

Transpacific Camptowns: Korean Women, US Army Bases, and Military Prostitution in America

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Abstract *Military prostitution has been a staple of US–Korea relations since the 1940s, contained in the so-called camptown communities surrounding US military bases in South Korea. But during the 1970s, as the US military steadily reduced its troop presence in Asia, camptowns were thrown into a chaotic state. Facing tremendous social disorder and economic upheaval, establishments that depended upon GI patronage began sending their madams and sex workers to domestic military sites through brokered marriages with US servicemen. These women arrived in the US South, a region housing the vast majority of America’s military. Consequently, southern bases like Fort Bragg in Fayetteville (NC), Fort Campbell in Clarksville (TN), and Fort Hood in Killeen (TX) saw the proliferation of military prostitution, which took form in illicit massage businesses catering to the sexual needs of local troop populations. By the 1980s, the Korean American sex trade would spread from these southern military towns to elsewhere in the United States. Highlighting the transpacific circuits among camptowns in South Korea and military bases in the United States since 1945, this article develops a portrait of the US South as a transnational militarized terrain, the camptown as a transpacific phenomenon, and Korean immigrant community formation as deeply intertwined with the happenings of US militarism abroad. In doing so, it explains how the proliferation of illicit massage businesses witnessed by southern military communities in the 1970s was a transnational outgrowth of military prostitution encouraged by the US military in South Korea.*

IN 1986, THE IMMIGRATION and Naturalization Service (INS) formed the Korean Organized Crime Task Force to investigate a problem that had long plagued southern military bases but now threatened all corners of American society—the issue of Korean prostitution.¹ Investigating the various massage parlors, saunas, and health spas operating as fronts for the illegal sex trade, authorities estimated that approximately 90 percent of

the industry's workforce were GI brides. Many women had come stateside via "sham immigration marriages," whereby brokers paid US servicemen upwards of \$5,000 for their marriage and a "quick divorce."² Alternatively, "recruiters work[ing] near military bases in America" targeted existing communities of Korean immigrant women in southern cities like Fayetteville and Killeen, luring divorced and married wives of US soldiers to work in the illicit establishments as well.³ Government attention to the matter culminated in the Immigration Marriage Fraud Amendments of 1986, which provided a legal basis for the deportation of Korean women deemed to be in "improper" marriages.⁴ This, in addition to hundreds of media reports documenting Korean prostitution in the United States since the early 1970s, reveals the massive scale at which Americans viewed and sought to resolve the problem. But with obvious US–Korea military connections, massage parlor prostitution was not simply an issue of illegal immigration or marriage fraud as federal authorities understood. As thousands of Korean women once working around US military bases in South Korea began migrating to domestic sites "from Fort Bragg in North Carolina to Fort Hood in Texas," first to sexually service GIs but eventually ordinary civilians as well, one startling fact remained—the camptown military sex industry had come to America.⁵

Since the beginning of the US–Korea military relationship, over one million Korean women have intimately entertained more than six million US military personnel in the camptown neighborhoods surrounding US bases in South Korea.⁶ While camptowns and military prostitution are largely understood by scholars as consequences of US military bases "over there," this article demonstrates how imperial spaces and practices abroad reverberate into the domestic arena as well, bringing remnants of US empire stateside and becoming problems for Americans at home.⁷ By highlighting the transpacific circuits forged among camptowns and domestic installations since 1945, I argue that the proliferation of illicit massage businesses, first witnessed by southern military communities in the 1970s before spreading elsewhere in the 1980s, was a transnational outgrowth of military prostitution encouraged by the US military in South Korea.⁸

The military sex industry's initial entry into the United States via southern bases was not merely coincidental, but rather the result of larger historical processes involving the region's steady militarization and expanding relations with US military operations abroad. Fueled by the expansion of the US military's massive network of international outposts during World War II and continuing into the Cold War years, the US government built most

of its supporting domestic facilities in the South. As a result, the southern United States, part of what has been effectively conceptualized as the Sunbelt and the “Gunbelt,” developed into one of the most heavily militarized and interconnected regions in the world.⁹ Domestic bases built up during these years—including Fort Bragg in North Carolina, Fort Campbell in Tennessee, and Fort Hood in Texas—remain some of the largest military installations in the world, connecting small southern cities to an expansive web of international outposts abroad and supplying from their ranks the vast majority of the millions of US soldiers who have served, and continue to serve, in South Korea.¹⁰ Only by understanding the US South as a transnational militarized terrain, and by considering a longer transpacific history of camptowns since 1945, does a full explanation for the spread of Korean massage parlor prostitution in the United States begin to emerge.

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In January of 1947, a circular from the headquarters of United States Army Forces in Korea instructed all male personnel “to refrain from association with Korean women,” forbidding relations with local girls “other than through the lowest form of prostitution.”¹¹ Such a contradictory stance highlights the irony undergirding US military policies at this time, deeming Korean women improper romantic partners for American soldiers, while simultaneously condoning prostitution. Indeed, in 1945, when some 72,000 American soldiers arrived to transfer power from the devastated Japanese empire following Allied victory in World War II, American soldiers were allowed to visit the various colonial era brothels that existed around US military installations once belonging to the Imperial Army.¹² Other newly erected encampments became the active sites of pimp and solicitor activities on the part of those impoverished and displaced from decades of oppressive colonial rule, and rates of venereal disease (VD) among troops skyrocketed. The camptown, as a controlled space where the sexual relations between American men and local Korean women could be tightly monitored, provided a solution to the VD crisis.

Through various off-limit military decrees, which delineated between authorized and restricted recreational spaces for soldiers, US military authorities mapped the coordinates of the camptown and established various *ad hoc* measures to contain the rampant spread of VD. As early as May of 1946, the US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK, 1945–1948) enacted Ordinance No. 72. The law criminalized Korean women for “engaging in or eliciting sexual intercourse with any member of the occupying

forces” while “suffering from a venereal disease in an infectious stage.”¹³ This distinction kept prostitution legal, but outlawed voluntary and involuntary venereal disease transmissions. One year later, a VD Control section under the Department of Public Health and Welfare of the USAMGIK introduced periodic health examinations and treatment for “entertaining girls” (a category ranging from street walkers, dancers, and bar girls to waitresses).¹⁴ Military commanders authorized establishments compliant with the US military’s VD control measures but decreed areas with high rates of solicitors off-limits. Streetwalkers who were found in close proximity to US bases and whose VD status could not be verified were removed, tested, and forcibly treated by military officials.¹⁵ GIs “apprehended in off limits areas” were “tried immediately by a Summary Court Officer in Division Headquarters” and faced a punishment up to “two thirds of a month’s pay.”¹⁶ Soldiers who contracted VD were quarantined at the Rehabilitation Training Center in Chinhae with two-time offenders deemed permanently ineligible for promotion.¹⁷

Such aggressive VD control measures not only demarcated the camp-town’s coordinates and criminalized certain kinds of intimate relations, but also homogenized an image of Korean women, in the minds of US military personnel, as prostitutes rather than longer-term companions or wives. At one point, military officials even identified laundries near military bases as sites of sexual contact and placed them off-limits, confirming military fears that no establishment, no matter how seemingly innocent, could be overlooked.¹⁸ It is likely that even women employed by the US military as typists, coffee girls, laundresses, hairstylists, or house girls were examined for venereal disease by health officials on the basis that they could make sexual contact with GIs clandestinely on base or at dances held at service clubs.¹⁹ Similarly, Korean phrases like *yanggongju* or *yanggalbo*, meaning “Western princess” and “Yankee whore,” respectively, have long been dehumanizing pejoratives used to describe women who have intimate relations with Americans—blurring the lines between camptown local, civilian employee, girlfriend, bride, and prostitute.²⁰

With the inauguration of the South Korean government in the fall of 1948 came the demise of USAMGIK. Consequently, military prostitution dwindled down almost completely, as the US withdrew from South Korea all but approximately five hundred officers in the form of a military advisory group. This would change with the outbreak of the Korean War in the summer of 1950, as millions of troops returned to the Korean peninsula and thousands of Koreans flocked to US bases for refuge. Justified “as a

necessary evil” to protect “respectable women” from rape, but also to offer foreign troops incentives for their military services, the newly formed South Korean government established “comfort stations” to facilitate military prostitution once more.²¹ But because the Armistice Agreement signed in the summer of 1953 marked merely a cessation of hostilities rather than a formal peace agreement, military prostitution continued even after the war as the US military remained to protect South Koreans from the imminent threat of a communist invasion. Consequently, the South Korean government reappropriated the “comfort stations” as clubs and dance halls for the US Army.²² In 1954, the South Korean government passed the Act on the Prevention of Infectious Diseases under the pressures of the US military, which provided a legal basis for VD screening in camptowns, bringing regulation back to the conditions of the USAMGIK rule of the 1940s.²³ Around permanent US military installations the South Korean government built VD clinics and dispatched health officials, and the US military provided medics and penicillin.²⁴ Thus, through the collaborative efforts of the US military and Korean government in the 1940s and 1950s, military commanders viewed Korean women working in close proximity to the US military as likely prostitutes and therefore VD carriers whose interactions with soldiers needed to be controlled at any cost.

The same imperial expansion that created camptowns in South Korea during the USAMGIK and Korean War years also reshaped the domestic landscape. The US military’s massive network of international outposts required a parallel development of domestic installations to train and house an army of unprecedented strength for deployment overseas.²⁵ The country’s militarization unevenly favored and pumped funds into regions like the US South. During World War II, for instance, one-third of federal funds for new military bases and defense industry contracts went to the states of the former Confederacy.²⁶ The growth of Fort Bragg in Fayetteville—today, the largest Army base in the United States and one of the communities that would eventually be implicated in the transpacific sex industry—is part of this history.²⁷ The Korean War inaugurated even greater defense spending than the World War II era, by quadrupling the national budget to approximately \$650 billion in today’s dollars or 14 percent of GNP from June to December of 1950.²⁸ Such an outstanding figure represents the highest point for defense spending in US history.²⁹ In anticipation of war, southern bases like Fort Campbell and Fort Hood transitioned from relatively small and temporary military camps into permanent military bases training hundreds of thousands of US personnel. By August of 1950, for example, the

Department of Defense had tasked Fort Campbell's 11th Airborne Division to fight America's air war in Korea. It was during this time when the base began operating an airborne school and the 11th Airborne Division became one of just six active duty divisions in the nation providing basic training for newly drafted soldiers serving as individual troop replacements for war. This resulted in the construction of permanent barracks, facilities, family housing, and the tangential development of an auxiliary community—all of which provided a sturdy foundation for the installation's growth throughout the remainder of the Cold War era.³⁰ Fort Hood also trained tens of thousands of ground forces for replacements during the Korean War, sending units of its 2nd Armored Division to Korea and reactivating its 1st Armored Division in these years. Like Fort Campbell, Fort Hood's war preparation facilities and surrounding military communities are direct byproducts of the Korean War.

Similar to the policies in camptowns that sought to contain the subversive threats that Korean women's sexuality posed to American troops, US immigration laws and military policies also restricted military brides' entry into the United States during the 1940s and early 1950s on the basis of their racial difference.³¹ The first Korean military brides immigrated to America during an era of segregation and antisecugenation, when US immigration and nationality laws barred virtually all Asians from entry into the country and prohibited their naturalization as citizens. Even in 1945, when Congress enacted The War Brides Act, it applied exclusively to the European spouses of US citizens. While an amendment to extend rights of entry to Asian women in 1947 marked a shift towards immigration liberalization during these years, the law was not transgressive in terms of race relations. Instead, it adhered to the status quo of miscegenation, as Congress deemed the intended beneficiaries "soldiers of the Japanese or Korean race" who had "married girls of their own race while serving in the Pacific," rather than white or black servicemen.³² For this and other reasons, including the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 and the continued belief that Korean women made better prostitutes than wives, military commanders regularly denied soldiers' requests for permission to marry. As a result, immigration records begin with the marriage migration of a single Korean woman in 1950 (presumably the first Korean military bride), and eleven in 1951, all of whom were most likely spouses of high-ranking officials and treated as an exception to the strict policy of restriction.³³

But such dominant constructions of Korean women did not go uncontested. Frustrated by the fact that "chaplains of many units of the Armed

Forces [were] orienting American soldiers so as to stop the increasing rate of intermarriage of white Americans to colored Orientals,” a soldier of enlisted rank argued that “American foreign policy cannot win friends in the Far East no matter how much money we spend as long as [we] continue to destroy the practical precepts of human equality.”³⁴ Arguments such as this were common, and highlighted how US citizens utilized marriages between servicemen and Asian brides to espouse the imperatives of racial pluralism and Cold War liberalism. Although communist accusations of American racism had the power to usurp the credibility of US democracy in the world, culturally produced narratives of Asian war brides’ seamless entry into the United States repudiated such claims and justified continued military presence in the region. Thus, media representations of the first Korean military brides erased them of their camptown pasts, transforming foreign prostitutes into American daughters and wives, offering lessons to Americans about Cold War integration.³⁵ The stateside arrival of Korean military brides was one major factor that pushed US officials to gradually liberalize immigration law in order to permanently accommodate its military presence in Asia.³⁶

In 1952, when Congress passed the McCarran-Walter Act, the law repealed racial exclusions on naturalization that previously impeded Asian brides’ entry into the country and allowed them to bypass the strict limits upheld on other immigration from Asia. Amid these changes in immigration law, the military made a congruent shift in its policy on marriages, and Korean brides began entering the United States in larger numbers, while camptown prostitution continued to flourish as a legacy of earlier military policies. In the years between 1952 and 1968 (when Congress enacted the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, removing the final vestiges of Asian exclusion), war brides constituted the vast majority of migrants from Asia alongside adopted children from Korea and Japan. The approximately ten thousand Korean brides who immigrated to the United States during these years dispersed to all corners of American society, either settling in their husband’s hometown upon the completion of his military service or following him to his next assignment upon reenlistment. For the latter group, many women (given the concentration of domestic installations in the region) migrated to the US South to bases like Fort Bragg, Fort Campbell, and Fort Hood. As a growing number of Korean immigrant women concentrated around southern bases, they provided a foundation for the immigrant communities that would soon grow around military gates on the US home front.

Although some of the first military brides struggled with racism, isolation, abuse, and abandonment, having immigrated to the United States as an exception to anti-Asian immigration policies, there is evidence to suggest that the Korean military brides residing near military bases fared a bit better than their counterparts who had to integrate into the civilian world.³⁷ Interestingly enough, the same has been said about black servicemen who reenlisted in the military rather than reenter civilian life following their tours in the Pacific.³⁸ This is because the US government ordered the desegregation of its armed forces in July of 1948, as part of an effort to repudiate international and domestic accusations that discriminatory racial practices—including the existence of a Jim Crow Army—made the United States ill-equipped to be the democratic leader of the new free world.³⁹ Although the desegregation of the armed forces created tensions around southern bases where locals remained hostile towards racial integration,⁴⁰ domestic installations observed generally more equitable practices than what existed elsewhere in ordinary American society at the time.

In some ways, military bases in the US South were like islands in a sea of Jim Crow, surrounded on all sides by the torrential waters of discrimination. One particularly important change in the midst of military desegregation was the development of a policy that took into consideration state miscegenation laws when deciding reassignments for US personnel.⁴¹ By June of 1954, twenty-eight states still upheld bans against interracial marriage. And while the majority of these laws applied to marriages between whites and blacks or whites and Indians, Asians (who comprised a number of twentieth-century legalized racial categories from Japanese, Chinese, Malayan, and Mongolian) were not permitted to marry interracially to varying degrees in nine states (Idaho, Utah, Texas, Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, Montana, Oregon and Wyoming). Although many GIs and their Asian brides were spared having to serve in parts of the country where their marriages were deemed illegal, there were still several exceptions.⁴² In these instances, the US military remained committed to protecting its intermarried personnel. For example, in 1953 when a southern community protested to the presence of a black soldier and his Asian bride, a military commander issued the pair on-base housing that was typically reserved for higher-ranking officers.⁴³ Such a practice was one method used by authorities to procure and retain essential personnel in southern states such as Mississippi, where an interracial couple would otherwise be within the legal jurisdiction of the state and subject to segregation laws.⁴⁴ Additionally, Korean brides were more likely to find the company of other women in military towns, with whom

they sometimes formed wives' clubs.⁴⁵ On base, they worked in kitchens as dishwashers and cleaners at a time when employment might have otherwise been difficult to come by.⁴⁶ In these ways, military bases in the Jim Crow South were small pockets of progress where status as military personnel afforded Asian brides (and their husbands) certain rights and privileges that might not have existed for those who ventured into the civilian world. In the 1960s, military bride communities would steadily grow alongside the camptown's expansion in South Korea.

When post-Korean War troop levels peaked in the sixties, roughly thirty thousand Korean women entertained approximately 62,000 American troops in the recreational neighborhoods outside the gates of every major US military installation in South Korea.⁴⁷ By then, camptowns had evolved from large populations of camp followers servicing troops out of tents and cardboard houses in shifting war zones to commercial entertainment districts surrounding permanent installations and catering to soldiers out of bars and night clubs.⁴⁸ Marriages also increased exponentially from an average of two hundred annually in the 1950s to nearly two thousand by 1969. Furthermore, in 1968 the enactment of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 normalized the racially discriminatory quota system and created preference categories that prioritized family reunification. This change in policy allowed Korean brides to sponsor their relatives for preferential immigration to the United States, thereby catalyzing the growth of Korean immigration to southern military communities. In 1988, a report based on data from the US Embassy in Seoul concluded that an average of fifteen relatives followed every Korean military bride to the United States.⁴⁹ For those sponsored relatives of Korean brides, domestic military installations often became their first stop in America.

As a result of this new influx of Korean migrants into military towns, small businesses began to burgeon around southern bases in a fashion uncannily similar to camptowns abroad. While sponsored family members typically sold their homes and belongings back in South Korea to amass the necessary start-up capital required to make these investments in the United States, they often fell short and required monetary assistance from their military bride sponsors to succeed. The presence of nearby family, and their oftentimes shared businesses, incentivized transient Korean women rotating between military bases in Fayetteville, Clarksville, or Killeen to permanently settle in one of these towns, which coincided with earlier waves of brides' husbands' retirement from military service. Thus, by the early 1970s as the military bride-based migrant community laid down its roots

around southern bases, these small cities saw the formation of their first Korean churches and associations.⁵⁰ Ethnic grocery stores and restaurants, marked with signs plastered in large-block hangul letters, accommodated a growing population of Koreans in small-town America, while a service economy catered directly to the local base community.

Soldiers' payrolls kept immigrant-owned gas stations, coin laundries, dry cleaners, tailor studios, insurance and real estate agencies, barber shops, fast food, liquor, and military surplus stores alive. In downtown Fayetteville, GIs even enjoyed Asian women who "lined up outside the Suzie Wong Club and Kim Chi Lounge" in what one reporter described to be "reminders of past land wars in Asia."⁵¹ Residents of Clarksville, Tennessee, frequented The Pink Lady, modeled after the juicy bar structure of camptowns in South Korea, which required male clientele to buy female hostesses shots of juice in exchange for their company. Military commanders subjected Korean-owned businesses to the same off-limit decrees as camptown establishments abroad, citing anything from "detrimental health and welfare conditions" (read: VD) at a massage parlor to violent brawls in a bar or club, the selling of illegal military weapons systems at a military surplus store, or the starching of uniforms at a dry cleaner (thereby making their wearers more susceptible to infrared detection).⁵² An off-limits decree on Korean-owned dry cleaners in Fayetteville for precisely this reason devastated locals in the early 1980s, although the businesses soon adjusted to the military's demands and recovered.⁵³

Military bride communities in the US South began to resemble the boom and bust economies of camptowns in South Korea, for they shared in the growth and decline of the military base nearby. These small southern cities remained vulnerable to the changing contours of US involvement elsewhere as their populations were tapped to supply the manpower necessary for American wars waged abroad. During the Gulf War in the early 1990s, for instance, the exodus of military personnel from Fort Campbell in Clarksville was so severe that both the US Department of Commerce and the US Department of Labor conducted surveys to assess the negative consequences on the local economies of the surrounding cities.⁵⁴ By 2002, before the effects of the Global War on Terror could totally be felt, Clarksville boasted 114 Korean-owned businesses.⁵⁵ A decade later, that number was less than half that figure, according to Clarksville residents.⁵⁶

Similarly, camptowns were thrown into a chaotic state in the early 1970s when the 7th Infantry Division and its twenty thousand troops were withdrawn from South Korea with plans to soon remove an additional ten

thousand upon the application of the Nixon doctrine—a policy primarily regarding US involvement in Vietnam that also sought to steadily disengage from Korea militarily. In just one year (from 1970 to 1971), real estate prices in camptowns plunged, six thousand (out of a total of 32,000) Koreans employed at US bases lost their jobs, and one hundred clubs had been put out of business. As a result, the salaries of Korean women catering to GIs out of bars and clubs decreased twenty-fold, from an average of ₩100,000 per month to a mere ₩5,000 (between four and five dollars today).⁵⁷ As the US military disbanded and reorganized units, and troops redeployed, some camptowns became abandoned ghost towns. In the town of Uncheon-ri surrounding Camp Kaiser, for instance, ten thousand out of eighteen thousand residents and “most of the 850 registered prostitutes,” who depended upon GIs for their incomes, moved elsewhere during this time.⁵⁸ The then head of the Institute of Economic Planning, Kim Hakyŏl, predicted that troop reduction might cut South Korea’s annual earnings from the US military in half, from \$160,000,000 to \$80,000,000.⁵⁹ Mayors from Uijeongbu, Yangju, and Pocheon proposed constructing new factories to help absolve their residents of the economic upheaval wreaked by the reductions.⁶⁰

Even for camptowns not directly affected by the troop reductions, social confusion mounted amid rapid economic changes, as the influx of new businesses and women from abandoned bases created tension and competition for a finite number of US dollars. One Korean periodical, *Shindonga* dramatically captured the chaos, highlighting stories of “bargirls” who had crossed one another to steal GI customers, as well as incidents of camptown clubs sabotaging competing establishments through false reports of VD that prompted military authorities to issue an off-limits decree.⁶¹ Kim Sangsu, the chairwoman for the Yangju Women’s Association in the 1970s, reported that many women solicited her advice for how to leave the camptown. However, “with no earnings, money, and ruined bodies, how could these girls move to another profession or line of work?”⁶² Camptowns quickly became overpopulated and burst with women looking to cater to GIs. As conditions worsened, unemployed women walked the streets, VD rates soared, and camptowns saw a rise in violence and crime. The US military instituted various off-limit decrees in response to the social chaos, the most famous of which was a forty-eight-day ban in the camptown of Anjeong-ri in Pyeongtaek, where just one businessman reported a loss of about five million won (\$13,157) at a time when the per capita income of South Koreans was below \$200.⁶³ Such bans exacerbated the desperate economic conditions within which camptown residents found themselves. While the amount of

US dollars that could be earned in South Korea was finite and depended upon a dramatically shrinking troop population, camptown businesses began “mov[ing] their operations to the US where the profits are greater” in their search for new markets.⁶⁴ Thus, the influx of camptown women from South Korea to the United States during the 1970s was a direct response to the problems inflicted by changing US military commitments in Asia. Because brokered marriages with US servicemen became the primary point of entry from camptowns to America, these women moved along the same transpacific circuits as the Korean military brides who came before them.

Indeed, the first reports of military brides working out of massage parlors in the United States appeared just shortly following the havoc wreaked by US military troop reductions in South Korea. One incident that made headline news and introduced Americans to the kinds of crime accompanying the military sex industry was the murder of Sun Ok Cousin near Fort Carson on September 19, 1974.⁶⁵ The attacker, Park Estep, stabbed and slashed the throat of another Korean woman, Yon Lee, before moving on to rape and ultimately shoot and kill Cousin. Both women were set on fire, but Lee survived to identify her assailant. The brutal attack committed by a twenty-five-year-old GI on US soil eerily resembled so much of the crime witnessed in South Korean camptowns during the 1970s.⁶⁶ While camptown residents in South Korea could move their operations stateside to flee economic turmoil abroad, they could not escape a culture of violence and GI crime that followed them transnationally. Incidents like this highlight the vulnerabilities and vast power inequalities between Korean women and their American male (oftentimes GI) clients in both South Korean camptowns and US massage parlors.

In the same year, a feature exploring problems faced by Asian military brides in the United States reported that ninety out of one hundred twenty women who worked in saunas and massage parlors around one military base were Asian, with eighty-six of that ninety being Korean women.⁶⁷ While this was one of the first reports that seemed to identify a correlation between massage parlor sex work and women brought over from US occupations abroad, most of the early documentation surrounding domestic prostitution was vague and lacked a clear understanding of the US military link and why Korean women were involved in sex work in such high numbers. One such report came from the discovery of a San Diego massage parlor in 1976, when officials, confused as to why Korean women had out-of-state licenses from cities with no known Korean populations, assumed that the masseuses carried falsified documents.⁶⁸ The women, of course, were GI

brides and had moved from smaller military communities in the US South to serve the large populations of military personnel surrounding bases in the southwest Sunbelt.

By the 1980s, illicit massage establishments could be found surrounding almost every military base in the country and even in major cities like New Orleans, San Antonio, and Houston.⁶⁹ As local vice squads orchestrated sting operations to close the parlors, business owners began moving their operations out of the South, shuttling Korean women with American last names to other parts of the country.⁷⁰ Although solid statistical data on the number of Korean women working in the sex industry during this time can only be gleaned from reports made by the local press or testimony from individuals examining the issue at federal or diplomatic levels, in 1986 one news source estimated that the number of Korean women in the domestic sex industry was somewhere between one thousand and twelve hundred,⁷¹ while in 1989 a State Department official put the number at six thousand.⁷² In 1983, even the popular investigative television series *20/20* featured the topic before primetime audiences, reporting that “by conservative estimates, one GI a day is involved in a sham marriage.”⁷³ In a shocking development, prostitution had become so pervasive that some states began to introduce laws mandating masseuses “submit to a physical exam and test for communicable diseases at least every six months.”⁷⁴ Resembling earlier VD control methods in camptowns, such measures highlighted an acceptance of Korean prostitution as an inevitable reality, marking a shift in local policies away from prevention and instead towards managing and ameliorating the damaging effects of massage parlors on ordinary American communities.

But who exactly were the women working in the massage parlors, and if they were married to American GIs, then why were they prostituting themselves? Media reports on illicit massage businesses depicted a wide range of individuals who had entered into varying degrees of free and unfree sexual labor, sometimes voluntarily, other times through coercive recruitment tactics and indentured servitude. However, women could generally be divided into one of two main categories—those who had entered into the United States from the camptowns in South Korea and brides already living in the United States around domestic military installations. For the first group, marriages with US servicemen were brokered out of camptown bars, with club owners seeking to move their business to the United States paying GIs anywhere between a few hundred to several thousand dollars per transaction.⁷⁵ By the 1970s, marriages between Korean women and American servicemen had become so common (peaking at over four thousand

in 1976) that GIs found little dissent from their commanding officers to marry. The entire process was said to be just a matter of “the paper drill,” according to one veteran. One report noted “even if the military knows the woman is a prostitute, the GI can merely claim that he hopes to make her an honest woman.”⁷⁶ With “some soldiers marry[ing] as many as four Koreans” during the short one-year duration of their military tours, federal and local law enforcement suspected that military commanders and even officials at the Embassy received bribes to approve marriages and administer visas.⁷⁷ Such lax procedures represented a dramatic transformation in military policy from just two or three decades prior, making marriage to American servicemen an effective and easy method to transport women from camptowns to America. The declining conditions, poverty, and overpopulation in the camptowns made many women vulnerable to exploitation, while others went voluntarily, viewing marriage to a GI and migration to the United States as an opportunity for a better life.

The second group of women consisted of Korean military brides already living in the United States. While some of these women were among the estimated 80 percent of marriages between GIs and Koreans that ended in divorce,⁷⁸ others were married women ranging from those with deployed husbands to brides who had left families behind in cities such as Fayetteville and Killeen. Push factors into the sex industry included financial difficulties in addition to abuse, abandonment, or rejection on part of GI husbands and Korean family members—highlighting the vulnerable position of Korean brides in America as stigmatized, immigrant women with limited English language skills and economic mobility.⁷⁹ News reports remained surprisingly balanced, showing not only the ways in which co-ethnics exploited young Korean women but also the agency of others who went into the industry voluntarily. For those assumed to be exploited, newspapers reported that “seasoned prostitutes regularly visit military locations such as Killeen, near Fort Hood, to ‘brainwash’ the young wives into leaving their husbands for ‘well-paying jobs.’”⁸⁰ Women were also lured in by recruiters who had “len[t] them money and sometimes mock[ed] their husbands’ salaries when the newcomers [were] struggling to make ends meet.”⁸¹ For voluntary workers, however, some women saw massage parlor work as an opportunity to gain necessary financial capital that might be unavailable to them elsewhere in American society, sometimes sending back “envelopes of cash” to support children and extended family.⁸²

Upon accepting work, ostensibly as masseuses or waitresses, Korean women were transported by recruiters to establishments that served as fronts

for prostitution. Even upon discovering that they were deceived, the GI brides often could not escape the establishments, as their borrowed money, transportation fees, room and board were all considered debts to be paid back. When arrests occurred, even bail money, legal costs, and relocation fees accrued in her name.⁸³ This system of debt-bondage was similar to that of the camptown bars in South Korea, where women, often duplicitously recruited from rural villages after responding to ads promising well-paying jobs and stable work, found upon arriving to their new places of employment that they owed their bar owners thousands of dollars in rent, furnishings, and job brokerage fees.⁸⁴ Some brothel managers in the United States even used local gangs to ensure that women with unpaid debts could not leave the premises, a practice that was infamous in South Korean camptowns as well.⁸⁵ In Texas, for instance, parlor owners utilized Vietnamese American gang members to prevent Korean brides from escaping—drawing from a group of Asian immigrants in the South whose presence was a direct consequence of America's war in Vietnam and the subsequent influx of refugees that flooded into America in the 1970s and 1980s.⁸⁶

In the United States, the owners of massage parlors were often the same women who managed or owned clubs in camptown communities. According to one diplomat who served in South Korea from 1976 to 1979, it was not uncommon to see a GI marrying a woman “20 years older than he was who looked well-traveled and well worn,” implying that a significant proportion of “sham marriages” involved camptown mamasans,⁸⁷ in addition to young sex workers.⁸⁸ Theoretically, through the “sham marriage” method, a camptown bar could slowly but surely move its entire operations to America, employee by employee. Illicit massage parlors in the United States proved incredibly lucrative. One Korean madam charged with prostitution in the San Antonio area had a \$400,000 home, three massage parlors, and a \$2 million estate when she died in the mid-1980s. By the end of the decade, the industry had grown exponentially, with vice cops in Texas claiming that “at least 80 percent of the houses of prostitution in the country use Korean women,” and “top federal and state investigators” confirming “99 percent of the Korean prostitutes working in the United States got here by marrying American GIs stationed in South Korea.”⁸⁹

Massage parlor prostitution and military communities in the southern United States continued to change throughout the 1990s and 2000s alongside changes in South Korean camptowns. A steady decline of US troops from an annual average of 40,000 to 28,500, coupled with Korea's rapid economic development, marked a new era for the military sex industry. As

Korean women left the camptowns in search of lucrative work elsewhere, labor shortages prompted the South Korean government to establish an E-6 visa, which allowed businesses catering to US troops to import migrant “entertainers” under the guise of tourism law.⁹⁰ By the early 2000s, research conducted by a women’s NGO revealed that 90 percent of those working in the bars and establishments around US bases in South Korea were now Filipina or, to a lesser extent, Russian.⁹¹ Accordingly, towns like Fayetteville, Clarksville, and Killeen saw the influx of a new generation of Korean military brides who were not actually ethnically Korean, but from the Philippines or Eastern European countries. By the 1990s, camptown sex workers were brought into the United States through other avenues beyond brokered marriages, such as unauthorized crossings on the Mexico-Southwest border or tourist and student visas that provided more cost-efficient entries. Today, in military cities like Fayetteville, Clarksville, or Killeen, various establishments of sex work continue to exist outside military gates. These businesses are typically run by older Korean *mamasans*, with women of differing Asian ethnicities servicing local men. News reports, which typically focus on arrests, reveal a mix of primarily Korean and Chinese names among the cohort. In 2018, a study published by the Polaris project, an antihuman trafficking NGO in the United States, confirmed just this, stating there were “more than 9,000 illicit massage parlors currently opened for business in America,” with Koreans ranking second among those prostituted, only behind Chinese women.⁹²

While further research into the 1990s and 2000s is necessary to uncover how and why exactly these changes occurred, this article has pointed to the camptown origins of illicit massage businesses in the 1970s, highlighting the transpacific circuits that have enabled military prostitution in South Korea to come stateside over the last several decades. From the camptown’s formation in the 1940s, to military bride migrations in the 1950s, Korean American community formation around US Army bases in the 1960s, and eventually military prostitution’s transplantation onto domestic soil in the 1970s and 1980s—US military encounters in South Korea have changed American society by bringing US imperial spaces, practices, and subjects into the home front. The US South, a transnational militarized terrain deeply intertwined with the reverberations of US militarism abroad, stands at the center of this history with possibilities of other transnational connections yet to be unearthed. While the happenings around US bases both “here” and “there” often remain out of sight to ordinary Americans, residents in towns like Fayetteville, Clarksville, and Killeen have long borne the brunt of US

military engagements abroad.⁹³ As attempts to contain the human spillover of empire proved futile and camptown military prostitution soon spread to all corners of the United States, ordinary Americans soon felt that presence as well.

NOTES

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In this article, Korean language terms have been romanized using the McCune-Reischauer system with names following the Korean convention of surname first. Exceptions are made for places, people with commonly recognized English transliterations, as well as direct citations from primary and secondary source documents.

1. US Congress, Senate, Committee on Governmental Affairs, *Emerging Criminal Groups: Hearings Before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Governmental Affairs*, 99th Cong., 2nd sess., vol. 4, September 17 and 24, 1986, 246.

2. US Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, *Immigration Marriage Fraud: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Policy of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 99th Cong., 1st sess., July 26, 1985, 15, 67.

3. Sharon Cohen, "Officials Take Aim at Massive Prostitution Network," *The Evening Post*, September 23, 1986.

4. *An Act to Amend the Immigration and Nationality Act to Deter Immigration-Related Marriage Fraud and Other Immigration Fraud*, Public Law 99-639, *US Statutes at Large* 100 (1986): 3537-44.

5. US Congress, *Emerging Criminal Groups*, 247.

6. Katharine Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in US-Korea Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 1, 121.

7. I borrow this verbiage from this book title: Maria Höhn and Seungsook Moon, eds., *Over There: Living with the US Military Empire from World War Two to the Present* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

8. I point out these connections fully aware of the "camptown shadow," which has long suggested that military brides are former military prostitutes. To be clear, although the vast majority of women working in illicit massage businesses were Korean military brides, estimates suggest that their numbers never exceeded a few thousand, meaning they represented a very small segment of the some 100,000 military brides in America today. For more on the "camptown shadow" and the ways it affects the lives of military brides, see: Ji-Yeon Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

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11. “Association with Korean Women,” January 25, 1947, United States Army Forces in Korea (USAFIK) Adjutant General, General Correspondence (Decimal Files) 1945–1949, National Archives and Records Administration at College Park (NARA), Records of General Headquarters, Far East Command, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, and United Nations Command (RG 554), Box 50.

12. Seungsook Moon, “Regulating Desire, Managing Empire: US Military Prostitution in South Korea, 1945–1970,” in *Over There*, eds. Höhn and Moon, 41; Pak Tongün, “Special Issue: South Korea and the US, Yanggongju and Mixed-Blood Children,” *Shindonga* (September 1966): 277.

13. Edward Grant Meade, *American Military Government in Korea* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1951), 221, 261.

14. “Venereal Control Program in South Korea,” July 27, 1948, Adjutant General’s Section Operations Division, General Correspondence 1948, NARA, RG 554, Box 78.

15. “Venereal Disease Control,” March 23, 1948, USAFIK, Decimal Files, NARA, RG 554, Box 148.

16. “Major General Orlando Ward to Commanding General John R. Hodge,” September 30, 1948, USAFIK, Decimal Files, NARA RG, 554, Box 148.

17. “Venereal Disease Control,” April 17, 1948, USAFIK, Decimal Files, NARA, RG 554, Box 148.

18. “Report of Meeting of Venereal Disease Council,” April 19, 1948, USAFIK, Decimal Files, NARA, RG 554, Box 147.

19. “Regulating Desire, Managing Empire,” 45.

20. For further discussion of this term, see: Grace Cho, “Diaspora of the Camptown: The Forgotten War’s Monstrous Family,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 34, nos. 1/2 (Spring–Summer 2006): 309–31.

21. Moon, “Regulating Desire, Managing Empire,” 41.

22. Jeong-Mi Park, “A Historical Sociology of the Korean Government’s Policies on Military Prostitution in US Camptowns, 1953–1995: Biopolitics, State of Exception, and the Paradox of Sovereignty under the Cold War,” *Korean Journal of Sociology* 49, no. 2 (April 2014): 10.

23. *Ibid.*, 11.

24. “Venereal Disease Council Meeting,” undated March 1948, USAFIK, Decimal Files, RG 554, Box 147.

25. This expansive network of US military bases is perhaps best described by historian Bruce Cumings as an “archipelago of empire.” For more, see: Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

26. Charles Reagan Wilson, *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 3: History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 67–68.

27. Fort Bragg’s population climbed from 5,400 in January of 1940 to 67,000 just six months later, ultimately ballooning to 159,000 at its peak during World War II. Catherine

Lutz, *Homefront: A Military City and the American 20th Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 50.

28. Bruce Cumings, *War and Television* (New York: Verso, 1992), 148.

29. Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea*, 390.

30. See chapter 5 in John O'Brien, *A History of Fort Campbell* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014).

31. For more on how interracial intimacy has been historically constructed as illicit, see Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

32. US Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, *Amending the Act to Expedite the Admission to the United States of Alien Spouses and Alien Minor Children of Citizen Members of the United States Armed Forces*, 80th Cong., 1st sess., July 11, 1947.

33. In this article, all statistics on military bride migrations are taken from the chart "Asian Women Immigrants Admitted to US as Wives of American Citizens by Country of Origin and Year." US Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization, Annual Reports, 1947–77, Table 6 (Washington, DC) reprinted in Bok-Lim Kim, *Women in Shadows: A Handbook for Service Providers Working with Asian Wives of US Military Personnel* (La Jolla, CA: National Committee Concerned with Asian Wives of US Servicemen, 1981), 12.

34. "Re: Alleged Segregation on Okinawa," Army Adjutant General, Decimal File 1953–54, NARA, The War Department and the Army Records (RG 407), Box 129.

35. One of the best examples of this Cold War narrative can be found in "A War Bride Named 'Blue' Comes Home," *Life*, November 5, 1951: 40–41.

36. Also part of this process were Japanese war brides and the adopted Asian children of US citizens. Numerous scholars have discussed these Cold War familial relations. See Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Naoko Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Caroline Chung Simpson, *An Absent Presence: Japanese Americans in Postwar American Culture, 1945–1960* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Arissa Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

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38. See chapter 2 in Michael Cullen Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific: Race in the Making of American Military Empire After World War II* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

39. See chapter 3 in Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

40. See chapter 3 in Lutz, *Homefront*.

41. "Miscegenation Laws of Various States of the Union," June 28, 1954, Army Adjutant General, Decimal File 1953-54, NARA, RG 407, Box 129.
42. Punishment for being in an unlawful marriage included property seizure, imprisonment, and the nullification of one's marriage.
43. Enoc Walters, "Adventures in Race Relations: Kicked into Luxury," *The Chicago Defender*, September 12, 1953.
44. "Miss. Segregation Laws Hit Oriental War Brides," *The Chicago Defender*, May 31, 1952.
45. See chapter 6 in Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*; "Korean Wives Plan Meeting," *The Evening Star*, July 29, 1963.
46. Juhwan Kim, "A Cultural Introduction of the Korean American Community of Killeen, Texas, 1950-2000" (Master's thesis, Baylor University, 2003), 51; Sang Jo Kim, "'We Should Not Be Forgotten': Korean Military Brides and Koreans in Kansas" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2012), 86, 98.
47. Ji-Yeon Yuh, "Out of the Shadows: Camptown Women, Military Brides, and Korean (American) Communities," *Hitting Critical Mass* 6, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 15.
48. Moon, *Sex Among Allies*, 27.
49. Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*, 164.
50. Kim, "A Cultural Introduction of the Korean American Community of Killeen, Texas, 1950-2000," 53.
51. Jim Mann, "We Think They Shot 'Em Down, Man," *The Tampa Tribune-Times*, April 27, 1980.
52. "Club Listed 'Off Limits,'" *The Fort Campbell Courier*, October 26, 2006.
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54. O'Brien, *A History of Fort Campbell*, 7.
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93. I borrow this verbiage from the immigrant popular adage: "We are here because you were there."

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