

Irvington High School

Prostitution on the Frontier: Power and Exploitation

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The 'Old West', a time and place in American history often mythologized, has a figure in society that often goes unnoticed: the prostitute. From the period of 1840-1920 they held an important position in the social and economic parts of society. Thanks to the social and economic situation, Victorian principles, and government action, prostitutes were able to gain substantial influence. However, especially among the heavily exploited Chinese, suffering among prostitutes was still common and a part of the narrative. That narrative did change over time through three periods: that of self autonomy, organized prostitution, and its eventual decline. Nevertheless, prostitution held great importance in the society of the Western Frontier.

The Western US of this time had a unique social setting that allowed for prostitution to establish itself in Western culture and economics. Unlike the East, the West had a combination of a less structured society, a population made up mostly of men, and a pride in the "roughness" of life. Although there were exceptions, white men tended to live alone as bachelors (Johnson) in the beginning of the frontier. From about the 1840s until around the 1870s the population was mainly male, thus creating a demand for female companionship (Simmons). This desperation reached such a point that men were willing to pay to see women's undergarments ("Adam Ruins"). Secondly, given the rougher nature of the West, men were less concerned with social conventions (Holman 86), thus creating an opportunity for prostitutes to hold a greater position within society. In fact, before they arrived in the West, "towns" were more like work camps ("Adam Ruins"). Thus, due to this connection to the births of these towns, red light districts could often be the Main Street of old mining towns (Myres 194). Rather than having that distaste for lower-class women found in the Eastern US, Westerners were more accepting, as according to Barnhart, "Any woman that a miner saw was beautiful, magnificent, and high class; prostitutes were wild, young, and entrepreneurial women. What on earth could a young 'panner find wrong with spending a night in her arms?" (Barnhart 15-16). In fact, it was so common that one mining song was "Oh, the lust for mountain dust/brought us lusty mountain men;/ Who, through their lust for mountain women,/quickly lost their gold again." (Tong 13). Indeed, not only was the West "backward", they were proud of it, as shown in the magazine *The Pioneer* "[we glory] in the isolation of our social position and our comparative freedom from social formalities, each cares to conform his action solely to his own will and pleasure." (Hopkins 213-220). Thus, due to this social dynamic, prostitutes were able to become entrepreneurs during this period.

Entrepreneurship during this early period of the West became an attractive reality for economically disadvantaged women, as well as allowing for independence. Since there was less regulation in the West as opposed to the more "civilized" East (Johnson), prostitutes could gain greater status as well as money due to the demand. Many Euro-American women that came to the West were

motivated by necessity, including causes such as famine, natural disaster, or an overall lack of economic opportunity. More, respectable professions such as being a seamstress, nurse, milliner, etc. were stigmatized by society due to Victorian ideals and the cult of domesticity. As it was the Victorian ideal that the woman would protect the purity and sanctuary of the home while the man provided for the family (Simmons). Thus, Eastern women already being looked down upon could come to the West, make more money, and have more independence. This made moving West an attractive prospect to women. Even within the field of prostitution, “frontier prostitutes experienced a greater degree of community interaction and integration, mobility and latitude in community settlement patterns, from the 1840s to the 1900s.” (Simmons). In conclusion, due to the social dynamics during the development of the frontier, prostitutes were able to be more independent and became fundamental to the community.

The economic reality of the West firmly intertwined with the social dynamics made prostitutes indispensable. As many early frontier towns were based off of mining opportunities, these towns would often be very fluid as mines were discovered, became profitable, and were depleted (Goldman 67). This meant that prostitutes would move from town to town, without being held back by ties thus giving them greater autonomy. In fact, in San Francisco these mining towns made prostitution a “lucrative business” (Hirata). Additionally, within the hierarchy of prostitutes, different classes of prostitutes would be common in different areas. For example, lower to middle class prostitutes were more common in smaller towns, while higher class prostitutes were more common with corporate towns (Simmons). Also, class lines within the profession allowed all classes of men to be served at their price point (Jameson). At the top of the food chain were madams and mistresses, who either ran their own brothels or had a specific elite clientele (or both), and down from there were prostitutes who worked in well-off brothels to saloon girls (Simmons). One thing this meant is that when resources started to dry up the highest class prostitutes were both financially and contractually able to leave first (Simmons), thus cementing their position on top. Lower status prostitutes were less able to leave, and indentured Chinese prostitutes couldn't and were often sold (Simmons), demonstrating their greater level of suffering and relative inability to take advantage of the fluidity of the West. Thus, due to the economic reality of mining towns, higher class prostitutes specifically were able to have a great deal of autonomy with that independence decreasing as class did.

In fact, through this deep seated establishment of prostitution with women gaining independence and success via themselves the “soiled dove” ideology developed. This ideology not only became ingrained in the culture of the West, but also acted as an explanation, a rationalization, to a confining Victorian society. By creating this myth, men created a woman who would “personify their dreams and desires, one that would be acceptable to love” (Holman) by imbuing her with proper Victorian qualities:

riches, elegance, beauty, jealous rivals, and the idea of leaving the profession to go on to a respectable life (Goldman 2). Indeed, the myth also painted the prostitute as pathetic, one to be protected rather than responsible for the social ills associated with brothels (Holman). Thus, this myth served as an excuse and rationalization for how taken men were with these “soiled doves”.

But the widespread success of this myth was mainly due to its use as an explanation - , whether it be to Easterners, to other men, to women, or to oneself.. Westerners both defended their “wild” nature and took pride in it. But for Easterners the moral outrage wasn’t about the existence of prostitutes - the East had plenty of brothels - but rather for the level of respect Westerners could show prostitutes (and the respectability of prostitution in society?). In fact, “Hats were removed and bows were executed” (Barnhart 20), since to an early Westerner, ladies were defined not on manners but rather “charity, faith, energy, generosity, cleanliness, and loyalty to friends” (Ray 57). And, this was deserved, as madams such as Lea Perry provided clothes to poor children and miners (Simmons). Indeed, the East understood it as partially a result of a lack of respectable women and due to the wildness of the frontier, its “restless, conflicted, and marginalized characters” (Rister 537), into which prostitutes fit; however, the pride in what proper Victorian society would consider to be inner sin is what bamboozled the East.

An interesting element of this East-West dynamic is the growth of the social dove from myth to ideology as the West became more developed. From the beginning, this myth was self contradictory as it served both as a defence for and celebration of Western backwardness in respect to prostitution. Indeed, the immoral activities the East so despised “were the only delights in life (Rister 538-539) to those in the West. Part of what makes this so interesting is that Easterners often misunderstood the context and meaning of phrases such as “abandoned women” in articles of Western newspapers (Haywood 83). Indeed, Western newspapers would often “advertise their famed prostitutes, ballooning tales about them -- reemphasizing the glamour of the profession” (Butler and Siporin 95-96). And, even the aforementioned Lea Perry, although given a funeral service and being honored in death, was not able to be buried within a cemetery (Simmons). Thus, through the creation of this soiled dove ideology, an interesting conflict is revealed within the West: a fascination with women and pride of their own raw society, a will to defend their nature, as well as a desire to conform to Eastern standards and enforce a moral code. A quote from Holman well sums up this contrast within the ideology itself, “The soiled dove was viewed as being both inherently bad, but also vulnerable and kind, independent.” Even the escape of Ah Toy, a notorious Chinese prostitute, from the profession was published in such a way that enforces the leaving-the-life element of the soiled dove ideology (Holman). And, unintentionally this ideology made prostitution more appealing to women themselves, specifically those that are economically disadvantaged, as they might “choose their own destiny” (Holman).

However, that autonomy and success decreased over time as the social and economic reality of the West changed. In the beginning of the frontier, prostitution was mostly self-employment, and women as free agents could gain a large profit. Indeed, some were able to invest in other interests, get out of the profession, or buy a brothel (Hirata) and the latter are those who maintained power and influence into the next period. This change was caused by two major factors. Firstly, of course, men took advantage of the profitable business opportunity. As, “male-dominated organized crime would take control and entrepreneurial opportunities would disappear” (Holman), and for Chinese prostitutes, secret Chinese societies had developed a monopoly by 1854 (Hirata). The second reason for this change was increased settlement and development of cities, which created an influx of proper Victorian women. These women, fitting in the ideal set for them, worked to establish a moral society and in their mind that meant dealing with prostitution. Indeed, according to Fitzpatrick, California used discussions of prostitution to “police sexual behavior, control women’s economic power, and limit immigration” which would fit very much into Victorian goals. Thus, as families began to take root, businesses near the red-light district suffered and more pressure was placed on the government to intercede (Simmons). Thus, as more people came to the West, making it more of a part of America rather than the foreign “frontier”, men took advantage of profitable business opportunities and ‘respectable wives’ inserted themselves and their Victorian ideals into society, together working to push down an “uncivilized” practice.

To better understand why exactly prostitution was so hated by the morally elite women, it’s necessary to comprehend the goals of Victorian culture and how prostitution went against them on every level. Firstly, women themselves weren’t supposed to be “very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind” (Acton 133). Thus, the sexual nature of the job itself was looked down upon not just for being immoral, but for being something unnatural and wrong for a woman. Secondly, the job of a Victorian woman essentially boiled down to: marriage, bearing children, and being a homemaker. In terms of marriage, one key element needed from the woman is chastity (Holman), something a prostitute can’t provide. And secondly, a woman’s role was to perfect the domestic sphere, and be a good mother; something which also wasn’t achievable for most prostitutes (Holman). As, many children were sent away and prevented with abortifacients (Trimble), and prostitutes didn’t have a household of which to take care. And, perhaps the most subliminally important aspect is classism. In Victorian culture, “the lower classes were required to adopt Victorian values for the hope of upward mobility” (Haywood 507-508). Thus, since prostitution was a profession in which even low class women could gain influence and wealth, the ability for the lower classes to gain influence by ignoring Victorian ideals was something horrid. Additionally, the women’s rights movement of the time viewed prostitution as an example of the dominion of man, a virtual slavery, and campaigned against it in their fight for women’s suffrage, painting

the prostitute as a victim (Best ix). Indeed, even past Victorian values, one feminist theory is that the breadwinner ideology, among others, worked to culturally devalue household work, despite being an important form of labor (Anderson). Thus, women achieving economically valuable labor was inappropriate to the social order. Thus, according to Victorian ideology, prostitution was a scourge due to its sexual nature, support of unladylike behavior, and the opportunity it gave to lower-class women.

In the beginning of Western settlement and the frontier, there was relatively little government regulation of prostitution (and honestly most things), thus further creating an environment conducive to prostitution. Compared to Paris and the East, California (and the West in general) had fewer regulations, with no required registration nor frequent arrests (Johnson). Not only was prostitution tolerated, but over time, “In fact all city councils in the West passed laws prohibiting the existence of brothels in cities and proposed taxation to punish it, knowing very well the large number of brothels would not substantially decrease and provide a steady tax revenue for the city.” (Butler 87). This indicates the identity of prostitution as something welcomed as entertainment to workers to a tax revenue source and being a necessary evil. However, with greater settlement and outrage from civilized women, the government did become stricter. For example in Winnipeg, in 1910, Point Douglas was established as the last segregated district (in terms of segregating areas of the city with and without prostitution and other such uncouth practices) of the city (Macfarlane). However, as with most governmental efforts of restriction, it didn't truly end prostitution. Rather, prostitutes became a political pawn, as Macfarlane argues, “Segregation was the most efficient means by which the Anglo-Protestant elite could assert their cultural superiority and moral sensibility over a growing modern city.” Similarly, in Cripple Creek Colorado, restrictions were put in place against bawdy houses, but no restrictions existed one block south of the area in question (Simmons). During recessions, restrictions were often passed at the behest of concerned women, but to little effect (Simmons). In fact, some areas underhandedly embraced prostitution (to an extent) using it as a moneymaker. In addition, madams influenced the way by which governments were formed (MacKell 367). However, despite the continuity of prostitution and limited governmental persecution of it, the arrival of “moral” women did reduce the ability for women to be independent and respectable as with the establishment of stricter social structures “[prostitutes] were driven back into condemnation” (Tong 33). Thus with the redefining of social structures, government restrictions were strengthened however ineffectually and the social independence of prostitutes declined.

Yet the power prostitutes continued to maintain is undeniable, even through the later age of brothels and less respectability. As already mentioned, in the first period (1840s-1870s depending on the area), “the frontier was the first time that women were able to profit immensely off of being women” (Tong 33). Wealth was more easily attainable from prostitution than other professions such as laundry or

cooking (Holman). Prostitutes were fighters, and the autonomy given to them during the early frontier period was a time in which women gained personal power. But, during the second period of the West (from around the 1870s-1890s depending on the area), the average prostitute started to lose her autonomy to brothels and madams started to gain real influence. According to Jan Mackell Collins, a historian, “[financial freedom gained by prostitutes] could even lead to a measure of political equality and influence in the communities where they served these men” (“Adam Ruins”). Prostitutes held a social importance, as the need for visibility to gain customers as well as a relative lack of upper class women, led prostitutes to hold social gatherings such as balls and dinner parties (Holman). They also were “the most elegant dressed women on the West Coast” (Barnhart 23) and saloons and bars in which prostitutes spent time were often the social centers of town (Murphy 51), thus giving them an immense social presence and influence. For example, Josephine Airey or “Chicago Joe” as she was known was at one point in the 1880s the largest landowner in the Red Light district (of Montana) (“Mary (Welch)”). Another example is Mattie Silks in Denver who gained such power that she was issued a liquor license, which was unusual as the police used the illegal serving of liquor as a pretense for raids (Rutter 140). And, this influence turned into both charitable and political power. Charitable prostitutes included Madam Millie who used her riches to fund childrens’ education, Madam Laura Evans who provided workers comp and shelter, and Madam Diamond Jessie Hayman who provided food and clothing amidst the San Francisco earthquake (“Adam Ruins”). In terms of political power, Wyoming, the first state to grant women’s suffrage, when in the process to become a state declared “We may stay out of the Union 100 years, but we will come in with our women” (“Adam Ruins”). The next 8 states to grant women’s suffrage were all in the West, and Wyoming was the nation’s first state to elect a woman as Governor (“Adam Ruins”). This trend suggests the greater presence women had in the West, due to the looser social systems, the innate intertwining of women with Western culture, and the ability for women to independently gain power, influence, and wealth. Thus, prostitutes gained autonomy through the early stages of the frontier, madams gained social influence during the middle stage, or the glory days of brothels, and that influence turned to political power in the final stage (from around the 1890s to the 1920s).

Despite all of the following discussions of power and influence gained by prostitutes in the West, one key element up to this point unmentioned is Chinese prostitution. It formed a massive part of the cultural and economic part of prostituion, and had such a massive impact on the West it deserves its own specific attention.

Unlike the Euro-American prostitutes who most often became prostitutes of their own free will, sometimes out of necessity and sometimes out of ambition, Chinese prostitutes most often weren’t afforded that luxury. In China at the time, problems such as oppression, foreign imperialism, and

population pressure created great poverty and desperation. One solution some Chinese families opted for was selling their daughter into prostitution. They wouldn't have to pay for room and board and would still receive financial support (Hirata). As estimated by a Qing official, as many as one in ten families might rely on a single Canton prostitute for their survival (Simmons). Additionally, daughters were often less valued as they would go on to support their husbands' family and were therefore not as valuable an investment to the family as a son.

These economic struggles also meant many men went to the US looking for employment and Chinese prostitutes followed. Also, the fetishization of Chinese women as the "archetype of female bondage and degradation" (Yun 29) increased demand. Together these two forces created a profitable market for Chinese prostitutes.

In the beginning, similar to Euro-American prostitutes, Chinese prostitutes had some degree of freedom and autonomy. But, unlike white prostitutes, the exploitation they experienced during the second period of organized prostitution (around 1870s -1890s) was far greater. During this period, procurers obtained women from China (either via kidnapping, enticing, or buying), importers brought them into America, and brothel owners "lived by their exploitation" (Hirata). Throughout the system, there was much opportunity for exploitation.

Pretty quickly, a system of high versus low class prostitutes was established. High class prostitutes were generally hostesses, only served Chinese men, and sometimes adopted a position within a Chinese man's home rather similar to that of a wife (Simmons). Meanwhile, low class prostitutes generally worked in brothels (Simmons). This system not only benefited Chinese men in becoming wealthy via the work of prostitutes, but also Americans by helping to maintain a continual cheap labor force of single young Chinese men (Hirata). Indeed, as well as simple racism and the fact that it was easy to do, one reason Chinese men received such low pay was to discourage the settlement of Chinese families, and the importation of young Chinese prostitutes also helped achieve that purpose (Hirata). Indeed, the general cycle was that a Chinese man would marry at home and work in America, thus fulfilling his familial duty and leaving for economic gain. Prostitutes supported this cycle, by both ensuring men would avoid relations with white women and send money home to their families, and the children of those families would continue the cycle(Hirata).

As the numbers of Chinese men in the West increased so did the demand for the importation of Chinese women, making the trade incredibly profitable. In fact, it was estimated that between 1852 and 1873, the Hip-Yee Tong alone imported 87% of female Chinese immigrants during that time, making about 200,000 \$ (Hirata). Women were often lured and kidnapped, especially after 1870 and when agents couldn't make their quota (Holder). For girls that weren't kidnapped but rather sold, contracts were

generally issued that generally included 200-500 dollars which was appealing to families, but was cheap compared to the average 850 dollars a Chinese prostitute was estimated to make a year (Simmons). Thus, this begins to reveal how girls and their families were exploited through this process.

Over time, with an increase in Anti-Chinese sentiment governmental action was first taken in 1875 via the Page Act and further in the 1890s and 1900s (Hirata). As early as the 1850s Chinese women were attacked for prostitution, blamed for divorce, and reported on in newspapers (Johnson). A governmental official added that he “would deport all Chinese prostitutes and Chinese women living in houses of prostitution, as I believe that they are really at the bottom of the most of the highbinder troubles.” (Industrial Commission). Indeed, one article in the 1870s read, “We offer no apology for the course pursued in expelling the six lewd women from town, as we are satisfied it was proper and just.... The citizens of Antioch only did their duty to their offspring.... We rid the town of six diseased Chinese prostitutes.” (“Antioch”). These two statements in a government report and newspaper depict the great strength of prejudice against the Chinese at the time.

These exclusionary acts changed America and mark the third period of Chinese prostitution in the West. In San Francisco, the peak in the number of Chinese prostitutes was in the 1870s, having rapidly grown up to that time and began to decline thereafter (Hirata). Moreover, the early laws used to target Chinese prostitution also stopped the entry of women seeking to emigrate, as all Chinese women were viewed as prostitutes (Chan 95). And, this trend of belief had been building since the 1850s, culminating in even more laws in the early 1900s (Castañeda). In fact, as Chan wrote, “No Chinese woman, regardless of her social standing, was safe from harassment.” (132).

These exclusionary acts changed the face of the importation of prostitution, ultimately causing it to decline, though it lingered late into the 1900s as a major force and moneymaker. Importation of Chinese women became increasingly inventive with more restrictive legislation. Chinese girls were made to memorize identities and interviews (Industrial Commission), hidden in buckets of coal (Wilson), and “concealed in padded crates billed as dishware” (Gray). One tong leader, “Little Pete,” was famed for his creative ways of sneaking women into the country, and ended up making \$50,000 (Dillon 319-321). And, although a gradual decline did occur in part due to these laws, they also resulted in suffering. From around 1891 and more so after 1910, Chinese men and women were made to wait weeks and even months in horrid living conditions at Angel Island, while lawyers profited off fighting their cases (Lai). And, in a story presented by the Industrial Commission, a girl named Lee Chun having been tricked into being sent to the US as a prostitute and then saved by American officials, was described as being “happy and contented” while waiting for a next ship home. This story demonstrates the need felt to cast accounts of

Chinese immigrants in terms of American saviors. As, lawyers, government employees, and Chinese criminals profited, Chinese immigrants suffered and the American government heralded its good deeds. Plenty of women were tricked into a life of exploitation, which did become a cause fought against by Americans with rhetoric and the provision of shelter (Sheperd), but on the whole it seems Americans did little to protect Chinese women. Over time, organized prostitution did decrease because of greater American social effort, governmental action, social changes in China, and overall changes of social dynamics in both the US and China. But not without the further suffering of Chinese immigrants and prostitutes.

The exploitation of Chinese prostitutes was myriad and occurred at all levels of prostitution. Lower class Chinese prostitutes were sold to multi-racial brothels, as “Chinese men generally felt that the most degrading thing a Chinese woman could do was to have sexual relations with a white man” (Dobie 242-244). And, white men were known to force them to “engage in aberrant sexual acts” (California Legislature). And lower class Chinese prostitutes were mistreated by brothel owners, as they could be punished with whips, burning, and banishment to brothels in mining towns (US Congress) as well as being beaten to death (Dobie 61). Even outside of sexual and physical abuse, Chinese prostitutes also performed manual labor for the brothels for which they entertained (Hirata). And, amongst all of this, the brothel owner took all of the money for which the prostitute suffered (Simmons). Even high-class Chinese prostitutes, who slept strictly with Chinese men, “were nevertheless chattel”, although expensively adorned (McLeod 183). Overall, the contract system, although seemingly a good deal for the families involved, ultimately benefited criminals and brothel owners at the expense of poor families and their daughters.

This is, however, not to say that white prostitutes didn’t suffer or experience exploitation as well. Both races were generally forced to give up children (who were sometimes forced to work by those in brothels (Hirata and Simmons). Both dealt with substance abuse (Simmons and Hirata), which was sometimes even encouraged to develop further dependence and debt (US Congress 96). Both could be married after their time in the profession, however there were differences. Although Chinese prostitutes were generally considered more marriageable, as they were considered to be obedient girls that performed their filial duty, they could also be tracked down by Tong mercenaries for leaving before their contract was up (which of course could be unfairly extended) (Hirata). Despite the exploitation white prostitutes faced, the level of exploitation and societal prejudice which Chinese prostitutes experienced was far greater.

All in all, prostitution was an incredibly important part of the Old West. Nurtured by its preexisting social and economic conditions, prostitution was also an influential force in its development.

Prostitutes could gain an unparalleled level of autonomy during the beginning of the settlement of the frontier, allowing for independence and financial success. With the cementing of social and political systems, brothels were firmly established, allowing for greater influence to be gained by madams as well as greater exploitation of lower level prostitutes. The soiled dove ideology developed to better explain the unique position prostitution held, as it so contradicted Victorian ideals. Later, as a moral code was imposed governmental restrictions increased. But during this time, prostitutes, although less free and respectable, were able to gain social and political power despite the overall potential for suffering within the profession. Contrarily, Chinese prostitution painted a different picture despite the exploitation of prostitutes of all races. Ripe with criminal activity, violence, American governmental actions, anti-chinese sentiment and overall exploitation, the social and political systems of the West ensured the suffering of Chinese women. Thus, prostitution held an important, if contradictory, position in Western society from the 1840s-1920s.

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