

See No Evil: A Tailored Reality? A Review

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Selling Sex Overseas: Chinese Women and the Realities of Prostitution and Global Sex Trafficking, by Ko-lin Chin and James O. Finckenauer, (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 309 pp., soft cover, \$26.00.

GLOBAL SEX TRADE AND TRAFFICKING is not a well-researched topic in a social scientific sense despite the hyperbole and sensationalism found in news coverage and public debate. Criminologists Ko-lin Chin and James O. Finckenauer launched a cross-national empirical research project on Chinese women in the global sex trade to gather hard data directly from sex workers and their facilitators. The goal of the research was two-fold: First, to depict a more nuanced picture of global sex trafficking with ideological and emotional detachment; and second, to counter the “prevailing trafficking paradigm” that focuses on smuggling, coercion, fraud, violence, enslavement, and organized crime in the trade.

The book is divided into three sections: Chapter one gives a critical review of the current literature, identifies the emotional, sensationalized and moralized “trafficking paradigm” formed by “moral crusaders” (e.g., those in NGOs, news media, and government agencies), and lays out an empirical research program and its methodology. Section two runs from Chapters two to seven and covers the substantive contents of the research, ranging from the “push and pull” factors in China and destination cities/countries; demographic profiles of Chinese women involved in global sex trade; the sex markets in the selected ten cities of Asia and the U.S.; their business, venues and income; and the facilitators. An important argument is presented here: “[T]ransnational commercial business is a business, and that the sex business is, like any other business, organized and functional in such a way that the benefits to all the participants are maximized, without certain participants having to be sacrificed or exploited.” (p. 29)

Section three (including the last three chapters of eight to ten) is more analytical, argumentative, and policy-oriented. It concludes that:

1. “Chinese women are involved in paid sex and some of those women may be victims, but certainly not all, nor even a majority. The driving force is clearly money, and the people running the operations are not seen to be members of or involved with organized crime.” (p. 221)
2. “It seems apparent that the transnational movement of Chinese women for the sex trade does not have the characteristics of sex trafficking as defined by the U.S. government, the United Nations, and other bodies. Our subjects did not view themselves as trafficked victims who were being forced, deceived, or coerced.” (p. 248)

3. “A failure to recognize the distinctions and nuances that actually characterize the commercial sex business, whether because of ignorance or politicized moral positions or both, obviously does nothing to help the women who are purportedly the major concern ... In the end, continuing to use sex trafficking as a moral battle ground is unlikely to result in effective policies and practices at any level.” (p. 279)

Undoubtedly for many scholars, not to mention the so-called “moral crusaders” in the book, the above-mentioned conclusions are both provocative and problematic. For example, feminists would never accept that the wear and tear of a woman’s most intimate part of her body as a normal businesslike transaction. Also, constructivists would raise a critique of the self-identification by the prostitutes as a flawed value creation at the fundamental level of identity. For both feminists and constructivists, it would be unacceptable to see the authors align their conclusions with the following remarks from two subjects respectively: “I want to be a woman again in my next life. That’s because if I am desperate for money, at least I have a body to sell.” And, “This is a great job; I really like it!” (p. 69) Without taking a side for ideological orientation or normative judgment, I would like to examine whether a well-intended research program and its execution by the authors have convincingly warranted the validity of their conclusions.

If the book is read as one of women’s studies, its strength and contribution is in its cross-national comparative research design that takes the Chinese identity of sex workers and their not being under the custody of law enforcement as controlled variables. The authors’ research strategy approximates the so-called tripartite methodology, which consists of narratives (or cases), rational choice theory, and statistics. As the authors have acknowledged, snafus can arise from non-random samples, the limited number of interviewees—in particular, only 164 *xiaojies* (young females) were recruited in ten cities—the shortage of funds, and the failure to recruit a female interviewer. I believe that the Chinese ethnicity of the interviewer might have resulted in a disproportionate percentage of Chinese clients whom the *xiaojies* claimed to have served.

However, the Achilles’ heel of the research is this simple assumption from the authors: “We interviewed the women in their own natural settings and without the presence of a third party.” (p. 278) Here the interview setting was the venue where “sex services were being bought and sold.” They include “the most visible prostitutes, namely, the street prostitutes, as well as those who work in front businesses such as massage parlors, bars, and so on, and in KTV (karaoke) lounges, private apartments, and in establishments that are purely brothels.” (p. 14) With the exception of private apartments, I believe, none of these venues are “theirs,” nor “their own,” and least of all, “natural” for the subjects. The asymmetry of physical and monetary powers between prostitutes and their clients, the illicit nature of prostitution in most places and countries, the pervasive corrupt police and government officials everywhere, and their predatory behavior towards foreign (or out-of-town) sex workers, contribute to the high risk for prostitutes in sex venues.

Understandably, utilizing the sex venues as interview settings creates a context of power asymmetry and role-playing for the women. Since the interviewees are in their professional attire, the contrast between the role of a professor and the role of a prostitute cannot be more radical. If the women want to maintain their self-worth and self-dignity, the psychological defense mechanism would kick in, resulting in predictable behaviors such as acting, feigning, and rationalization. The authors believed that their choice of these venues guaranteed “the credibility of the information” and have argued: “People usually lie when they have something to gain by doing so, or when they have something to fear from telling the truth. Neither of those conditions existed in our interviews.” (p. 278) Contrary to their beliefs, these women had psychological fear and self-rationalization so that, even if they did not lie, they tended to be either affirmative to anticipated answers or evasive to self-abnegating responses. Adding that there was a rejection rate of nine percent (p. 24) and forty-seven percent referrals (p. 21) out of a small-N population, an unknown amplifying effect could compound numerous initial caveats cautioned by the authors; their conclusions can be easily erroneous.

One remedy for not taking the information from the prostitutes at face value can be a follow-up intensive interview after the initial round of trust-building. But the authors did not have a single follow-up for richer biographical information or updates from the subjects. When the issue of violence, abuse and murder came out in interviews (p. 151 and p. 232), instead of pressing for more information, tracking down the source and uncovering the story by searching for new information, the two authors commented: “We do not know how many working women from China were murdered overseas by their clients, but we have to believe that this is a very rare occurrence.” (p. 198)

Take another example, organized crime. In the interviews, the circumstantial evidence of organized crime is scattered everywhere: There is the “uniform nightclub” or “first-class club” with more than a hundred girls working there (p. 135); one agent from Hong Kong mentioning a huge conglomerate that “has business in Malaysia, Indonesia, United Kingdom, Japan, and some of the countries in the Middle East” (p. 154); the involvement of police (p. 157); “a group of bosses” and “the main bosses behind the whole business” (p. 163); paying protection fees or bribes to the police (pp. 225-226); etc. Despite all of this, the authors still conclude “that organized crime figures [as] key traffickers would also seem to be unfounded.” (pp. 237-238) The authors found that of the 149 women interviewed in overseas locations, almost all of them had arrived with genuine documents and none were transported overseas by a trafficker.

In one interview, a *xiaojie* mentioned she served eighteen customers a day (p. 81); in another interview in Los Angeles, the *xiaojie* said that “I saw twenty-two men”: “After those twenty-two sessions, I did not even have the strength to apply the brake when I drove home.” (p. 181) But the authors did not think they revealed the nature of sexploitation in this line of work and have made the following observation: “[I]t is safe to say that the women were not particularly unhappy with their clients, regardless of venue, site, and client background. Most subjects said that the majority of their clients were pleasant, ‘normal,’ and that the sexual transactions between them and their clients were generally quick, straightforward, and business-like.” (p. 193)

“See no evil” (p. 227) is a major message the authors have conveyed, but I am afraid that is not going to find a receptive readership easily. Providing that most readers would agree to the authors’ suspicion of the self-serving motives behind the advocacy groups and government agencies for the trafficking paradigm, the same number of them would also believe that Chinese prostitutes and global facilitators are not free from their own self-serving motives and therefore their well-guarded revelations cannot be taken at face value. In addition, if the authors rejected the definition of organized crime by the U.N. and adopted a more restricted definition limited to mafia-style groups and triads in Asia (p. 33); if the authors rejected the network as an organizational form for organized crime and only stuck to organized crime with a “big O” (p. 167), if the authors focused mostly on the present of their subjects but showed little interest in their early initiation into the oldest profession; and if the authors separated the “domestic trafficking” in China from the “global trafficking” that they intended to study, then all these provisos would serve to question the integrity and validity of the research.

“Agency” is a key concept applied in this research to lend support to its reasoning. Agencies do not merely interact with each other at an individual level (e.g., prostitute versus client, pimp, etc.). The most similar cases design (that all sex workers are from China) and the most different cases design (that those Chinese women have gone to a diverse group of nations in terms of economic development, democratic governance, rule of law, and cultural background, etc.) combined, can make a strong “structured agency” analysis. The collected interviews offer rich information to examine the structural constraints (e.g., Chinese state-guided capitalism, masculine and patriarchal East Asian developmental state model initiated by the Meiji Japan, and the hegemonic doctrine of neoliberalism in both the U.S. and the global political economy, etc.) upon the choice by agency.

Regrettably, the authors have argued, without taking any consideration of the context for their original initiation into the sex industry, that the Chinese prostitutes “do not fit the stereotype of being young,

naive, and particularly vulnerable girls” (p. 49) and their involvement in global commercial sex is “the best option” and “most viable option.” (p. 51) However, the “best” option does not have to be a “good” one. If the Chinese women were presented only with a choice-set between bad and worse, instead of one between good and bad, which was defined by poverty and power parameters, constructive academic thinking cannot leave out a critical examination of China’s internal political and economic dynamics and conclude that a realistic U.S. policy for anti-smuggling has to be global.

The authors’ disdain of the moral crusade and American hypocrisy in Asian countries with regard to anti-smuggling policy neglects one possibility: If Chinese women in the U.S., Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong are treated better than those in other Southeast Asian countries, with the latter better treated than those in mainland China, as documented by the book, it could be a result of the moral and women empowerment campaigns sponsored by the advocacy groups—in particular under more liberal settings. We may credit the so-called “horrible” anti-trafficking discourse (p. 9) to the authors’ disappointed search for evidence to fit the trafficking paradigm.

Nonetheless, Chin’s and Finckenauer’s ambitious book has generated rich primary data on the global phenomenon of Chinese women sex trafficking and has broken new ground for further empirical research on this subject. Its preordained mission of refuting the prevailing trafficking paradigm kept the authors away from rich news coverage on the subject in all ten selected cities. Yet, the authors need to go further in their analysis to work out a new synthesis or a transcendental paradigm, and to reconcile their findings with the findings from others such as journalists, NGO activists, and feminists. The book has neither destroyed the “oppression paradigm,” nor has convincingly built a sound agency paradigm, but it has lent support to a “polymorphous paradigm” (p. 146), which cautions the idealistic and moralistic “crusaders” to pay more attention to the nuances and complexities of the global trafficking issue and exercise more cost-effective analysis to avoid a diminishing return of utilities in public policy.

As a researcher on complex topics regarding Asia—such as Chinese organized crime, social protest movements, and the “women’s question”—I have encountered a multitude of methodological challenges. Without moralizing this delicate subject, some social scientists have offered different tackling strategies. For example, Jacqui True (*The Political Economy of Violence against Women*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) proposes a “feminist political economy approach” (it is natural to insert “global” into this phrase), with equal attention to structure and agency, and their interactions to research and analyze all types of violence against women. For her (True, p. 187), a feminist methodology is “attentive to all forms of power especially those more hidden aspects, to different types of knowledge, and to relationships with research participants who will often be survivors of violence.”

In a broader sense, indeed, “the women’s problem,” including violence against women, is a men’s issue. The feminist agenda needs men’s support (here in the form of research) and all men who care about and promote women’s well-being are feminists. Ranajit Guha’s attentiveness to “the small voice of history” is a feminist approach. A refusal to turn up an antenna to the murmurs of women, and sometimes even a blatant negligence of their outcries (for example, “the catch 22” for the Los Angeles *xiaojie*), are androcentric. This attitude can block our further search for deeper causal mechanisms through a “process-tracing” method (e.g., Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, MIT 2005) and stifle our “sociological imagination” (C. W. Mills and Todd Gitlin, Oxford 2000) to link individual narratives to the structural context.

At the beginning of their book, Chin and Finckenauer write: “These horror stories clearly present one of the slices of the truth about human trafficking. But is this the whole truth? Is it even a large part of the truth? These are questions we will address.” (p. 10) As an eventful beginning, this book is still a valid call for future researchers on the subject of global trafficking of women.

Bio

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