



Chinese Studies Center, Asian Research Center for Migration  
Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University

with support from

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The Center for the Protection of Children's Rights Foundation

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Vorasakdi Mahatdhanobol

translated by  
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## Introduction

This monograph is the English language version of the original Thai language version of this research study published in 1996. The information derived from the Thai version is so interesting that it should be available to a wider audience; thus, this translation. The Institute of Asian Studies expresses its appreciation for the support provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), both for the translation and publications costs. The efforts made by Mr. Aaron Stern to complete this translation are also much valued.

**Dr. Wittaya Sucharittanarugse**

**Director**

**Institute of Asian Studies**

## Acknowledgments

Like every piece of work, this would not have succeeded as a solo effort. The support, cooperation and assistance from various people and organizations cannot be ignored.

The people and organizations that were most important in the genesis and success of this monograph were as follows: 1) Dr. Khien Theeravit, who has always supported my work at the Chinese Studies Center and who influenced and supported me during his tenure as the Director of the Institute of Asian Studies; 2) Dr. Wittaya Sucharittanarugse, the present Director of the Institute of Asian Studies, who helped to edit and improve this paper; and 3) the Center for the Protection of Children's Rights Foundation (CPCRF), that provided the opportunity and support needed to complete this work. These three people and organizations receive my sincere thanks and respect.

Teerapan Weerawat, Wasana Gownoparat, Porntip Bongkaen, Chularat Uppakam, and Wanchai Boonpracha work at CPCRF. They all traveled with me while I performed my research, each with a different responsibility but all working towards the same goal. Their cooperation stimulated my thoughts and energized me. Sanphasit Koomprapan and the other workers at CPCRF assisted me both directly and indirectly.

Though it took some time to complete this work and build a relationship with CPCRF, I am now very close to the CPCRF staff. We lessened the strains created by our four trips together to the point that I am not reluctant to call them friends.

The officials at the Division of Alien and Exit-Entry Administration, Public Security Bureau of Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China, assisted by providing useful information. The Chinese Embassy in Bangkok expedited efforts to coordinate work between Thailand and China.

Woranut and Rachada, two fine members of the Usanagorn family, were the first people to assist me and both of them made my work easier in many ways through their friendship and understanding. I completed this paper in Pattani province, Thailand during the summer of 1996. Of course, I had to host a party for all my close friends and younger relatives who constantly pushed me to finish.

For all the Chinese women suffering life as sex workers – whether willingly or not – who provided information for this study, there is no way this work could have succeeded without their input.

I received unique inspiration from undergraduate and graduate students who endured hearing about this study and asked me questions about it. The merry atmosphere that I found almost every time I entered the classroom also contributed something.

My good friends both inside and outside the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University – especially at the Holistic Institute – posed excellent questions about my work, providing constant encouragement and pleasure.

Jintana Ritisaeen at the Institute of Asian Studies typed this manuscript with care and dedication. Jeng Hong Ing, a researcher at the Chinese Studies Center, kindly translated some documents from Chinese to use in this study. Professor “Chia” or Chia Yen Jong provided deep insights into Chinese society and culture. Many others at the Institute of Asian Studies helped directly and indirectly to assemble this final work now in your hands.

I also must thank Dr. Supang Chantavanich at the Institute of Asian Studies for promoting the effort to have this study translated. Aaron Stern, who undertook the task of translating my work, and Pornpimon Trichot, an esteemed colleague who edited the translation, earn praise for the many hours they spent on this manuscript.

All of the people and organizations above deserve my great and heartfelt gratitude.

## Dedication

### For my mother

### Note from the Translator

The Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University published the Thai version of Chinese Women in the Thai Sex Trade in December 1996. For a variety of reasons, particularly the importance role of international migration in the study, Dr. Supang Chantavanich (the Director of the Asian Research Center for Migration) suggested that someone translate the study to give English-language readers access to the information it contained. I accepted the challenge, though completing the task required more time than I initially expected.

For those who are not familiar with translating the Thai language into English, the major differences between the two languages present some good challenges. In this case of this study, the challenges are somewhat more significant than translating a dry, fact-laden research report. Vorasakdi Mahatdhanobol, the author, has a writing style most people would call “flowery.” He enjoys playing with words and using some vocabulary which is rarely found in everyday Thai speech. Sentences often begin with long introductory clauses and the ideas within a given paragraph will sometimes shift around in ways that make it difficult to break them into consistent English sentences. In sum, the study sometimes reads like a tale more than a formal academic monograph.

As a result, this translation takes some liberties. The goal is to present the information the author wishes to convey, not to emulate his writing style. What this often means is that the translation reduces the “flowery” characteristics of many sections in various ways:

- cutting down long introductory clauses
- not attempting to use vocabulary that directly matches the rarely-used words and expressions employed by the author
- re-organizing certain paragraphs so the sentences fit together in ways an English-language reader can comprehend more easily

I apologize for any “corruption” of the original manuscript while noting that no translation can ever capture all the subtleties of a work

in its original language. This translation provides the information necessary to understand the issue of Chinese women in the Thai sex trade, the most important goal of this effort.

A few specific points are worth noting. First, this translation will use the word “trafficking” to describe the unwilling entry of women into the sex trade. It implies that the women never had the desire to sell their bodies but were forced to do so under threat. It also implies that the women were unaware initially of what the agents and owners of commercial sex establishments intended for them; i.e., that they were fully deceived. Second, the maps in the original manuscript have been redone to take advantage of better software and to show some additional points of interest. Third, the tables with trade data in chapter 4 have been updated to include 1996 figures. Lastly, at the time this manuscript was being researched and written, the Thai baht was trading at about 25-26 baht per United States dollar.

The translator wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Pornpimon Trichot who provided excellent editorial help and explained some of the author’s more unusual linguistic twists. Her aid was sometimes necessary simply to understand the subtle points the author wished to convey. Vorasakdi Mahatdhanobol, the author, deserves similar recognition because he took time from his busy schedule to go over the translation page by page. It turned out that his contribution was absolutely necessary since even Pornpimon had questions about the points he sought to convey in the Thai manuscript. Anchalee Stern, my wife, also aided me during a number of late-night translation sessions at home, patiently explained some of the author’s more intricate ideas. Lastly, without the generous financial contribution from the International Organization of Migration in Bangkok, you would not have this manuscript in your hands.

Aaron Stern  
February 1998

## Introduction by the Author

Like any other civilization, China has commercial sex workers (CSWs) within its borders. However, China has a special quality with a long history with regard to CSWs. There has been a tendency to separate China's CSWs into two types: the ones that sell their bodies and the ones that do not.<sup>1</sup>

There are probably no doubts about the first type of CSW. In other societies, especially Thai society, the word "prostitute" refers to women who sell sexual services to men. There are some anomalies in this definition. The sale of sexual services is not limited to women. Men also sell their bodies and even the presence of commercial sex between members of the same gender is now common and accepted. There are also children – boys and girls – who sell sex, something difficult for societies to acknowledge.

The idea of a second type of CSW in China needs some elaboration. The word "prostitute" or "Jinu" in Chinese has the same meaning in Chinese and Thai society (i.e., the first type of CSW described above). The second type of CSW refers to a woman who entertains guests (most or all of whom are men, naturally) without providing any sexual services. These women entertain clients in various ways: singing; playing musical instruments; dancing; reciting or improvising verse; drawing pictures or demonstrating calligraphy; making conversation; and reading literature or relating stories.

This list contains samples of the forms of entertainment the women offer and does not mean that each woman can perform every service. Each woman has a specialty, though some women are talented enough

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<sup>1</sup> The information about commercial sex workers who do not sell their bodies comes from a conversation with Professor Jang Guang Ping of the Yunnan Institute of International Studies during June 1996. This information was very valuable in expanding the overall vision of this study after I had completed a draft of it in April 1996. Though this paper incorporates the ideas from Professor Jang, the analysis in this paper is entirely mine. Therefore, given that it is normal for research such as this to have deficiencies and shallow areas, I take responsibility for any shortcomings.

to offer their clients more than one form of entertainment. The important point here is that a woman who has the skills necessary to offer her services as a CSW who does not sell sex must have a substantial basic educational background. Yet these women are found in the same establishments as those who provide sexual services.

The existence of women who simply entertain their clients in a non-sexual manner has given rise to tales, stories, myths and poetry. These many tales, stories, etc. involve love or relationships between the women and sages (siu-cai), wealthy young men, or other young people.<sup>2</sup> Only such men as these, with taste and a certain amount of education, could mingle with and use the services of these women. These women had some status in society and their situation differed fundamentally from that of current Thai CSWs. Even if a Thai CSW has a high-level education and some social status, in the end she is still a sex worker.

The social status of the men using the services of the women was unimportant. There were many young men with "good taste and education" who formed relationships with these women. Some of them even received financial support from their female acquaintances.

The discussion above shows that commercial sex in China has had a special nature. China's CSWs (both the ones who sell and who do not sell sexual services) have played a part in the flow of Chinese history. Yet since all these women have been labeled "Jinu" or prostitutes in the conventional sense, Chinese people tend to look down on CSWs and hold them in contempt. The Chinese social view conforms to the attitudes found in almost all other societies regarding women who

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<sup>2</sup> In Chinese history, siew chai were learned men with the equivalent of a Bachelor of Arts degree. They had high privileges and influence in Chinese society while having more freedom than men with the equivalent of a Masters degree or a doctorate (in Chinese, "si yeun" and "juang yuan," respectively). A siew chai could associate with people below his social class, including certain "vulgar" people (in Thai, "kon sahm") such as the women entertainers not providing sexual services. In the past, Chinese law prevented those ranked higher than siew chai to associate with such women. People took these laws seriously. This explains why the siew chai composed tales of love for these women more frequently than other men.

“dance for a living,” regardless of whether these women engage in sexual acts with their clients (it is worth noting that “geisha” in Japan closely resemble their Chinese counterparts who do not sell their bodies).

China’s history of commercial sex differs fundamentally from that found in present-day Thailand. No person studying Thailand’s sex trade refers to CSWs who do not offer sexual services. Interestingly enough, over the past century – the most recent period during which Chinese women began to appear in the Thai sex trade in significant numbers – CSWs offering non-sexual entertainment in China have almost disappeared. Of course, this is not to say that today’s CSWs in China do not entertain their clients by sitting and drinking with them. The difference is that this form of entertainment ends with the woman selling her body. And many decades ago, a significant number of Chinese CSWs provided such sexual services in Thailand. Nobody has determined when this first generation of Chinese CSWs stopped working.

In China, there was once a tremendous effort to eliminate commercial sex, the “oldest profession in the world.” This effort began with the Chinese Communist Party’s ascension to power on the mainland in 1949. CSWs who provided sexual services were taken for re-education to learn about China’s new “people’s society.” After re-education, they had to work in factories or in the countryside, based on their condition and desires. As for the women who entertained clients without selling sex, some of them changed professions, entering areas where they had some skills. Others suffered the fate of the first type of CSW.

The passage of time helped to comfort some of the women to a point where their lives resembled those of typical Chinese. Many married and led quiet lives. Some women built up their social status to a high level as well.

The success of some women in transforming their lives helped them to handle the difficult period of the Cultural Revolution during 1966-1976. The Red Guards forced many former CSWs to confess about

their past activities and criticize themselves for these previous errors. Some of the women in this situation were of high social status.

The Cultural Revolution died out in 1976 and on 6 October 1976 Jiang Qing, former Chinese leader Mao Zedong's wife and leader of the Cultural Revolution, lost her power in the Chinese leadership. The Cultural Revolution transformed China in ways never seen before, to a point where the country reverted to a condition found before the Cultural Revolution ever started. The collective mental release by the Chinese people after the demise of the Cultural Revolution has not been seen on such a scale since 1949.

A few years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping became China's most powerful leader. Deng Xiaoping, who had been purged from power on a number of previous occasions, was the main influence behind the destruction of Gang of Four, a group led by Jiang Qing. He ended up controlling China, though he did not have the highest official position. It was well-known that the people with the highest position owed their rank to him.

As China's supreme ruler, Deng Xiaoping initiated policies in 1979 to open up China to the outside world and to reform the economy. After 30 years of closure to capitalism, China changed rapidly under the new policies. The government designated large cities on China's eastern coast as special economic zones. Under various unfamiliar guises of development, the lives of people in these cities changed as massive numbers of migrant laborers from rural areas flowed in. People with university-level education drove the rapid transformation of the urban zones. During Deng Xiaoping's rule, a significant middle class emerged and major gaps between social classes appeared.

As a result of Deng Xiaoping's reforms, China reversed itself and became increasingly capitalist and materialistic. The reversal was great enough to alter the thinking of both urban and rural dwellers, making them seek ways to earn large amounts of money quickly. Some used illegal means to achieve this goal, one of which was the sex trade.

China produced an endless number of CSWs during its reform period, a completely different situation than the pre-1979 era. The nature of the sex trade after 1979 also differed fundamentally from the period prior to 1949. The policy to open China to the outside world transformed commercial sex into an occupation rooted in the provision of sexual services, the same as found in other capitalist countries.

In addition, the transformation of the profession affected Chinese women, turning them into another sexual “standard” for foreign tourists to seek while in China and anticipate while in their home countries. As a result, the deception of Chinese women into the commercial sex trade outside of China quietly grew and nobody knows exactly when it arose. However, it is known that Southeast Asia is one destination for these women and that within Southeast Asia, the main receiving country is Thailand.

The presence of Chinese CSWs in Thailand has captured the attention of Thais and foreigners. Though this paper is not a detailed, in-depth study, it is still valuable because nobody has written about this issue. To complete this study required struggling with a variety of obstacles and after years of research I have found the dark side of China’s reform period that few people see. This dark side (i.e., the sex trade) is linked to other sad facets of post-1979 China: the presence of various forms of crime; the decline of moral standards; and the spread of AIDS.

In present-day China, the former function of some CSWs as entertainers has been completely replaced by women whose primary purpose is to provide sexual services. With regard to women who become CSWs willingly, nearly all of them have more than a high-school level education. In a sense, this implies that there are enough educated and knowledgeable women in the sex trade to reconstitute the old role of women as entertainers who do not provide sexual services. But this role is from a bygone era.

The kind of ethical behavior that has been a strong force in Chinese society for thousands of years is undergoing a gradual erosion that started when China opened its door to the outside world. When

Chinese women go abroad to work as CSWs, it is as though this erosion is expanding everywhere.

Looking at this phenomenon of social decay in China, it seems no different than what has occurred in Thailand or other countries around the world. It is notable that under China's current reform policies, outside influences have penetrated in ways that have benefited the country. But people neglect or do not see the obvious harm these influences bring. China's social problems have arisen and saturated Chinese society in ways that make them very hard to solve. It is disappointing that China missed its opportunity to address these problems initially. Other countries opened themselves to outside influences decades before China and thus have had the chance to grapple with the resulting problems for many years.

However, the question of China's missed opportunity is a separate matter. China is a vast country, densely populated with 1.2 billion people (1996 estimate). If someone wishes to judge China, they should understand that it is not an easy task to prevent and solve the country's social problems. There are limits as to what China can accomplish.

This study has various shortcomings and I take full responsibility for all of them. I hope that it brings about a positive change, that it creates an understanding of China as a nation within the global human community and promotes cooperation to address China's problems. If this study has even a little value, it should be used to pressure China in various ways, to make China answer for its successes on the world economic and political stage.

At this point, the time has come for alternatives and actions to prevent and solve the problems with China's reforms. If the Chinese believe that its efforts to reform the country require opening China to the outside world and cooperating with friendly nations, they should see that successfully preventing and solving the problems arising from these reforms requires cooperating with other countries as well. If China rejects collaboration with the outside world, it will allow the continued existence of these problems and demonstrate that it sees