

# Child Trafficking in China: Who are Female Perpetrators?

Dr. Anqi Shen  
Teesside  
University

## Abstract

Trafficking in children is a long-lasting social problem in China. While evidence shows that the majority of child trafficking incidents in the country involve women as perpetrators, females' involvement in the illicit trade is underrepresented. This short essay focuses on women perpetrators in child trafficking in China. It intends to explore who female traffickers are, what motivates women to engage in child trafficking, how they access children, and what role they play in the trafficking processes. By examining female child traffickers, this essay hopes to look deeper into the child trafficking trade and to gain an in-depth understanding of the problem so as to help find better solutions to respond to it.

## Introduction

Trafficking in children is a long-lasting, nationwide social problem prevalent in China's history. Traditionally, children are placed in a subordinate social and familial position in China, and it is culturally accepted that adults hold a superior position over children. In pre-liberation China, children were regarded as the property of their parents and subjected to abuses. Domestic abuses against children were justified under parental authority. Despite increasing emphasis placed on child protection in policy and practice since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), children's status is still discounted, especially in the country's underdeveloped rural areas.

Causes of child trafficking in China are complex, and the social ill is the product of the interplay between multiple deeply rooted traditional, cultural, and socioeconomic factors, as well as some negative effects of public policy. Child trafficking remains a social problem in the reform era. Often, the Population Planning Policy (*jihua shengyu zhengce*), formerly known as the "One Child Policy", is believed to be the cause of child trafficking in China. However, given the long history of the problem in the country, the population control policy certainly is not a root cause of child trafficking, although it has facilitated the child trade by creating further demand for children in the criminal market.

Trafficking in children, like human trafficking as a whole, is a complex and variegated social phenomenon. This short essay focuses only on one dimension of child trafficking in China – female perpetrators. It intends to explore who female child traffickers are; what motivates them to engage in the child trade; how they access children; and what role they play in the trafficking processes. Understanding perpetrators' – in this case, female traffickers' – motivations and operational behaviour

helps us to gain deep insights into the illicit human trade and helps to work out how the problem can be better tackled at both policy and practical levels.

Who are female child traffickers?

Official documentations, news reports, and academic studies (e.g., Shen et. al., 2013) all indicate that the majority of trafficking incidents involve women as perpetrators, and women appear to play a recognizable role throughout the trafficking processes. Who are female child traffickers, then?

Existing research (e.g., Ren 1996; Shen 2015, 2016; Zhao 2003) consistently suggests that female human traffickers in China are often poorly educated rural women, many of whom are illiterate. They are typically mature women, with a narrow vision, and limited life experiences. In a recent study I conducted of female perpetrators in child trafficking (Shen 2016), the majority of the women traffickers were originally from impoverished, remote, mountainous regions in Yunnan and Guizhou provinces, who were either rural migrant workers in the city or peasant farmers residing in their birthplaces prior to their arrests. The study forges a link between these women's poor education and lack of life experiences and their involvement in child trafficking. Two interpretations can be offered.

First, poor education limits the rural women's ability to judge right from wrong, especially in areas with moral ambiguities, such as the child trade. Traditional Chinese culture values family ties. In this cultural context, enabling a full family unit with parents and children (sons and daughters)

is traditionally viewed as a social good. It is, therefore, difficult for poorly educated individuals to understand that trading children as commodities is the wrong way of valuing them. My research (Shen 2015) shows that female child traffickers commonly failed to recognize that trafficking in children violates the fundamental rights of those children as human beings and is thus unacceptable.

Second, illiteracy and inadequate education prevent people from gaining knowledge as to the nature and consequences of their wrongdoing, which would otherwise have enabled better informed decision-making. While information about human trafficking – detailing such things as the illegality of the child trade and its legal consequences – is widely available in the popular media, ironically, the populations who most need this information are unable to access it through these media channels. Public education does not seem to reach the populations who most need the awareness of human trafficking and trafficking laws – those who live in the remote, mountainous areas where there are technical difficulties communicating with the villagers; rural migrants who are highly mobilized from one place to another in the city are also excluded. As demonstrated in my 2015 study (Shen 2015), quite often the female traffickers were first-time offenders, who were unaware, for example, that taking a baby from one place to another for others could amount to trafficking and result in a long-term prison sentence.

What are women's motivations for trafficking in children?

Evidence in official, journalistic, and academic discourses indicates that women (and men) are typically driven by economic incentives to engage in child trafficking, although their circumstances vary and direct causes differ.

China's economic reforms in the past few decades have led to unprecedented economic growth, as well as a highly polarized society: a small number of super-rich at the top, and a sizable number of impoverished citizens at the bottom. This impoverished population subsists merely on the agricultural produce from the small pieces of land they own. Money-making opportunities are considerably constrained for peasant farmers in the remote, underdeveloped regions of China.

Since the start of China's economic reforms, rural labor surplus – men and women – have been encouraged to go and find jobs in the city. At the same time, the rural-urban divide that was institutionalized in the Maoist era remains unchanged. It means that under the household registration scheme (*hukou zhidu*), the rural population does not enjoy state welfare such as social housing, medical care, and other social security provisions to which their urban brothers and sisters are entitled. With the existing patchy social security system, people of rural status (e.g., peasant farmers and rural migrants), including women, are left on their own to deal with their life problems.

My research into female child traffickers (Shen 2016) shows that there was a general shortage of money among the women who were involved in the child trade, and these women often committed the crime in exchange for just a little bit of cash. On some occasions, there were urgent financial needs; in other cases, the criminal proceeds of female perpetrators were spent on day-to-day household expenses, such as food and groceries. While financial gain through participating in child trafficking was not guaranteed, the convicted female child traffickers admitted that their motivation was simply to earn money and they had little alternative choice. Clearly, due to a lack of social and financial resources, these women had limited opportunities to generate wealth and turn their lives around. However, the doors to the criminal markets were wide open to them. Child trafficking is one illicit route to money generation, and the aforementioned female perpetrators chose to take it. But how do women gain access to the trafficked victims? What role do they play in child trafficking?

What role do women play in the child trafficking processes?

The existing evidence shows that the supply of children in the illicit market comes from a variety of channels: illegal adoption, abduction by deception, and kidnapping. Illegal adoption appears to be common in child trafficking cases in China. It is not unusual that parents are found to give away their unwanted children or even sell them for illicit gain. According to a 2015 study conducted by *China's Southern Metropolis Daily*, over 40 percent of the court cases in their study involved trafficked children who were sold by their own biological parents.

With a few exceptions, women typically play various supplementary roles in the child trafficking processes. My study (Shen 2015) suggests that female participants were largely involved in handling new-born babies who were abandoned, given away, or sold by their own parents. Apparently, accessing these children did not require significant capital investment or the use of violence. Therefore, there were virtually no barriers for women to enter the child trade. Sheltering and transporting babies was certainly unchallenging for the female traffickers who were mothers and had brought up their own children. However, the sale of children is rarely a one-person job in the criminal market, and “middlemen” are often needed to go between buyers and sellers. These middlemen can be professional traffickers or opportunistic one-off merchants known to one or both parties of the transaction. Again, women are not barred from playing a role in this stage of the trafficking processes, and even illiteracy is not a barrier (Shen 2015, 2016).

Generally, the child trade is profitable. However, not everyone involved in it can be guaranteed to make a fortune. There is not any current evidence to indicate how many traffickers are financially successful or how much an individual trafficker can make from the buying and selling of children. I found that the women traffickers who participated in my study (Shen 2015) were typically “unsuccessful players” in child trafficking. Even those who obtained children independently had to rely on others to complete the transactions, and they had little say about how much they could get paid. And not everyone had a fair share of the proceeds in the criminal market of the child trade: Often, uneducated and inexperienced rural women were the unlucky “losers” in the transaction and tended to be bullied by sophisticated, professional traffickers. At times, these same women became easy targets for law enforcement (Shen 2015, 2016).

The popular media tends to depict child trafficking as an organized criminal enterprise. In many journalists’ analysis, traffickers are described as “sophisticated”, and terminology such as “criminal gangs” tends to be used (e.g., *BBC News*, 11 March 2015). However, the extent to which child traffickers are organized is an empirical and theoretical question that requires robust academic inquiries in order to find answers. My research (Shen 2015) shows that among criminal partners in the child trafficking business, women tend to rely on only one or two personal contacts – brothers, sisters, brothers/sisters-in-law, cousins, and acquaintances from their same village or known through occasional work. They might not have formed any “structure” as such. Women traffickers identified in that study were amateur, uncalculated, and unsophisticated. In general, these female traffickers were ordinary women living at the bottom of society in reformed China. While it is this category of women traffickers who are often arrested, convicted, and incarcerated, there exist better organized professional traffickers with the skills and sophistication that allow them to remain undetected.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, child trafficking is a hideous crime. It violates the fundamental rights of children by selling them as commodities in the markets. Also, the child trade in which children are goods on sale gives rise to abuses and degrading treatment of those vulnerable victims by adult traffickers. However, rather than offering a general account of the various dimensions of child trafficking in China, this essay pays attention to women who are involved in child trafficking as perpetrators to look deeper

into the illicit trade and gain an in-depth and more nuanced understanding of the problem so as to help find better solutions to respond to it.

Female traffickers, as the evidence shows, are often peasant farmers and rural migrants, who are typically members of China's marginalized and disadvantaged social groups. These women are, of course, criminal offenders under the trafficking laws, but at the same time, they are also victims of rapid social changes and of social and gendered inequalities in an increasingly marketized China. Because legitimate money-making opportunities are not readily available to them, some of these women turn to the criminal markets and engage in an illicit trade that they can manage to access and function within.

Hence, child trafficking in China is essentially a problem of social inequality. The continuation of this social evil should also be attributed to the criminogenic effects of the capitalist practices in post-Mao reform era. Toughening trafficking laws and imposing harsh sentences on child traffickers are not solutions to this problem. Describing female child traffickers as ruthless and sophisticated women is unhelpful, too, as it does nothing but make harsh penalties palatable for women who, like men, are already subject to long-term imprisonment under the existing criminal law.

In order to tackle the historical problem of child trafficking in China, public policy should be reviewed, and radical reform in certain areas may be inevitable. For example, emphasis should be placed not only on law enforcement crackdowns, but also on creating opportunities for disadvantaged women and the disadvantaged Chinese population as a whole. Efforts must be made to develop the state welfare system so that it applies equally to everyone in the country. All of society must work together to tackle poverty and find ways of diverting individuals belonging to disadvantaged and marginalized social groups from drifting into the criminal markets. Furthermore, it is vital to widely promote cultural and legal awareness about human trafficking, while at the same time reforming the country's adoption services to reduce the demand for illegal adoptions. In addition, government-sponsored research on human trafficking in general, and child trafficking in particular, is urgently needed in China. Continued research is an important tool in addressing fundamental questions about human trafficking, as well as playing an essential role in the design of countermeasures against this persistent social evil.