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Demi Bride Trafficking: A Unique Trend of Human Trafficking from South-East Asia To China

By Laetitia Lhomme¹, Siren Zhong², and Billie Du³

Abstract

Every year, hundreds of thousands of women and girls from Southeast Asia are forced or tricked into marrying Chinese men who exploit them for sex and childbearing. Although an emerging body of research and reports has revealed the scale and living conditions of the trafficked brides, there have not yet been systematic studies that would help stakeholders understand the real needs of the victims. Bride trafficking victims are generally defined as those who are deprived of their rights and married against their will. However, our investigation found that in China, cases which involve seemingly willing victims are barely covered by the current trafficking victim identification system, despite the existence of “the principle of the irrelevance of consent” (UNODC, 2014). Due to the lack of unified measures and feasible research methods, empirical research on such groups is very limited. In an effort to fill this gap, this article identifies this category as “demi bride trafficking” and includes an academic exploration of the transnational trafficked marriages in China as well as a descriptive analysis based on the interviews of various NGOs, experts, and government officials. By analysing the dysfunction of external interventions and the potential link between the Belt Road Initiative and the increasing number of human trafficking cases, this paper then suggests that currently, the most effective solution is to address it internally, with a focus on fulfilling victims’ individual demands, which in turn requires an individual tailored victim protection system to be built.

Keywords: Modern slavery, Forced migrants, Women empowerment, Transnational crimes

Introduction

Bride trafficking from Southeast Asia to China can be dated back to the 1980s. During that period, borders in Southeast Asia began to open, and transnational financial activities were growing. The weak management control system in the border areas promoted the human trafficking industry. That is, with the natural geographical advantage of the Great Mekong Subregion (GMS), new networks and cross-border transportations made it more convenient for traffickers to transport victims from China, Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand to supply sex trade (Emmers, 2003).

Since 2000, however, following China’s economic growth, the number of bride trafficking cases from the GMS to China has gradually increased and become one of the primary forms of cross-border human trafficking in the region. According to the Vietnamese official data, more than 3,000 women and children were trafficked between 2012 and 2017 (Vu, 2018). In the same period, Kachin Women’s Association Thailand (KWAT) has estimated that 7,500 Myanmar women had gone through forced marriage and childbearing to Chinese men, and those women suffered from both psychological and physical abuse (Robinson & Branchini, 2018). All these figures reveal just the tip of the iceberg of the bride trafficking industry from Southeast Asian countries to China.

Corresponding to this increase in transnational bride trafficking, the Chinese government modified its national laws to respond to the international standard of countering human trafficking. However, its practices are still limited because neither the Palermo Protocol nor China's domestic laws explicitly include bride trafficking in its definition of human trafficking. As a whole, China still has no effective laws for preventing bride trafficking. But even if specific law modifications that counter bride trafficking were passed in the next few years, this problem would not be wholly solved. The transnational bride trafficking phenomenon is still far from being eradicated through legal regulations, mainly due to the complexities lying behind the trafficking itself.

The crux of this paper's purpose is to answer the questions: what are the unique characteristics of bride trafficking in China and what are the main needs of the victims? The methodological framework of this paper combines half-structural interviews with NGOs and Chinese government officials who implemented the victim assistance/resettlement project, as well as analysis of secondary resources. This analysis will start with a brief explanation of the bride purchasing phenomenon in China. It will then introduce the unique form of human trafficking in China, which we defined as "demi-bride trafficking". This unusual type of trafficking is neglected a lot by previous researchers, and the related victims are not covered by the current victim identification system. By exploring the existing counter-human trafficking operations in China and how the whole industry is expanding alongside China's developing plans, this paper emphasises the urgency and potential approaches to build an individual tailored victim protection system.

Bride Trafficking in Southeast Asia and China

So far, there is no universal definition of bride trafficking (UNDOC, 2020). Bride trafficking, also called bride purchasing, is a special form of sex trafficking that is based on the commodification of females, yet it is different from sex trafficking. The exploitation involved in bride trafficking is more precisely related to the commercialization of marriages—generally, it enables the female brides to be sold to male buyers, and its purpose is not to find a person's love partner, but to fulfil the need of male buyers to arrange a wife who can function as a sex object, a birth-giving machine, and a domestic worker (UNDOC, 2020). Yet what needs to be noted here is that such a close connection with marriage makes the bride trafficking phenomenon doomed to be affected by different marriage-related cultural factors in different regions. This may also help explain why it is rarely possible to set an applicable worldwide definition of "bride trafficking", which means that it would be better to analyse the cultural and financial complexities of bride trafficking from a regional level.

When it comes to cultural aspects, in most Asian countries, bride trafficking has its deep inseparable relationships with forced marriage, or arranged marriage, which in turn is connected to one important marriage-related tradition: matchmaking (Hackney, 2015). Matchmaking is a tradition in both Southeast Asia and China in which the males' families give a "bride price" to the brides' families to indicate their financial ability (Molland, 2011). Later, attracted by the generous "bride price" that Chinese males are willing to pay, traffickers boosted illegal trafficking businesses across borders. In some cases, the female victim may voluntarily move to China for a marriage to gain a better financial status, only to later realize she was deceived after ending up in a poor suburban family. Thus, the concept of voluntariness in those transnational marriages makes it hard to find a clear boundary between a bride trafficking case and a simply unsuccessful arranged marriage, in turn making bride trafficking a unique form of human trafficking in Southeast Asia. This is also why the United Nations has pointed out that when trafficking occurs for the purpose

of forced or servile marriage it is not always possible for it to be recognized as a crime because of these cultural reasons (UNODC, 2018).

Another regional aspect that needs to be analysed is the economic conditions in Southeast Asia and China. Currently, there are some cases in which the female is victimized as a bride but later attracted by the better financial conditions in the new home; she may voluntarily choose to stay in China. In turn, even though females like this meet the basic elements of being victims of bride trafficking, they are still not covered by the victim identification system in China. This is because these victims are hard to recognize and find from the very beginning of the identification process. In addition, with the further development of economic cooperation in the GMS, transnational population flow and huge financial benefits brought by economic differences among countries will increase, which will only make this trend of bride trafficking between Southeast Asian countries and China more severe in the future.

The Trend of Bride Purchasing

As a special form of human trafficking and transnational criminality, bride trafficking between Southeast Asian countries and China has its inevitability as a social phenomenon, not only due to the cultural reasons which have been mentioned in the second section, but also due to the complicated financial reasons behind each individual buyer and each bride. In this section, we are going to focus on the two endpoints of this purchasing chain – the Chinese male buyers and the Southeast Asian girls for supply – and analyse their vulnerable situations and essential demands in their social contexts.

The Male Buyers and their Demands

In 1978, the Chinese government promulgated the one-child policy. Many married couples, especially those in rural areas, still favour having a son to carry on the male family name. This attitude is rooted in the minds of older Chinese generations because of the country's patriarchal tradition. Thus, sex-selective abortions and female infanticide caused the huge unbalanced ratio between male and female in China's population, and it further affected the bride market in those most touched areas such as the neighbouring countries.

According to the national economic data for 2019 released by the National Bureau of Statistics, by the end of 2019, China's male population was 31.64 million more than that of female (China Industry Information, 2019). The imbalance in the marriage market has led to a prevalence of involuntary bachelorhood marriages, as well as an increase in marriage costs such as betrothal gifts and wedding ceremony fees. In the villages with high female rural-to-urban migration, the surplus male groups are required to offer a house and around \$15-25,000 US dollars to the bride's family, but the average yearly salary in the village is only one-fifth that amount. Comparatively, \$4,500-5,500 US dollars is the average price for a wife from Southeast Asian countries. According to statistics, more than 11,500 out of 13,422 transnational marriage families belong to low-income families, accounting for 86% of the total (Yu & Gao, 2019). For those who cannot afford high marriage expenses, buying a wife is just an economical and practical option. This figure also reflects Hudson and Boer's theory that males' demand for marriage and sex often stimulates crimes against females, such as rape, forced marriage, and modern slavery (Hudson, 2002).

In addition, the development of China's society and the improvement of gender equality, women's self-consciousness, and independence have become stronger, and their dependence on their husbands has been greatly reduced (Lewis, 2020). However, certain Chinese men have not

progressed; the "masculinity" of men and the "traditional virtue" of women remains deeply rooted in their minds. In a family structure, they are trying desperately to maintain old, gendered power dynamics. The image of a submissive, easily controlled wife is very appealing to these men. Thus, men with this ideology will seek out illiterate, docile, and obedient foreign women who are accustomed to poor living conditions as their wives in order to achieve their ideal marriage situation.

The Girls for Supply and their Vulnerable Situations

Although the brides trafficked to China are from different countries in Southeast Asia, there are some common factors of these vulnerable situations shared by the victims. First of all, a majority of victims are unschooled, come from ethnic minorities, live in rural areas, and greatly suffer from poverty (ASEAN, 2019). Local threats such as military conflicts and natural disasters also increase the vulnerability of their situations. Take Myanmar, for instance; 90% of Myanmar victims in bride trafficking are from Kachin minority, an ethnic community affected by the internal conflict in Myanmar (ASEAN, 2019). The armed conflict displaced many girls and put them under extreme financial hardship. In order to escape poverty, political conflicts, and a displaced living status, going to China is often regarded as a relatively better choice for these girls to fulfil their basic financial needs and to gain a peaceful life, even though it also means that they might be trapped and suffer later in China and be identified as illegal immigrants instead of victims.

Because of this, it was not surprising to find in our investigations that bride-trafficking victims exist with varying degrees of voluntary willingness. In some cases, this willingness occurs in the first stage, during which the victims voluntarily enter China for marriages but are later trapped by fraudulent documents, domestic violence, and sexual exploitation. In other cases, this willingness occurs after they are victimized and trafficked to China, when they voluntarily choose to stay at their buyers' homes. Despite the fact that "the principle of irrelevance of consent"¹ is used internationally to help identify victims of human trafficking, the difficulties to define the voluntary level and the degree of victimization in cases like these are still making these trafficked victims harder to identify, which has subsequently brought new challenges for the law enforcement and NGOs who want to assist. In turn, a more detailed victim identification system which fits into the status quo is urgently needed. To better identify overlooked bride trafficking victims, we proposed a notion of "demi-bride trafficking" (DBT).

The Victims of Demi-Bride Trafficking in China

Two Categories of Demi-bride Trafficking with Case Studies

Type 1

According to our interview with government officers from different regions, there is an increasing number of cases where women choose to stay in China voluntarily. The reasons can be roughly divided into three aspects. First, the victims are lucky enough to enter a family without violence or abuse. The buyer wins the trust of the victims with goodwill and gives them hope of a normal life. Second, the traditional family value advises Southeast Asian girls to be contented with the man they have "married" and to take the responsibility to raise the kids. Thus, for the women who have already given birth to children with the buyers, even if they are dissatisfied with their

¹ According to "the principle of irrelevance of consent", consent of the victim to the intended exploitation is irrelevant when the exploitive actions and means have been used (UNODC,2020).

life, they would still choose to stay, in consideration of the growth of their children and the responsibility they have as mothers. Plus, most of them have no financial ability to be single mothers, so they prefer to maintain their existing families. The last reason then refers to conflict in the girls' home countries, which applies mainly to Burmese women. Burmese victims, especially those from Rakhine and the Kachin State, are suffering from armed conflicts and displacement. On the contrary, staying in China provides them with a relatively more stable social environment. So even if they are trafficked and abused, they prefer to stay in China, because at least there their most basic survival needs are guaranteed.

Though these women were victims of bride trafficking, they often voluntarily accept their fates later which makes them unaware of their need for compensation for their victimization in the first place. In turn, their life seems not distinctive from those of normal Chinese citizens on the surface, and they cannot be easily identified as victims of bride trafficking. Even if in some cases victims in this category manage to be identified and are under investigation by the police, a combination of voluntariness and victimization still makes it hard for the police to produce a suitable corresponding solution on how to deal with such victims.

Case Study

Fan² used to be an ordinary girl in Myanmar before she was drugged and trafficked to China. "When I woke up, the traffickers told me that I had been sold to China, if I wanted to return to Vietnam, I had to pay back 2000 yuan," said Fan. She continued, "If there is no ransom money, I have to stay there until someone comes to buy me. "

Ten days after, a Chinese young man paid 2000 yuan to buy Fan as a wife. The husband took her back to his home in a poor and remote area. Fan's fear of being locked up and sexually exploited did not happen to her; instead, she was loved and treated nicely by her husband. The fact that their relationship started "commercially and illegally" did not affect their intimacy and romance. After they had two children, Fan said that although she had thoughts of escaping back to her hometown, due to good treatment from her husband and her traditional family values, she dropped this idea and decided to forget her original family in Vietnam.

Type 2

The second categories of "demi-bride trafficking" victims are those who have shown their voluntary willingness to enter China for a real marriage at first but later find themselves trapped. Many brokers, who want to get great profits from transnational matchmaking between Southeast Asian countries and China, would first go to the targeted countries to look for girls in vulnerable situations and convince them that marrying a Chinese man is a relatively good way to solve their families' financial difficulties. In turn, this first stage does involve some degree of voluntary willingness from the victims. For such cases which involve certain degrees of victim's consent to the marriage, the United Nations has pointed out that according to the "principle of irrelevance of consent", the victim's consent to the marriage itself is irrelevant in the process of identifying victims because the existence of the exploitive actions and means can already fulfil the concept of "receiving intended exploitation" (UNODC, 2020). This principle does seem to help identify this group of victims, but the problem is, current laws in China are not in line with this principle; when such cases are under investigation, the violence the victims have suffered is often regarded as domestic violence, instead of bride trafficking exploitation.

² All victims' names have been changed to protect their identities.

In addition, girls in poverty are more likely to follow customary laws or tribal practices in marriage because they come from uneducated families. The fact that they do not have an official marriage certificate gave the buyers' families opportunities to take advantage of these brides' legal statuses, and then use imprisonment and deportation as threats to make them give up the idea of escaping. In turn, even if sometimes these women manage to turn to the police for help, or if they are found by the police, out of fear of being found illegal they do not offer accurate narratives of their experiences, which in turn makes them unidentifiable as victims of trafficking because there is no proof of exploitation. Because of this, "the principle of irrelevance of consent" cannot protect victims because their "consent to the marriage" and their illegal entry prevents them from telling their true stories to police in the first place.

Case Study

The case is about a Laotian girl whose name is Pan³. The matchmaker gave Pan's family \$4,200 USD as a bride price and told Pan that her marriage to her future Chinese husband would be legitimate, and that she could leave this husband freely if she didn't like the family in China. Believing this to be true, Pan followed the matchmaker to China to meet her future husband.

Pan enjoyed the marriage in the beginning; she even posted her husband's pictures on her social media to show her happiness. However, everything changed after she discovered her husband's obsession with having a baby. Every time she refused to have sex he would lock her in the bathroom for the whole day. She later also learned that she entered China with a tourist visa, and no marriage certificate was ever issued. Her passport and telephone were kept by her husband. She tried to run away, but the man told her that he paid \$30,000 USD to the matchmaker, and he would not let Pan go back to Laos if he could not get the money returned. It was at that time that Pan understood she was a victim of human trafficking.

Unlike other human trafficking cases, in Pan's case she accepted the bride price and voluntarily married a Chinese man. In cases like Pan's, women realize they are victims once they find out that their marriages are illegal and that they cannot run away from their buyers.

The Essential Demands from DBT Victims

For the first type of victims who stay in China voluntarily, their primary needs are to obtain social benefits, custodial rights, and legal protection in China. Their rights are restricted in land distribution, employment, medical care, endowment insurance, etc., which could cause them life-long instability. Without legal immigration status, they will always live in a vulnerable position and have a fear of deportation or re-trafficking.

In addition, language barriers hinder their communication, which makes it difficult for them to integrate into the surrounding communities and find a sense of belonging. Being foreign in a largely homogenous society such as China's, they are generally excluded from social dialogues and family decision-making. Psychologically, this group does not classify themselves as "victims of trafficking" but rather as "marriage migrants". They want nothing but support and recognition from society and to live a normal life with dignity.

Equally important, for those who are trapped and forced to stay in China after they "married", a broader definition of human trafficking needs to be put in place. Due to language barriers and the absence of legal protection, most of the victims are reluctant to seek help from

³ This case study comes from our work with a local NGO. The NGO demand us to keep their confidential so the rescue program could continue in China.

local police. In some cases, even if they turn to the police, they encounter the problems of inefficient law enforcement and are sent back to their buyers.

Unprotected Situation of DBT Victims: The Dysfunction of NGOs

In most countries, NGOs play an equally important role as law enforcement in victim rescuing, reintegration, and prevention. However, in China, their impact is limited due to the restriction on their operations. Following the pass of the “Law of the People’s Republic of China on Administration of Activities of Overseas Nongovernmental Organizations in the Mainland of China” in January 2017, all foreign NGOs in China have to submit to police supervision and declare sources of funding and allow the Chinese government to operate daily supervision and monitoring over them (BBC, 2016). The legislation also banned foreign NGOs from recruiting staff in mainland China, which made the local rescue program of human trafficking victims almost impossible.

And for the Chinese NGOs, their scope of activities is restricted to only victims with Chinese nationality. Although it would be helpful if NGOs in China could raise awareness of potential male bride buyers with more information on the specific punishment for purchasing humans, few Chinese NGOs have this practice. Besides, stable cooperation between Chinese NGOs and NGOs in the GMS regions is also lacking. We interviewed many members of NGOs in Myanmar and Vietnam during our research who have shown a great desire to work with Chinese social groups. Just as one of them once pointed out, “[we understand] NGO operations are limited inside China, but they could at least help a bit with the translation, localization, and policy explanation.”

Under this situation, overseas NGOs have now shifted their focus more on prevention. For instance, local NGOs such as Blue Dragon and Kachin Women’s Association in Thailand have set several advocating and education projects in Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar. They teach girls how to distinguish between real job offers and potential trafficking activities and deliver basic knowledge of self-protection, such as how to use “WeChat” (a Chinese communication app similar to WhatsApp) and how to contact the police in China. Nevertheless, these efforts are far away from reaching the needs of victims.

Weak Regional Cooperation

Regional cooperation has been settled since as early as 2004—the ministers of six governments of the GMS (Cambodia, China, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) against Trafficking in Persons—but the situation is not getting better. Indeed, this memorandum was perceived as a “soft” law with no monitoring body, so it failed heavily in providing common norms for state members to address human trafficking in the region (Kranrattanasuit, 2014). Although it tried to provide a standard definition of trafficking, its language is vague and only “*encourages*” member countries to use the definition contained in the Palermo Protocol. Although MoU is a symbol of the regional cooperation among GMS countries, it can neither elaborate an explicit definition of human trafficking victims nor offer a practical way of implementing protection.

Save the Children pointed out in our interview that two other factors that interfere with the implementation of regional cooperation between law enforcements are inadequate execution strategies and the collusion of corrupt officials. Traffickers are known to enlist the help of corrupt officials in recruiting victims and moving them across borders (Caballero-Anthony, 2018). This phenomenon is particularly rampant somehow due to the general financial improvement in

Southeast Asia. With the desire to further improve the local economy and surpass that of other areas, some villages protect and facilitate bride trafficking for extra earning. For instance, according to a news report in 2017, dozens of Thai police officials were found guilty in trafficking cases (Jirenuwat & Goldman, 2017). Compared to the mere inability of implementation, such collusion between the police and the traffickers no doubt brings much more severe consequences, along with an irredeemable decline in the credibility of the police.

Deteriorated Situation under China's Economic Influence

In recent years, several NGOs and journalists have observed that the practice of human trafficking seems to be emerging in new areas alongside the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)⁴ (Carvalho, 2020). A combination of enhanced mobility of labour between partner countries, the uneven development in certain regions, and extensive exploitation of the poor in rural areas has caused this rise in number of trafficking victims (Hedström, 2019). That is, although China's investment has brought infrastructure development and more commercial opportunities, most of the money flows into the pockets of state-aligned investors and private sector companies. Take Myanmar as an example, the state-owned projects, such as Copper mines, benefit mostly the government and military forces in Myanmar⁵, but have displaced thousands of local people with a worse financial condition and a spoiled environment (IRIN, 2010). Since governments in the GMS repeatedly prioritise economic growth and energy development over the prevention of human trafficking, the scale of the problem continues to increase.

The Urgency of Building a DBT-based Victim Identification System

The external interventions, analysed in the previous section, are ineffective at pulling DBT victims out of their vulnerable situations. We argue that the focus of governments and NGOs must be shifted more to internal interventions—i.e., eliminating the ability of men to buy transnational/foreign brides and to actively offer assistance to DBT victims who are now still in China.

Indeed, in recent years Beijing has made some improvements in the former, such as cutting off the demands from buyers after it committed to regional counter-human trafficking operations. The Chinese government made an amendment to its Criminal Law in 2015 to illegalize the compartment of purchasing humans for the first time. Thus, a buyer who hosts a trafficked woman and forces them to bear a child will face a combined punishment for offences of rape and accommodating a trafficked person.

However, simply having this improvement on punitive justice is not enough. An enhanced restorative justice for victims is also urgently needed today, which can put its focus on helping the trafficked brides who have already been harmed. Yet what needs to be noticed is that this goal cannot be achieved with only one step. To be more exact, assisting the trafficked victims (no matter whether it is through rescue, rehabilitation, integration, legal help, or any other means) requires a sophisticated link which can connect the victims to the corresponding social service departments for help. This link should not only make these helpful resources—either national or foreign—

⁴ The Belt and Road Initiative (the Initiative), proposed by China in 2013, is aimed to boost China's economic cooperation between Southeast Asian countries.

⁵ The mine's operators, Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd (UMEHL), which is owned by Myanmar's military, and Myanmar Wanbao, a unit of China North Industries Corp, will get 19 percent and 30 per cent respectively. While the government of Myanmar holds 51 per cent of the profits (the Reuters 2013).

available and accessible to the victims, but also should be able to provide accurate and detailed information of the victims' individualized situations and demands to the assisting departments. Hence, such an ideally effective and efficient "link" could only be made with a first-step victim identification system, which is well-grounded on a thorough and detailed categorization of victims.

There is still some hope for the development of such a victim identification system. In China, the victims were generally considered "sanfei (三非)" before 2015, which represents people who are guilty for entering, residing, or working in China illegally. Once they have been caught by the police, they would face detention and repatriation regardless of the fact that they were trafficked. But fortunately, a preliminary victim identification system has started to operate in many areas in China, which means that once the victims of trafficking are identified, they would be sent to shelters and remain free from penalization (China News, 2020).

The main problem for this preliminary victim identification system lies in the unclear/inadequate criteria that Chinese laws and policies lay out for victims, none of which include the victims of demi-bride trafficking. For those who want to stay in China, the law leaves a gap that makes it difficult for the victims to obtain their legal status and social benefits. As for those who voluntarily move to China, they do not match the definition of "being cheated or forced ... [and] trafficked to the buyers" set out in China's National Plan of Action on Combating Trafficking in Women and Children Trafficking (2013-2020). Thus, when they seek help, their cases are more likely to be treated as fraud or domestic violence.

It's worth noting that in Jiangsu province, there are cases where trafficked girls who choose to stay in China voluntarily could be considered regular residents and become registered in the Chinese' civil affairs system. In those cases, the girls are happy with their situations and come to the police for help. Once the local police confirm that they are not under threats, they help the girls obtain a family-reunion visa and marriage certificate. Also, community officers have the responsibility to raise awareness among local citizens about human trafficking and identify foreign brides to prevent potential cases of DBT.

Such practices in Jiangsu province, though not representative across the nation, are a great blueprint for an ideal victim identification system in the future. Yet it is critical to note that such an individual-tailored victim identification and assistance system cannot easily be applied to a large geographical areas like China if there is not a strong and clear operation guide from the central government down to the local administrations that can ensure a consistent implementation of victim identification and assistance.

This also explains why most current victims are still suffering from lack of identification as victims of human trafficking; they may be sent back to the buyers by the police, deported back to their home country, or face domestic violence or other kinds of gender-based abuse. These contrasting implementations of policies, compared to the ones in Jiangsu province, all demonstrate a prevalence of ambiguous central policies and information asymmetry between different levels of governments in China. The type of police intervention can also vary depending on the education and personal morals within a police department. According to one NGO that helps rescue trafficked girls in China, it is normal to see police officers from the same province operate in two opposite ways—one might give the girls money out of his own pocket to let them go back to their home country, while the other might accept a bribe from the fraudulent marriage brokers and turn a blind eye.

Therefore, a detailed and thorough victim categorization on a theoretical and academic level—as outlined by our paper—is no doubt the first step to advancing protections for trafficked women, although it is far from enough. In order to bring DBT victim categorization into real

practice, we also require the consistency of policies and effective education programs for the relevant police officers, which could only come from a strong and clear anti-trafficking operation guide from both the central and local administrations.

Conclusion

In summary, we would like to highlight the two tasks this paper tried to achieve. First, we analysed the unique characteristics of bride trafficking in China. By using existing victim identification systems, we defined two new and distinct groups of victims as “demi-bride trafficking” victims. Sex-selective abortions and female infanticide caused by China’s one-child policy have led to a hugely unbalanced ratio between male and female citizens in China, and it further affected the bride market and human trafficking patterns in its neighbouring countries. Meanwhile, the poor economic or conflict situations of victims in their home countries and the long-existing tradition of using customary law in marriage added push factors for girls who were to marry Chinese men, voluntarily or involuntarily. These “outsiders” are excluded from the social system in China and face many practical problems including language barriers, rights restrictions, and lack of social supports. Therefore, their core needs are legal identity, social integration, and legal protection.

Second, despite the descriptive nature of this study as well as the limitations of the data, this paper explored the challenges of the current operations by NGOs, regional cooperation, and governments. This paper then argued that the complex situation requires the consistency of policies among China’s central and local government in defining an individual-tailored victim protection system.

As we pointed out in this paper, the larger social problem behind DBT is the imbalance of population development and the squeezed marriage market. Chinese men have difficulty finding a spouse in their domestic marriage market which leads them to look for alternative marriage arrangements. And finally, the expansion of the BRI has a potential to exacerbate and bring to the forefront the systemic and deeply entrenched economic and societal inequalities that are among the root causes of bride trafficking. Therefore, we call for future research to be conducted in more realistic settings into the potentially harmful relationship between the BRI and human trafficking.

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