

## HONGKONG

### PROSTITUTION

# Blonde & Blue

Police zero in on prostitutes they can catch: Whites on tourist visas

By **JUANITO CONCEPCION** and **CHRIS JASPER**

**A** CAMPAIGN to rid Hongkong of hookers using escort and massage agencies has sparked a row over how best to contain prostitution. While vice officers claim their clampdown will help clean up the territory, others fear the move will force more prostitutes back on the streets, making the sex industry more visible, more open to triad control and more dangerous for prostitutes.

Police in Tsim Sha Tsui and Wanchai are now in the midst of their latest campaign, partly in response to the proliferation of agencies offering girls through the Yellow Pages.

Agencies have grown from only two in 1991 to eight now — although the volume of Yellow Pages escort and massage advertising, stretching to 16 pages in GTE's 1993 *Hongkong Buying Guide*, is about what it's been for several years.

Tsim Sha Tsui assistant divisional commander Daniel Lawley says the new twist in the oldest profession is the burst of agency-related activity over the last couple of months aimed at business visitors in hotels. "We've always spent resources on fighting local prostitution,"

he says. Lawley is inclined to make distinctions between economy and business class prostitution and says he is determined to see the latter driven out of Hongkong's upmarket hotels. "We've not targeted high-class girls before but we're cracking down on them now."

But he has his detractors, Roberta Chan being one. She runs the Europa escort agency and argues the new policy is misguided. "Sooner or later, all businessmen who do a lot of travelling decide they want some company," Chan says.

"The market is there, and there's no

**Class Act: Roberta Chan in feathers and lace at Europa agency (above); Yellow Page yellow adverts (right).**

way the police or anyone else can get rid of it. What they've got to decide is how best it can be controlled — and I'd suggest escort and massage agencies are as close as Hongkong is going to get to a satisfactory system."

Chan also claims agencies keep close tabs on where their girls are, making it safer for them — yet service is discreet. "Clients only have to pick up the phone in their hotel room to be put in touch with a girl. Only three people need know about it. Surely that's better than having a red-light district or girly bars."



**Old fashioned round-up: Police now targeting 'high class' girls.**



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**Unnoticed:** Some police officers would seem to agree. Even Lawley concedes, "People hardly notice a young woman who walks into a hotel and goes straight to the room of her client."

Hotels could be much more helpful, suggests Yau Tsim district operations officer Albert Hau. "Hotel staff don't take the initiative of calling us if we don't ask them to," he says. "It's probably because they have other priorities."

Chan argues agency sex is better sex. "We're businesses, we're completely above board and we pay taxes. Surely the police would be better employed concentrating on street walkers

and triad pimps in Mongkok.

"We are not part of the problem — we are part of the solution." Exchange of

money for sex is not a crime in Hongkong. Agencies do not solicit customers for sex and so avoid charges of soliciting, which is an offence. Agencies can be prosecuted for living off immoral earnings only if police prove they have received money

"earned" through prostitution by girls on their books.

"The men aren't our clients, the girls are," Chan says. "We take their details and

put them on a computer, so we can match them up with the right customer."

Chan is careful to explain which charges cover what. "When a man phones, we explain that we will charge a fee for putting him in touch with a girl, and charge for the girl's time," she says in what seems an acknowledgement there is a client relationship with men.

"That is paid on the girl's arrival at his hotel room — and the cheque is made out to us." Technically, she isn't working for the agency.

"This introduction fee is all we get out of the transaction. Anything else is between the man and the girl. If he agrees to give her more for something, that's his business. We see none of the money."

Agencies typically charge a \$1000 introduction fee for two hours or \$2,500 for the night. Girls charge a minimum of \$1,500. Fees of \$3,000 to \$6,000 are typical for visiting businessmen.

Given the legal ins and outs, police have been forced to focus on prostitutes out to focus on prostitutes on tourist visas. While prostitution may be technically legal in some situations, it constitutes work which visitors without proper visas are not permitted to engage in. And Officer Hau maintains they work through agencies.

"Most foreign prostitutes

operating in first-class hotels in Yau Tsim and Wanchai districts are European." British prostitutes don't need work permits, making them harder to nab than other Caucasians.

**Hookers off the hook:** Most agencies claim Caucasians account for fewer than 40 per cent of names on their books — unlike Europa. "My agency specialises in white women and most of the customers are also white," Chan contends. "It's mindless victimisation."

Stings against expat hookers began in March and since then Chan has lost three Europeans, two Americans and two Australians from her line-up. In one at Tsim Sha Tsui's Hotel Nikko, Lawley himself posed as a member of a British trio looking for "something exotic." When the European girls who were despatched asked for the agency introduction fee, they were arrested.

Says Chan: "The girls were surprised and upset, because they really didn't think they could be arrested. And they spent most of the weekend in jail — high heels and all!" They were eventually deported for visa violations. In subsequent operations at the Metropole, Kowloon, Nathan and other hotels, Tsim Sha Tsui officers arrested more than 40 foreign women and turned them over to the Immigration Department.

Chan questions the legality of police actions: "In these swoops, the girls are

held as soon as the agency fee is mentioned. Yet that money goes to us, not them, so how can it be used to prove they were working illegally? As for other payments, all our girls tell customers that anything other than the introduction fee is a tip or a gift," she says.

"Even though the prostitution element is not illegal, they know that because they're on tourist visas they must not directly ask for a fee.

"So there again, acceptance of tips should not be taken as proof that they're working."

Till now, the girls have taken their legal lumps quietly. Now Chan is trying to rally other agencies in joining together to fight a test case. She says she has already held three meetings with six other operators. "This thing has brought us together."

Officer Hau, declining to be specific

at this point, says police will broaden their approach. One measure suggested by Wanchai district operations officer Julia Lau would require all out-call escort and massage girls to be registered and licensed, as massage parlour staff are required to be.

**Yellow Pages:** Authorities may also push for tougher restrictions on Yellow Pages ads — or even press for an outright ban on escort ads. And while the authorities are bearing down harder than ever, others are trying to get tough too — if for less altruistic reasons.

Window is in possession of a GTE Directories letter to advertisers which stipulated a new 100 per cent additional loading charge on top of 1994 rates for escort and message advertisements.

Agencies sought legal advice and complained. GTE subsequently scrapped the loading charge, but stuck with its 10 per cent rate hike for all advertisers.

Certainly, escorts make a handsome contribution to GTE's Yellow Pages ad business. A page sells for \$225,000 on a 15-month contract, good tip money by any standard — no matter what the profession.

**"There's a market and there's no way the police can get rid of it. What they've got to decide is how best to control it"**



**Round-up II:** Agencies argue clampdown on them means more street sex.