
REVIEWS

Prostitution and Slavery in Asia: Does the Market Set the Captives Free?

Kathleen M. Nadeau

Lisa Law. *Sex Work in Southeast Asia: The Place of Desire in a Time of AIDS.* London and New York: Routledge, 2000. 127 pp.

Ryan Bishop and Lillian S. Robinson. *Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle.* New York and London: Routledge, 1998. 252 pp.

Katharine H. S. Moon. *Sex among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. 160 pp.

Since the 1970s and 1980s, post-Marxism has challenged traditional social science definitions of sex slavery that derive from the globalization and ideology of the capitalist market economy. In particular, postmarxists¹ influenced by the French Marxist mode of production school began to reconstruct and analyze the context and structure upon which slavery, including sex slavery, was grounded in precolonial and semicolonial societies and cultures. One of their important theoretical contributions was to show that Western concepts of prostitution (sex as a commodity) and Western notions of slavery associated with the trans-Atlantic African slave trade were inappropriate and inapplicable for understanding these institutions in the precolonial and semicolonial cultures and societies of Asia and Africa. This form of postmarxism has been widely criticized by cultural Marxists² and postmodern theorists³ alike for being guilty of essentialism and for being overly deterministic. It is noteworthy, however, that this school provided a fresh and innovative way of looking at culture in all of its multiple variations in social praxes (e.g., Hindu temple prostitutes and Chinese concubines in contradistinction to modern sex workers). This essay, embarking from a mode-of-production perspective, examines earlier definitions of sex slavery in order to investigate the question of the capitalist importation of today's sex industry in Asia. After laying the historical groundwork, three recent and exemplary studies on contemporary prostitution in Asia are singled out and reviewed.

It is important to realize from the outset that no cross-cultural definition of slavery in any form exists at some universal level that is applicable to understanding precolonial slavery in diverse Asian milieus. James Watson, however, has defined an open system of slavery as one in which a person of slave status

has some opportunity for advancement either out of slavery in terms of freedom or out of slavery in terms of being absorbed into the controlling kinship group.⁴ An ideal-typical model of this system, which is illustrated later in this essay, is found in yesterday's Thailand. This system is commonly thought to be the result of an abundance of land, combined with a shortage of people. This situation creates a need for laborers to work the land, in addition to an increased demand for a broader selection of marriage sexual partners. This limited supply of people and abundance of land usually results in a system of slavery that would be termed "open," since the slaves may eventually be incorporated into the dominant group, and the division of the available land resulting from this inclusion is not an issue of concern.

In contrast, a closed system of slavery is one in which there is practically no opportunity for a change in status. Where land is considered a highly valuable resource such as in China at the dawn of the age of colonial commerce, discussed below, it is controlled by the most dominant group, representing the masters. Since access to landed inheritance is restricted, the status of slaves is more inclined to remain stationary; they are not accepted into the controlling kinship lines under any but unusual circumstances (e.g., adopting a male heir). This stationary position of status is the defining mark of a closed system.⁵

Various Asian religious and philosophical traditions have influenced the form taken by indigenous systems of slavery. While the institutionalization of slavery may have nothing to do with Buddhism and Confucianism as envisioned by the founders (Buddha and Confucius), Confucianism and Buddhism did advocate a specific social order of hierarchy (serving the king). For example, Buddhism diverged from, and was informed by, Hinduism. The Buddhist preoccupation with merit-making and harmonious co-existence with all life forms, coupled with Hindu notions of caste and hierarchy, converged nicely with the open system of slavery as practiced in early Thailand. In comparison, the Confucian interest in following lines of authority through a kinship system that ranked people according to age level and placed ancestors over the living, seniors over juniors, males over females, and male scholars over the commonweal was most compatible with a closed system of slavery in ancient China. A basic understanding of Buddhism and Confucianism and the differences between them in terms of the specific social and historical formations to which they refer is critical for an understanding of the disruptive appearance of the modern sex tourism industry in the region. Hence, a discussion of some of the differences between Chinese Confucian slavery and Thai Buddhist slavery in terms of their historical articulations with, and disjunctures from, modern forms of prostitution in Asia, is pertinent.

Thai history has long been informed by Buddhist and Hindu social teachings.⁶ Unlike in India or China, where genealogical links, largely, are traced through male lines, in Thailand, genealogies are traced bilaterally through both the male and female sides of the family. It is Thai daughters, not sons, who are expected to take care of their parents in old age. This horizontal status accorded to both sexes is offset inasmuch as Thai females were always considered to be household property, either of their father's or husband's. Female slaves were

definitively valued for their contribution to sexual reproduction and as second wives and concubines. In earlier times, a father or husband who sold his daughter or wife into bondage in times of starvation or financial crisis could keep her at home as long as he paid the interest on the loan. Moreover, a freeman, formerly, had to prove himself heavily indebted before he could legally sell any member of his household or himself into slavery or he would be severely punished according to law. Buddhism, as well, mitigated some of the harsher effects of slavery as it was viewed as meritorious, and slaves had some rights against owners who transgressed the boundaries of their sexual rights. Slaves, also, could possess private property and some of them were given positions of authority over other slaves and free clients.

Historically, Thais practiced an open-ended form of slavery that was theologically oriented around Buddhist ideas of a galactic order, and even the King of Siam was said to be a slave of Buddha. Much like India, Thailand has a philosophy of a coming of a just and righteous king. In times of judicious and benevolent kingship, social life is said to be replete with a bountiful harvest and harmonious relationships that produce a popular feeling of well-being. Selfish and duplicitous kingships, obversely, mark times of bad harvest and social disruption. The ancient system of slavery in Thailand, not unlike that in precolonial Philippines, albeit in a different guise, was really a form of debt slavery; men and women could “buy” their freedom. The laws in place guaranteed basic rights.⁷ Free clients and slaves often were perceived to be living on the same level status-wise, and some slaves (e.g., temple slaves) held substantially higher stations than those who were free. The king held the most slaves, dividing them among princes (and leading monks) in exchange for their loyal service in governing the kingdom. Slaves were a symbol of luxury and wealth, but Thai society was not oriented around slavery as a mode of production because slaves worked alongside free clients. Typically, freemen and their families were self-sufficient subsistence farmers who worked the king’s land and who could be called, within reasonable guidelines, by royal administrators to provision food and to labor on construction projects for the kingdom.

The Thai system of slavery might be called more “feudal” in nature. The slave has many of the same modes of entry into slavery that are found in early China, namely, conquest, war, capture, and being “sold,” but there is an added aspect of the debt slave who may or may not be redeemable. “Redeemable” meant that one’s debts might eventually either be worked off or paid off and the condition of slavery diminished and the slave freed. In addition, there are other forms of slavery not commonly found in China, for example, that of judicial or temple slaves. The temple slaves were those who placed themselves into service. In some cases their lives might be viewed as being better than the lives of free persons. They were exempt from mandatory labor requirements and the services they did provide were lighter than other forms of slavery. The slaves of war and conquest, for example, were by far the most common. (Many tens of thousands were taken by the Siamese in the wars against the Khmer empire in the fourteenth century.)⁸ Andrew Turton explains why this infusion of bodies into the population was necessary: “Frequent warfare was above all a means of

competing not so much for territory as such but for increase in population and no doubt for the maintenance and replacement of a population constantly ravaged by malaria, small pox, famine, flood, and drought, and not least by the depredations of other state's wars and raids."⁹ These slaves were then distributed among nobles, according to their rank, while some were donated to temple services. At times, the temple slaves were commissioned by the king to build new temples in a distant and remote regions in order to win the local community's support and loyalty.¹⁰ In addition, slaves served another function as a form of exchange and currency.¹¹ Thus, the use of slaves became more than the acquisition of a labor force and a replacement population; it was also a political and economic exchange used to pay off debts and influence political conditions. Thai slaves were either absorbed or absolved, rather than freed or made kin. While the entire subject is more complicated, we have laid enough groundwork to definitively distinguish the Thai institution of sexual labor from the modern type, the latter deriving from outside colonial processes and the globalization of the capitalist market economy as will be discussed, shortly. A word, first, on the Chinese example.

China has been long influenced by Confucian social teachings. Unlike in Thailand, where the family tree is traced bilaterally through male and female lines, in China, genealogical links are recorded over the generations through male ties. Chinese females are perceived to be outsiders. They are never named in ancestor rites, and their primary role is to bear male heirs. A female could enter into domestic household service as a maid or child servant; in the latter instance, she might be adopted as a younger sister and become part of the family.¹²

She might also be arranged into an exogamous marriage, sometimes, as a child bride. The brideprice for the first wife, which was high, was transformed into a dowry, and the marriage rite itself marked the transfer of certain rights and privileges to her. In contrast, the primary role of second wives was to produce sons, with concubinage being for pleasure. Matchmakers arranged the sale of maids, brides, concubines, and prostitutes, in private and out of public view.

Slaves in China found themselves in a closed system. As a rule, slaves in China were born as slaves or purchased as children; in addition concubines were purchased by the wealthy. While the potential for slaves to alter and change their status was open in Thailand, that opportunity was extremely limited in China, yet not completely absent. China is a patrilineal society and, as such, any inclusion of males into the lineage would constitute a threat to existing heirs, since this would cause further division of property at the death of the clan head. Therefore males who were not purchased as children for replacement heirs (meaning that there were no other heirs) were suspended in permanent slave status, although eunuchs were accorded high status because they were believed to be more loyal and powerful (e.g., they usually served the emperor's royal court). According to Watson, "while girls are treated with a certain flexibility, a boy will enter his new life as a full heir or a chattel slave. There is no possibility of change in later life."¹³ Females actually had more opportunity for improving their situation through marriage. Chinese women are considered as *belonging*

to, rather than being *in* the kinship line, even when they marry within it. Since they did not have any inheritance rights that would have been recognized or supported, they were not viewed as a threat and were therefore more socially mobile.

China created its own supply of slaves from within by creating stratification within its own social structure, taking its slaves from within a created “lower” class. The stigma attached to the status of slave lasted not only for the entire life of individual slaves, but for subsequent generations of slaves as well. This was in part due to the Chinese practice of ancestor worship. The Chinese viewed their lineage as being a requirement for being considered “civilized.” Since the males were carriers of the lineage, even the poorest farmers would resist selling their male children until all the daughters and even the wife were sold and the situation became so dire that they were forced to sell them off or watch them starve. This attitude resulted in fewer males on the market and thus males demanded higher prices. This practice repeatedly breaks the male slave’s family line. Thus, the slave, in essence, never develops a family line and her/his hereditary lines remain unknown. In some modern cases, an ancestral line might be invented in an effort to conceal the lack of ancestry. Once a slave was purchased, there would be some expense on the part of the master. Feeding, clothing, and housing a slave might become a considerable burden, especially if the master takes on a significant number of slaves. The slave market, with these financial concerns and with an abundance of slaves for sale, helps to create “a buyer’s market.” Within this buyers market the largest portion of the slaves represented the females, although the females, through marriage, might lose the stigma of having a “slave background.” In effect, the stigma that extends in long lines through generations affects the male line. This may be viewed as a second type of “escape” for women, since through marriage they could lose the title of slave and their offspring would therefore be able to escape the stigma of slave ancestry. Neither of these options is available to male slaves.

I have used these two examples of indigenous systems of slavery because they partly inform institutions of prostitution as practiced today in predominantly Confucian/Christian Korea, Buddhist Thailand, and Christian Philippines. For one among many examples, they can help us understand the historical bases against which obviously poor Thai parents are thinking when they “sell” their teenage daughters or young children to recruiters who promise them jobs in Bangkok.¹⁴ But, in practice, there are no real actual historical and cultural continuities between the different and various ancient Asian systems of arranged marriages, concubinage, and prostitution and the various modern forms of sex work and slavery in the region. The theological and sociological bases around which old Asian civilizations were oriented have long been subverted and changed, albeit incompletely, first by the colonization processes, and second, by spread of the world capitalist system. This apparent and unprecedented change is the subject of the following discussion on modern sex work in Asia.

In *Night Market*, Bishop and Robinson elaborate and analyze the global processes that commodify sex and alienate labor as part of the economy and culture

of global capitalism. They exhaustively trace out the trajectory between the R&R (rest and recreational) activities of the U.S. military forces during the Vietnam War and the subsequent development of the sex tourism industry in Thailand, which was institutionalized by the local government under the supervision of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank as a strategy for economic development. They analyze a wide array of news pieces, literary discourses, and popular writings on the subject of tourism in Thailand, to show that the linchpin of Thailand's modern economic development is sex. Young women and men, and children too, are enticed to work in Bangkok's teeming array of brothels, massage parlors, and sex bars that service predominantly male tourists from the United States, Western Europe, Australia, Japan, the Gulf States, Malaysia, and Singapore. Despite Thailand's international reputation as one of the modern-day sex capitals of the world, public discussions of the subject inside Thailand are repressed and tabooed. Bishop and Robinson persuasively argue that "breaking the silence" that pervades the everyday lives of many Thais and tourists can begin the process of liberating prostitutes from the oppressive and exploitative circumstances that afflict their lives.¹⁵

Law's *Sex Work in Southeast Asia* takes the study of the sex tourism industry in Southeast Asia another step by interjecting a sex worker subject who voices questions about her own conceptualization of sex work. A keen ethnographer and cultural geographer, Law does not rest as she painstakingly conducts her fieldwork in the nightclubs, for example, of Cebu City, Philippines. She frequents the night bar scene there and wins the trust of local prostitutes, one of whom she eventually moves in with. This allows her to delve more deeply into the lives and experiences of the local sex workers. In the process, she opens a window for sex workers to tell their own stories about their employment in the bars. She finds that their stories do not fit the stereotypes of sex workers as victims of colonialism, sex tourism, or political economy.¹⁶ She argues that prostitution is only one component of these women's multifarious and complex lives — it is a job that they often work for short periods of time — and that their work cannot be equated with their individual personhood. Her analysis is particularly succinct and revealing of a story not often told, in that it grapples with not only her own role but that of nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers and advocates of women's liberation, in articulating the prostitute-as-victim-or-agent debate — a debate, Law contends, that "denies the ambiguity of the identification" of NGO workers and feminists with women in the sex industry, as well as the possibility that this debate can provide a new theoretical basis upon which new identities can be constituted.¹⁷

It is this hopeful aspect of Law's work, the open-ended and processual aspect of identity formation, that I find most compelling. She "calls" us to look at prostitutes as being really one with ourselves. Instead of getting bogged down in debates over the issue of whether or not these women have entered their line of work as victims or free agents, Law speaks to the importance of recognizing that the daily struggles of these prostitutes are really our common human struggles that result not so much from within our individual selves as from an outside "totality."

In *Sex among Allies*, Moon takes a different approach. Her analysis of the U.S. military's role in promoting prostitution in the Republic of Korea argues that the Korean government has a long history of using women and their sexuality for political ends. Ever since the Koryo dynasty (918-1392), females have been trained as entertainers, *kisaeng*, to serve the royal court of exclusively male scholar-officials. The Choson dynasty's (1392-1910) adoption of Confucianism implemented strict legal and social measures to enforce women's chastity in the rest of the female population. Early Korean monarchs sent thousands of women as tribute to emperors in China. In Korea, there are even legends of concubines who sacrificed their chastity and lives for national well-being (see, for example, the story of Non'gae, the concubine of General Choe Kyonghoe, who seduced a Japanese commander during the invasion of Korea in 1592). It is against this particular history, argues Moon, that the current South Korean government's emphasis on state-building, national security, and economic development — together with its lack of concern for the social welfare of prostitutes who service U.S. military personnel and tourists and the Korean government's policies on prostitution as a form of tribute — have to be understood.¹⁸

Moon also takes the reader behind the scenes to look at, and hear the voices of, Korean prostitutes at work. Interestingly, she gives "voice" to female prostitutes who compare their situation in Korea to that of prostitutes in Japan after World War II, the latter of whom they say "were given more power to deal with [American] G.I.s."¹⁹ Moon looks at how various, non-monolithic, U.S. military policies on prostitution have affected national policies on tourism in Korea. Her work is excellent but I would like to have heard this story (of militaristic domination coming from above) not only from the perspectives of Korean anti-communist nationalists, U.S. military personnel, and contingent sex workers, but from that of the antiestablishment nationalists whose views are anchored in the history of Korea's independence struggle coming from below.²⁰ Yet, Moon's detailed analysis and careful use of official documents to tell the story of the role played by the U.S. military forces and Korean policy makers in institutionalizing the sex industry in Korea is impeccable.

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I have argued for the importance of contextualizing and distinguishing modern forms of sex work in Asia, from earlier forms. I have suggested that sex tourism corresponds to Euro-American colonial forms of slavery, which dealt in humans as nonhuman commodities, while precolonial Asians in all of their diversity and difference, preponderantly treated their slaves as part of their living and related societal body. Policy makers of international lending bodies and local governments, among others, have "rationalized" and perpetuated the sex tourism industry in Asia by "saying" that it has always existed there. But, the kind of sexuality that can be bought and sold as a commodity on the market, for example, wherein "a man can turn his desire into a thing," is not the same kind of sexuality that was integral to the social reproduction of Asian social formations.

The subject of modern forms of sex work in Asia is exhaustively and brilliantly analyzed by Bishop and Robinson, Law, and Moon, whose respective and

complementary works can be usefully used by all those who want to understand the impact of the global sex tourism industry on local histories and individual lives.

Notes

1. For example, see the collection of papers in *Marxist Analysis and Social Anthropology*, ed. Maurice Bloch (London: Tavistock, 1984); Maurice Godelier, *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and James Watson, ed., *Asian and African Systems of Slavery* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980).
2. See, for example, William Roseberry, *Anthropologies and Histories* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989) and Robert Ulin, *Understanding Cultures, Perspectives in Anthropology and Social Theory* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984).
3. See, for example, Alison Assiter, *Althusser and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1990); Jean Baudrillard, *Mirror of Production* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1995); and J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell's, 1996).
4. James Watson, "Slavery as an Institution, Open and Closed Systems," in Watson, *Asian and African Systems of Slavery*, 1-15.
5. *Ibid.*, 10-11.
6. Refer to Andrew Turton, "Thai Institutions of Slavery," in *ibid.*, 251-92.
7. *Ibid.*, *passim*.
8. *Ibid.*, 255.
9. *Ibid.*, 254.
10. See Patricia Stranahan, "Opening the Books on China's Leadership," *Critical Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (2001): 152. This is reminiscent of, albeit different from, the U.S. government's implicit support of some conservative missionary groups in China today. This support prepares the way for outside (e.g., multi-national) investors and weakens the Chinese government politically.
11. Turton, "Thai Institutions of Slavery," 256.
12. According to Asian Studies specialist Rueyling Chuang (personal communication, 2001), these female servants, typically, are perceived by the Chinese to be part of the family. They often are romanticized in Chinese literature. There is not much open discussion of the slave market's use of "servants" as a common praxis in ancient China.
13. See James Watson, "Transactions in People: The Chinese Market in Slaves, Servants, and Heirs," in Watson, *Asian and African Systems of Slavery*, 224.
14. Bishop and Robinson, *Night Market*, 214-15.
15. *Ibid.*, vii.
16. *Ibid.*, 63.
17. *Ibid.*, 119.
18. *Ibid.*, 41.
19. *Ibid.*, 157.
20. For example, see Kenneth Wells, ed., *South Korea's Minjung Movement: The Culture of Politics and Dissidence* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995).

