**Book club** 



A book on prostitution in China asks sex workers how they see the industry, the state and

## **ROBERT FOYLE HUNWICK** — AUGUST 7, 2025

themselves.

SOCIETY

Reviewed: The Regulation of Prostitution in China: Law in the Everyday Lives of Sex Workers, Police Officers, and Public Health Officials, by Margaret Boittin (Cambridge University Press, December

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2024).

vegetable stew from neighbourhood hawkers."

he business of pleasure is often anything but that for those who work it. Yet in Margaret Boittin's new book on sex work in China, we are shown a rare moment of leisure: about 200 sex workers "milling about" a Beijing park near the salons and KTV parlors they operate out of, "catching up with friends and snacking on grilled corn on the cob, meat skewers and

quickly scatter the sisters. Boittin herself is later approached and threatened, not by the authorities but representatives of the nearby skin trade, who suggest she should scram before they "cream your table into pulp." This was Boittin's introduction to the Chinese underworld of surly madams, hard-bitten hookers, predatory policemen and truculent johns. But her resulting book, *The Regulation of* Prostitution in China (Cambridge University Press, December 2024) is most interesting when

it examines how these women see themselves, rather than the state's perception of their illicit

The scenic spot is interrupted by a wagonload of police officers chasing an arrest quota, who

The first third of the book lays out the fascinating history of prostitution in China. "To wear a green hat" famously signifies cuckoldry in today's China, but the phrase derives from a Yuanera directive that men of "debased status" must wear verdant headgear should they wish to pimp their wives or daughters. By the late Qing dynasty, the cities of Kunming, Guiyang and

was "not compatible with commodification of the body." On a November evening in 1949, public security officials in Beijing shut down over 200 brothels. The following year, a documentary came out about the sex workers' "transformation" into model socialists. Within two years, the Communist Party was able to reduce the existence of prostitution to an extent that sexually transmitted diseases were effectively eradicated. Unless you were Mao Zedong himself, who enjoyed unfettered orgies with provincial virgins up to his deathbed, the 60s did not swing in China, nor did the 70s.

arrangement that might resemble a foreign concession.

Chengdu had built walled zones for prostitution where police sold

entrance tickets, "claimed a percentage of sex workers' earnings,

charged rent for the brothels, coordinated health inspections and

After the advent of the People's Republic in 1949, such Vegas-

style "concentrated sin" solutions went out the window. Socialism

sector, who from the early 1980s had free rein to indulge their most debauched desires without reproach. The 1990s and beyond saw a surge in sexual proclivity, and officials caught with dozens of mistresses: the Jiangsu Province Construction Bureau head with 140 mistresses including a mother-daughter combo nicknamed "one arrow, two birds"; the balding railway minister Liu Zhijun who, it was rumored, slept with the entire female cast and crew of a Dream of the Red Mansion production he had bankrolled. By 2010, China Daily, the Party's official English-language newspaper, estimated that between three and ten million women were engaged in sex work. Unofficial estimates put the number twice as high.

The same rules did not apply to Party officials, nor their entrepreneurial allies in the private

communicable sexual diseases. The first documented mainland case of HIV/AIDS in July 1985 was attributed to "bourgeois liberalization" — Party-speak for the ills of Deng's reform efforts. The virus was nicknamed "Loving Capitalism Disease" (爱资病, a play on the homophonic Chinese shorthand for AIDS, 艾滋病). By 2007, syphilis had re-emerged as "the

Confronted with the *de facto* return of a sex economy, the Hu-Wen administration (2002-2012)

set out to regulate prostitution in a bumbling way. As Boittin deftly illustrates with interviews

and examples, the government simultaneously ignored, condemned, tolerated and taxed the sex

most commonly reported communicable disease in Shanghai," according to The Lancet.

trade. As late as 2006, Boittin reports the State Council Legislative Affairs Office

he integration of prostitution into the global market also accelerated a re-introduction of

had built walled zones for prostitution where police sold entrance

acknowledging that "as everyone knows, entertainment venues have a dual nature," adding that today's cadres "openly recognize the close ties that exist between [sex] and entertainment, and create rules designed to signal they are eliminating sex work from these places." That same year, detailed rules were introduced to regulate businesses such as KTVs, nightclubs and 24-hour bathhouses,

insisting they "remain closed between 2 and 8am ... doors in

private rooms may not have locks [and] be at least partially

transparent so that the entire room is visible from the outside

[and] dimmable lights systems are forbidden." Furthermore, KTV

nightlife venues ignored them and local inspectors generally ignored the scofflaws. All the government had to do was tell the venues they couldn't sell sex, then tax them for the sex they inevitably sold. One former employee of the state-backed All-China Women's Federation went so far as to tell Elanah Uretsky in her 2016 book Occupational Hazards: Sex, Business, and HIV in Post-Mao China (Stanford University Press): "It's natural for men to have [affairs] because they can distinguish their feeling from sex," adding "it's not a big deal." In her fieldwork, Boittin, sometimes accompanied by a research assistant, boldly sallies forth

into the demimonde of Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and elsewhere to conduct one-on-one

The observations they provide paint a pitiable picture, reflecting society's view of these

interviews with an array of insiders covering the full gamut of China's sex industry. She visits

KTV clubs, apartment-brothels and the homes of mistresses, interviewing the women therein

dispossessed, often desperate people. "Su Yin was a farmer in Sichuan," we learn of one woman

working a park in Beijing to support two children and a husband back home, a man "who is

completely dependent on his wife, failed to live up to expectations and doesn't want to work."

66 They have an extremely tense relationship and frequently yell at each other. She accuses him of being a lazy partner who gambles away all her hard-earned income (albeit earned from the sexual labor of others). In Mei Jie's defence, her husband does seem to spend most of his days sitting in their living room and watching television. "

oittin's interviewees are clear-eyed and calculating about their situation, even if some are fanciful to the point of delusion, with some women long in the game promising themselves just a couple more years before heading back to the family farm for a bucolic retirement. These conversations reveal fascinating differences between how workers of differing status view their profession. Those on the lowest tier, who work on the street or in makeshift brothels, falang (法郎) — salons without scissors — tend to view their work as shameful. They are acutely aware of their precarious position, and are generally disinterested in politics, the police or even health check-ups, viewing their work as generally damaging to society and illbefitting of legalization. Middle-tier workers however, such as hostesses in KTV clubs, embrace HIV tests, are willing

to call the police on belligerent clients, and tend to show an interest and even trust in the state

at large. For them, sex work is illicit but natural, certainly nothing to be ashamed of. "If I like

the client, I'll go with him regardless of money," says one of Boittin's interviewees, Jing Ming,

"we women have our own needs!" They are aware of the benefits that greater regulation would

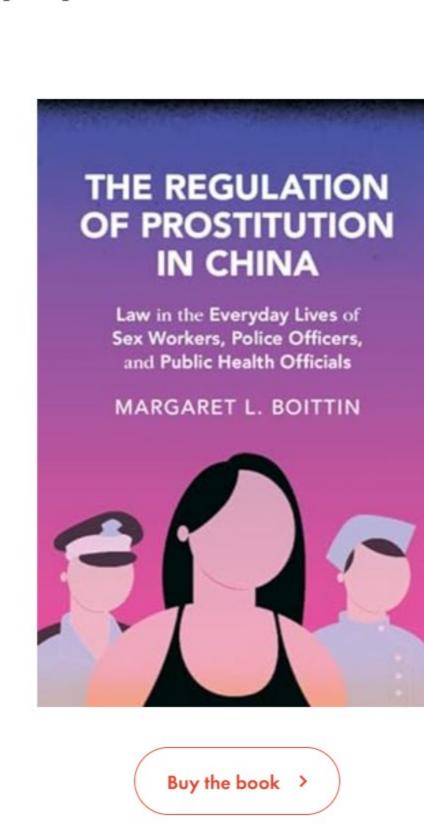
provide, and stridently in favor of "a safe and comfortable environment" - even demonstrating

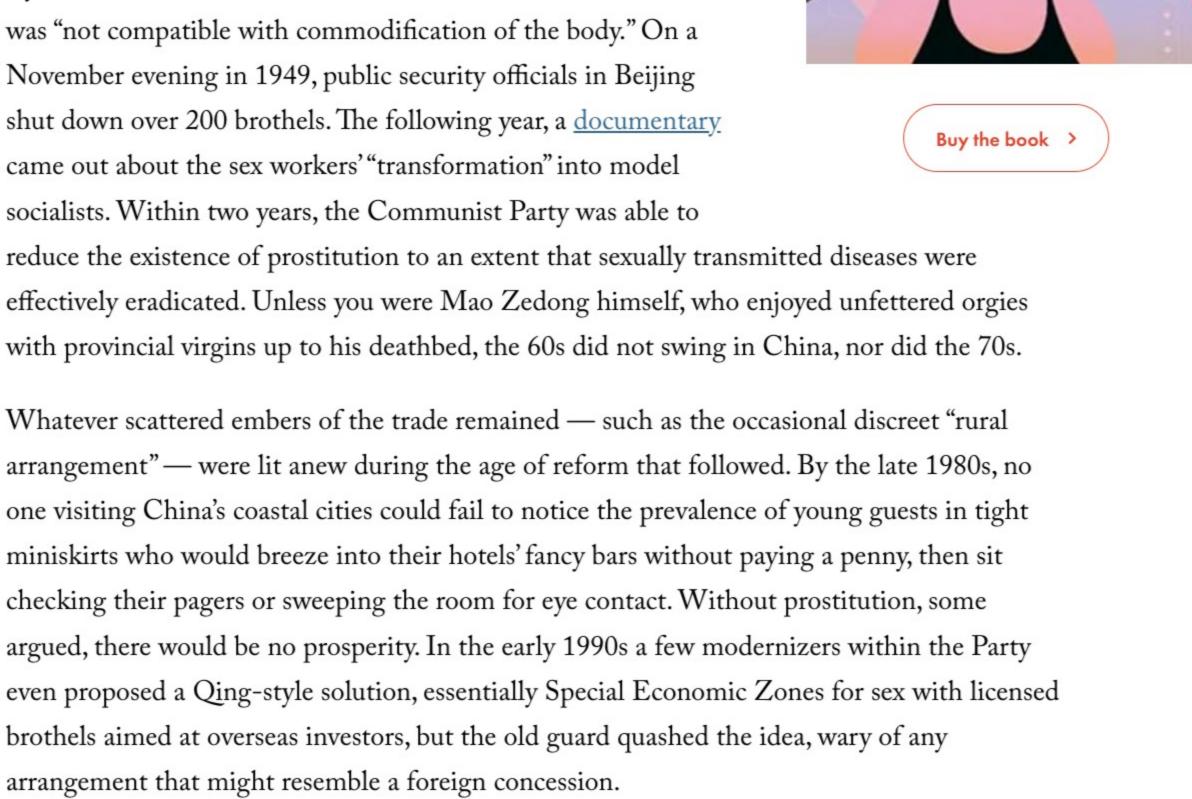
for their rights, as rare protests for legalization in Shenzhen in 2007 and Wuhan in 2010

Second wives, meanwhile, don't consider themselves sex workers at all. The lifestyles of the ernai (二奶) whom Boittin interviews range from lonely Ah-Fang, who receives a few hundred dollars a month to loiter in a Chaozhou apartment waiting for a married businessman to drop by, to cosmopolitan Lucy, 26, who spends her days drifting from salons to A screenshot of Jia Zhangke's Touch of Sin (2013) features Starbucks, waiting for her controlling client to visit prostitutes in a high-end Dongguan KTV costumed as Red for an occasional hook-up and hand over a handsome Army soldiers, under review by prospective johns. (Youtube) 10,000 RMB (about \$1,500) monthly stipend. None of these sex workers (or johns) wants anyone back home to find out, considering their

but that tolerance (and taxation) continue in less-trafficked corners of China. The drudgery of open-secret "pink zones" remains likewise unabated. In the former prostitution hub of Donnguan, for example, former KTV monoliths have been converted to nursing homes, and the sex trade has been pushed out to the suburbs. Maybe that is where it belongs in the "civilized" China of the Xi era, that has yet to address the contradictions seething under the surface of a harmonious society.

Header: Sex workers in the Chinese city of Dingshu in Jiangsu Province, China, a center of the pottery

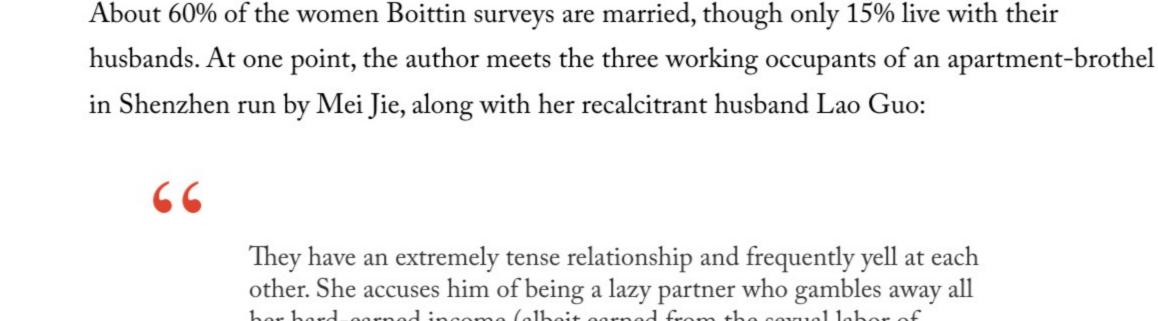






Getty Images)

hostesses must wear ball gowns "reminiscent of 1980s American Chinese prostitutes wait for customers at a prom dresses" or a traditionally demure qipao, while bathhouse neighborhood brothel in Shanghai, employees must don medical scrubs. November 2006. (Mark Ralston/AFP via Aware that such strict rules might dampen their clients' ardor,



on their perceptions of self, society and state.

bathhouses that they can't sell sex, then tax them for the sex they

family and neighbours to be "feudal" or close-minded. Though tradition holds that villagers should "mock poverty, not prostitutes," one girl fears being "drowned in spit" should her relatives learn the source of their monthly remittance. "I wish the government would tell

One suspects that the state's prohibitory axe has fallen hardest in flagship cities like Beijing,



work.

provided security."

6 6 By the late Qing dynasty, the cities of Kunming, Guiyang and Chengdu

tickets.

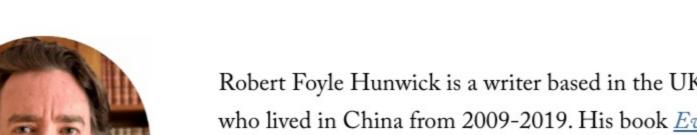
Mei and Lao share a 7 year-old child, Dou Dou, whom Mei tries to shield from their trade by sending him to boarding school, with limited success. When Boittin asks the madam where she can find more subjects to interview, an eager Dou Dou pipes up with a list of helpful suggestions. Later, a client spots the author concealing herself behind a curtain; on being told she is a researcher and not a sex worker, he "sat down and started talking to me about himself, his wife, and his children, as though we were meeting at a dinner party." Perhaps this is the point: the trade is so ubiquitous in many parts of China, and so normalized despite its illegal status, that admitting to indulgence is no more remarkable than ordering an array of spicy dishes. All the government had to do was tell KTVs, nightclubs and 24-hour

inevitably sold.

proved.

everyone that a xiaojie [小姐, little miss] is different from a whore," complains a homesick Jia Qing. "That way, people in my village wouldn't call me a whore." What's missing? Despite the breadth of her research, Boittin admits that the book does not

cover male prostitution, whether homosexual or female johns and their "duck men" (鸭子), and there are also barely any clients mentioned. The book mainly covers the tail end of the Hu Jintao years up until 2012, and doesn't document the full effects of Xi Jinping's prosecutorial crackdowns on the sex trade, which have severely curtailed the once thriving industry.



China will be published in 2026.

industry, 5th May 2000. (Jonathan C. Katzenellenbogen/Getty)