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Female Perpetrators in Internal Child Trafficking in China: An empirical study

Anqi Shen¹

ABSTRACT

Through an empirical study, this article explores the overall profile of female traffickers of children in China and their role and performance in the trafficking processes. Its contribution to the human trafficking literature lies in its focus on female perpetrators in particular. The article provides an overview of the international literature on female traffickers as well as contemporary knowledge about internal child trafficking in China. Empirical data from incarcerated traffickers suggest that portraying female traffickers as active players of criminal networks obscures the structural problems affecting female child traffickers. The short-term result is that the problems of female offenders are ignored, and the long-term impact is policy-making that is disconnected from the lived experiences of an important population. From a gender perspective this study suggests that female child traffickers are offenders as well as victims of social and gender inequalities in China's reform era. This study also proposes that internal child trafficking in China should be brought in the international and Anglo-American debates surrounding human trafficking.

KEYWORDS

Child trafficking, female trafficker, China, qualitative study

Introduction

Human trafficking literature suggests that human trafficking, especially trafficking in women and children for sexual exploitation, commonly involves women as perpetrators and that they may assume an active and prominent position (see, for example, Siegel and De Blank, 2010).

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Elaborating on national data, the United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2014, p. 27) finds that 28 per cent of convicted human traffickers were women whose roles in the human trafficking processes often “require frequent interaction with victims.” Siegel (2011) argues that female participation in human trafficking reflects the gender defined social roles in a broader society. The present study pays attention to women’s involvement as perpetrators in *internal* child trafficking in China and it aims to further illustrate the complex nature of human trafficking as a social phenomenon. Based on empirical data, it also seeks to make contributions to the comparative efforts that are needed to identify the nature and extent of human trafficking as a global as well as local problem.

Trafficking in women and children has been a nationwide problem throughout Chinese history (Biddulph and Cook, 1999). Ren (1996) suggests that the continuation of child trafficking must be situated in the context of the Chinese tradition that places children in a subordinated social position. In feudalist China, children were regarded as the property of their parents and the selling or buying of children was legally and morally acceptable until the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Today, the child trade is explicitly prohibited but child trafficking remains a social problem that has survived even the economic reforms started in the late 1970s.

Child trafficking is defined in the *Chinese Criminal Law* 1997 under Section 240, together with trafficking in women:

Trafficking in women or children involves acts including kidnapping, abducting, purchasing, trading, facilitating and transferring women or children with an intention to sell. It is punishable with between five and ten years imprisonment. With aggravating factors, it is punishable with a maximum ten years imprisonment or a life sentence. Anyone who commits

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this offence with aggravating factors under extremely serious circumstances may be punished with the death penalty.

The law specifies aggravating factors including, for example, being the leader of a trafficking group, trafficking three or more children, using violence, stealing or kidnapping children and causing severe bodily harm or deaths in trafficking operations. While the law does not define extremely serious circumstances, selectively reported court cases seem to suggest that they refer to a combination of aggravating factors, such as being primary traffickers (usually organisers), having trafficked a large number of children (for example 223 in the Jiang Kaizhi case), carrying out child trafficking across many regions, and continuously trafficking in children for a long period of time (for example over four years in Yu Lixiang's case).

In the current law, purchasing children is a separate offence and punishable with a maximum three years imprisonment. The aim is to suppress the demand in the child trade. Alongside the law, a series of policy documents have been issued to serve as statutory interpretation to clarify the law, recognise the crime reality, and direct law enforcement actions that aim to repress human trafficking. For example, the *Opinion on Tackling Trafficking in Women and Children* was jointly issued by the Supreme People's Court, Supreme People's Procuratorate and Ministry of Public Security (MPS) in March 2010 (hereafter, 'Opinion 2010'). It states:

Picking up abandoned children and subsequently selling them may amount to child trafficking. Stealing or kidnapping children initially for adoption but subsequently selling them constitutes child trafficking.

It goes on to clarify that "parents selling their own children for illegitimate gain constitutes child trafficking." However –

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Parents giving away their own children for private adoption, even when receiving a small amount of “nutrition fee” or “appreciation money”, does not amount to a crime, so long as they do so due to financial hardship or in accordance with the old tradition that values boys and devalues girls, and not to seek illegitimate gain.

Thus, the Chinese law provides a localised definition of human trafficking that is in line with, but not identical, to the United Nation Protocol on Trafficking in Persons to reflect the local crime problem. What is clear is that China prohibits treating children as commodities and under no circumstances the buying and selling of children can be acceptable. In addition, through identifying several unique characteristics of internal child trafficking, the law and policy concerning internal child trafficking in China is *de facto* a law against illegal adoption.

Aiming to eradicate the child trade, the top-down national anti-trafficking campaign, known as “da-guai” (anti-trafficking), is launched from time to time to target the crime when it is viewed as an imminent threat to social order and often results in a large number of arrests. However, despite the enforcement efforts child trafficking is persistent and develops in new ways (Biddulph and Cook, 1999).

In human trafficking research, studies on child trafficking in China are sparse. Existing literature (see, for example, Ren, 1996, 2004; Zhao, 2003) has examined the root causes, the nature and estimated scale of the problem but rarely focuses on female perpetrators. Shen, Antonopoulos, and Papanicolaou (2013) produced a study and suggested that the majority of child trafficking incidents in China involved women as perpetrators who played a recognisable role throughout the trafficking processes but did not explore female traffickers in a great detail.

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Through an empirical study that listens to female traffickers' own voices, this article aims to explore the overall profile of the female child traffickers, the role they played and their performance in the trafficking processes so as to make contributions to international literature on human trafficking and that concerning female perpetrators in particular. It starts with an overview of trafficking literature on female traffickers and of what is known about child trafficking and female child traffickers in China. This serves to place the present study in the international criminological framework and also provide some contextual background. This framing is intentional, in light of recent work suggesting there are several frameworks for understanding trafficking and slavery (Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2015; see also Brysk and Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2012). Following the methodology section, it presents the empirical findings to achieve the aims of the study and finally the concluding section summaries the evidence presented and offers several implications for theory, policy and practice.

Women Perpetrators in Human Trafficking: A literature review

In international literature regarding human trafficking, women and gender are evident usually in stereotype about vulnerable female victims (Barberet, 2014) whilst female perpetrators – the complexity of their lives and their experiences in trafficking operations and in the criminal justice process – tend to be overlooked. However, several recent studies have started to look into women's involvement in human trafficking as perpetrators, in which female traffickers are investigated, typically through a cultural analysis, in the context of trafficking in women and children for sexual exploitation in transnational settings. The findings indicate geographical and cultural variations in women's level of participation. For example, in Nair's (2004) study in India, nearly half of the trafficked persons reported that their traffickers were women, whilst in Israel about 10.5 per cent

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of the human traffickers were females (Levenkron, 2007) and in Italy women represented seven per cent of Albanian traffickers operated between 1996 and 2003 (UNODC, 2009).

Existing literature also shows that the roles that women play in trafficking networks is culturally/ethically shaped. For example, it is found that West African women, Nigerian madams in particular, ran transnational trafficking networks and played significant and multiple roles, including organiser, recruiter, trafficker, exploiter, and enforcer. It claims that West African women are traditionally active players in the public sphere and the power of women is evidence in “cultural art” of the region (see, Arsovska and Begum, 2014; Iacono, 2014; Mancuso, 2014) and it is in this cultural setting that female criminality in transnational human trafficking is embedded. In the same context, Mancuso (2014) observes that only women with economic, social and relational resources are able to manage the entire trafficking process and actively participate in decision making. Thus, both gender and class positions seem to shape women’s roles in trafficking operations.

In the Balkans, however, females tend to be partners in crime and supporters in criminal networks and women usually play peripheral roles. This is interpreted in the context of “a long-lasting patriarchal history in which women are taught to obey their husbands and accept their submissive roles” (Arsovska and Begum, 2014, p. 104). Therefore, the passiveness of Balkan women in transnational human trafficking reflects the deeply rooted gender subordination of women in the region. By contrast, in the Dutch context, women are found active in recruiting girls and controlling them, especially if they originate from the same countries and/or work also as prostitutes; “Being able to talk to them and to take care of them, they are also able to control them and/or exploit them, with or without a male companion” (Kleemans, Kruisbergen, and Kouwenberg, 2014, p. 25).

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All of these studies make important contributions to the trafficking literature by highlighting the issues of cultural diversity in gender role, gender power and gendered performance in human trafficking commonly involving trafficked women and children for sexual exploitation typically in transnational settings. In a special issue of the *Annals* published in May 2014, two articles talk of domestic child trafficking: one looks at pimps' association with underage prostitution in a Canadian region (Morselli and Savoie-Gargiso, 2014) and the other investigates commercial sexual exploitation of children in the United States (Marcus, Horning, Curtis, Sanson, and Thompson, 2014). Both articles challenge conventional stereotypes about teenage prostitution and the pimp-prostitute relation in the current, dominant trafficking narrative. However, they do not aim to specifically examine female offenders. Distinctively, Keo (2014) and Keo, Bouhours, Broadhurst, and Bouhours (2014) researched both domestic and transnational human trafficking in Cambodia and their research had a particular focus on female traffickers and child trafficking for illegal adoption is also included in the discussion. Their findings will be used to compare with the results from present study.

In the existing literature, geographical and cultural differences do seem to raise interesting questions about women's roles and performance in human trafficking activities. China – the most populous country in the world and a geographical context that has long been outside the mainstream international academic research – provides an important and unique opportunity to study this subject and to produce novel findings (Weitzer, 2014) about women in human trafficking and women in crime in general.

Women's Involvement in Child Trafficking in China: The cultural context

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Although child trafficking in China is generally under-researched, a handful of studies have revealed that trafficking in children in the country is largely for domestic illegal adoption that is mainly driven by several deeply-rooted traditional beliefs (see, for example, Biddulph and Cook, 1999; C. Y-Y. Chu, 2011; Ren, 2004; Shen et al, 2013). Three cultural traditions are particularly influential. First, parents favoured large families and believed that “the more children, the better life” (Shen et al., 2013, p. 35). When a family could no longer have a child of their own, purchasing one was an option or even a desire. Second, in traditional Chinese society, only a male heir could carry on the family name and thus prolong the family’s existence. Since daughters were deemed to be outsiders – as they would marry out one day – sons were conventionally expected to take responsibility for their aging parents. Therefore, Chinese parents historically preferred sons to daughters. While a family which could not have a son(s) of their own might consider adopting one, those living in unsustainable conditions who had more than one daughter might decide to give their daughters away. Third, traditional Chinese culture values family ties. In this cultural context, enabling a full family unit with parents and children – sons and daughters, just like match-making, is a social good (Shen, 2015). Therefore, people going between child buyers and givers/sellers were not morally condemned. These cultural norms have survived the economic reforms especially in rural China.

In the field of child trafficking in China, despite difficulties, efforts have been made to not only estimate its scale but also identify its operational characteristics. The United Nations Inter-Agency Project (UNIAP, 2015) on Human Trafficking, for example, retrieved from 800 articles in a study of trafficking cases reported in print media between 2006 and 2007 and found that the main means of trafficking were fraud and deception (37 per cent), kidnapping (26 per cent), abuse of power or a position of vulnerability (17 per cent), and physical violence (5 per cent). It appears

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that children are easy targets of human traffickers and the use of physical violence is rarely necessary. Thus, child trafficking does not seem to have “gender barriers” for women (Zhang, Chin, and Miller, 2007).

In China, policy documents tend to be issued when a crime problem has become a public concern. For example, Opinion 2010 was issued when human trafficking had gained increasing momentum. Apart from urging law enforcement to be strengthened to respond to the crime, it identified several characteristics of internal child trafficking. For example, it indicated that babies, usually girls, could be abandoned by their parents due to a financial hardship in their family or because of the traditional gender preferences. Abandoned babies may be picked up by strangers who may keep them or subsequently sell them to others. For the same reason, parents may give away their own children and they may even accept a small amount of monetary reward although financial gain is not their intention. However, some parents do sell their own children for illicit gain. Moreover, children may be stolen, snatched or kidnapped and subsequently sold in the criminal market. Earlier, the MPS *Opinion on Implementation of Law and Policy Tackling Trafficking in Women and Children* was issued in 2000, which acknowledged a lack of awareness of human trafficking and the trafficking law among the population in the remote, poverty-stricken mountainous regions where human trafficking was prevalent and it also stressed the difficulties raising awareness in those regions. Academic literature suggests that the regions concerned are the impoverished rural areas in Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and Sichuan provinces with poor public transport and poor communication with the outside (C. Y-Y. Chu, 2011; Ren, 1996, 2004; Shen et al, 2013; Shen, 2015).

Popular media tend to report high profile trafficking cases said to involve “major trafficking rings” or “gangs” (Custer, 2015; Ng, 2015; Thornhill, 2015) and trafficking groups are believed to

have become increasingly sophisticated (see, Beard, 2014; Patience, 2015), whilst there are also different observations (see, for example, *Xinhua News*, 2012). Media analysis suggests that child trafficking is often related to domestic adoption. However, children are also kidnapped or lured away from home to be sold into a life on the streets, begging for change or pickpocketing strangers while under the control of adult criminals (Brown and Xu, 2014; Custer, 2013; Patience, 2015). Typically, buying and selling children is viewed as a lucrative trade in the criminal market (FlorCruz, 2013; Patience, 2015; Thornhill, 2015) and it is thought that child traffickers are driven by ‘either desperation or by greed’ (Ng, 2015).

In the Chinese language news media, women are often found to participate in child trafficking, who usually operate with others but may also act independently (CCTV, 2009; *China News*, 2010a, b; *Fuzhou News*, 2010; *Taihai News*, 2013; *Xinhua News*, 2012, 2013a, 2014). Women appear to be active players as they not only are frequently involved but also play prominent roles in trafficking operations (*China News*, 2010a, *Fuzhou News*, 2010; *Xinhua News*, 2007, 2009, 2012). Through describing how trafficked babies are roughly handled in the trafficking processes, female traffickers tend to be depicted as conscienceless, evil women who are ‘greedy’ and ‘cruel’ (CCTV, 2009; *China News*, 2010a, b; *Daily Mail*, 2013; *New York Times*, 2003; *Xinhua News*, 2010; 2013a, b).

Although media sources tend to provide rich anecdotal information, one needs to be sceptical when attempting to use journalist accounts in an academic inquiry because, as Levi (2008) points out, popular media present a disproportionate emphasis on individual pathologies rather than the complex, but relevant, structural causes. Lee (2011) even argues that our knowledge about human trafficking is limited, incomplete and often shaped by media and information flows. This study,

grounded by empirical evidence, hopes to discover some facts about female child traffickers in China.

Methodology

This article is primarily based on the data drawn from a larger research project on gender and crime in China (Shen, 2015). Since human traffickers are difficult to identify as they operate in a black market that is clandestine in nature, it was considered that conducting interviews in prison was a possible route to convicted female traffickers.

Interviewing is a particularly valuable method for feminist researchers to gain insights into the world of their research subjects (Hesse-Biber, 2007) and a body of academic studies on female criminality has relied on interviews in the prison environment with convicted offenders (see Bailey, 2013; Chui and Gelsthorpe, 2004; Keo, 2014). However, access to prisoners is not an approach typically adopted by academic researchers in China. In the present study, gaining access was a painstaking process, which was done largely through the author's personal contacts, rather than a well-defined, top-down formal approval procedure. Enormous effort was required to seek permissions from key gatekeepers. In addition, strict obligations were imposed on the researcher to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. For this reason, all names of respondents in this article are pseudonyms. Considering the research aims as well as practical factors, semi-structured interviews were used to collect the female traffickers' narratives and biographies.

As of July 2013, 44 women were incarcerated for child trafficking in the sample prison, from whom ten were randomly selected, and all of the ten women agreed to participate in the interviews. Although had it been possible interviewing all of the 44 women would have strengthened the data

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and the article, given that it is extremely difficult to access prisoners in China and the restrictions imposed on the researcher by the prison administration as to when and how the fieldwork could be undertaken, interviewing ten women was more realistic than interviewing more.

Following Bailey (2013), the interview was divided into four sections to document as much detailed and accurate information as possible: (1) family background; (2) living conditions prior to detention; (3) crime information; and (4) respondents' self-reflections. The first two sections of the interview produced a detailed socio-demographic profile of the respondents. The third section provided data about their living conditions so as to identify the women's motives for entering the child trade. And the open-ended fourth section encouraged self-reflections from the respondents.

As in other prison systems (see, for example, Bailey, 2013), recording devices are strictly prohibited by the Chinese prison authority. As a result, interviews were recorded by note-taking in Chinese and the field notes were word-processed and simultaneously translated into English as soon as practically possible after the interviews on the same date. Data analysis was conducted manually which started while the data were being processed.

It is acknowledged in qualitative research that participants may lie (Manheim & Rich, 1986) or they may reconstruct their activities (Sharpe, 2012). In the present study, I find that occasionally the respondents preferred not to expose the very details of their crimes. To deal with incomplete or seemingly "doubtful" data, my strategy was to leave them as they were to avoid making imaginary assumptions as doing that may create so much bias that could render fieldwork invalid or distorted (Becker, 1967). To ensure accuracy, secondary information were used to corroborate the respondents' accounts. Therefore, in addition to primary data, secondary information was gathered, which included the published scholarly work and open source materials, especially news

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reports. In data analysis, empirical findings drawn from the interviews were compared with the claims, evidence and allegations in the secondary sources. While judicial material is not included in this dataset as China adopts a civil law legal system in which judicial ruling is not a source of law and thus cases are not comprehensively compiled, judgments are selectively reported. The reported cases were consulted whenever necessary.

The limitations of research methodology in this study are fully acknowledged. Firstly, China is a vast country with enormous regional variations. Since the data was largely drawn from interviews with a small number of convicted female child traffickers in one prison, the findings here cannot be taken as an accurate reflection of females' involvement in child trafficking in China. Secondly, as already noted, this study uses journalistic information, where necessary, to illustrate some aspects of internal child trafficking in the country. It is worth noting that journalistic information should be treated with caution (see Gall, 2006; Shen & Winlow, 2013). On the other hand, media sources offer anecdotal data that can be useful in 'critical intellectual reconstruction' (Layder, 2013, p. 91). Thus, journalistic information, through collaboration with primary data and evidence from other secondary sources, helps 'enhance the reliability, validity and generality of findings' (Layder, 2013, p. 91). Of course, this study can be replicated and hopefully it will inspire future even more rigorous empirical research.

Overall Profile of the Female Child Traffickers

Table 1 below illustrates the overall socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents (n=10), July 2013

Respondent	Age	Domicile	Education	Marital Status	Occupation	Prison Term (years)
GDX	31	City	Illiterate	Married	Migrant peasant	6.5

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HSF	35	City	Illiterate	Married	Migrant peasant	5
JLY	69	Township	Illiterate	Widowed	Hostel owner	4
LLJ	46	City	Illiterate	Married	Migrant peasant	10
LXH	28	City	2-year schooling	Married	Migrant peasant	5
PGM	46	City	Illiterate	Married	Migrant peasant	5
PXM	42	Village	Illiterate	Married	Peasant farmer	5
QMC	58	Village	Illiterate	Widowed	Peasant farmer	12
WGY	33	Village	Illiterate	Divorced	Peasant farmer	6
XY	37	Village	Illiterate	Married	Peasant farmer	5

The respondents

As Table 1 shows, the respondents were aged between 28 and 69, seven were married and all of them were mothers of one or more children. Prior to their arrests, except JLY – a resident of a small township, all other respondents were born in impoverished rural areas in Yunnan, Guizhou and Henan provinces, of whom four were peasant farmers living in their birth places and five were migrants working in the labour-intensive industries in cities. Two respondents were disabled: HSF developed cerebritis just before school age and XY was half deaf from birth. Thus, the convicted female child traffickers participated in this study were largely peasant farmers and migrant peasant workers – China’s most disadvantaged social groups (Goodman, 2014). This finding is similar to that of Keo et al (2014) in the Cambodian context: female human traffickers, including child traffickers, were socioeconomically disadvantaged women.

The interviews reveal that nine respondents had no previous convictions whilst JLY was convicted of sheltering others for prostitution about ten years ago. GDX, whom was caught while transporting a baby in the present case, reported that she sold an unwanted baby previously which went undetected. LLJ was a first time offender but convicted of two accounts of child trafficking. This supports the finding of Shen et al (2013) that indicate that child traffickers tended to be opportunistic offenders who did not usually have a long history of human trafficking or criminal offending.

Social and familiar background of the respondents

A striking finding in this study is that – with the exception of 28-year old LXH, who was a primary school dropout – all respondents were illiterate. This confirms previous studies that suggest high illiteracy among rural female population and also among child traffickers (Ren, 1996; Zhao, 2003). However, the results here offer a more nuanced account and show that younger women in their twenties and thirties who grew up in the reform era may still be illiterate or semi-illiterate and that the respondents were commonly subjected to profound gender discrimination against their education in rural China, as WGY, a 33-year old peasant from Yunnan, remarked:

My family did not have spare money to pay for my school fees but all my brothers had finished primary school. In our area, only boys were expected to read and write. My sister and I did not have a chance.

Being excluded from schooling, girls stayed at home and were expected to take household responsibilities. As the oldest child of the family, once LXH dropped out of school she was burdened with household chores, including looking after her younger siblings. Several respondents reported that they were asked to participate in manual work at very young ages. For example, LLJ began working in the field when she was nine and WGY started at seven or eight years of age.

The impact of deprived childhood – exclusion from formal education, household chores, early manual work, and an impoverished life in general – is profound on rural women and the majority of the respondents faced multiple forms of marginalization. Like female traffickers in Cambodia (Keo et al, 2014), the respondents had no particular knowledge, skills and experiences and therefore had limited legitimate opportunities. In this context, human trafficking appears to

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offer an illegitimate opportunity to earn money. Thus, female human traffickers are simultaneously “perpetrators and also victims” (Keo et al, 2014, p. 212).

WGY was a peasant farmer and a widow who was bringing up her children on her own. Being illiterate, the only opportunity for her to earn a little extra cash was to work occasionally at a building site mixing sands along with male workers at a rate of 30-40 yuan (10 yuan = approximately US\$1.57) per day. Poor living conditions combined with a lack of money-making opportunities seemed to have rendered the uneducated rural woman susceptible to criminal activities. According to WGY: “300-400 yuan for undertaking a train journey to transport a baby was so tempting that I had no hesitation to take the opportunity.” After all, compared with her earning from doing heavy manual work, the amount promised to her for transporting a baby was good income.

Emotional encounters of the respondents in child trafficking

Chinese women are culturally expected to be caregivers in the family and community (Zhang et al, 2007). Like in many countries, women who have children themselves become perpetrators of crimes against children are often condemned for breaking the law as well as for “breaking every culturally sanctioned code of femininity and womanhood” (Jewkes, 2011, p. 137). Therefore, as indicated earlier, female child traffickers are commonly depicted as conscienceless evil women in the popular media. However, the data in this study seem to suggest that the respondents were ordinary women who had guilty feelings and ‘normal’ emotional experiences. LLJ’s story, for example, shows that while making choices female child traffickers may be influenced by their maternity instinct:

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An old lady in my village showed me a baby boy... She said she found him at the roadside and asked whether or not I wanted to have him. The baby had a lovely tubby face and beautiful silky skin and I loved him straightaway... I took him home but soon found something was wrong with him... he could not smile... I took him to hospital and he was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy.

LLJ said that she could not afford the baby's medication and later her sister helped her have the baby sold. She was in tears when describing what subsequently happened: "The police told me that the baby's problem was soon found out by the seller family. They could not find us so [they] started to torture the baby and finally abandoned him."

Similarly, HSF could also have avoided being involved in child trafficking. Her account was that she did not get involved for money but wanted to help: "The acquaintance... said the baby's father had died, her mother was terminally ill, and she needed a better family to bring her up." HSF therefore looked for a buyer through a man living in a different city and later received a 1,000 yuan introducing fee from him. According to herself, "had I known the baby was stolen I would not have done that for only 1,000 yuan... I am a mum myself."

Quite often child traffickers claimed that they did not know the babies handed over to them were stolen, kidnapped or abducted. Their claim is not totally unsupported. Illiteracy and poor education may have hampered the peasant farmers in the remote, mountainous areas and the highly mobilised migrant workers from receiving the necessary knowledge of child trafficking that would have enabled them to make better informed decisions when a money-making opportunity came up. It should be recognised that such a lack of awareness may have shaped the female traffickers' choices and their level of participation.

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Although the child trade gives rise to abuses and ill-treatment of trafficked children, no evidence in this dataset suggests that the babies were badly treated by the respondents. QMC found an abandoned baby at the roadside with his face covered with ants: “I took him home... I bought a milk bottle to feed the baby with water and milk. Later I fed him with *lan-hu-mian* (semi-liquidised noodles).” All of the respondents said that they handled the trafficked children in the normal way and nothing they did was unacceptable. However, even if this account can be proven, buying and selling children is a criminal offence in accordance with the Chinese law and how trafficked children are treated is only an influential factor for sentencing.

Thus, the data here refute the notion that female child traffickers are conscienceless, and suggest they were ordinary women who seemed to find motherhood fulfilling and joyful (Jewkes, 2011). LXH, who kidnapped a three-year old girl, illustrated this possibility:

I am unable to give birth again due to a medical problem... But I love children... The girl was so pretty, sweet... After a few days (when we were together) I felt she was my real daughter. I started to buy more things for her... One day she suddenly called me “mum.”

In the interview, LXH did not want to disclose the details of her crime, such as her intention to kidnap the girl and what was planned to deal with her, but kept referring to the girl as her daughter. LXH’s incomplete story may seem to make little sense, but according to *Sina News* (2011), some female traffickers did change their mind and want to keep the trafficked children at home as their own. It appears that the female traffickers here are women who are maternal, whilst some women in the same or similar conditions might not value and enjoy motherhood for a variety of reasons (Jewkes, 2011).

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Therefore, involvement in child trafficking does not automatically make female perpetrators cold-blooded, conscienceless evil women (Shen, 2015). To a certain extent, the image of female child traffickers has been distorted by the patriarchal media which doubly condemn them of being criminals as well as bad women.

Female Traffickers' Entry, Their Role and Performance in Child Trafficking

Child trafficking is not usually a one-man business and broadly speaking it is a form of organised crime. While previous studies suggest that human trafficking in China involved complicated, ever-growing networks (Biddulph and Cook, 1999; H. Z. Chu, 1996; Ren, 1996, 2004), recent Chinese language news reports find that trafficking groups are kinship-based and loosely structured with associates who are usually members of the extended families, friends and acquaintances (*China News*, 2010a, b; *Fuzhou News*, 2010; *Xinhua News*, 2012). The present study offers further evidence in support of this notion.

Female traffickers' entry and their roles in the trafficking processes

Keo et al (2014) reveal that the entry requirements in human trafficking are low for women in Cambodia and the same finding appeared in the present study. Table 2 below illustrates the respondents' entry points and the role(s) they played in child trafficking.

Table 2. Women's Entry Points and Their Role(s) in the Child Trade

Entry point	Frequency	Respondents
Recruitment	8	
- Picking up abandoned babies	1	QMC
- Accepting babies given by others	3	GDX ¹ , HSF, LLJ ²
- Paying for 'unwanted' babies ³	3	GDX, LLJ, XY ⁴
- Kidnapping	1	LXH

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Facilitation	4	
- Sheltering	3	LLJ, LXH, QMC
- Looking for buyer	1	HSF
Transportation	6	
- For relatives/acquaintances for a fee	2	PGM, WGY
- For husband	1	PXM
- Transporting the self-recruited babies	3	GDX, QMC, XY
Sale	2	
- Acting as an 'agent' for seller	1	JLY
- Selling an baby to an acquaintance	1	GDX

Notes:

1. GDX was caught while transporting a baby in the present case. Previously she was given an unwanted baby by an acquaintance and subsequently “gave” the baby to another acquaintance and received an “introducing fee.”
2. LLJ was convicted of two accounts of child trafficking: (1) a baby boy was given to her free of charge; (2) she paid to get an “unwanted” baby from an acquaintance.
3. The interviews reveal that several respondents came to know from the investigators and at their trails that the babies whom they handled were not unwanted but stolen, abducted, or kidnaped.
4. XY and her husband paid 2,000 yuan for a baby on behalf of her sister-in-law who wanted to have babies to “help others.”

As Table 2 illustrates, like that in human smuggling (see, Zhang et al, 2007), services in child trafficking are narrowly defined and can be provided by different individuals. Although nothing should prevent women from entering the child trade at any stage, the female traffickers in this sample appeared to be more frequently involved at the recruitment and transportation stages and typically played more than one role in trafficking operations.

The interview data reveal that the female traffickers obtained babies through a variety of channels, including picking up abandoned babies from roadsides, accepting babies given by others with or without a fee, paying for “unwanted” babies usually where there were ready buyers, and kidnapping young children. It appears that recruiting children does not require significant capital investment or the use of violence that tends to prevent females entering criminal enterprises (Steffensmeier, 1983).

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Clearly, sheltering and transporting babies were not too challenging for the respondents, as they were mothers and had brought up their own children. The data show that three respondents were asked by their relatives and acquaintances to transport babies and they did not even know names of the buyers awaiting them at their destinations. Previous research suggests that female traffickers are thought to have inherent advantages in sheltering and transporting babies because they are less likely to be suspected (Shen et al, 2013).

The sale of children in the criminal market often involves a middleperson(s) to go between buyers and sellers. Here, JLY acted for a seller – a young man who was selling his own new born daughter:

He is a relative of an old friend of mine. He wanted me to help him tell *mai-jia* (the seller) that his wife had died and he was unable to raise the baby up and how much money he wanted. He promised to give me 2,000 yuan *zhong-jie-fei* (agent fee) if the baby was sold.

It does seem to be true that “apart from basic interpersonal skills, no particular knowledge and abilities are necessary to participate in trafficking” (Keo et al, 2014, p. 212). Here, even illiteracy was not a barrier for JLY to play her role and facilitate a transaction in the child trade.

In the present study, the respondents’ involvement in child trafficking was largely opportunistic with little planning and organisation. Clearly, they were engaged in the child trade by chance and trafficking in children did not seem to be what they deliberately sought out. For the majority of them, child trafficking was only a one-off event and not even a “short term strategy” (Zhang et al, 2007, p. 720).

In addition, like their female counterparts in Cambodia (Keo et al, 2014), the female child traffickers here did not appear to be part of structured trafficking networks, but on the other hand,

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none of them had performed alone and they tended to rely on one or two lines of personal contacts, typically their husbands, sisters, in-laws, cousins, friends and acquaintances from the same village or known at the workplace. Therefore, although child trafficking may not involve well organised, sophisticated criminal *groups*, it does require a certain level of collaboration between individuals. In this sense, child trafficking is a form of organised crime despite the loosely-structured networks and unexperienced, amateur players.

Overall, the data suggest that the child trade has low entry requirements that allow the poor and undereducated women to get involved to do something “simple” and make quick money. However, easy entry does not guarantee women’s “successes” in the illicit business.

Female traffickers’ performance in child trafficking

The data seem to suggest that interviewees had little control in the child trade – no matter which role they played – and that they were less frequently engaged at the sale stage. This is probably due to a lack of resources. Even where the respondents obtained the children independently and wanted to sell them for gain, they seemed to have to rely on others to complete the transactions and had little say about how much they would want to get. In the child market, a transaction between a desperate seller and a willing – and often keen – buyer would logically guarantee a payment. This does not mean, however, that every player in the process could have a fair share of the proceeds. Indeed, some might not get anything.

Child trafficking is often depicted as a lucrative business (Shen et al, 2013) and the present study reveals that the respondents could potentially receive payments in the range of 300/400 to 25,000 yuan for their services. However, the reality is that the amount they could eventually receive depended on a number of factors and nothing was guaranteed. JLY was promised a fee

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that amounted to over a quarter of the sale price for acting on behalf of the seller but did not receive anything in the end. Being a woman in her late 60s, she could do little to enforce the payment in the criminal market. According to the respondents, there was little chance to negotiate the price. Holding the babies for longer was troublesome and they were keen to quickly pass the babies on to someone else, get a little extra cash, and go away to carry on their normal lives. With this mentality, how much the female traffickers could gain largely depended on how lucky they were in a particular transaction.

Thus, in the criminal trade, the poor, uneducated, and inexperienced rural women did not appear to have much chance to succeed. If making little or no money in a transaction was bad luck for them, there were worse ones, such as detection. PGM, WGY and XY were detected *en route* transporting babies. PXM, a 42-year old peasant farmer was asked by her husband to take a baby to Xinxi – a small township over two thousand kilometres away from their village in Yunnan:

I am an illiterate and had never left home before. I was scared of going with the baby on my own, so I asked my cousin to go with me. She was also an illiterate and had never gone out before.

PXM and her cousin were arrested at the railway station of their destination. PGM was also caught at the railway station for transporting a baby: "... When I saw the uniformed policemen I became very nervous. They... came to ask where the baby was from. I told them she was not mine but I said she was unwanted. They arrested me."

In fact, even early detection might not be the worst case scenario for the female traffickers. The uneducated powerless women seemed to be easy targets of sophisticated professional criminals who were ready to take advantage of the women's vulnerability. WGY was offered an

opportunity to transport a baby for a man whom she met briefly at the building site where she worked occasionally. She believed his story about the baby but when she was arrested and questioned about the baby she was unable to provide the man's full name and whereabouts. Consequently, the male trafficker went untraced whilst WGY was held criminally liable. QMC, a 58-year old illiterate peasant, was victimised by two male criminals in a trafficking operation:

On my way home (after transporting a baby), I was stopped by a man at the railway station. He said he found a bag of money next to us and wanted to share it with me... When we were just about to count the money, another man came and said the money was his and some of it had already gone missing. He searched me violently and took all my money away.

The criminal market is full of uncertainties, illegality and danger and it appears that the uneducated, unexperienced and unorganised individuals were unable to fully cope with it. Whilst sophisticated, well organised, and professional child traffickers do exist, this study shows that some traffickers, like the respondents here, are amateur and less calculated. It is perhaps this group of traffickers, often women, who are arrested, convicted, and incarcerated. As Beare (2012) observes in a different geographical context, "there is a tendency for enforcement to have the effect of 'eliminating' the most unsophisticated and providing more of a monopoly to those with the skills and resources to avoid detection" (p. 269).

Discussion and Conclusion

Since the late 1990s, approaches toward human trafficking appear to have been precipitated upon the notion of transnational organised crime (Shen et al, 2013). For Hobbs and Cunnihan (1998), this understanding has an important shortcoming. They argue that "global-transnational-international studies of organised crime... ignore or substantially underestimate the importance of

the local context as an environment within which criminal networks function” (p. 289). This Chinese case further illustrates regional characteristics of human trafficking: no evidence in this dataset shows that the female traffickers were part of well-structured criminal networks. Rather, their networks were “small, poorly resourced and loosely organised” – as that identified in Cambodia (Keo et al., 2014, p. 215). The findings here further challenges not only trafficker stereotypes but also that of human trafficking and organised crime.

Taking a “micro-level research” approach, this article highlights trafficking as “much more complex and variegated than the image popularised in the dominant discourse” (Weitzer, 2014, p. 20). As the data show, the female child traffickers here were largely migrant peasant workers and peasant farmers – both were born and brought up in the underdeveloped, remote mountainous regions where child trafficking is prevalent. They commonly had a deprived childhood living in impoverished conditions and received little, if any, formal education as a result of poverty and gender discrimination against girls and women. As members of China’s marginalised and disadvantaged social groups, their life choices were constrained. As this article shows, the female child traffickers were ordinary women and mothers: while being opportunistic offenders who committed crimes against children for illicit gain, they had not lost humanity entirely. Although there were virtually no barriers for them to participate in the trafficking processes in which they did play a variety of roles, their performance, as the data indicate, was hampered by their lack of interpersonal skills and life experiences. Consequently, they were easy targets for both law enforcement and more sophisticated and professional criminals. Thus, the present study challenges the distorted image of female child traffickers in the popular media which has resulted from a shortage of accurate information.

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Based on empirical evidence, this article offers several implications for theory, policy and practice. Firstly, it suggests that portraying female traffickers as active players of criminal networks hides the structural problems of women engaged in child trafficking and female offenders in general, and therefore distorts policy-making. Describing female child traffickers as ruthless, conscienceless, and evil women hurts more than it helps, since it justifies harsh penalties for women. As of 3 May 2015, an ongoing internet survey reported that 75 per cent of the respondents supported the death penalty to be more frequently imposed on child traffickers (qq.com, 2015). As Table 1 above illustrates, harsh sentences have already been imposed on female traffickers. Apart from that, little seems to have been done to deal with demand and supply in the child trade.

Secondly, this study in the context of China offers a unique case for further inquiries into women's involvement in general criminal activity and organised crime in particular. The findings here lend support to Keo et al (2014, p. 220) who conclude that female human traffickers were "pushed by a lack of legitimate opportunities and pulled by the presence of illegitimate opportunities, engage in unsophisticated criminal activities for modest gains." The research findings in both studies challenge popular assumptions or claims. While this study finds that the female child traffickers were not affiliated to any structured organised criminal groups, it does recognise child trafficking as a form of organised crime. By doing so it challenges "the taken-for-granted, mainstream accounts featuring a certain exceptionalist notion" and thus holds that organised crime should be construed as "a particular instance of contemporary society's war cries, entrepreneurship and profit" (Antonopoulos and Papanicolaou, 2014, p. 3) and "unlicensed capitalism" in the term of Hobbs (2013). In fact, through a gendered lens, this article is not about human trafficking or organised crime, but is about equality and fairness. It argues that to identify

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female child traffickers as offenders as well as victims of social and gender inequalities helps to direct fact-based policy responses.

As we have seen, in China, internal trafficking in children, often new born babies, is largely for domestic illegal adoption. Thus, human trafficking in the local context is not a phenomenon associated with migration, *transnational* organised crime and trafficking in women and children for sexual exploitation. Accordingly, international trafficking law is highly localised in China to reflect the local crime reality, local circumstances, and local cultural norms. Therefore, the Chinese case further highlights the tension between international advocacy networks and national and local efforts to work with communities to combat common problems, such as human trafficking, which impact on many, if not all, countries in the world despite its varied characteristics.

Toward the end of this article I argue that internal child trafficking in China should be incorporated into the long-running debates surrounding human trafficking occupying the Anglo-American world in which commonalities can be easily identified (Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2015) whilst the perspectives of “others” have become the marginalised that has little impact on theory, policy and practice.

Finally, this article is unique in that interviewing prisoners in China is very rare and few international studies on crime and criminal justice in the Chinese context have achieved this, although similar and even more sophisticated research into these areas has been undertaken in other cultural settings. In the field of human trafficking, high quality local empirical research is called for as it can help closely monitor the local trends and patterns and thus provide accurate, reliable debates that support evidence-based policy making and the accumulation of more studies

of this nature will help address “some fundamental questions about the complex dynamics of human trafficking” (Weitzer, 2014, p. 21).

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