
Southern China’s Pearl River Delta is a center not only of export with the country’s highest concentration of migrant workers, but also of the sex and entertainment industry that has accompanied economic growth and has itself become a significant factor in the local economy (the mayor of Dongguan felt compelled to state in spring 2014 that a recently concluded anti-prostitution campaign would not seriously harm the local economy). Liu’s study, which is based on her dissertation at the Rutgers School of Criminal Justice, examines the relationships between migration and prostitution, and between prostitution and human trafficking. She held 64 interviews in Shenzhen (which borders Dongguan), of which 40 were with female sex workers (at nightclubs, karaoke lounges, massage and hair salons, and on the streets), 9 with sex-ring operators, and 15 with law enforcement officials. Six of the 40 women were victims of trafficking. The interviews explored three complexes of questions: 1) routes taken into prostitution, such as own choice, pressure from relatives, influence from boyfriends, abduction etc; 2) structural factors, individual characteristics, and concrete circumstances leading to the sex industry; and 3) degrees of deception and coercion encountered in the process.

The first three of the book’s eight chapters are introductory in character, addressing general conditions relating to migration within China such as the income gap between urban and rural locations as well as the history of prostitution in the country. The author also presents her qualitative methodological approach and discusses unclear terminology in connection with human trafficking. She views certain discourses – feminist ones which equate prostitution and human trafficking and certain anti-trafficking ones that overemphasize structural factors – as helping to confuse the issues. Going beyond purely psychological or solely socioeconomic explanatory models, Liu employs a rational choice perspective (RCP) to differentiate the sale of sexual services from trafficking, and thus to lay the groundwork for more suitable policies on prostitution which is currently prohibited in China. Chapters 4-6 describe and assess the interviews. The women come from farming or first-generation migrant families, and all worked in the production or service sectors before entering the sex industry. In contrast to existing literature, Liu does not find a link between prostitution and domestic violence, history of abuse, or negative relations to parents. In addition to structural factors such as poverty, social inequality, unemployment, and a patriarchal culture, she examines
individual factors that facilitate a turn to prostitution such as influence from boyfriends, relatives, or peers, or special circumstances such as serious family illnesses. The working and living conditions for women in the sex industry vary according to location, (sexual) services provided, prices, income, and expenditure. The women express similar fears such as their families finding out, being imprisoned, or contracting STDs including HIV/AIDS. Chapters 7-8 evaluate the results. Liu places the reasons for prostitution (and trafficking) into three categories: 1) economic, e.g. income gaps, lack of social welfare programs, insufficient legal protection in legitimate sectors of the economy; 2) socio-cultural, e.g. greater tolerance for extramarital sex, traditional views of the female body as a woman’s most valuable possession, gender-specific educational inequality, and changing attitudes toward money; and 3) situational, e.g. influence from friends or relatives, advertising for the sex and entertainment industry, and less social control. She concludes that women tend to make the initial decision themselves to enter the sex business, but then become dependent on third parties (hair salon owners, madams at nightclubs and karaoke bars, massage salon operators, pimps) who all want a cut of their earnings. However, this study cannot answer the question of where precisely the border lies between voluntary prostitution and exploitation/forced labor.

Liu considers the strengths of her book to lie in its consideration of both structural and individual factors affecting women in the sex industry, and its ethnographic face-to-face interviews including some with active offenders (as opposed to those already incarcerated and/or human trafficking victims identified by NGOs). As weaknesses, she mentions insufficient reliability and representativeness, possible limits to the truth of interviewees’ statements, and a lack of validity because the interviews were not recorded and the author had to reconstruct them from memory.

As a reviewer, I see the strengths and weaknesses somewhat differently. There are weaknesses in how the qualitative interview material is treated, both in occasional attempts to evaluate it quantitatively and in the presentation of – apparently – literal citations although no visual or audio recordings were made. Moreover, RCP is not very suitable for interviews with trafficking victims. This issue is comparatively underexplored and it is unclear why the author did not work with relevant NGOs here. I would also have wished for more explicit analysis of the possible legalization or regulation of prostitution. The strengths of the work, on the other hand, clearly lie in the detailed presentation of diverse and complex routes into prostitution and of the living, working, and dependency relations in the sex business. Here RCP proves effective in illuminating the decisional scope – albeit modest – for these young women. This study is very well worth reading (with room for editorial improvement). Overall it is very
successful at showing a broader audience the world of these young female migrant workers and the general conditions they face in the southern Chinese sex industry.

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