WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM 'THE WOMAN IN CHAINS'?

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DURING THE CHILLY days before the Lunar New Year of 2022, a video began circulating on Chinese social media of a woman standing alone in an outdoor shed wearing a thin pink sweater.[1] She is shackled to the wall by a chain around her neck. The man behind the camera asks if she is cold, but it is unclear whether she can understand. The woman, whom authorities referred to first as Ms Yang, and later as Xiao Huamei 小花梅 ('Little Plum Blossom'), was revealed to be the wife of a Mr Dong from Feng county, Jiangsu province. Although the birth-control policies in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have only recently been relaxed to allow three children per couple, Ms Yang had given birth to eight children, seven of whom were sons.

The video is shocking and deeply disturbing. On the Chinese internet, it stirred an outpouring of anger, which overcame China's internet restrictions and united liberals, feminists, and nationalists in outrage. The woman became known as 'the mother of eight children' 八孩母亲 or 'the woman in chains' 铁链女. According to *The New York Times*, Weibo posts about the woman garnered more than 10 billion views, 'rivaling those about the Beijing Winter Olympics'.[2]

Part of this outrage was directed at the government response. Within two weeks, local governments issued four contradictory statements. On 28 January, a day after the video went viral, officials in Feng county claimed that Ms Yang was legally married to Mr Dong and was restrained because of mental illness.[3] Two days later, they claimed Mr Dong's late father had found Ms Yang begging on the street and local officials had found her competent to consent to marry the younger Mr Dong.[4]

Then, on 2 February, the Xuzhou City government — which has jurisdiction over Feng county — announced that Little Plum Blossom had travelled east with a Ms Sang from her hometown in Yunnan province in south-western China, ostensibly to seek treatment for her mental illness, when she went missing.[5] Finally, on 10 February, Xuzhou authorities reported that Mr Dong, Ms Sang, and Ms Sang's husband, a Mr Shi, had been arrested and charged with trafficking a woman, *guaimai funü zui* 拐卖妇女罪, and that the Feng county government was providing support to Ms Yang and her children.[6]

Journalists and internet sleuths have continued to challenge the authorities' claims. Journalists who visited Little Plum Blossom's supposed hometown in Yunnan have cast doubt on her identity. Two women who travelled to Feng county to conduct their own inquiries were arrested. The authorities' initial failure to detect the trafficked woman and her captivity as well as their lack of appropriate action when the story broke damaged their credibility among sceptical internet users.

In response to the public uproar, seventeen local officials lost their jobs. The provincial government investigated and, on 29 March, the deputy director of the Xuzhou Public Security Bureau was arrested. Also in March, Premier Li Keqiang urged stricter enforcement of trafficking laws and announced measures to reunite trafficked women and children with their natal families.[7]

The case of Little Plum Blossom has reverberated throughout China in a way that previous trafficking cases have not. But the contours of her story, as far they can be known, are familiar from a long history of women being sold into marriage,

What have we learned from 'the Woman in Chains' 铁链女?
Source: Nikhil, Flickr

and from the fact that thousands of women and children are still bought and sold each year despite human trafficking being punishable by up to ten years in prison or even the death penalty. The trade in women and children is fuelled by poverty, inequality, and, despite decades of government efforts to persuade people that daughters are just as valuable as sons, the ongoing pressure, especially in rural communities, to produce a male heir to continue the family line. The One-Child Policy introduced at the beginning of the 1980s led to skewed sex ratios that have also contributed to trafficking as families seek desperately to obtain wives for their sons. The Feng county case shows that at least some local officials must have been looking the other way.

Yet, the case also shows that, in certain contexts, the line between 'legitimate' marriage and the purchase of a woman or girl can be blurry at best. If history is any guide, ending the sale of women and children would require rethinking what forms of marriage and family are acceptable on both a local and a national scale.

Qing China

Trade in women and children was not, and is not, limited to China. As late as the nineteenth century, selling one's wife — not to mention slavery — was accepted practice in England, North America, and Australia. Human trafficking continues across the globe today. However, the historical sale of women and children in China had characteristics shaped by neo-Confucian ideology and skewed sex ratios. The common understanding in late imperial China was that sons supported their parents and performed vital ancestral rites. Daughters married out and provided labour for their husband's family. A strong preference for sons led to widespread female infanticide, which was conceived of as a kind of 'postnatal abortion'.[8] This differed even from Tokugawa Japan (1603–1867), where infanticide was common but parents aimed to keep a balance of sons and daughters. Research by James Lee and Wang Feng shows that in some populations in Qing (1644–1911) China, in some years, up to 40 percent of female births ended in infanticide.[9]

Sons may have been prized over daughters, but every parent hoped their son would marry and produce male heirs as well. Fewer girls reaching maturity in a community meant fewer wives available for the community's sons. The marriage market was real, and men's marriage prospects were determined by their class and status. A wealthy man might take a wife and a concubine (multiplying their chance of producing sons), whereas a poor man might have no marriage prospects at all. Unmarried men were known disparagingly as 'bare sticks', *guanggun* 光棍. Sexually frustrated and unable to fulfill their ritual obligations to their family and their ancestors, these men were considered a threat to social order. As the empire expanded, single men migrated to the frontiers as either soldiers or settlers. Many married local women, who might have consented, been coerced, or sold outright.

Women's experience of marriage differed dramatically depending on status and class, including, for example, if they were a primary wife or a secondary wife or concubine. However, for women, marriage was almost universal.

Women in imperial China were bought and sold, and most of these sales occurred within the framework of marriage. Marriage was typically conceived of as a transaction, a contract not between the bride and groom but between their respective families.[10] The groom's family would pay a bride price, and the bride's family would provide her with a dowry. The bride price was usually larger than the dowry and was considered compensation for the bride's family having raised her. That said, there could be considerable variation in marriage practices even within a single community. My own research in Guizhou, in what was then the Qing's south-western frontier, indicates that some young women chose their own marriage partners and received a say in how their dowries were spent. Other girls were married off as children to even younger boys, and were raised by, and in turn toiled for, their husband's family.

One important factor affecting a woman's experience of marriage was how far from her husband's home was her natal village. If close, a woman's birth family might provide her with regular material and emotional support and intercede on her behalf in disputes with her husband and his family. In some communities, including those I have studied in Guizhou, married women might spend weeks or months visiting their natal home. In contrast, if a woman married or was sold far from home, she would be separated from her kin and left with no-one to turn to if she was treated badly.

In late imperial China, only a few wealthier women received an education, so it can be difficult to recover the voices of poor women who were bought and sold. Yet, records show the difficult choices some women faced to keep themselves and their families alive. In a legal case from 1749 analysed by Matthew Sommer, the indebted husband of a woman surnamed Zhang sold her loom and asked her 'to sleep with his creditor'.[11] When she refused, he sold their daughter. Zhang ultimately killed her husband, aided by her mother and sister, in what Sommer calls 'an extreme but telling example of a woman's natal family standing up for her'.

Ning Lao Taitai 宁老太太, an elderly woman from Shandong interviewed extensively by American

social worker Ida Pruitt in the 1930s, recounted how, in the late nineteenth century, her opium-addicted husband sold her younger daughter, twice. The first time, she retrieved her child after challenging the buyer on the legality of the sale. The second time, after tracking down the child, she was convinced by the buyer, the childless second wife of a wealthy official, that her daughter would have a better life with them.

The poor woman conceded, 'I knew that her words were true, so I went away.'[12]

The Republican Era and the Mao Years

The turn of the twentieth century saw a change in elite attitudes to the place of women in the state and society. Reformers like Liang Qichao 梁啓超 (1873–1929) and feminist writers like He-Yin Zhen 何殷震 (1884–1920?), Bing Xin 冰心 (1900–1999), and Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–1986) critiqued the patriarchal order and advocated for women's education and independence. A small cohort of women and girls were educated in modern schools, albeit with the expectation on the part of male reformers that they would make better wives and mothers in the service of the modern nation.

Intellectuals were concerned about the plight of rural women and what it said about the nation they were trying to build. Shen Congwen 沈从文 (1902–1988) wrote of the child bride Xiaoxiao 萧萧, married at age eleven to her two-year-old husband.[13] Coerced into sex by an older farmhand, she is threatened with drowning or resale when her pregnancy is discovered. Her life is saved when she gives birth to a son whom the family agrees to raise. Cui'er 翠儿, a protagonist in a story by Bing Xin, is less fortunate: she is no older than fourteen when her mother-in-law beats her to death.[14]

Agitation by elites led to government legislation. In 1910, a year before the fall of the dynasty, the Qing attempted to outlaw slavery and human trafficking. As Mara Yue Du observes, the Republican civil code of 1929–1930 reconfigured marriage from a contract between the parents of the betrothed to one between the bride and the groom, implying that their consent would be required.[15] However, the sale of women and children continued throughout the Republican era.

Woman and child wearing a tiger hat, circa 1920
Source: Sidney D. Gamble Photographs Collection

As Johanna Ransmeier writes, urbanisation and commercialisation, wartime conditions, and long-distance transportation created new opportunities for traffickers and matchmakers to exploit vulnerable people.[16]

Mao Zedong claimed that women's liberation was vital to the revolution he would go on to lead. In his 1927 *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*, Mao described rural women as oppressed by the state, the lineage, religious authority, and their husbands.[17] Women fought with the communists against the nationalists and the Japanese, though as David Goodman writes, communist leaders prioritised 'economic mobilisation' over 'raising women's political consciousness'.[18] After the PRC was established in 1949, the *Marriage Law* of 1950 forbade forced marriages and interference in selecting a partner by third parties, including parents.[19] It prohibited polygamy and child marriage and allowed a woman to sue her husband for divorce. Yet, as Gail Hershatter has shown, women seeking a divorce faced intense pressure, and sometimes violence, from their families and even local officials, making divorce a difficult, even dangerous, choice.[20]

Less attention has been paid to trafficking under Mao, but as writer He Qinglian observes, the economic calamity and famine that followed the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) were ideal conditions for human traffickers.[21] She suggests that the sale of women was an accepted strategy for survival in poor rural communities. She also recalls a young boy from her block who was kidnapped off the street (boys could be 'adopted' as heirs by childless couples). National census

data suggest that female infanticide declined under Mao, but girls were more likely to die of neglect than boys during the famine of 1959–1961.[22] While reliable statistics are hard to come by, human trafficking may have been more difficult under Mao given the tight social and ideological controls.

Reform and Opening

The reforms of the 1980s gave the trade in women and children a new lease on life. The social and economic reforms implemented under Deng Xiaoping allowed for more physical and economic mobility while contributing to widening inequality. At the same time, strict birth-control policies limited most couples to a single child, though many families, especially in rural areas, found ways around them. These policies made it harder to ensure a son and male heir, which remained an imperative for many families despite efforts to promote daughters as equally valuable. By the late 1980s, sex-selective abortion and the abandonment of female infants contributed to more than 110 male births being reported for every 100 registered female births.[23]

As in earlier periods, poverty, skewed sex ratios, and the continued importance of male heirs fuelled the trade in women and children. A pioneering account of human trafficking from 1989 identifies Xuzhou, the regional transportation hub in northern Jiangsu that includes Feng county, as the epicentre of a burgeoning trade in women across provincial lines. It claims that between 1986 and 1989, 48,100 women were purchased in Xuzhou alone.[24] Xuzhou Train Station was a key nexus in the trade, and forty local taxi drivers helped traffic 101 women and girls as young as thirteen.

Women and children were typically trafficked from poorer 'peripheral' provinces to 'core' provinces in the north and east. The authors of the 1989 report alleged that in one village in Xuzhou, two-thirds of young wives had been purchased from the south-western provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou. More recent studies show this pattern continuing in the twenty-first century. Tiantian Zheng calculates that more than 90,000 women and children were sold in China between 2000 and 2013, with more than 90 percent coming from

poor provinces in south-western and central China.[25] Others came from neighbouring countries including Vietnam, Myanmar, and North Korea. During my fieldwork in Guizhou in 2018 and 2019, women recalled children being snatched from the side of the road. Far from home and, in the case of children, sometimes unregistered under the household registration system, *hukou* 戶口, women and children could find it difficult to run away. Young children might not even know the names or address of their parents.

Accounts of human trafficking suggest a degree of social acceptance, particularly in communities where sales of women and children are more common. They also show something of the slippery slope between legal marriages and illegal trafficking. A male villager quoted in the 1989 report asks: 'What is the difference between buying [a wife] from a matchmaker [*meiren* 媒人] or from a trafficker [*fanzi* 贩子]? I really don't get why buying a woman from a matchmaker is legal, but buying a woman from a trafficker is illegal.'[26] While the villager saw these transactions as comparable, a trafficker selling women across provincial lines could make ten times as much as an ordinary matchmaker, usually a woman, would receive in Yunnan.

The line between trafficking and legal marriage has not always been clear to the trafficked women either. And although they were initially sold to their husbands, many of them eventually chose to stay. A woman interviewed by researchers in the early 2000s was acutely conscious that she had been trafficked.[27] In 1990, when she was seventeen years old, she was tricked on to a train in Kunming, Yunnan, then held by a trafficker in Xuzhou. He locked her in a room, where prospective buyers, *maizhu* 买主, came to inspect her. Her eventual buyer — her husband — also kept her locked up. When she refused food and drink, he threatened to sell her on to an older man in his seventies or eighties. She said that in the early years, she ran away several times, but stopped running away when her child, born in 1991, was older.

Another woman's account was more ambivalent. In 1987, aged twenty-one, she agreed to travel from Yunnan to Shandong to marry a man she had never met.

His family gave her parents a few hundred yuan and paid her travel expenses. She felt cheated when she discovered that her husband was not as well off as the broker claimed, but he treated her well, buying her rice because she was unused to the wheat eaten in northern China. She described her feelings nearly two decades later: 'He [her husband] treated me well, it's only that I was homesick … They [her husband's family] said: "What do you mean, you're homesick? Your parents are both dead."'[28]

She continued: 'If I went home I would feel out of place. No matter how good my home is, it would still feel out of place. I will stay at this [her husband's] home. Even if it's no good, I have to make do.'

A New Era?

Despite the attention brought to the issue by the case of Little Plum Blossom, it is unlikely that public outrage or even legislation will end the sale of women and children in China. For one thing, it is questionable whether there is the political will to do so, given the leadership's general disinterest in addressing most kinds of discrimination faced by women. In recent years, the government has put in place regressive policies promoting traditional gender roles, including a new divorce law making it harder for women to leave their husbands.[29] As has been widely reported, for the first time in decades, the new twenty-four-member Communist Party of China (CPC) Politburo includes no women (see Focus, 'The Communist Party of China: Where Are the Women?', pp.147–153). Easing birth-control policies could balance sex ratios over time, reducing demand for trafficked brides. Authorities have proposed increasing criminal penalties for buyers of women and children — currently no more than three years in prison — to equal those of the traffickers themselves. But politics and policy are only part of the problem.

One of the most gut-wrenching moments of the video from Feng county comes in its opening seconds. The videographer is led to the shed by one of the woman's young sons. He has no sense that there is anything wrong and explains that he brings his mother food every day. In an earlier video, filmed by the Feng county government to promote the success of its targeted poverty

alleviation program, Mr Dong proudly shows off his seven sons without any hint that he is aware of committing a crime.[30] The local government's blindness towards the woman who gave birth to these children suggests that her sale and detention were acceptable in the local community.

Demographic and material constraints mean that not every man will be able to marry and produce a male heir. Ending the sale of women and children would require, among other things, rethinking marriage and the family so that 'success' is not measured by the number of sons. The stigmatisation of unmarried men and women and of childless couples would have to end and forced marriages and human trafficking become socially unacceptable as well as illegal. The case of Little Plum Blossom has drawn a wave of attention to the plight of trafficked women. The government has signalled a crackdown, but can it address the root causes, particularly poverty, inequality, and patriarchy?

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook: Chains*, edited by Linda Jaivin, Esther Sunkyung Klein and Annie Luman Ren, published 2023 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2023.02B