

Prostitution in Canton

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The following interviews were conducted by Miriam and Ivan London and describe a little known and, to some, surprising aspect of life in contemporary China. The questions and answers appear in their original form. The Londons are well known to the readers of Worldview, beginning with their articles, "The Other China" (May, June, and July/August, 1976).

I. A FORMER RED GUARD

[In the Soviet Union there are strict laws against prostitution. Nevertheless, if a man is interested in picking up a girl for sexual purposes, he knows where to go find one. Take Canton. Do men know where to find such a girl?] I've had no personal experience, but I did learn something about this from others in 1971. It happened that I was sent on an errand by the large brigade. I had to get some wire cable, but there was none to be had in Canton, so my job was to procure it through the speculators' organizations. They're like what you call "black societies" here in Hong Kong. People who belong to such organizations are social outcasts. They still have guns left over from the Cultural Revolution. They've taken over city districts, and they sell loot obtained from thieves and run underground factories. If they're caught in these activities, they're very severely punished. Because I went to buy from them, I got to know a lot of people in such organizations in Canton's Hsi Kuan district. That's a mixed-up place—all kinds of people there! These new friends of mine knew about prostitutes along Pearl Light Road, who were called "roadside chickens"—that's a famous culinary dish in Canton. They were always talking about things like this. They told me the ways you could tell whether a girl was a roadside chicken. Only insiders knew. I didn't dare go try this out myself, though.

[What were the ways to determine a roadside chicken?] I told a friend all about it who's full of mischief and he went over to Pearl Light Road just to have a look. When he saw a few girls answering my description, he called out, "Motor!" One of the girls, he said, turned

and called right back, "Son of a motor!" Such girls are called motors, I think, because a motor always keeps turning.* Their hair turns, too—I mean that it's all swept in a curve to one side, covering one eyebrow, and tied behind. Proper girls wear two pigtails or have their hair done in what's called the "sporty" style. But this other hairdo tells you immediately the girl is a roadside chicken. Sometimes I saw girls like that on the street, but they looked so elegant I was really puzzled... Roadside chickens often wore dacron clothes in white or pretty colors, with the second button down from the throat left unbuttoned—not just the first. If you passed them back and forth several times, they'd come over to you.

[Does "motor" mean the same as "roadside chicken"?) No, motors are girl delinquents. But they include roadside chickens who are prostitutes. We also called prostitutes "string" girls.

[Were any signals used to draw the prostitute's attention—for example, with a cigarette?] Not with cigarettes. But if you weren't sure a girl was a roadside chicken, you could circle around a bit, with a dollar note sticking halfway out your shirt or jacket pocket. Then the girl would approach you. I once taught a peasant all about this, but he didn't have the nerve to try it.

[Where is Pearl Light Road?] In the southeast part of Canton near the Pearl River crossing. In the Nan Kuan district, now called "Central."

[Is it a deserted road?] No. There's a very mixed crowd there. And there are no large buildings along the road—only residential houses.

*Another respondent understands the meaning of "motor" differently: The girls are so called because "as soon as electrical contact is made (i.e., money produced), they will start 'running.'"

[*In what section of the road does such activity take place?*] All along the road. It's about two kilometers long. But mostly this took place near seaside—we call the Pearl River the "sea."

[*Weren't there residents' committees responsible for the houses along Pearl Light Road? Why didn't they stop all this?*] First there was no way of stopping it. And secondly that wasn't their job. People who lived there belonged to those speculators' organizations and were always having fights. The people from the residents' committees didn't want to get involved, lest they have some accident. If any of them said anything bad against the organization people, their own children could suffer for it.

[*In what way?*] They'd be beaten up.

[*If you could recognize the roadside chickens, couldn't the police?*] Yes. But during that time—1970-73—conditions in Canton were very confused. The Public Security Bureau, which had been split into two factions during the Cultural Revolution, was just newly reorganized and had to direct its attention mainly to major crimes—spying activities and things like that. Society was in a mess. There were fighting organizations like "Seven Tigers of East Mountain" and "Little 8th Route of Ho-nan" (these are some of the names), which had fights every day and people were chopped.* Because of this, less attention was paid to the roadside chickens.

[*Did these fighting groups have any political involvement?*] No. They were just continuing to fight Cultural-Revolutionary-style. They fought for territory. These people also had no legal residence [*hu k'ou*] in Canton.

[*So these fighting organizations had separate territories?*] Yes.

[*You mentioned a lack of hu k'ou. Were any of the roadside chickens girls who had illegally returned from the countryside? Who were these prostitutes?*] Yes, there were girl students ["educated youth" from the city] who returned from the villages and became prostitutes in Canton. On the whole, girls in this profession could be divided into three types: First, those who had been prostitutes before the Cultural Revolution. This includes girls who refused to go to the countryside and stayed in the city—but they were already connected with this profession. Second, those girls who were sent to the countryside and returned to the city, where they became prostitutes afterwards. Such prostitutes were younger in age—generally they were only junior middle school graduates. Maybe there were some senior middle school graduates among them, but very rarely. Usually they came from some inferior schools in Canton and the suburbs. Girls from good schools wouldn't do this. Third, the worst type. These had been only primary school students during the Cultural Revolution. They resumed their schooling just at the time we [Red Guards] were being sent down to the countryside. Although they hadn't been able to join in the real action of the Cultural Revolution, still they'd got involved in this and that. Many eventually became motors or roadside chickens. Their conduct was very bad, especially compared with the way students had behaved before the Cultural Revolution.

[*You speak of inferior middle schools in Canton and*

the suburbs. In what way were such schools inferior to others?] Generally, when good schools in Canton accepted students, they emphasized "redness" and "expertness"—that is, top scholastic ability—studies and conduct. By inferior schools I meant those with an inferior environment and inferior instruction. Neither scholastic achievement nor conduct in such schools was very good.

[*Do you mean these inferior schools were in "bad" neighborhoods?*] Yes. Bad neighborhoods—bad environment. Canton is very big. Besides the five districts, there are the suburbs, where a lot of people live—and where you have collective dormitories belonging to factories and other large units.... Just like Hong Kong, wherever you have low-rent housing, wouldn't you say people's behavior there is worse?

[*Why do you consider the girls who had been in primary school during the Cultural Revolution as the worst?*] The Cultural Revolution really messed up the teachers. Afterward, teachers didn't dare speak out about anything. Their dignity was all swept away by the Cultural Revolution. They were outranked by the students. Even though those primary school girls weren't active participants in the Cultural Revolution, still they saw and heard a lot of bad things. During those two years they really didn't receive any education, so they had a lot of free time to get involved in this or that outside the school. They learned about all the bad ways of doing things then—the fighting and killing—and they became bad themselves.

[*Then, would you say that such girls later became prostitutes not for economic reasons, but because they enjoyed that life-style?*] I wouldn't say they exactly enjoyed it. The other two types of girls had either no *hu k'ou* or proper job in the city, so they became prostitutes in order to make a living. That's understandable. But former primary school girls—and they form the mainstream of motors in Canton—are something worse. It's as though a kind of black-society influence had penetrated the school. There were whole groups of such girls. When I returned after two years in the village, I found they'd become worse than I ever imagined possible.... I wouldn't put it so awfully as to say those girls enjoyed that kind of life. Maybe it's better to say that they felt it was a carefree life-style—it was the new wave.

[*Concerning the first category of professional prostitutes—were they predominantly of any group—say, of the red or black classes? Or was it an indiscriminate mixture?*] Some black, some red. It was indiscriminate. Of course, among those of the red category there would not be any children of cadre members, because they were economically sufficient. It's not surprising for children of workers and peasants to be prostitutes, because most workers and peasants really haven't become better off financially since liberation [in 1949]. They usually have more children and have trouble making ends meet.... Many were also of the black category, especially in Hsi Kuan.

[*Were there places other than Hsi Kuan and the Pearl Light Road area where prostitution was practiced?*] I

*i.e., attacked with a Chinese chopping knife.

had a very close friend who told me about another place—Hung Teh Road in Canton's Ho-nan district. Actually it was on X X Road, close to the intersection with Hung Teh, but people always said Hung Teh because it was the most well-known road in the district. The locality was peculiar, because the land was sunken and one had to reach it by going down a few steps. A whole group of houses there were like thieves' dens, where gambling and other things went on, including prostitution. A really mixed-up place! It was just opposite the territory of the "Ho-nan Little 8th Route," where I've been myself. My friends are generally not the sort who would have contact with places like this, but this particular friend was forced by circumstances to join a speculators' organization. Let me explain briefly. His mother was dead and his father had been struggled* and committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution. So he became an orphan who lived alone. When he was sent to the countryside, earning his keep became a problem. Without parents to help out he just couldn't survive, so he joined that kind of organization in order to make a living. He told me that not everyone could go to that area near Hung Teh Road. You had to have some "background"—that is, connections with the organization. People there did a lot of fighting and stealing and engaged in speculation on the outside. The prostitutes there, he said, were very loose in their behavior; they ran around nude in their rooms.

[*The prostitutes there, then, did not solicit trade like those on Pearl Light Road?*] Right. They accepted only known people.

[*Do you know whether prostitution continued to operate on Pearl Light Road until the time of your escape in 1973?*] It did.... Around the time I left, the prostitutes in the Hsi Kuan district were even more flagrant. They'd actually follow students into the villages sometimes. Hsi Kuan was a very bustling place—many big restaurants, movie houses, and department stores. Wealthy people live there—most of the prostitutes' customers were such people.

[*Were there any favorite streets in Hsi Kuan for prostitutes?*] Yes. Wen Ch'ang South Road, Shih Pa P'u Road, Hsia Chiu Road which is now called Hsiu Li Erh, though few people use this new name. But there's no open solicitation. The prostitutes around there usually have customers with whom they're well acquainted. They didn't go with just anyone—only when it was in their interest to do so. For example, early in 1973 when I was preparing to escape, I had to look about for a boat, because it was too cold to swim. A friend of mine, who'd been sent down to a fishing village, helped me locate one. Two of the militia I talked with on board didn't want any money from me, but they asked me to find them wives! At first, I really felt baffled, because generally city people would never marry anyone from the villages. But when I mentioned this to a friend in a speculators' organization in Hsi Kuan, he just laughed and said that no matter how many girls I wanted or how beautiful, it could all be managed. So one of the militia came to Canton and my friend found two motors for him. They were so beautiful he nearly fainted at the sight and promised to arrange everything for me. As it turned out,

other things happened that made me put off my escape. But at the time those motors promised to marry the militia. Of course, they weren't serious and would have left them after I reached Hong Kong.... This incident led to a misunderstanding with my girlfriend.... She thought I personally knew those motors.

[*But what did the motors get out of this?*] They were obeying my friend, who was a minor leader. There were many such girls under him taking his orders.... These girls belonged to the organization and were not engaged in prostitution only, but also in other underhanded activities—stealing and swindling.

[*So you have to approach the right person in Hsi Kuan in order to get a girl?*] Yes. You have to go through an organization man. The girls are very beautiful and the people in the organizations make money very easily.

[*Do you mean that prostitution is under the protection of these organizations, which take their cut?*] I believe so. The girls cooperate willingly. Some of them, you see, have no legal residence; others have run away from home. So they are very loyal to the organization. They'd do anything they were told—even fight. Their money is shared by everyone in the organization. My friend always took some lovely girl home with him and suggested I do the same. But I didn't want to—and I had my own girlfriend. Even though she sometimes stayed at my house, I would never dare do anything.... Traditional ideas still persist "up there" [in China].

[*Are there any prostitutes in Hsi Kuan who did not belong to a speculators' organization?*] Impossible.

[*When the girls themselves referred to such an organization, what word did they use?*] Not many organizations dared have a name, because it could get into the Public Security Bureau files and help trap them. So the members would often say they belonged to the "big brother leader," giving the head of the organization's nickname. For example, if his name were Bill [an approximation of the original Cantonese], they might say they belonged to "Wild Bill." Or they'd mention a road or place, that is, their territory.

[*Were any of the organization leaders women?*] Yes, there were also "big sisters."

[*Why is it impossible for a girl to operate independently in Hsi Kuan?*] The territoriality is very clearcut. Almost every road has a different organization. One false step might lead to a fight. If you belong to one street and want to make a living on another, you must get to know the leader of that street. In Canton there are so many incidents of people getting chopped. It's impossible to do business independently in such a complicated place.

[*You said that prostitutes would even follow students into the village. Can you explain the circumstances?*] There are two reasons for doing this. First—to avoid a residence checkup. And secondly, life in the city can be troublesome. In the village at least no one bothers them for a while and they can live cheaply. After two weeks to

*The transitive use of the word struggle corresponds to the special Chinese use of the word to mean a procedure leading to confession of shortcomings, "errors," or "crimes" by the accused and may or may not involve physical torment.

a month they go back. Many girls have followed men they didn't even know—they were introduced to them.

[*Does this mean the girls go to the countryside under organization sponsorship?*] They're introduced to such men by the organization leaders. If residence was really being checked, even the leaders couldn't protect them. Every year before the two trade fairs there was a big residence checkup in all these places. Before the check-up the girls all ran away to avoid disaster. Afterward they'd return.

[*In your own experience, how common was this—girls taking off temporarily for the countryside?*] Quite common. There were checkups before the spring and autumn trade fairs and National Day—the last two more or less at the same time. Sometimes there was one before May 1—this one was usually sudden.... Those two motors I mentioned earlier always said they meant to come stay at my house in the village, but I didn't let them.

[*Did the peasants notice the girls' arrival?*] They noticed, but didn't bother about that. They felt city people got around more and looked on them with envy.

[*What do you mean by "looked on them with envy"?*] They felt that what went on in the city was completely different from the village. They saw us former students, girls and boys, going around everywhere together. But in the village, because of the old customs, a boy wouldn't even touch a girl's hand.

[*Did the peasants know or suspect that the organization girls were prostitutes?*] They didn't necessarily know—generally they didn't. But if some girl student was caught as a prostitute in Canton and sent back to the village, then the peasants would spread the news. In the neighboring village there was one girl like this who was caught during a checkup before a trade fair. She was sent back and struggled at a production brigade meeting.

[*In many big cities around the world, where there is organized prostitution, there is generally some police involvement. That is, the police are bribed or paid off. From what you say, the police knew about these organizations, because they knew where to conduct their checkups. Hence our question: Between such checkups, was there any quiet cooperation involving a turnover of money?*] I wouldn't venture to say there were prostitute organizations in China. I was speaking mainly of motors who were in the business—but they were engaged in other things, not only prostitution. I'm not too familiar with the situation on Pearl Light Road. I only know what my Hsi Kuan friends told me—maybe there was a prostitute organization there.... About whether the police knew, of course, they did. All the cases were on file and the girls were sometimes caught. If they were former city students [educated youth], they'd just be sent back to the countryside, not even punished. Prostitutes who did have legal residence in Canton were sent to detention houses for about 1-3 months. If they were arrested more than 2-3 times, maybe they'd get a 2-year sentence to labor reform. Once I visited a friend of mine in a detention house—he'd failed in an escape attempt—and I saw a lot of motors there. But they acted as though nothing had happened.... Actually, the checkups were carried out not by the Public Security people, but by the Workers' Patrols and the Road and Street

Committees. But a lot of people in these two units also had some involvement in the speculators' organizations. So, at times they kept one eye open and one eye shut. Their main purpose in these checkups was to find "black persons" and "black households"—people without legal residence in Canton.

[*What do you mean by saying that the girls in the detention house "acted as though nothing had happened"?*] It seemed they took it all very casually—as if it didn't matter at all, being locked up for a while.... They often sang popular songs and tried to strike up conversations with others.... Later, I was in a detention house myself for ten days in 1973 and I saw prostitutes there not only from Canton but from Chiang Men City and the Hsin Hui County Seat. Inside, everyone knew who was who, because people had to report their professions.

[*The beautiful motors must have had connections. Why didn't they escape to Hong Kong?*] Some did. Those two motors who helped me get the fishing boat that time—they also were thinking of escaping. One of my friends recently ran into an ex-motor here. She's working as a "dancing girl" [a prostitute] in a "black parlor." Last year I saw her a few times and she seemed quite nice then. She worked for a while in a factory, then in an arcade. I don't know why she became a dancing girl this year [1975].

[*You mentioned earlier many wealthy people in the Hsi Kuan district. Who would these be?*] People who are engaged in speculative buying and selling, who run underground factories. They belong to the speculators' organizations, but they're not completely controlled by them. They're on their own and come and go as they please. Sometimes they have kids under them who take orders.... In a word—commercial people who really earn piles of money. It was rare on the mainland to see people with a great deal of money—so it seemed to me.

[*What about the high-ranking cadre? Were they customers of those motors?*] They absolutely did not have the guts. Those cadre members have an entirely different way of having their pleasure of girls. They didn't have any relationship with this kind of girls.

[*What was their way?*] That was another matter entirely. During the Cultural Revolution we would go read the big character posters at the Municipal and Provincial Party Headquarters. There—and also in our own small newspapers—we read many items exposing the cadre's indiscriminate man-woman relationships. The high-ranking cadre would use their power and rank to seduce girls. Suppose a girl applies to go to Hong Kong because her parents or husband are there. Frequently, the cadre member handling her case will force her to have sexual relations with him. Some of the cadre seduce or rape female personnel of lower rank. I knew personally of one case. My classmate's father, who was deputy head of a Public Security Bureau, had relations with his secretary and even brought her home and asked his children to call her "auntie." It became a big scandal.

[*We assume that most customers are not wealthy. Therefore, what was a prostitute's standard charge?*] Some charged \$2 [JMP], others \$5. It's expensive if you consider that an apprentice worker makes \$20 a month and a worker from \$30 up.... When I was in the detention

camp in 1973, I heard one worker there say that a certain girl was really cheap—only 50 cents and 2 catties worth of *liang p'iao* [rice coupons].

[*Why \$2 for some and \$5 for others?*] Ordinary prostitutes charge \$2. Higher class ones—\$5....I do want to add something. I was told by a friend of mine about prostitutes in Canton's Park of Culture, which is a place for public entertainment. He said there were many such girls around the skating rink there. At the time he went there (just for the fun of it), the sign to look for was a handkerchief sticking halfway out of a pocket. This sign changed from time to time. At other times it might be some colorful badge. He accosted a girl directly and asked her price. It was \$5. Those who charged \$5, he said, were really beautiful.

[*What kind of colorful badges would the prostitutes wear?*] There was no fixed kind. Many badges were on sale. The most common ones were Mao portrait badges, red flags, and badges showing the alliance of workers and peasants.

[*But didn't a lot of people in the city wear Mao badges?*] During the Cultural Revolution, yes. Then everyone had to wear a Mao badge. But since then, fewer and fewer people wear one.

[*Did the prostitutes have any special way of walking?*] They didn't walk very properly.

[*Meaning?*] You could sense it on sight. Proper girls walk gently and slowly, but those prostitutes had a kind of bouncy walk. Hop, skip, and jump, like little girls. They'd run a little, put their arms around their girlfriends' shoulders and whisper something. There weren't any high-heeled shoes "up there," so they'd often walk tiptoe.

[*In your opinion, has prostitution been increasing or decreasing since the Cultural Revolution—or is it more or less the same?*] Before the Cultural Revolution I concentrated only on my studies and knew nothing at all about prostitution. During the Cultural Revolution, I did hear a bit about it. Afterward, when I was sent down to the countryside, I knew such a thing definitely existed—my Hsi Kuan friends proved this to me many times. And I met prostitutes of the three categories I mentioned before....Of course, prostitution is increasing, but it's not too serious.

II. A RECENT MIDDLE SCHOOL GRADUATE

[*Did you come across any prostitutes in the Sha Ho detention house (in 1973, after being caught during a*

first escape attempt)?] Yes, but only a few.

[*How old were they?*] Very young—around sixteen. There were none older than that.

[*Was there anything special about the way these girls acted?*] They were comparatively lively. They talked about everything and were fond of joking. It just seemed they had no thought of their future; there was no tomorrow. They were very lighthearted—they would start teasing any boys they met.

[*What do you mean by teasing?*] A sort of joking. For example: "Where do you live? Let's go have some fun together after we get out." In a half-teasing manner. They would start it all—they were very brash.

[*Pretty? Or coarse-looking?*] Some very pretty, others not so very. But generally they were better-looking than the ordinary. These girls are called motors in Canton. Delinquent boys are called windmills.

[*Do you know why?*] I was very young when I heard people say that a motor without a windmill has no effect. But if there are both of them together, the motor can turn the earth and sky dark [create a great storm].

[*Can you explain this more?*] It means that, if there were motors without windmills, society wouldn't be much affected.

[*What does a windmill do in Canton?*] They get into fights, break into houses, rob and steal.

[*Are the windmills the girls' customers—or do they control the girls?*] Generally they form into groups, mostly unnamed—and these groups control the girls. They also protect them....It was a funny thing on the mainland: The windmills and motors were always so lighthearted and optimistic. They had activities planned all the time—always something going on. But people like me were usually in a state of unhappiness, boredom, loneliness, and idleness. That carefree attitude the motors and windmills had was very widespread—it was the bad aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Before the Cultural Revolution there hadn't been anything like that.

[*It's an interesting contrast you draw between the merry delinquents and sad you. How do you explain it?*] It was mainly because we felt the social system was not at all to our satisfaction—we always had that feeling. They accepted the system more than we did. Since they couldn't get away from the system, they seemed not to care about their future or any consequences and just tried to obtain as much happiness as they could. They usually ended up badly.