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Global Political Economics of Japanese Prostitution

This project seeks to explain the gradual shift in Japanese politics in legitimizing, concealing, and monopolizing Japanese prostitution that began in the early Tokugawa era to the Meiji era by contextualizing it to the changing global economic order. During the Tokugawa era the Japanese government imposed heavy taxes on prostitution brothels, tea houses, and other institutions that profited on sexual favors. However, sexual favors and entertainment by women did not become distinctly defined until the attempted monopolization of prostitution by the advent of the “pleasure quarters”. The pleasure quarters helped to modernize and urbanize Japan, while at the same time, concealing how the elite Japanese had exploited the poor. However, through new forms of transportation, urbanization’s dependence on the commodification of women as prostitutes became more apparent to the Japanese public. The false image of prostitution as a contained enclosure was exposed, which threatened to delegitimize political authorities of Japan. During this crisis in the early Meiji era, Western ideology spread to Japan through Christian missionaries and a changing global economic order. Western ideology helped legitimize both Japanese state authorities and the modernization that came from prostitution. Without looking at the shifts of the global economy and the connection it has to Western ideology, we cannot understand how Japanese prostitution evolved in tandem with modernization and Western ideology.