 1927, the changshu tuan lowered the daily wages of all nuling in Guangzhou. The union resisted and went on strike for the restoration of wages. However, Big Buddha disrupted the strike by promising his “foster daughters” special deals. The general wages were reduced after a compromise was reached between the union and the changshu tuan.14 A fire mysteriously broke out and burned down the office of the union in the fall of the same year, and soon after, the authorities disbanded the union because it no longer had a legitimate office. Although it was rumored that some members of the changshu tuan had started the fire, no evidence was found. Witnessing the situation, many nuling quickly switched sides and leaned on the changshu tuan for jobs. Ah Mou left Ah Hei and became a lover of a leading member of the changshu tuan to protect her status. Thereafter, the changshu tuan took control of all the nuling once again. Members of the changshu tuan constantly enticed individual singers with special benefits or high wages to break the unity of the nuling.

Nuling did not face competition from male workers as nü zhaozai did, since teahouses hired women only to sing. According to this logic, nuling should have had a better chance of succeeding in a labor dispute than did nü zhaozai. However, the labor movement still failed, principally for three reasons. First, they did not understand the importance of the print media and poorly operated their movement. The most prominent papers in South China did not report the strike or the fire. Accounts of the events were found only a few months later, in anecdotes or biographies in the tabloids, in the form of nostalgic reminiscences rather than political statements. Nor did any nuling talk to the press about their situation as the nü zhaozai had done in 1922. They were not able to reach out to other activist groups; nor did they get much sympathy from the public. Second, the union was fraught with infighting, and since most nuling worked independently, they could not form close alliances with other nuling, who were also their competitors. Further, because of the looseness of their network, they did not win the support of women’s organizations and other social campaigners who fought for equality and thus did not seize the opportunity to turn this conflict into an issue for the larger women’s movement.15 Rather than articulating the issue as labor rights, they limited themselves to short-term individual economic goals. Although we see some evidence of working-class consciousness among the nuling, the movement was too disorganized to have any effect. Third, whereas the struggles of the nü zhaozai were between women laborers and their male counterparts, this struggle was between women laborers and changshu tuan, which was dominated by teahouse owners, whom nuling had always depended on for assignments. The issue was not about recognition in the industry but the formalization of their status as workers and the representation of their interests through the labor union. Moreover, most activists lacked experience in unionizing. Although male labor unions were solid at that time, among women laborers, aside from the telephone operators, no precedent of successful struggles against employers could be found in the city.16 As we saw in the case of Bai Yumei, she slowly turned herself into a figure not unlike a madam when she became the president of the union. Many nuling who were heavily involved in the union relied on nepotism to obtain job assignments and special favors. Thus, the nuling union was a union only in name; it was not a modern labor organization that guaranteed fairness and equity.

THE THIRD MOVEMENT (1935): REDEFINING LABOR

In 1935, at the height of the worldwide depression, when the number of nü zhaozai increased rapidly, a heated discussion started once again among women activists, the male labor union, and the government. The male workers’ labor union called for the total abolition of female employees and fought against the incursion of women in men’s workplaces. Although the original concern of male workers was the unemployment of men, they soon focused on professionalism and morality, discrediting women workers for lacking the skills required for the job and turning the restaurants and teahouses into a degrading workplace, where men went to indulge themselves and where capitalists used women for profit.

Unlike the situation in 1922 and 1927, the women teahouse employees who were active in the labor struggle in 1935 were able to build an alliance that transcended class and occupational boundaries. These women workers also appeared to be much better informed about the socioeconomic situation of Guangzhou and what they wanted out of their job and this particular struggle. Various women’s associations and activists in Guangzhou, teahouse owners, and women hairdressers also backed the women workers. The main groups involved in the 1935 teahouse workers’ movements, the Women’s Association (Fünü hui) and the United Front of Women’s Movements (Fünü yundong da tongmeng), were both later criticized in Chinese Communist Party historiography for rightist tendencies. While the male workers’ common interest was to reduce the number of women employees in teahouses, male owners of teahouses and restaurants saw it as to their advantage to do the opposite. The government was generally passive, although it claimed to aim at solving the unemployment issues of both men and women.

From 1929 to 1936, Guangdong Province was under the leadership of Chen Jitang, the chairman of Guangdong Province who set up a separatist
regime to rival the central GMD government in Nanjing. To solidify his power, he established the Southwest Political Council (Xinan zhengzhi hui) and the Southwest Headquarters of the Guomindang Central Executive Committee. At the municipal level, the main political agency in the government was the Guomindang Municipal Party Branch (shi dangbu). The departments that played major roles in the issue were the Social Welfare Bureau, which had been formed after the dissolution of the Social Customs Reform Committee to carry out surveys and government propaganda, monitoring the hygiene, welfare, and social customs (fensu) of the population; the police (gonganju), which enforced the laws and combated social unrest; and the Office of Civil Affairs (Minzheng ting), which managed the details of citizens’ affairs and decided how orders from the provincial and municipal committees should be carried out.

Engendering Teahouse Labor

In mid-April 1935, after a meeting in which members decided that the employment of women in teahouses and restaurants would deprive its members of jobs and affect their livelihood, the Restaurant and Teahouse Labor Union petitioned the government to ban the employment of nü zhaodai. According to the union statement, the unemployment of male teahouse workers had reached around five to six thousand of the total number of twelve thousand. The statement also made it clear that men had the skills and the “art” of working in teahouses and that it would be unfair to let unskilled women penetrate the industry.

In reality, because many women service laborers were often hired temporarily or under specific circumstances, they did not receive extensive training for their jobs. Thus, their qualifications as “workers” were easily put in doubt and subject to male workers’ attacks during the labor-rights movement. However, in the case of nü zhaodai, the skills required to handle the job were not specified. Most often, the male labor union referred merely to strength or cooking but did not elaborate.

The entry of nü zhaodai redefined the nature of the service industries and the meaning of “services,” creating a culture in which tipping was expected, as well as new conventions of heterosexual intimacy. Although their job might entail physical labor, such as carrying pots and dishes and cleaning, what distinguished the women from male service laborers were their “services”—that is, accompanying, chatting, touching, and attending to customers.

In an article titled “A Critique of the Labor Strife between Men and Women” (Namü zhiyongzao pingyi), Qi Shi elaborated on the inappropriateness of women working in teahouse settings:

Even if [women] do work, they should not work in teahouses and restaurants. Because Chinese women lack wisdom and are greedy, most of them think of it as a shortcut to make money and do not know the real meaning of work. I went to a teahouse in Yonghan Bieyu that hires many nü zhaodai. I saw a small group of them, wearing clothes with bright colors, chatting and smiling near the regular customers. Their attitude was casual, as if they worked only for those regular customers. They only wanted to have more tips. We cannot assume that they have other indecent behavior, but this kind of work does make them feel this is easy money.

Aside from the assumption that these women “lack[ed] wisdom,” were “greedy,” “did not know the meaning of work,” and felt waitressing was “easy money,” Qi Shi mainly pointed out that women’s casual attitudes, such as “chatting and smiling,” and their mode of dress affected the image of the job that male workers normally took on. However, the real meaning of serving (zhaodai) was mentioned but not addressed. His criticism echoed the May Fourth critics who stressed that women needed to acquire renge (personhood/individuality) in order to emancipate themselves from their oppressed condition, and he revealed the expectations that skills and knowledge were the bases of employment.

In “Working Women in China” (Zhongguo de zhiye jun), published in 1935, the author differentiated “real jobs” from what the writer interpreted as the new occupations called “flower vases” (huaping): the jobs that women occupied, such as secretaries and saleswomen in department stores, were only meant to provide “decoration and entertainment for men. In the lowest tier of huaping work, we can find the women who work as prostitutes and dancers.” The article argued that the only way to reach gender equality was for women to get educated and do “real work”: “Women need to gain strength and knowledge, work hard, and not indulge themselves in pleasure. If they stop depending on others, then there will be a way out.” Because the work of nü zhaodai did not require “strength” and “knowledge,” what they did was not a real job but only decorations and entertainment. The services were mainly for men, and the value of the women’s existence depended on men’s level of satisfaction. Thus, even secretarial work and sales, both of which should have had higher class statuses, could only belong to the category of huaping, along with nü zhaodai, prostitutes, and dancers.

During the 1935 struggle, linking nü zhaodai to prostitution was a strategy the male labor union and its supporters deployed to argue against women’s employment. In flyers soliciting male workers’ support for a strike protesting the use of women employees, the labor union used such words as yiluo maixia (leaning against the balcony to sell smiles) to describe the behavior of nü zhaodai, implying the sexual nature of their work. Although such phrases on the flyer were later changed by the
municipal government, the idea that *nǐ zhàodài* were immoral became entrenched in the rhetoric of the labor union and became the main accusation made about *nǐ zhàodài*. Overall, the male workers who were critical of women joining the service industry emphasized their lack of proper training and strength as the main disqualifications; however, they also condemned women’s service labor because it perpetuated the objectification of women and demoralized society.

In 1935, some commentators even expressed their fear that such *nǐ zhàodài* were actually prostitutes in disguise. In April, the writer of a newspaper article commented that even though not all waitresses were street prostitutes, all engaged in dissipated behavior (*fángdàng*) and flirted inappropriately with customers.\(^{58}\) The danger of *nǐ zhàodài* and prostitutes, constituted as a group, lay in their flexibility and ability to move between industries and locations. Newspapers published stories about private prostitutes as well as the girls on fishing boats who also worked part-time or full-time as singers and *nǐ zhàodài*. One article published in August stated, “Because of their appreciation of this income, they decided to take advantage of their good looks and started to work in teahouses.”\(^{30}\) The rise of “public women” in the cities gave conservative commentators an opportunity to influence the public with their notions of social morals in the name of defending the city from social danger and decay.

Another article published in May in *Xiānggǎng gōngshāngribáo* talked about the reasons for the proliferation of *nǐ zhàodài* in Tianjin. Modernity and urbanization were depicted as social forces that made women fall into degrading occupations. Similar viewpoints were expressed about prostitutes in the late 1920s and early 1930s.\(^{27}\) Even though perceptions of the two industries were intertwined and *nǐ zhàodài* were sometimes referred to as disguised prostitutes, *nǐ zhàodài* were generally perceived by the public as a step higher than prostitutes in terms of morality, partly because the sexual relations between *nǐ zhàodài* and their customers, if any existed, were not as unambiguous. Moreover, the acceptable norms for social interactions between the two genders were probably changing as a greater variety of service industries prevailed in cities.

**Modernizing Teahouse Labor**

When social critics started analyzing whether the rapid growth of *nǐ zhàodài* represented a social problem or an instance of women’s emancipation, they often tied the issue to both urbanization and modernity. In an essay submitted to a newspaper in July 1935, the author defended women’s employment by stating that although banning women workers was one way to solve the problem, it was not a good solution. The article argued that it was just as undesirable for women to lose jobs as it was for men. Even though social morals might be at stake, this circumstance should not be a reason to stop women from working: “There are no countries that would stop women from working just because such occupations might hurt social morals.” Comparing China with other countries, the writer expressed disbelief that China was using social morals as a reason for barring women from working; the only legitimate reasons to limit women’s choices of occupation should be physiological ones—for example, if women could not perform their jobs or if the jobs might create problems for reproduction. Since the author believed that neither of these conditions obtained in the work of *nǐ zhàodài*, there were no grounds to ban them and that the ultimate solution was for employers to see their businesses as part of the economic system of the society and themselves as responsible for providing both men and women with opportunities. The article called for business owners to take a more active role in improving the economic situation and to increase shifts so that more workers could be recruited.\(^{38}\) By conveying the importance of incorporating women into the working class, the writer employed arguments that evaded the sexualized nature of their work, concentrating instead on the role of business owners in creating a society of gender equality.

In a similar vein, another article gave two reasons for the popularity of occupations such as hairdressers and *zhàodài*: underdevelopment of the nation and imperfection of the educational system, both of which forced young people to gather in cities. The author, Feng Fan, wrote, “If the country had developed its industries, then there would be jobs that required men to do them. There would be no need for them to concentrate on haircutting and service industries. Perhaps they would be more willing to have women take their place if women had more education; then perhaps women, too, could get better positions in schools, organizations, and shops, and there would be no need to compete with men [in these service sectors].” In Feng’s opinion, women working in teahouses or hair salons could do so as a temporary resort to prepare themselves for more education. This argument reinforces a hierarchy in the jobs available to women and acknowledges the inferiority of women who served in teahouses as opposed to women who worked in “schools, organizations, and shops.”

Feng furthered the argument by comparing the situation of Chinese cities with those of the Soviet Union, alleging that the latter had no such competition between the genders either in the countryside or in the cities, because the nation was more modernized than China. Working rights had become an international trend, but because China could not develop education and other forms of industry and crafts, there was a surplus of uneducated human labor in the cities. Modernization could raise the educational level of the people, and it could create job opportunities in
suburbs and rural areas as well. Both would be long-term solutions to the problems of unemployment.29

Another writer criticized the labor union for upholding women’s virtue as an excuse to cover its real objection to women hostesses: that the men were afraid of losing their jobs. The author used the analogy of toothbrush makers’ complaining about the use of machinery in toothbrush making to imply that the labor union’s complaints about women entering the industry were not convincing. Even in the case of competition, the author believed, women should not be held responsible because such developments were inevitable. Those accusations, this critic went on, were like blaming industrialization for the decline in workers who made toothbrushes by hand. The article also argued that to cure the root problem, the government had to improve social organization, maintain stable politics, and develop new industries. As a temporary solution, the government departments should find a way to solve the employment problems of male and female workers.30

Other writers wrote in more anticallertion tones and suggested that the economy of the nation needed to be overhauled. The women’s section of Xianggang gongzhe ribao published an editorial essay by a critic named Jizi contending that working rights were human rights and that it was capitalism that deprived people of such rights: “Capitalism drove both women and men out of work and created social divisions. It created poverty, and productivity turned into a surplus of goods. Thus all industries had to stop, and people are now out of their jobs.” The writer further argued that in order for women to achieve financial independence, society must be reorganized so that private ownership as manifested in the family system could not exist: “When women participate in employment activities, they cannot get rid of the hurdles of their families, and they cannot get job training that develops their creative nature.” Here, Jizi regarded the employment of women as a necessary step toward a new kind of social system, one that would replace the current system based on family structure. Jizi saw the family as a sign of private ownership, which should be removed along with capitalism in order to solve the problem of unemployment in general.

These newspaper commentators appeared to be intellectuals influenced by a particular trend of May Fourth “civilizational” thinking, which viewed the growth of employment for women as an “inevitable development of civilization” embraced by modern nations. Thus, they urged the government to take responsibility for protecting women’s working rights and improving the educational system.

Most commentators who reacted to the problem of unemployment from an economic perspective saw it as an example of the nation’s societal problems, although they differed in their opinions about the

suitability of service labor for women. In political discourse, these commentators, most of them educated men, often identified themselves as national citizens (guomin) who shared the responsibility of improving the country’s economy and reputation. The articles also display the visions concerned literate national citizens had for their country as a member of an international community. To these writers, a government’s attitude toward employment manifested its commitment to modernization. In their comments, questions of morality and the gender ratio, central to the debate among activists, were cast aside. Instead, these writers focused on the way China should live up to the requirements of a modern, civilized nation.

Unlike social commentators who focused on social ideals, the insiders to the conflict continued to link the issue of nü zhōudài with social morality. In a public discussion meeting on April 21, titled “Can Restaurants and Teahouses Employ Female Employees?” the issue was raised again. In addition to members of the Restaurant and Teahouse Labor Union, representatives of women’s organizations and other male and female laborers also attended as observers. A Social Welfare Bureau (Shehui ju) representative presided over the meeting. The members of the union concluded that it was immoral for women to be nü zhōudài because it was a chance for capitalists to manipulate them to seduce customers. As a temporary solution, they urged the government to set up an investigation department to monitor “bad elements” among the female workers who were disruptive to social order, set a flat rate on wages, and enforce a gender division in the work.31

At about the same time, the union gave the police (gōng’an ji) a list of teahouses that had hired nü zhōudài. The police stated that after detailed investigation, if a large number of women were found to be engaging in improper behavior, an order to ban women from working in teahouses might be reissued.32 Within a few days, newspapers reported a rumor that the party (dangtu) would stop women from serving (holding a teapot and handing out hot towels) and allow them only to do secretarial and cleaning work in order to disallow any physical closeness between the nü zhōudài and the customers, which had become the main cause of controversy.33

Feminist organizations supporting women workers countered the attack on women employees’ morality by calling attention to women’s contribution in modern industries and the misconduct of men. The Women’s Association (Fānì hù)34 argued, “A few years ago, the government tried to abolish nü zhōudài, because there were bad elements [buling fenz] mixed within it. But this should be considered as personal misbehavior, and should not be generalized as a reason to eliminate all teahouse employees.” The association also noted that women had been working as civil servants, teachers, doctors and nurses, salespersons, and ushers and
were found capable of handling jobs commonly done by men. She also questioned the morals of male employees by citing examples of waiters running away with employers’ money. Since criminal behavior was not confined to one gender, she did not believe that morality was a reason to fire 亡 zhaodai.

Since arguments by the Women’s Association were ignored, women laborers decided that they would compromise by proposing to enter the male-dominated labor union and follow its regulations. The leaders of the women teahouse workers promised that they would monitor the behavior and uniforms of women workers. This was a bold step for women employees to take, but the labor union refused to add a women’s section, arguing that if it did so, it would be hard to anticipate the consequences. This reaction indicates that the vision of membership, the “imagined community” of the union, was exclusive to men.

Various government departments, including the Provincial and Municipal Party Branches (Sheng shi dangbu), the Office of Civil Affairs (Minzheng ting), the police (gong’an ju), and the Social Welfare Bureau (Shehu ju), had a meeting on April 24 to discuss this controversy. Three principles were finalized from the meeting: (1) to alleviate men’s unemployment, (2) to promote women’s employment, and (3) to protect social morals. On May 9, at its forty-fourth meeting, the executive committee of the Municipal Party Branch (Shidangbu zhixing weiyuanhui), which was the legislative branch of the government, passed an eight-point resolution about female employment, which included fixing the percentage of female employment at 20 percent and setting a restriction on female employees’ working hours and styles of dress.

Both men and women workers were dissatisfied with the resolution. The male workers believed that 亡 zhaodai only made up 1 to 2 percent of the overall teahouse employees, since the number of women in the job market was not high. They feared that because 亡 zhaodai were relatively new and not as well trained as men, many employers would hire unskilled women workers instead of men because female labor was cheaper. They proposed to limit the numbers of female employees to 5 percent of the total ratio in each company. In a document addressed to the government voicing their opinions on gender equality, the union stated,

> We have read about theory of equal rights [pingquan zuopin], and we understand that what [President Sun Yat-sen] meant by equal rights is that people find their place in politics with real equality; as we usually say, there are differences between the intelligent and the ordinary. . . . Equal opportunity has never been based on taking away other people’s jobs. Even [President Sun] said that we should put serving society as our goal, not robbing [daohu] others. Now they steal men’s jobs and try to equalize the number of men and women and they call that equality. It not only violates the teachings of [President Sun], it is a betrayal of his teachings. . . . These women who try to steal men’s jobs and create social unrest are in fact guilty of destroying commerce and obstructing the country’s prosperity. . . . We need to stop them from stealing the [male] workers’ jobs.41

Sun Yat-sen’s teachings were most often used in activism that emphasized gender and social equality, but here the union manipulated Sun’s teaching for its own purpose; rather than emphasizing equal representation in service industries, the document interpreted Sun’s thought to support their position that the teahouse was a space where women did not belong because their talents did not lie there. They even accused pro-亡 zhaodai activists of betraying Sun and the principle of gender equality by taking away men’s work.

During a meeting of the labor union, a guest speaker from the party branch stated, “Because the late President Sun said that one had to love one’s labor, therefore the party had to assist the development of the labor, and thus the union had to follow the order of the party.” He further gave his opinion on the women activists’ actions: “Any action of robbing and exploitation is a counterrevolutionary action.” Even though the party argued that promoting women’s rights was just as crucial as helping the labor force, this guest speaker, representing the government, aligned with the male workers. This circumstance suggests that even though gender equality in service industries was integral to the party’s revolutionary agenda, the government continued to prioritize men as the main labor force and to perpetuate gender inequality.

Women workers and their supporters felt that women’s representation in the industry should be raised to 50 percent. They were also dissatisfied with the time limit on working hours, since teahouses and restaurants had their busiest period after seven in the evening. The women accused the government of favoring male workers and contended that the new proposal went against Sun’s principles. They insisted that equal representation was the fulfillment of Sun’s wish. The leaders of the women workers also began to organize a Restaurant and Teahouse United Office (Guangzhou nizi jiulou chashi banzhangbu) as a countermovement to the labor union run by men. Their plan was to set up the office, eradicate the bad behavior of workers, and resist restrictions imposed by the government.42

A member of the Guangdong branch of the United Front of Women’s Movements (Guangdong nüqi yundong datong meng hui) wrote a letter to the Provincial Party Bureau of the Southwest Political Council (Xiinan zhengzhihui shengzhengju shengdangbu) expressing the organization’s opinions about the government’s role in protecting women’s employment.43 She requested that the organization help safeguard the working
rights of nǐ zhàodài and argued that whether a nation was strong or weak depended on whether its society was secure, and that in turn depended on whether the nation could “solve the problems of people’s livelihood [minshēng] and democracy [minzhū],” which includes “protecting the rights of the citizens to work and to operate their business freely.” This evolution was crucial, she stated, because many nations in the world had included in their constitutions (defē) the question of people’s livelihood and the right to work. The author continued that the freedom of work and the guarantee of such rights were written clearly in Sun Yat-sen’s Three People’s Principles, the Republican Constitution, and other important documents. These statements show that the members of the United Front of Women’s Movements were probably intellectual elites familiar with Sun Yat-sen’s principles. Arguing against the statements made by the male labor union and commentators who believed that women should stay away from the male-dominated service industries, they associated women’s working rights with citizenship and modernity.

The Municipal Party (Shidāng) regarded the decision as extremely fair and saw no favoritism. One of its members even claimed that currently, women teahouse workers amounted to only a few hundred, and with a 20 percent representation, the city could allow for an employment of as many as twenty-four hundred women workers. After hearing a rumor that the ratio might be changed to 6:4, the labor union held a meeting on May 19 that was attended by over a hundred members. The organizing committee demanded that the Executive Bureau (Zhīxíng bù) maintain the eight-point resolution; otherwise the union would call on all the workers in teahouses and restaurants in Guangzhou to go on strike.

The members of the union also condemned teahouse owners for ignoring the government order and opening more teahouses and hiring more workers, which had done harm to union members. They argued that now that the unemployment number had risen to five thousand, if the ratio were altered to 6:4, at least two thousand more male workers would be unemployed; such a high number of unemployed workers would make it difficult to prevent them from committing crimes, and the problem would escalate to a level that would disrupt public order. A few days later, the Municipal Party Branch reaffirmed the 8:2 ratio.

The tension between the labor union and women activists intensified. The labor union decided to cancel the membership of anyone found to have collaborated with women. As a result, several union members were dismissed. The owners of Yiping Teahouse in Changxing Street and of other teahouses reported harassment by male workers. Throughout the week, men dressed in soldiers’ uniforms went to the teahouses, each occupying a table or room and drinking until the teahouses closed so that other customers could not get in. The teahouses that employed women resisted this tactic by manipulating the prices. If the men came for drinks only, they would be required to pay the basic charge of five cents for tea and twenty cents for towels, a few times more than the normal charge, with a minimum of four persons at each table. Moreover, to prevent losses caused by vandalism, the teahouses removed expensive food from their glass display cases. The union denied responsibility for this decision and claimed that accusations of harassment were libelous statements circulated by women workers. The union also supported the male workers who resigned from teahouses as a form of protest. Some nǐ zhàodài were so afraid that they quit their jobs. In the midst of this chaos, the owners of Pingguan and ten other teahouses asked for police protection for fear of further violence, stating.

Although now we have competition, men and women on both sides are dear comrades and families. Plus, under this flag of blue sky and white sun, we should wait for the resolution from the Executive Bureau of the Southwest [Xīnán zhīxíng bù]. These illegal behaviors [of vandalism] not only undermine the friendship of both sides, they also bring great harm to society. So we have to ask the police to protect us, to prevent conflicts, and to maintain public order. We would be grateful.

Teahouse owners suffered the most from the strife. When at first they set out to hire women to save their businesses, the male employees were dissatisfied and started protesting by leaving their jobs or ruining teahouses that hired women. The owners tried their best to befrend both sides. When that effort proved unsuccessful, they relied on the police to restore order. At that time, Guangzhou was known for its systematic regime under the rule of Chen Jitang. By stressing the importance of social order, these owners tried to appeal to the government for help.

More teahouses and restaurants started hiring women to save waning business. On May 31, some teahouse owners even went to Hong Kong to find nǐ zhàodài, and it was rumored that forty had been hired and would go to Guangzhou. The union warned the owners not to violate the party’s order before the case was resolved, because more than five thousand men had lost their jobs. The conflict intensified when the labor union announced that a demonstration would be held on August 8. At the same time, hairdressers formed the Guangzhou Women Hairdressers’ Schools Alumni Club to back the women teahouse workers.

Hairdressers Joining the Movement

Like women employees in the teahouses, the rise of women hairdressers was a new phenomenon that emerged in the 1930s with other service industries that offered opportunities for unskilled lower-class women.
According to Xianggang gongshang ribao, the total number of hairdressing salons was fifty-three, with two of them catering to women only. The hairdressers were also drawn into the movement for women’s working rights. In early June 1935, the male hairdressers’ union claimed that on June 4 the unemployment register indicated that three thousand of its members had lost their jobs. Many male hairdressers blamed the loss on the increase in women hairdressers. On June 15, they decided in a representative meeting that they would ask the government to restrict the opening of female hairdressing salons and the number of women hairdressers. Such restrictions might give the unemployed a chance to recover. If their proposal was refused, they would unite with all the hairdressers and their families to petition the government.

To resist control by male workers, the female hairdressers had been discussing the possibility of working together with women teahouse workers. The activists in the Women’s Association wanted to establish two official unions, one for the teahouse workers and another for the hairdressers. In the next few days, the United Front of Women’s Movements proposed that the hairdressers set up a special organizational help unit for each industry to form a union. The leaders of the United Front sent representatives to discuss the constitution and the direction of work. They claimed that their purpose was not only to help women employees in the restaurants and teahouses but also to tackle any problems regarding gender and employment. The effort of organizing unions came from outside rather than from the service laborers themselves. The leaders of the United Front were likely to be intellectuals who were conscious of the international trends of labor movements. Nevertheless, their agenda of forming unions for the first time triggered women workers from different service industries to act together under the umbrella title of “laborers.”

Compromises

In early June, Lin Yizhong, the head of the Office of Civil Affairs (Minzheng ting) and a leading member of the city government, came back from a trip and met with He Xiangning, one of the most respected women activists in China since the May Fourth era, to discuss the strife. Lin brought the standoff to an end. On June 13, the labor union decided to pressure the government to enforce the eight-point solution by threatening to stage a large protest. As a follow-up, the Executive Bureau sent the union’s request for monitoring of the 8:2 ratio to the Municipal Party Bureau as the ultimate resolution to the strife.

Meanwhile, an investigative report by a newspaper claimed that many nü zhaozai had previously been prostitutes and that they had violated the public safety law and thus posed great barriers to the effort to legitimize the employment of women in teahouses. Responding to the accusation, the Women’s Association admitted that some prostitutes had indeed come to this industry; however, they argued, even in legal proceedings it was permissible for people to start over (zhixin). Attention should focus on social morals (fenghua), not the backgrounds of the nü zhaozai.

The head of the Police Bureau also indicated that suspicion of teahouse workers because of their past was misplaced. “Women in the teahouse industry can broaden the opportunities women can have, or else they will have no means of making a living and will be forced into prostitution. This will be unthinkable. Thus promoting women’s employment in the teahouse industry not only could end unlicensed prostitution, it could also improve the economy of the country’s citizens.” By this time, the Guangzhou government was adopting a positive attitude about women’s employment in service industries. In its policy concerning prostitution, the government also encouraged prostitutes to go to reform institutions. Perhaps the government increasingly saw service labor as a solution to the problem of prostitution.

To keep women employees in their businesses, owners of teahouses and companies also began to self-monitor the social interactions between their women employees and their customers. In order to further uplift nü zhaozai to the status of laborers, nü zhaozai themselves brought up the issue of morality. Distancing themselves from prostitutes and separating themselves from immoral women, nü zhaozai entered the sphere of legitimate laborers. In order to do so, it was necessary to remove the threat their sexuality posed to society.

The eight-point method prohibited women from working between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. or at banquets (huiyuan), and it regulated women employees’ clothing. Teahouses were asked to stop allowing flirting and any other inappropriate behavior. Another new regulation also prohibited teahouses from hiring more than two blind female singers in one night and banned such singers from marching in the streets to solicit customers. These restrictions show that the government tried to regulate women’s appearance and behavior in the name of protecting women. Such regulations invented a new morality in the service industries.

To avoid further criticisms, the Women’s Association also issued methods for eliminating misconduct on the part of women employees. It organized steering committees in each occupation and collected public opinion on protecting morals and women workers. It proposed that the government draw up measures to eliminate misbehaving women service laborers.
In other industries, too, leaders and employers supportive of employing women started self-monitoring. In order to plan for recruiting female members, the hairdressers’ union also investigated the conditions of women hairdressers. The women leaders of the labor movement were told to order the female hairdressers to abandon all bad behavior, such as unnecessary makeup (goutou fenman) and soliciting customers (zhaoshi guke).\(^6\) In addition, the leaders advised them to refrain from being sexually dissolute (jiangdang) and to maintain a professional spirit (dengse) while working.\(^6\)

Ultimately, then, the strike resulted in several compromises. The main settlement was the 8:2 ratio, whereby each teahouse could not employ more women than 20 percent of all employees. It was a victory for women activists, who finally gained legitimacy. However, these women also agreed to establish new rules for women employees’ working hours, uniforms, and behavior in the workplace. These provisions make it evident that the government abandoned the idea of abolishing the hiring of nü zhaodai, as it had done with the abolition of prostitution. These service laborers were slowly accepted as “productive urban citizens,” with the condition that they would restrain workplace behavior that could be seen as sexualized or seductive.

The newspapers continued to write about the outcome. One reporter commented that the 8:2 ratio was a victory for the nü zhaodai and their bosses. The request for hiring women workers was intended only for specific restaurants and teahouses that had hired many women (most of which were women-owned and women-run teahouses). The male leaders who had proposed the ratio had not thought about the effect it would have on the male-run businesses that previously had not hired any women employees. According to this reporter, when the new 8:2 ratio was enforced, all restaurants and teahouses would have to hire at least as many women as made up 20 percent of their entire workforce. Because of the new law, many teahouses that had not previously hired women started to do so. Moreover, the hiring process was decided by the owners, many of whom did not sign contracts with the union, and therefore the rule initiated by the union had no effect on these teahouses.\(^6\) With the government’s promise that it would not abolish nü zhaodai, teahouses were guaranteed to hire women as at least, but likely more than, 20 percent of all employees.

Even after women activists had won the battle by tightening control over the behavior and dress code of individual nü zhaodai, male commentators continued to argue that women were not suited to work in the service sector because of physical limitations. Medical columns for women written by self-proclaimed doctors or specialists warned working women about the danger of working too hard. Some of them used medical theories to convince women that such jobs would be detrimental to their health. For example, one columnist argued that it was bad for women to stand for a long time because “the sexual organ would be flushed with blood.” The blood would then flow to the hipbones and cause additional diseases. This writer further stated that “working too hard” and “exhaustion,” together with “cold,” “lack of cleanliness,” and “irregular sex, such as masturbation,” would cause infection. He also advised women against the use of tampons, since they would obstruct blood flow, causing the organ to easily be contaminated by germs. It was best for women to wash their outer labia several times a day.\(^7\) Such articles implied that working in a public place would not be a convenient setting for women to take care of their hygiene. Although the author did not refer to service labor explicitly, it is likely that teahouses would fit the category of such a work setting.

In the final years of the 1930s, the discourse about nü zhaodai’s working rights shifted. As Japan encroached on China, nü zhaodai participated in discussions of the war and emphasized their patriotism as workers.\(^7\) They became allied with women’s groups such as the Alliance of Guangdong Female Comrades Fighting against War Enemies (Guangdongzheng funii kongdi tongzi hui) and donated money to the war effort.

Perhaps because “workers” took on an important identity in 1920s revolutionary rhetoric and continued to do so in the 1930s, when the Communist Party went underground, nü zhaodai and women’s organizations were eager to “lift” the status of their occupation to become workers. In this context, nü zhaodai were understood as “workers” whose existence and participation were welcome in the economic system and were inevitable to societal progress and civilization. By constructing service laborers as “workers,” the public also redefined stigmatized public identities previously regarded as “degraded.” The prerequisites for becoming “citizens” were ambiguous, but “worker” (that is, a productive being) was definitely a desirable status. Ironically, the advocates of modernization, who earlier had been troubled by the increase of public women in the city, saw no problem letting them pass as “workers” when they saw fit. In other words, these lower-class women might be considered productive urban citizens on condition that their jobs were not explicitly sexual and that the elements of their work were not scrutinized.

In fact, it was evident that the rise of “public women” could no longer be contained by policies of abolition. The well-organized, labor union-led movement to abolish nü zhaodai in 1935 also failed because too many women were working in the service industry. The government found no choice but to quietly acknowledge the “lesser evil.”

The rift with male workers continued, however. One nü zhaodai activist described how working conditions in 1938 had been improving, but
she complained that male coworkers often intentionally sabotaged the women's work and organizing effort. One of the activist goals of nü zhoudai was to "work on changing the contemptuous attitude of the public toward women workers." The public, although slowly accepting the necessity of service laborers' existence in the city, continued to hold an ambivalent attitude toward women engaged in such work. At times, this ambivalence became a barrier, preventing these women from functioning comfortably in society.

The examination of the women who served in teahouses and restaurants demonstrates that the rise of the service sector was a terrain of competition and invention. While capitalists took the opportunity to squeeze profits, unskilled women and men sought expertise and training in order to become "professionals" in the service sector. Drawing on newspaper and tabloid commentaries about women's employment in the late 1920s and 1930s, I have focused on the widespread debate about women teahouse workers—a debate that is far more significant than has been realized; in fact, it was a symbol of modernity. Women in the service sector revealed clear contradictions in the compartmentalization of victim and predator. In the social thinking of the day, the activities of the nü zhoudai and her work were significant enough to elicit great interest. This interest and the places where the nü zhoudai plied her trade suggest that female service workers were slowly redefining the connotation of public occupations and public identities, which had previously been regarded as degraded. While teahouses may have provided a modern space for voyeuristic interest and intimate heterosexual companionship, the implications of this public work of intimacy are broad. It seems clear that the issue of women's employment in teahouses was acknowledged even by contemporaries to be a startling symbol of modernity rather than a parochial problem involving a mere handful of service workers and their male patrons.

NOTES

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1. Lu Xun, "What Happens after Nora Leaves Home?" The writer and critic delivered this speech at Beijing University in December 1923. Henrik Ibsen's play

A Doll's House became very popular after Hu Shi translated it in 1918 in the New Youth. In the original story, Nora, the heroine, after a fight with her husband, came to the realization that she was only playing the role of a doll in her family. Fed up, she left the house and slammed the door behind her. The story of Nora drew much empathy from Chinese women, especially the ones who lived in arranged marriages and were not happy. Nora became a symbol for young women who sought liberation from the family and marriage system. However, Lu Xun was not so optimistic about what would become of the Chinese Nora after she left home. In the speech, he did not give a direct answer, but he warned that at the time, society was not able to provide the support women needed to become independent from their families. He believed that economic survival was crucial for women who wanted to leave home. The speech is reprinted in Silent China: Selected Writings of Lu Xun.


4. The male labor unions were quite well organized; the restaurant unions had gone on strike for a pay raise in 1922. The government was forced to compromise before the men would resume work. For details, see Huazi ribao, January 22, 1922.

5. Since very few lower-class women were literate at that time, whether this report was truly written by a nü zhoudai is questionable. This is one of the few newspaper articles whose author self-identified as a nü zhoudai, however.


8. Guangdong mingguo ribao, January 22, 1926.

9. Huazi ribao, January 14, 1922; January 16, 1922. The Guangdong nüjie lianhe hui, formed in 1919, was the first women's organization in Guangdong. It was criticized after 1927 by the CCP for its middle-class constituency. The name of this organization never reappeared in the later movement.

10. Zhajiang huabao, no. 9 (1929).

11. Although the wider political environment turned more conservative, since nüde was not seen as labors and did not seem to pose a political threat to the GMD, the political climate does not seem to have been the principal reason for the failure of the nüde movement.

12. For details about the huang zhi, see chapter 4.


15. Although many organizations and labor groups were founded in the early 1920s by CCP members in Guangdong, as leaders of the CCP went underground, most of these groups also subsided after the split between the GMD and the CCP in 1927.

16. See chapter 1 for details.


19. Such doubts about qualifications were raised with respect to other female service laborers as well. For example, in the case of hairdressers, the training period was originally six months and the trainee had to pay a tuition fee of $60. However, as demands for female hairdressers grew, the time for instruction was shortened to one to two months. A reporter/commentator wrote, “When men learn how to cut hair, it usually takes them three years, but for women, it only requires three months. Some even get out of it in less than three months. Many of them need to be retrained. And most customers are not satisfied with their work.”

20. For details about the creation of the culture of tipping, see chapter 4.


22. Xianggou gongshang ribao, August 15, 1935.


26. Although Xianggou gongshang ribao was a Hong Kong-based newspaper, it circulated in Guangzhou as well. It carried a detailed account of the labor strife of 1935.

27. See chapter 5.


32. Nanhua ribao, April 26, 1935.

33. Huazi ribao, April 21, 1935.

34. Nanhua ribao, May 2, 1935.

35. Not much is known about the work of this organization. From some of its statements, it appears to have been formed by middle-class women who were active in the GMD.


37. Huazi ribao, April 21, 1935.

38. Huazi ribao, April 21, 1935.


40. The eight points were as follows: (1) Guangzhou city should treat all employees equally, regardless of their sex. (2) When restaurants and teahouses employ women, the total number cannot exceed 20 percent of the total staff of the company. (3) The restaurants and teahouses that have not hired female employees may do so, but they cannot dismiss any male employees because of the new recruitment of female employees. (4) For the protection of women, they cannot work between 10 P.M. and 6 A.M. (5) Female employees must wear aprons and earth-colored clothing, and they should be simple in appearance. (6) Restaurants that hold drinking banquets (huagun) cannot hire women workers. (7) When there are any discoveries of behavior that breaches social morals, the restaurants will be banned from employing women. (8) This solution will be carried out by the Administrative Department (zhixing bu).


42. Xianggou gongshang ribao, May 20, 1935.

43. Xianggou gongshang ribao, May 20, 1935.

44. Not much is known about this organization either. But it was one of the few women’s organizations that survived the 1927 purge. Many of its statements emphasized the importance of Sun Yat-sen’s constitution and teachings.

45. Huazi ribao, April 7, 1935. The author mentioned that the Zhonghua Mingwu Xinzheng Shiqi Yuehua, no. 37 and no. 41, promulgated on June 1 of the twentieth year of the Republic (1931), as well as the Zhonghua Mingwu Constitution no. 136 and 138, stated clearly that the Republican government guarantees its citizens the rights of occupation and business.

46. Xianggou gongshang ribao, May 17, 1935.

47. Xianggou gongshang ribao, May 18, 1935.


51. Xianggou gongshang ribao, May 7, 1935.

52. Xianggou gongshang ribao, June 4, 1935.


54. Xianggou gongshang ribao, June 1, 1935.

55. Xianggou gongshang ribao, April 26, 1935.

56. Xianggou gongshang ribao, August 14, 1935. The hiring of women hairdressers started in Shanghai, and the practice spread to Hong Kong. In 1935, the Zhonghua nü xijshe (Chinese Women Crafts Learning Association) was established. The founder of Guangzhou hairdressing was Du Bingshan, who started a class at the YWCA. She came from Daliang district of Shunde County. At that time the silk industry was declining because of the rural depression. She decided to learn some practical skills and went to Hong Kong. Thereafter she set up Guangzhou’s Nüzi tiya xijsu (Women Hairdressing Learning Center). Others also opened learning institutions, such as Zhongguo xijsu (China Crafts Learning Center) by Shen Shuqiu, Zhonghua xijsu (Chinese Crafts Learning Center) by Du Bingde, Guomin xijsu (Citizens’ Crafts Learning Center), and Zhenle xijsu (Virtue Crafts Learning Center). Many of the schools would introduce women to work in a crafts shop. Some of the students did not have to pay tuition, but their income for the first few months was deducted and given to their teachers.

57. Xianggou gongshang ribao, April 26, 1935. The women hairdressers did not have a fixed salary. Customers’ payments were divided between the shop and the hairdresser, with the shop taking 60 percent and the hairdresser getting 40 percent. Tools were provided, but the women had to supply their own uniforms. In the winter, they wore jackets; in the summer, they usually wore white blouses and black or blue skirts. The cost of a haircut ranged from 20 to 40 cents. Many women also got tips, called hand-shuddering fees (shouzhen fei). The monthly income could therefore range from $30 to $90. Some of these women were married, some not, but most entered the industry out of financial need. The total number of graduates of the hairdressing schools was around seven hundred, and around two to three hundred were employed in Guangzhou. Others either went to remote counties or did not work at all.

Chapter 8

60. Xianggang gongshang ribao, July 15, 1935. At its representative meeting, the union conveyed the following points to its members: (1) Before the formal enactment of the law, member restaurants and teahouses should follow the proposition of an 8:2 ratio and the eight-point methods. (2) If established companies wanted to start hiring female employees, they should apply to the union and state clearly the names of the new employees. New companies must apply to the union three days before the business opens. (3) All companies should hire male employees who quit their jobs because they were not satisfied with the older hiring of female employees. (4) Both new and old companies need to follow the 8:2 ratio and should not replace male workers with female employees. (5) From the day this solution is passed, all members must follow the solution dictated by the union. If members violate any regulations, the union will impose appropriate penalties.

63. Xianggang gongshang ribao, July 7, 1935.
65. Xianggang gongshang ribao, July 8, 1935; July 15, 1935. For the first violation, a warning would be given; the second violation incurred a penalty; the third violation earned dismissal. At the same time, the employers would also be given a warning and penalty for each violation. After the fourth violation, the shop would be banned from hiring women.

66. Xianggang gongshang ribao, July 21, 1935. The records do not indicate whether the government acknowledged these proposals.
67. Xianggang gongshang ribao, April 26, 1935.
68. Nanhu ribao, April 24, 1935.
69. Xianggang gongshang ribao, July 8, 1935. Many Guangzhou teahouses were owned by women. It is probable that they were influenced by the hairdressing industry. The hair salons that hired women at that time were owned by women.
70. Xianggang gongshang ribao, August 2, 1935.
71. Zhongshan ribao, April 21, 1938.
72. Guangzhou mingpu ribao, May 14, 1938. The main goals of the organization were to mobilize women teahouse workers so that they would become more nationalistic and donate to the war effort.

Conclusion
Lower-Class Women, “Emancipation,” and Urban Citizenship

This study has revisited the concept of women’s emancipation by focusing on South China and examining the interpretations of the concept by various political and social participants in 1920s and 1930s Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Jiefang was a key word in twentieth-century China, especially in regard to the emergence of women’s consciousness in the 1920s. Historical writing has often described the period from the May Fourth Movement until the purge of the Communists in 1927 as one of social radicalism. For women, the period symbolized the onsets of a new freedom as they were encouraged to pursue free marriages, emancipate themselves from traditional constraints, and seek their own careers. This study’s focus on urban South China suggests, however, that women’s emancipation was not a simple story of progress but rather one that entailed social control and defining womanhood. Scholars on whose work I build have explored emancipation as an important ideal never achieved by women, whether because of ideological shortcomings on the part of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or the exigencies of political practice.1 Here I consider emancipation as an iterative process, unstable and not necessarily linear or progressive, constantly refuged according to changing local circumstances and the wider political environment.

Differences in the Concepts of Emancipation between Hong Kong and Guangzhou

Even though Guangzhou and Hong Kong were geographically close, the term “emancipation” had a different history in each place. In Hong Kong,
the usage of "emancipation" was limited. Predominantly, the general concept of "emancipation" was adopted by dispossessed male workers who had ties with labor groups in China; it was used to refer to freedom from colonial control. As to how it should apply to the case of women, British missionary and government documents often evoked the term "slave" to refer to mui tsai and trafficked women, categories of women whom the colonial regime tried to uplift. The main task of missionary women who worked in Hong Kong was to convert Chinese women to Christianity and to teach them Western values so that they would not be bound by Chinese customs. These women reformers refrained from using the term "emancipation," perhaps because it was tied to the anti-imperialist discourse circulating in Hong Kong. Instead, they chose less controversial terms, such as "rescue" or "release" (shifang).

In Hong Kong, the main government-sponsored institution that dealt with mui tsai, prostitutes, and other groups of women who did not conform to the norm of virgins or chaste women was the Po Leung Kuk (PLK). In the PLK, only the women willing to change were qualified for "rescue," which often meant short-term confinement in the PLK. When the PLK "released" women to return to their home (xiangjia), that second decision would end in one of two ways: one was to place the woman back with her husband or within her natal home, while the other was to send her back to China. Thus, the policy of release was a strategy of creating boundaries between the household and the outside world, as well as between Hong Kong and China. Unlike the common understanding of emancipation, the policy of "rescue" and "release" was not aimed at making women independent or freeing them from household constraints.

In Guangzhou, partly because of the more direct influence of the May Fourth Movement, the metaphor of freeing an enslaved/bound woman's body often appeared in local discussions and social campaigns as a way to empower women to become agents and citizens. Activists in revolutionary politics encouraged women to appreciate their natural bodies, gain economic independence, and free themselves from feudal practices. The municipal government initiated the jengsu reform campaign in the mid-1920s to support the cause. Unlike in Hong Kong, where only specific categories of women were seen as needing to leave their destitute circumstances, in Guangzhou all women, regardless of class background and occupation, were metaphorically depicted as slaves who had to transform themselves.

Colonialism was without doubt the most crucial factor shaping the differences in the concepts of emancipation between Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Nevertheless, we need to examine smaller-scale mechanisms in the two cities in order to understand the differences colonialism made.

In Hong Kong, the issues of gender and class were articulated by different political groups in separate contexts, but in Guangzhou, gender was subsumed under class in political discussions. In Hong Kong, the colonial government and missionaries were concerned with the question of women. The Chinese elites also had a stake in issues related to charity, but their concerns were with fending off foreign interference while maintaining their social status in the city. Those who participated in discussions about women in Hong Kong were British legislators and missionaries, together with Chinese elites. In contrast, the laborers in Hong Kong were the most active group expressing anticolonial sentiments, as demonstrated by the 1920s workers' strikes. Although at moments labor activists wanted to incorporate the issue of mui tsai into the broader cause of child labor, the Anti-Mui Tsai Society, composed for the most part of professionals in Hong Kong, rejected their support. While victimized women could elicit sympathy from colonial elites, the laboring classes were generally perceived as threatening to colonial rule. In addition, during that period, women workers in Hong Kong, as a category distinct from male laborers, seldom organized to fight for their working rights. Nor did the male labor movement leaders make an effort to recruit women. Overall, Hong Kong discourse seldom treated lower-class women as agents who emancipated themselves. Neither their gender nor their class status mattered in political discourse. The governing regime and the elites rendered them passive objects of charity, although we can find women taking up those perceived images of passive womanhood to serve their own ends, as is seen in recorded testimonies in the PLK.

In Guangzhou as well as elsewhere in China, intellectuals and activists of both the CCP and the Guomindang (GMD) perceived women as agents of political change. Educated elites first articulated the question of women as one related to national survival. In the late Qing, Liang Qichao and others spelled out the importance of women's political participation. During the May Fourth Movement, intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao argued that women's participation in the cause of revolution was necessary if the nation was to attain modernity. The idea of gender equality was also incorporated in the CCP's political agenda; the CCP's founders believed in the importance of women's equality in developing a new political order. In Guangzhou, women's labor rights were high on the agenda of both the CCP and the GMD. Women-led class-based movements, such as the telephone operators' movement in 1924, could be found. The CCP tied jindai jiefang to lower-class women's suffering and located women's oppression in a class structure in which men and women workers were at the bottom. Even later, when the Communists went underground after 1927, social commentators in Guangzhou who wrote in local newspapers continued to see gender equality and the right to work as fundamental to societal progress.
In both cities, however, service workers remained marginal members of the laboring class. Politicians and conservative commentators perceived women service laborers as outside the category of workers because of the sexual nature of their work. When they appeared in popular publications, these women were depicted as performers in the entertainment venues, as innocent women who had degenerated because of financial reasons or women who yearned for a life of luxury. Even in Guangzhou, neither the government nor male laborers supported mǔlıng and mǔ zhūode in their organized attempts to expand their work opportunities. Rather, their backers were mainly feminist organizations formed by women intellectuals.

THE QUESTION OF CUSTOMS

In political discourse, the issues of mǔ tāi, prostitution, and breast binding were commonly defined as forms of fēngsū (social customs) or traditions. Although at times social critics referred to them as local customs, more often these practices were seen as reflecting the larger cultural characteristics of the Chinese people. British politicians and missionaries condemned the mǔ tāi system, foot binding, and concubinage as examples of “Chinese customs or traditions” that reflected the barbarity of Chinese people. Resisting control by British colonizers, local elites used the concept of Chinese customs as a defense for keeping mǔ tāi in households in Hong Kong, arguing that the mǔ tāi system was intended to be a benevolent Chinese practice. In this debate, while British colonizers viewed Chinese customs as inherently backward characteristics of the colonized, to Chinese elites they evoked nationalistic sentiments toward the lost nation of China.

In Guangzhou, Chinese customs were constantly monitored by state authorities and public commentators. During the Fēngsū reform movement in the 1920s, everything tied to old Chinese customs had to be abolished, including breast binding, mǔ tāi, and prostitution, because they were classified as feudal barriers to the cause of modernization. Many of these practices, which focused on the bodies of women, were especially unacceptable in Guangzhou because of the city’s position as the “cradle of the revolution.” In the subsequent fēnghūa protection movement from 1930 to 1935, however, the city government of Guangzhou revisited the meaning of fēngsū and embraced a reified notion of Chinese culture newly tied to national aspirations, as evident in the Campaign for National Products. In Hong Kong, where “custom” became a defense of local practices against British interference, the meanings of Chinese customs did not change over time; in Guangzhou, however, social customs were frequently revised to fit into the definitions of modernization at particular moments.

EMANCIPATION AS POPULATION MANAGEMENT

Anxiety about moral degeneration among urban residents, beginning in the late 1920s, led to a new stress on control of the population and a new need to sustain specific forms of proper class and gender behavior. Urbanization, the rising new middle class, and print culture made public entertainment available to the masses. At the same time, the development of the sexualized service industry and sensationalized tabloid literature gave rise to public disapproval of women working in popular entertainment. Through disciplining women’s bodies, authorities attempted to establish new social standards of proper gender norms. In both cities, the perceived immorality of women posed a threat to programs of emancipation, and in the 1930s, both cities reacted by using different strategies to contain “bad” women. Social critics complained of moral decay and searched for causes: the vulgarity of the new rich, the immorality of the service industry and the popular press, and women who worked in public. The tabloid writers demanded attention to social distinctions within an upwardly mobile urban middle class and criticized those who could not maintain the refined tastes of the literati of a previous generation. The accreditation of the liàngjiā fùnǚ (women from good families) was crucial to the political management of women in both cities. Even though expectations for bodily practices changed quickly between 1920 and 1935, concerns about women’s virtue remained constant. The government in Guangzhou mandated standards for citizens’ behavior and dress, while in Hong Kong, women who did not act properly were taken to the PLK by their spouses, parents, or families for discipline; the most deviant were deported to rural China.

Hong Kong and Guangzhou residents crafted their exclusivist notions of urban citizenship by disciplining women. Both cities determined citizenship not by virtue of current residence but by place of origin and local standards of civilized behavior. The glamorous urban environment was also unsuitable for unmarried women who were not enlightened enough to take on proper jobs. In Hong Kong, the concept of “home” was evoked to draw boundaries between Hong Kong residents and those who did not belong. The concept can be understood in two ways: first, written with the Chinese character xiàng, it represents a backward China; second, written as jiā, it means a family that can provide a safe refuge for women. In the 1920s and 1930s, as the PLK cases illustrate, the elites in Hong Kong gave new meaning to xiàng beyond a place of origin and used the term to refer to territories outside of and different from Hong Kong. While young girls
and women who needed a pure environment were sent back to their families or husbands in xiang for home supervision, the women who became prostitutes or who failed to conform to the norm were told to leave Hong Kong by themselves. Neither group was included in the ranks of functioning urban citizens in Hong Kong, and both were banished from public view. On the other hand, if these women were married or had proper guardians, their families (jia) were supposed to restrain their mobility. In Guangzhou, place of origin was less determinative than manners, and a shift in citizenship from birthplace to the new residence was allowed if the residents learned to acquire proper behavior and conform to the dress code current at a given time.

Social hierarchies in the two cities were built not only on structures of gender, class, and place of origin but also within categories of lower-class women as well. Within the latter group, the ones who ranked the highest in society were usually felt to deserve the most sympathy, and the ones who deserved the least were the women who ranked the lowest. The image of the victimized woman was useful to various political participants in drawing boundaries. Advocates of the abolition of mui tsui, for instance, drew public attention to the image of pathetic girls awaiting emancipation. These women were to be rescued and returned to society, whereas others, classified as deviant, were confined in the PLK or deported from Hong Kong. Women themselves adopted the stance of victim to create opportunities for survival and upward mobility, as demonstrated by the women who testified in the PLK. In the entertainment industry as well, images of poor, abused singers represented one type of ideal femininity, one that male customers desired and women used as an asset in the labor market. In certain circumstances, assuming the status of victim provided women with the ability to move across the boundaries that confined them.

As Japan encroached on China after 1935, however, anxiety over local prestige came to be regarded as trivial, and the definition of "emancipation" was remade to mobilize both men and women to fight against the war enemy. Independence of the nation became the main goal of citizens, and other types of emancipation were rendered secondary. The mit zhaidai movement in Guangzhou came to a close when gender gave way to the larger war effort.

However, this type of intervention in women residents' behavior resumed after the war. Beginning in the mid-1940s, many of the fenghuai policies reappeared in yet another new form in Guangzhou, rebranded as fengqi (social trends). In 1945, the Restaurant and Teahouse Labor Union introduced new regulations for female teahouse employees in order to "correct their luxurious and bad tendencies" (gaizheng shechi hulang zhi fengqi). In 1947, the city government set up several seminars to talk about the rectification of social trends (zhuang sheshi fengqi zuotianhui), which included discussion of how people should behave and dress. In 1948, the provincial assembly proposed new guidelines for reforming fengqi. While the meanings of this fengqi campaign are beyond the scope of the present study, these new policies appear to be another episode in a long continuum of social-control projects initiated by local authorities, and as in other campaigns, monitoring behavior remained an important means of achieving such control. At the same time, like the service laborers, women probably continued to experiment with their own versions of modernity and to explore the limits of social tolerance.

In focusing on the political discussions of women's bodies, this study suggests that emancipation and social control were inseparable. Emancipation was always conditional and entailed restrictions. To the residents of both cities in the 1920s and 1930s, lower-class women's behavior had to be monitored constantly in order for urban society to achieve its imagined modernity.

Such strategies of social control were not limited to Republican China, however. Until Hong Kong reverted to Chinese control in 1997, the border that separated mainland China and Hong Kong marked out the colonized territory of Hong Kong from that of the sovereign state of China. During and after World War II and the civil war in China in the 1940s, Hong Kong witnessed a great influx of refugees from China. In 1951, both the British colonial government and the People's Republic of China (PRC) decided to enforce border control between China and Hong Kong. Migration continued over the next few decades as dramatic political events, such as the Cultural Revolution, took place in the PRC. While in the 1980s and 1990s the immigration policy was further tightened, the PRC established near the border a cluster of Special Economic Zones, including Shenzhen and Zhuhai, with flexible economic policies and governmental measures conducive to foreign investment, thus increasing the traffic across the border.

The border did not disappear with decolonization, however. Unlike many borders whose purpose is to mark the territories of national entities, this particular border is now used to control movements of people and goods between two regions that today formally reside within one nation. Even though Hong Kong has reintegrated with China after 1997, residents of Hong Kong and mainland China need special documents (the Home Return Permit for Hong Kong residents and the exit endorsement for mainland residents) to cross the Hong Kong–mainland China border. The border has evolved from one with few restrictions in the early decades of the twentieth century to one heavily guarded against illegal migrants since the formation of the PRC. Yet, over the last few years, cross-border tourism has become crucial to the economic codependence of the two regions.
In popular narratives in Hong Kong as well, the mainland Chinese continue to serve as the “other,” and mainland travelers and migrants are constantly accused by the public of behaving improperly and thus disturbing the social order and international image of Hong Kong. Although crossing the border has become much easier, by associating manners with origins, these dissatisfied Hong Kong residents imply that the right to belong to the city should be restricted to those who have acquired appropriate behavior. As in the 1920s and 1930s, single women from and on the mainland attract media attention because they are often seen as street prostitutes or mistresses of Hong Kong men. Such portrayals became especially prominent after the inception of the Individual Visit Scheme (Ziyou xing) in July 2003, which allowed travelers from the mainland to visit Hong Kong on an individual basis. Prior to the scheme, most mainlanders could only travel to Hong Kong on business visas or in group tours. The purpose of the scheme was to boost Hong Kong’s economy after the SARS crisis in the spring of 2003, and travelers from the mainland did help the Hong Kong economy; but negative popular representations of mainlanders also proliferated. Such sentiments not only echo the earlier discourse of urban citizenship but also reveal the new anxiety of Hong Kong residents about losing their sense of cultural superiority over mainlanders as decolonized British subjects. Unlike the situation in the 1920s and 1930s, however, Hong Kong residents can no longer deport undesirables from the city, because the city is no longer a colony of Great Britain but a special administrative region of China, economically and politically dependent on the mainland. Since 2010, the PRC government’s plan to merge nine cities in the Pearl River Delta region into a supermetropolis and the decision to construct the Guangzhou–Hong Kong section of the high-speed railway have triggered intense debates in Hong Kong. Many of its residents strongly oppose these future plans to re integrate Hong Kong into South China, partly because such development will dislocate a large number of local inhabitants and eventually destroy the identity of the postcolonial city and its people. While some may argue that these plans are the “future anterior” of the PRC government to reverse the earlier colonial policy that had barred mainland Chinese from coming to Hong Kong, the emphasis on building expensive transportation and commercial networks that principally benefit the upper-class Chinese in Hong Kong and mainland China reminds us that urban modernization, as always in history, involves monitoring what kind of people or information can and should move across regions.

Nor did the concept of emancipation and its tie to bodily comportment disappear. In Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and many big cities in China, plastic surgery, particularly breast enlargement, has become popular among women. Meanwhile, opponents of plastic surgery, voicing their views in the newspapers, criticize women’s pursuit of artificial beauty, suggesting that they should embrace their natural bodies. Women are portrayed as foolish consumers who blindly follow social trends and male expectations. These arguments are very similar to those that appeared during the natural-breast campaign in the 1920s. In both cases, women were expected to emancipate themselves, but the form of that emancipation was predefined by the very people who had already formed firm ideas of what women “will have become” in the future. In contemporary South China, as in the Republican period, women who exceed the limits of social expectations may find that emancipation, entangled as it is with social control and competing definitions, remains beyond their reach.

NOTES

2. Until 1980, illegal immigrants who successfully negotiated the border and moved into the city were allowed to settle in Hong Kong.