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## China: Sex Work and Human Trafficking (Part 1)

### Of Human Bonds: Between Sex Work and Trafficking

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## China: Sex Work and Human Trafficking (Part 1)

19 August 2013

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*Tiantian Zheng explores the intersection between sex work and human trafficking in post-socialist China. This is the first of a [three part](#) <sup>[17]</sup> series.*

Current statistics showed that China hosted approximately [250,000 victims of human trafficking](#) <sup>[18]</sup> from both internal and international sources. Identified as a source, transit, and destination country for human trafficking, China's issues of human trafficking have been recognized as forced marriage, forced labor, and sex work, which is also termed sex exploitation and sex trade.

There is a discrepancy between government and non-government reports and sex work researchers' findings on sex trafficking. My two-year ethnographic research on sex workers in a metropolitan city in China, found no sex workers who had been forced to engage in sex work. They entered the sex industry for a variety of rational reasons. Indeed, to date, research on human trafficking in China has found little or no evidence of sex workers being forced into sex work. The difference between reports and research findings can be a result of a lack of study in the extreme northern part of China, and a victim script that has been appropriated by voluntary migrant sex workers to cover up voluntary sex work and evade legal consequences.

### Definition of Trafficking

According to the United Nations Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons of 2000, as part of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, [trafficking involves](#) <sup>[19]</sup> "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons" by "the use of force or other means of coercion" with the "purpose of exploitation." The Protocol further explains "exploitation" as, at a minimum, "the sex work of others" and "other forms of sexual exploitation." According to the Protocol, a person is considered a trafficked victim so long as s/he is involved in the above-mentioned situations, regardless of whether the person consents to it or not. In other words, if a woman makes a voluntary choice to work as a sex worker, she is defined as a trafficked victim as her consent is deemed irrelevant.

Indeed, over the last decade, the dominant discourse on trafficking not only has conflated trafficking with sex work, but also has [conflated voluntary sex work with sex trafficking](#) <sup>[20]</sup>. Informed by this dominant discourse, research on human trafficking in China rejects distinctions between "forced" and "free-choice" sex work and [considers all sex workers to be sex-trafficked victims](#) <sup>[21]</sup>. In doing so, real persons' narratives and life experiences were lost in a list of statistics of the so-called "trafficked victims."

Following this cultural logic, the state has subsumed trafficking under the category of sex trafficking and taken measures such as police raids to enforce rehabilitation or reeducation, or deport voluntary sex workers who are deemed as trafficked "victims." China's current anti-trafficking strategies have denied women's agency to choose to work as sex workers, robbed them of survival strategies, and dismissed other forms of forced, exploitative labor situations.

The reason for the conflation of sex work, migration, and trafficking lies in the lack of understanding of migrants' real lives by many social workers, policymakers, government representatives, and others. We should not perceive them as passive victims manipulated by others, but as human agents who choose to work in the sex industry as a migration strategy and who fight to control their lives.

### Reasons for the Sale of Women into Forced Marriages

A host of cultural and economic factors such as gender imbalance, rural poverty, and the high cost of bride price and wedding are the root causes for the [increased demand of women into forced marriages in rural China](#) <sup>[22]</sup>. Due to the long history of devaluing women, an imbalanced sex ratio has been a long-term problem. It was [reported](#) <sup>[23]</sup> that the sex ratio at birth in 2010 was 118.08 males for 100 females, which was an improvement of 119.45 to 100 in 2009. As a result of this imbalanced sex ratio, many poor men in rural areas are unmarried either because they could not find a partner or because they could not afford the bride price or wedding. In many areas, the high cost of a wedding ceremony and bride gifts exceeds the [price of purchasing a wife](#) <sup>[24]</sup>. Due to the traditional belief that a daughter after marriage will stop providing for her natal family and become the labor force for the husband's family, the bride's parents require the bridegroom to provide financial compensation for raising the daughter. Without the appropriate bride price, the parents would not permit the marriage. Since parents' endorsement is the key to the daughter's marriage, poor men find themselves unable to afford a bride.

Pressured by the family, many poor men would purchase women from outside into forced marriages. In many rural areas in China, marriage is not an individual issue, but a family business. This is because men are obligated to produce male heirs to continue the lineage through marriage. In times of difficulty to fulfill his duty, a man usually receives help from his entire family to purchase a woman who will be utilized as a reproductive tool to carry on the lineage. When facing the police's demand to free the woman, the buyer would receive sympathy and may even be protected by villagers because purchasing a wife is

considered a morally correct thing to do for an unmarried man.

The low social status and low education of women have also made them an easy target for deception. Most of the women who are sold or deceived into forced marriages are young and live in dire poverty. At times, they are sold by their own parents to a man who offers the highest amount of money as a prerequisite for marriage.

In addition to the deeply-entrenched cultural reasons, relaxed state policies about population mobility, the market economy, and the slogan of "being rich is glorious" also play an important role. Population mobility has created opportunities for women to be lured and bought into forced marriages in faraway rural areas. Guided by the market economy, the sale of women is often legitimized and facilitated by village officials because the sale is considered a lucrative business for villagers and a way to boost the local economy. In some cases, village officials perceive it as an important strategy to solve marriage problems and maintain social order.

### Selling and Buying Women

Selling and buying women for marriage has been a widespread cultural practice in Chinese history. Research has shown a diminishing [rate of kidnapping and selling women and children](#) <sup>[25]</sup> from 2.29 per 100,000 in 1991 to 0.44 per 100,000 in 2002. Despite recent efforts, the sale of women continues to exist in China. It was estimated by the Ministry of Public Security that 10,000 women and children are being abducted and sold each year. Between 2001 and 2005, 1,794 women and children in a remote southwest province in China were sold and more than 2,000 victims were rescued.

It was reported that a lot of women in Yunnan were sold to provinces such as Henan where gender imbalance was severe. Between April and July 2004, police rescued 85 women and children who were abducted from the southwestern part of Yunnan, which was affected the worst. It was also reported that some women from countries such as Vietnam have migrated to China for economic reasons and found themselves sold or kidnapped. In 1995, 2,716 women were freed from kidnappers and deported back to Vietnam.

In these cases, women are kidnapped, abducted, or deceived with a guarantee of well-paid jobs, and subsequently transported to mountainous or inland rural areas into forced marriages. These women often suffer severe mental and emotional problems and have difficulties reintegrating into their family and community. These problems often arise from physical abuse such as violence, sexual abuse, intimidation, and rape to which they are subject. In addition to the physical scars and emotional damage, the cultural stigmatized image of unmarriageable and unwanted women also make parents reject their reintegration into the family after the rescue.

### Forced Labor

Although Chinese laws prohibit forced labor, it remains a serious problem in China. Internationally, many [Chinese men were deceived into forced labor](#) <sup>[26]</sup> in countries such as Mexico, Japan, Australia, the Netherlands, and Argentina. Internally, many men, particularly children, were kidnapped or abducted into enslaved forced labor. For instance, it was reported that over one thousand men were forced to make bricks without payment in hundreds of brick kilns in Shanxi Province. [Hundreds of these abducted laborers were teenagers and children](#) <sup>[27]</sup>; some were young as eight. Scantily clad, these laborers were often fed no more than water and steamed buns and forced to work in inhumane conditions that were worse than prisons.

Upon the news about the forced labor at brick kilns, hundreds of parents traveled to brick factories in search of their missing sons. A mother visited over 100 brick factories in Shanxi Province looking for her 15-year-old son. She saw small kids, some as young as 14 or 15, hauling carts of bricks; and the ropes they pulled left tracks of blood on their shoulders and back. Some were moving very hot, heavy bricks from the machine belt very quickly to prevent burns and damage by the machines. A father found his 16-year-old son after a number of visits to brick factories, only to find his son "totally dumb, not even knowing how to cry, or to scream or to call out 'Father.'" Held in the arms of a crying father, the son, who was in rags and had wounds all over the body, was incapable of emotional reaction.

Despite the virulent issue of forced labor and child labor, authorities and local leaders were not able to help petitioned parents to locate their missing sons and failed to crack down on these illegal factories. Although officials attributed the difficulties to the remote and isolated locations of these factories, many believed that local officials were in alliance with these illegal factories and that local officials, including labor inspectors, resold the children from newly closed kilns to other factories.

### Sex Trafficking

There is suspected sex trafficking despite the fact that neither I nor other sex work researchers have come across it. The news about North Korean women being forced into sex work was cited from non-government organizations and government reports in China. Conditions in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have driven many North Koreans to voluntarily cross the border and migrate to China in search of a better life. Though many North Korean women choose to illegally migrate into China, [some North Korean women are kidnapped at the border](#) <sup>[28]</sup>. Due to their illegal, undocumented status, they are often at the whim of the Chinese who sell them into sex work, forced marriage, or forced labor. It has been reported by non-government organizations and international organizations that many North Korean women have been forced into marriages or forced to work in the entertainment industry after their entry into China.

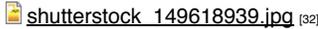
I myself cannot corroborate with this data, as I have not encountered anyone forced into sex work among over 200 sex workers I worked with during my fieldwork. Other researchers, such as [Chin and Finckenaer](#) <sup>[29]</sup>, also did not find any forced sex work during their intense ethnographic work with Chinese sex workers in eight areas in Asia (Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and mainland China) and two cities in the US (Los Angeles and New York).

To explain the discrepancy between government and non-government organization reports and fieldwork researchers' findings, I can offer two theories: 1) The areas North Koreans were kidnapped or sold were in the extreme northern part of China, where, to date, no sex work researchers have conducted any fieldwork. 2) Upon arrest, North Korean women were faced with two options. First, they would be severely punished and sentenced by law if they admitted that they knowingly violated the Chinese law by voluntarily crossing the border to do sex work. Two, they would avoid the legal punishment by claiming that they were deceived, kidnapped, and forced into sex work. As victims, they not only would escape criminal punishment, but also would be helped by law enforcements and non-government organizations. Sex workers in my research, upon arrest, would also claim as victims to avoid criminal punishment.

*\*[Note: Read [part 2](#) <sup>[17]</sup> on August 27. This article was originally published as "Prostitution and Human Trafficking in China," in [The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Criminology](#) <sup>[30]</sup>, and is republished with permission from the author and publisher.]*

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There is a lot of controversy over the numbers of adult woman who are forced sex slaves. The real factual answer is that no one knows. There is hard evidence that the sex slavery/sex trafficking issue continues to report false information and is greatly exaggerated by politicians, the media, and aid groups, feminist and religious organizations that receive funds from the government, The estimate of adult women who become new sex slaves ranges anywhere from 40 million a year to 5,000 per year all of which appear to be much too high. They have no evidence to back up these numbers, and no one questions them about it. Their sources have no sources, and are made up numbers. In fact if some of these numbers are to be believed which have either not changed or have been increased each year for the past twenty years, all woman on earth would currently be sex slaves. Yet, very few real forced against their will sex slaves have been found.

Sex trafficking is illegal and the penalties are very severe. It is very difficult to force someone to be a sex slave, they would have to have 24 hour guards posted and be watched 365 days a year, 24 hours per day. Have the threat of violence if they refused, and have no one notice and complain to the authorities or police. They would need to hide from the general public yet still manage to see customers from the general public and not have the customers turn the traffickers in to the police. They would need to provide them with medical care, food, shelter, and have all their basic needs met. They would need to have the sex slaves put on a fake front that they enjoyed what they were doing, act flirtatious and do their job well. They would have to deal with the authorities looking for the missing women, and hide any

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