

# Labor Stratification and Gendered Subjectivities in the Service Industries of South China in the 1920s and 1930s: The Case of *Nü Zhaodai* (女招待)

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## Abstract

The hiring of *nü zhaodai* (waitresses) in teahouses and restaurants was a common topic of debate among labor activists, feminist groups, politicians, and commentators in the Guangdong region in the 1920s and 1930s. The explosion of concern about women's employment in the service industry demonstrates that while women were indispensable in reviving the depressed service sector by attracting male customers, the sudden visibility of seductive women working in public space posed a serious threat to society. This article examines two major labor movements led by *nü zhaodai* in Guangzhou, in 1922 and 1935, to

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understand the intersections of labor and gender in a modernizing China. Women's entry into the service industry in the early twentieth century challenged the working privileges men had been enjoying. Moreover, these two labor movements reveal contradictory visions of modernity. While among progressive intellectuals and women activists, the labor rights of women were seen as necessary for China's modernization, the male labor union and anti-*nü zhaodai* critics condemned *nü zhaodai* as immoral elements of modernity that were harmful for the city. Through the labor movements, *nü zhaodai* and other political participants refigured services provided by women as work and reconstructed women in the service industry as productive citizens.

**Key Words:** *nü zhaodai*, waitresses, service industry, Guangzhou, labor, morality, modernity

Workers' rights are a major theme in social history, especially histories of the lower classes. Yet, women service laborers seldom appear to exercise agency in many studies on labor movements compiled by historians—whether in mainland China or in the West—because both the categories of “women” and “service laborers” were seldom used by contemporaries or even in later historical considerations of the working class. Nevertheless, labor movements of women service laborers did exist. Activism among teahouse waitresses in Guangzhou, for example, can be found in newspaper and magazines reports in 1922 and 1935. This essay hereafter refers to *nü zhaodai* rather than “teahouse waitresses, since the Chinese term conveys a range of connotations different from the English, as will be seen further below.

This essay first introduces *nü zhaodai* as an example of rising women service labor in South China. Through transgressing the domestic boundary set

for “good girls” (*liangjia funü* 良家婦女) and previously regarded as “degraded” (*xiajian* 下賤), these women who performed service labor slowly redefined the meanings of “women laborers” in popular discourse. The strength of women service laborers as shapers of their social milieu and their effect on the teahouse industry’s gender configuration was a testament to their effectiveness as social agents. Then I will focus on two labor movements led by *nü zhaodai* in Guangzhou to analyze three points. First, these labor movements add a new gender perspective to labor history. Before the 1920s, labor was implicitly gendered male. The labor activism highlighted in this article was mainly focused on women’s access to labor and the same working rights that men enjoyed. The two decades of the 1920s and 1930s witnessed the rise of working-class consciousness among women service laborers. The two movements that *nü zhaodai* initiated can be understood as women’s resistance against men’s control within the labor class. These movements help us rearticulate the narration of labor history and enlarge our notion of class politics.

Second, these labor movements, especially through the conflicts between supporters of *nü zhaodai* and the male union, reveal contradictory visions of modernity. On the one hand, the rhetoric of women laborers asserted a relationship between a grand vision of national modernity and activism for women’s rights. While women activists fighting for working rights made use of nationalistic discourse to further their goals of equal rights, anti-capitalist activists relied on the women’s movement to articulate their desires for reaching an international standard of modernity which incorporated women’s rights. On the other hand, the male labor union believed that modernity could be attained only if women stopped competing with men in the teahouse labor market.

Third, the labor union and anti-*nü zhaodai* critics stigmatized women in service industries by portraying such women laborers as immoral or

unnecessary. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, there was a common assumption that women's service work was degrading and linked with prostitution. The rise of "public women" in the cities gave moralists an opportunity to influence the public. Some spoke against the employment of women and regarded service workers as decorations ("like vases") because they did not possess the necessary strength and skills for the job but rather used their looks and social skills to please customers. More sympathetic commentators called working as *nü zhaodai* a temporary means of survival or transitional job for women who wanted to lift themselves out of prostitution. However, some political participants in the debate over the *nü zhaodai* in 1935 refigured stigmatized identities as work and reconstructed public women as productive citizens and necessary laborers. Overall, the concept of women's virtue, however, remained strong in the discourse of service labor in the 1920s and 1930s.

## Women service industries

The phenomenon of women working in service industries began in the late nineteenth century, when women were hired to work in public entertainment venues such as cinemas and art theatres in Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and their adjacent counties.<sup>1</sup> In Guangzhou, however, many swimming pools, theatres and cinemas maintained tight gender segregation until the 1930s. Some of the first female service laborers were female employees recruited to serve women in separate female sections of movie theatres.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Weikun Cheng's study of actresses in Beijing offers another example of how economic and consumption needs drove lower-class women to take up men's jobs, thus complicating conventional gender segregation in the cities. See Weikun Cheng, "Women in Public Spaces: Theater, Modernity, and Actresses in Early Twentieth-Century Beijing," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 9:3 (September 2003), pp. 7-45.

2 Although female servants predated this development, they mostly served in households

Provincial regulations required theaters to set up a separate female entrance and food store, and to hire women as guards, ushers and store managers specifically for the female section.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, there were no signs of segregation in restaurants and teahouses for the middle class, which continued to have a mixed but predominantly male clientele. The growing spending power of the new middle class, including merchants, industrialists and shop owners, shaped the patterns of consumption and might have prevented eating venues from being affected by the policy of gender segregation. Such venues did not seem to be available for laborers or other members of the lower classes members in Guangzhou, however. In Hong Kong, there is no evidence that gender segregation existed.

Most writers in the popular press tended to see the urban area of Guangdong as one metropolitan region with Guangzhou and Hong Kong being its centers. The rise of women in service industries in late 1920s and 1930s Guangzhou and Hong Kong was a direct result of economic crisis and unemployment. Depression in the rural economy in nearby counties forced women and men to seek work in the major cities of the region. The census of 1932 counted roughly 280,000 unemployed men and women in greater Guangzhou out of a total population of 2 million.<sup>4</sup> The supply of jobs in factories in cities was not enough for the lower class. For female workers, another major factor in the consolidation of the social category of service laborers was the “emancipation” movements to abolish the *mui tsai/ binü* 妹仔/婢女 (bondservants) system and the prostitution industry in Hong Kong and the Guangdong area beginning in the 1920s. Most of these women

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or brothels as bondservants (*binü*). The novelty of service laborers who appeared at this time lay in their status employees of companies, rather than private households.

3 Guangzhou shi zhengfu (Guangzhou City Government), *Guangzhou shizheng ting gaiyao* 1 (1922).

4 See Edward Lee, *Modern Canton* (Shanghai: Mercury Press, 1936).

laborers were floating migrants moving in and out of Guangzhou, Hong Kong and their environs. As for their previous occupations, reports in the popular press show that many of the women who worked in teahouses previously had been courtesans, although a substantial number of them came from other industrial sectors.

To illustrate how the entry of large numbers of lower-class women contributed to the evolution of the service industries in places of pleasure for middle-class men in 1920s and 1930s Guangzhou and Hong Kong, I will use the case of women working in teahouses and restaurants. *Nü zhaodai* were introduced in the mid- and late 1920s after teahouse entertainment was popularized.<sup>5</sup> These women behaved intimately with customers and were aggressive in pursuing their independent lifestyle and pleasing customers, because their main income came from tips rather than allowances or wages set by foster mothers or teahouse managers. Thus, in the popular press, they were often depicted as a new type of urban woman who embodied modernity. However, even though many of them were “modern” in their appearance, public manners, and financial independence, they were not fixed in this occupation; some of them switched jobs because of poverty and job instability, and others left to marry and have children with their former customers. Stories in pictorials and tabloids depicted them either as ex-prostitutes who had worked in brothels, or as streetwalkers who sold sexual services after their regular working hours in teahouses. In the 1930s in particular, newspaper commentators also persistently criticized women who participated in the service industry at large for sexualizing public space and degrading social morality. Even though intimate acts could be easily found between women employees and teahouse customers, the space of the teahouse was

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5 For a detailed study of teahouse culture in another urban setting, see Di Wang, “‘Masters of Tea’: Teahouse Workers, Workplace Culture, and Gender Conflict in Wartime Chengdu,” *Twentieth-Century China* 29:2 (April 2004), pp. 89-136.

fundamentally different from that of the brothels. Whereas in the brothel sexual transactions between patrons and prostitutes happened privately (although the banquets patrons held with prostitutes in attendance were semi-private), in the teahouse consumption took place in public, and customers and employees were both watching and being watched at the same time. Actions and conversations in such a setting were easily overheard and recorded by critics seated at a neighboring table.

### Rise of the teahouse

Several factors conjoined in the late 1920s to give rise to the popularity of *nü zhaodai* and other types of teahouse service laborers. One was the rise of the new middle class and its demands for a higher living standard. The idea that the teahouse could serve a place for entertainment and leisurely eating only became popular after the turn of the century. A writer named Ah Chang depicted the change in teahouses in the early twentieth century in “A Brief History of the Evolution of Teahouses” published in *Guangzhou minguo ribao* in 1936. He divided the development of modern teahouses into three periods: old teahouses before the 1900s, which he called “the period of waning (*shuailie* 衰落)”; the period of reform (*gaizao* 改造) between the mid-1900s and the mid-1910s; and the period of evolution (*jinhua* 進化) between the mid-1910s and the mid-1920s. In the first stage, when the old teahouse industry was waning, the main function of teahouses was to feed large groups of laborers in a short span of time. Officials and middle-class businessmen generally despised teahouses because they were not clean and attracted large crowds of laborers. Even though residents of other social strata also enjoyed *dimsum*, they tended to order servants to fetch them rather than mixing with the crowds themselves. The function of the teahouse then was to generate enough food for the laboring class, rather than to provide high-quality eating venues and

customers to feel satisfied (*bao* 飽) but also leading them to fight over the “lychee flesh.”<sup>12</sup> The writer did not write about her facial features or give her name, however.

The entry of *nü zhaodai* into teahouses redefined the nature of the service industries, the meaning of “services,” and the culture of tipping, creating new conventions of heterosexual intimacy. *Nü zhaodai* did not have to possess or pretend to possess particular skills to entertain the customers. Their erotic appearance and their intimacy were the main services. The ideal *nü zhaodai* was under twenty years old, hospitable to customers, dressed in fashionable clothing, and good at making small talk. These became new requirements for service laborers and selling points teahouses relied on to maintain competitiveness.

In 1922, a contributor who identified herself as a *nü zhaodai* wrote a series of articles in *Huazi ribao* (華字日報), a popular Hong Kong newspaper, about the new aesthetic expected of a *nü zhaodai*:

Since [the development of modern teahouses], [women have become] teahouse decorations, like applying powder... When [the owners] select [women] employees, they also set up an age limit. If one is young and beautiful, then she can get more money. If she is old, then it is hard to get into the industry. Even the notice posted outside the door states the age guidelines clearly: “Old women, please don’t even bother to ask.” The best is 18-19 and hospitable in attitude, because we are the right age, and our temperament is stable.<sup>13</sup>

Even though the job might entail physical labor, such as carrying pots and dishes and cleaning, what distinguished these women from male service laborers were their “services,” i.e., accompaniment, chatting, touching, and

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12 *Huaxing san ri kan* 474, 10 January 1931.

13 *Huazi ribao*, 12 January 1922.



generally giving attention to customers. As the contributor of *Huazi ribao* explained her main duties:

We smile when we see people, always happy. It's like a whiff of spring breeze (*chunfeng manmian* 春風滿面), and this makes people want to befriend us. Sometimes when people come to drink, they will say that we enchant them. Because of that, there are many customers....

Serving people does not necessarily imply seducing people... But if we serve customers, it is hard to escape some talking and joking (*tanxiao* 談笑). Welcoming our guests is our duty.<sup>14</sup>

The way that service laborers expressed their femininity, such as adopting provocative fashions and hairstyles and demonstrating economic autonomy, made them resemble the image of “modern girls” (*modeng nüxing* 摩登女性). However, their versatile image also exemplified more than one way of being “modern”: they sometimes dressed like students, sometimes like mature women in leather shoes, and sometimes like Chinese ladies in *qipao*. One writer described the appearance of *nü zhaodai* in the 1930s:

The *nü zhaodai* in restaurants and teahouses usually wear white uniforms with blue lace. They all have their hair permed. They have all kinds of looks. They wear makeup, some of them wear socks, and some of them wear leather shoes without socks. They are tidy, fragrant, and dazzling (*xiangyan* 香豔). I say fragrant and dazzling, because they put on perfume. With their light makeup, sometimes their faces are sparkling. They wear their “uniform” only at work. Every morning, if you arrive at a restaurant early, you will see them coming to work. They wear *qipao* and other clothes, carrying the Guangzhou rectangular

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14 *Huazi ribao*, 13 January 1922.

salary, *nü zhaodai* could earn up to a few yuan in tips daily, not including gifts from regular customers. Thus, every month, they could make at least 30 to 40 yuan, and sometimes up to 200 to 300 yuan. He noted, however, that this depended on whether they were naturally beautiful (*tiansheng lizhi* 天生麗質) and good at socializing (*changyu jiaoji* 長於交際).<sup>21</sup>

Another male customer wrote an article about his experience at a restaurant in Yonghanjie, where the menu stated that everything was half-price. When the bill came, it was 20 cents. He paid 40 cents, hoping that he would get a 20-cent bill back. However, the *nü zhaodai* gave him one 10-cent bill and some small change. He complained that tipping was getting worse and blamed it on the new female employees, suggesting that tipping be banned or limited to the minimum degree.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, the entry of *nü zhaodai* redefined the nature of the service industries and the meaning of “services,” creating a culture in which tipping was expected, as well as new conventions of heterosexual intimacy. Like male service laborers, *nü zhaodai* were generally expected to engage in physical tasks (carrying and cleaning), but they were also expected to provide “services” that involved various kinds of attention to the customers. Below, I discuss two labor movements involving *nü zhaodai* in Guangzhou to illustrate how women’s entry into the teahouse industry transformed the nature of service labor in the 1920s and 1930s.

## The 1922 movement

In the early 1920s, the teahouse union in Guangzhou was exclusively

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21 *Jinre zhi huanan*, p. 74.

22 Zhao Yongguang, “Tiebi guyong nugong sheng chu de yi ge wenti” 貼俸顧用女工生出的一个问题 (A problem stemming from tipping for women employees), *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 15 July 1935.

male and controlled not only the activities of the employees, but also the hiring practices of the owners. The issue of hiring *nü zhaodai* was first raised when two restaurants in Foshan County started hiring a large number of women workers in January 1922. This caught the attention of the teahouse union, which lobbied for an order banning *nü zhaodai*, because the union leadership believed that they threatened the livelihood of male workers.<sup>23</sup> One restaurant owner was even pressured to sign an agreement with the union pledging that he would stop hiring female employees. The owner refused to sign, arguing that since “teahouse employees” commonly referred to chefs and *shifu* 師父 (tea masters) at the counters, hiring women merely as servers and cashiers should not be considered a violation of hiring regulations.<sup>24</sup> Although the union yielded in this conflict, it immediately filed a complaint with the Guangzhou government and petitioned for legislation to stop women from working in the teahouse.<sup>25</sup>

The self-identified *nü zhaodai* who wrote a series of articles in *Huazi ribao* in 1922 mentioned above noted the commotion after the union became involved in the issue of women’s employment.<sup>26</sup> She witnessed a union protest which was instigated by a union member being charged with personal assault because he “disturbed the customers” of a teahouse that hired women. After he was arrested, the whole union membership gathered outside the police station and demanded his release. When the police failed to respond, the union members took the issue to the provincial office. An administrator at the office,

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23 *Guangzhoushi shizheng gongbao* (The Canton Municipal Government Gazette) 46, 9 January 1922.

24 *Huazi ribao*, 16 January 1922.

25 The male labor unions were quite organized, as the restaurant unions had conducted a strike for a pay raise in 1922. The government was forced to compromise before they would resume work. For details, see *Huazi ribao*, 22 January 1922.

26 Since very few lower-class women were literate at that time, whether this was truly written by a *nü zhaodai* is questionable. However, this is one of the few pieces of writing in newspapers whose authors self-identified as *nü zhaodai*.

become more conservative about gender issues and initiated campaigns to control women's bodies,<sup>31</sup> commentators and even some male union members remained radical about class politics and continued to express their anti-capitalist viewpoints.

Unlike the situation in 1922, in 1935 the women teahouse employees were able to build an alliance that transcended class and occupational boundaries. Various women's associations and activists in Guangzhou, teahouse owners, and women hairdressers all backed the women workers. The main groups involved in the 1935 teahouse workers' movement, the Women's Association (*funü hui* 婦女會) and the United Front of Women's Movements (*funü yundong da tongmeng* 婦女運動大同盟), both were later criticized for rightist tendencies in CCP historiography because of the elite economic status of their leaders. While the male workers' common interest was to reduce the number of women employees in teahouses, male owners of teahouses and restaurants saw that they would benefit by hiring women. The government was generally passive, although it claimed to want to solve the unemployment problems of both men and women.

The main political agency in the government was the Guomintang Municipal Party Branch (*guomindang shidangbu* 國民黨市黨部). The Party Branch was under the provincial leadership of Chen Jitang (陳濟棠), and sometimes rivaled the government in Nanjing. The departments that played major roles in the issue were the Social Welfare Bureau, which had been formed after the dissolution of the Social Customs Reform Committee (*shehui ju* 社會局) to carry out surveys and government propaganda, monitoring the hygiene, welfare and social customs (*fengsu* 風俗) of the population; the Police (*gongan ju* 公安局), which enforced the laws and combated social unrest; and the Office of Civil Affairs (*minzheng t'ing* 民政廳), which

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31 The city government initiated a set of morality (*fenghua* 風化) protection campaigns, which including a ban on strange costumes from 1933 to 1935.

managed the details of citizens' affairs and decided how orders from the provincial and city committees should be carried out.

In mid-April 1935, the Restaurant and Teahouse Labor Union petitioned the government to ban the employment of *nü zhaodai*, after a meeting in which members decided that the employment of women in teahouses and restaurants would deprive its members of jobs and affect their livelihoods. According to the union's statement, the unemployment of male teahouse workers had reached around 5,000-6000 out of a total number of 12,000 workers.<sup>32</sup> The statement also made clear that men possessed particular skills and the "art" of working in teahouses and that it would be unfair to let unskilled women penetrate the industry.<sup>33</sup>

In reality, because many women service laborers were often hired temporarily or under specific circumstances, they did not have extensive training for their jobs. Thus, their qualifications as "workers" were easily put in doubt and subject to the attacks of male workers during the labor rights movement.<sup>34</sup> However, in the case of *nü zhaodai*, the skills required to handle the job were not specified. Most often, the male labor union only referred to strength or cooking, but did not elaborate on them. In an article on "Working Women in China" (*zhongguo de zhiye funü 中國的職業婦女*), published in 1935, the author differentiated "real jobs" from what s/he interpreted as the

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32 *Huazi ribao*, 16 April 1935.

33 *Huazi ribao*, 16 April 1935.

34 Such doubts about their qualifications were raised with respect to other female service laborers as well. For example, in the case of hairdressers, the training period was originally six months and the trainee had to pay a tuition fee of sixty dollars. However, as demands for female hairdressers grew, the time for instruction was shortened to one to two months. A reporter/commentator wrote: "When men learn how to cut hair, it usually takes them three years, but for women, it only requires three months. Some even get out of it in less than three months. Many of them need to be retrained. And most customers are not satisfied with their work." (*Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 14 August 1935).

and continued to work as prostitutes part-time. [With these mixed backgrounds,] it is inevitable that these women become corrupt.<sup>39</sup>

Even though education was an asset for women in the struggle for survival, the author of this article did not see it in a favorable light. Many commentaries against the hiring of *nü zhaodai* tied them to prostitutes and focused on the immorality of women working in a public setting. Modernity and urbanization were depicted as social forces that made women fall into degraded occupations. Similar viewpoints were expressed about prostitutes in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The attitudes of customers and writers towards these women were inconsistent; on the one hand, they continued to see them as having no alternatives to service work given the dire economic situation, on the other hand, they could not help condemning them as corrupt women yearning for luxury. In a guidebook published in 1937, the author talked about *nü zhaodai* and prostitutes together, linking both to the larger socio-economic problems of the region which forced them to become migrants:

*Nü zhaodai*'s families suffered a lot. They became *zhaodai* because of their parents' loss of jobs. Many of them owed rent, and did not have enough to eat...

About their origin... It is clear that a small number were prostitutes before they began working as *zhaodai*. However, taxes on prostitution (*huajuan* 花捐) were high, and prostitution was not prospering, so they had to change their jobs. A large number of them came from the countryside. The rural economy collapsed, and many of them had to move to the city. However, they did not know it was hard to live in the city too, especially for rural migrants like themselves. So to make a living, they had to

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39 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 5 May 1935.

sacrifice their good looks (xisheng sexiang 犧牲色相). Each of their smiling faces actually hides many tears. Have they really fallen? Yes, they have. But who can judge that this is their fault? This is only the abnormality of the society. I don't dare to say their existence is injurious to public morals (youshang fenghua 有傷風化)...<sup>40</sup>

Even though the author insisted it was larger social problems that made these women sink, and the pitiful condition of these women provoked him to write sympathetically, his comment implied that such jobs were immoral and not desirable for “good women.”

Highlighting the hardships of young women working in teahouses, newspapers also sensationalized stories about *nü zhaodai* becoming victims of abuse, assault, and suicide. A case was brought to court on September 11, 1935, in which three men were accused of bullying and blackmailing a *nü zhaodai*.<sup>41</sup> Another well-known case concerned a *nü zhaodai*, Xu Weixing, stabbed to death by an intimate male friend, Zhou Zhong, who intended to borrow money from her. The man later tried to kill himself by cutting his throat, but was rescued in the end. The Court finally sentenced him to death.<sup>42</sup>

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40 *Jinre zhi huanan*, p.73.

41 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 12 September 1935.

42 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 19 June 1935; 17 July 1935; also in *Huazi ribao*, 18-19 July 1935. A later report said that both the man and the woman came from Nanhai. The man became unemployed and often asked the woman for money. The defendant said in court that he and the woman were married in their home village. However, during the spring festival, his wife suddenly went to Hong Kong by herself to become a *nü zhaodai*. He found her and told her not to work in this occupation but to no avail. “I went back, but because of her I became depressed. Whenever I thought about it, I became very angry; the only way was to kill her and kill myself. I regret that I didn't kill myself successfully. Even if I am not sentenced to death, I ask to be executed anyway.” At the time she was killed, she had only been working in Jiangsu Jiujia for 20 days or so. Every night, she went home after midnight. The report also noted that the woman lived a poor life and could not even have linens. A lamp and a few simple items of clothing

Cases of *nü zhaodai* committing suicide also appeared regularly in newspapers. For example, a long report was written about the suicide of a *nü zhaodai* named Xiyu who worked for Dasanyuan (大三元), a famous restaurant in Hong Kong. The doctor confirmed that she was a virgin at her death. She killed herself because she was being forced to marry a rich man by her mother. She was the second young “public woman” to commit suicide in two weeks, after the suicide of the famous actress Ruan Lingyu (阮玲玉).<sup>43</sup> The circulation of tabloid stories about service laborers was a channel through which life stories of service laborers were publicly displayed and consumed. These stories in turn fed into the public male imagination of *nü zhaodai* as fragile victims. These writings also conveyed the sense that the tragic ends of these *nü zhaodai* were the results of social circumstances rather than their own doing.

At the same time, many commentators expressed their fear that *nü zhaodai* were actually prostitutes in disguise. The danger of *nü zhaodai* and prostitutes, seen together, lay in their ability to move between industries and locations. Newspapers also published stories about unlicensed prostitutes, as well as poor boat girls, also working part-time or full-time as singers and *nü zhaodai*. “Because of their desire for greater income, they decided to take advantage of their good looks and started to work in teahouses.”<sup>44</sup> The rise of “public women” in the cities gave conservative commentators an opportunity to influence the public with their notions of social morals, in the name of defending the city from social danger and decay. A newspaper writer commented that even though not all waitresses were street prostitutes, they exhibited dissipated behavior and flirted inappropriately with customers.<sup>45</sup>

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43 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 26 March 1935.

44 Wen, “Nü zhaodai shidai zhi chalou,” *Guangzhou minguo ribao*, 17 August 1925.

45 *Huazi ribao*, 16 April 1935.



## Othering the prostitutes

The distinction between prostitutes and *nü zhaodai*, however subtle was nonetheless significant to the cultural shaping of the profession. A writer of short stories published in a newspaper recounted the conversation he overheard about the origins of *nü zhaodai* at a teahouse:

I went to Xiangzhen teahouse yesterday. The diners at the neighboring table were talking. Person A said: “Nü zhaodai all come from poor families. Because of recent unemployment, there’s no money to buy clothes, pay rent, and buy food. Isn’t that a harsh life?” Person B said, “Right. If they were from well-off families, how could they have become *nü zhaodai* and tolerate the teasing of sexually hungry men and devils (yuhai jimin yu sezhong ergui 慾海饑民與色中餓鬼)?” Person A continued: “It seems to me that *nü zhaodai* are disguised variations (bianxiang 變相) of illegal prostitutes. Thus the families of *nü zhaodai* are similar to those of illegal prostitutes.” Then they laughed. I heard their conversation, thinking that what they said is so wrong. Although many *nü zhaodai* were illegal prostitutes before, many of them were from good families and were forced to become *nü zhaodai* because of poverty. We cannot use one word to generalize about all of them. Some are illegal prostitutes who became *nü zhaodai* and stopped being prostitutes. As I know, one even became the female owner of a venue for quitting opium. If we put the label of illegal prostitute on them, doesn’t this wrong (yuanwang 冤枉) them? We should investigate more thoroughly, before we say anything.<sup>46</sup>

To this writer, even though illegal prostitutes and *nü zhaodai* might have

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46 “Tantan *nü zhaodai* de jiating” 談談女招待的家庭, *Chenbao*, 5 April 1935.

similar backgrounds, the nature of the two occupations, and in turn the fate of these two kinds of women, were quite different. Though sympathetic to *nü zhaodai*, his comment indicated a hierarchy, which put *nü zhaodai* in between prostitutes (the worst form of poor labor) and owners of venues for quitting opium (a respectable occupation). This kind of ranking was quite common among commentators and activists, and it was such comments that gave the *nü zhaodai* the status of “laborers,” a category which could earn public approval. This writer raised the point that the position of *nü zhaodai* might not be desirable for women, but could give destitute women a better status and a better future than prostitution, especially women originally from good families. *Nü zhaodai* could serve as “transitional jobs” for women to uplift themselves. As waitressing was slowly beginning to be counted as acceptable labor, therefore, *nü zhaodai* came one step closer to becoming full-fledged citizens, precisely since they were productive laborers and not immoral predators.

The more favorable reception of teahouse workers was also evident in popular movie images. The film *Malu Tianshi* (馬路天使) (1937), juxtaposed two sisters living in the same household—the younger sister a pure, innocent *nüling*, while the older sister a prostitute with a dark, mysterious character that even her younger sister fears at the beginning. At the end, the younger sister successfully escapes from the control of her foster parents and marries her true love, whereas her sister, who is despised by everyone (including the boyfriend of the younger sister), finally sacrifices her own life for others. The two sisters also symbolize the socially recognized fates of the pure and the tainted. The younger sister does not lose her virginity to a rich man from whom her parents receive money and promise marriage. Even though the older sister wants to change her life and marry a “good” man, she can only be understood through her martyrdom at the very end. Her death also symbolizes the clear division between good and evil. Even though she aspires to find her true love and become one of the “good,” her past as a prostitute would surely haunt her if

she continued to live. Only through sacrificing her life can she cleanse her past as a tainted woman. As for the younger sister, although she shares foster parents and an upbringing with her sister, because she never gives up her body for a money transaction, she is saved from reproach by other characters in the story and by the audience.<sup>47</sup> In a commentary in *Xianggang gongshang ribao* (香港工商日報), the author used *nü zhaodai* and streetwalkers (“street-girls” in the essay) to compare the women in the sexual industry in the East (China and Japan) and the West. He argued that while women preferred to be streetwalkers in the West, *nü zhaodai* was a more popular occupation in China. This was because China was a “semi-feudal” country which policed women and restricted them from taking up more independent jobs.<sup>48</sup>

However, street prostitutes certainly continued to exist in South China in the 1930s. As licensed brothels closed down and teahouses opened, providing sexual services were taken up by two occupations: while street prostitution became a clandestine site for direct sexual consumption, teahouses provided a space for voyeuristic interest and intimate companionship. *Nüling*, *nü zhaodai* and other service laborers re-channeled men’s sexual desire through companionship, flirting, cultural entertainment and spectatorship, all in a public venue, whereas street prostitutes provided quick carnal gratification in a clandestine setting. The stigmatization of street prostitution was intensified through further legislation on unlicensed prostitution in the 1930s and 1940s.

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47 *Malu tianshi* (Street Angel), dir. Yuan Muzhi (1937). Even though this was not a film produced by filmmakers from South China, writings in the popular press showed that it was very popular in the Guangdong region as well.

48 Miao Xiu, “Nüzhaodai de shehuixue” 女招待的社會學 (The sociology of *nü zhaodai*), *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 22 September 1935.

## Women's employment and modernity

When social critics started analyzing whether the rapid growth of *nü zhaodai* represented a social problem or an instance of women's emancipation, they often tied the issue to both urbanization and modernity. An essay submitted to a newspaper entitled "The problem of men and women fighting for work" (*nannü zhigye zhengye wenti* 男女職業爭業問題) in July 1935 defended women's employment by stating that although banning women workers was one way to solve the problem, it was not a good solution. S/he argued that it was equally undesirable for women as for men to lose their jobs. Even though social morals might be at stake, this should not be a reason to stop women from working: "There are no countries that would stop women from working just because such occupations might hurt social morals." Comparing China with other countries, s/he exclaimed in disbelief that China was using social morals as a reason to bar women from working. S/he contended that the only legitimate reasons to limit women's choices of occupation should be physiological ones, for example if women could not perform a particular job, or if their jobs might create problems for reproduction. Since s/he believed that this was not the case in the work of *nü zhaodai*, there were no grounds to ban them, and that the ultimate solution was for employers to see their business as part of the economic system of the society and to see themselves as responsible for providing both men and women with opportunities. S/he called for a more active role for business owners in improving the economic situation and to increase the number of shifts so that more workers could be recruited.<sup>49</sup> Thus commentators conveyed the importance of incorporating women into the working class. Business owners also had to act to create a society of gender equality. On the whole, the writer of this essay argued, it was not morality but the economy that was key

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49 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 15 July 1935; 22 July 1935.

to the working rights of men and women.

In a similar vein, another article gave two reasons for the popularity of occupations such as hairdressing and waitressing: underdevelopment of the nation, and problems in the education system, both of which forced young people to gather in the cities. The author, Feng Fan, wrote, “If the country had developed its industries, then there would be jobs that required men to do them. There would be no need for them to concentrate on haircutting and service industries. Perhaps they would be more willing to have women to take their place. If women had more education, then perhaps women, too, could get better positions in schools, organizations and shops, and there would be no need to compete with men.”<sup>50</sup>

The author furthered this argument by comparing the situation of Chinese cities with those of the Soviet Union, arguing that the latter had no such competition between the two genders in the countryside nor in the cities, because it was more modernized than China. Working rights had become an international trend, but because China could not develop education and other forms of industry and crafts, there was a surplus of uneducated human labor in the cities. Modernization could raise the educational level of the people, and it could also create job opportunities in suburbs and rural areas as well. Both would be long-term solutions to the problems of unemployment. However, implicit in these comment was a presumption that women should not disrupt the male-dominated teahouse industry because their strengths lay elsewhere.

Another writer criticized the labor union for upholding women’s virtues as an excuse to cover their real objection to women hostesses: that they were afraid of losing their jobs. S/he used the analogy of toothbrush makers complaining about the use of machinery in toothbrush making to imply that the labor union’s complaints of women entering the industry were not

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50 *Huazi ribao*, 22 April 1935.

convincing. Even in the case of competition, the author believed that women should not be held responsible, because such developments were inevitable. Those accusations, this critic believed, were like industrialization being blamed for the decline of workers who made toothbrushes by hand. S/he also believed that to cure the root problem, the government had to improve social organization, maintain stable politics, and develop new industries. As a temporary solution, the government departments should find a way to solve the employment problems of both male and female workers.<sup>51</sup>

Other writers wrote in strong anti-capitalistic tones and suggested that China's economy needed to be overhauled. The women's section of *Xianggang gongshang ribao* published an editorial essay by a critic named Jizi entitled "The Employment Issue of Modern Women" (xiandai funü de zhiye wenti 現代婦女的職業問題), contending that working rights were human rights and that it was capitalism which deprived people of such rights: "Capitalism drove both women and men out of work and created social divisions. It created poverty, and productivity turned into a surplus of goods. Thus all industries had to stop and people are now out of their jobs." Jizi further argued that in order for women to achieve financial independence, people must reorganize their society, so that private ownership as manifested in the family system could no longer exist:

For a woman to become a human being (ren 人), she must first establish financial independence. To achieve that, she must participate in employment activities in society, and develop her creative character and working skills. She also has to be trained in her work. But the society's economic organization and family structure are built on private ownership. When women participate in employment activities, they cannot get rid of the hurdles of

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51 *Nanhua ribao*, 18 April 1935.

their families, and they cannot get job training that develops their creative character.<sup>52</sup>

Here, Jizi regarded the employment of women as a necessary step toward a new kind of social system, which would replace the current one based on family structure. S/he saw the family as a sign of private ownership, which should be removed along with capitalism, in order to solve the problem of unemployment in general. These newspaper commentators appeared to be intellectuals influenced by May Fourth thinking, who believed that the inclusion of women in service sectors was an “inevitable development of civilization” that could not be blocked by government policies. Some went further and argued that gender equality and working rights were both fundamental qualities of modern nations. Thus they urged the government to take responsibility for protecting women’s working rights and improving the educational system.

Commentators who reacted to the problem of unemployment from an economic perspective generally saw it as an example of the nation’s societal problems, although they had different opinions about whether service labor was suitable for women. In political discourse, these commentators, most of them educated men, often identified themselves as national citizens (*guomin* 國民) who shared the responsibility of improving the country’s economy and reputation. Their writings also display the visions concerned literate national citizens had for their country as a member and competitor in the international community. To these writers, a government’s attitude towards employment manifested its commitment to modernization. In their comments, questions of morality and the gender ratio, central to the debate among activists, were cast aside. Rather, these writers focused on how China should live up to the requirements of a modern, civilized nation.

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52 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 27 June 1935.

## Reforming morals

Unlike social commentators who focused on social ideals, the insiders to the conflict saw the issue as one that would affect morality in concrete ways. In a public discussion meeting on April 21, members of the labor union brought up the question of morals again. The title of the discussion was “Can restaurants and teahouses employ female employees?” In addition to members of the Restaurant and Teahouse Labor Union, representatives of women’s organizations and other male and female laborers also attended as observers. Social Welfare Bureau representative Lu Bofei presided over the meeting. The members of the union concluded that it was immoral for women to be waitresses, because this gave capitalists the opportunity to manipulate them in seducing customers. As a temporary solution, they urged the government to set up an investigation department to monitor “bad elements” among the female workers who were disruptive to social order, set a flat rate on wages, and enforce a gender division in the work.<sup>53</sup>

At about the same time, the union gave the Police Bureau a list of teahouses that had hired *nü zhaodai*. In response, a committee member of the Municipal Party of the Social Welfare Bureau (*shehuiju shidangbu* 社會局市黨部), Fo Guanghe, delegated officials to investigate the behavior of women teahouse workers and the situation of male unemployment. The police also said that after detailed investigation, if a large number of women were found to be engaging in improper behavior, an order to ban women from working in teahouses might be reissued.<sup>54</sup> Within a few days, newspapers reported a rumor that the party (*dangbu* 黨部) would stop women from serving customers (handling teapots and hot towels) and only allow them to do secretarial and cleaning work, to disallow physical proximity between *nü*

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53 *Nanhua ribao*, 26 April 1935.

54 *Huazi ribao*, 21 April 1935.



*zhaodai* and customers, which had become the main focus of controversy.<sup>55</sup>

The two feminist organizations supporting women workers countered the attack on women employees' morality by calling attention to women's contribution in modern industries and the misconduct of men. Peng Sumei, a core member of the Administrative Affairs Committee of the Women's Association (funühui changwu weiyuanhui 婦女常務委員會),<sup>56</sup> argued, "A few years ago, the government tried to abolish *nü zhaodai*, because there were bad elements (*buliang fenzi* 不良分子) mixed in with them. But this should be considered as personal misbehavior, and should not be generalized as a reason to eliminate all teahouse employees." She continued that women's emancipation meant equality in education and economic participation. She noted that women had been working as civil servants, teachers, doctors and nurses, salespersons and ushers and were found capable of handling jobs commonly done by men. There was a growth in women's employment all over the world, but the labor unions did not understand the international trend of promoting it. She also questioned the morals of male employees by citing examples of waiters running away with their employer's money.<sup>57</sup> Since criminal behavior was not confined to one gender, she did not believe that morality was a reason to fire *nü zhaodai*.

Since arguments by the Women's Association were ignored, women laborers decided that they would compromise by proposing to enter the labor union and follow its regulations.<sup>58</sup> The leaders of the women teahouse workers promised that they would monitor the behavior and uniforms of women workers. This was a bold step for women employees to take, but the labor

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55 *Nanhua ribao*, 2 May 1935.

56 Not much is known about the work of this organization. From some of its statements, it appears to have been formed by middle-class women who were active in the GMD.

57 *Nanhua ribao*, 15 April 1935.

58 *Huazi ribao*, 21 April 1935.

union refused to add a women's department, arguing that if it did so, it would be hard to anticipate what would happen next.<sup>59</sup> This reaction indicates that the vision of membership, the "imagined community" of the union, was exclusive to men.

The Provincial and Municipal Party Branches, the Office of Civil Affairs, the Police Bureau, and the Social Welfare Bureau held a meeting on April 24 to discuss this controversy. Three principles were finalized at his meeting: (1) to alleviate men's unemployment, (2) to promote women's employment, and (3) to protect social morals. The two sides cooled down after the announcement.<sup>60</sup> On May 9, the administrative committee of the Department of the Municipal Party (*shidangbu zhixing weiyuanhui* 市黨部執行委員會), which was the legislative branch of the government, passed an 8-point resolution at its 44<sup>th</sup> meeting about female employment, which included fixing the percentage of female employment at twenty percent and setting a restriction on female employees' working hours and styles of uniforms.<sup>61</sup>

Both men and women workers were dissatisfied with this solution. The male workers believed that *nü zhaodai* only made up of 1 to 2 percent of the overall teahouse employees, since the number of women in the job market was not high. They feared that because *nü zhaodai* were relatively new and not as

59 *Huazi ribao*, 21 April 1935.

60 *Huazi ribao*, 25 April 1935; *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 25 April 1935.

61 The eight points were: (1) Guangzhou city should treat all employees equally regardless of their sex; (2) When restaurants and teahouses employ women, the total number cannot exceed 20 percent of the total staff of the company; (3) Restaurants and teahouses that have not hired female employees may do so, but cannot dismiss any male employees because of new recruitment of female employees; (4) For the protection of women, they cannot work between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.; (5) Female employees need to wear aprons and earth-colored clothing, and their appearance should be simple; (6) Restaurants that hold drinking banquets (*huayan*) cannot hire women workers; (7) When there is any discovery of behavior that breaches social morals, the restaurants will be banned from employing women; (8) This solution will be carried out by the Administrative Department (*zhixing bu*).

well trained as men, many employers would hire unskilled women workers instead of men because female labor was cheaper. They proposed to limit the number of female employees to 5 percent of the total ratio in each company. In a document addressed to the government voicing their opinions on gender equality, the union said:

We have read about theory of equal rights (*pingquan zhuyi* 平權運動), and we understand that what Zongli 總理 (Sun Yat-sen) meant by equal rights is that people find their place in politics with real equality; as we usually say, there are differences between the intelligent and the ordinary.... Equal opportunity has never been based on taking away other people's jobs. Even Zongli said that we should put serving society as our goal, not robbing others (*duoqu* 奪取). Now they steal men's jobs and try to equalize the numbers of men and women, and they call that equality. It not only violates the teachings of Zongli, it is betraying Zongli's teachings.... These women who try to steal men's jobs and create social unrest are in fact guilty of destroying commerce and obstructing the country's prosperity.... We need to stop them from robbing the workers' jobs.<sup>62</sup>

Sun Yat-sen's teachings were most often used in activism which emphasized gender and social equality, but here the union manipulated Sun's teaching for their own purpose; rather than emphasizing equal representation in service industries, they interpreted Sun's thought to support their position that the teahouse was a space where women did not belong because their talents did not lie there. They even accused pro-*nü zhaodai* activists of betraying Sun and the principle of gender equality by taking away men's work.

During a meeting of the labor union, guest speaker Lian Sheng from the

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62 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 25 May 1935.

Party branch stated, "Because the late Prime Minister Sun said that one had to love one's labor, therefore the Party had to assist the development of the labor, and thus the union had to follow the order of the Party." He further gave his opinion on the women activists' actions: "Any action of robbing and exploitation is a counterrevolutionary action. The union should ask the revolutionary government to punish such action."<sup>63</sup> Even though the Party argued that promoting women's rights was just as crucial as helping the labor force, Lian Sheng, representing the government, aligned himself with the male workers. This suggests that that gender equality in service industries was not part of the government's revolutionary agenda, or at least that the government still prioritized men as the main labor force.

Women workers and their supporters felt that women's representation in the industry should be raised to 50 percent. They were also dissatisfied with the time limit on working hours, since the most crowded time in teahouses and restaurants usually came after seven in the evening.<sup>64</sup> They accused the government of favoring male workers, and contended that such a policy was against the principles of Sun Yat-sen. Rather, equal representation would fulfill Sun's wishes. The leaders of the women workers also began to organize a Restaurant and Teahouse United Office (*guangzhou nüzi jiulou chashi lianhe banshichu* 廣州女子酒樓茶室聯合辦事處) as a counter movement to the labor union run by men. Their plan was to set up the office, eradicate the bad behavior of workers, and resist restrictions imposed by the government.<sup>65</sup>

A member of the Guangdong Branch of the United Front of Women's Movements (*guangdong nüquan yundong datongmeng hui* 廣東女權運動大同盟會) wrote a letter to the various departments of the provincial government and party (*xinan zhengweihui shengzhengfu shengdangbu* 西南政委會省政

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63 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 20 May 1935.

64 *Xianggang xianggang gongshang ribao*, 10 May 1935; 15 July 1935.

65 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 20 May 1935.

府省黨部), voicing the group's view of the government's role in protecting women's employment.<sup>66</sup> She requested the organization to help safeguard the working rights of *nü zhaodai*.

She further argued that whether a nation was strong or weak depended on whether the society was secure, and that in turn depended on whether the nation could solve the problems of people's livelihood (*minsheng* 民生) and democracy (*minzhu* 民主), as well as protect the rights of the citizens to work and to operate their business freely. This was crucial, she argued, because many nations in the world had included the question of people's livelihood and the right to work in their constitutions. (*da fa* 大法).<sup>67</sup> The author continued that the freedom of work and the guarantee of such rights were written clearly in Sun Yat-sen's Three People's Principles, the Republican Constitution, and other important documents.<sup>68</sup> These statements show that the members of the United Front of Women's Movements probably were intellectual elites, since they were informed about international affairs and were familiar with Sun Yat-sen's philosophy. Arguing against the statements made by the male labor union and commentators who believed that women should stay away from the male dominated service industries, they associated women's working rights with citizenship rights and petitioned the government to protect such rights. To these women activists, China needed to catch up with other nations in order to modernize.

However, the Municipal Party (*shi dangbu*) committee member Fo

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66 Not much is known about this organization, but it was one of the few women's organizations which survived the anti-communist purge of 1927. Many of its statements emphasized the importance of Sun Yat-sen's constitution and teachings.

67 *Huazi ribao*, 7 April 1935.

68 The author mentioned that the *Zhonghua minguo xunzheng shiqi yuefa* 中華民國訓政時期約法, articles no. 37 and no. 41, promulgated on June 1 of the 20th year of Republic (1931), as well as the *Zhonghua minguo constitution* articles no. 136 and no. 38 started clearly that the Republican government guarantees its citizens the rights of occupation and business.

Guanghe regarded the government's decision as perfectly fair and saw no favoritism. He claimed that currently women teahouse workers only amounted to a few hundred, and with a 20 percent representation, the city could allow for an employment of as many as 2400 women workers. He did not understand why the women workers were still not satisfied.<sup>69</sup> After hearing a rumor that the ratio might be changed to 6:4, the organizing committee of the labor union had a meeting on May 19 with over a hundred members. The committee demanded that the Administrative Department (*zhixing bu*) maintain the 8-point resolution, or else the union would call all the workers in teahouses and restaurants in Guangzhou to go on strike.<sup>70</sup>

The members of the union also condemned teahouse owners for ignoring the government order and opening more teahouses and hiring more workers, which had done harm to union members.<sup>71</sup> They argued that now that the number of unemployed had risen to 5000, and so if the gender ratio was altered to 6:4, then there would be at least 2000 more unemployed male workers. With such a high number of unemployed workers it would be hard to prevent them from committing crimes, and the problem would escalate to a level that would disrupt public order. A few days later, the Municipal Party Branch (*shi dangbu*) reaffirmed the 8:2 ratio. When this decision was handed to the Administrative Department (*zhixing bu*) for the second time, the members of the male union were also unsure what to do, because they were afraid that this decision to allow many women to work would cause further unrest.<sup>72</sup>

The tension between the labor union and women activists thus intensified. The labor union decided to cancel membership of those who were found to

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69 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 17 May 1935.

70 *Xianggang xianggang gongshang ribao*, 18 May 1935.

71 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 20 May 1935.

72 *Nanhua ribao*, 22 May 1935.

have collaborated with women. As a result several union members were dismissed. Owners of Yiping Teahouse in Changxing Street, as well as other teahouses, reported harassment by male workers.<sup>73</sup> Throughout the week, men dressed in soldiers' clothes went to the teahouses, each occupying a table or room and drinking until the teahouses closed. The teahouses that employed women resisted this by manipulating the prices. If the men came for drinks only, then they would be required to pay the basic charge of five cents for tea and 20 cents for towels, with a minimum of four persons.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, to prevent losses caused by vandalism, the teahouses had to remove expensive food from their glass display cases. The union denied responsibility for this and said that accusations of harassment were libelous statements circulated by women workers. The union also supported the male workers who resigned from teahouses as a form of protest.<sup>75</sup> Some hostesses even left their jobs because of fear. In the midst of this chaos, owners of Pingquan and ten other teahouses asked for police protection for the fear of further violence, stating:

Although now we have competition, men and women on both sides are dear comrades and families. Plus, under this flag of blue sky and white sun, we should wait for the resolution from the Administrative Department of the Southwest (*xinan zhixingbu*). This illegal behavior [i.e., vandalism] not only undermines the friendship of both sides, it also bring great harm to society. So we have to ask the police to protect us, to prevent conflicts, and to maintain public order. We would be grateful.<sup>76</sup>

Teahouse owners were the ones who suffered the most from the strife. At first, they wanted to hire women to save their businesses, then men

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73 *Nanhua ribao*, 12 May 1935.

74 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 7 May 1935.

75 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 4 June 1935.

76 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 20 May 1935.

employees were dissatisfied and started protesting by leaving their jobs or ruining teahouses that hired women. The owners tried their best to befriend both sides. When unsuccessful, they relied on the police to restore order. Guangzhou at that time was known for its systematic management under the rule of Chen Jitang. By stressing the importance of social order, these owners tried to appeal to the government for help. Over time, more teahouses and restaurants started hiring women to save the waning business. On May 31, some teahouse owners even went to Hong Kong to find *nü zhaodai*, and it was rumored that 40 had been hired and would go to Guangzhou. The union warned the owners not to violate the party's order before the case was resolved, because more than 5000 men had lost their jobs. The conflict intensified when the labor union announced that a demonstration would be held on August 8.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, the hairdressers formed the Guangzhou Women Hairdressers' Schools Alumni Club to back the women teahouse workers.

### Hairdressers join the movement

Like women employees in the teahouses, women hairdressers were a new phenomenon in the 1930s. According to *Xianggang gongxiang ribao*, the total number of hairdressing salons was fifty-three, with two of them serving women only.<sup>78</sup> The hairdressers were also drawn into the movement for women's working rights.<sup>79</sup>

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77 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 1 June 1935.

78 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 26 April 1935.

79 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 14 August 1935. Women hairdressers started in Shanghai, and then the practice spread to Hong Kong. In 1935, the *zhonghua nü xiyi she* (The Chinese Women Crafts Learning Association) was set up. The founder of Guangzhou hairdressing was Du Bingshan, who started a class at the YWCA. She came from Daliang district of Shunde county. At that time the silk industry was declining because of the rural depression. She decided to learn some practical skills and went to Hong



In early June 1935, the male hairdresser union claimed that that on June 4, the unemployment registration recorded that 3000 of their members had lost their jobs. Many male hairdressers blamed this on the increase in women hairdressers. On June 15, they decided in a representative meeting that they would ask the Southwest Executive Branch (*xinan zhixingbu*) to restrict the opening of female hairdressing salons and the numbers of women hairdressers. Then the unemployed might have a chance to recover. If this was not permitted, they would unite with all the hairdressers and their families to petition the government.<sup>80</sup>

To resist control by male workers, the female hairdressers had been discussing the possibility of cooperating with women teahouse workers.<sup>81</sup> The activists in the Women's Association wanted to establish two official unions, one for the teahouse workers and another for the hairdressers.<sup>82</sup> In the

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Kong. Thereafter she set up Guangzhou *Nuzi lifa xiyi suo* 女子理髮習藝所 (Women Hairdressing Learning Center). Other vocational institutions were also set up, such as *Zhongguo xiyi suo* 中國習藝所 (China Crafts Learning Center) by Shen Shuqiu, *Zhonghua xiyisuo* (Chinese Crafts Learning Center) by Du Bingde, *Guomin xiyisuo* 國民習藝所 (Citizens' Crafts Learning Center) and *Zhende xiyisuo* 貞德習藝所 (Virtue Crafts Learning Center). Many of the schools would introduce women to work in one of these shops. Some of the students did not have to pay tuition, but their income for the first few months of later employment was deducted and given to their teachers.

80 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 26 April 1935. The women hairdressers did not have a fixed salary. The payment by the customers was divided between the shop and the hairdresser, of which the shop got 60% and the hairdresser got 40%. The tools were provided, but the uniforms were self-supplied. In winter, they wore jackets, but in summer, they usually wore white blouses and black or blue skirts. The cost of a haircut ranged from 20 to 40 cents. Many women also got tips, called hand-shuddering fees (*shouzhen fei* 手震費). So their monthly income could range from 30 dollars to 90 dollars. Some of these women were married, some not, but most entered the industry because of financial need. The total graduates of the hairdressing schools were around 700, and the people who were employed in Guangzhou were around 200 to 300. Others either went to remote counties, or did not work at all.

81 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 5 June 1935.

82 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 23 May 1935.

next few days, the United Front of the Women Movements (*funü yundong da tongmeng*) proposed to the hairdressers that they set up a special organizational unit to help the workers in each industry to form a union. The leaders of the United Front sent representatives to discuss the constitution and the direction of work. They claimed that the purpose of this was not only to help women employees in the restaurants and teahouses, but also to tackle problems regarding gender and employment.<sup>83</sup> The initial effort to organize unions thus came from outside rather than from within service laborers themselves. The leaders of the United Front were likely to be intellectuals who were conscious of the international trends of labor movements. Nevertheless, their agenda of forming unions prompted women workers from different service industries to act together under the umbrella title of “laborers” for the first time.

### Compromises

Lin Yizhong, the head of the Office of Civil Affairs (*minzheng t'ing*) and a leading member of the city government, came back from a trip and met with He Xiangning, a prominent woman leader in the Central Committee of the Guomindang, in early June to discuss the strife.<sup>84</sup> Lin brought the standoff to an end. On June 13, the labor union decided to force the Administrative Department to enforce the 8-point solution by threatening to stage a large protest otherwise.<sup>85</sup> As a follow up, the Administrative Department (*zhixing bu*)

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83 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 12 June 1935.

84 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 15 June 1935.

85 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 15 July 1935. In its representative meeting they conveyed the following points to its members: (1) Before the formal enactment of the law, member restaurants and teahouses should follow the proposition of 8:2 ratio and the 8-point methods; (2) If old companies want to start hiring female employees they should apply to the union and state clearly the names of the employees, and new companies have to

sent the union's request of monitoring the 8:2 ratio to the Municipal Party Bureau (*shi dangbu*) as a final ultimate resolution to the strife.<sup>86</sup>

Meanwhile, an investigation report by a newspaper claimed that many *nü zhaodai* had previously been prostitutes, and that they had violated the public safety law and thus posed a threat to the effort to legitimate the employment of women in teahouses.<sup>87</sup> Responding to this accusation, a leader in the Women's Association, said that she could not deny that there were prostitutes who came to the industry. However, she argued, even in legal proceedings it was permissible for people to start over (*zixin* 自新). Attention should be put to contemporary social morals (*fenghua* 風化), not the background of the *nü zhaodai*.<sup>88</sup> The head of the Police Bureau also indicated that there was no need to be suspicious of teahouse workers because of their past. "Women in the teahouse industry can broaden the opportunities women can have, or else they will have no means of living and will be forced into prostitution. This will be hard to imagine. Thus promoting women's employment in the teahouse industry not only could end unlicensed prostitution, it could also improve the economy of the country's citizens..."<sup>89</sup> By this, the Guangzhou government had adopted a more positive toward women's employment in service industries. In its policy towards prostitution, too, the government encouraged prostitutes to attend reform institutes. Perhaps the government increasingly saw service labor as a solution to the problem of prostitution.

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apply to the union three days before they open business; (3) All companies should re-hire male employees who quit their jobs because they were not satisfied with the employment of female employees earlier; (4) Both new and old companies need to follow the 8:2 ratio and should not replace male workers with female employees; (5) From the day this solution is passed, all members need to follow the solution of the union. If they violate any regulations, the union will impose appropriate penalties.

86 *Xiangnag gongshang ribao*, 26, 27 June 1935.

87 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 4 July 1935.

88 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 7 July 1935.

89 *Nanhua ribao*, 3 May 1935.

## Removing the threat of *nü zhaodai*

To keep their women employees, owners of teahouses and companies also began to monitor the social interactions between their women employees and their customers. And in order to further lift *nü zhaodai* to the status of laborers, *nü zhaodai* themselves brought up the issue of morality. Through distancing themselves from prostitutes and distinguishing themselves from immoral women, *nü zhaodai* entered the sphere of legitimate laborers. In order to do so, it was necessary to remove the threats their sexuality posed to society. The 8-point solution prohibited women from working between 10 pm and 6 am or for banquets (*huayan*), and regulated women employees' clothing.<sup>90</sup> Teahouses were asked to stop flirtation and any other inappropriate behavior. Another new regulation also prohibited teahouses from hiring more than two blind female singers in one night and banned such singers from marching on the streets to solicit customers. These restrictions show that the government was trying to regulate women's appearance and behavior in the name of protecting women. A new morality in the service industries was invented through such regulations.

To avoid further criticisms, the Women's Association (*funü xiehui*) also suggested methods for eliminating misconduct on the part of women employees.<sup>91</sup> It organized steering committees in each occupation and collected public opinions on protecting morals and women workers. It proposed that the government draw up measures to eliminate misbehaving women service laborers.<sup>92</sup>

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90 It ordered female employees to wear aprons and dress in plain-colored clothing.

91 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 8 July 1935; 15 July 1935. For the first violation, a warning would be given; the second violation, a penalty; the third violation, dismissal. At the same time, the employers would also be given a warning and penalty for each violation. After the fourth violation, the shop would be banned from hiring women.

92 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 21 July 1935. Whether the government took in these

In other industries, too, leaders and employers supportive of employing women started monitoring the workers. The hairdressing union, in order to plan for recruiting female members, also investigated the conditions of women hairdressers. The women leaders of the labor movement were told to order female hairdressers to discard all bad habits, such as unnecessary makeup (*youtou fenmian* 油頭粉面) and soliciting customers (*zhaozhi guke* 招致顧客).<sup>93</sup> In addition, the leaders advised them to refrain from being sexually dissolute (*fangdang* 放蕩), and to maintain a professional spirit (*bense* 本色) while working.<sup>94</sup>

Ultimately, then, the labor strife resulted in several compromises. The main settlement was the 8:2 gender ratio, whereby each teahouse could not have more than 20 percent female employees. This was a victory for women activists, who finally gained legitimacy. However, the women activists also agreed to set up new rules for women employees' working hours, uniforms, and behavior in the workplace. From this case, it is evident that the government gave up on abolishing the hiring of *nü zhaodai*, as it had done with the abolition of prostitution. These service laborers were slowly accepted as "productive urban citizens," with the condition that they restrain workplace behavior that could be seen as sexualized or seductive.

However, newspapers continued to write about the aftermath of the compromise. One reporter commented that the 8:2 ratio was a victory for the *nü zhaodai* and their bosses. The point here was that the ratio might limit those restaurants and teahouses that had already hired many women (and which were mostly women-owned women-run teahouses), but the male leaders who first proposed the ration did not think about the effect it would have the male-run businesses that previously had not hired any women employees. According to

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proposals are not known from the records.

93 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 26 April 1935.

94 *Nanhua ribao*, 24 April 1935.

this view, with the new 8:2 ratio, all restaurants and teahouses would have to hire at least 20 percent women. Because of the new law, many teahouses that had not hired women started to do so. Moreover, the hiring processes were decided by the owners, many of whom did not sign contracts with the union. Thus, the rule set up by the union had no effect on these teahouses.<sup>95</sup> With the government's promise of not abolishing *nü zhaodai*, teahouses were guaranteed to hire at least, but more likely more than, 20 percent women employees.

Even after women activists won the battle by tightening the control of the behavior and dress code of individual *nü zhaodai*, male commentators continued to argue that women were not suitable for work in the service sector because of their physical limitations. Medical columns for women written by self-acclaimed doctors or specialists warned working women about the danger of working too hard. Some of them used medical theories to convince women that such jobs would be detrimental to their health. For example, one columnist argued that it was bad for women to stand for a long time because "the sexual organ would be flushed with blood." The blood would then flow to the hipbones and thus cause other diseases. This writer further stated that "working too hard" and "exhaustion," together with "coldness," "uncleanliness," and "irregular sex such as masturbation" would cause infection. He also advised women against the use of tampons, since they would obstruct blood flow, and thus the organ would easily be contaminated by germs. It was best for women to wash their outer labia several times a day.<sup>96</sup> Such articles implied that working in a public place would not be a convenient setting for women to practice good hygiene. Although the author

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95 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 8 July 1935. There were a few teahouses in Guangzhou owned by women. Probably they were influenced by the hairdressing industry. The hair salons that hired women at that time were owned by women.

96 *Xianggang gongshang ribao*, 2 August 1935.

did not refer to service labor explicitly, it is likely that teahouses would fit in the category of such a work setting.

In the last years of the 1930s, the discourse about *nü zhaodai* working rights shifted. As Japan encroached on China, *nü zhaodai* participated in discussions of the war and emphasized their patriotism as workers.<sup>97</sup> They allied with women's groups such as the Alliance of Guangdong Female Comrades Fighting Against War Enemies (*guangdongsheng funü kangdi tongzhi hui* 廣東省婦女抗敵同志會) and donated money towards the war effort.

Perhaps because “worker” became an important identity in 1920s revolutionary rhetoric and continued to be so in the 1930s, when the Communist party went underground, *nü zhaodai* and women's organizations were eager to “lift” the status of their occupation to become workers. When critics put aside the sexual nature of their job and discussed the *nü zhaodai* issue as an unemployment problem, they automatically juxtaposed these “degraded” women workers with female and male workers of other forms of “respectable” labor as necessary components of a modern society. Here, *nü zhaodai* were understood as “workers” whose existence and participation were wanted in the economic system and inevitable to social progress and civilization. By constructing service laborers as “workers,” the public also redefined stigmatized public identities previously regarded as “degraded.” The prerequisites of becoming “citizens” were ambiguous, but “worker” (i.e. being productive) was definitely a desirable status. Ironically, the advocates of modernization, who earlier had been troubled by the increase of public women in the city, saw no problem letting them pass as “workers” when they saw fit. In other words, these lower-class women might still be considered as productive urban citizens, on the condition that their jobs were not explicitly

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97 *Zhongshan ribao*, 21 April 1938.

sexual and that the content of their work was not scrutinized.

In fact, the government had no choice but to accept these women. It was evident that the rise of “public women” could no longer be contained by abolition policies as in the early 1920s. The well-organized labor union-led movement to abolish *nü zhaodai* in 1935 also failed because too many women were already working in the service industry. The government had no choice but to quietly acknowledge this “lesser evil.”

The rift with male workers continued, however. One *nü zhaodai* activist described how working conditions in 1938 had been improving, but she complained that male co-workers often intentionally sabotaged their work and organizing efforts. One of the activist goals of *nü zhaodai* was to “work on changing the contemptuous attitude of the public towards women workers.”<sup>98</sup> The public, although slowly accepting the necessity of service laborers in the city, continued to hold an ambivalent attitude towards women engaged in such work. At times this ambivalence became a barrier preventing these women from functioning comfortably in society.

From this brief discussion of women who worked in teahouses and restaurants, it should not be clear that the rise of the service sector created a space of competition and invention. While capitalists took the opportunity to squeeze profits, unskilled women and men also sought expertise and training in order to become “professionals” in the service sector. Drawing on newspaper and tabloid commentaries about women’s employment in the late 1920s and 1930s, I have focused on the widespread debate about women teahouse workers. This debate, I have suggested, is far more significant than has been realized. It was itself, I would argue, a symbol of modernity. Women

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98 *Guangzhou minguo ribao*, 14 May 1938. The goals of the organization were: (1) to report the situation of the national salvation work by the female workers; (2) to enlighten other women workers; and (3) to continue their national salvation work, not only through collecting donations, but also through eliminating espionage.



in the service sector clearly revealed contradictions in the way distinctions were drawn between victim and predator. In the social thinking of the day the activities of the *nü zhaodai* and her work were significant enough to elicit great interest. This interest and the places where the *nü zhaodai* plied her trades suggest that female service workers were slowly redefining the connotation of public occupations that had previously been regarded as degraded. My evidence suggests that teahouses and teahouse hostesses may have provided a modern space for voyeuristic interest and intimate heterosexual companionship. At the same time, the implications of this public work of intimacy are broad. It seems clear that the issue of women's employment in teahouses was acknowledged even by contemporaries to be a startling symbol of modernity and not a parochial problem involving a handful of service workers and their male patrons.

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# 現代服務行業與婦女勞工的主體性 —— 1920-30 年代華南的女招待

陳 欣 欣

## 摘 要

二、三〇年代，女招待成爲廣州工會分子、婦女團體、政府官員以及社會評論家熱烈爭辯的話題。雖然僱用女性作招徠令當時面臨困境的服務行業得以重生，但是，女招待的性感形象卻被視爲對社會帶來極大威脅。本文章以 1922 及 1935 年廣州的兩次女招待勞工運動爲例，分析勞工及性別在中國現代化進程所發生的關係。女性投身服務行業，挑戰了「勞工」一詞的男性定義，也挑戰了男性勞動者的工作特權。女招待的勞工運動更揭示了廣州市民對現代性的不同想像和衝突。對於知識分子及女性主義者來說，女性的工作權是國家現代化項不可或缺的條件。相反，工會及反對陣營卻認爲女招待是現代化帶來的惡果，令城市的道德淪亡。而與此同時，圍繞著聘用女招待的討論，將女性提供的服務重新界定爲勞動，更將從事服務行業的女性重新建構爲對社會發展有貢獻的市民。

**關鍵詞：**女招待、服務業、廣州、勞工、道德、現代化