

A rose by any other name

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet.”

– Romeo and Juliet (II, ii, 1-2), William Shakespeare

A group of apparently wealthy, well-dressed housewives with slightly too much make-up, and slightly too much jewellery, burst into a European-style furniture store in Causeway Bay, Hong Kong. They tore up the bedsheets, knocked over the tables and chairs, yelled, and generally caused mayhem. Miss Fu, the store manager, told Elaine and Wendy, two other assistants, and me, then only 18 years old, to try to reason with the women while she called for the police.

“How dare you stand there so brazenly, after seducing our husbands?” shouted one of the women.

“You chickens [Hong Kong slang for prostitutes], show us what you have that’s so good! You don’t just sell beds, you whores hop onto them with our husbands!”

Elaine, Wendy and I were scared and nervous. So was Miss Fu, but she stood her ground, hands on hips, feet firmly planted, and responded: “Look at yourselves, you stupid, tai-tai bitches. Shit for brains, no wonder your men run after other women. Your husbands aren’t here. Go and look for them in a whore house!”

The most slightly built of the women was sure this defence confirmed that Miss Fu really did have something to hide. She grabbed Miss Fu's hair and yelled, "You slut, selling beds has turned you into one yourself! How can you even think of being my husband's mistress? Why don't you take a look at yourself? You ugly, dried-up old spinster!"

Ironically, another commented: "Your husband must have poor taste. How else could he fuck a shit like her?"

The slightly-built one let Miss Fu go and asked, "If it's not you, then who is it?" They looked at us accusingly. Eventually, all eyes landed on Elaine.

"This slut has a mole as big as a broad bean," one of the women said. "She may not be a whore, but she could be their pimp." This stunned poor Elaine, whose jaw dropped visibly. Then, fingers stabbed at Wendy's face. "Men wouldn't touch her poxy face, but they'd love to feel her huge tits." Wendy flushed profusely.

Suddenly, the largest of the marauding women shouted directly at me, "Look at her, thin eyes and thick lips, a born chicken." I was nervous, confused, and angry.

The police arrived within twenty minutes and took the worst of the troublemakers away. There was little sympathy for the remaining women who were left licking their wounds. It seemed to them they were the victims. They were surrounded by a damned pimp, a deserted spinster, whores, a born chicken with narrow eyes and full lips, and a girl with bad skin and annoyingly full breasts; and to add insult to injury, the police were on their side.

For weeks after the showdown, Elaine remained embarrassed at the

public ridicule of her mole, and resigned. Wendy reacted badly when Miss Fu continued to remind her of the comments on her skin and breasts, implying blame of some sort. Finally, Wendy sought satisfaction in a settlement arranged by the labour union.

My own supposed “chicken look” was destined to make me the butt of continued jibes. After a row with staff members who were making fun of me, I was fired by Miss Fu.

I was only 18, and found the accusation of having a “chicken look” much more shameful than anything else I could imagine. Years later, I still feel the shame. Even now, as an adult I will look at myself in the mirror to try to see if the accusation has any validity, and to find any sign that I am a good woman.

One of the housewives eventually admitted they had made a mistake and should have gone into the shop next door. The housewives’ collective jealousy had erroneously affected the lives of innocent individuals and left me with a powerful memory.

Although confused at the time, with the benefit of hindsight I can see many implications and emotions in the events at the furniture store. The loathing married women have for prostitutes; fear of ageing and loss of attractiveness; competition between females for the same source of security. Objectively, it is easier to blame the most remote party, i.e. the supposed prostitute, rather than the man. Push the man too far and he takes his patronage elsewhere, which creates a self-fulfilling accusation, whether or not a prostitute is the cause.

Imagine if the definition of prostitution was broadened to cover not just cash but security, housing, clothes, and a generally more

comfortable life in return for such benefits as companionship, sexual availability, a housekeeper, birth mother, and child minder. It could then be argued that the angry women were simply single-client prostitutes trying to frighten off freelance prostitutes competing for the same source of benefits and security.

Prostitution is often called the oldest profession. It is probably more accurate to call it the oldest business. Despite its many forms, the common factor is an exchange of usually, but not always, money, given in return for sex of some kind. In this context, 'sex' is used to describe any benefit arriving from a person of the opposite sex: non-contact companionship, friendly affection, outings as an apparent couple, all the way through to full sexual intercourse and its many variations.

Whenever and whatever the demand, there has always been a supply, and vice versa. Which drives which? Chickens and eggs in an eternal circle.

In literature and the visual arts, the prostitute is typically portrayed by reference to quite clearly defined clichés: a superficially sweet and appealing creature hiding an underlying, hard-edged cynicism; a downtrodden, used and abused wretch; or a happy hooker in full control acting out of choice, living proof of Darwin's notion that the female chooses the male. This was a shocking concept to Darwin's male contemporaries, and despite its compatibility with biological evolution, it remains uncomfortably at odds with much feminist thinking on the subject of *female* sex workers. The feminist view of *male* sex workers is

rather more fuzzy.

Prostitution is a classic case of proximity determining perception. In another country, it may be seen as a fascinating aspect of an exotic culture, something different and exciting. In the next town, it is a social ill, about which something really should be done. In the street in which one lives, it is a terrible, disgusting, immoral, depraved business operated by cheap criminals and even cheaper women.

In truth, people who suppose themselves to be morally superior would rather not acknowledge the existence of prostitution in their own society, its existence being a reflection of aspects of self. Such prejudice is deeply rooted. It serves to reinforce notions of moral superiority and justifies a lack of concern about the welfare and dignity of prostitutes.

Pragmatically, however uncomfortable it may be, societies ought to accept that prostitution is here to stay. If all the might of the United States could not eradicate the urge to drink alcoholic beverages during the Prohibition era, then eradicating an aspect of hormonally driven human behaviour, fundamental to existence, is not an initiative likely to succeed.

In Hong Kong today, it is possible to find those involved in ‘public relations’, massage girls, karaoke hostesses, house hookers and streetwalkers without too much difficulty.

Police Crackdown On Prostitution and *Women’s Prison Cells Jammed* are common themes in Hong Kong newspaper headlines. Political parties, hand-in-hand with local community representatives, take to the streets to demonstrate against prostitution in peaceful neighbourhoods. Voluntary groups who care for the prostitutes protest that political parties