

Jeffreys, Elena
Book Review of
Jeffreys, Elaine
China, Sex and Prostitution

RoutledgeCurzon Studies on China in Transition

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Jeffreys presents a laborious critique of the sex industry, gender and policing in the PRC today as viewed through the lens of China studies academia. Her argument focuses on critiquing China Studies from both a western and mainland academic viewpoint, and in particular she castigates the work of western feminists who suggest the PRC should recognise sex work. While offering a new reading of contemporary China studies contribution to the field, these writers are accused of imposing a ‘western’ view (13), ‘abdicating the (PRC) government responsibility to provide employment’ (94), and Non-Government Organisations who do the same are described as ‘dispassionate’ (93). The progression of her argument lets her down, and by the end of chapter 5 the reader is left wondering how she drew the conclusion that sex work, as a category of employment, cannot be implemented in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The moral overtones of the book are codified and may elude the reader during the first reading, but her conclusions leaves no doubt that she believes it is morally wrong to support sex work as a category of employment, not just in PRC but anywhere.

She argues that the sex worker rights lobby has proposed impossible ‘solutions’ to sex work, that their argument is therefore flawed and unable to be effectively developed into a model anywhere. She states that sex workers don’t want to engage with regulation due to their wish to remain untaxed, and that is a stumbling block in the implementation of an effective model of the recognition of sex work as legitimate work. But her own sources contradict this. The World Charter for Prostitutes Rights, extensively quoted by Jeffreys but overlooked in this case, clearly states that it is the right of sex workers to be taxed appropriately. The World Charter, written in 1985, is the one of the few primary source of sex worker rights literature that Jeffreys refers to, but it is poorly misrepresented for the sake of Jeffreys argument.

Jeffreys main point in her argument against sex work in the PRC is that their sex industry is too diverse to fit into a “simplistic” mould of sex work (11). This argument tacitly paints a picture of non-PRC sex industries as one dimensional and transparent, while the PRC by contrast is complex and ever changing. Is she using the same ‘exoticisation’ that she so strongly criticises traditional China studies academics for using? It would seem that she is positioning China as the ‘other,’ and western sex industries as somehow easier to grasp by comparison. The global sex industry has diverse layers, technologies and methods for avoiding detection. Jeffreys uses the

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example of ‘second wife’ (waishi or baoermair) and ‘hired wife’ (baopo) categories as well as the CCP officials who use their privilege to gain sexual favours as arguments that the Chinese sex industry is too different from sex work notions to adopt a sex worker rights model. She privileges herself as ‘knowing’ China more than sex worker rights advocates know sex workers, and her argument that is inconvenienced by her lack of sex worker NGO primary texts. Sex worker NGO’s the world over discuss sex for favours, the phenomena of sugar daddies, opportunistic workers and the transient nature of the industry. Even more complex are the issues surround voluntary trafficking, bonded contracts within the sex industry and the different methods of identification for male, female and transgender workers. Jeffreys argument relies on overlooking primary sources of sex worker rights materials and portraying PRC’s sex industry as somehow separate from the global sex trade.

This is an overall disappointing addition to our understanding of gender, sexuality and work in the PRC. Jeffreys does explore major events of policy formation in the PRC and draws on a comprehensive bibliography of recognised mainland academics in the field, but misses vital publications of Zi Teng (Hong Kong Sex Worker Group) and the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW). Information about the PRC sex industry regulatory structures is unfortunately hidden inside a morally charged critique of western feminist views about sex work. This is a shame because her chapter on Policing Change sheds some needed light on the mass-line mobilisations which are the interface between the sex industry and the PRC. Also well received will be her exploration of the popular media portrayal of sex work and sexuality in general, which she uses many newspaper and journalistic sources to paint a vivid picture of mainstream portrayals of the sex worker.

From title to conclusion Jeffreys mystifies Chinese sex industry workers as beyond categorisation and therefore unable to be recognised as legitimate. For this reason the book is a step backwards for sex workers in the PRC. Her use of language is unnecessarily academic, which may put it out of reach of sex worker activists, but does not hide the fact that it is morally driven.