

Chapter 3. The Spread of Prostitution

Widespread prostitution in South Korea

In this chapter, I want to pose the question of why society accepts the existence of prostitution in spite of it being an antisocial and immoral institution. I will discuss prostitution and sexual violence during the Korean War as well as present-day coffeehouse prostitution in South Korea, partly on the basis of the things I have seen and experienced myself. I hope to make a contribution to explaining the meaning and function of prostitution, and the process through which it evolves.

My hometown may not have been a village of Confucian scholars, but we were a typical rural community thoroughly steeped in the Confucian traditions of ancestor worship and rites of passage. Therefore it goes without saying that we also had a strong sense of Confucian ethics towards sex. In particular, girls were always expected to guard their chastity and have the morals of proper ladies. Nonetheless, these Confucian sexual mores were turned upside down by the war. I have already discussed the process through which my hometown confronted sexual violence during the Korean War by becoming a "prostitution village". Prostitution put down deep roots in towns located near military bases, though sexual violence has not entirely disappeared there, and then it spread to other areas. This then brings us up to the even more widespread reality of prostitution in Korea today.

There exists a society of sexual morality, which restricts prostitution as antisocial sexual deviancy, and at the same time a society that seeks to reduce normal physiological tensions through the institutionalization of prostitution, in the belief that it is not possible to satisfy the sexual needs of all society within the framework of legal marriage alone. In other words, even though there are differences of degree, every society will have both prostitution and regulations against it. However, even once-fixed ideas about marriage and prostitution have been changing considerably in modern society, and the nature of prostitution has also changed. As a result, prostitution has become difficult to define, but if I was to attempt a definition myself, I would call it a dynamic interplay between normal and deviant sex, a relationship that might be balanced between the two or imbalanced towards one or the other. Even married couples sometimes use a form of "client prostitution," and often women who are called "prostitutes" are similar to lovers.

The status and the definition of "wife," "mistress," *geisha*, "infidelity," and "adultery" have all changed in modern times and it is thus not mere sarcasm to say that a fine line exists between marriage and prostitution. Korea has had its own traditional system of *kisaeng* entertainers, who could variously be lovers or prostitutes, and although modern society has officially suppressed the sex trade, it flourishes behind the scenes.

After US Army units left my village, they moved into a permanent base in the city of Dongducheon, about four kilometers away, and most of the prostitutes in my village

accompanied them. It has been said that the total number of such prostitutes, known as "Western whores," is two or three times the number of soldiers in a division. In the area where American soldiers are stationed, the economy relies on them and when they are forbidden from leaving their bases the local economy quickly slips into recession. The same is true everywhere there are US Army camps, including some in spots well-known across Korea like Daegu, Itaewon in Seoul, and Paju and Osan in Gyeonggi. These districts have the look of American towns and they are known to be outside the jurisdiction of normal Korean laws.

I once saw a sign just outside Daegu's US military bases of Camp Henry and Camp Walker for a shop dealing with international marriages. In South Korea today, there are also a lot of high-class women who enjoy going to restaurants and golf courses frequented by US soldiers in order to get exposure to American culture. In the aftermath of the Korean War, if a Korean woman was walking with a white man, it was simply assumed that she was a prostitute. Now, international marriages are common and there are apparently many cases of prostitutes formally marrying American soldiers. Researchers have shown that American soldiers serving in Korea look for a wife while shifting between one lover and the next, whereas Korean women stick with one partner and do not separate from him. Such differing views on marriage seem to be one of the pitfalls of international marriages for Korean women. However, in Korean society, many women believe that if they lose their virginity they have no chance of getting married, and that is the reason why prostitutes view American soldiers or Western people in general as being ideal marriage partners. A similar sort of tendency also exists among Korean women working in seedy nightclubs in Japan. According to Oh Seon-hwa's book *Skirt Wind*, some Korean women who lose their virginity and cannot get married drift to Japan and become hostesses.

In Korea, there is also prostitution around where South Korean soldiers are stationed. Red-light districts have been formed near train stations used mainly by soldiers, and until quite recently prostitutes used to congregate in great numbers around Seoul Station and Cheongnyangni Station. Such things were a widespread phenomenon.

Prostitutes in Korea usually rent private houses which they redecorate to give them a home-like atmosphere in order to attract American soldiers as regular customers. They seem to serve as "comfort stations" to provide solace to homesick American soldiers who want to feel as if they are back at home. Many prostitutes dream of getting an international marriage that, if they are lucky, might lead to a new life in the United States. International marriage is thus a possible escape route for women cast off by society as morally depraved. Whether or not they are seeking a regular customer who will marry them, the prostitutes' primary goal is to earn money and obtain the capital needed to establish a business.

A woman who I will call "Lady C" had become a prostitute and was raising a child she had had with a white man, but she had been together with an American soldier who she was planning on marrying and who was even sending her support money. Ultimately she ended up later losing contact with him and had to give up on any plan for an international marriage.

She became a coffeehouse manager, using the money she had saved up, and recently died in a traffic accident.

Although depraved acts like prostitution are deviations from the straight path known as marriage, the prostitutes themselves may see prostitution as being their own path to marriage. These ironic occasions when prostitution leads to marriage can also be seen in South Korea's coffeehouse prostitution industry. Likewise members of the general public might consider prostitutes as people protecting society from sexual violence, but prostitutes view themselves as people trying to work their way up to normalcy from the lowest rungs of society. Though the government may attempt to suppress prostitution, the people's opinions on public prostitution vary widely.

Next I will give my thoughts on "coffeehouse prostitution" in Korea.

Coffeehouses

Though I had been a frequent visitor to coffeehouses, I had not known that they were centers for prostitution. I stopped by coffeehouses habitually when doing field studies of farming villages and fishing villages. I ended up becoming interested in the functions and characteristics of coffeehouses, and that is how I noticed for the first time the presence of prostitution.

A full-fledged coffeehouse industry in Korea did not start until Japanese colonial rule. During the reform period in Korea just prior to the colonial period, black tea and coffee brought by Western diplomats spread amongst Korea's upper classes. Korea's first coffeehouse was attached to a hotel in Incheon, and the first such hotel-affiliated coffeehouse in Seoul was established in 1902 by Russian citizens of German descent. Modern-day coffeehouses began to appear following the March 1st Movement of 1919. It was after that that Japanese citizens took the lead in setting up Aokido coffeehouses and in the Chosun Hotel, followed by the opening of a modern-day coffeehouse around 1923 on Mount Geumgang. Coffeehouses next sprung up as cultural spaces for Korean entertainers, and prior to World War II, they had also become sites for hosting exhibitions and book publication parties as well as gathering places for unemployed people.

After the end of the Korean War the pre-war role played by coffeehouses as centers for cultural activity shifted. From 1960 and onwards, the coffeehouses, which were once run by intellectuals, expanded due to the appearance of a new business model based on a "madam" and the waitresses known in Korean as *agassi*. It was then that the coffeehouse business really took off.

In 1944, there were 60 coffeehouses in Seoul, but by 1955 there were 286. That number reached 1,041 in the year 1960 and then rose to 3,359 by the year 1977. The general setup of these coffeehouses involves one manager, two waitresses, one delivery man with a moped, and one male cook. When the manager hires a waitress, he first pays an employment agency a placement fee amounting to ten percent of her salary, and then upon bringing her to the

coffeehouse, he pays the waitress in advance for her first month of work. I was told that the coffeehouse waitresses are paid 1,200,000 won monthly with free room and board, and the fee paid to the employment agency is therefore 120,000 won. A Korean professor who I was travelling with mentioned to me that their salaries alone are somewhat higher than the starting wage of a university professor but are even more impressive when you take into account the free room and board.

The manager is responsible for bringing a madam and waitresses to the coffeehouse, but it is the madam who takes care of the waitresses. The madam plays the role of a big sister for the waitresses, giving them guidance on things like customer service, makeup application, and their on-duty hours. The madams also serve as emotional support for the waitresses, and I have been told that a madam may resign if she does not get along with the waitresses. Still, taking care of customers remains the primary duty of the madam.

The madam of a coffeehouse dresses in the traditional Korean women's garment known as the *chima jeogori* and her job is to entertain and chat with her regular clients. Madams with a good reputation will attract a great many customers. The madams and the waitresses are also sent out to take orders and deal with customers who want credit. This "madam system" had spread quickly throughout Korea, but now coffee shops similar to the ones in Japan have become popular in urban areas and madams are gradually being replaced by waiters. Even so, the madam system still persists in the countryside.

Nevertheless, coffeehouses remain important as places to rest or socialize, both in cities and the countryside. Their usual adult, male customers often visit coffeehouses several times each day, and those who become the regular client of a madam can freely take advantage of all the coffeehouse's services. Many people select one coffeehouse as their regular haunt, and in provincial cities the lineup of customers at any given coffeehouse is more or less fixed.

One challenging aspect of running a coffeehouse is competition with other stores. To prevent business from being taken by other coffeehouses in the neighborhood, coffeehouses do extra services for their customers and cultivate many regular clients. Even more troublesome is the fact that they must insist on on-the-spot cash payment rather than credit or else they won't make any money at all. Coffeehouses have had to expand above all into the field of direct coffee delivery in order to stay competitive. Direct coffee delivery was made a success through the use of delivery men on mopeds who carry the waitresses all over town. In some circumstances the waitresses themselves might drive the mopeds, and seeing them do their deliveries in the city is not unusual. It was the introduction of the moped into South Korea which made this new field of service feasible.

A coffeehouse that I will call "Coffeehouse R" told me that it does direct coffee deliveries to 130 locations in a day. The waitresses jump onto the back of mopeds driven by delivery men while carrying a coffee pot and coffee cups in their hands. In order to cover as much ground as possible, they plan out a route through several locations near to one another. After delivering coffee to the first customers on their route, they continue through the rest of their

rounds while the first ones are still drinking, and then backtrack in order to collect up all their coffee cups on the way back to the coffeehouse.

Such delivery orders come from many places including government offices, inns, eateries, and even individual homes. Sometimes single people at home or at an inn order enough coffee for several people, and I was told that the waitresses take special care for those occasions. It was then that I learned that some of these people were included in the "ticket" system. These tickets are a trade secret known only to their most trusted regular clients.

Photo Caption: A coffeehouse waitress (unrelated to the women described in this book) delivering coffee to a customer.

Listening to the waitresses' stories

When I tried to speak at length with a coffeehouse waitress for the purposes of my research a madam mentioned to me the "tickets," known informally as *bong*, and told me to use one. This is how I first discovered the ticket system.

Under the ticket system, a customer may have a waitress all to himself on an hourly basis. When a customer wants exclusive access to his favorite waitress or madam, he calls up the coffeehouse to order a ticket, and then the madam weighs the merits of the request based on things like whether or not the employee has enough time. If the madam approves the request, the customer is charged by the hour. The price varies somewhat between coffeehouses, but it tends to be roughly 20,000 won per hour. It was explained to me that, officially, the tickets exist to respond to those customers who want a chance to eat and drink with their favorite waitress or madam, but in practice the system has attracted social criticism for being connected to prostitution.

This matter would later become widely known through the popularity of the 1986 movie *Ticket*, directed by Im Gwon-taek, which takes up the subject. In this film, Ji-suk (played by Kim Jee-Mi) was the wife of a dissident writer but is now involved in the sex trade and is bringing waitresses to a port city in Gangwon Province, where she runs a coffeehouse. One of them is Se-young (played by Jeon Se-young), who has never worked as a coffeehouse waitress before and is scolded by Ji-suk when she refuses a request from her customer. Se-young's boyfriend Min-su, who is a university student, visits her and tells her that he cannot pay his tuition and will have quit university. Se-young tells him that she will find the money, and while searching for some way to do so she becomes intimate with Captain Pak. Min-su ends up finding out about Se-young's relationship with Captain Pak and breaks up with her. Ji-suk meets with Min-su, but does not succeed at convincing him to reconsider.

Coffeehouse waitresses prostitute themselves during coffee deliveries because of their money worries, which sometimes stem from the need to support their families.

When I was walking through the islands of South Jeolla Province, there were a lot of coffeehouses with signs stuck on their entranceways reading "Our coffeehouse does not accept tickets." I decided to investigate several of these places.

"Coffeehouse T" was reputed to treat its employers better than any of the nine coffeehouses clustered around the local town hall. The madam was paid a salary of 1,500,000 won and the waitresses were paid a salary of 1,400,000 won. It did not have any delivery men with mopeds, so it didn't do long-distance deliveries and instead just had the waitresses do deliveries on foot to locations near the coffeehouse.

Although this coffeehouse also had a sign reading "Our coffeehouse does not accept tickets," I was told that, in fact, sales of tickets, priced at 10,000 won per hour, accounted for twenty to thirty percent of their sales. I heard that on one day the coffeehouse ultimately made 200,000 won, of which about fifty percent were from deliveries, thirty to forty percent from in-store sales, and twenty percent from tickets. The cost of a ticket is paid entirely to the madam and is later received by the waitress as part of her monthly salary. Still, the waitresses are able to make good money from tickets. Depending on their own skill, waitresses may also receive tips completely independent of their regular salary. I was told that the tips known as "bathroom charges," which waitresses get directly from customers in exchange for sexual services, amount to a hefty sum of money. On deliveries, the waitresses told me that they do not have any set regular clients, but instead take orders from anywhere they receive them.

One woman of twenty-nine years, who I will call "Lady G," had become a coffeehouse waitress and, after only two years, came to "Coffeehouse T" for a 1,400,000 won advance payment received via her employment agency in Gwangju. The manager of the coffeehouse had paid her employment agency a grand total of 1,600,000 won which was her advance payment plus a 200,000 placement fee. What's more, "Lady G" requested an additional 5,000,000 won advance on her salary so the manager loaned her the money. Because there are so few people willing to work as coffeehouse waitresses, the manager complied with her request, and giving her a loan was also a form of security so that she would work there for a long time.

Despite this, there are various reasons why most coffeehouse waitresses do not stick to any one job for long. In cases when a waitress quits within three months, the next employer simply ends up assuming her debt. In Seoul, there is a system where coffeehouse waitresses start work at 9:00 AM, go home at 10:00 PM, and then get a day off, and these waitresses might make a monthly salary around 850,000 won. In addition, even though coffeehouse waitresses make high wages in the countryside, they can still run into problems here as well. For instance, if they do not undergo a physical examination for things like STDs every six months then they will not receive a certificate of good health and will not be able to continue working.

The ticket system generally applies to times between 8:00 AM to 9:00 PM and waitresses can make good money during this period. I have been told that the waitresses do not want to work

outside this period, especially between 11:00 PM and 1:00 AM, when they would have to service drunk men from bars and restaurants.

These restaurants do not hire their own coffeehouse-style waitresses because their labor costs are already high, but often make transactions by borrowing such waitresses from coffeehouses. When the coffeehouse waitresses receive an order from a restaurant they are supposed to take it whether they like it or not, but the normal number of ticket requests they receive are more than three times what they can handle. Some of their customers do disgusting things to them or make unreasonable demands, and at those times the waitresses respond by refusing tips even when offered them. There are some customers who refuse to pay at all even after they have had sex with the waitress, but as troublesome as that is the waitresses cannot report them since prostitution is illegal, and they have no choice but to put up with it. Some customers are also delinquent in their payments when ordering coffee, but here the waitresses have legal recourse and can resolve the problem.

Coffeehouse waitress "Lady K," age thirty-one, at first went by her real family name, but in Yeonggwang County she used a different name, as well as another different name in "Coffeehouse T". In this business there are very few people who go by their family names, as is normal in Korea, but rather they often use just their first names. Coffeehouses waitresses stick with one name once they select it, changing it only if another person with the same name comes to their coffeehouse or if they are rejected in love. In the former case, I am told that the new arrival will switch to a different family name and use that. Almost all the waitresses keep either their real first name or their real last names, and few will adopt an entirely fabricated alias.

"Lady K" spent ten months in a coffeehouse on an island in South Jeolla Province and then went on to work in the South Jeolla counties of Jangheung, Yeongam, Gurye, and Jindo before coming to Gwansan. Like "Lady G," her transfers were arranged through an employment agency in Gwangju. There are numerous such employment agencies in Gwangju, seven to be precise, but "Lady K" has done all her work with just one of them. In the past, "Lady K" had relied on a woman who sold cosmetics to take care of her job transfers from coffeehouse to coffeehouse, but now she almost invariably uses an employment agency.

The women who get into the coffeehouse business as waitresses come, by and large, from bars. Girls from the countryside who have run away from home or women who have been involved in prostitution start out working in bars and then later switch to coffeehouses in the hopes of finding somewhat more respectable work. Coffeehouses are their preferred form of employment because, unlike bars, a coffeehouse is a daytime job and their customers want normal relationships with them, possibly even marriage. In other words, it's said that a job as a coffeehouse waitress might even evolve into a marriage into a good family. Each and every coffeehouse has its own stories, passed from one person to the next like folklore, about waitresses who succeeded at finding a husband at that very coffeehouse. I was told at one coffeehouse that a waitress got married to a rich and kind man just a few days ago. He had left

his home when his wife had cheated on him and left home. Then he found at this coffeehouse a woman, skilled at housework and was good with children, who he married, and now they live happily ever after.

Seeking marriage

There are many coffeehouse waitresses who aspire to get married but there are not very many suitable partners for them. A "suitable partner" needs to be both rich and kind. The waitresses do not want to continue living in a farm town. They would like to marry a businessman. The danger that they might become victims of human trafficking does exist, but it does not extinguish their dreams of marriage. There are indeed many people who will enjoy a good married life, but, by and large, marriage for coffeehouse waitress is not easy. Even if they do find a suitable partner, objections might come from friends and family and terrible arguments might occur. The percentage of such marriages that actually go off without a hitch is extremely low. Because of this, there is a general tendency for people to look down on the coffeehouse waitresses who walk about with their coffeepots in hand.

One waitress joined a coffeehouse after divorcing her abusive husband and was paying someone else 300,000 won a month in child care expenses to raise her children.

A talented waitress with many years of experience might become a madam, but being a madam is a difficult job with considerable responsibilities attached, so many people remain coffeehouse waitresses even into their thirties. "Lady K" is also still working as a coffeehouse waitress, though she mentioned that she wouldn't mind becoming a madam. She stated that she does not want to get married because all men are two-faced and unfaithful. She insisted that no matter how well-behaved a man looks, he will show his beastly side sooner or later.

According to "Lady K," seventy percent of the customers who come to her coffeehouse are old men, many of whom want to grope the waitresses. She said that it is rather tiresome dealing with their many stock questions like "How old are you?" and "Where are you from?" She added that younger men are honest and do not usually act like that, so they are better customers. Women also come to the coffeehouse, either together with a man or with other women, but they never come alone.

"Lady K" told me that the best customers bring a lot of friends, talk quietly, and leave in a short period of time. Those who do the opposite cause inconvenience, such as people who come alone, sit around for a long time, and do things that get on the nerves of the waitresses. Some customers say crude things to the waitresses, but the ones who are basically good-natured do not leave a bad impression even if their language is bad. What the waitresses really hate are people who speak kindly but have cold hearts. In small villages, some customers use coffeehouses as their set meeting places due to their friendships with the manager and might bring in a lot of other people with them, but there are other customers with no fixed loyalties who will pop into any coffeehouse.

Even though their salaries are fixed, coffeehouse waitresses strive mightily to raise their sales. As their line of work has many challenges, being able to improve their sales gives coffeehouse waitresses a sense of job satisfaction.

However, "Lady K" had a few bitter experiences in her job. There were a lot of violent men at the port near where she worked. They had vulgar mouths and vulgar hands, often trying to grope the waitresses. When they got a ticket some of them thought they could do whatever they wanted to the waitresses and demanded sex right away. One day a man twenty-seven years of age bought his own ticket and then closely watched her reaction as he poured liquor onto a watermelon and tried to force her to drink it. When she refused and went back to the coffeehouse, the man angrily phoned up the madam and told her that "Lady K" was not a good employee. When things like this happen it is customarily the job of the madam to stand up for her waitresses, and it is also a test of the madam's authority, as the verbal abuse that she can dish out to an adversary is proof of her experience. A good madam will give her customer a real tongue lashing in order to settle the situation.

Some have even said that in coffeehouses, it is not the customer, but the waitress who is always right. Even so, I have been told that when a coffeehouse waitress has no work she goes back home, naturally telling her parents that she is on leave from the factory, and in this relaxed atmosphere might doze right off for twenty-four straight hours. At these times the waitresses sometime also meet up individually with people from their coffeehouse and form a mutual finance group with them.

"Lady A," thirty years of age, did not tell me her family name. She was a madam who never let her guard down. When I asked her if she made a monthly salary of about 1,500,000 won she replied, "I made that for three years in Jindo and later came here. I chose this coffeehouse because all the customers who come here are well-behaved." Though she refused outright to permit any photography or answer any questions about the coffeehouse, she did provide me with some information.

Her coffeehouse sold tickets at 20,000 won for a two-hour block, and she also informed me of the meaning of *bong*, the slang word for a ticket. The word came into use because when the waitresses went to spend an hour with their customer they brought five energy drinks called *bong*, which were sold for 2,000 won each.

The madams manage the waitresses' time, but they don't have the right to appoint personnel or other such administrative duties. "Lady A" was also kind enough to offer me the perspective of the coffeehouse manager, who was having problems with the mounting labor costs of paying for the coffeehouse's four waitresses. She mentioned that they also have to occasionally deal with the problem of waitresses who take their advance payments and then run off. Her remarks were consistent with her role as a supervisor of the waitresses and gave me a rather different impression from what I heard from the waitresses themselves.

This brings me to an explanation of the direct coffee delivery service, one of the defining characteristics of a Korean coffeehouse, which can perhaps also be seen as an extension of the issues I have already discussed above. The subtext which strongly underlies this service is not so much the delivery of coffee, but the dispatching of a woman. Very few restaurants in South Korea do direct deliveries. Though farmers sometimes bring takeout back to their places of work, the restaurants themselves do not do delivery. There are Chinese restaurants which are starting up such services, but apart from that it is fair to say that delivery service is virtually nonexistent in Korea's restaurants and bars. Coffee delivery remains the big exception.

Coffee delivery in Korea today is reminiscent of its popularity in the Middle East in medieval times. Ralph Hattox wrote the following in his 1985 book *Coffee and coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*.

"The coffeehouse... was in essence a 'take-out' shop, usually located in a commercial area, for the convenience of those doing business in the markets. It might have been nothing more than a tiny cubicle, where coffee was prepared and then put into the hands of those menials who carried it to the various shops in the market for the refreshment of the merchants and the clients they were cultivating. The custom, as those who have been in the markets or offices anywhere in the Near East well know, is still very much alive. It is not at all uncommon to see young men or boys, employees of the coffee stall itself or, more usually, employees of the individual concerns, hustling through the streets and alleys carrying cups and single-serving sized pots on a tray..."