Shih E. (2023) *Manufacturing Freedom: Sex Work, Anti-Trafficking Rehab, and the Racial Wages of Rescue*. University of California Press.

Review by **Christopher R. Martin**

A jewelry party at a suburban Southern California house sounds like a nice occasion. A couple dozen guests, takeout from a local Thai restaurant to eat, and original handmade pieces – pearl bracelets from $30 to $50, earrings with semiprecious stones for about $20, and necklaces for up to $75. Oftentimes the attendees end up buying a few pieces. The jewelry looks fine, and there is kind of a quid pro quo for these events – I came to your house and ate your food, so I should return the favor and buy a piece or two. Maybe I could give them as gifts to friends.

But this party isn't a gig for Avon or any number of direct-sales jewelry companies. This merchandise has a higher purpose. These are "slave-free goods," and the party attendees, assembled through their local evangelical Christian church, are visually moved by the video screened and stories of how victims rescued from sex trafficking in Bangkok are given new, meaningful lives as jewelry makers. The party makes about $2000 in two hours, which supports Cowboy Rescue, the American organization that hosts the event.

This is another case of the American practice of ethical consumption: buy some cool handmade jewelry at a house party and support the rescue and productive employment of formerly trafficked women in Thailand. Problem solved!

Not so fast, writes Elena Shih in her book, *Manufacturing Freedom: Sex Work, Anti-Trafficking Rehab, and the Racial Wages of Rescue.* The book is the winner of the Working-Class Studies Association's C.L.R. James Award. (Full disclosure: I was one of the judges, and re-reading the book for this review, I appreciate it even more.)

Shih writes from a great deal of experience. Now an assistant professor of American Studies and Ethnic Studies at Brown University, Shih tracked "slave-free jewelry" from Los Angeles, its primary site of consumption, to Beijing and Bangkok, where it is produced. Shih explains that "slave-free goods" are an "emergent niche market created by the global anti-trafficking movement in the early 2000s."

In China and Thailand's capitals, Shih embedded herself as a participant-volunteer, doing three years of fieldwork and gaining access to various parties in the movement: "government officials, the United Nations, consumers, NGO workers, activists, trafficking survivors, and sex workers." Seeing what happened inside the anti-trafficking organizations, her views began to change.

"Although I started my fieldwork optimistic about jewelry making as a form of cultural activism, as I immersed myself in the participant observation on the shop floor, workers seemed to interrogate the confusing duality between manual labor and spiritual reform," she writes. "By my third summer of research, I often raised questions with activists, but found them to be quickly shot down, or…co-opted sometimes to enact more rigid surveillance on workers."

The problem, she finds, is us – the consumers, the U.S. government and anti-trafficking vigilantes. Since around 2000, the U.S. government has taken a special interest in the topic, and Shih calls the U.S. the "self-appointed global sheriff of anti-trafficking efforts" around the world. Each year, the Department of State issues the TIP (Trafficking in Persons) Report, which ranks each nation on compliance with anti-trafficking standards. If a country gets downgraded in the report, it can be subject to sanctions by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

But this bureaucratic approach isn't enough for America's self-styled anti-traffickers. Shih devotes an entire chapter to "Vigilante Humanitarianism in Thailand," groups of fervent civilian Americans like Tim Ballard and his Operation Underground Railroad who bring their raid-and-rescue operations to developing countries with little or no state accountability. Shih reminds us of Ballard's supporters, like conservative commentator Glenn Beck, who traveled to Thailand with Ballard and his wife in 2017 and reported the journey on his radio program. (In 2023, after Shih's book was published, Ballard stepped down from the group he founded after allegations of sexual abuse, and in 2024, six women brought federal sexual assault charges against him. Ballard, the heroic figure of a Hollywood movie about his work, had pulled in $50 million annually in donations, the *New York Times* reported.)

Shih rightly finds a lot of hidden motivations and reproduced old-order colonial relations in all of this. "Profit and religious proselytization become invisible as motives when shrouded in the sentimentality of entrepreneurship and rehabilitation as pathways to 'freedom'."

Shih's careful analysis of the anti-trafficking rescue industry finds several failings. First, the anti-traffickers conflate commercial sex work, in which workers "do not consider themselves 'victims of trafficking,'" and actual sex trafficking, where people might be kidnapped and pressed into labor. Secondly, Shih explains that "cases of nonsexual-labor trafficking far exceed those of sex trafficking," yet most U.S. anti-trafficking groups "have magnetically been drawn to *sex* trafficking." Third, the "rescued" workers are put into jobs where they have little autonomy, and certainly no opportunities for labor organizing. The minimum wage jobs offered by American anti-trafficking rehabilitation organizations can require additional "repentant labor," including Bible study and church worship, and their off-work social connections are tightly surveilled. Ultimately, the vocational training "does not offer pathways to long-term social mobility or economic independence." Instead, Shih says, it "reproduces low-wage women's work by seeking to replace the sale of sex with the sale of jewelry."

In sum, the rescuers come off as the imperial power, pushing Western religion and low wages on the people they "rescue." Shih concludes that a better path for more accountability and less worker exploitation would be for the U.S. to instead support worker organizing in the Asia-Pacific region, rather than "allocating additional power to governments, corporations, and consumers." The U.S.

anti-trafficking organizations that Shih investigated reported nearly $200 million in annual revenues. That would be a good start for helping workers organize.

Shih's book is smart one. In her deep ethnographic fieldwork, she listened to the actual workers, and her message offers a profound reconsideration of the "rescue" work that on first glance seemed to have so much moral clarity.

Reviewer Bio

Christopher R. Martin is professor of Digital Journalism in the Department of Communication and Media at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, Iowa. He is author of *No Longer Newsworthy: How the Mainstream Media Abandoned the Working Class* (Cornell University Press, 2019), winner of the 2020 C.L.R. James Award from the Working-Class Studies Association.