
Recent international concern over the globalization of human trafficking and prostitution has yielded numbers of media reports and studies by governments and international organizations, including the United Nations, that draw attention to the deceit, coercion, debt bondage, and exploitation associated with this kind of fraudulent activity. But with limited empirically-based research and with almost no personal information from the victims of such crimes, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which trafficking and the transnational sex industry are intertwined. Despite a genuine interest by authorities world-wide to determine what connections exist between transnational commercial sex trafficking and criminal organizations, there is a knowledge gap: the absence of hard data has made a realistic and accurate assessment of global commercial sex operations near impossible. This situation is exasperated by the fact that these same experts are well aware that the problem of human trafficking has become endemic.

In this volume two Rutgers University criminologists, Ko-lin Chin and James O. Finckenauer, aim to overcome this knowledge gap, and based on the results of their intense research, conclude that the oft-cited paradigm of adult women prostitutes as victims of transnational human trafficking needs revision. Over a two-year period they probed the Chinese female commercial sex industry in Hong Kong, Macau, (Taipei) Taiwan, Bangkok (Thailand), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Singapore, Jakarta (Indonesia), Shenzhen (China), Los Angeles, and New York. They limited their investigation to one group of women only—those women from the People’s Republic of China who work in these specific geographical locations. Chin and Finckenauer interviewed 350 persons on-site: not only the sex workers themselves, but also sex ring operators, smugglers, law enforcement agents, and victim service agencies, in Mandarin Chinese. They sampled and questioned prostitutes first, and from within that group, they attempted to identify trafficking victims according to international definitions of sex trafficking crimes and victimization. They gained access to these women first through referrals, answering advertisements posted at massage parlors, bars, karaoke lounges, nightclubs, as well as responding to women working in restaurants, hotels, escort agencies, and on the streets of these ten locations.
Chin and Finckenauer found that, counter to current thinking about trafficking, these Chinese prostitutes were not victims of sex exploitors, and that in fact they were active agents seeking sex work overseas in order to make money for themselves and their families. Their research revealed that initially, these women had entered the world of commercial sex in China as they realized the limited economic opportunities in factory work or other manual labor markets in contrast to the lucrative environment of commercial sex. With limited education and lack of career advancement, and perhaps facing real financial crises within their families, they chose to make a living by selling sex. And once they crossed that threshold, the decision to go abroad became simply economic. Thus, they knew already before leaving China that prostitution outside the country was more monetarily rewarding than within. According to the authors, these women rationalized their work in the sex industry as a means to find financial gain and material success—cultural and personal biases did not seem to deter them from this sex work. None of the women they interviewed had been subjected to abduction, force, or coercion by those persons who facilitated their emigration to engage in the commercial sex business overseas. While they may have received financial, travel, and job assistance before and after departing China, the authors discovered that with very few exceptions these women were not drafted by others, and that large-scale organized crime groups were not involved in either their recruitment or their employment. In some cases, a single ‘snakehead’ or individual gang member enrolled female prostitutes or made arrangements for their passage from the mainland to other countries, but this was not a general pattern. Although Chin and Finckenauer did uncover different forms of prostitution within different countries, and various kinds of sex exploiters, ranging from ‘chickenheads’ (male pimps) to ‘mommies’ (women who solicit business for other women), they conclude that the transnational Chinese sex industry is not run by global-wide criminal gangs.

The authors reiterate in their summary that Chinese prostitutes engaged in transnational sex should not be considered helpless, childlike, passive individuals, but rather ‘ferocious tigers’. “They…actively initiated the process of going overseas by aggressively looking for an opportunity to go abroad, regardless of whether they had already engaged in paid sex in China or not” (p.272). Chin and Finckenauer also discovered that some of these prostitutes formed long-term romantic relationships with their customers, and that rarely did clients act violently with these women. Many of these prostitutes, Chin and Finckenauer observed, return home with a great deal of money which enables them to purchase real estate or automobiles. In their
conclusion they also recommend that researchers make comparable studies of international prostitution, including Nepali women in India, Burmese in Thailand, Vietnamese in Cambodia, and Thai women in Japan in order to understand better the broader contours of the global commercial sex industry.

So how do we reconcile the kind of results Chin and Finckenauer obtained and the common image of sex workers as unwilling participants in the world of commercial sex? This question may be answered in two ways. First, one needs to scrutinize media reports more carefully: those officials who rely on films, sensationalist TV, newspaper and magazine reporting to gather information on sex trafficking may find that these sources of information, often expressed in the form of anecdotal stories, are not as dependable and accurate as they assume. Chin and Finckenauer advocate that researchers should talk openly to the sex workers and their helpers themselves, and that such investigation should not be conducted in an atmosphere of ‘moral battleground’. The reference to ‘moral battleground’ originates in the second way one may explain the contrast between the authors’ findings and the degrading aura of sex trafficking, that is, in the well-known debates between radical feminists who condemn prostitution as a site of male domination and see all women involved as victims, and sex workers’ rights advocates who consider prostitution both an enduring reality and an individual choice. But framing the phenomenon of sex trafficking in terms of moral and philosophical differences tends to reduce opportunities to engage in robust research, as these two authors have done. Because the ‘moral debate’ obfuscates understanding of those practices that facilitate both domestic and overseas prostitution, such as the involvement of self-seeking avaricious local officials, there is insufficient attention paid to the actualities behind the Chinese prostitution industry.

Chin and Finckenauer conclude that future research on sex trafficking should focus on the ‘push and pull’ factors driving human migration. What is the impact of personal issues such as domestic violence and divorce ‘pushing’ women into prostitution? And how do the economic factors, such as freedom and economic opportunity appear to pull women from their native country? It seems certain that those countries with a flourishing sex industry which provide a relatively safe basis for prostitution in lucrative commercial sex venues will continue to attract both sex workers and clients. Thus, in their view, there should be more investigation of the business habits, and facilitators involved in the movement of adult women—these include transport operators, document forgers, and corrupt officials. In effect, “the world of prostitution
and sex trafficking is not a black and white world” (p.279). And thus, what ethnographic research can yield is a better understanding of those who make such practices possible so that legislators, policy-makers, and law enforcement agencies can help to ameliorate its worst excesses.

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