Empire, Capitalism and Human Trafficking in Northeast Asia

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The exploitation of women in Northeast Asia has a history intricately tied into the processes of conflict, empire and global capitalism. The contemporary victims of these abuses are North Korean refugees who leave their country and, once in China, are considered illegal migrants to be repatriated to North Korea. With no legal recourse and no means of existing legitimately in China, North Korean refugees are easy prey for brokers and human traffickers operating outside of the law. The trafficking of North Koreans is a distinctly gendered process as women who enter China are treated as commodities, sold to Chinese men as brides, or forced into prostitution to pay off debts accumulated while escaping North Korea. This situation, however, did not develop overnight and to understand the roots of this tragic and ongoing exploitation, it is required we cast our minds back to an even darker time in history.

The colonization of Korea by Japan in 1910 brought with it the mass recruitment, occasionally voluntary, but mostly through coercion and deception, of women from North and Southeast Asia to work as ‘Comfort Women’ in the rest stations of the Japanese Imperial Army. Many of these women worked in unimaginable conditions, servicing Japanese and Korean military personnel in stations from Manchuria to the Philippines.

Following the capitulation of Japanese forces in 1945, the United States took over as builders of empire in East Asia. Not unlike the Japanese, the Americans established a chain of military bases from Japan to Korea, Guam to the Philippines and beyond. These would continue to multiply as the threat of the ‘Red Menace’ escalated in the region. Another feature shared by the Japanese and Americans was the growth of ‘Camptowns’, areas of petty commerce, alcohol and entertainment, replete with a thriving sex trade to ‘comfort the boys’ far from home. Tragically, many of the women working in these Camptowns had previously toiled under the Japanese. The Korean case is particularly representative of this; after 1945, many Korean ‘Comfort Women’ found the thought of returning home too much to bare, others who tried were ostracized and marginalized, labeled as collaborators who had betrayed both themselves and their country. As a result, many returned to the only thing they had known – selling their bodies.

In the late 1960s, as the Vietnam War escalated, Camptown sex workers were encouraged, under the Park Chung-hee regime, to act as ‘Goodwill Ambassadors’ to American soldiers on R&R, ensuring the flow of US dollars remained constant. The influx of American dollars, secured by means of Korean blood spilled on the battlefields of Vietnam and the ‘intimate diplomacy’ of Camptown sex workers, fuelled the industrialization of Seoul. Encouraged by a government focused on modernization-at-any-cost, young women from the Korean countryside poured into the capital to take up places in the factories churning out products for export. Those who were unable to find work on the assembly line found work in the bars of the Camptowns. A direct result of this gendered, mass movement from rural to urban was the gradual disappearance of the young, unmarried female from the villages of Korea.

Rural Korea was being sacrificed as part of Park’s master plan and, in an effort to placate the fast growing bachelor population of the countryside, the government sponsored ‘bridal tours’ of Northeast China. These trips were explained as a way for rural men to meet a woman who was more ‘obedient and traditional’ than South Korean women, and who would not be adverse to a life laboring in the fields. Most appealing, the women on offer in Jilin, Heilong and other provinces of Northeast China were ethnically Korean, thus ensuring the bloodline of the Korean people was ‘kept pure’.

For much of the 1980s and early 1990s, with the explosion of the unregulated bride tourism industry, the bride of choice for the rural bachelor continued to be the Chosonjok (ethnic-Korean Chinese) woman. However, as more and more women continued to arrive, certain ‘truths’ started to be revealed for both parties. Chosonjok women were not as obedient and ‘traditional’ as advertised, while Korean rural men, often living in worse conditions than the women had experienced in Northeast China, did not represent a gateway to the glitz and glamour of South Korean modernity. With the improvement of relations between China and South Korea and a gradual relaxation of restrictions pertaining to Chosonjok working in South Korea, it became harder for bachelors to find ethnic Korean-Chinese brides willing to follow them into the rice fields.

There were two reactions to this; firstly, South Korean men started to look further afield for women, outside of Northeast Asia and beyond previously imagined ethnic restrictions. Secondly, as the population of Northeast China became more affluent and mobile, ethnic-Korean women, as with South Korean women nearly thirty years prior, were less willing to settle for a rural existence and the dearth of potential brides in that area became more pronounced.

Chinese men in the provinces of Northeast China have found themselves in a similar position to South Korean rural men a generation earlier: with land to work, aging parents to care for and no heir to pass on the estate to, a wife must be found. The demand for brides, in this case, is being satisfied by North Korean women who cross the border illegally in search of work, food, an escape from hardship in their hometown and, at times, passage to South Korea. These women, many of whom are in their late teens and early twenties, are a vulnerable population. The market for brides in China is, as it was in South Korea, unregulated and dominated by ethnic Korean and Chinese brokers for whom making a profit is more important than the basic human rights of the individuals of whom they take charge. North Korean women are bought, sold and trafficked throughout Northeast China and beyond. Many are sold to Chinese men as brides; many others are funneled into the burgeoning sex industry of the region.

A few of the ‘luckier’ women who find themselves victims of human trafficking are able to escape and, often with the help of South Korean-based secular and religious organizations, make their way to South Korea. However, as with the so-called ‘Comfort Women’ sixty years prior, they find themselves unable to tell their stories. They are silenced by a fear of being stigmatized, labeled as dirty and impure, having sold their bodies and their virtue for questionable motives. An inability to find peace in South Korea is leading some of these women to re-migrate to third countries – Canada and the UK being among the most popular destinations so far. Whether the distance and the time elapsed will afford these individuals the chance to begin their lives anew, or, as with the ‘Comfort Women’, whether the ghosts of their past will continue to haunt them, is still to be seen.

If there are two unfortunate truisms that we can discern here; firstly, that history repeats itself, in terms the historically-embedded normalization of the exploitation of Asian women to satisfy the needs of empire building and modernization. Secondly, that money speaks louder than the cries of the disenfranchised. It is too early to know if the lives of the victims of human trafficking will be at all improved in their new homes in Sydney, Toronto or London, let us hope that, unlike the ‘Comfort Women’, they do not have to wait a lifetime to feel some sense of justice.