The teahouse, which flowered in the 1920s and 1930s as a consequence of rising standards of dining and leisure, was a key location of modern entertainment. The changes in market expectations of femininity are reflected in the transitions of teahouse laborers in restaurants (jiulou) and teahouses (chaguan or chatou) in Guangzhou and Hong Kong, from blind singers (guji), to singers (niling), and finally to waitresses (niu zhaodai), as they were represented in huabao (pictorials) and xiaobao (tabloids). While after the May Fourth Movement many of these service and entertainment laborers represented the “emancipatory” orientation of reformists and feminists, who urged women to participate in social labor, they simultaneously served as icons of typically male-centered anxiety about the moral strength of the nation and urban citizenship.

The service sector, as represented by the teahouse industry, introduced a new public venue for intimacy between the two sexes, led to the growth of the popular press, and popularized a form of pleasure previously available only to elite men. These were unprecedented opportunities for lower-class single women to pursue financial independence and sexual agency. At the same time, however, when femininity became the subject of social discussions in teahouses and the popular press, the way teahouse laborers presented themselves in public and the kind of “service” they offered challenged the boundaries of society’s moral tolerance in Guangzhou and set the stage for increased government regulation of social morality in the 1930s. Along with the growing importance of service laborers in urban society, women shaped their own media image and fought for labor rights.
The phenomenon of women working in service industries began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when women were hired to work in public entertainment venues, including cinemas and art theaters, in the two cities. In Guangzhou, however, many swimming pools, theaters, and cinemas maintained tight gender segregation until the 1930s. Some of the first female service laborers were female employees recruited to serve women in separate female sections of the movie theaters. Provincial regulations required theaters to set up a separate female entrance and food store and to hire women as guards, ushers, and store managers specifically for the female section. Nevertheless, there were no signs of segregation in restaurants and teahouses for the “middle class,” which continued to have a mixed but male-dominated clientele. The growing spending power of the new middle class, including merchants, industrialists, and shop owners who tried to make their fortune in the city, shaped the patterns of consumption and might have prevented eating venues from being affected by the policy of gender segregation. Such venues did not, however, seem available for laborers and other lower-class members of society in Guangzhou. In Hong Kong, on the other hand, there is no evidence that gender segregation existed. But in regard to teahouses, most writers of the popular press did not indicate clear differences between Hong Kong and Guangzhou.

The rise of women in service industries in late 1920s and 1930s Guangzhou and Hong Kong was a direct result of economic crisis and unemployment. Depression in the rural economy in nearby counties forced women and men to seek work in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. The census of 1932 counted roughly 280,000 unemployed men and women in Greater Canton out of a total population of 2 million. There was an insufficient number of jobs for the lower class in urban factories. For female workers, beginning in the 1920s, another major factor in the consolidation of the social category of service laborers was the “emancipation” movements to abolish the mui tsai system and the prostitution industry in Hong Kong and the Guangdong area. At a time, after the call for women’s emancipation during the May Fourth Movement, when these abolition efforts threatened women who had participated in stigmatized labor and forced them to leave their work, they were eager to join a wide range of industries. Most of these women laborers were floating migrants who moved in and out of Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and their environs. As for their previous occupations, reports in the popular press show that many of the women who became nü zhao dai or nü ling had been courtesans, although a substantial number of them came from other sectors.

The changes in service labor can be illustrated by three kinds of female employees in teahouses: guji, nü ling, and nü zhao dai. In popular representations, these women were often depicted as exemplary figures on a continuum from tradition to modernity. Guji, or blind singers, exemplified unemancipated women, controlled by their foster parents and of limited mobility because of their physical disability. Rather than manipulating their beauty or sexuality, they made their living primarily through soliciting sympathy. Although, by the 1920s, most middle-class elites were familiar with such new ideas as emancipation, New Culture, and liberty, cultural images associated with the past still appealed to them. The frail guji constituted one such image.

Unlike guji, nü ling were sighted singers whose popularity relied partly on their beauty in front of the camera and on stage. On the one hand, nü ling kept traditional elements in their appearance, wearing old-style Chinese qipao, keeping their hair straight, and hiding their bodies. On the other hand, they also experimented with new modes of femininity: some put on makeup and wore high-heeled shoes; others developed affective or sexual relationships with customers beyond the teahouse setting. Since most of these women were also exposed to popular literature, advertisements, and customers, it is likely that the popular culture around them sharpened their awareness of available concepts of beauty. They were often represented as women in transition.

Following nü ling, nü zhao dai were introduced in the mid to late 1920s, after teahouse entertainment was popularized. These women interacted even more intimately with customers and were more aggressive in pursuing their independent lifestyle and pleasing customers, because their main income came from tips rather than allowances or wages set by foster mothers or teahouse managers. The popular press therefore often depicted them as a new type of urban woman who embodied modernity.

Although these three female figures—guji, nü ling, and nü zhao dai—appeared to trace a linear progression of women’s emancipation, the flexibility of styles indicated that adaptations to tradition and modernity were in flux, and women’s mixture of “traditional” and “modern” elements reflected the ambivalent stages of urbanization in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. Guji might appear to be helpless, but their ability to work in public and use their disability as an asset to earn income showed that they were more than victims who needed help. The increased use of commodities and the erotic appearance of nü ling, including their provocative poses, hairstyles, and gazes, could be signs of their experimentation with modern outfits and looks. However, compared to dancers and other public figures in the 1930s, the way they dressed could still be classified as conservative. They might have bobbed hair and wear short-sleeved qipao, but they seldom permmed their hair or decorated themselves with expensive accessories. Perhaps their financial status did not allow them to afford more extravagant styles, or perhaps a mixture of different styles
was the trend in that period. As for nü zhaozai, even though many of them were “modern” in their appearance, public manners, and financial independence, they were not fixed in this occupation; some switched jobs and became nüling, and others left to marry and have children with their former customers. The enduring stereotype of teahouse laborers during the 1920s and 1930s, despite the change from blind to sighted singer was that they were clandestine prostitutes. Stories in pictorials and tabloids depicted them either as former prostitutes who had worked in brothels or as streetwalkers who sold sexual services after their regular working hours in teahouses. In the 1930s in particular, newspaper commentators persistently criticized women who participated in the service industry at large for sexualizing public space and lowering social morality. Even though intimate acts between women employees and teahouse customers were frequent, the space of the teahouse was fundamentally different from that of the brothel. Whereas in the brothel sexual transactions between patrons and prostitutes happened privately (although the banquets patrons held with prostitutes in attendance were semiprivate), in the teahouse consumption took place in public, and all customers and employees were both watching and being watched at the same time. Flirting actions and conversations in such a setting were easily overheard and recorded by critics seated at a neighboring table.

RISE OF THE TEAHOUSE

Several conjoined factors in the late 1920s gave rise to the popularity of nüling and nü zhaozai. One was the rise of the new middle class and its demands for a higher living standard. The idea that the teahouse could serve as a place of entertainment and leisurely eating became popular only after the turn of the century. Ah Chang, a writer, depicted the change in teahouses in the early twentieth century in “A Brief History of the Evolution of Guangzhou Teahouses,” published in Guangzhou mingyue ribao in 1936. He divided the development of modern teahouses into three periods: old teahouses before the 1900s, or what he called the period of waning (shuishuo); the period of reform (gaizao) between the mid-1900s and the mid-1910s; and the period of evolution (fushuo) between the mid-1910s and the mid-1920s. In the first stage, when the old teahouse industry was waning, the main function of teahouses was to feed large crowds of laborers in a short span of time. Officials and middle-class businessmen generally despised teahouses because they were not clean and attracted large crowds of laborers. Even though residents of other social strata also enjoyed dim sum, they tended to order servants to fetch it rather than mixing with the crowds themselves. The function of the teahouse then was to generate enough food for the laboring class, rather than to provide high-quality eating venues and services.

However, according to Ah Chang, beginning in the 1900s, new houses and shops were built and furnished as Western-style houses for businesses. Teahouse owners also followed this change as they noticed that the new middle class was growing in the cities:

The windows were bright, the counters were clean, the food was interesting, and the service was good. So there were many people who went to Changti [a location in Guangzhou where teahouses were clustered] to try the tea. It was no longer like before, when people looked down on teahouses... [Many teahouse owners] were ashamed to use the old names of the teahouses [zhaozai]. They would either renovate their places or improve their food. Or else, their business would go down.

Such competition continued in the period of what Ah Chang characterized as “evolution.” The standards became more specific not only as regards the food but also for the packaging and the atmosphere:

Some of [the teahouses] were conspicuous for atmosphere and display; others [had employees who were] good at serving customers. Still others stood out because of their cheap prices. For instance, a certain teahouse did not have a very nice space, but it was still exceptionally crowded. To see the reason why, it was because every day after the meals, the [waiters and waitresses] would serve the customers cheap buns and shrimp dumplings. As a result, their business was still good.

It was also in the 1910s that Liang Zhengdun, one of the first teahouse owners in Hong Kong, introduced wrapping for pastries to improve the hygiene of the take-out products. Ah Chang further noted that hiring women as nü zhaozai (waitresses) and nüling (singers) became one strategy to improve businesses that targeted the middle class. If we take Ah Chang’s account as a common belief among the service providers at that time, there seemed to be two ways of improving competitiveness in the fierce commercialized industry. One was to improve the quality of the “services” (the products, the setting, and the speed of catering) for the customers’ satisfaction; the other was to lower the price or provide the customers with something “extra” in addition to what was expected (such as cheap buns and shrimp dumplings) so that the customers would feel that they were paying a small sum for an ample quantity of commodities. In addition, the appearance of women reshaped the expectations for the service industries, and in many articles about the new teahouses, more attention was paid to women laborers’ affect and behavior than to the quality of the product.
Singers were first employed in department stores and amusement parks in the 1900s. The amusement park run by the Zhenguang Company in Hong Kong was the first place to invite girls to sing in public at its opening. Usually, entertainment venues set up small stages for the singers in front of the listeners, who either gathered in front of the stage or, in the case of a teahouse or a restaurant, sat at various tables scattered around the room. At the very beginning, blind girls sang songs from famous Cantonese operas. As these singers became popular, they began to perform songs written by Cantonese songwriters, many of them literati who patronized the singers. Western instruments were also introduced, along with Chinese erhu (a two-stringed instrument). The singers were differentiated by genre according to the range of their voices; for example, pinghau singers sang in a natural voice; zihou singers sang in a high pitch, usually an octave higher than pinghau singers. The evolution from guji to nuling evinces the changing aesthetic standards of customers and the refinement of singing skills among teahouse singers in the 1920s.

Providing simple performances by blind girls was a business strategy that often saved small teahouses from closing, since it supplied free entertainment for patrons while they ate. Much like mui tsai, the guji were represented in the popular press as victims of evil traffickers and madams. The pay for guji was meager and was shared with the madams and the teahouse owners.

When guji were first invited to sing in teahouses, these places were sites of consumption and charity, practices that supplemented each other to sustain the industry. In popular history and literature, guji were depicted as deliberately blinded by their madams as a means of control. Teahouse owners and writers in the popular press commoditized disability by putting these women on display in teahouses and in writing to solicit sympathetic patrons and readers. Despite the maltreatment, the practice of hiring guji was tolerated as a sustainable way to help disabled young females, who would otherwise be starving in the streets.

In an essay that appeared in the Guangzhou mingao ribao in 1926, a contributor suggested ways to save guji when he observed that they were slowly being superseded by nuling. Like the Guangzhou government, he recommended registration of guji to “avoid forced migration or escape.” Interestingly, in order to “save” guji, he also advocated employing them in teahouses instead of sending them to rescue homes. Since the teahouses that hired nuling generally made more money than the ones that hired guji, for compensation he proposed that the teahouses that hired guji should be exempted from taxation, while those that hired nuling should be required to pay. He also suggested that the teahouses should sell their songbooks and charge the customers a fee for each song sung by blind women. The revenue thus gained should fund rescue institutions and training centers for blind girls who were in desperate straits. This writer’s comments demonstrate clearly that he saw the teahouse as a site of charity for allowing guji to work there.

His proposal was not adopted because politicians became wary of guji prostituting in private. In 1926, a bill was passed by the city government of Guangzhou to register blind singers and send them to a rescue home (juyuan), where they were taught handicrafts (gongyi) for periods ranging from a year and a half to three years. The girls could not leave during that time unless they were supported by their families or were married off. The rehabilitation program of the rescue home was similar to that for mui tsai at the Po Leung Kuk in Hong Kong, which categorized women according to the sympathy they were accorded. In setting up new rescue homes for the disabled, the government pulled the most vulnerable groups of women, the blind girls, out of employment and put them in the category of “charity recipients.” The government tried to separate these young women from the market economy and external influence.

Yet, the main reason for the decline in the employment of guji was not government regulation but popular demand. One commentator explained that the nuling came to appear more beautiful and attracted more customers than did guji because “they were originally jiaoshi [a type of prostitute] in Chentang Dongji [area in Guangzhou famous for brothels] who sacrificed their bodies and pretty looks [ziweng xiaoxiang] and were used to exposing themselves to the public.” The government had hoped that illegal prostitution would cease with stricter regulation on guji, but it had not taken into account that nuling, who were more dynamic and attractive, would pose a bigger threat to social morals.

Pioneer Liang Zhengdun reformed the teahouse industry in several ways in the early 1920s. Besides hiring former prostitutes to work in teahouses, he also professionalized the industry by recruiting literati and customers to write songs and lyrics, as well as compiling songbooks for the customers to use to sing along. A small number of nuling started to sing in teahouses and restaurants, as well as on the rooftops of department stores in Hong Kong. Their popularity was partly bolstered by the Guangdong–Hong Kong workers’ boycott of 1925, when many Hong Kong workers protested against British colonialism and went to Guangzhou for a general strike. Joining the Guangzhou–Hong Kong workers’ boycott movement, nuling and musicians demanded that their wages be raised. When the owners refused, many nuling in Hong Kong left for Guangzhou. After the boycott, nuling in Hong Kong and Guangzhou moved frequently back and forth across the border and worked in both cities. Their flexibility won them job opportunities and fame in both cities.

According to an essay that appeared in the Haizhu xinhua in 1928, nuling were divided into three classes, according to their looks and
singing skills. They usually signed contracts with one or two teahouses, where they appeared regularly. The teahouses paid them daily wages; this system was called bangong zhi (contract system). The muling who were both beautiful and good at singing belonged to the first grade. They received between eight and eleven yuan each day. The ones who were beautiful but could not sing, or the ones who were only good at singing but did not have good looks, belonged to the medium grade, with daily wages from three to six yuan. The ones who possessed neither singing skills nor looks belonged to the lowest grade and could only earn one to three yuan on the days they worked, but because of their rank, they were seldom offered stable positions in any teahouse. The singing hours of teahouses and restaurants were normally noon to half past three for lunch and seven to eleven at night. Customers who had enjoyed the performances began to pay regular visits to specific teahouses, looking for their favorites. Occasionally, muling were asked to sing for “lantern” banquets (denglong jiu), which usually ran from eight in the morning to four in the afternoon at the patron's home or at a restaurant reserved by the guests. The remuneration for singing at these banquets was usually higher than that for regular singing hours.16

THE POPULAR PRESS

The growing commercial economy allowed for the development of a new entertainment industry centering on the prominent visibility of women. In the information network that connected tabloids and teahouses, competition and survival made women strive endlessly to perfect their appearance and the quality of their performance. Between 1927 and 1929, portraits of singers, waitresses, prostitutes, and actresses in Guangzhou and Hong Kong adorned the front covers and pages of huabao (pictorials), xiaohe (tabloids), and other entertainment publications.9 The sections on the entertainment industries in these publications also provided sites for sensational narratives. The emergence of such reading matter reflects the intense commercialization, beginning in the 1920s, which brought about a service industry that became attentive to feminine aesthetics. In response to popular demand as reflected in the press, female entertainment laborers experimented with different forms of femininity to satisfy their customers' appetites. An analysis of stories from the popular press reveals the relationships between muling (female singers) and the network of men who supported the system, including the contributors, the customers of the teahouses, and the owners of teahouses who oversaw the hiring and circulation of muling. Contributors to these popular reading materials, who may also have been the customers or owners of teahouses, commented not only on the actual singing skills of muling but also on their looks, private lives, and love affairs; they reported every happening in the teahouse or restaurant that might intrigue readers. They were at the same time observers, reporters, and participants, and their stories became templates for entertainment news reportage. The popular press served as a venue where male writers could create their idols, at the same time that they could tarnish the reputations of muling, teahouse owners, and rival customers. The formation of this particular type of fandom of entertainers, accelerated by the tabloids, gave shape to modern forms of gender relationship in public space but also caused anxiety about the debasement of class values and moral decay, which led to government regulation.

Huabao

Chinese huabao, which originated in Shanghai in the 1870s, were magazines that contained pictorial illustrations along with the articles.18 Reputed to be politically more outspoken than standard newspapers, the earliest huabao generally included satirical illustrations drawn by well-known artists to make fun of social phenomena and to criticize government. In the mid-1920s, along with technological advances and the advent of print culture, the growing popularity of photography, and the development of commoditized urban culture, most huabao transformed into entertainment publications. Their photographic illustrations included not only landscapes and portraits of famous people but also images of prostitutes, actors and actresses, singers, and sometimes waitresses. The materials in the magazines ranged from columns by established writers, rising writers, and amateur writers to submissions by ordinary teahouse customers. Male readers, writers, publishers, and editors used the huabao to comment on modern urban life. Their articles turned these writers into authoritative observers, even experts on activities in public venues. The contents, including the cover, the essays, and the photographs, allowed the readers to peek into the lives of entertainment laborers.

Following Liangyao huabao, one of the most prominent huabao of Shanghai, many similar kinds of huabao were founded and distributed in major cities of China. From 1927 to 1929, huabao flourished in Guangzhou and Hong Kong, including titles such as Zhiqiang, Huaimou, Feifei, Tianju, and Lina. Most of these huabao circulated in both cities. A typical huabao featured short stories, serialized novels, opinion pieces, humorous anecdotes, and biographical essays on Chinese opera and movie actors and actresses, female singers, and prostitutes; most of these articles were not politically oriented. Most huabao were published monthly, were around twenty pages in length, and were generally sold for two to three jiao, indicating that the publishers were probably interested in extending their
readership from economic elites to the lower middle class. The advertisements featured in these publications, including for cigarettes, health products (particularly ones related to reproductive functions), cosmetic products, jewelry, and accessories, suggest that the readers were both female and male. Most of these magazines were discontinued within a year after their first issue. *Zhijiang xingji huabao*, one of the longest uninterrupted-running *huabao* in Guangzhou, lasted from 1926 to 1929. The transient nature of these publications indicates that competition was fierce and readers seldom developed a loyalty to any specific titles.

As seen in figure 2, most *huabao* printed colorful cover art in every issue, featuring a full-sized photo of a female model. The cover illustration was intended to attract potential readers while simultaneously affecting others who might glimpse the magazine and imagine, idealize, and consume the model on the cover. Thus, images of women had become an important component of the aesthetics of publishing. A few *huabao* used composite photographs on their covers, copying *guohua* or landscape paintings in the background and placing a framed photograph of a woman inside the painting. It could be for advertisement purposes that teahouse owners let *huabao* feature the photographs of *niuling* who contracted with them. Nearly all the photographs showed a woman from her torso up; only occasionally did they show a woman's entire body. The typical close-up features of the young cover model, posed with her head tilted or in profile, revealed her medium-length hair, sometimes tied in a bun, large eyes, and light makeup. On other covers, she has bobbed hair and wears Western attire—a loose dress with a scarf or a hat. More often she dressed in a *gipao*, accessorized with a flowery headband, jade earrings, or other adornments with greater Chinese characteristics. Young women's portraits also filled up the pages of the *huabao*. In figure 3, one page of a *huabao* displays the portraits of two singers, Cui Hong and Miao Ran, the former dressed like a student, holding a bouquet of flowers and wearing a hairpin, a traditional *gipao*, and a jade bracelet, while the latter posed in a casual way with her hands behind her head. Another *huabao* used a model holding up a fan made of peacock feathers. The way these women presented themselves in photographs showed that the common attire of women during this period was a juxtaposition of various forms of beauty.

**Xiaobao**

*Xiaobao* were much cheaper, costing about one jiao per issue, and were published more irregularly, ranging from once every three days to weekly. Some developed from newspaper supplements (*jukan*) but still had *huabao* as their titles. They were composed of fewer than four pages, printed in black and white, and the quality of the paper and printing was rougher than the twenty-page *huabao* and was identical to that of newspapers. Because of the size and cost of publication, most of these could afford only one or two black-and-white portraits of women in each issue, on the front page or placed in the middle of articles. *Huaxing saunikan*, published by a Hong Kong newspaper publishing company, was put out once every three days from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s. Another popular *xiaobao* circulating in Guangzhou and Hong Kong was *Guzi saunikan* (figure 4). Unlike the longer *huabao*, which had richer and more diverse content, these shorter versions consisted only of descriptions and anecdotes about entertainers and sensationalized news. The layout was denser because of limited space; each page usually carried ten to fifteen short essays. The writing in these *xiaobao* was in a more traditional literary style than that used in the colorful *huabao*, perhaps tailored for older male intellectuals who were trained in classical Chinese. Given the background of the New Culture Movement, one might expect that popular publications like *xiaobao* would carry articles in vernacular (baishuo) Chinese. The use of classical language in tabloid writing, however, along with the nostalgic sentiments expressed in many of the articles, demonstrates that even after the mid-1920s, readers of the popular press were not entirely hostile to older cultural forms.

**Besides huabao and xiaobao**, teahouses also put out printed guides for their regulars. Most of these publications contained critiques of stage performances, commentaries on the singers’ movements and looks, and imaginary reconstructions of the singers’ past history. Customers changed from passive observers to active participants in the performances in teahouses, as evidenced by their behavior and writing in tabloids. The act of going to see a performance of a *niuling* was called *guige*, which literally means watching songs, suggesting that the visual content was at least as important as the vocal skills. Writers contributed to *huabao* for various reasons: a contemplation of a *niuling’s* performance, a demonstration of expertise, the companionship of male literary networks, or commercial profit. Some commented on the looks and styles of *niuling*, and some critiqued their singing and attitudes. In other words, every detail of a *niuling* was on display. The reading culture of the popular press generated sustained a sense of belonging. The essays, photographs, and drawings in the publications fed customers’ imaginations and played a role in allowing them to visualize these women. Through them, readers were able to track *niuling*, and sometimes they found out more about their family histories and previous occupations.
After *nīlìng* became popular, *guījì* sank to the lowest stratum of the singing industry, becoming substitutes at venues that could not afford to hire *nīlìng*. As a *huābāo* writer commented, "Although the performance of *guījì* is not interesting, it's better than nothing." Nonetheless, alluring vulnerabilities embodied in poor song girls were not altogether abandoned in the entertainment industry after *nīlìng* took over. While politicians wanted to organize female citizens in such a way that the weak were sent to reform institutions and transformed into embroiderers, and the untamed were ousted from the marketplace, the commercial world continued to demand that other vulnerable women be put on display as performers in teahouses. Stories in the popular press continued to focus on the singers' difficult pasts. Writers invoked enduring images of traditional womanhood, in particular the sufferings these women had endured offstage. For example, in *Gēshèng yángyì*, a publication issued by a teahouse in Hong Kong, many of the *nīlìng* were depicted as victims of their madams, who had bought them as adopted daughters and trained them to sing. Their stories were very similar to the descriptions of destitute prostitutes in printed brothel guides: sympathetic commentaries about fallen young girls who came from noble parentage but whose existence now was fragile and pitiful. The only reason these women had become "public women" was the downfall of the family as a result of the economic depression. Occasionally, like the histories of prostitutes, the narratives of their pathetic backgrounds could solicit sympathy and financial assistance from customers. The presentation of *nīlìng* as frail or victimized women reinforced the class boundary between the singers and their customers. At the same time, these texts presented *nīlìng* as women who maintained their honor by remaining in poverty, separate from the pool of bad women who prostituted themselves.

Biographies of singers appeared in such tabloid columns as "Shīhuà xiǎozī" (Stories of Stone Flowers) in *Huaxìng sāowān*. Sometimes singing was seen as a way for the *nīlìng* to obtain freedom from a dark fate, such as prostitution. For example, Liang Yaoxi, a former prostitute, learned to sing before she married. Later, when she discovered that her husband already had a wife, she left him and became a singer. Another story concerns the fate of Da Yinglian, a famous *nīlìng* in Guangzhou who had been a prostitute. She married a policeman but was abandoned when the political situation became unstable. She then used her savings to buy two girls and taught them singing and dancing skills. Unfortunately, both these girls died. To support her mother, she became a singer. The writer of the article added that she stopped sleeping with her customers. In describing how they confronted their unhappy marriages and challenging economic backgrounds, tabloids indirectly praised these singers' perseverance and their ability to gain independence. Underlying this kind of storyline is the writers' enduring belief in the value of women's chastity. Even though singing was not a prestigious occupation, it ranked higher than remarriage and prostitution in the eyes of these male writers.

Another popular type of essay concentrated on the attitudes, bodily movements, facial expressions, and gestures of the *nīlìng* during their singing performances. One contributor described in detail the poses of several famous *nīlìng* on stage:

- **Bai Lanfang:** Turns her body to one side. Eyes glance left and right. Quite calm. Head turns frequently. A bit sulky during performance.
- **Shaojing:** Turns her body to one side. Eyes glance left and right. Relaxed and poised. Nose and cheeks move together. Eyes sometimes closed. Legs constantly change positions. Sometimes holds handkerchief in her hand.
- **Wenfei:** Turns her body to one side. Eyes still like water. Upright. Bends her back once in a while. Quite natural in her style. Eyes only concentrate on one place—does not look at other things.
- **Yunfei:** Electricity [shuāng] quite strong. Sits straight; sometimes bites her lips. Puts her mind to singing. Head moves left and right along with the melody.
- **Meiying:** Sometimes turns her body to one side but sometimes sits straight. Pathetic [qīlián] look on her face. Eyes twinkling left and right. Head moves to see the number of patrons. Sometimes gives a wry grin pretentiously.

These contributors were at the same time customers, close observers of every move and gesture, and commentators who distributed their notes to the public. Never before had publications devoted so much space to women's appearance at work. Here, women's bodies became objects that offered an erotic source of visual pleasure. The quality of singing was also an important item in the evaluations, but it was not written about in this particular commentary. Depictions of the women's physical comportment, together with descriptions of their life stories, facilitated the projection of fantasies on the part of the viewers.

While watching the performances, contributors also condemned excessive behavior, sometimes lamenting about women's conduct in public: "When they sing, they always show their smiling face, or act seductively. Otherwise, they dress in exaggerated clothes or put their arms around the patrons. . . And when they rest, they sit next to the patrons and chat with them. If singers don't engage in these acts, then even if people wanted to slander them, they could not find any possible excuses." Contributors to the tabloid positioned themselves as moral and cultural defenders. At the same time, they assessed the singing skills of *nīlìng*, establishing themselves as experts in and critics of this art form. One of them wrote
condescendingly, “Songs were touching, and had the power to influence others. But most nüling do not bother to improve. When they sing, they only do it with a lukewarm attitude. Or they talk or smile but they don’t concentrate. Nüling should pay attention to this.”

When women sang in public, their behaviors, affects, skills, and styles of presentation left them open to criticism from different customers, sometimes unknown to them, but who were critical to their popularity.

**Fans**

In both Guangzhou and Hong Kong, huabao frequently publicized exposés of singers’ private lives, feeding the appetites of the fans who read the magazines. Information sharing was part of fans’ everyday lives and helped create a demand for more knowledge. In one such story, the contributor reported and commented on a few famous nüling:

Meiyi: Months ago, she said she was going to Shanghai to find a new path for herself, but she has been staying at Hong Kong Dawelian Hotel. Sometimes she participates in activities aside from those of nülings. Everyone has a different story about her. But before she left, she announced that it would only be for two months. Now that it is close to the deadline, she will probably come back soon. Whether her reputation will be affected by this trip, it is not convenient to make a judgment yet.

Dayinglian: Since she gave birth at the end of last year, she has not given any impressive performances. This is not unrelated to childbirth. According to some sources, since she gave birth, her voice has become coarse, her youth does not return, and her looks also show that she is aging. Her original patrons have gradually moved on to other singers. Teahouses find her price high but her performance too weak to attract customers. To prevent any losses, they tell her not to sing. That’s why she does not appear much lately. Sometimes she takes her daughter to a teahouse in Shibafu, or meets with Wu. (Special note: Wu is the father of the daughter.)

Wenwuyao: Since her return during the [Chinese] New Year, she has been doing well for a while, but she has learned most of her singing from albums, thus she cannot sing in new keys and her singing bores people’s eardrums. She is not liked by the customers. Since her nude pictures were published by a magazine, she is looked down upon by many people. Recently she has been going out with a young man named Zhong all the time. There’s a rumor that they will cohabit as well. The former patrons are criticizing her because of that. Even if the singing industry rises again, it does not look like her career will develop any further.

These contributors made a career of critiquing nüling, tracking down their whereabouts, and gossiping about their private lives. Nüling suspected of selling sexual services or having secret love affairs were subject to gossip. For example, Meiyi, in this story, was reported to have participated in “outside activities,” which probably implied that she was a prostitute in private. Wenwuyao was also condemned for her casual love relationships. These tabloid writers were the first generation of paparazzi in South China, who reported on popular idols. The genre had moved away from the brothel guides of two decades earlier, written by literati, who had reported discreetly about courtesans’ pitiful backgrounds. In contrast to those essays, these reports were vulgar and sometimes indulged in graphic details of women’s body parts and their lifestyles. Although these huabao also published reports on courtesans, they more often concentrated on the courtesans’ character and rarely mentioned their private lives outside of the brothels. As for the consumption of nüling, people from every class could witness and enjoy, either at a teahouse or simply at home by reading a tabloid. The new tabloid reportage transformed the experience of how women were consumed as well as how male urbanites communicated with one another. They no longer had to make friends or let their identities be known to communicate their ideas; they could just write under a pseudonym. A virtual community was developed through the emergence of tabloid culture.

**A Space of Romance**

To borrow a phrase from Elise Tipton’s commentary on cafés in Japan in the early twentieth century, the teahouses in China provided “an atmosphere of romantic love” but not sex in a public space. Through the habitual behavior of watching performances, interacting socially with teahouse employees, and writing for tabloids, the teahouse customers tried to build their new identity as urban consumers. The ability to interact casually with the opposite sex might help to establish their sociability as masculine urbanites. They were also aware, however, that such behavior should not go too far. One tabloid writer described asking a fellow customer if he was going to the teahouse to see a performance; the latter was embarrassed and stated that it was his first time, and he was merely curious. The writer laughed, because this was not the first time he had seen that customer. (He himself was probably also a regular, since he noticed the frequency of the other man’s visits.) Even though the writer did not think that there was anything immoral about going to teahouses once in a while, he reminded young readers that they should not indulge in this form of entertainment:

First, nüling are open, they should not be owned privately. Flirting with them publicly is not only damaging to one’s character, but also nauseating [rouse] for people to see. Second, these kinds of places easily make one lose
a sense of direction [miski]. Thus even as a leisure activity, it can only be temporary but not habitual, especially at this time when our strong neighbors are watching us viciously and when our country is facing imperialism and unequal treaties. The building of the nation requires our effort... Young men should not indulge themselves in such entertainment. It is time for them to wake up.9

Unlike their arousal when they visited brothels, the excitement men experienced in teahouse circumstances was limited; they were entertained but not actually engaged in sexual contact, at least not in public. Men who bought the services of nûling usually requested “company” rather than sex. These encounters sometimes fostered romantic relationships between customers and nûling, and some women chose to marry their clients as a way out. To the author of this article, going to teahouses for songs could be legitimate visual and aural entertainment, but it would be wrong to go too often. As indicated by the response of the customer being approached, it was still taboo for men to be teahouse regulars. To fancy a female performer in a public place made them feel guilty because, as male citizens, they carried the responsibility of building the nation. The nationalist tone of this writer implies that the development of a modern city, which made available new satisfactions in entertainment and consumption, tempted citizens to turn their attention away from nation-building efforts to capitalist and material pursuits. He was convinced that such indulgence had to be constantly (self-)monitored. This example suggests that the modernity manifested in urban commodification was sometimes regarded as in tension with the modernity needed for the survival of the nation against imperialism.

The “Big Uncles”

Dajiù (big uncles) were devoted patrons of the nûling. The activities of dajiù were widely documented and ridiculed by their rivals, who were at the same time customers and huabao writers. In one anecdote, the writer described Mei Ying as mediocre in her voice and looks and noted that she exposed her ugliness only when she sang. The reason why she became so popular, the writer explained, was her yajiù shu (strategy of pleasing the regular customers). Methods of pleasing customers became an important means of survival in the industry, particularly customers who regularly visited the same teahouse and became fans.

The powerful dajiù were called jiufa (lords of dajiù), a name coined after junfa (warlords). One writer described them as ugly, rude, or “good for nothing” sons of rich parents (ershizhi). Another contributor stated that all dajiù belonged to one of three types: (1) rich but old men, (2) romantic lovers, or (3) young die-hard fans. These jiufa were “powerful” in a variety of ways: “Some stood out because of their wealth, some had more members on their teams, others were known for good looks, power, or sharing secrets of the heart [miski].” Jealously and fights among these regular customers became live dramas in teahouses and were vividly depicted in the tabloids. Most of the stories focused on the inappropriate public behavior of the dajiù, who were mostly members of the new middle class. The following story depicts how these dajiù often used violence to resolve trivial conflicts in teahouses:

Fat Boss [feizong] is a well-known dajiù in town. One day his favorite singer, Bai Yanzai, broke her instrument’s strings while playing. Fat Boss was concerned and immediately went forward to ask how she was doing. Other patrons of Bai saw her intimate behavior and became very jealous. Three simultaneously pulled out their pistols and scared Fat Boss away.9

According to such articles, dajiù were not only emotional but ill-mannered as well, with a tendency to cause trouble in teahouses. Another story depicted how their behavior even caused their idol’s dismay:

Miaoling was old but good at adorning herself; thus she was able to win the sympathy of older customers. One of them came to her workplace every day, regardless of bad weather. The reason why Miaoling was hospitable to this customer was because of his money. One day their mutual glances caught the attention of the customer’s nephew, White Jelly [Bailiangjia]. When Miaoling finished her song, he approached her and whispered. Miaoling nodded. But the uncle noticed it and ran to the nephew and scolded him for his lack of manners. The two got into a fight and embarrassed Miaoling, and she finally walked out of the scene.9

Vulgar behavior in the teahouses challenged the boundaries of society’s moral tolerance. In writing about the manners of the customers, tabloid writers depicted a chaotic urban society dominated by the nouveau riche, who had gained their fortune in the previous decade but never quite attained a respectable status comparable to that of the literati, who always could be counted on to behave properly in public space. Huabao and xiabao writers tended to portray themselves as perceptive social critics, untouched by social temptations like the dajiù. However, since they were also consuming entertainment in the same public space, it is likely that many of them were just dajiù in disguise.9

Regulating Intimacy

By the end of the 1920s, the rise of sexual intimacy between nûling and their “vulgar” customers and the debasement of class values as reflected in the sensationalized tabloid literature created a moral dilemma for the authorities in both Guangzhou and Hong Kong. One huabao writer
introduced the idea of forming an association called the Hong Kong Voluntary Group for Fighting Daji (Xianggang taoji yiyou jun): “If we want our country to be strong, we must first correct social order, restore the old morals (jiu daode), and condemn bad customs (fenghua). This is something pressing. My proposal to attack these daji is intended to save society from degeneration.” For the first time in huabao, such singing entertainment was linked to morals (daode). This author’s proposal was not taken up, perhaps partly because most daji were entrepreneurs who supported the economy and partly because the targets of this proposed campaign were not women, whom the government and politicians blamed for tainting social customs.

In 1930, as a result of the Fengsu Protection Campaign, new laws required all teahouses in Guangzhou to be licensed if they wished to hire gushi. For nüling, only thirty licenses were granted per season, and each teahouse could not have more than two singers each night. Singers could not sing after midnight or solicit customers on the streets. At about the same time, prostitution and songs with seductive content (yinci fiaoxiao) were also strictly forbidden. The laws became even stricter in the mid-1930s. Only ten licenses were issued in total, and the owners who successfully obtained them were assessed a tax of sixty yuan. The hours for nüling were also further reduced to between nine in the morning and eleven at night. These regulations aimed at restricting women teahouse laborers’ freedom of work.

Another aspect not mentioned by tabloid writers was that such writing itself became a social problem. The Fengsu Protection Campaign not only restrained the activities of women service laborers but also imposed legislation about reading materials. Books that violated social customs and contravened good morals were banned, including anything that could cause sexual arousal. Huabao faded after 1929, perhaps due to stricter censorship. The guidelines for “reports on lifestyles of many kinds,” such as those of “dancers, prostitutes and workers,” and other descriptions with sensationalized (huaese toose) language stated that publications should aim at objective and accurate reporting and should not exaggerate or focus on the “dirty” side of things, for the sake of people’s moral development (dexing) and appreciation for entertainment.

**NÜ ZHAODAI**

While the place of nüling in tabloids slowly gave way to reports on the movie industry, nü zhaodai (teahouse waitresses) became the new companions of teahouse regulars. Nü zhaodai were more commonly known as nüshi before the 1920s. The latter term shared an etymology with shihong, household servants or attendants before the twentieth century. The emphasis was on private services (shi) to one’s superior. The invention of a new term, nü zhaodai, symbolized a change in the nature of the job to activities done in public, services and companionship provided by strangers outside the home. Sometimes it was associated with love or sexual relationships. In contrast, waiters continued to be called shiqing or nanshi, but not zhaodai, or nan zhaodai, even after the popularity of the term nü zhaodai spread. The usage of different terms shows that waitresses were distinct from waiters, who continued to be seen as servants, whereas waitresses’ responsibilities included “inviting” and “entertaining,” as implied in the verb compound zhaodai, which came to mean serving.

** Although Ah Chang and others saw the changes in the teahouse industry as a Darwinian progression, in which the desires of middle-class customers replaced the needs of the lower class, another writer noted the continuing existence of lower-class teahouses through the 1930s. He added, however, that teahouses were differentiated by class and by the food they served, and the teahouses that had poor laborers as their primary clientele were distinct from the ones for better-off people in that they could not afford nü zhaodai:

There were four tiers of restaurants and teahouses: (1) Drinking restaurants (jiujia) that also had tea—they were mostly located in the Chentang area—but they did not serve morning tea. These restaurants had different types of seats for different classes as well as different prices. (2) Teahouses or tearooms (chashii) which hired young women as hostesses (zhaodai). They only served dim sum but no wine or dishes. The customers ordered from a list. (3) Tea places (chujia) which served tea all day. The waiters carried the dim sum and walked around. There were no nü zhaodai. (4) Fried-noodle shops (chaozhuang)—mainly for the working class. There was little dim sum and no nü zhaodai.

The emergence of nü zhaodai was part of a stratified and gendered consumption culture in which middle-class venues provided an interactive space to meet members of the opposite sex, while the lower-class venues were single sex. Both accounts, however, noted that the hiring of nü zhaodai was directly connected to the transition in the clientele of the service industries from lower to middle and upper class, and women were hired to match the rising expectations of the customers. At the beginning, the employment of women service laborers was a temporary experiment, but slowly their eroticized appearance and performances became a standard feature of the teahouses.
The New Definitions of “Service”

Articles in the popular press continued to be sexualized when nü zhao
dai entered the scene, but most often the content of the essays focused on
the intermingling of men and women and the attitudes of nü zhao
dai. Funny anecdotes, rather than individual details about nü zhao
dai, were featured in huabao and xiaobao. One writer, for example, wrote that a nü
zhao
dai called “lychee” because her flesh (rou) was like “a lychee
without a seed,” easily causing customers to feel satisfied (liao) but also
leading them to fight over the “lychee flesh.” The writer did not mention
that nü zhao
dai’s facial features or name, however.

The entry of nü zhao
dai into teahouses redefined the nature of the ser-
vice industries, the meaning of “services,” and the culture of tipping, cre-
ating new conventions of heterosexual intimacy. Nü zhao
dai did not have
to possess, or pretend to possess, particular skills to entertain the cus-
tomers. Their erotic appearance and their intimacy were the main services.
The ideal nü zhao
dai was under twenty years old, hospitable to customers, dressed in fashionable clothing, and good at making small talk. These became new requirements for service laborers and selling points teahouses relied on to maintain competitiveness.

Early in the 1920s, a contributor who identified herself as a nü zhao
dai wrote a series of articles in Huazi ribao about the new aesthetic of
a nü zhao
dai:

Since [the development of modern teahouses], women have become
teahouse decorations, like applying powder... When [the owners] select
women employees, they also establish an age limit. If one is young and
beautiful, then she can get more money. If she is old, then it is hard to break
into the industry. Even the notice posted outside the door states the age
guidelines clearly: “Old women, please don’t even bother to ask.” The best
is 18–19 and hospitable attitude, because we are the right age, and our tem-
perament is stable.

Even though the job might entail physical labor, such as carrying pots
and dishes and cleaning, what distinguished these women from male
service laborers were their “services,” that is, accompaniment, chatting, touching,
and attention to customers. The contributor to Huazi ribao explained her main duties:

We smile when we see people, always happy. It’s like a whiff of a spring
breeze [chunfeng muqian], and this makes people want to befriend us.
Sometimes when people come to drink, they will say that we enchant them
[xiaoyuan]. Because of that, there are many customers. . . .

They say that we nü zhao
dai have a lot of bad habits, and they even say we are worse than prostitutes, and that we don’t observe rituals and rules.

Nüling and Nü Zhao
dai in 1920s and 1930s Guangzhou and Hong Kong

They also say that we breach social morals, and must be abolished... Serv-
ing people does not necessarily imply seducing people... But if we serve
customers, it is hard to escape some talking and joking [lamusiao]. Welcoming
our guests is our duty.

She went on to compare female and male teahouse employees and argued
together men employees were engaging in the same flirtatious behav-
or as women but were not accused of being improper or immoral. This
writer did not deny “improper” behavior but called it inevitable.

The way that service laborers expressed their femininity, such as adopting
provocative fashions and hairstyles and demonstrating economic autonomy,
made them resemble the image of “modern girls” (modeng nuxing). However, their versatile image also exemplified more than one
way of being “modern”: they sometimes dressed like students, sometimes
like mature women in leather shoes, and sometimes like Chinese ladies
in qipao. One writer described the appearance of nü zhao
dai in the 1930s:

Nü zhao
dai in restaurants and teahouses usually wear white uniforms with
blue lace. They all have their hair permmed. They have all kinds of looks. They
wear makeup, some of them wear elegant and dramatic [xiangyan]. I say
fragrant and dazzling because they put on perfume. With their light makeup,
sometimes their faces are sparkling. They wear their “uniform” only at work.
Every morning, if you arrive at a restaurant early, you will see them coming
to work. They wear qipao and other clothing, carrying the Guangzhou rectan-
gular handbag. They look like students going to school.

Although most customers enjoyed being served by nü zhao
dai because
of their good looks, some people liked them for other reasons. In an article
in Huaxing sanrikkan, a writer criticized waiters’ attitude, especially toward
female customers. He noted that although nü zhao
dai seldom attracted
the attention of female customers, he encountered one nü zhao
dai who
was different because she was sincere to both male and female customers
and even helped to change babies’ diapers. The author encouraged nü
zhao
dai to follow her example and attend to other needs of the customers
as well. However, judging from contemporary popular publications that
stressed the relationship between nü zhao
dai and male customers, services
to women customers did not seem to be a prioritized concern of teahouse
owners or nü zhao
dai.

Popular publications regularly reported stories about the love rela-
tionships of teahouse workers, criticizing these women for leading scandal-
ous lives and warning male customers to refrain from becoming addicted
to teahouse entertainment or getting too involved with women employ-
ees outside the teahouse setting. For example, Xianggang gong
gang ribao
reported on the owner of an herbal teahouse who was beaten to death because he fell in love with a nü zhao dai. According to the report, the suspect was a lover of the nü zhao dai, relied on her for income, and made her join his group of hooligans.46

At the same time, tabloid writers were being judged by the nü zhao dai while they looked at and wrote about the women. One article commented that a tabloid columnist was boorish and caused a nuisance to nü zhao dai, who nicknamed him “Dag-Meat Monk” (govern heshang)47 because he was ugly, fat, and poor. The male writer of such a story probably wrote for his readers’ amusement, but he was also warning other customers to be attentive to their attitude and behavior, for they, too, might become public caricatures. These stories fed the imaginations of customers about these dangerous women who might lead men astray.

As nü zhao dai came to dominate the teahouse scene, tipping, which had been an action representing a customer’s appreciation of services, became a means for nü zhao dai to squeeze money from the customers through direct and indirect demands, such as the offer of towels. In 1935, one writer claimed to have witnessed waitresses threatening, seducing, and “doing other bad things” to customers to make them give substantial tips.48 As one observer described two years later,

In these five or six days, I went to twenty to thirty of the most famous restaurants and teahouses in Guangzhou. As for spots like “special conversational zones,” I went to two or three. . . . When you choose a seat, one of them will come over to ask for your order and bring you tea and dishes. If you are a generous man, or if you talk to them, they will treat you more enthusiastically. There are also male hosts in the restaurants and teahouses, but I never see them carry the bills away. These jobs are always done by the women. This is for the purpose of getting more tips.49

It appears that only women could generate such lucrative tips. A commentator who wrote for a guidebook believed that besides their regular salary, nü zhao dai could also earn up to a few yuan in tips daily, not including gifts from regular customers. Thus, every month, they could make at least thirty to forty yuan, and sometimes up to two to three hundred yuan. He noted, however, that this largesse depended on whether they were naturally beautiful (tianniang lixi) and good at socializing (changyu jiaoyi).50 As Figure 5 shows, “social skills” can be interpreted as tactics to get customers’ money.

Another male customer wrote about his experience at a restaurant in Yonghanjie, where the menu stated that everything was half price. When the bill came, it was twenty cents. He paid forty cents, expecting that he would get twenty cents back. However, the nü zhao dai gave him one ten-cent bill and some small change. He complained that tipping was getting worse and blamed it on the new female employees, suggesting that tipping be banned or limited to a minimum.51

The Fallen Women—Nü Zhao Dai and Prostitutes

Newspaper commentators often suggested that nü zhao dai were the reason for moral decay by indicating that they were a variety of prostitution. An article in Xianggang gongsehang ribao talked about the common origin of nü zhao dai. The author reasoned that most nü zhao dai had been abandoned by their male relatives or chose degeneracy because of greed and that they shared the same background as prostitutes:

(1) Some of them became admirers of famous nü zhao dai and their lifestyles and thus their fathers and brothers did not want to take care of them. (2) Some were forced into the industry by their incompetent husbands. (3) Some had education and wanted to turn it into social skills in the industry. (4) Some were prostitutes before, and continued to prostitute part-time. [With these mixed backgrounds,] it is inevitable that these women become corrupt.52

Even though education was an asset for women, helping them to survive, the author of this article did not view it favorably. Many commentators against the hiring of nü zhao dai tied them to prostitutes and focused on the immorality of women working in a public setting.

The attitudes of customers and writers toward these women were inconsistent; on the one hand, they continued to see them as having no alternative, given the dire economic situation; on the other hand, they could not help condemning them as corrupt women yearning for luxury. In a guidebook published in 1937, the author talked about nü zhao dai and prostitutes together, linking both to the larger socioeconomic problems of the region that forced them to become migrants:

Nü zhao dai’s families suffered a lot. They became shao dai because of their parents’ loss of jobs. Many of them owed rent and did not have enough to eat. . . . About their origin. . . . It is clear that a small number of them were prostitutes before working as shao dai. However, taxes on prostitution [shao] were high, and prostitution was not prospering, so they had to change their jobs. A large number of them came from the countryside. The rural economy collapsed, and many of them had to move to the city. However, they did not know it was hard to live in the city too, especially for rural migrants like themselves. So, to make a living, they had to sacrifice their good looks [shao sheng shang]. Each of their smiling faces actually hides many tears. Have they really fallen? Yes, they have. But who can judge that this is their fault? This is only the abnormality of the society. I don’t dare to say their existence is injurious to public morals [yongsheng fenghu].53
Even though the author insisted that it was larger social problems that made these women fall and that the pitiful condition of these women motivated him to write sympathetically, his comment implied that the jobs themselves were immoral and not desirable for "good women."

Highlighting the hardship of young women working in teahouses, newspapers also sensationalized stories about nü zhuodai as victims of abuse, assault, and suicide. A case was brought to court on September 11, 1935, in which three men were accused of bullying and blackmailing a nü zhuodai. Another well-known case concerned a nü zhuodai, Xu Weixing, stabbed to death by an intimate male friend, Zhou Zhong, who intended to borrow money from her. The man later tried to kill himself by cutting his throat but was rescued. The court finally sentenced him to death. Cases of nü zhuodai committing suicide were also regularly featured in newspapers. For example, a long report was written about the suicide of a nü zhuodai named Xi Yu who worked for Dashiyuan, a famous restaurant in Hong Kong. The doctor confirmed that she was a virgin at her death. She killed herself because her mother was forcing her to marry a rich man. She was the second young "public woman" to commit suicide in two weeks, after the suicide of the famous actress Ruan Lingyu. The circulation of tabloid stories about service laborers was a channel through which life stories of service laborers were publicly displayed and consumed. These stories, in turn, fed into the public male imagination of nü zhuodai as fragile victims. These writings also conveyed the sense that the tragic ends of these nü zhuodai were the results of social circumstances rather than their own doing.

At the same time, many commentators expressed the fear that such nü zhuodai were actually prostitutes in disguise. The danger of nü zhuodai and prostitutes, seen together, lay in their ability to move between industries and locations. Newspapers also published stories about unlicensed prostitutes, as well as poor girls who lived on fishing boats, also working part-time or full-time as singers and nü zhuodai: "Because this income is enticing, they decided to take advantage of their good looks and started to work in teahouses." 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. A newspaper writer commented that even though not all waitresses were street prostitutes, they exhibited dissipated behavior (jinguang) and flirted inappropriately with customers.

The subtle difference between prostitutes and nü zhuodai was nevertheless significant to the cultural shaping of the profession. A writer of short stories published in a newspaper recounted a conversation he overheard at a teahouse about the origins of nü zhuodai:

I went to Xiangzhou teahouse yesterday. The diners at the neighboring table were talking. Person A said, "nü zhuodai all come from poor families. Because of recent unemployment, there's no money to buy clothes, pay rent, and buy food. Isn't that a harsh life?" Person B said, "Right. If they were from well-off families, how could they have become nü zhuodai and tolerated the teasing of perverted men [yintai jinrin yi senghong eguai]?" Person A continued, "It seems to me that nü zhuodai are disguised variations [biyue] of illegal prostitutes. Thus the families of nü zhuodai are similar to those of illegal prostitutes." Then they laughed. I heard their conversation, thinking that what they said is so wrong. Although many nü zhuodai were illegal prostitutes before, many of them are from good families and were forced to become nü zhuodai because of poverty. We cannot use one word to generalize. There were some illegal prostitutes who became nü zhuodai and stopped being prostitutes. As I know, one even became the owner of a venue for quitting opium. If we put the label of illegal prostitute on them, doesn't this wrong [jiaowu] them? We should investigate more thoroughly before we say anything.

To this writer, even though illegal prostitutes and nü zhuodai might have similar backgrounds, the nature of the two occupations, and in turn the fate of these two kinds of women, would seem to be quite different. Though sympathetic to nü zhuodai, his comment indicates a hierarchy, one that put nü zhuodai between prostitutes (the worst form of poor labor) and owners of venues for quitting opium (a respectable occupation). This kind of ranking was quite common among commentators and activists, and it was such comments that raised the status of nü zhuodai to "laborer," a category which could earn public approval. This writer raised the point that the position of nü zhuodai might not be a desirable one for women but could give desultute women a better status and a better future, especially women who came from good families. As waitressing was slowly beginning to be counted as acceptable labor, nü zhuodai might be one step closer to becoming full-fledged citizens, since they were productive laborers and not immoral predators.

The more favorable reception of teahouse workers was also evident in movie images. In the movie Malu tianshi (1937), two sisters living in the same household are juxtaposed; the younger sister is a pure, innocent nüling, while the older sister is a prostitute with a dark, mysterious character that even her younger sister fears at the beginning. By the end, the younger sister successfully escapes from the control of her foster parents and marries her true love, whereas her sister, who is despised by everyone (including the boyfriend of the younger sister), finally sacrifices her own life for others. The two sisters also symbolize the socially recognized fates of the pure and the tainted. The younger sister does not lose her virginity to a rich man from whom her parents receive money and a promise of
marriage. Even though the older sister wants to change her life and marry a "good" man, she can only be understood through her martyrdom at the very end. Her death also symbolizes the clear division between good and evil. Even though she aspires to find her true love and become one of the "good" women, her past as a prostitute would surely haunt her if she continued to live. Only through sacrificing her life can she cleanse her past as a tainted woman. As for the younger sister, although the two share foster parents and an upbringing, because she never gives up her body for money, she is saved from reproach by other characters in the story and by the audience. In a commentary in Xianggang gongshang ribao, the author used nü zhaozai and streetwalkers ("street girls") in the essay to compare women in the sexual industry in the East (China and Japan) and the West. He argued that while streetwalking was a popular form of prostitution in the West, nü zhaozai was more popular in China as an occupation. This was because China was a "semifeudal" country that policed women and restricted them from taking up more independent jobs. However, street prostitutes did continue to exist in South China in the 1930s. As licensed brothels closed and teahouses opened, sexual services were taken up by two occupations: while street prostitution became a clandestine site for direct sexual consumption, teahouses provided a space for voyeuristic interest and intimate companionship. Nüling and nü zhaozai rechanneled men's sexual desire through companionship, flirting, cultural entertainment, and spectatorship, all in a public venue, whereas street prostitutes provided room for quick carnal gratification in a clandestine setting. The stigmatization of street prostitution was intensified in the 1930s and 1940s through further legislation of unlicensed prostitution.

NOTES

1. Although female servants predated this stage, most of them served in households and brothels as bondservants (bìnà). Service laborers who appeared at this time were employees of companies rather than indentured to individual madams or masters.


3. The "middle class" at that time was an ambiguous category. Many of the clients of the teahouses inherited their wealth from their fathers. Others were nouveau riche through legal and illegal enterprises.

4. See Edward Bing-Shuey Lee, Modern Canton (Shanghai: Mercury Press, 1936).


6. Chang, "Er shi nian."
7. Chang, "Er shi nian."
10. However, unlike the nüling who superseded them, the gujii did not have their portraits displayed in tabloids, probably because in the late 1910s and early 1920s, tabloid culture had not yet become popular.
11. Jessica Evans contends that charity is a form of psychological transaction through which security is bought. To Evans, "the charities' obsession with the bodily mark betrays an irrational and even sadistic impulse which goes far beyond their humanist claims to be the defenders of disabled people." Through charity, the giver disowns the unwanted "dependency, incompetence and debility," rejecting the disabled other while preserving the giver as "whole and separate." See Jessica Evans, "Feeble monsters: Making Up Disabled People," in Visual Culture, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997). I agree that there is a close relationship between curiosity-led consumption and charity, but in contrast to Evans, I argue that at that time, consumption was seen as a form of charity.

14. Gu, "Chang nüling shihui zhì chalou" [The nüling era of restaurants], Guangzhou minguo ribao, August 15, 1925.
15. Lu Yan, Xianggang zhanqiu [Hong Kong History] (Hong Kong, 1979), 3.

17. The publications included in this discussion are huabao with sections on singers and prostitutes, newspaper supplements (fukan), and guidebooks published by teahouses and brothels.

18. The first huabao, Xinhui huabao, published by missionaries in 1870s Shanghai, consisted of poetry, stories, biographies, and essays about science and art. Other titles of early famous huabao are Tuhua xinbao, Denshibazi huabao, and Feiyiying huabao. Most huabao started in big cities, such as Shanghai and Tainjin.

19. Yinying huabao belongs to this category. It is also known as Yinying ribao fukan.
20. At least, it circulated in the South China region between 1927 and 1931.
22. In the 1930s, prostitutes and the "insane" were often deported from cities to rural areas. See chapter 6 on the Po Leung Kuk.

23. Geseng yanying, August 8, 1936. In the story, a customer helps to train a prostitute as a singer after listening to the story of her background.

25. Linlang huabao 7 (1928).
27. Zhujiangu xingyi huabao (1927).
29. Guangzhou mingguo ribao, February 3, 1926.
32. Zhuzhong xingyi huabao 1 (1928).
33. Most of the writers did not reveal their identities, but based on their critical attitude toward the dajia, it is also probable that these writers were literati who felt out of place in this new urban scene dominated by entrepreneurs.
34. Linlang huabao 5 (1928): 5.
35. Guangzhou huaxia zhi shiheng guxiang jikan [Reports of Guangzhou Municipal Government Regulations], 1930.
37. The movie industry became prosperous in the early 1930s, and many of the movies produced in Shanghai and Guangzhou were distributed nationally. Famous actors and actresses became national stars.
38. A newspaper contributor tried to trace the origins of women waitresses (nű zhaozai) and claimed that they existed in the writings about Li Bai in the Tang dynasty and the Zheng emperor in the Ming dynasty. The writer argued that both of these figures had bad women companions who were not their wives or concubines but rather nű zhaozai. In this context, the term nűshi was not used. See Nanhua ribao, February 22, 1935.
39. Jinri zhi Hua’nan (Shanghái: Guǎngmíng shùdān, 1937), 73.
40. Huaxing shèrìkan 474 (January 10, 1931).
41. Huazi ribao, January 12, 1922.
42. Huazi ribao, January 13, 1922.
43. According to the project “Modern Girl around the World” started by the University of Washington, the “modern girl” was “a figure who appeared around the world in cities in the early to mid-twentieth century,” who wore “provocative fashions and pursued[ed] romantic love” and “appeared to disregard the roles of dutiful daughter, wife, and mother.”
44. Jinri zhi Hua’nan (1937).
46. Xianggäng gonggong ribao, September 23, 1935.
47. Huaxing shèrìkan 125 (August 17, 1927). “Dog-meat monk” literally means a monk who eats dog meat. It is often used to represent dangerous hypocrites who pretend to be harmless.
52. Xianggäng gonggong ribao, May 5, 1935.
54. Xianggäng gonggong ribao, September 12, 1935.

55. Xianggäng gonggong ribao, June 19, 1935, and July 17, 1935; also in Huazi ribao (dates unclear). A later report stated that both the man and the woman came from Nanhai. The man became unemployed and often asked the woman for money. The defendant said in court that he and the woman were married in their home village. However, during the spring festival, his wife suddenly went to Hong Kong by herself to become a nű zhaozai. He found her and told her not to work in this occupation, but to avail. “I went back, but because of her, I became depressed. Whenever I thought about it, I became very angry; the only way was to kill her and kill myself. I regret that I didn’t kill myself successfully. Even if I am not sentenced to death, I ask to be executed anyway.” At the time she was killed, she had been working in Jiangsu Jujia for only about twenty days. Every night, she returned home after midnight. The report also noted that the woman lived a poor life and could not even have linens; a lamp and a few simple items of clothing were all she had.
56. Xianggäng gonggong ribao, March 26, 1935.
57. Wen, “Nű zhaozai shidai zhi chalou” [The nű zhaozai era of restaurant], Guangzhou mingguo ribao, August 17, 1925.
60. Mala tianshi [Street Angel], dir. Yuan Muzhi, Mingxiu Film Company (1937).
Figure 1. A cartoon, titled "New Drama on the Grand Stage: Cry and Laugh (Ku yu xiao)," depicting a naked woman in chains and a "free," well-dressed woman sneering at her. A gigantic male face lurks at the back. The naked woman is chained to an anchor bearing the Chinese characters pingqiong (poverty). The left caption reads, "On the grand stage (of life), all are performers/actors [lingren]." Huaying 1 (1931).

The author would like to extend her sincere thanks to artist Heather Poon, who provided invaluable help in preparing these images and improving their quality.
Figure 2. Some of the huabao published and distributed in 1920s Guangzhou and Hong Kong: (clockwise from top right) Feifei huabao, Tianqu huabao, Yuehai huabao, and Zhujiang xingqi huabao.

Figure 3. Two sections in Zhujiang xingqi huabao on information and gossip about nailing. In these portraits, the featured nailing wore qipao and were asked to pose as models for photographers. The hairstyles and poses of Cui Hong (top left) and Bai Mudan (bottom) are very similar, even though they are holding different objects.
Figure 4. Three issues of Guzi sanikan (1928–1929), one of the most popular xiaobao circulating in Guangzhou and Hong Kong in the 1920s.

Figure 5. A cartoon, titled "Social Skills [yaoji shouwun]," depicting a waitress picking a seemingly drunk customer's pocket. Guangzhou zazhi 16 (1935).

Figure 6. A cartoon depicting a policeman inspecting the breasts of a woman. The caption on top says, "Breast-binding suspect!" Huaxing sanikan 116, July 16, 1927.
Figure 7. A cartoon series titled "Evolution of Women's Fashion (Funii fu zhuang zhi yan bian)," Guangzhou mingzao ribao (1935).

Figure 8. Floor plan of the Po Leung Kuk in the 1930s. The living quarters of the inmates and the public areas were separated by barriers on both floors. Inmates with "contagious" problems were restricted to the left side of the floors and kept apart from the rest of the inmates (adapted from a 1936 floor plan of the Po Leung Kuk, modified by Heather Foon and the author).
The Fenghua Protection Movement in Guangzhou, 1929–1935

In chapter 3, I examined the Guangzhou government's use in the 1920s of outdated *fengsu* as a convenient rubric under which to launch reforms of "social customs" that hindered women's freedom through such practices as breast binding, keeping bondservants, and prostitution. Here I resume the discussion of *fengsu* in the context of 1930s campaigns that aimed to prevent the moral deterioration of society, including a rehabilitation program for prostitutes, the promotion of national products, and the campaign against strange costumes. In government policy, the change seemed to have arisen in 1930, when the Guangzhou government was no longer interested in reforming "old" customs but radically shifted to protecting morals or eliminating what were termed "bad" (*buiang*) customs. In government and legal documents, the term *fenghua* (social morals) increasingly replaced *fengsu* (social customs), while *fengsu*’s meaning shifted to refer to proper manners in a society. As shown earlier, the conservative turn in the 1930s did not appear abruptly but had been developing even before the launching of the Fengsu Protection Campaign in 1929.

Beginning in the 1920s, what many regarded as the uncontrollable freedom of women to explore fashion and opportunities in the service sector and the increased depictions in the popular press of social interactions between men and women in the public space alarmed social commentators and the city government; the speed of the change seemed particularly alarming. Many residents of Guangzhou who welcomed the prospect of women discarding old "traditions" were apparently indulging in sensationalized publications and embracing new forms of social entertainment.