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Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America
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CHRONOLOGY OF SELECTED EVENTS IN MODERN KOREAN HISTORY

- 1866 The *General Sherman*, an armed U.S. merchant marine schooner, tried to open Korea to the United States, but the ship was burned by the residents of Pyongyang.
- 1871 The United States took revenge for the burning of the *General Sherman* by dispatching the military and conducting what the *New York Herald* called the "Little War with Heathen." About six hundred and fifty Koreans died in the battle.
- 1875 Korea and Japan signed the Kanghwa Treaty, which gave Japan access to Korean ports, reduced tariffs and gave extraterritorial rights.
- 1882 Korea and the United States signed their first treaty. In short order, Korea was forced to sign similar treaties with Britain and Germany, giving benefits such as port concessions, extraterritorial rights to the citizens of those countries, and reduced tariffs on their goods.
- 1892 The Tonghak Peasant Rebellions began. In 1894, the reigning Korean monarch sought help from China in putting down the rebellion, and Japan viewed this as cause for war.
- 1894 The Sino-Japanese war was fought on the Korean peninsula, over the issue of which country had greater influence on Korea. Japan wins. The Tonghak Rebellions were put down.
- 1895 The Japanese killed Queen Min, enraging Koreans.
- 1904 The Russo-Japanese war was fought on the Korean peninsula, again over Korea. Japan won, shocking Western nations who had thought that an Asian country could not defeat a Western power.
- 1905 Japan declared that it would henceforth manage Korea's international affairs. This was the first official step toward colonization.
- 1910 Japan annexed Korea.
- 1919 Koreans staged a nationwide, peaceful demonstration against Japanese imperialism and for Korean independence, which was brutally

smashed by the Japanese military. Known as the March 1 movement, this demonstration spread to Koreans overseas. Koreans in the United States, led by Phillip Jaisohn (Suh Jaepil), organized a Korean Independence Parade in Philadelphia in April 1919.

In the coming decades, the Korean independence movement was active both domestically and overseas, especially in China, Manchuria, and the United States.

1945 Yo Un-hyung, a respected Korean independence leader, was advised by a Japanese official that Japan would soon be defeated and that Yo should prepare his people for self-rule. Yo began to form People's Committees in each neighborhood district throughout the country.

In early August, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Among the dead and wounded were thousands of ethnic Koreans.

On August 15, Korea was liberated as Japan declared unconditional surrender, and simultaneously was divided at the 38th Parallel, with Soviet troops occupying the north and U.S. troops occupying the south.

The United States declared a military government in the south in the same manner that it declared a military government in Japan, and began to disband the People's Committees, accusing its members of being procommunist.

1945-53 Until the north-south border was sealed in 1953, a significant migration of people north and south took place. The movement north largely consisted of workers, landless peasants, tenant farmers, proindependence activists, and communist sympathizers, while many wealthy landlords, large farmers, merchants, intellectuals, and collaborators with the Japanese colonial government moved south.

By the end of 1945, South Korea's first camptown appeared in Bupyeong, near the western port city of Incheon.

1946 In U.S.-occupied southern Korea, labor strikes, demonstrations

against the American military government, and any activities deemed "procommunist" were put down with the active assistance of the U.S. military.

1948 Southern Korea held unilateral presidential elections while under U.S. military rule, electing Syngman Rhee as its first president and declaring itself the Republic of Korea.

Shortly thereafter, northern Korea declared itself the People's Democratic Republic of Korea, with Kim Il Sung as its president.

1950 The Korean War broke out. Under the leadership of the United States, the United Nations sent troops to Korea. The U.S. government, which never declared war, called it a "police action."

The first Korean women to marry Americans began to arrive in the United States.

1951 China entered the Korean War, fighting with North Korea. Among the Chinese troops were ethnic Koreans from China.

1953 The Korean War ended with an armistice agreement signed by North Korea, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States. South Korea could not sign because officially it had not partaken in the war. South Korea had signed over all military authority to the United States. The armistice declared a Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that roughly followed the 38th Parallel. The war destroyed the Korean peninsula and left it utterly devastated.

Although the war was over, the supreme commander of the Korean military remained a U.S. general.

1960 A student revolution toppled the Syngman Rhee regime and a new government was established.

1961 Park Chung Hee, an army general, led a military coup and began nearly two decades of military dictatorship. A student movement devoted to democratization began to solidify.

1965 South Korea and Japan signed a normalization treaty, as student activists in South Korea protested what they term "a sellout."

1966 South Korea and the United States signed a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that gave wide latitude to the U.S. military, including the free use of any and all South Korean land necessary for military activities.

Early 1970s The U.S. reduced the number of troops in South Korea and, with the Korean government, launched a camptown cleanup campaign. The South Korean government sent officials to the camptowns to tell the women that they were patriots for earning foreign exchange and serving as civilian ambassadors.

1979 Park Chung Hee's hand-picked commander of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency assassinated him, claiming that he was mishandling labor unrest in Masan that had spread to mass rioting.

1980 Chun Doo Hwan, another army general, led a military coup with the assistance of Roh Tae Woo. In May, the military brutally suppressed prodemocracy demonstrators in Kwangju, killing thousands of citizens in what came to be known as the Kwangju Massacre. Student activists later began to blame the United States, arguing that Chun could not have ordered such troop movements without the consent of the United States.

1981 Chun was the first head of state received by newly inaugurated U.S. President Ronald Reagan.

1987 Middle-class Koreans joined students in prodemocracy demonstrations after Chun named Roh his successor. Roh agreed to democratize Korea in a July statement. Roh and two long-time prodemocracy politicians, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, ran for president. Roh won.

1988 Seoul hosted the Summer Olympics.

1992 Kim Young Sam and Roh formed a new political party and Kim was elected president of Korea a few months later.

Yoon Geum-yi, a bar hostess in a camptown near Seoul, was murdered by an American soldier in what South Korean police described as the most horrendous crime they had ever encountered. Her murder sparked a movement against the unequal Status of Forces Agreement

and called for its revision. It also added momentum to the student movement calling for the expulsion of U.S. troops from South Korea.

1995 Kim Il Sung died after leading North Korea for half a century, leaving his son, Kim Jung Il, as his successor.

1997 The IMF crisis hit South Korea as the value of its currency, the South Korean won, plummeted to half its precrisis level.

Kim Dae Jung won the South Korean presidential election, along with an economy in crisis.

In the camptowns, women joked that their work had become valuable again for the earning of foreign exchange.

2000 Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il met in a historic summit in Pyongyang, the North Korean capital. They released a joint declaration that called for steps toward a reunification without interference from external powers.

contours of an everyday resistance not against strangers or social superiors in public spaces, but against family intimates in private spaces. It shows us the hollowness of American multiculturalism even as it shows us the ways in which military brides contest that particular hegemony. And it offers us a glimpse of the transformative potential of imagining and locating community beyond the nation.

Camptown, U.S.A.

The first Korean woman to enter the United States as the bride of a U.S. citizen arrived in 1950. She was the only one that year, and in all likelihood her husband was an American soldier. In the nearly half-century since then, close to a hundred thousand Korean women have followed as brides of U.S. soldiers.¹ These marriages have been made possible by the continued American military presence in South Korea, which provides the immediate context in which Korean women and U.S. soldiers meet and marry. The American presence not only creates the physical context—military bases and nearby camp-towns, towns that revolve economically around the bases and which contain red-light districts catering to U.S. soldiers, where the two meet—but it also helps create the social and cultural contexts—militarized prostitution, local civilian employment on military bases, and the lure of America—that make marriage to U.S. soldiers, an appealing option for Korean women.

Relationships between Korean women and American soldiers have been shaped by the unequal relationship between the United States and Korea. These marriages might be based on personal choices made at the individual level but they are also a consequence of a half-century of American military domination over Korea. At least for the women, the choice to marry an American soldier is profoundly shaped by this larger context of Korean subordination. America's military presence in Korea serves as a constant reminder of the glaring contrast between Korean

poverty and American wealth, which is too often interpreted as the contrast between Korean backwardness and American modernity. Additionally, the sexual subordination of Korean women on and around U.S. military bases in the region cannot be overlooked when examining the nature and the origins of relationships between Korean women and American soldiers.

The relationship between Korea and the United States is itself gendered, with Korea inscribed as the feminine other in need of protection and the United States playing the role of the masculine superior and guardian. This gendered context of neoimperialism is a major factor in the skewed gender profile of intermarriages between Koreans and Americans, the overwhelming majority of which are between American men and Korean women.²

The flip side of protection, of course, is that the masculine guardian also has the power to exploit the feminine other. This aspect of the gendered nature of the U.S.-Korea relationship is perhaps most notoriously reflected in the phenomenon of militarized prostitution, which can be found around every U.S. military base in Asia. South Korea, Okinawa, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam have been or still are locations where Asian women serve the sexual desires of U.S. soldiers in clubs and bars clustered in so-called camptowns (also known as base towns or GI towns) that develop near military bases.³ In Korea, these camptowns are found next to every major U.S. military installation, small ones near the small bases, larger ones next to the larger bases. Camptown activists estimate that between twenty to twenty-five thousand women are currently engaged in sex work within these communities.⁴

Itaewon, located in the heart of Seoul, South Korea's capital, is one of the better known and larger camptowns. Replete with U.S. fast-food restaurants and stores selling Korean-made goods such as leather jackets and baseball caps, by day Itaewon serves as a shopping district for American tourists and expatriates longing for a taste of home. By night, it becomes the red-light entertainment district for soldiers stationed at nearby Yongsan, home of the Eighth Army and headquarters of the USFK, U.S. Forces Korea. An American reporter describes Itaewon this way:

A mile or so outside of Yongsan U.S. Army Garrison in central Seoul, past the tourist shops and street vendors selling Bulls, Raiders, et al ap-

parel, past the Burger King and the newly-opened Orange Julius and down a series of narrow roadways packed with American soldiers who are falling in and out of ramshackle clubs—Cadillac Bar, Love Cupid, Texas Club, Boston Club, the King Club, the Palladium, the Grand Ole Opry—is one of the 180 GI camptowns that exist outside of every significantly sized military base in South Korea. . . .

On any given night in Itaewon, women in prostitution costume hang out club doors soliciting GIs: one part come on, one part contempt. An old Korean woman, hands clasped behind her back, spends the night strolling up and down Hooker Hill, approaching young GIs in their downy sports jackets, asking, "Lady?" as the GI, after questioning "How much? How old?" follows her up the hill and down an alley.⁵

My own 1997 visit to Uijongbu, a much smaller camptown near Seoul, highlighted both the social distance between mainstream Korean society and the camptowns, and the pervasiveness of the U.S. military presence in South Korea. I boarded the subway in central Seoul, along with students, smartly dressed middle-aged women, younger women in office garb, and business-suited men. Only one foreigner, a woman, was visible. During the fifty-minute subway ride, the composition of the passengers changed. The middle-aged women became more shabbily dressed and the young women more heavily made-up, while the business-suited men were nowhere to be seen, having been replaced by men in work clothes. Black and white American GIs, identifiable by their military fatigues, could be seen in nearly every compartment of the train: alone, in groups, or in pairs with young Korean women who were almost invariably dressed in short skirts, with permed hair and heavy makeup. Although perms, heavy makeup, and short skirts are in vogue among young urban women in Korea, the cheap quality of their clothes and the sparkly disco club style of their slightly smudged makeup set these women apart from the chic urbanites who stride through Seoul's fashionable districts.

Uijongbu itself was a bustling small town with what appeared to be a thriving commercial district. English signs made it clear that Americans were among the customers and several American fast-food chains were within walking distance of the station. American soldiers mixed with

Korean pedestrians and U.S. military vehicles were visible among the cars and buses. I boarded a city bus along with several GIs and asked the driver to let me off at *bbaet-bul*, the local name for the Uijongbu red-light district.⁶ We headed for the outskirts of the town. Evidence of the U.S. military was everywhere: in addition to military jeeps and trucks, there were signs pointing to Camp Red Cloud and Camp Stanley, the gates of Camp Stanley itself, and the road, which was too wide for such a rural area and was obviously constructed to accommodate military vehicles.

The Uijongbu camptown is actually two neighborhoods, one in front of each U.S. military camp. The *bbaet-bul* bus stop is in the Gosan-dong neighborhood in front of Camp Stanley. It is a shabby, obviously poor area, with narrow streets and back alleys honeycombed with small houses. At first glance, it could be mistaken for any poor neighborhood in any semirural area of South Korea. But the local establishments and clubs, with names like Diamond and Mustang, and the presence of American GIs walking with Korean women, indicate that this area is somehow different. According to camptown activists, Uijongbu has about fifteen clubs in which fifty women work.

Many of the Korean women who marry American soldiers are assumed to have been prostitutes and club hostesses in camptowns such as this. Although no reliable statistics are available regarding the number of camptown women who married American GIs, the existing literature still concludes that the majority of Korean women-American GI marriages involve camptown women.⁷ Most of these conclusions are based on ethnographic evidence, casework with Korean military wives living in the United States, speculation based on INS statistics of Korean women who immigrate to the United States as wives of American citizens, and/or statistics kept by the Korean government on emigration and marriages between Korean and American citizens.⁸ One Korean wife of an American GI told a researcher that nine out of ten Korean women met their GI husbands at clubs catering exclusively to American soldiers, thus implying that they were prostitutes, and then added that nine out of ten will deny it.⁹ Another researcher, however, found that the assumption that most women who marry American soldiers are prostitutes was unsupported by her data, which included a random sampling of applications made in 1978 by soldiers seeking permission from their com-

manding officers to marry Korean women and a survey of Korean women who had married American men and were seeking emigration visas from the Korean government.¹⁰

Among the wives that I encountered, it was considered a "known fact" that many of their compatriots had once been camptown women. However, only a few women spoke of camptown backgrounds, and most of the other women had detailed stories about meeting their husbands through friends, on-base jobs, and other encounters.

A satisfactory demographic profile of Korean women who marry American soldiers will probably never be compiled, given the dearth of data. However, it is clear that even though camptowns are one place where Korean women and American soldiers meet and form relationships, it is not the only place. And although it may have been the primary place in the past for the blossoming of such international marriages, it can no longer be assumed that this remains the case. Yet there is no doubting that militarized prostitution figures prominently in the phenomenon of marriages between Korean women and American soldiers. Research in the camptowns and with Korean women who came to the United States as GI wives consistently reveal that many marriages do involve former camptown prostitutes. Research also shows that many come from areas near camptowns and U.S. military bases, regardless of whether or not the women themselves were prostitutes.¹¹

But more important, the very existence of militarized prostitution looms like a shadow over both Korean society and the lives of Korean women who marry American soldiers, even if those marriages began in locales other than camptowns. To take only the most blatant example, the sexual virtue of all women who marry American soldiers is immediately suspect, as one Korean woman found upon her engagement to a soldier. The woman, who worked in the same U.S. military base office as her fiancé, recalled the reaction of her coworkers:

As soon as people in my office heard about my engagement with John, they looked down on me. I was made to feel dirty and unworthy. Some soldiers asked me to go out with them, obviously thinking that I was now an easy mark for propositions. I quit my work rather than put up with such nonsense.¹²

Her fiancé, for his part, found that his military colleagues and commanding officers tried to dissuade him from the marriage. Some showed him pictures of sisters and female cousins, offering to introduce him to them. Korean women, it seems, were generally deemed acceptable as sexual companions, but not as wives to take home.

Along with unfavorable reputations, the stereotype of the camptown woman results in social alienation. It helps to keep Korean military wives isolated from both mainstream American society and mainstream Korean society, whether in South Korea itself or in Korean immigrant communities in America, for it makes the women an easy target for contempt. This in effect leaves them isolated within tightly restricted social circles where their primary relationships are either with their immediate families or with other Korean military wives.

It is therefore absolutely necessary to examine militarized prostitution in order to fully understand the historical and social contexts in which marriages between Korean women and American soldiers occur.

America's Comfort Women

For many American soldiers, Korea is synonymous with the proverbial rock 'n' rolling good time, and Korean women—treated as playthings easily bought and easily discarded—are essential to that experience. The women are seen by the soldiers as innately sexual, even depraved, and doing what they do for fun and money. If anyone has forced them into prostitution, in the eyes of the soldier, it is the Korean madams and pimps, not the U.S. military and certainly not the soldiers themselves.¹³ The continuing prevalence of this belief is apparent in an April 1999 discussion about militarized prostitution in Korea on an e-mail list whose members, judging from their self-descriptions, are primarily Western males (mostly American) who spent some time in South Korea and maintain an interest in the country. The discussion also demonstrates that soldiers are not the only ones who hold this opinion. Most of the list members who posted on this topic refused to acknowledge that the women in this situation are victimized in any way by the U.S. military or individ-

ual soldiers. Instead, the discussants insisted that the majority of the women had made free choices to become prostitutes. One man called camptown women "women who are husband hunting, having fun, or in such [sic] of some sucker with a PX Ration Card." He suggested that "what you really need to do is 'follow the money,'" implying that since money flows from the soldiers to the women and pimps, it is the women and pimps who are benefiting from prostitution. Another man argued that without camptown prostitution, "there would be more rapes, and that the Army is thus keeping down violence against the local community (although that is a terrible thing to say)."¹⁴

Racism and sexism cannot be discounted as powerful factors in such discourses.¹⁵ These are military manifestations of a deep-rooted American racism against Asians, which in the twentieth century has been expressed in the vilification of Asians as the "yellow peril" or the "yellow horde," as the villainous Fu Manchu, and the sexy but dangerous Dragon Lady. Combined with sexist and racist stereotypes of Asian women as exotic sex objects, this kind of thinking encourages and permits U.S. soldiers to treat Asian women, especially but not only prostitutes, as dispensable sex toys.

As Katherine Moon notes in her groundbreaking study of militarized prostitution in South Korea, the U.S. military condones and even encourages such behavior among its troops. One sailor told her that some commanding officers told their men that Asians like prostitution, calling it a way of life.¹⁶ Articles in the *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, the primary military newspaper for U.S. troops in the Pacific, actively encouraged soldiers to seek out the camptown by reviewing clubs. One 1977 article, for example, touted the *kisaeng* party—a night of drinking and dancing with female entertainment—as the "ultimate experience" and "the Orient you heard about and came to find."¹⁷ A U.S. Army manual from the 1980s turned a blind eye to the troops frequenting prostitutes with a "boys will be boys" attitude, telling the reader that "being a red-blooded American soldier, you will undoubtedly get your chance to experience the various aspects of the village." The manual then provided "tips" for patronizing camptown women, advising the soldiers to check the women's VD cards, stick to the licensed club women, and stay away from the streetwalkers.¹⁸

A U.S. Army chaplain interviewed in 1991 by Moon explained:

What the soldiers have read and heard before ever arriving in a foreign country influences prostitution a lot. For example, stories about Korean women being beautiful, subservient—they're tall tales, glamorized. . . . U.S. men would fall in lust with Korean women. They were property, things, slaves. . . . Racism, sexism—it's all there. The men don't see the women as human beings—they're disgusting, things to be thrown away. . . . They speak of the women in the diminutive.¹⁹

These distorted and dangerous ideas on the part of Westerners are embedded in the very fabric of the relationship between U.S. soldiers and local camptown women. These women are America's comfort women, the victims of a system of militarized prostitution that is supported and regulated by the U.S. military for the benefit of its soldiers.²⁰

Although it is usually Japan that is vilified for the creation of a corps of comfort women during World War II, virtual slaves serving the sexual desires of Japanese soldiers, America also has a history of forcing women and girls into similar situations of sexual subjugation and exploitation.²¹ In Vietnam, an installation of prostitutes servicing four thousand U.S. soldiers was specifically created by and for the benefit of the U.S. military. The brothels, two concrete barracks each containing a bar, bandstand, and sixty curtained-off compartments where the women lived and worked, were located in fenced compounds guarded by military police, compounds that included restaurants and other recreational facilities for the soldiers. During the Korean War, some three hundred politically suspect Korean women, members of the communist party and leaders of people's committees, were confined by the U.S. military to a warehouse in Seoul and repeatedly raped by U.S. soldiers. In Okinawa, U.S. military personnel recruited twelve- and thirteen-year-old Okinawan girls, placed them in cages on the U.S. base there, and forced them into sexual service for the soldiers. In the Philippines, commanding officers in the U.S. military actively promoted prostitution, some of them even owning their own clubs and managing their own groups of prostitutes. And in Korea during the 1970s, military buses were used to transport as many as two hundred prostitutes a day from the camptown of Tongduchon into

nearby Camp Casey.²² In each of these cases, commanding officers either tacitly condoned such activities or actively participated in them.

These are just a few of the examples culled from historical records and eyewitness testimony. Although some of them may be dismissed as aberrations, the system of militarized prostitution developed by the United States in Asia suggests otherwise. While Japan, which has no troops stationed overseas, no longer has the opportunity to engage in its version of militarized prostitution, America's comfort women still exist today in the camptowns outside every U.S. military base in Asia.²³ In Okinawa, South Korea, and the Philippines, the U.S. military directly and indirectly regulates clubs and the hostesses-prostitutes who work there, ostensibly to ensure that U.S. soldiers are protected from venereal diseases.²⁴ In Korea, the system of militarized prostitution is so pervasive and so central to the U.S. presence, that Korea scholar Bruce Cumings calls it "the most important aspect of the whole relationship (between the United States and South Korea) and the primary memory of Korea for generations of young Americans who have served there."²⁵

America is not the first country, of course, to use Korean women for the entertainment of its soldiers. The sexual exploitation of women by the military, particularly the exploitation of a subjugated country's women by the conquering country's men, have gone hand in hand throughout history.²⁶ Indeed, the history of prostitution in Korea is intimately linked to Korea's political and military subjugation by foreign countries, first Japan and then the United States.²⁷

Before the twentieth century, wandering bands of entertainers occasionally bartered sex for money or goods, and *kisaeng*, women trained in music and the arts who entertained upper-class men, sometimes engaged in sexual relationships with their patrons. Ruling elites of past centuries have used the bodies and sexualized services of women such as the palace ladies-in-waiting, *kisaeng*, and young maidens sent as tribute to Mongol kings, in order to advance their own interests.²⁸ But prostitution as an organized, commercial endeavor was first introduced to Korea by Japan at the turn of the century. As Japanese power over Korea gradually increased, eventually culminating in Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, Japanese troops became a common sight. So did single Japanese men who came to Korea for the economic opportunities offered by this nascent

colony. It was for them that Japan created the first legalized prostitution quarters in 1900. The largest were located in Pusan, a southern port city, and Seoul.

Illegal prostitution was also deliberately encouraged by the Japanese government, which undertook a policy of transforming bar waitresses and *kisaeng* into prostitutes. Bar waitress and *kisaeng* became euphemisms for prostitute, and what used to be the *kisaeng*'s occasional sexual relationship with a favored patron, better characterized as an illicit love affair often accompanied by love letters and poetry than as sex-for-money one-night stands, became obligatory commercial transactions. Japanese troops and government officials formed the customer base for many brothels and bars, while high-ranking Japanese military and government officials frequented the more expensive *kisaeng*.²⁹

Many of the young women working as prostitutes were sold by destitute families, while others were kidnapped. As this soon became a social issue, the Japanese colonial government in Korea instituted "placement agencies." These agencies ostensibly brokered employment for young women, especially those from poor rural families who came to urban areas seeking work. (Japanese colonial policy dispossessed many Koreans of their land, turning small farm owners into impoverished sharecroppers. The sons and daughters of many such families sought work in urban centers.³⁰) But in fact the agencies placed the women in brothels, bars, and *kisaeng* houses. Once "dirtied" in such a way, patriarchal mores emphasizing female chastity made it difficult for them to find other employment or lead "respectable" lives.³¹

This legacy of Japanese colonialism remains a strong presence in South Korea. Placement agencies have existed throughout the decades since Japan left the Korean peninsula in 1945, and they have played a significant role in tricking young Korean women into prostitution, including work in the camptown clubs serving U.S. soldiers. Contemporary red-light districts are often located in the same areas where Japan created legal prostitution quarters. *Kisaeng* tourism, a form of sex tourism, draws thousands of Japanese men to Korea each year.³²

Militarized prostitution in Korea formally began in 1937 with the advent of Japan's expansionist war with China. Japan began mobilizing Korean workers for the war effort, drafting laborers to fill the manpower shortage in Japan and in Japanese settlements in Manchuria, Russia, and

Southeast Asia. The mobilization soon expanded to include women, first as manual laborers and then as "comfort women," sexual slaves in a system of brothels organized and maintained by the Japanese government for the exclusive use of the Japanese military. Brothels were established in the war zone in the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, and China, as well as in bases located in Korea. Some of the youngest and prettiest women, usually girls just in their early teens, were sent to special camps in Japan where they were first offered to high-ranking military officials and then, their virginity soiled, sent to the war zone brothels to service rank-and-file troops. Some two hundred thousand Korean women, some girls as young as eleven, were sent to work in these brothels. They were recruited by teachers, local administrators, and anyone else in a position of authority within the Japanese colonial government in Korea. The government issued quotas that had to be met by each locality, and when girls couldn't be recruited with the promise of earning money in Japanese factories to support their families, they were simply kidnapped.³³

With Japan's defeat in World War II came Korea's official liberation from Japanese imperialism. But emerging Cold War realities divided the nation in half at the 38th Parallel, with Soviet troops entering the north and U.S. troops entering the south. In his first proclamation to the Korean people, General McArthur announced that the troops were occupying forces and that the U.S. military would be taking over both the functions and the property of the departing Japanese government. Soon thereafter, the U.S. military government was formalized. The southern part of Korea was now little more than a colony of the United States.³⁴ As if to symbolize this, Yongsan Garrison in Seoul, once the headquarters for the Japanese Imperial Army, became the headquarters for the U.S. military. Other Japanese military installations, such as posts in the port city of Pusan, also became U.S. military installations.

The Camptowns: A Brief History

The U.S. entry into Korea and the establishment of camptowns were virtually simultaneous. U.S. forces landed in the southern part of Korea on September 8, 1945, in the west coast port city of Inchon. By the end of

that year, a nearby town called Bupyong had become the first camptown. Soldiers stationed at Inchon sought liquor and girls for recreation. Poverty-stricken women, some of them prostitutes who had catered to the Japanese, others part of the rural and urban poor, gathered to fill the soldiers' desires in the hope of making a living. Soon simple frame houses sprang up in a neighborhood called Shinchon. These clubs and brothels housed about a thousand women. Few, if any, spoke English, and they were compensated for their services not with money, but with U.S. military supply items such as rations, cigarettes, and jackets.³⁵ These prostitutes were dubbed *yang galbo* (Western whore). As militarized prostitution, U.S. style, expanded throughout Korea, other terms were added: *yang gongju* (Western princess) and *yang saeksi* (Western bride). The use of "princess" and "bride" to describe these women can be seen as a rhetorical gesture that acknowledges the material comfort and glamor symbolized by the United States while ridiculing the women's efforts to achieve it by selling their bodies to American soldiers.

During the Korean War (1950–53), the number of camptowns expanded. The camptown centered around the Shinchon neighborhood in Bupyong doubled in size, as an estimated two thousand women gathered in the area's clubs. Makeshift camptowns sprang up wherever bases were located, only to be torn down as troops retreated or advanced. Since troop access to civilian villages was strictly controlled during the war, women carrying blankets made deals outside the villages and did their business in the mountains. This was the beginning of the so-called blanket squad, groups of women who followed the troops from place to place. After the war, blanket squads followed soldiers to annual training maneuvers held deep in the Korean countryside. These squads still exist today, organized by pimps with the aid of U.S. military personnel who provide detailed information on the dates and locations of annual training maneuvers. Largely composed of camptown women, the squads follow troops into remote rural areas where the soldiers conduct war games. There, each woman services thirty to forty men a night.

The development of camptowns transformed and often destroyed once peaceful rural farming villages throughout South Korea. The 1990 novel *Silver Stallion* describes this process, linking it to the social demarcation between virtuous and unvirtuous women. Set during the Korean War, the novel begins with the appearance of U.S. troops in a small

farming village, apparently checking the area for enemy soldiers. They set up base not far from the village. One night, a widow living alone with her two children is raped by U.S. soldiers. She is shunned by the villagers, who are simultaneously stunned at her misfortune and ashamed at her loss of female virtue. They are also terrified that a similar fate will befall them as well, and they set up night patrols to watch for marauding soldiers. On several occasions, soldiers ransack houses looking for women.³⁶ Soon, however, prostitutes begin to gather near the base and a small camptown is established. Although distressed at the proximity of such filth, the town heaves a collective sigh of relief, for at least the village women will be safe from the sexual violence of the foreign troops.³⁷

The novel's separation between "virtuous" women and "dirty" women mirrors that of Korean society, where women who work in the camptowns are social pariahs, but are also seen as a necessary evil since their existence safeguards the chastity of the "virtuous" women. Camptowns and *yang gongju* became a permanent fixture in Korean society after the Korean War, and the camptown woman became the archetypal "fallen woman." Because the war ended not with a peace treaty but with a truce, the U.S. military has continued to maintain troops in South Korea. As a result, the number of camptowns increased with the number of military installations, as did the number of *yang gongju*.

In addition to Bupyong, some of the earliest and largest camptowns include Itaewon, areas of Pusan called Hialeah and Texas, Tongduchon, and Songtan. The camptowns in Pusan were among the most stable, as U.S. soldiers were stationed there throughout the war. (This was possible because Pusan, a port city located at the southeastern tip of Korea, left UN control only briefly during the war.) The U.S. military used Pusan as a landing port, and the camptowns of Hialeah (next to Camp Hialeah) and Texas soon appeared. Hialeah remains a camptown today, while Texas (located next to the Pusan train station) has become a camptown serving not only the U.S. military but also sailors and other itinerant travelers passing through the port.³⁸

The 1960s were the heyday of the camptowns, when more than thirty thousand women earned their living entertaining some sixty-two thousand U.S. soldiers stationed in virtually every corner of South Korea. The Paju area northwest of Seoul, militarily important due to its proximity to the DMZ³⁹ that serves as the truce line between North and South Korea,

contained the highest concentration of U.S. troops until 1971. Nicknamed the "GI's Kingdom," the area was home to the 1st Marine Division and the 24th, 7th, and 2nd Infantry Divisions. The largest camptown during this period was Tongduchon, nicknamed Little Chicago and located just east of Paju and north of Seoul. When Camp Casey was established as the main infantry base at the end of the Korean War, Tongduchon was transformed from a remote farming village into a chaotic world of drugs, sex, crime, and black market deals in PX goods. During its height in the mid-1960s, some seven thousand women in Tongduchon worked as prostitutes serving the U.S. military.⁴⁰

Because U.S. bases were one of the few, if not the only, sources of income in the poverty-stricken years of the 1940s through the 1970s, the camptowns attracted not only poor women, including war widows and orphans seeking to make a living, but also entrepreneurs and criminals. In collusion with GIs, Korean civilians smuggled military supplies and PX goods out of the bases, selling them for a handsome profit on the black market. Pimps and madams established clubs catering to the soldiers, hiring women at starvation wages to work as hostesses-cum-prostitutes. Villagers opened laundries, restaurants, stores, and other businesses serving the more mundane needs of the soldiers and the camptown women. The *Dong-A Ilbo*, one of South Korea's major newspapers, reported on the development of these camptowns, using as a model Uijongbu, a camptown just north of Seoul but south of the larger Tongduchon. Before the war, Uijongbu had about ten thousand residents and one silk mill as its sole industry. But with the war, hundreds of unemployed people, UN forces, and criminals literally invaded the town, bringing with them various underworld activities. About two thousand women worked as *yang gongju*, and the small town was suddenly filled with cabarets, bars, tailor and dress shops, and other stores. By the 1960s, an estimated 60 percent of the sixty-five thousand Koreans in Uijongbu were engaged in some form of business catering to the U.S. military.⁴¹

With the construction of U.S. military bases came not only the transformation but also the literal destruction of Korean villages. In July 1951, Songtan, about an hour south of Seoul by bus, was invaded by the bulldozers of the 417th Squadron of the U.S. Air Force. The squadron built an airfield, causing five thousand people (one thousand families) to lose

their homes. These families had farmed the same plots of land in Songtan for generations, making their living from the annual rice harvest and the charcoal they made from the wood they chopped in surrounding forests. As they left their ancestral lands, each family held a piece of paper from the U.S. military promising monetary compensation in neatly typed Korean and English. The promised compensation, which was much less than the market value of the land, never materialized despite years of legal battles.⁴² Over the years, more residents were displaced as Osan Air Force Base expanded to become the largest base in Korea and the second largest Air Force base in Asia. (Since the 1992 closing of Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, Osan is now the largest.) Journalist Oh Yun Ho describes the transformation of Songtan:

Oblivious to the local residents' resentment, the airfield was completed at top speed within six months. The surrounding area became the land of the stars and stripes. Thatched-roof houses gave way to all kinds of stores with English signs, aluminum cans replaced gourds, and a village full of shy maidens with their long braided hair instantly became a village full of *yang gongju*.⁴³

With the construction of the airfield, Songtan became home to a major hub of U.S. military activity in Asia and a thriving camptown. When the United States began to reduce its land forces in 1971, army camptowns such as Tongduchon suffered, but Songtan grew as the United States continued to emphasize airpower. An air squadron is stationed there, and soldiers from other units regularly fly in from Okinawa for weekend training sessions.⁴⁴ Songtan today is one of the largest camptowns, with about one thousand five hundred prostitutes. The projected move to Osan of the Eighth Army and USFK headquarters (currently located at Yongsan in Seoul) is sure to make Songtan Korea's camptown capital.

American Town is a camptown developed with the collusion of both the South Korean and American governments. Built by a South Korean general and a landowner in 1969 during the height of the Park Chung Hee regime, American Town turned farmland in North Cholla Province into a sanctioned red-light district for U.S. soldiers. Distinctly marked off from the nearby civilian town of Kunsan and the surrounding countryside by chain-link fences, American Town at first was wholly owned by

the two developers, but later became a corporation with shareholders. During the 1970s business was so good that the clubs opened even during the day and a fleet of buses ferried soldiers between Kunsan Air Force Base and the town. Today (2001), two buses operate daily between the camptown and the base. The town includes dormitory housing for the women, about twenty clubs, a dozen stores, and a government-run health clinic where the women receive mandatory testing for sexually transmitted diseases.⁴⁵

These camptowns perform crucial social functions for both South Korea and the United States. Both governments seem to consider camptowns a necessary evil. For South Korea, the camptowns hold the promise of containing unhealthy American influences, protecting "virtuous" women from the threat of rape, and—especially during the early years of economic development—earning foreign exchange.⁴⁶ It is also a way for a subjected government to cater to the dominant country. For the U.S. military, camptowns provide a release for the troops and help to maintain troop morale. They also help to keep unruly soldiers away from "normal" civilians and thus reduce tension with the Korean public at large. While the U.S. military officially decries prostitution as an unhealthy influence on its soldiers, it also lets the soldiers know that frequenting prostitutes in Korea is acceptable behavior. As one military chaplain says,

In Korea, the guys are inundated with prostitutes. And the U.S. forces and the American government are saying "Hem, hem—be tolerant." . . . Where we could make a difference is, where we could take the rules, the strictures like in Germany or in other nations where they are stricter, where this kind of thing doesn't go on, and apply it to Korea, we could fix this problem in 20 minutes. . . . But in Korea, we just say, "Aw, it's the culture" and wink at what goes on.⁴⁷

Both the South Korean and U.S. governments, however, do more than simply "wink at what goes on." For the South Korean government, these camptowns and the regulation of camptown women have been crucial to maintaining smooth relations with the U.S. government. Katherine Moon points out that making sure that camptown women played their proper role as entertainers and sexual playmates who would foster goodwill to-

ward Korea among American soldiers was an essential aspect of the South Korean government's strategies for national security. The United States, for its part, takes it for granted that its soldiers "need" paid sexual companions for high morale and demands that camptown women be kept free of venereal disease so that soldiers do not become infected. Thus, as Moon demonstrates, the South Korean government and the U.S. military have engaged in a decades-long collaboration to regulate camptown women and their behavior. In the process, they have subtly, sometimes overtly, promoted the sexual exploitation of Korean women. The women are doubly victimized: betrayed by their own government and virtually sold as a kind of war booty to the United States, and exploited by a foreign government interested only in the women's usefulness as sexual diversions for the ostensible purpose of maintaining troop morale.

The U.S. military has also long regarded prostitution as a moral and health issue, however, sometimes worrying that it damaged U.S. reputations in the eyes of the local civilians. But despite official hand-wringing over the moral state of "our boys," the United States has never seriously attempted to eliminate prostitution around its military bases in South Korea. This is in contrast to its efforts to eliminate prostitution around its European bases, as the chaplain quoted above notes. Although soldiers are officially forbidden any involvement in prostitution, unofficially they are given a wink and a nod. A 1965 report conducted by the Eighth U.S. Army frankly admitted that "fraternization (in the form of prostitution) is near the core of troop-community relations here." It also found that most soldiers believe that such "fraternization" endears Korea to the soldiers, making them more willing to fight, and that "most officers believe that fraternization is generally a constructive force." In the end, the United States adopted a "boys will be boys" policy toward camptown prostitution in South Korea.⁴⁸

Before the 1970s, the U.S. military engaged in sporadic efforts to regulate clubs and club women, primarily to control the spread of venereal disease. U.S. medical officers intermittently checked camptown women for sexually transmitted diseases, military authorities unilaterally declared as off-limits clubs that were deemed problematic because infected women worked there, and military police went on patrol through the towns. Bases also instituted VD contact identification systems, pressuring soldiers to identify those they had patronized. Club women identified

by soldiers were summarily taken to military medical centers where they were tested and medicated. But such regulation contradicted the official position that the military had nothing whatsoever to do with prostitution. U.S. officials therefore continually pressured the Korean government to regulate the camptowns and the prostitutes.

Although reluctant to take systematic action, the Korean government did take steps toward regulation. The first step was to set up official districts where "entertaining" foreigners was the main business. Thus, even as prostitution was officially outlawed in 1961, 104 areas were designated in 1962 as special districts of prostitution. By 1964, that number had increased to 145, all of them camptowns. Since 1972, about 72 such districts have remained in operation. The highest concentration has been in the area surrounding Seoul, which includes the Paju area, Tongduchon, Uijongbu, and Songtan.⁴⁹ Women who work in the clubs were registered as hostesses and required to join "women's associations" with names like the Rose Club and the Dandelion Club. Government-run medical clinics and private clinics on government contract were established in each district for mandatory VD testing and treatment of the women. But due to a lack of finances and initiative, regulation was lax. Venereal disease remained a constant complaint by the U.S. military, along with repeated requests that the Korean government do something about the problem.⁵⁰

The South Korean government did little until 1971, when troop reductions under the Nixon Doctrine caused the Park Chung Hee government great anxiety about the stability of U.S. support. By then, official U.S. rhetoric about the immorality of prostitution had faded to the background and health issues, namely, the spread of venereal diseases and the effect this would have on the combat-readiness of the soldiers, moved to the forefront. Prevention and treatment of disease and the control of the local prostitute population became the primary concerns. One sailor described how the ship's medical officer would gather the men before docking in a Philippines or Korea port, give them a quick briefing on health precautions, and hand out condoms.⁵¹ The message to the men was clear: Go ahead, but don't catch any diseases. In 1971, spurred by American complaints about conditions in the camptowns and feeling a need to forestall reductions in the U.S. commitment to Korea's defense, the Korean government joined with the American military in a five-year cleanup campaign.

The cleanup campaign, initiated by the U.S.-Korea Status of Forces Joint Committee,⁵² intensified and expanded existing efforts to control VD to include improving civilian-military relations, improving sanitation and the physical infrastructure, reducing crime and black market activities, and teaching club owners and hostesses how to equitably treat black and white soldiers. At each step of the way, the U.S. military prodded the Korean government into action, providing advice, medical supplies, and other forms of support, but almost always keeping American officials in the background. This creates the illusion that it is primarily the Korean government that regulates prostitution and the camptowns, but in reality such regulation is demanded and orchestrated by the American military, with a weak Korean government able to do little but acquiesce.

The Korean government was motivated primarily by its belief that American military assistance was vital to its national security. The perception, whether justified or not, that North Korea would attack the moment that U.S. support of South Korea faltered fueled this belief in the necessity of U.S. military aid. This partially explains the Park Chung Hee government's strategy of using patriotic rhetoric and the communist threat to persuade camptown women to cooperate in the cleanup campaign. Throughout the 1970s, Korean government officials gathered camptown women into town halls for monthly lectures on patriotism. The women, the officials would say, were patriots because their work with American GIs helped the national defense and earned foreign exchange for the development of the national economy. Thus, their full cooperation in the cleanup campaign, and the expectation of better relations with the U.S. military plus increased business for the camptowns, were posited as a form of patriotism. The women, according to this logic, were performing the supreme sacrifice for the good of their country. However, few, if any, women believed this rhetoric. As camptown women told interviewers, sex work was just dirty, there was nothing patriotic about it.⁵³

In addition to controlling venereal disease, the U.S. military also wanted to allay increasing racial tension between black and white troops. Although this tension was a reflection of racial tensions back in America during the 1960s and 1970s, U.S. military authorities blamed camptown women and camptown practices of segregated clubs. Camp-

towns were segregated along racial lines just like American society. Most clubs catered to white soldiers, while a few clubs, usually with inferior facilities, catered exclusively to blacks. The women themselves were categorized as those who catered to whites and those who catered to blacks. One black soldier bitterly complained to the *Overseas Weekly* (4/71) that "I ask a girl to go to bed and she says no. My money is as green as anybody's." Club owners and camptown women countered that it was the prejudices of white soldiers that dictated camptown segregation. Clubs who allowed blacks lost business from whites, and women who serviced blacks found that whites avoided them.⁵⁴ Since white soldiers were more numerous, losing their business meant losing profits. Instead of trying to educate their soldiers, the U.S. military authorities turned to camptown women to smooth racial relations among their troops. "Educating" the women to treat black and white soldiers equitably was a major aspect of the cleanup campaign.

The U.S. military's regulation of prostitution in the camptowns was conducted at the highest levels. The commanding officer of the Eighth Army in Yongsan personally visited clubs in Itaewon, the nearby camptown, to ask club owners to educate the women about proper behavior toward black soldiers. Continued discrimination by the women against black soldiers, he warned, would result in the military placing the club off-limits, and thus in reduced revenue for the clubs. The military produced posters, banners, coasters, and other paraphernalia for use in the clubs, all emblazoned with antidiscrimination mottoes. Also produced were brochures telling the women that a failure to treat black and white soldiers equitably would result in a loss of morale among the soldiers, thus endangering Korea's security.⁵⁵

Efforts to control VD soon became the focus of the cleanup campaign. The efforts, however, targeted only the women. The soldiers themselves were given warnings, education, and treatment if found infected, but were never regulated. The U.S. Surgeon General, in a report to the commanding general of the Eighth Army, emphasized that "control of infection in the prostitute reservoir [is] of primary importance," and recommended that the USFK "encourage growth of ROK diagnostic ability."⁵⁶ In practice, this meant increased regulation of the women. The number of women registered as club hostesses rose, and conditions for registration became more stringent. Registered women were required to carry

VD identification cards. Invalid cards resulted in fines, being summarily taken to detention houses (known among the women as the Monkey House) where women who tested positive were held and given medication until the infections cleared. Testing as often as twice a week was required, and women were routinely harassed by both U.S. military police and Korean police for proof of registration and testing. Failure to register meant that the women could not work in the clubs, recognized as the locus of camptown prostitution.⁵⁷

The number of U.S. military police patrolling the camptowns as well as the frequency of their patrols increased. This was ostensibly intended to monitor the behavior of the soldiers, but it effectively served as another means of regulating the women. The U.S. military police, for example, engaged in surprise visits to the clubs, demanding to see the women's VD identification cards. The military police also rounded up women identified by infected soldiers as the source of their infection. A camptown woman was never given a chance to verify that the soldier who had identified her had in fact had sex with her. There was no such thing as medical confidentiality for the women, while the military kept in strict confidence the identities of infected soldiers. Many women, therefore, never found out which soldiers had identified them. For the women, these control methods posed both mental distress and financial burdens. They found the police harassment and the exams, especially when performed by U.S. medics, to be deeply humiliating as well as an affront to their sense of national pride. What, after all, were U.S. officials doing harassing and examining Korean citizens in Korea? The women were also required to pay for the mandatory testing and treatment. On their meager earnings, this was often impossible. Many were forced to borrow from their club owners (essentially pimps) and were thus thrown into greater debt and under the tighter control of the club owners.

The women were also required to wear numbered tags so that the soldiers could better identify who they slept with, and the soldiers were expected to write down the names of these women on slips of paper kept at the club. Each base also kept photo files, books filled with the names and photographs of the registered women, along with their numbers, to make identification easier. In cases where soldiers did not remember the numbers and had failed to write down the names, the military police escorted them to the clubs and had the soldiers point out the offending women.

The women were then taken to medical clinics or detention centers, usually on the spot and with little explanation. Because the soldiers often had difficulty remembering whom they had slept with, they often identified the wrong women. Nevertheless, even women who tested negative after such identification were often medicated anyway.⁵⁸

Much of this system remains in place in the twenty-first century. Korean officials and U.S. military officials together make routine tours of camptowns to check registration and VD identification and otherwise keep an eye on the camptown women. The military police still accompany soldiers on identification missions, and the women are still required to pay for and undergo regular testing for venereal disease.⁵⁹

The Road to Camptowns

Who are the camptown women and how do they end up there?⁶⁰ For the vast majority of the women, prostitution is a last resort and is often an occupation which they are tricked into entering. In the early years of the U.S. military government period and the Korean War, the women were often war widows or orphans, some may have been former prostitutes during the Japanese colonial period, and some were victims of rape by UN or U.S. forces. Although generalizations are hard to make, the available evidence indicates that poverty plays a leading role in camptown prostitution. Over the years, camptown women generally have had low levels of formal education, have come from poor families with either one or both parents missing, have often been financially responsible for the upbringing of siblings or the care of sick or unemployed parents, and in many cases have been the victims of rape, incest, or irresponsible and/or abusive boyfriends or husbands. Most have worked in factories, as domestic laborers, or in odd jobs as waitresses or store clerks. Camptowns may also not be the first place where they entered prostitution, whether it was as a last resort or as a result of being tricked or kidnapped. Some women are sold to camptown club owners by their current pimps.

For many camptown women, the path to a camptown club began when they answered placement agency ads. Placement agencies, already well established under the Japanese colonial regime, got into the camp-

town business almost as soon as camptowns first appeared. As camptowns became established, they worked vigorously to persuade, coerce, and trick poor women seeking employment into working as prostitutes. After answering ads promising work, room and board, and sometimes even an education (although education in what was never specified), the women were usually raped, beaten into submission, and then sold to a Korean brothel or a camptown club.

Outright kidnapping is also a common method. Pimps seek out young girls from the country arriving in big cities such as Seoul and promise them employment, food, and shelter. The girls are usually poor, seeking work, and may be runaways. If they believe the promises, they are usually raped and then sold as prostitutes. Sometimes women who have lost their virginity will voluntarily walk into camptowns. These women are often the victims of male cruelty or irresponsibility. They may be victims of rape or incest trying to escape from difficult family situations, or have had coercive sexual relationships with men who later left them, or are fleeing abusive husbands, or have been abandoned by husbands or boyfriends. They are usually poor and often have to support siblings or children. Finding themselves with few options for making a living, they turn to sex work in the belief that since they have already been "dirtied," they might as well use their bodies to support themselves.

Once the women enter this line of work, regardless of how, it is very difficult for them to return to "normal" work and "respectable" society because of the social stigma. Other factors that make escape from the camptowns difficult, however, are the club system itself, which keeps the women in a form of debt bondage, and the reality that with little education and few skills, few forms of alternative employment are open to them. For those women who do learn skills such as taxi driving, beauty salon work, or dressmaking, jobs remain hard to find.⁶¹ As a result, many women simply grow old and die in the camptowns. The more fortunate among them may perhaps become club owners themselves, while the less fortunate may end up spending their elderly years as streetwalkers, soliciting drunk soldiers young enough to be their grandsons in order to eke out a meager existence.

The club system generally dictates the lives of camptown women.⁶² The women usually start by borrowing money from the club owner to buy a bed, sound system, dresser, and other items necessary to furnish

the room they are assigned. This is the room where they are expected to receive customers, thus the need for a Western-style bed and sound system. Many clubs have rooms in the back for the hostesses. Room and board are deducted from their earnings. This initial debt is usually the beginning of the women's debt bondage to the club owner. Because their earnings often cannot cover all their expenses, particularly for women who are supporting children, siblings, or parents, they are forced to continually borrow from the club owner, their sole source of credit. In addition, the placement fees charged by employment agencies or the body price charged by traffickers (essentially the price the club owner has paid to purchase the woman) are usually charged to the women's accounts. In this way, women enter camptown life with substantial debt which they must pay off if they wish to leave. For most women, paying off the debt proves impossible.

Some clubs have a meager base salary, while others make the women work solely on commission. The workday begins in the early evening. Their job is to make small talk with the GIs who come to the club, dance with them, and make them buy drinks. Every drink the GI buys for a hostess results in a small commission, less for plain juice, more for an alcoholic drink. To earn more money, the women must have sex with the men. Although in theory a woman might choose never to engage in prostitution, in practice her employers and the weight of her debt effectively render that choice impossible. A "short time" means just an hour or so, while a "long time" means overnight. It is common for the women to have regular customers, and a regular customer can also turn into a contract live-in arrangement. In such an arrangement, the pair sets up house and the man pays monthly living expenses. It is usually within such an arrangement that promises of marriage are made and children born. Such relationships usually end with the GIs' tour of duty, if not before, and the women are forced to return to the clubs to earn a living.

America, America

American soldiers, camptowns, and *yang gongju* are inextricably intertwined for Koreans. They also hold dual meanings. On the one hand, they

are despised for immorality and their corrupting influence. GIs and *yang gongju* frequently appear in Korean novels and short stories, for example, in story lines and descriptions that leave little doubt as to the cruelty and crassness of the GIs and the tawdry, tragic lives of the *yang gongju*. As one middle-aged man who grew up in rural southwestern Korea notes, "We all knew about the *yang gongju*, but it wasn't part of our lives. We just knew that they were dirty. Everyone knew that." On the other hand, they can be imbued with an alluring glow by their link to America's material abundance. One camptown woman explains how her longing to enter the luxurious America pictured in the movies and on television led her to naively seek out a camptown in the 1980s:

When I watched TV and the movies during my youth, I wanted to go live in America. When I was a little older, I wanted to have some luxuries, but that was impossible in our poor household. So I came to the camptown to meet Americans and earn lots of money. But once I got here, I found that many things were different from what I had expected. I never imagined that I would have to do this kind of work. And it doesn't even earn lots of money. If I had known that it was this kind of place, I would never have come.⁶³

Similar sentiments are expressed in *Gobbi*, a novel that traces the lives of two half-sisters, both of whom become *yang gongju*. The heroine Chong-in's childhood during the Korean War and her impressions of America are described as follows:

American soldiers camped in the orchards of her grandmother's brother. The child [Chongin] grew up in the midst of endless talk about the war. To her, the war wasn't fearsome or a terror, but a thrill, an impression, an excitement within which was always embedded the sweet scent of chocolate and American soldiers. So the child liked the war and the American GIs because she could go to the orchard everyday and receive chocolate. She couldn't understand Pilsu's father, who got so angry at the GIs when they asked to borrow his wife. If he had lent them his wife, he would have received a barrelful of chocolate and delicious cookies. . . . And then there was Wonja, whom she saw by chance. . . . On a hill behind the orchard, several American soldiers

made the village maiden Wonja lie down and then took turns riding on her belly. As soon as the American soldiers left, Wonja struck the ground repeatedly with a hoe as she cried. A year after she disappeared, she came home to visit wearing stylish high heels, perhaps proving true the rumors that she had become a *yang gongju*. Seeing how Wonja had turned into a stylish woman, the child believed that the act of American soldiers riding on a maiden's belly was a wonderful magic that turns maidens into beautiful women.

... Young girls on tiptoes and with sashaying hips would sing merrily:

Yang galbo (Western whore), *ttong galbo* (dirty whore), where are you going? With my high heeled shoes, I'm going to the *yangnom* (here used as derogatory slang for American soldier).

Chongin sang that song until she was ten. Each time, she wanted to wear high heels and run to the American soldiers like Wonja.⁶⁴

In both the fictional character's reminiscence and the camptown woman's testimony, the realities of sexual assault, poverty, and camptown life are glossed over with a naive, awed view of America's material luxuries and pleasures. In the early years, food figured prominently among the luxuries. Food items were among the most important in a long litany of never-before-seen material goods that American soldiers brought to an impoverished and literally starving Korea: Taster's Choice coffee, ham, Spam, Oscar Mayer hot dogs and bologna, hot cocoa, marshmallows, peanut butter, butter, cheese, jam and jelly, Oreo cookies, Ritz crackers, Jello pudding, potato chips, and of course Hershey's chocolate. An army ration staple that GIs often tossed to Korean children, chocolate symbolized the abundance and generosity of America. Not only was America so rich that it could provide its soldiers with a candy like chocolate, but Americans were so generous that they simply gave it away to the children they saw. Americans, the saying went, were so rich that they had meat at every meal, and not just bits lost in the soup or stew, but whole great hunks of it, one for each person. The culinary trappings of middle America, items like the ones listed above, were rare delicacies affordable only by the rich and only if one went to the black market. Even after South Korea prospered, American food items remained luxuries.

American foods such as Spam, for example, are imported and sold in fancy department stores as gourmet delicacies, while Oreo cookies, Cheese Whiz, Kraft singles, and the like are still spirited out of the nearest PX and sold in black market corners of neighborhood grocery stores and outdoor markets.

As the South Korean economy prospered and the nation industrialized, the luxuries of American life were conveyed to Koreans through Hollywood movies and the daily broadcasts of AFKN, the U.S. military's television network in Korea.⁶⁵ During the 1980s, for example, the prime-time melodrama *Dallas* conveyed the portrait of a glamorous, high-living America. But American soldiers, as the most visible, palpable American presence in Korea, remained the primary symbol for American material abundance and the luxurious life of plenty. Soldiers also conveyed the impression, unlike *Dallas*, that even ordinary folks led lives of plenty in America. A rank-and-file soldier seemed to enjoy greater material plenty than even upper-class Koreans. Stories of golf courses, bowling lanes, movie theaters, large houses with expansive lawns, swimming pools, and restaurants serving steak at half the going price spread among Korea's urbanites. These were the amenities found on large bases such as Yongsan, where family housing faithfully mimicked suburban America, complete with schools, parks, sports leagues, and PTAs. If one became a *yang gongju*, one would get to know GIs and have access to America and its luxuries. Becoming a *yang gongju*—although what that entailed was unknown to the innocent—is thus seen by impressionable youngsters as the clearest way to achieve this life. The magical lure of America obscures the reality of its presence in Korea.

The lure that America exerted (and to a large extent still exerts) on Koreans is a consequence of the unequal relationship between the two countries. It is the lure that the metropole exerts on its colony. It is all the stronger because America was seen as a liberator, not a colonizer. Under the dominant discourse of America as the savior who rescued Korea from Japanese imperialism and then saved Korea from communism, American heroism and generosity joined with American material abundance into an image of utopia. The same Korean man who spoke of everyone knowing that camptown women are dirty continued by saying, "But America was like our big brother, our ally. And we felt gratitude to the soldiers for helping us defend our country." Although a countering image of

America as a corrupting influence has run parallel with this image of utopia, the positive image has been dominant. The power, wealth, and modernity that America symbolizes overshadow the negative consequences of America's dominance over Korea. Indeed, America's image began fraying at the edges only after the 1980 Kwangju Massacre, a brutal crackdown on prodemocracy protesters in which the United States has been implicated.⁶⁶

But even as America's allure held sway, most Koreans despised camptowns and the *yang gongju* who worked there. Traditional patriarchal mores emphasizing female chastity and a centuries-old pride in what Koreans consider a homogeneous culture and people have meant that prostitutes serving foreigners were relegated to the dregs of society. Those who, like the camptown woman quoted above, came to camptowns seeking the America of their dreams were quickly disillusioned by a reality they never imagined. In this light, Korean government exhortations to camptown women that they were patriots working on behalf of their nation can be seen as empty rhetoric justifying the exploitation of these women.

But neither patriarchal mores nor extremes of cultural and racial pride can account for the contempt heaped on camptown women and military brides. Those same mores and that same pride kept the issue of comfort women under Japanese rule a secret for decades, but they are now held up as innocent victims of an imperialist aggressor while camptown women remain pariahs. Indeed, former comfort women themselves disdain any links with camptown women. What can account for this difference? Part of the answer lies in the identity of the aggressor. Japan is seen as a former colonizer who has yet to fully come to terms with its history and who may yet have designs on its former colony. The United States, however, is still primarily seen as an ally and a friend who deserves thanks, whose freedoms and material abundance are ideals to be envied and emulated.

To see the camptown women as victims of militarized prostitution and as modern-day comfort women, would be to shatter that vision of America. It would force Koreans to confront the myriad humiliations and brutalities committed by Americans and the U.S. military, incidents tucked away in small print in obscure corners of the newspaper, hidden in half-forgotten memories. Land seized by force and farmers forced out to make

room for U.S. military installations; American troops firing into small groups of unarmed civilians peacefully demonstrating against the division of their country and against the U.S. military government; workers thrown out of factories they had begun to operate on their own after the Japanese owners left in the wake of Japan's defeat in 1945; countless Korean civilians murdered or brutalized by American soldiers who are given little more than slaps on the wrist by U.S. military authorities. Numerous such incidents, painstakingly researched by journalist Oh Yun Ho, testify to an America that is imperialist, cavalier, and ruthlessly self-centered in its dealings with "junior partners" such as South Korea. In addition, recent revelations about not only the 1980 Kwangju Massacre but also the 1948 Chejudo massacre and the Nogunri massacre during the Korean War reveal an America brutal in its treatment of Korea.⁶⁷

It is an image that directly contradicts the dominant thinking. But more to the point, seeing camptown women as victims of U.S.-sponsored militarized prostitution would shatter a self-conception of Korea as a sovereign nation. It would force a realization of the ways in which the United States oppresses Korea and Koreans, of the fact that Korea is at best a junior, a very junior, partner, and at worst a victim, even a pawn, of an imperialist America. The U.S. military presence in South Korea has meant, for example, that whole towns have grown economically dependent on the local U.S. military base, their fortunes waxing and waning with the size of the troops. In short, towns such as Uijongbu, Songtan, and Tongduchon are economically dependent on decisions made thousands of miles away by the leaders of a foreign country. But if such realities are faced, a national self-identity as a sovereign nation in partnership with the United States would be in tatters.

This self-identity as a sovereign nation is a distinctly masculine one. To keep itself masculine and sovereign, it must banish the feminine and the subordinate. Camptown women, as prostitutes servicing the soldiers of a foreign power, are emblematic of the feminine and the subordinate. They serve to symbolize all the humiliations that Korea suffers at the hands of the United States. Indeed, political radicals in South Korea are increasingly using the image of the camptown woman as a metaphor for a nation brutalized under imperialism. Novelists have long utilized this metaphor, portraying *yang gongju* in Korean literature for decades as a metaphor for the subjugation of the Korean people as a whole.⁶⁸ But for

Koreans in the mainstream, it is necessary to condemn these women as whores and/or cynically praise them for patriotism as civilian ambassadors and earners of foreign exchange, all the while relegating them to the shadows. Only by doing this can the realities of the situation between the United States and Korea be ignored and denied, thus allowing the officially sanctioned belief in Korean sovereignty and American benevolence to remain dominant. America's golden image is left relatively untainted while Koreans despise camptowns and camptown women. In effect, the realities of U.S. influence on Korean society are interpreted as individual depravity: the women are prostitutes not because of Korea's circumstances and relations with the United States, but because the women are morally corrupt. The logic of national pride requires this interpretation.⁶⁹

This simultaneous condemnation and shunning of *yang gongju* and glorification of America can help explain why camptown women who have no illusions about camptown life have so often clung to dreams of marrying an American soldier and living in America. They are well aware of their pariah status in Korean society. Interviews with camptown women conducted by My Sister's Place, a community center for camptown women run by camptown activists, and by researchers Sandra Pollock Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus show that these women believe that they too have rights as human beings and should not be condemned for being prostitutes.⁷⁰ But most, if not all, view coming to the camptowns as a mistake. For camptown women, the concept of sex work as a legitimate profession is literally foreign. Many dream of a "normal" life as a wife and mother, and since this life is impossible to achieve with a Korean man due to Korean society's ostracization of camptown women, they dream of marrying an American soldier. How to survive and how to escape the camptown is the daily concern of most camptown women. The historical and social conditions underpinning camptown prostitution render largely irrelevant the arguments of some Western feminists and activist prostitutes who claim that prostitution can be an empowering occupation and a way out from patriarchal domination.⁷¹ The converse is true in the case of militarized prostitution in Korea: The camptown women live under extremes of patriarchal domination literally practiced on their bodies by both Korea and the United States.

In addition, the negative experiences that many camptown women have had with Korean men—abusive relationships, experiences with pimps, sexual assaults, and the like—often lead women to believe that all Korean men are untrustworthy and do not treat women well. In such a situation, the pervasive lure of America becomes even stronger. American men, even the crass GIs, can be viewed as "better" than Korean men.

Novelist Kang Suk-kyung, who lived in a camptown as preparation for writing about camptown women, describes them in her 1983 short story, "Days and Dreams":

When you think about it, a camptown is like an island floating between Korea and America. Neither mainland nor sea, just an island. And just as an island is just an island, the women here are nothing but foreigners' whores. Temporary honeys for the American GIs, shunned by their homeland, they are called only by that name.

... Because it is a rootless island, the women who live here cannot lay down roots either. Women either depend on their pimps or long to go to America because they know all too well the hopelessness of this island life.⁷²

In the dreams of a camptown woman, camptown life may be miserable, but surely among the GIs there will emerge a Prince Charming who will sweep her away to a wonderful new life in the American paradise. This Cinderella dream, however, appears to have waned considerably as younger camptown women hear about their elders' experiences with American soldiers and as women who have left camptowns for America return with tales of horror.⁷³ Nevertheless, marriage to an American soldier remains one of the few paths out of the camptowns.

It has been a narrow path, however. Most women in the camptowns have stories about GIs who promised marriage, only to desert them once their tour of duty ended. Women who succeed in marrying a GI and immigrating to America constitute a small percentage of the tens of thousands of women who have worked in the camptowns during the past half-century. It is not uncommon for women to trust GI promises of marriage and give birth to children rather than abort unexpected pregnancies. When the promises are broken, the women are left with mixed-race

children to raise alone, a task made more difficult by poverty and the double stigma attached to illegitimate mixed-race children.⁷⁴

Working On-Base

As emphasized earlier in this chapter, camptowns are not the only places where Korean women and American GIs meet. Another common locale is the U.S. military base itself. Ever since the U.S. military first came to South Korea in 1945, it has employed Korean nationals in a variety of jobs, ranging from interpreter to janitor. Jobs that have been open to women include dishwashers, cooks, or waitresses in on-base restaurants, mess halls, bars, and clubs; clerks, receptionists, or secretaries in various offices; and cashiers at the PX or commissary. Many of the women who gathered around U.S. bases during the 1940s and 1950s were probably hoping for jobs of that kind, only to find that such jobs were difficult to obtain without some knowledge of English or a personal connection.

Several women I interviewed for this study spoke of working on U.S. bases and of having met their husbands there. One worked as a dishwasher and vegetable peeler in an on-base restaurant, most likely a mess hall, judging by her description. Another worked as a clerk in a supply office. Her job was to type records of inventory and disbursement of supplies. Although she knew only the English alphabet and had no typing skills, she did her work by memorizing the spellings of the various items that were disbursed through the office. Base jobs such as hers were obtained mainly through personal connections. One woman, for example, obtained her job through a Korean military official, a close neighbor.

Working on a base, especially a PX or an office, puts Korean women into a primarily American environment which inevitably leads to an opportunity to make comparisons between Korea and America. If camptowns can be compared to islands, neither here nor there, then bases can be compared to peninsulas, extensions of the American mainland intruding upon Korean territory. The language is English and the woman's coworkers are American, as are her customers and other people she must deal with in the course of her work. The work culture, the way of interacting with other people, even the tools of the work and the material

goods encountered through the work (typewriters, pencil sharpeners, dishwashers, flush toilets, ovens, and most especially the consumer products in the PX, the commissary, or the Sears catalog) are American. If she works in a large base such as Yongsan, she may see military housing reminiscent of suburban America, each house with its own lawn and backyard. Every time she steps through the gates of the base, she is stepping into a world very different from the one in which she lives. A camptown woman described the difference between Korean society and the base as follows:

When you go to the U.S. Army base, everything is automatic. They can use as much electricity or water as they need. Meanwhile, the government tells us to save electricity and water. It's a world apart.⁷⁵

This was the situation in the 1990s. Again, the primary contrast is between scarcity and abundance, deprivation and privilege. How much starker the contrast must have been in the past, when even parts of the capital city had no running water or electricity, or when the entire country lay in ruins after the Korean War.

America was, indeed, a world apart for Koreans, and yet it was a world that reached into their lives in profound and unsettling ways. America influenced not only the political situation and economy of South Korea, but also the personal lives of countless Koreans.