

Min Liu. *Migration, Prostitution and Human Trafficking: The Voice of Chinese Women*. London & New York: Routledge, 2018. 216 pp. Paperback: \$24.95. ISBN: 978-1-4128-1505-5.

As China continues to increase its economic clout and international power, the most marginalized and vulnerable individuals within its populace remain invisible and silenced. In *Migration, Prostitution and Human Trafficking: The Voice of Chinese Women*, Min Liu shines a light upon the lives of women who are concealed in darkness in the midst of the increasingly visible sex industry. In so doing, Liu delves into the underlying forces that compel young women to migrate to Shenzhen, China and enter into the sex industry. This journey proves representative of a fusion of individual factors and broader structural issues. Liu's study specifically examines two distinct linkages: migration and prostitution, and prostitution and human trafficking. Throughout the book's eight chapters, the reader is steered through an intricately woven tapestry of Chinese culture, economic and feminist theories, as well as policy and law. This foundation serves as an immersion into the multi-faceted context in which these women are situated and enables the reader to better empathize with their experiences in migration and sex work.

In an effort to thwart stereotypical perceptions of sex workers, Liu interviews these women and thereby enables them to reclaim their voices, and reshape the derogatory narrative that generally dominates in such work. The crux of the issue is not moral depravity or an inherent desire to be seeped in sex; for many of the women, entering into this realm of sex work is a rational choice in light of the alternatives. Whether it be a lack of familial support, no opportunity to pursue a college education, or a traumatic event, the young women had experienced unimaginable hardships. Meanwhile, unlike the education system, prostitution is accessible—"[i]t is scarcely possible to walk for 10 minutes in any big Chinese city without coming across the sex trade in one of its many guises" (11)—and promises high-pay and a glimmer of possibility for a better life. China's preoccupation with monetary success percolates throughout this book, and dovetails with a history of social mores that make entry into sex work far easier. These women are all entrenched in a modern Chinese culture that has relatively weak social bonds between men and women, and appears indifferent to monogamy, sexuality, and virginity (p. 155). By elevating the voices of these women, Liu's work contributes profound insight into the exponential growth of the sex industry within China's borders.

Through the introductory chapters, Liu reveals that despite China undergoing tremendous economic growth, much of its citizenry remains in disarray (Chapters 1-2). Right around the time China ended its period of isolation in 1978, it began adopting rural economic reform policies (pp. 2-3). As a result, farmers were forced to move to urban areas, and quickly formed a large "floating population" (3). As of 2007, there were over 120 million migrant workers from rural areas. Additionally, economic reform replaced lifetime jobs with performance-based contracts, and demolished the comprehensive social security systems China's citizenry had become accustomed to. Unfortunately, when these social development policies were dismantled, no social welfare replacement followed. In the face of a growing income gap and amplified social inequities between rural and urban areas, the "large-scale" migrant citizenry pursued opportunities wherever they might emerge. Indeed, each of the women interviewed came from a farming or first-generation migrant family.

In chapters 2 and 3, reader is also introduced to the theoretical frameworks that the author has employed to study prostitution, namely, the rational choice perspective (56) and the ongoing feminist debates (pp. 33-37) between wholesale abolition and greater regulation of sex work. Critically, the latter centers around whether women can deliberately choose to migrate as a means of entering into the industry *without* coercion or pressure from broader socioeconomic forces. Liu

implicitly critiques the radical feminist discourse that equates prostitution and trafficking, and seeks to abolish prostitution altogether. She aims to reject sweeping generalizations about prostitution and portray the women and their circumstances more realistically and poignantly. Accordingly, she appears to subscribe to a more liberal, progressive feminism that respects a woman's decision to enter into the sex industry.

Given the premium that China has come to place upon the sex industry in its economy, it is unlikely that the country will strive to provide its women with alternative pathways. Tragic though this may be, I see no reason not to acknowledge that prostitution is a viable option for women; indeed, the new ethic in China is marked by the notion that society should be "laughing at poverty, not at prostitutes" (155). As such, the desire to protect women and their bodily autonomy can coexist with sex positivity and an unwavering respect for the choices that women make. Similarly, the rational choice perspective focuses on the calculated cost-benefit decision making that women engage in prior to entering into prostitution. In fact, the majority of these women were fully aware of the emotional and physical demands of the work (albeit perhaps not the conditions under which they would be working) as well as the substantive financial gains. The interviews reveal that monetary or material success looms large in China's culture, and serves as one of the major incentives for entry into sex work. In chapters 4-6, the aforementioned structural factors and theoretical frameworks intertwine with the individual characteristics that the women share in their interviews.

In order to undertake her research, Liu immersed herself fully in Shenzhen, a mecca of sorts for sex work. Based in her dissertation for the Rutgers University School of Criminal Justice, Liu spent two months conducting fieldwork, and two years immersed in research and investigation (xi). At first, she sought to initiate interviews at the women's places of work (such as entertainment venues, hair salons, and the streets), but she quickly realized that therein she would be confronted with a lack of trust and an air of suspicion. She changed course and leveraged her contacts in Shenzhen to organize interviews she would conduct in her native tongue. Her qualitative methodological approach utilized snowball sampling to organically reach women that were willing to reflect upon their lives prior to prostitution, pressures and circumstances that lead them to the industry, and the degree to which deception and coercion factored into their entry. While there are some shortcomings or drawbacks to the small sample size (only forty female sex workers were interviewed) and the lack of audio recordings or transcription, Liu addresses these in stride (pp. 28-29) and underscores her objective: capturing the women's voices.

By forming a connection to these women through their own friends, Liu avoided being perceived as a threat, and ensured that her interviewees would feel safe. Interestingly, her approach mirrors the way in which her interviewees came to be introduced to sex work: through the guidance or introduction of a friend or family member. Few of the women independently chose to become prostitutes on a whim or because of an especial aspiration to do so. Each of them had chosen to migrate to Shenzhen from various rural regions in China and there, they were left entirely on their own, away from home, and equipped with little education. Many of them entered into mundane factory work that they soon found overly strenuous, while earning meager pay. Downtrodden by metropolitan realities, the only remaining vigor was devoted to an undying desire to find a better life for themselves and their families. This element of isolation and vulnerability made human connection all the more powerful in finding their way into prostitution. Regardless of the life they lived before Shenzhen, the ultimate guides into this high-paying (and thus lucrative) work were the people they *knew*—friends, co-workers, acquaintances, even family members.

Rather than becoming fixated upon drawing a quick conclusion, Liu acknowledges that the statistics and research on prostitution and human trafficking are both insufficient and

inconsistent. The precise number of women forced into prostitution remains unknown and, moreover, the statistics have often been influenced by the particular policy or theory that the researcher endorses. In addition to problems of politicization and subjectivity, the very definitions of prostitution and human trafficking are ambiguous and hinge on differing interpretations of terms such as “coercion,” “position of vulnerability,” and “exploitation” (183). Given these deficiencies, Liu’s work is highly compelling. She does not succumb to the errors of other work, and is able to clearly differentiate herself and delineate the contribution she seeks to make. Instead, she embraces a holistic methodology that is reminiscent of design-thinking—a process that actively seeks to understand the context, challenge assumptions, and redefine the issues so as to identify alternative strategies and solutions. Her problem solving approach wholeheartedly embraces the potency of human connection and empathy. In doing so, Liu is able to address the heart of the matter—the women’s perspective.

Certainly, informed law and policy requires accurate and objective statistics and definitions. Yet, obtaining these is impossible without first learning more about the women themselves. In listening to these women’s journeys, the reader is able to gain deep insight into notions of coercion, choice, autonomy, and force. Of the forty women interviewed, only six were victims of trafficking. This suggests that a dichotomy does exist within the sex industry, and does not warrant wholesale abolition. Furthermore, these accounts reveal the ambition, resilience, and unwavering tenacity of the women, and remove the possibility of superimposing uninformed biases or generalizations. In effect, this work takes women out of their silence and facilitates our understanding of the complexities of the sex industry. Liu carves out three broad categories for reasons the women enter into sex work: economic; socio-cultural; and situational. Ultimately, she concludes that these migrant women generally make the decision to enter into the sex industry themselves, but then succumb to the unfair demands of their overseers—pimps, nightclub operators, and salon owners (p. 185). While this finding does not draw the exact delineation between prostitution and trafficking, it does sketch out the contours and indicate that a distinction between voluntary entry and exploitation or coercion does, in fact, exist.

In the final chapter, Liu delves into some of the legal framework around prostitution and human trafficking in Shenzhen (p. 175). Herein, she provides accounts from law enforcement officials that illustrate a grim reality for these women. She interviewed nine sex-ring operators and fifteen law enforcement officials in order to gain a sense of the regulatory and administrative terrain in Shenzhen (p. 17). What she found was that although China had long sought to eradicate prostitution, it now recognized the function of the sex industry in its economy and did not seek to rid itself of it. The local governments are corrupt, and simply do not incentivize police officers to arrest the owners of the largest sex venues (p. 182). Instead, officers go after the women and their customers while leaving the most influential drivers of the sex industry untouched. As a law student, I found Liu’s synthesis of law and narrative to be enlightening, but was disappointed by the cursory overview moments before the book abruptly concluded. I would have enjoyed seeing more of a discussion focused upon what legalizing or regulating prostitution would look like. On the whole, I felt that this chapter needed to either be expanded upon, or intertwined within earlier chapters. Undeniably, the law should be informed by the work Liu did in Shenzhen. Nevertheless, by placing the legal framework last, Liu fell short of clearly outlining the shortcomings of the manner in which the current system works. At present, both definitions of prostitution and trafficking and policies and regulations governing the sex industry fundamentally lack empathy for the women they impact the most. Liu’s work is the missing piece. And yet, Liu neither underscores the potential magnitude of her work, nor speaks to the role of empathy.

In the same vein, I found that the book's potency was muddled by a disjunctive nature and lack of flow. The chapters did not directly connect to one another, and the headings and subheadings within them did not transition the reader in a meaningful way. Despite finding the work incredibly captivating, I found myself wishing Liu would have regarded the work as having greater salience and invested more time in polishing and editing the piece so as to reach a far broader audience. Thus, although the background information and overview of past work was incredibly valuable and enlightening, simple elements such as more flow charts (like Figure 7.1, p. 172) or a graphical depiction of the results would have gone a long way in conveying the work's value. Likewise, the manner in which the book's chapters were organized proved problematic, and could have been packaged in a way that did not detract from the book's core—the women's voices.

I expected that the moving and emotional accounts would have been showcased more prominently and grouped less haphazardly. Likewise, even the title of the book could have placed more of an emphasis upon the women's voices. Above all, however, I felt that the way in which she categorized the women's accounts blatantly misinterpreted the women. Though many of the women had a stable family life, I would not go so far as to claim that there was “[n]o evidence of neglect or negative relationships with their family” (73). Two contrary examples stood out to me: An An's account of her parents not letting her eat if she did not work; and Xiao Hui's experience with her father's alcoholism and abuse of her mother (p. 66). Furthermore, while boyfriends (pp. 76-79) may have a significant effect in some circumstances, I felt that Liu overemphasized small fragments of the women's accounts and heavily relied on the accounts of managers and sex ring operators (pp. 139-144). Undeniably, the element of psychological coercion and naïve love and trust in men is at issue. Many of these sex workers are young women that are away from home for the first time, and are looking for comfort and support. However, only a handful of women mentioned the role of their boyfriends. For instance, Lin Dan merely said that her boyfriend does laundry and cooks instead of works, and that she “would feel lonely” coming home without him (142). Liu does acknowledge that the extent to which such relationships are coercive or “a fair exchange” cannot be clearly established (143). Nevertheless, the overreliance upon third party perspectives was effectively a misrepresentation of the women's voices. Liu also missed a major unifying theme: the role of familial expectations. For several women, their turning point was the realization that they would disappoint their families by their failure to save a sufficient amount of money. Xiao Xiu, for example, stated, “It is shameful to go home without money” (77). Likewise, Ah Wen's family asked her for money and she thus felt there was “no other choice than to take this job [in prostitution]” (p. 80). As such, a discussion of China's family culture as well as its connection to monetary success felt like a glaring omission.

Liu appropriately grapples with a key question: At what point does prostitution become human trafficking? This inquiry is undoubtedly riddled with ambiguity, but she successfully navigates us through with a comprehensive analysis. That said, she does not effectively organize the pathways and falls short of taking a stance of her own or even making forward-looking suggestions. This felt like a grave shortcoming because the book is an incredibly compelling primer for future work in cities across China and the world. Since this was a case study solely focused upon Shenzhen in the context of China's transformation, Liu missed an opportunity to call for researchers to follow suit on an international scale. One of her undeniable strengths was the ability to conduct the interviews in her native language. Urging others to do the same across the world appears intuitive. On one hand, Liu alluded to the UN Protocols to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons and underscored the inadequacy of its definitions of prostitution and human trafficking. On the other, she fails to use this moment to reinforce the importance of her own work as a contribution for future gatherings of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized

Emily M. Lamm, book review, Min Liu. *Migration, Prostitution and Human Trafficking*, *AmeriQuests* 14.1 (2018)

Crime. In my eyes, Liu's work is positioned at the intersection of China's blistering global rise, the progressive feminist movement, and human-centered design. I truly wish Liu would have repackaged this book into as an incredibly timely piece in a magazine such as National Geographic or The New York Times.

I come away from *Migration, Prostitution and Human Trafficking: The Voice of Chinese Women* with gratitude for Min Liu's contribution. This work would be of interest to university-level individuals intrigued by intersectionality, feminist perspectives, internal migration, and transnational crime. However, future readers should not look for conclusions or closure from this book. On the contrary, they should view this as a starting point for further research, discussion, and changes in policy. In the end, the book reveals that empathy is imperative if humanity is ever to truly come together to protect women around the globe. Above all, we must take the time to bring voice to the invisible, and discover the inspiration that flows from understanding the lived experience of another.

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