GENDER AND JUSTIFYING STATE-SANCTIONED MILITARY PROSTITUTION IN U.S-OCCUPIED KOREA

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ABSTRACT This paper explores through a feminist lens how everyday gender roles created the social conditions required for military prostitution in US-occupied South Korea. It explores the historical, colonial context of this occupation as well as the implications for state-sanctioned action that favoured soldiers over exploited women.

INTRODUCTION

War is a big business, with the U.S. Department of Defense budgeting $1.73 Trillion USD in 2023 alone (United States 2023). It would be an impossible task to trace exactly how much money circulating in the global economy has been touched by war's dirty hands. But beyond commodifying military equipment and supplies in conflict, there is a human, gendered aspect to war that is often overlooked. This stems from the all-encompassing gender norms that bleed into every aspect of social reality and inevitably taint conflict dynamics (Enloe 2014). This gendered aspect of war dehumanizes women as vulnerable objects which either require protection or invite exploitation (Karmakar 2022). Sexual exploitation in the form of military prostitution transforms local and global markets for women's sexual labour and exasperates the cleavages between the global north and south (Jeffreys 2009).

While documented military prostitution dates back to the seventeenth-century British Empire (N. Y. Lee 2007), this paper focuses on how military prostitution before, throughout, and after the official U.S. occupation of South Korea between 1945-1948 contributed to and was shaped by U.S. imperial projects. By first exploring Korea's long history of colonial domination by Chinese and Japanese occupations, I then examine how everyday gender roles laid the foundation for the structural effects visible today in prostitution patterns near military bases in the southern U.S. (Kahm, 2017). I outline Korean state-sanctioned policies that, when put into practice by the American military, further subjugated and commodified over a million Korean women for sexual consumption by soldiers (N.-Y. Lee 2018). Ultimately, the consequences of these state-sanctioned imperial projects created a deep ripple effect still visible today in Korea and in the southern US.

Military prostitution is defined as paid (hetero)sexual labour in a military context, as opposed to intimate labours performed by women outside of military contexts (S. Moon 2015, 138). Disentangling sexual slavery from prostitution in a military context is difficult because women are often coerced into these positions and may or may not actually be paid for their sexual labour (S. Moon 2015). Whether subjected women are forcibly or willfully recruited, and regardless of whether or not they receive any compensation, this paper considers any form of sexual labour that specifically targets soldiers as consumers to be military prostitution (N. Y. Lee 2007). Military prostitution is just one way that war differently impacts women, so taking a feminist approach to this subject appropriately unpacks the everyday gender norms that create and legitimize this enterprise. Feminist critiques reject hegemonic narratives, while highlighting the intersection of social forces that contribute to differences in the lived realities of women

and men, and even between women (Bold, Knowles and Leach 2002). A feminist approach focuses on the objective of critically engaging women's lived social realities to change them for the better (Laher, Fynn and Kramer 2019).

During war, everyday patriarchal power structures intensify exponentially, and women find themselves experiencing more frequent gendered attacks like sexual abuse and violence. For example, terrorist groups often use sexual violence as a coercive tool to recruit and maintain control of female suicide bombers who could never achieve equal status or treatment within their organization (Naraozhna and Knight 2016, 146). Even when terrorists participate in the same violent acts, women are assumed to avenge the loss of their sexual purity, while men avenge the loss of their family (Naraozhna and Knight 2016, 58). Social actors use different tactics on women because they are typically seen as second-class citizens (Munoz-Encinar 2019). Gender norms are powerful cultural weapons for the commodification of women's bodies, a dynamic that becomes even more complex for racialized women. Social constructions of what constitutes respectable femininity justify some acts of violation against women's bodies as warranted, and even invited (Laher, Fynn, and Kramer 2019). I highlight the powers that shaped this commodification of women's bodies for sexual consumption in US-occupied Korea through a cultural analysis, emphasizing that everyday gender norms laid the foundation for military prostitution by objectifying women as inherently vulnerable sexual objects compelling either protection or exploitation by deeming them second-class citizens (Karmakar 2022).

Military prostitution is widespread and varied, therefore it is necessary to narrow the scope of this project specifically to Korean and American contexts, instead of examining Japan or Vietnam for example which also have histories stained by military prostitution (Doolan 2019). This project places American imperialism in Korea within the longue durée of history, taking a wholistic account of how the US imperial project here was ultimately advanced on the backs of women. This occurred because of unique, active state legislation which favoured the wellbeing of male soldiers above the wellbeing of women.

Ultimately the American imperial project in Korea was intentionally advanced through military prostitution. Imperial goals are difficult to define but often centre around the building blocks of hegemony; namely material capabilities, institutions, and ideas (Knight and Keating 2010, 99). Women provided sexual labour that did not uniformly advance their own interests, but instead exploitatively advanced "informal imperialism" related to economic, cultural, and institutional domination (Burns 2017). Physical effects and institutions of American imperialism were advanced by state sanctioned regulation and the physical segregation of sex workers into areas known as Camptowns. The Korean government deemed these areas uninhabitable for local Koreans and instead granted access only to the US military and the women working there. More generally, the rest of the Korean state acquiesced to US military rule too through the supposed economic benefits that military prostitution brought to the nation.

To understand how this system of sexual exploitation came to be, it is crucial to consider Korea's long history of colonial domination. Military prostitution has been common throughout global history, particularly in conjunction with imperial and colonial projects. British troops in the seventeenth century documented followers behind their armies traveling East who set up camps for prostitution near the soldiers' resting areas. Centuries later, Britain maintained a regulated system of prostitution in its colonies of Bombay, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai despite prostitution being outlawed domestically (N. Y. Lee 2007). The fact that white British women in these colonies and domestically were not subjected to prostitution highlights the deep intersection of race and exploitation. Even during this period of British-regulated prostitution, women serving British soldiers had to undergo health checks that greatly favoured soldiers' well-being over women's well-being

(N. Y. Lee 2007). These were often unnecessarily invasive procedures performed publicly by people who were not doctors, and aimed at protecting soldiers from contracting communicable diseases rather than from spreading them (N.-Y. Lee 2018, 458). Military prostitution is a long-standing practice that is not unique to the US occupation of Korea, and was thought to contribute to managing troops in accordance with masculine stereotypes of soldiers.

A millennium of sexual exploitation laid the foundation for the expansive system of military prostitution in Korea which grossed over $70 million in 1969 and employed approximately 1 sex worker for every 3 soldiers. (N.-Y. Lee 2018, 761). The Korean Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392) was forced to round up and offer young girls, translated as "tribute women" after Mongol domination by the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). Following that, the Korean Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910) recruited and offered women to China's Ming Dynasty during its occupation of the peninsula (1368-1662) and later began training them as *Kisaeng*, similar to Japanese *Geisha* (N. Y. Lee 2007, 457). These *Kisaeng*, although considered lower in the social hierarchy at a time when a socially important measure of a woman's worth was judged by her sexual purity, still "enjoyed a certain respect from the public for [their] accomplishments" (Lee N. Y. 2007, 457). These women were trained in music, art, and literature, and wholistically embodied hedonism and pleasure instead of being sexually objectified and forcefully commodified (N.-Y. Lee 2018).

To address widespread issues of violence and rape, the Nanking massacre, that undermined legitimacy and trust in the occupying government and hindered effective military rule, Japanese imperialists created full-scale, licensed brothels for soldiers' patronage and issued both regular and surprise health checks. The Nanking massacre in Japanese-occupied China lasted six weeks in 1937 and ended only after the brutal murder and rape of hundreds of thousands of people, a horror which seriously undermined the legitimacy of the military governance supposedly there to protect. The creation of a brothel system by the imperial Japanese state was intended to prevent future rapes and violence that were seen as inevitable due to the stereotypically masculine qualities associated with war and soldiers (Narozhna and Knight 2016, 143-146). Instead of attempting to curb this seemingly inevitable violence against women, it was commercialized, regulated, and protected by the state, prioritizing profit over personal security.

As the Japanese occupation commercialized prostitution, *Kisaeng's* symbolic meaning alongside their physical roles changed dramatically (Lee N. Y. 2007). Through state regulation, imperial Japan began strategically abusing Korean women and dehumanizing them as mere sex objects for soldiers' use (Doolan 2019). In 1904, the Japanese occupation officially legalized prostitution in physically restricted zones where prostitutes were required to live, and defined the practice as "anyone willing to exchange sex for anything" (Lee N. Y. 2007, 457-458). This comes as a stark contrast to previous social constructions of sex workers in Korea as symbols of sexual pleasure and hedonistic liberation, with a certain level of social respect. Further, under Japanese control sex workers were forced to undergo health examinations twice a week with additional surprise checks, often performed under humiliating conditions (S. Moon 2015). Any woman working in the entertainment industry, including waitresses and bar girls, could be stopped walking down the street and examined on suspicion of VD (Venereal Disease, later known as STI) infection (Doolan 2019). In response to the beginning of these intrusive state policies, *Kisaeng* unions called for strikes and better working conditions. These labour unions took collective action as a form of resistance in the 1920s and 30s to the worsening conditions of sex work which were increasingly similar to sexual slavery (S. Moon 2015). *Kisaeng* collective power in this period was temporarily effective, and even won sex workers the right to a free, one-day leave from these Camptowns in 1935 (N. Y. Lee 2007, 459). This

spirit of resistance began to fade as state-licensed prostitution became firmly entrenched in Korea in the 1930s. It became increasingly difficult to strike or organize when this licensing system was put into effect, as any sex workers refusing to comply lost their license immediately and was removed from the physically segregated area.

While Japanese occupation of Korea laid the foundation for military prostitution in the brothels they built, American occupation adopted this system and modified it for two main purposes: soldiers' satisfaction and controlling the spread of VD (N. Y. Lee 2007). 200,000 young Korean women were drafted as prostitutes in WWII, many of whom were stationed at the first brothel for foreign soldiers, *Komachien*, which opened the day before Allied Forces moved in in 1945 (N. Y. Lee 2007, 460). Stand-alone brothels transformed into entire village-like Camptowns devoted to sex work under harsh regulations and constant state surveillance (N. Y. Lee 2007) These Camptowns became economically dependent on American soldiers, exponentially increasing the scope and size of military prostitution in Korea that eventually subjugated over a million women (N.-Y. Lee 2018). It is important to keep this historical context in mind when examining how the Korean government in conjunction with American military, legalized and segregated physical spaces and issued invasive mass VD exams and imprisonment during VD treatment, only for women.

Despite prostitution being illegal in greater Korea since 1948, Camptown prostitution was allowed to continue long after the official American military occupation ended the same year and left South Korea completely devastated through the 1950s. After decades of war and brutal conditions, South Korean city streets were flooded with orphans, widows, and maimed and starving people everywhere (N.-Y. Lee 2018). It was under these social conditions of complete desperation that both the Korean people and the Korean government were offered a Hobson's choice. It was unsafe for the remaining military personnel to wander these ghoulish streets where violence prompted by desperation lurked at every corner, yet these foreign soldiers provided up to 25% of Korea's GNP, over half of which was related to Camptown economy (N. Y. Lee 2007, 454). So, physical areas were segregated for the purpose keeping soldiers safe while frequenting brothels, a setup that was economically lucrative to their owners and the state. Despite asymmetric power conditions between Korean and occupying forces, a "symbiotic" relationship between the Korean population and American soldiers was forged. While the income of foreign troops was spent in the impoverished, war-torn state, soldiers were simultaneously sheltered from the brutal reality of living conditions that most South Koreans faced outside of the Camptowns and military bases (K. H. Moon 2007). Camptowns were highly controlled areas, and entering and exiting them required government approval. This made it impossible for potential threats to US military operations to enter the securitized areas, but also impossible for women in these Camptowns to leave (N. Y. Lee 2007, 454). This system was designed to advance imperial objectives by strengthening Korean-US alliances and keeping up troop morale, all while protecting "respectable" Korean society from this reality (S. Moon 2015, 146).

At the height of military prostitution in Korea, there was approximately 1 sex worker for every 3 soldiers (N. Y. Lee 2007). The massive scale of sexual exploitation in post-occupation Korea could not have been possible without the foundations of Japanese-licensed brothels, and the active encouragement and support of the system by both Korean and American states. By the 1960s there were only 30,000 licensed sex workers operating in Camptowns, a number that dropped to 20,000 by the 1970s-80s. The U.S. had approximately 35,000 troops stationed in Korea in the early 2000s, cut by half from 1945's 70,000 soldiers, which is parallelly reflected in the declining amount of licenced women working in Camptown brothels. This indicates that the market existed solely to satisfy American soldiers as consumers of exploited women.

A key difference between Japanese and American occupations was the active role that the Korean government played in regulating military prostitution for soldiers' wellbeing over women's. The Korean government condoned this system of exploitation despite prostitution's official illegality, by not just accepting American requests for accessible sex workers as it had done during Japanese occupation, but by actively encouraging state-sanctioned exploitation. Korean Judge Lee Beom-gyun argued in 2018 that the South Korean government actively encouraged prostitution to boost ties to the US (K. H. Moon 2007). Women employed in brothels were praised as patriots for bringing in foreign currency into the economy (Hankyoreh 2018). In Gyeonggi Province, 11 percent of the total population of was engaged in military prostitution in the nation's four largest Camptowns, which were designated as special segregated zones catering to American interests (N. Y. Lee 2007, 454). These were designated to strengthen US-Korean alliances and boost troop morale, but consequently entrenched thousands of women within a deeply exploitative and dehumanizing system of sexual slavery (K. H. Moon 2007).

These Camptown served as one way of maintaining the strategic 70-year alliance between Korea and America. These power dynamics coupled with globalization turned the system of sexual exploitation into a monster. Korea was in a state of poverty and political turmoil following decades of war and occupation – it was a nation that could do nothing to protect its citizens. The Korean government designated its two largest Camptowns, Dongducheon and Pyongtaek, as Special Tourist Districts in 1997 and women working in these districts still had to be licensed and subjected to humiliating and invasive VD examinations (N. Y. Lee 2007). The government physically ghettoized these districts, keeping "respectable" Koreans from entering and US soldiers from exiting the Camptowns into the broader, homogenous Korean society (N. Y. Lee 2007).

CONCLUSION

The Camptown brothels were securitized to the point they were akin to prisons for the women working in them (Shorrock 2019). This is because both the US military and Korean government's objectives were primarily to keep troops safe from local violence and sexual infections and collect revenue - but not to protect or care for sex workers. However, as Camptowns were established as control measures, VD infections skyrocketed to 568 in 1,000 soldiers in Korea compared to 111 per 1,000 worldwide in that time according to a study done by the U.S. Army (Shorrock 2019). The U.S. sought to tame rampant rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) by imposing dehumanizing measures on women's bodies instead of soldiers. This was the seemingly-natural course of action because of the gender stereotypes that socially justify second-class citizenship for women. Troops combed through brothels searching for women who were possibly infected, forcibly detained them, and shot them up indiscriminately with penicillin provided by the US military. Following a period of unofficial imprisonment for the treatment of VD, women were sent back to American customers to continue working. Some of these women received so much penicillin that their arms might hang down to their knees by the time they were allowed to leave, which led to the creation of derogatory colloquial names for these detention centres, like "monkey houses" (Shorrock 2019).

The primary goal of US troops was to protect men's bodies from STIs, but while framing the bodies of the women they were exploiting as the only possible sites of STI transmission. The rates of VD imprisonment soared from 190 women weekly in December 1947 to between 200-300 weekly in February of 1948 (N. Y. Lee 2007, 463). Although the military ramped up what they saw as 'effective' VD prevention measures based on gendered tactics, actual rates of VD transmission held the same, unchanging at 60% between this same time period (N. Y. Lee 2007, 463). Though these efforts were aimed only at women and not the military personnel who exploited them, and were thus quite ineffective, the strategy remained in place. It is evident here how

everyday gender roles shape these practices, which suggest that promiscuous women are impure or dirty, while promiscuous men are not out of the ordinary.

To illustrate the scope of the U.S. case we can compare it to the actions of UN peacekeepers in Bosnia-Herzegovina, who similarly committed atrocities upon the vulnerable people they were sent to protect. Local organized crime setups established brothels and trafficked women from Russia and Ukraine (Koester 2020). It is important to note the difference in size and scale of these operations. While in Bosnia, the number of women in sex work grew from very few to almost 10,000 in 1992 (Koester 2020), the amount of Korean women in sex work reached almost one million in total (N.-Y. Lee 2018). This is partially because government and military interventions that furthered sexual exploitation were much more sophisticated and far-reaching in Korea. While the Korean government actively sponsored these projects, Bosnian forces were merely complicit by turning a blind eye to the organized crime rings recruiting women for prostitution (Koester 2020). Because of this, there were no imposed health checks or an official ghettoizing system that institutionally entrenched sexual slavery for soldiers' consumption. UN officials condoned this behaviour, flippantly and egregiously arguing that "boys will be boys" in defence of the allegations; but neither the UN nor Bosnian forces played a part in setting up systems which were ultimately easier to dismantle (Koester 2020). Further, because these Bosnian brothels were run by organized criminal organizations, the military patrons who frequented them were often video-taped and blackmailed with evidence of their immoral patronage (Koester 2020). This undermined the ability of the UN forces to control corrupt local Bosnian forces. On the other hand in Korea, the government protected soldiers as patrons of these Camptowns, which ultimately strengthened US-Korean relations in a symbiotic way.

Following the US occupation of Korea, there are tangible links to the sex work industry in the modern southern US. As (Jeffreys 2009) has argued, adult industries are now globalized alongside all other industries, a process that highlights disparities between the global south and the global north while unequally extracting and exploiting human resources. Brokered marriages between Korean women and US military officers based in southern US states became increasingly common in the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries (MacLean 2014). In these arrangements, soldiers are offered a sum of money for an illegitimate marriage, followed by a quick divorce. After immigration to America, these Korean women ultimately end up stationed in brothels and massage parlours in and around army bases in the southern U.S. (Doolan 2019), particularly in the former slave-owning states of Tennessee, North Carolina, and Texas (MacLean 2014). The Fort Bragg (TN), Fayetteville (NC), and Fort Hood (TX) U.S. military bases' illicit massage parlour system became firmly entrenched as those bases shifted from temporary to permanent in preparation for WWII (Doolan 2019, 18). Movement to and from these sites is tightly controlled, further marginalizing and isolating women working in those areas (Doolan 2019). This attempt to securitize women's bodies for the pleasure of men while again safeguarding domestic women's "respectability" mirrors what happened abroad in Korea and has deep implications for the intersection of race and gender. Military prostitution during the U.S. military occupation of Korea was not a solitary blip in history, but is rather the result of a historical buildup that has lasting and ongoing effects, particular for sexual tourism today (N. Y. Lee 2007, 455).

As American military operations took over the existing brothel system established by imperial Japan, they modified it for two purposes; soldier satisfaction in terms of how physically protected these Camptowns were, as well as VD control measures imposed only on women's already exploited bodies. Where women engaged in prostitution as *Kisaeng* used to be considered symbols of pleasure and hedonism, the forced nature of their sexual labour under later conditions drastically

changed both their symbolic meaning and their physical roles. These changing symbolic representations are central to Korea in the context of U.S. occupation both because of the historical background and the emergence of migrant Korean sex workers in southern US states in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The international sex tourism industry still visible today in the U.S. and Korea also rests on these gendered social constructs (N. Y. Lee 2007, 455). The U.S. occupation contributed to a massive 25% of South Korea's GNP at the time, and prostitution-related activities supported over half of Camptowns' economies. Ideologically, communism was denounced in schools, and people were introduced to American ideas of free market trade being the most desirable (Kahm 2017). This would not have been possible if widespread violence and rape were undermining public trust in US military rule, like it did in Japanese-occupied China. Supposed troop management and economic benefits to this war-torn state made the public generally willing to turn a blind eye to these Camptowns. The gender roles that paint men as requiring sexual satisfaction to perform the typically masculine duties of being a soldier are foundational for this system of exploitation (Narozhna and Knight 2016). Everyday gender norms allowed for women to be objectified and exploited. Male soldiers in this context were always seen as acting in natural ways and therefore were catered to. Because these gender norms bleed into all aspects of life, resistance through rejecting dominant gendered narratives should also be effective. If expectations of male and female behaviour create the conditions required to condone this kind of sexual exploitation, changing social expectations might not allow for such pervasive wrongdoing in the future (Koester 2020). Further, a shift in these expectations might also foster more effective legislation at actually curbing STI infection rates and protecting women involved in prostitution.

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