

South Korea

Elisabeth Schober, *Base Encounters: The U.S. Armed Forces in South Korea*

London: Pluto Press, 2016. 240 pages. Hardcover, \$83.93; paperback, \$33; eBook \$26.40. ISBN: 9780745336107 (hardcover); 9780745336053 (paperback); 9781783717712 (eBook).

The presence of large numbers of American soldiers posted at a series of military bases scattered throughout South Korea since the Korean War has often caused friction between Americans and local communities. Entertainment districts near American military installations have had their share of confrontations and controversies between US soldiers and residents in or near these areas. Crimes or alleged misdeeds by American military personnel in these entertainment areas have attracted sharp protests by South Koreans, who often resent the presence of so many foreign troops in their land. Elisabeth Schober brings an anthropologist's eye to the unique world of young American GIs and their involvement with Koreans. Her focus is the entertainment areas near several American bases in South Korea where young male American military personnel mingle with young Korean women for temporary companionship and sex.

Schober frames her study noting: "The long-term stationing of United States forces in South Korea created an exceptionally pernicious triangle involving foreign soldiers, local women, and native men. Acrimonious sentiments triggered by the issue of camp-town prostitution were amplified into a matter that touched upon vital national questions and have been carried forward through time, affecting ever new generations and urban spaces" (162). Schober divides her book into seven chapters. The first two chapters present a history of American bases in South Korea, the creation of nearby entertainment zones for American GIs, an introduction to some of the tensions that have developed in these areas, and a history of the nation's steady march from an impoverished dictatorship to a wealthy democracy. Chapter 3 looks at several violent incidents where American soldiers have inflicted harm on Korean women and how these incidents have enraged Koreans nationwide. Chapters 4 and 5 study entertainment zones at bases in the outer fringes of Korea and in the capital of Seoul. Chapter 6, which is followed by a broad conclusion, looks at the creation of newer entertainment zones in Seoul and elsewhere that provide an alternative to the older entertainment areas.

The Korean peninsula is one of the most heavily militarized sectors in the world, with nearly 30,000 American soldiers stationed there. Schober focuses on the tensions between American soldiers and Koreans through her exploration of the lives of soldiers, sex workers, and anti-base activists, who use any mishap between soldiers and sex workers as an excuse to hold large demonstrations against the American presence. The result is a comprehensive introduction to the social, economic, and political factors that have shaped the tensions over American bases in South Korea.

Throughout the book, Schober keeps coming back to what is now viewed as the quintessential "GI crime," the gruesome murder of a young Korean prostitute, Yun Küm-I, by an American private on October 28, 1992. This event came to "represent people's imaginations in South Korea of what US soldiers are potentially capable of. . . . At that time . . . the death of Mrs. Yun served as a starting point for widespread public agitations that would reappear with each new transgression of US military personnel and their dependents" (10–11). From this event comes the central question

of this work: “How and why did it happen that the figure of one murdered woman was turned into such a powerful stand-in for a nation perceived to be under constant duress? And which processes were at work in this particular transformation of individual biography into social text that this murder case would give rise to, allowing the emergence of a new, highly successful nationalist frame on the US military presence in the country?” (64).

South Korea is a young nation progressing toward mature nationhood, and the presence of troops from an alien land is a reminder of their own potential weakness. As one nationalist group once noted, “Yun’s mutilated body was material evidence of imperialist violence against the bodies of Korean women. These bodies were allegorized as the ‘victimized’ and ‘suffering’ Korean nation. The body of Yun . . . became a metaphorical boundary for the nation” (69). Yun’s murder provoked a growing anti-base movement among several leftwing forces that had traditionally been concerned with nationalist issues. Stories of sexual exploitation of Korean sex workers in these entertainment zones near US bases were “at times used as all-too- neat allegories for the suffering of the Korean nation as a whole” (78). A parallel problem for many South Koreans is that sexual activities between Korean women and American men “have literally exposed the Korean nation to the greatest threat: that of miscegenation. The sex workers are often understood to be the very embodiment of that peril of treacherous mixing, and this is particularly true for those women who have given birth to children fathered by US soldiers” (80). Matters are further complicated by the recent entry of entertainers from other countries, including women from the Philippines and Russia who have, to a small degree, replaced Korean women in some of these entertainment zones. These and other issues discussed by Schober fill this comprehensive and well-researched study.

This study is one of the first of its kind—a serious and comprehensive study of a clash of cultures in a stressful military zone. It is a careful case study of how a nation might react against the prolonged presence of foreign troops on its soil, even if those troops are there for the protection of that nation. What happens in South Korea occurs elsewhere as well. The rape of a twelve-year-old Japanese girl in Okinawa by several American soldiers, for example, led to angry demonstrations across Japan, and there have been angry encounters between American soldiers and locals in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other parts of the Middle East. Historically, colonial powers, during their heyday, have experienced similar situations with the local populations under their control who did not appreciate the prolonged presence of foreign troops.

Base Encounters is a highly original and important work that will serve many different constituencies. It is precisely the kind of book that US policymakers and commanders in the field should read to better handle human relations crises in South Korea, Japan, and anywhere else American troops are stationed. It would be a worthwhile text in graduate-level international relations classes, serving as a case study of the problems that can evolve when a major power stations troops in a foreign land, and the powerful forces of nationalism that are pushed to the fore because of their presence. Journalists would do well to study this book carefully before accepting assignments in East Asia, the Middle East, or anywhere else foreign troops are stationed.

My only objection to this fine work is in the layout of the text. The printing is so small that reading through the text can be a real chore.

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