

BROKEN FLOWERS

BY ZENG RENQUAN

With opportunities still limited in the countryside, many young girls find themselves caught up in the world of vice.

According to a report in *Chutian Metropolis Daily* on August 20, a sixteen-year-old girl nicknamed Lanlan was taken by the police to the Chongqing City emergency assistance station. She was covered in dirt from head to toe, her eyes full of panic and fear, and staff could tell in a glance that she was mentally unhinged.

Sixteen-year-old Lanlan was from Xiangfangu City in Hubei Province. At the end of this past May, she was tricked by a man known as “Bully Boy” into going to Chongqing, where she was forced into prostitution. It was said that after she “ran away” she was “discovered” by the police. In the emergency assistance station, Lanlan kept scrawling drawings on the wall and babbling to herself. Two days later, Lanlan’s mother came and took her home. According to staff at the assistance station, in that month alone they had “rescued” six girls who had been similarly tricked; all six were under eighteen, and the youngest was only fourteen.

How many underage prostitutes are there in China today? Society at large has no means of estimating the number, and the government neither dares nor wishes to keep statistics, because there are way too many troops in this army, the situation is too ugly, and too many reports would mean that those in power would lose face. Behind every underage prostitute there is tragic story: when they were tricked into becoming prostitutes, there were police and local government officials who managed to make matters even worse.

As it happened, while I was on the train home during the National Day holiday, the bunk above mine was occupied by a young man surnamed Li. Li was about thirty years old, and after his nap he climbed down for some food and booze. He was very talkative, especially after knocking down a few glasses. It turned out that Xiao Li worked in the “mistress” business; he and his older sister had opened a restaurant at the junction of Tianmen and Yingcheng in Hubei. This so-called restaurant was merely a front for a brothel with three women working in it, the oldest of whom was nineteen, and the others only fifteen and sixteen. Business was very, very good, and the three women couldn’t



Young prostitutes in Dongguan, Guangdong Province. Photo: Sinopix.

keep up with demand, so Li was on his way to Sichuan to look for more women. He had already established contacts, and a middleman had once again helped him find two fourteen- or fifteen-year-old girls. As we were talking, I began to develop a much better understanding of underage prostitution in China.

"Most of the young girls are from Sichuan, Hubei and the remote mountain areas of Hunan. On the plains you won't find anyone. The flatland women are a bit smarter and more difficult to fool. The girls from deep in the mountains haven't seen much of the world, they're greener. They come from very poor homes, so they're easier to fool." Li talked exuberantly as he downed another glass. "We all have our ways, using a string of middlemen to make connections. All of these middlemen have their own methods. Some of them find a girl's father and swear to him that the girl is going to have a job with very good pay, and some parents think, if their daughters can earn some money and give the family some support, who can say no? Some women who have themselves worked as 'mistresses' go back to help recruit new girls; they're from the same village, and girls who've never been out their own village before meet these women who have been around and have money for food and nice clothes—who can blame them for getting antsy? Working as a middleman is pretty good work; you can make as much as one or two thousand on one transaction."

"How old are the women you recruit?" I asked uneasily.

"The younger the better," Xiao Li said. "None of them will be older than eighteen—the older ones are tougher to manage. None of them have any education to speak of. The ones who've gone even as far as junior high school are few and far between. Basically you're talking about girls who are fifteen or sixteen; the customers like them at that age," he said with a smutty leer.

My heart trembling, I asked, "But they're so young . . . are they willing to do this kind of thing?"

"There's nothing else out there for them," he said. "First we humor them a bit, buy them some pretty clothes, show them some porn movies, have some more experienced girls tell them about all the benefits, and then it's usually fine. If this doesn't work, we slip a little something in their drink to knock them out. After the first time, the second and third come pretty easy, and then you don't have to worry any more . . . But the fee for a 'first night' is pretty damn high, at least 1,800 yuan, with 200 or 300 going to the girl. The boss who put up the stake naturally wants more money, but once that's over with it gets cheaper—50 yuan per visit, with 20 for the boss and 30 for the girl."

"What kind of customer do you get down there?" I asked, my heart heavy.

"Most of them are just passing through," he said with a funny laugh. "Truck drivers, guys attending meetings or officials out on business. Any restaurant with parking will have just about anyone, from petty officials to big bosses. But senior officials won't come to simple places like ours. Those guys mostly go to four-star hotels for more high-class entertainment. But a place like ours, once it gets started, draws a lot of word-of-mouth business, and quite a few people will even take a detour to stop by because of the great value. These guys are usually loaded in more ways than one, if you know what I mean," he said with a laugh.

I had a hard time conjuring a smile, so instead I asked, "Doesn't the PSB bother you guys?"

"We pay them off right off the bat; otherwise, how are you going to open a new place?" he said dismissively. "Haven't you noticed? Every national highway, every provincial road is lined on both sides with restaurants, and every doorway will have a couple of girls on display. They're all 'that kind of girl,' and they're all very young; otherwise, how are you going to attract customers? After all, if these guys just want to eat, they can do that anywhere. At the same time, every restaurant has the protection of the local PSB. If you don't, how can you operate? Dealing with the PSB is a cinch. You treat them to a good meal, slip them a red envelope, let them 'try out' your prettiest girls, and from then on they'll give you a heads-up if there's a raid, and if you have problems with a customer, you can give them a call and they'll stop by and set things right."

I couldn't take it any more and burst out, "Don't you know that what you're doing is completely illegal? The women that you're setting up as hookers, most of them are children!"

He just downed another gulp of booze and angrily replied, "Damn it, these days it doesn't pay to be an official; agricultural taxes and fees are down, village cadres would rather just confiscate the fields and farm them themselves. There's nothing ordinary people can do about it, and if you don't stick your neck out you'll never survive."

Regardless of whether it's a big city or a small city, whether it's an urban area or the countryside, massage parlors, karaoke bars and hotels can be found anywhere. Look under the street lights, under the shinning neon signs, and you'll see them: the fashionable young girls in heavy makeup with cigarettes between their fingers, hiking up their miniskirts to show off their legs, their lips warbling pop songs, their eyes measuring up the contents of a man's pockets. Their existence has become part of the scenic landscape of the city. Their customers are men with money who are successful in business and in politics, respectable, well-dressed men who under the shelter of nightfall answer their animal desires with one hand gripping a wad of bills and the other arm curled around the waist of girls young enough to be their own daughters. They don't care if the girl at their side is only fifteen or sixteen, if she has a sad past, if she was forced into her trade, and they care even less whether once their desires are satisfied, a broken child goes off to find a quiet place to weep in secret.

According to sources within the Public Security Bureau, nearly half of China's prostitutes are underage, and almost all of these children are forced into prostitution. Day after day, official newspapers and television proclaim that children are China's future, China's hope, but how many senior officials actually care about children? If local officials really cared about child development, would there be underage prostitutes like Lanlan tricked into work in China's cities and towns? If our officials actually paid attention to effective administration and really cracked down on this problem, would people like Xiao Li still have the space to run rampant as they do?

Translated by Tom Kellogg