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

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Abstract.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of women and girls from Southeast Asia are being 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 to 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 certain degrees of victims' voluntary willing are barely covered by the current trafficking victim identification system, despite the existence of "the principle of the irrelevance of consent". 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, focusing 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

1. Introduction

Bride trafficking from Southeast Asia to China can be dated back to 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



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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 revealed 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. On the whole, China still has no effective laws for preventing bride trafficking. Yet taking a step back, even if there could come some specific law modifications on countering bride trafficking in the next few years, this transnational bride trafficking phenomenon is still far from being eradicated through legal regulations, mainly due to the complexities lying behind the bride trafficking itself.

The crux of this paper's purpose is to answer the question of 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 the 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.

2. Bride Trafficking in Southeast Asia and China

So far, there is no universal definition of bride trafficking (UNDOC, 2020). Bride trafficking, or called bride purchasing, as a special form of sex trafficking, is based on the commodification of females; yet 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.



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From the cultural aspects, in most Asian countries, bride trafficking has its deep inseparable relationships with forced marriage, or arranged marriage, which in turn is connected with one important marriage-related tradition -- matchmaking (Hackney, 2015). Matchmaking is a tradition in both Southeast Asia and China for the males' families to give "bride price" to the bride's family 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 in-between. In some cases, the female victim may voluntarily move to China for a marriage to gain a better financial status, but later she would realize she had been 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 possible to not be recognized as a crime due to some cultural reasons (UNODC, 2018).

Another regional aspect 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, because these victims are hard to be recognized and found 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.

3. 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.

3.1 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 hold the notion of having a son to carry on family names of the male. 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, 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



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Industry Information, 2019), The squeeze of the marriage market has led to a prevalence of involuntary bachelorhood marriage, 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 normal price to buy a wife from Southeast Asian countries. According to the statistic, 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 male's demand for marriage and sex often stimulates crimes against female, such as rape, forced marriage and modern slavery (Hudson, 2002).

Besides, with 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 is deeply rooted in their mind. 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. Therefore, males with this ideology will seek out illiterate, poor living conditioned, docile and obedient foreign women as their wives in order to realise complementary marriage.

3.2 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). Besides, local threats, such as military conflicts and natural disasters, also give rise to 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 made many girls displaced 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.

Therefore, it is not hard to understand why we found out, during our investigations, there exists a mix of victimization with certain degrees of voluntary willingness on those trafficked girls for supply. 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 were victimized and trafficked to China, when they voluntarily choose to stay at their buyers' homes. Despite "the principle of irrelevance of consent"¹ is used internationally to help identify victims

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).



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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).

4. The Victims of Demi-Bride Trafficking in China

4.1 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 normal life. Second, the traditional family value advises Southeast Asian girls to be contented with the man they have “married” to and 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 life, they would still choose to stay, in consideration of the growth of their children and the responsibility as their 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 the conflict situation of 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 with them a relatively more stable social environment. So even if they are trafficked and abused, they prefer to stay in China, at least to get their most basic survival needs guaranteed.

Hence, for this category of victims, even though the bride trafficking did occur on themselves, such a later voluntariness and an acceptance of their fates can make them unaware of the need to get compensated for their past victimized experiences. In turn, their life seems not distinctive from those of normal Chinese citizens from 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 the investigations by the police, such 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,” Fan said. “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

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



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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 them to ignite the intimacy and romance. After they had two children, Fan said that although she had the thoughts of escaping back to her hometown, due to the good treatment of her husband and her traditional family value, 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 the beginning 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 received is often regarded as domestic violence, instead of bride trafficking exploitation.

In addition, girls in poverty are more likely to follow customary laws or tribal practices in marriage due to low education of themselves and their 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 females manage to turn to the police for help, or if they are found by the police, with a fear of being found illegal, they would not offer accurate narratives of their experiences, in turn cannot provide proofs of exploitation which are needed for the police to identify them as victims of bride trafficking. In this way, “the principle of irrelevance of consent” also cannot play its role to protect the victims, because such “consent to the marriage”, as a reminder of their illegal entry, has already prevented them from telling the true stories out to the police from the very beginning of the identification process.

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 will be legitimate, and that she could leave this husband freely if she doesn’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

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.



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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, this type of victims like Pan accepted the bride price and married a Chinese man voluntarily. But they were transformed into victims once they figured out that their marriages were illegal, and they could not run away from the buyers.

4.2 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 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.

4.3 Unprotected Situation of DBT victims

4.3.1 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, as well as allow the Chinese government to operate daily supervision and monitoring over them (BBC, 2016). The legislation also banned foreign NGOs from recruiting staffs 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



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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. Many NGOs we interviewed in Myanmar and Vietnam during our research have shown great needs 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 the victims.

4.3.2 The weak regional cooperation

Regional cooperation has been settled as early as in 2004 -- a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) against Trafficking in Persons was signed by the Ministers of six governments of the GMS (Cambodia, China, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam) – 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, with an irredeemable decline in the credibility of the police.

4.3.3 Deteriorated situation under China's economic influence

A new trend has been observed in recent years by several NGOs and journalists that the practice of human trafficking seems to be emerging in new areas, alongside the expansion of the Belt



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and Road Initiative (BRI)⁴ (Carvalho, 2020). This rising number of trafficking victims is due to a combination of the enhanced mobility of labour between partner countries, the uneven development in regions and more extensive exploitation of the poor in rural areas (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.

5. 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 the 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 – 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 such improvement on punitive justice is not enough. An enhanced restorative justice for victims is also urgently needed nowadays, which can put its focus on helping the trafficked brides who have already received certain harms. 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 – available and accessible to the victims, but also should be able to provide accurate and detailed information of the victims' individualized situation and demands to the assisting departments. Hence, such an ideally effective and efficient “link” could only be done with a first-step victim identification system, which is well-grounded on a thorough and detailed categorization of victims.

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).



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In fact, there exists some hope for the development of such a victim identification system. In China, the victims were generally considered as “sanfei(三非)” before 2015, which stands for the 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. Yet fortunately, right now, 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 free from penalization (China News, 2020).

The main problem for this preliminary victim identification system lies on the unclear/inadequate criteria laid out for victims by Chinese laws and policies: none of which include the victims of the demi-bride trafficking. For those who wanted 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 moved 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 were more likely to be dealt with as fraud or domestic violence.

It's worth noting that in Jiangsu province, there were cases where the trafficked girls who choose to stay in China voluntarily could be considered as regular residents and get 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 confirmed that they are not under threats, they would assist the girls in getting a family-reunion visa and marriage certificate. Also, community officers have the responsibility to raise the 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, can still be regarded as 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 so easily be applied to a big geographical area, like the whole of China, if there is not a strong and clear operation guide from the central government down to the local administrations, which can ensure a consistent implementation of victim identification and assistance.

This also explains why currently most victims are still suffering from not being able to be identified as victims of human trafficking: they may be sent back to the buyers by the police; be deported back to their home country; or face domestic violence or other kinds of gender-based abuses. 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 would accept a bribe from the fraudulent marriage brokers and turn a blind eye.

Therefore, a detailed and thorough victim categorization on a theoretical and academical level – as outlined by our paper– is no doubt the first step to advancing protections for trafficked



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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 an 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.

6. 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 has 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 those girls to marry Chinese men, voluntarily or involuntarily. Currently, for such “outsiders” who are excluded from the social system in China, they are faced with many practical problems such as 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, the 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 the paper, the bigger 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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