Public Space in Urban Asia

Public Space in Urban Asia gives a compelling insight into the research conducted by the Asian Urban Lab. The lab, as led by chairman William S.W. Lim and co-directors Sharon Siddique and Dan Fenh, is an attempt to align “the best local and international thinking on spatial justice to the particularities of various specific Asian conditions” (p.11).

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Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam

Sex trafficking is a hot topic in international politics today. Millions of dollars of international monetary and in-kind aid flows flow into Southeast Asia to stop the trade in women and children. Yet the literature on trafficking in Southeast Asia tends to treat it as a modern development and, as a result, some aspects of forced migration and forced prostitution have been grossly misunderstood.

Christina Fipgo


Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam is the first in-depth historical study of trafficking in Vietnam. Drawing on a vast base of empirical evidence from 19th and early 20th century missionary reports, military documents, newspaper stories, diplomatic correspondences, and reports from the domestic colonial government, Lessard explores a large scale trafficking networks that sold women and children within Vietnam or to China and Hong Kong, where they would ultimately be sold into marriage, prostitution, or domestic servitude. Lessard argues that while trafficking networks predated French colonial rule, colonialism exacerbated the trade. War, state monopolies on goods and opium, and social norms in which women and girls were both “prized and preyed upon” (p.7) helped conditions in which a black market that traded kidnapped women and girls flourished.

The first chapter explores missionary experiences with human trafficking networks. Lessard contextualizes missionary writings on trafficking in a time when Catholic priests aggressively sought converts and the French government launched colonizing missions and established a border with China. Conflating Catholic missionaries with colonial forces, Lessard explores a large scale trafficking networks that sold women and children within Vietnam or to China and Hong Kong, where they would ultimately be sold into marriage, prostitution, or domestic servitude. Lessard argues that while trafficking networks predated French colonial rule, colonialism exacerbated the trade. War, state monopolies on goods and opium, and social norms in which women and girls were both “prized and preyed upon” (p.7) helped conditions in which a black market that traded kidnapped women and girls flourished.

Chapter 2 investigates kidnappings and trafficking that occurred within the context of the pacification of Tonkin in the second half of the 19th century. Lessard draws on military accounts, newspaper stories, and travelers’ memoirs of their experience with trafficking in Tonkin, a politically volatile region during this time period. Trafficking of women and children that occurred in this period offered low-cost solutions to the heavy expenses associated with military activity in the area. Hostilities between highlanders and ethnic Vietnamese fueled the kidnappings, and victims were sold into the opium trade. After the Tai Ping rebellion in China, bandit groups migrated into northern Vietnam and attacked villages for survival. The Nguyen government eventually copped some of the bandits and used them to fight the French military as it took over Tonkin. Within this context, kidnapped women and children proved to be valuable commodities that were easily traded for opium and weapons.

The third chapter focuses on trafficking incidents discovered by the French consul to China or discovered by merchant marine vessels or customs and borders agents, both of which were accountable to the command of the consulate in cases of human trafficking. The French consul was then responsible for repatriating victims, yet, as Lessard shows, repatriations catalyzed diplomatic problems when Chinese men claimed rights to Vietnamese women and children. The French consul attempted to control these networks of Vietnamese women by strictly regulating departure permits for Vietnamese or Chinese women traveling to China and checking ships that departed from Hanian.

The final chapter examines the pressures that human trafficking placed on the colonial government in Indochina. With newspapers reporting horrifying cases of beatings and victims being thrown overboard, France’s inability to stop traffickers from crossing borders or using colonial ports and coastland embarrassed the French colonial government. Vietnamese intellectuals criticized the colonial state for the hypocrisy of justifying colonialism with claims to ‘protect’ its subjects. As much of the trafficking trade was run by Chinese gangs, these discourses in part articulated Chinese fears and claims that the colonial state was too soft on the Chinese community.

Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam is a thorough investigation into the political, diplomatic, and economic conditions in which the market for women and girls flourished during the colonial period. With incredible detail drawn from an array of sources — some known to historians and many previously uncovered — Lessard proves that human trafficking is not a modern concept in Vietnam and indeed has a long history in Indochina. One of the strengths of this book is that the author is notably satisfied with using the term “human trafficking.” Instead, Lessard asks hard epidemiological questions of her sources. As she approaches the topic of trafficking from the viewpoint of missionaries, military men, the consulate to China, and high-ranking colonial authorities, she is careful to critique the biases of these sources as well as to evaluate how likely a source was to have experienced trafficking networks or victims themselves. This book will prove essential for the study of human trafficking — both academic and applied. It will be useful for both undergraduate and graduate courses in Asian history, French history, and gender studies. It should be a mandatory read for aid workers who focus on trafficking in Vietnam and China.

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