

To: FRAC
From: Elizabeth J. Remick, Political Science
Re: Report on research using FRAC grant
Date: December 20, 2004

A FRAC research grant supported a research trip for my book project entitled “Sex and the state: prostitution and local state building in Republican China” during the summer and fall of 2004. I spent almost five months in China doing archival and library research in Kunming, Yunnan province, and Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, China. FRAC funds paid for my plane fare, lodging, and the fees associated with archival and library research. The main research question I asked was: why did localities in China choose different approaches to dealing with prostitution during the Republic (1911-1949), and how did their chosen approaches affect the trajectory of local state building? The theoretical significance of the topic is that since the system of prostitution was predicated on a particular set of gender relations that allowed women to be bought and sold as commodities, the outcomes of state policy towards prostitution illustrate how gender relations can structure state organization and function. Prior to this research trip, I had previously completed a case study on Guangzhou, Guangdong province, where the local state employed a model of heavy taxation and regulation of prostitution, generating vast revenues for the municipal government and making local state growth possible in many other policy areas, including education, roads and other infrastructure. For the final two case studies in the book, I turned to Kunming, where the local government had chosen a coercive strategy of police-run brothel compounds, and Hangzhou, where the government selected a regime of light taxation, minimal regulation, and philanthropy.

Kunming

Process: In Kunming, I encountered some serious difficulties getting access to materials because officials at two key resource locations said my project was too sensitive. This came as a surprise to me because when I visited the city on a “scouting” trip in 2002, I was given access to all the materials I requested at archives and libraries and encountered no signs that this would be a difficult subject. Based on officials’ comments, it was clear that some kind of political change relating to foreigners doing research in Kunming had occurred between 2002 and 2004, and I am still not sure exactly what it was.

Findings: Nevertheless, I was able to find interesting materials in other archives and libraries, and I will still be able to use Kunming as a case study. Kunming’s approach to prostitution was the most state-involved and coercive in the country: it established police-managed brothel compounds that were patrolled by officers, enforced frequent compulsory health checks on prostitutes, and gave state backing to the madams whose power was institutionalized within the brothel compounds. The compounds were conceived as strong anti-prostitution measures, with the intention of leading one day to the abolition of prostitution. Based on my early reading of the evidence, I think that the local leaders took this approach for two important reasons: (1) in a border region that was heavily militarized, a coercive approach was a natural extension of the other highly coercive policies of the local government, and (2) large-scale prostitution was relatively new there and not as socially respectable as in other parts of the country, making it easier

for the state to fight entrenched pro-prostitution interests and minimizing social resistance to the brothel compounds. Nevertheless, the policy provoked strong opposition from Confucian organizations, women's groups, the YMCA, and other anti-prostitution groups who interpreted the policy as being supportive of prostitution rather than being a prohibitive measure. The local government defended its policy against these attacks and in the end created a large bureaucracy to administer the brothel compound and to track down unregistered prostitutes, adding to what was already a large, police-dominated local government.

Hangzhou

Process: My research went much more smoothly in Hangzhou. I was able to get access to the university libraries, municipal and provincial archives, and the provincial library without any problems. All of those places had much larger collections than their counterparts in Kunming, which should not be surprising because Kunming is relatively remote and poor while Hangzhou is in the heartland of rich Eastern China. Historically, record-keeping was better, and governmental and charitable activities themselves more plentiful, in Hangzhou.

Findings: Hangzhou's approach to prostitution was diametrically opposed to Kunming's: beyond registering and lightly taxing brothels and individual prostitutes as was the standard throughout the country, the local government did very little to try to control prostitution in the city's "red light" districts besides sponsoring small-scale rescue homes for women who wished to leave the business. In 1930, the new modernist national government tried to force Hangzhou to ban prostitution by gradually withdrawing prostitutes' licenses through a series of lotteries. The measure was so remarkably unsuccessful—after the first lottery, a crowd of about 500 pimps, madams and prostitutes protested for several days outside the prostitute rescue home where their unwillingly "liberated" sisters were sequestered after their licenses were revoked, and ultimately stormed the gates to free them—that the city simply gave up and continued on as before. Why did the local government take this *laissez-faire* approach? Hangzhou had a long and rather illustrious history of producing courtesans, and there was a long tradition of connections between scholar-officials and prostitutes in the elite culture of East China. As a result, prostitution was socially acceptable to most men in Hangzhou, and brothels were simply one of the many entertainments available to male tourists who came to see, and read or write poetry about, the breathtaking scenery of Hangzhou's famous West Lake. Surprisingly, considering that Hangzhou was in many ways a hotbed of modernist thought—normally very critical of the system of officially-sanctioned prostitution—there was little direct modernist opposition to prostitution throughout the period in question. From the perspective of local state building, the approach to dealing with prostitution in Hangzhou had remarkably different consequences from the approach chosen in Kunming. Rather than producing a massive and coercive bureaucracy, Hangzhou's approach was characterized by minimal police (or tax collector) involvement and only resulted in the construction of tiny rescue organizations and handicrafts training centers for ex-prostitutes. These institutions were dwarfed by the local government's large-scale relief institutions established to provide help to refugees, beggars, delinquent youths, elderly indigents, and abandoned baby girls. In Hangzhou, prostitution was viewed as a rather

minor social problem, and so reform and philanthropy rather than coercion and control were the watchwords in dealing with it.

Thanks to the FRAC grant, I have now completed the fieldwork for this project. Based on this research, I expect to produce a book manuscript to be submitted to a major university press, as well as at least three articles for publication in peer-reviewed journals.