

Internal child trafficking in China



Although *transnational* trafficking in children has attracted worldwide attention in the last two decades, *internal* trafficking has been relatively ignored. A number of geographical contexts have been largely neglected by the academic community and one of them has been China; a country with a remarkably long history of the phenomenon and one in which the particular practice is culturally embedded, to the point that it is viewed simply as tradition.

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Supply, demand, facilitation

Child trafficking has a long history in China although it remerged as a 'new' tendency in the last two decades or so. In addition to a change in scale, the characteristics of child trafficking have also transformed. As a result it has attracted the attention of some high echelons of the Chinese establishment who consider it a 'lucrative business'. For instance, an expert from the Criminal Investigation Bureau of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) explains in no uncertain terms that, "compared with trafficking in women, trafficking in children is more profitable and easier".¹

There are a number of supply, demand and facilitating factors involved. Some are common to other geographical contexts, whereas others need to be understood within the unique local historical, cultural, socio-political and economic context of China. These include: poverty, high profits and low risks for traffickers, loopholes in law and ineffective implementation of law, regional economic imbalance, movement of people and 'floating populations'.

Of great significance is the 'One Child Policy'. This particular policy is often the platform for the facilitation of internal child trafficking in a country that favours large families (primarily in rural areas) and that has a male-dominant culture, placing higher value on boys than girls.

Supply and recruitment

Recording crime in China is rather unsystematic and inconsistent. Although internal trafficking is an acknowledged issue and the media are not banned from reporting on it, it appears that annual official figures of internal human trafficking either do not exist, due to the lack of an operational recording system, or are kept confidential due to political sensitivities.

The various ways in which children are found and selected for trafficking depend on the age of the children, the purposes for trafficking and the specific circumstances. New born babies and extremely young children may be obtained through various channels, including: collecting abandoned infants, receiving unwanted children from their parents (with or without payment), purchasing children from other traffickers, stealing/kidnapping or even using force or violence to snatch them. Unwanted newborns can be bought from their parents, private clinics or illegitimate midwife services. Families suffering financial hardship may also seek to sell 'additional' children in exchange for money (this has been the case with the Uighur community in the west of the country).

For older children, abduction and/or deception are the most common methods of recruiting. Investigated cases reveal that female traffickers often play a crucial role in tempting children away from their homes.² Teenagers (and sometimes their parents) tend to be deceived with fraudulent job offers such as working in factories, building sites, and restaurants.

Demand for children

Traditionally, children have mostly been trafficked from the economically underdeveloped areas (such as Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan and Xinjiang) to the more developed urban regions in the east. Trafficked children are sold for a variety of purposes:

- *Illegal adoption.* Both boys and girls are wanted for the purpose of adoption, but buying a boy is much more expensive than buying a girl. In urban areas, trafficked boys or girls are purchased by childless families.³ In a case that was publicised in 2005, the scheme involved the sale of babies to a *legal* orphanage (the Hengyang Social Welfare Institute). The orphanage official was willing to pay for babies because foreign adopting parents usually donate large amounts of money (US\$ 3000-5000 per child) when they legally adopt a baby or child from a Chinese orphanage.⁴
- *Forced marriage.* Traditionally, girls (and women) have been abducted and sold as wives for impoverished men. In many rural areas it is tradition for a man and/or his family to buy girls for wedlock;⁵ in some localities this is known as *maiqing* ('bought marriage').⁶ Buying a wife is not seen as a criminal act, but as part of the culture of rural China.
- *Labour exploitation.* This form of exploitation has existed for centuries, however, trafficking children for the purpose of labour exploitation started to be a political issue in the 1990s.⁷
- *Street trading, begging and street crime.* Trafficked children are sold to individuals who force them to carry out street trades, such as selling flowers, polishing shoes, and performing in street 'kid shows'.⁸ Disabled children (primarily) are also used for begging, as they supposedly garner more sympathy. Some trafficked children are deliberately injured by their exploiters and forced to beg for money; this has become a distinctive feature of the local informal economy in the Henan and Anhui provinces.
- *Sexual exploitation.* Teenage girls are deceived by fraudulent job offers, such as factory or restaurant work, and are subsequently sold into prostitution. The Ministry of Public Security suggests that labour and sexual exploitation-related trafficking including of children is gradually replacing the more traditional purposes of human trafficking in China.⁹

Above: A father holds photos of his missing daughter who was trafficked into prostitution while his youngest child and wife stand with him.
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Traffickers and their process

Individuals traditionally involved in the trafficking of children in China typically do not have criminal records or even a history of trafficking. Many cases involve people who can abuse a position of trust, such as school teachers. In the case of systematic or large scale trafficking, the business tends to have a naturally defined horizontal 'structure' with independent, autonomous 'entities' involved in the process. In some cases individuals act as intermediaries who link disconnected actors of the business or assist in the sale of children by identifying potential buyers. Generally, individuals or small groups form temporary collaborations. There is some evidence that these collaborations often emerge through familial and ethnic ties (primarily among the Uighur community).

Different roles exist in the trafficking process, these include: (1) Organisers: individuals in the position to initiate trafficking schemes due to their legal status and/or employment (e.g., director of orphanage); (2) Recruiters: often people from the same community as the children themselves; (3) Sellers: mainly local residents who are familiar with the market, its peculiarities and 'needs'. In many cases the recruiter and the seller are the same person; (4) Facilitators: individuals who may otherwise not be involved in the sale or other aspects of the business. For example, some owners of homes rented by traffickers not only 'turn a blind eye', but they also assist by identifying (prospective) buyers.¹⁰

Local protectionism plays a part in the existence and growth of child trafficking. Local officials of course recognise the illegality, yet appear "sympathetic towards the families who had spent money on purchasing, [and they suggest that] these families should not doubly lose (loss of purchasing money as well as children purchased)".¹¹ Where significant profits are made from forcing children into work in local businesses, and even street dealing or begging, local officials choose to ignore the practice, and view these cases as successful local entrepreneurship. In addition, local governmental authorities do not perform their functions effectively in managing, supervising and inspecting small-scale private workplaces, coalmines, brick kilns, factories and other enterprises that regularly employ trafficked children,¹² and in actual fact facilitate child trafficking business by hampering, or preventing altogether, anti-child trafficking investigations and operations.

Generally, internal child trafficking in China is the result of a complex intertwining of supply, demand and facilitating factors, heavily affected by the socioeconomic change in the country supported passively or actively by local officials, and embedded in the Chinese cultural milieu.

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Notes

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- 12 'Child Labour Re-emerging in Shangxi' (2007), *Southern Weekend*, available at <http://tinyurl.com/73c6par>, accessed on 24 July 2012.