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Book Review: Understanding South Korean Economic Growth through the eyes of Militarism, Sex Work and Migrant Labour

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Understanding South Korean Economic Growth through the eyes of Militarism, Sex Work and Migrant Labour 2010. Jin-Kyung Lee. London: University of Minnesota Press 305pp ISBN978-0-8166-5125-2. \$27.50

Reviewed by George Opendjuru, PhD¹

This book is structurally divided into five (5) chapters the first being an introduction which provides an overview of the whole text. The introduction is followed by four chapters labelled 1 to 4. Each of these chapters deals with a major argument that the author is advancing in the text about South Korea's economic development in relation to US militarism as a sexualised and racialised encounter. Jin-Kyung Lee (2010, p. 2) Summarises the encounter in the following extract:

What I call "proletarianization" of sexuality and race, that is the way in which sexuality and race, in necessary articulation with each other, Korean ethno nationality, and trans-national racial hierarchy, becomes aspects of productive and socially reproductive labour that are constructed for specifically gendered, classed, ethnicized or racialised, and nationalised collectives in the trans-national context

All the debates which are set against the well trodden line of analysis of South Korean economic development as an outcome of industrial/manufacturing labour engagement are reflected in the introduction. The text presents an alternative perspective on the South Korea's economic development by looking at South Korean military involvement in the Vietnam War, Sex Work and immigrant and migrant labour in South Korea. Each of this is well expounded in a chapter. Sex work is viewed from two more perspectives of "domestic Prostitution" (female sex labour for domestic clients) and "Military Prostitution" (female sex labour for US military in Vietnam). Lee achieves these arguments by exploring literacy and popular cultural representation of South Korean military service in Vietnam, domestic Sex work, Sex work for US military in South Korea and Vietnam, and immigrant and migrant labour to South Korea.

Jin-Kyung Lee, sees the participation of South Korea in the Vietnam War as a major contributor to South Korean's economic and industrial development. Jin-Kyung Lee terms this process as a "sexual proletarianization" a process in which gendered labour are sexually deployed for the military work for men and military and sex work for women.

Jin-Kyung Lee in the argument brings out a paradoxical relationship between two unusual activities of war (the production of destruction) and economic development (the production of wealth). The US and South Korea are exposed as countries that profited or promoted their economic interest from the Vietnam War. The US used its military relationship to advance neo-colonial interest in Asia while South Korea benefited by becoming a sub-imperial country promoting US military and economic interests in the Asian sub region. In accepting to provide military labour for US Vietnam War, South

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Korea was exporting its labour which is the only resource it had to serve the US military interest.

South Korea used a number of national policies in advancing its economic interest through its participation in the Vietnam War. One of these was the anti-communist rhetoric in which it sold its support of the US military interest in Vietnam. In this process the South Korean leadership created Korea and most of Asia as a low wage region for the US economy.

Lee identifies four key areas which immensely contributed to the industrial growth of Korea. These are: Korean Military service in Vietnam, domestic prostitution, military sex workers or prostitution for US soldiers in Vietnam, immigrant and migrant workers in South Korea.

If Lee's focus on participation in war, as a factor for economic development, is not paradoxical enough the reorganisation and valorisation of sex work or the "production of sex" as a major contributor to economic development is even more paradoxical. I am going to engage with each of these aspects since as I have already mentioned above they all constitute complete chapter of analysis, which shows how South Korean economic growth was based on the export of labour for US military interests in Vietnam and the import of migrant and immigrant labour (Male for military service and female for military sex work) from the neighbouring countries for their industrial production in the South Korean economy. Lee conceptualises this process as sexual proletarianization.

Using the concept of proletarianization Lee executes a deep analysis of military labour as the mobilisation, reconstruction and appropriation of certain aspects of masculinity and its deployment in a range of tasks. In this analysis Lee comes out as a humanist who sees the relegation of human nature as a disposable subject of wealth creation. Lee elaborates this further by pointing out the contradictory nature of military servicemen as both potential victims and agents of state necropolitics and power. That is, the military are the potential exterminable subjects for state. By using all kinds of valorisations and glamorisations of military service the state plays down this dehumanising deployment of human labour in the production of destruction in a bid to promote voluntary recruitment in the place of the earlier despicable conscription methods. This method of valorisation and glamorisation of the military service made its value higher than its real economic worth to an individual thus making this necropolitical job very attractive in spite of its low individual economic benefits. To bring this about Lee argues that the state used, "(supra) ideological causes such as ethnonationalism heterosexist masculinism, racism, and transnational anticommunism" (p. 39). In doing this the economic value of military labour is downgraded and its heroic and ethno-nationalistic values enhanced at least during the war. Such strategies were used to disguise the fact that the South Koreans were serving in this war as subordinates to the US and not for their real national or political interest.

As a result of this strategy Lee argues the South Korean men become easy and cheap targets for recruitment as substitute labour to serve US military interest in the Vietnam War. Lee calls this military surrogacy for the US military. This arrangement according to Lee brings the recruitment for military service in consonance with the capitalist market system. As substitutes South Korean men were of equal value to US soldiers. This equality in substitutability value was relegated in favour of uneconomic

values such as gender, race and class, which were used to determine their remuneration in relation to their US Service men in Vietnam.

The rhetoric used to obfuscate the true motive of the war was to disguise the economic gains to the Korean state through the sale of cheap male bodies as military labour to the US foreign military interest in the Asian region, and secondly, to gain the US support for and divert attention from the fledgling Park Chung Hee's military dictatorship in its early years.

The analyses are complex but accessible through careful reading. The other alternative analysis which Lee provides for military labour is that of looking at it as a sexualised male service. In this Lee equates in a very convincing way, how war and victory and the defeat of the enemy equals a male sexual encounter with a female. In this case the victors get the feeling of the male sexual satisfaction over the vanquished enemies that are seen as females.

The book builds up into a humanist feminist critique of South Korean's military involvement in the Vietnam War as surrogate bodies for the US military. The analysis is critical of the literary works on the Vietnam War with their biased reporting on the sexual nature of the South Korea's Military encounter or relationship with the Vietnamese women while failing to see the American Military encounter with the South Korean women in the same light.

Race is significant in Lee's analysis of the South Korean Military support of the US. The contradictory racial position derives from the fact that the South Korean military was at cross-roads, on the one hand wanting to identify with American superiority while on the other, recognising their racial closeness to the Vietnamese.

The book presents a deep analysis good for academics and professional readers within the disciplines of political and social sciences. Those in economics who are used to conventional economic analysis of development in relation to productive services have a lot to benefit from reading this text since it gives a completely new insight to understanding labour and economic development.