

Dangerous Liaisons: Race, Gender and Prostitution in Early Colonial Hong Kong

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This paper situates prostitution in early colonial Hong Kong within the broader context of debates about race and immigration in mid-nineteenth century Britain. In 1857, Hong Kong passed an 'Ordinance for Checking the Spread of Venereal Disease,' which anticipated the Contagious Diseases Act in Britain by seven years, and required prostitutes who serviced European clients to be examined regularly and detained in the Lock Hospital until treated. Meanwhile, depictions of prostitutes as agents of contagion permeated the press and government reports. Chinese prostitutes were invariably portrayed as sexual predators who dwelt on the periphery of Hong Kong society, from whence they preyed upon their European victims. According to such narratives, Chinese prostitutes were construed as a criminal class that threatened the colony's social stability. Drawing on a wide range of sources, this paper explores the assumptions and contradictions that underlay these narratives of 'dangerous liaisons.' It demonstrates how racial tensions in the colony echoed and configured metropolitan anxieties over immigration from the 1830s, when immigrants were suspected of importing disease and other evil practices into the country. Finally, the paper considers the implications of a discourse that pitted Chinese prostitutes, as active agents, against a 'feminized' and passive European masculinity.

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