Child trafficking in China: Evidence from sentencing documents

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Abstract: Child trafficking has long been internationally recognized as a serious crime. However, due to data scarcity and inconsistent definitions, the scope and the nature of such criminal activity are not well understood in China. To fill this gap, this study aims to provide new evidence by digitizing and analyzing sentencing documents on child trafficking in China during 2014–2016. Taking advantage of web-scraping techniques, all child trafficking cases were downloaded from the China Judgments Online website. Through geographic mapping and network analysis, we identified four geographic hotspots for trafficking - the Central East (Shandong, Henan, and Hebei Provinces), the East (Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces), the Southeast (Guangdong and Fujian Provinces), and the Southwest (Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan Provinces) and explored the connection between the hotspots and the gender of victims. We further examined the association of provincial socioeconomic characteristics with the frequency of trafficking cases and found that the sex ratio at birth and the number of legal adoptions per thousand population were positively correlated to the frequency of buying and selling children.

Keywords: child trafficking; China; gender difference; illegal adoption

1. Introduction

Child trafficking, a serious and grave crime against vulnerable children, has attracted global attention for decades (Gozdziak and Collett, 2005; Kangaspunta, 2003; Lee, 2005; Staiger, 2005). Scholars in this area have spent a tremendous amount of time on issues of international trafficking, yet domestic trafficking has largely been ignored, possibly due to the inconsistency in definitions of human trafficking that most researchers have adopted (Larsen, 2011; Rafferty, 2007; Shen, Antonopoulos, and Papanicolaou, 2013; Weitzer, 2014). For example, according to the United Nations (UN) Protocol on trafficking document, human trafficking is defined as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by improper means (such as force, abduction, fraud, or coercion) for an improper purpose including forced labor or sexual exploitation.” The definition emphasizes three specific elements: The act, the means, and the purpose of exploitation (UN, 2000). When studying domestic trafficking, however, researchers might find that the exploitation-oriented framework does not fit a country’s legal system. For instance, in the Chinese legal system, the definition of child trafficking focuses on the abduction or trafficking of a child for the purpose of selling, while forced labor or sex exploitation is only considered an aggravating factor during the whole trafficking process (Shen, 2016). Therefore, such an inconsistency may hinder the effort to understand the severity of domestic trafficking in the Mainland China (hereafter China).

Ren (2004) reported that, from 1980 to 2000, there were 10,768 children trafficked nationwide, meaning that thousands of families lost their young children and most of whom had little chance of ever finding them again (Shen, Antonopoulos, and Papanicolaou, 2013). Although forced labor or sex exploitation might not be the main purpose of child trafficking - some victims were voluntarily sold by their own parents - the negative
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consequences are certainly not negligible; the victims live with their buyers who are not monitored by official institutions, and the chances of a child being abused, resold, or abandoned are quite high if their buyers become incapacitated in any way (Rafferty, 2007). Some scholars argue that the Chinese legal definition of child trafficking can be categorized as an illegal adoption (Shen, 2013). Regardless of what officially constitutes as child trafficking in different countries, the consequences of such crimes cannot be overlooked, and understanding the pattern and related issues of child trafficking is still of great urgency.

Unfortunately, empirical studies on child trafficking in China are rare (Li, Tan, Wang et al., 2018; Shen, 2016; Wang, 2015; Xing, Chen, and Xu, 2017). One possible reason is the lack of empirical data. Previous work has either been entirely based on official statistics released by governmental agencies (Ren, 2004) or mixed with interviews of individual victims conducted by NGOs (Chu, 2011; Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, 2013), which offer little insight to the problem besides aggregated numbers and unsupported speculations on general patterns. In recent years, new empirical studies have emerged using information garnered from Regional Police records or websites that help people to find their missing children to investigate child trafficking (Wang, 2015; Li, Tan, Wang et al., 2018; Wang, Wei, Peng et al., 2018). For instance, Wang (2015) utilized Provincial Police records that contained information on the origins of victim(s), locations of buyer(s), purposes of purchasing, and means of transportation to explore the pattern, size, and potential causes of child trafficking in Fujian Province from 2009 to 2014. Moreover, based on self-reported information scraped from missing children websites, both Li et al. (2018) and Wang et al. (2018) identified regional hotspots and critical bridges of child trafficking. Even though studies such as these improved the current understanding of child trafficking in China, the applicability and implications of their results are potentially limited by regional relevance (e.g., Fujian Province) or self-reported bias (e.g., abducted or missing cases only).

As part of the effort to improve Judicial Transparency, beginning on January 1, 2014, the Supreme People’s Court of China (SPC) required the People’s Courts at all levels to upload their sentencing documents, except for those cases that may contain classified information (e.g., cases related to national security) and pose a threat to individual privacy (e.g., cases related to juveniles) or those deemed “inappropriate” to publicize. The publicized sentencing documents provide a unique opportunity to investigate child trafficking, as the documents include information on defendants and trafficking routes (Tao, 2017; Xing, Chen, and Xu, 2017).

Previous findings on the magnitude of child trafficking in China are mixed, especially when different sources of data are compared. Due to the limited sources of data regarding these crimes, most of the prior studies have either used official statistics from government reports and police records or cited self-reported information while evaluating the extent of child trafficking. For example, using released government reports, Ren (2004) reported that, from 1980 to 2000, there were 10,768 children trafficked nationwide, approximately 500 cases per year, which is consistent with the data released from the National Bureau of Statistics of China that documented the total number of detected child trafficking cases as 618 in 2016 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2017). According to the information obtained from missing children websites, Li et al. (2018) found that the number of trafficked children increased from <50 in the early 1980s to nearly 400 in the year 1994; the number of children trafficked then decreased to a stable level of around 250 after the year 2002. These differences might be due to selective reporting. For instance, the cases reported by the missing child websites are exclusive to children who are either missing or abducted; however, many victims of child trafficking are sold by their parents (Li, Ren and Zhang, 2013). As such, those cases are included in the governmental reports but are not reported to the missing child websites. While utilizing police records in the Fujian Province, Wang (2015) reported that, between the years of 2010 and 2013, the police in Fujian Province detected more than 11,000 child trafficking cases, which is equivalent to more than 3000 cases per year in one province. Although both Ren (2014) and Wang (2015) employed data from official sources, the huge discrepancy is still difficult to explain.

Despite the disparity in the magnitude of child trafficking cases across different data sources, researchers have suggested a consistent pattern of geographical hotspots for child trafficking. For example, victims were trafficked from the Inland Northern and Southwest regions (e.g., Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou Provinces) to the Central East (e.g., Shandong, Henan, and Hebei Provinces) and Southeastern coastal regions (e.g., Fujian and Guangdong Provinces) (Li, Tan, Wang et al., 2018; Ren, 2004; Tao, 2017; Wang, 2017; Wu, 2017).

Generally speaking, younger boys were more marketable than girls in the black market. Existing literature has shown that male victims comprised 53–66% of the total number of children trafficked (Li, Tan, Wang et al., 2018; Ren, 2004; Xing, Chen, and Xu, 2017), and the price of boys ranged from 10,000 to 20,000 Chinese yuan (approximately USD $1,500–$3,000) in 2,000, which was nearly 2–3 times higher than the cost of girls (Ren, 2004). Wang (2015) reported that, in the Fujian Province, boys were bought at 70,000–80,000 yuan (approximately USD $10,300–$11,800), and the price of girls was only about half (Wang, 2015). In terms of age distribution, the majority of victims were under 7 years old, while older girls were more frequently sold into the sex industry or bridal trade (Ren, 2004).
Scholars have linked some trafficking patterns, for example, the frequency and probability of selling or buying for economic and cultural reasons (Wang, 2017; Wu, 2017). For instance, studies have suggested that the large income gap, low level of education, and high illiteracy rate are positively correlated to the probability of selling victims; similarly, a high sex ratio at birth (SRB), which is considered a consequence of the restrictive practice of the family planning policy and traditional culture, is associated with the high probability of buying victims (Wang, 2017). In addition to the profit- or culture-motivated hypothesis (Jiang Q and Sánchez-Barricarte, 2013; Shen, 2013), some scholars have argued that the black market for child trafficking in China was triggered by the demand for illegal adoption, a result of the unique combination of the one-child policy, the traditional culture of male-preference, and the barriers to legal adoption (Ren, 2004; Shen, Antonopoulos, and Papanicolaou, 2013; Tao, 2017; Wang, 2015; Xing, Chen, and Xu, 2017). Given that many children were voluntarily sold by their parents or relatives, people who lived in poor rural areas with relatively loose family planning policies were more likely to sell their own children (Wu, 2017; Wang, 2017), given their own gender preference (Rafferty, 2007). In addition, the high profit, low risk, and lenient punishment for parental sellers in child trafficking businesses elevated the supply (Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte, 2013; Shen, Antonopoulos, and Papanicolaou, 2013; Zhang, 2006).

Although previous studies have examined the child trafficking issue in China, due to limited information provided by official records and the unreliable nature of self-reported cases, much of the research suffers from inconsistent results or a lack of empirical evidence. Moreover, to understand the extent of child trafficking, legal adoption has to be considered because adopters and buyers share the same “market” in China. To fill this gap, the current study aims to provide a more substantial basis for empirical research on child trafficking through the analysis of official sentencing documents. Although a single source of information cannot provide a complete picture of the extent of child trafficking in China, the sentencing documents provide useful information on both the victims and offenders. Furthermore, by taking the advantage of geographic information system technology, we are able to map trafficking networks and summarize trafficking patterns, thus contributing to a better understanding of the nature of child trafficking in China.

Taking advantage of the released sentencing documents from 2014 to 2016, the current study seeks to explore the patterns of child trafficking in China, focusing on the characteristics of the victim, geographic distribution of trafficking routes, and the related socioeconomic factors. This article is organized as follows: First, we begin by summarizing previous findings. Next, a description of the data and methods used is presented, followed by our results and discussion. We conclude with a summary of our findings and suggestions for future studies.

2. Data and Methods

2.1. Data

In this study, we utilized web-scraping techniques to retrieve all available sentencing documents during the period of 2014–2016 citing Article 240 of the Chinese Criminal Law that criminalizes the trafficking of females or children. Sentencing documents were obtained directly from the China Judgments online (CJO) website, which is the official archiving platform for the national judicial documents. The process of webpage data collection is to automatically browse the website through client-server communication, store the contents of webpage, and to structuralize them into analyzable data. The contents of interest, for example, the sentencing documents, are stored on server and can be located and visited by a global address - Uniform Resource Locator (URL). Theoretically, once the URL of each of webpages is known, the contents could be retrieved and transported using HTTP protocol (Fielding, Gettys, Mogul et al., 1996). However, due to the lack of well-developed software and individually customized structure of the CJO website, the whole process of data collection was done by specialized programming in Python. According to Article 240, any individual who is involved in “any act of abducting, kidnapping, buying, trafficking in, fetching or sending, or transferring a woman or a child for the purposes of selling the victim” faces a penalty of not <5 years or life imprisonment and a fine or confiscation of property. Since the mandatory uploading started from January 01, 2014, and there is no regulation to urge the People’s Courts to upload the cases sentenced before that, the number of cases sentenced before the year of 2014 is very limited. While the project was started in 2017, only three full years of data were available. Therefore, the analytical sample consists of 536 first trial cases sentenced from 2014 to 2016 with 1,074 defendants and 859 victims.

For a criminal case, usually there are three steps involving investigation, prosecution, and trial. The process of each of cases might be different. Among the total of 536 cases sentenced between 2014 and 2016, more than 90% of victims were sold at the same year of the case being trafficked. Although there were no official data sources showing the number of prosecuted child trafficking cases in the legal system, according to the official emergency response system - Tiayuan which is led by the Ministry of Public Security of China, there were totally 3,053 reported missing children, and 97.6%
of them were found between May 2016 and May 2018. Among all the solved cases, the top four categories were running away from home (55.9%, 1,705 cases), getting lost (13.9%, 424 cases), accidental death (4.6%, 140 cases), and being trafficked (1.6%, 48 cases) (Mo, 2018). Roughly <30% of total reported cases, 250 per year were child trafficking even if we assume the worst case scenario that all the rest were child trafficking cases.

Based on the number of cases uploaded to the websites of CJO and Open Law and the official gazettes of the SPC, the percentage of the uploaded among sentenced cases for crimes of infringing on the rights of the person and the democratic rights of citizens including murder, homicide, rape, and human trafficking was about 60%. If there is no substantial discrepancy on the pattern of selective uploading across provinces, the number of cases that we have was about one-third to half of total number of cases.

In contrast to the international definition of trafficking that focuses on the purpose of exploitation, child trafficking in the Chinese Judicial System emphasizes the illegal trafficking process and the purpose of profit making. Therefore, we acknowledge that a direct comparison of findings between the international child trafficking studies and those using data from the Chinese Judicial System might not be suitable. Furthermore, we acknowledge that sentencing data acquired from the CJO may be incomplete due to the interpretations of the SPC (2013; 2016), which states that all sentencing documents are required to be uploaded, except for cases with classified information, individual privacy concerns, defendants under 18 years old, those closed for mediation, and other “unpublishable” situations, thus leading to suspicions that the uploaded sentencing documents might be subjective to selection or purposeful deletion (Liebman, Roberts, Stern et al., 2017). Unfortunately, there are no available sources (e.g. official gazettes, news reports, and research articles) that could be used to cross-reference and evaluate the pattern and extent of uploading or deleting case information so far. In addition to the possible selective uploading or deleting of documents, it should be cautioned that not all incidents of trafficking have been identified by the police, and of those offenders who have been caught, not all have gone through the legal system. Still, despite the limited access to child trafficking data, the information garnered from the CJO sentencing documents may add some much-needed insight into the current trafficking issues in China.

2.2. Measurements

As a structured document, each of the sentencing reports has three distinct parts: A caption, main body, and conclusion. The caption contains the parties, the court, and the case number. The main body gives a description of acknowledged facts by the court, for example, information about the offender(s) and the victim(s), characteristics of the offense, such as time and location, and court processes (e.g. legal representation and appeal). The dispositional decisions, such as articles cited and sentences, are listed in the conclusion. We manually coded all the information on offenders, victims, offenses, and victim-offender relationships. For example, gender of victim (male), age of victim in years, whether the victim is sold by guardian(s), final price paid by the buyer in thousand Chinese yuan, whether the case is reported to police, whether the purpose of trafficking is adoption, the number of offenders involved, and the proportion of male offenders involved, were coded.

For each of the cases, geographic information on both the origin and destination of trafficking routes was also recorded at both the provincial and city levels, which were used to match local socioeconomic indices, such as the urban–rural average income ratio (URAIR), the SRB, the rate of illiteracy, and the level of legal adoption. For provincial socioeconomic characteristics, the URAIR and the percentage of rural illiteracy were chosen as the measures of socioeconomic development. The ratio of the summed number of adoptions over 2013-2016 versus the average total population was used to access the level of legal adoption, and the SRB was used as the level of son preference.

Except for the level of adoption that were from the Statistical Yearbook of the China Civil Affairs (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016), all other measures were from the latest census. Regional hotspots, as identified by the heat maps, were also controlled using dummy variables for regions: Central East (Shandong, Henan, and Hebei Provinces), East (Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces), Southeast (Guangdong and Fujian Provinces), and Southwest (Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunan Provinces).

2.3. Analytical methods

We provided regular descriptive analyses to explore the link between socioeconomic factors and characteristics of child trafficking, such as the gender of the victim. To examine the geographic pattern of child trafficking, heat maps were generated to see the areas where trafficking origins and destinations were mostly concentrated, and trafficking networks were plotted using R packages such as recharts (Xie, 2017) and igraph (Csardi and Nepusz, 2006). We also estimated
a series of zero-truncated Poisson models to explore the link between the socioeconomic characteristics at the province level and the frequency of child trafficking.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive analyses and gender differences

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for the victims by gender. Among the victims, 61% were boys. The average age of the victims was 1.38-year-old, and girls were slightly older by approximately two months ($p < 0.10$). About 80% of the victims were sold by their guardian(s) with little difference by gender. Except for the cases that were detected during the transaction or transport period, almost all children were adopted by their buyers. In terms of price, boys were sold at an average of 46,430 yuan (approximately USD $6,800), which is 18,390 yuan (USD $2,650) higher than that of girls. The highly significant difference ($p < 0.001$) underlines the high market value of boys, which coincides with the son preference in China. However, it is worth mentioning that, due to substantial discrepancies on the level of socioeconomic development across provinces, price might not be comparable and the inference may not be applicable to a broader population. Among all cases, slightly more than half of the children (55%) were trafficked across provincial borders, only 23% of victims were found by the help of informants, and the rest were found by police investigation or connections to other trafficking cases. Apparently, boy victims were 8% more likely to be reported or identified by informants ($p < 0.01$). For each of the victims, there were multiple offenders. For example, on average, five offenders were involved in a single trafficking case, with two or three of them being female.

It is worth noting that the majority of children were sold by their guardians (parents, grandparents, or other relatives), and nearly all of the victims were adopted. This phenomenon is rooted in the unique legal regulations and practice of adoption, in which private adoption agreements are not formally recognized. Although the law does not exclude private parties, most of accepted adoption cases are from state-run orphanages. In practice, it is not easy to fulfill the legal requirements for private adoptions, which fosters a market of selling and legalizing victims of child trafficking. For

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Both sexes</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Sex difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>Mean (SD) or %</td>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>Mean (SD) or %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male children</td>
<td>851</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>846</td>
<td>1.38 (1.38)</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>1.50 (1.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guardian</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption purpose</td>
<td>676</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price (RMB yuan) (*1,000)</td>
<td>801</td>
<td>39.34 (34.73)</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>28.04 (20.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported to police</td>
<td>859</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average # of offenders</td>
<td>859</td>
<td>4.93 (3.60)</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>5.06 (3.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male offenders</td>
<td>810</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-provincial cases</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The $p$ value is based on z/t test. SD: Standard deviation. $+p < 0.10$; $*p < 0.05$; $**p < 0.01$; $***p < 0.001$.

Figure 1. Heat maps of origins and destinations of trafficking victims. (a) Origins of child trafficking. (b) Destinations of child trafficking.
example, after adopters’ pay for victims, they usually need to purchase a falsified birth certificate to legitimize their “children” (Shen, 2013; Wang, 2015).

3.2 Geographic pattern of child trafficking

Using the brightness to represent the frequency, panels (a) and (b) in Figure 1 show the concentrated areas of trafficking origin and destination of victims, respectively. Consistent with the previous findings on child trafficking patterns in China, the Central East (Shandong, Henan, and Hebei Provinces) and the Coastal (Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong Provinces) regions were the most frequent destinations of child trafficking in the past few years, though victims were also trafficked from Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou Provinces besides the areas overlapped with destinations. Figure 2 maps the origin and destination with the known route information. It is clear that the trafficking routes could be classified into two types: Intra- and inter-province. Among the origin and destination overlapped areas, most of the routes share the same origin and destination at the provincial level, while the Southwestern region (Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou provinces) dominates at the inter-province level, serving as the main supplier to the Central East and Coastal provinces. Possible reasons for these patterns may include the large demand for adoptions in the Central East and coastal regions, and the profit-driven trafficking in the regions where the implementation of the one-child policy is relatively less restricted (Xing, Chen, and Xu, 2017; Wang, Wei, Peng et al., 2018).

To further explore whether the pattern of child trafficking differs by gender, Figure 3 shows the heat maps of male and female victims in relation to their origins and destinations. Compared with the destinations of the female victims, one distinct pattern of male victims is that more boys were brought to the Southeastern coastal areas, especially for Fujian and Guangdong Provinces where the son preference is high (Wang, 2015). Similarly, for the origins, the Southeast region, for example, Fujian and Guangdong Provinces, contributed to substantial numbers of boy victims, while the demand and supply of the Central East region, such as Shandong, Henan, and Hebei, tended to be less gender selective. Scholars have linked gender-selective trafficking to the combination of patrilineal family structures and practices in certain regions, as well as the high level of economic development that makes illegal adoption affordable (Shen, 2013; Wu, 2017; Zhang, 2006).

3.3. Provincial characteristics and child trafficking

To evaluate the effects of provincial socioeconomic characteristics, we estimated a series of zero-truncated Poisson models against the number of cases by gender and location of victims, and the results are summarized in Table 2. After controlling for regional hotspots, the level of adoptions was positively associated with the expected log count of child trafficking for both male and female victims at origins and destinations, which could be an indication that the frequency of child trafficking is triggered by the demand of adoptions. Another interesting finding is that the SRB was correlated to the expected log count of male victims at the destinations, which means that a higher SRB is linked to more boys being purchased in the destinations.

Figure 2. Routes of child trafficking in China from 2014 to 2016
Consistent to the geographic hotspots revealed in the heat maps, Table 2 also reinforces the geographic patterns. For instance, compared to other areas, the Southwest region (Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan Provinces) has much fewer female victims bought \((1-\exp(-1.655))=80.8\%\), but a considerably higher amount of selling cases for both boys \((\exp(1.849)-1=535\%)\) and girls \((\exp(1.949)-1=602\%)\) more, while the East region (Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces) was only associated with a high frequency as a destination for both boys and girls but not as a point of origin. The Southeast region (Guangdong and Fujian Provinces) has very high levels of buying both male and female victims and selling boys but a slightly higher level of selling girls; the Central East region (Shandong, Henan, and Hebei Provinces) showed high concentrations of both selling and buying for both boys and girls.

4. Discussion

The current study explores the characteristics, patterns, and related factors for child trafficking in China using the CJO sentencing documents. By quantifying the sentencing documents citing Article 240 of the Chinese Criminal Law from the years 2014 to 2016, we provide some new evidence of child trafficking in China. Our results indicated that there were two major categories of child trafficking: Intraprovincial (45%) and interprovincial trafficking (55%). The Central East provinces of Shandong, Henan, and Hebei, as well as the Coastal provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Fujian, are among the top trafficking destinations for all types of trafficking, with more than half of intraprovincial trafficking occurring in these regions. Interprovincial trafficking was more frequently observed in routes originating from the Southwest regions, such as Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan provinces, to the Central East and Coastal regions.

Our results indicated that the majority of the trafficked victims were under 3 years old and were sold by their guardians and that almost all of the victims were adopted by their buyers. The findings implied that illegal adoption might be one of the major driving forces behind child trafficking in recent years. In contrast to earlier findings that highlight the connection of child trafficking and the tradition of child-brides in certain regions such as the Fujian province (Chen, Ebenstein, Edlund et al., 2015; Lid, Larsen, and Wyshak, 2004), we only found six victims intended for the role of a child bride, which may suggest...
Table 2. Results of zero truncated Poisson regression model by location and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Destination models</th>
<th>Origin models</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of adoption (*1,000)</td>
<td>1.53 (0.09)***</td>
<td>0.28 (0.13)*</td>
<td>1.45 (0.08)***</td>
<td>0.66 (0.11)***</td>
<td>0.95 (0.13)***</td>
<td>0.53 (0.18)**</td>
<td>0.85 (0.10)***</td>
<td>0.54 (0.14)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex ratio at birth</td>
<td>0.06 (0.01)***</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.02)</td>
<td>0.13 (0.01)***</td>
<td>0.07 (0.02)***</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.04 (0.02)*</td>
<td>0.01 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of rural illiteracy</td>
<td>0.00 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.20 (0.05)***</td>
<td>-0.16 (0.02)***</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.11 (0.04)**</td>
<td>-0.03 (0.02)*</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.03)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URAIG</td>
<td>-0.69 (0.20)***</td>
<td>0.96 (0.42)*</td>
<td>-0.52 (0.18)**</td>
<td>-0.40 (0.34)</td>
<td>0.57 (0.14)***</td>
<td>0.37 (0.20)*</td>
<td>0.56 (0.11)***</td>
<td>0.25 (0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region: CT</td>
<td>3.40 (0.35)***</td>
<td>2.26 (0.22)***</td>
<td>1.20 (0.25)***</td>
<td>1.34 (0.21)***</td>
<td>1.63 (0.37)</td>
<td>1.95 (0.30)***</td>
<td>1.62 (0.25)***</td>
<td>1.85 (0.20)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA</td>
<td>2.35 (0.41)***</td>
<td>1.45 (0.29)***</td>
<td>1.10 (0.31)***</td>
<td>0.98 (0.25)***</td>
<td>2.73 (0.83)</td>
<td>2.30 (0.28)***</td>
<td>0.18 (0.34)</td>
<td>1.62 (0.25)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>2.51 (0.47)***</td>
<td>0.58 (0.45)</td>
<td>1.95 (0.30)***</td>
<td>1.85 (0.20)***</td>
<td>2.07 (0.64)</td>
<td>3.58 (1.50)*</td>
<td>-1.15 (2.63)</td>
<td>1.47 (1.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SW</td>
<td>-1.66 (0.61)**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-3.58 (1.50)*</td>
<td>-1.15 (2.63)</td>
<td>-10.88 (1.39)***</td>
<td>-5.80 (2.19)**</td>
<td>1.63 (1.37)</td>
<td>-3.39 (2.09)</td>
<td>-0.12 (0.95)</td>
<td>1.47 (1.50)</td>
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<td>-2LL</td>
<td>271.57</td>
<td>90.13</td>
<td>288.32</td>
<td>125.70</td>
<td>263.03</td>
<td>183.23</td>
<td>425.60</td>
<td>229.20</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>281.57</td>
<td>108.13</td>
<td>298.32</td>
<td>143.70</td>
<td>273.03</td>
<td>201.23</td>
<td>435.60</td>
<td>247.20</td>
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<tr>
<td>BIC</td>
<td>287.25</td>
<td>118.35</td>
<td>304.00</td>
<td>153.92</td>
<td>278.92</td>
<td>211.83</td>
<td>441.28</td>
<td>257.42</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>23</td>
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Note: URAIG: urban–rural average income ratio. CE: Central East; EA: East; SE: Southeast; SW: Southwest; LL: loglikelihood, AIC: Akaike information criterion, BIC: Bayesain information criterion, N: Sample size, SE: Standard error. *p<0.10; *p<0.05; **p<0.01 ; ***p<0.001.
that the tradition is diminishing. In line with the previous findings (Shen, 2016), child trafficking often involved multiple offenders (4.93 on average) whom were loosely organized as a group in which nearly half (44%) of them were female.

Our analysis has identified geographic patterns of trafficking that related to the gender of victims. The Southwest region (Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan Provinces) served as a supplier to the rest of the hotspots for both male and female victims, while the East region (Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces) showed a high frequency of child purchases. The Southeast region (Guangdong and Fujian Provinces) has high levels of buying both male and female victims and selling boys; and the Central East region (Shandong, Henan, and Hebei Provinces) tended to be less gender selective for both selling and buying.

Our research also found that the frequency of trafficking was related to the provincial socioeconomic characteristics, such as the SRB, and the number of adoptions per thousand. Although the previous studies have called attention to the link between high SRB and the trafficking of women (Wu, 2017), the current understanding of the role of SRB on child trafficking is still very limited. Our results indicated that a high SRB might also be a contributing factor of child trafficking. Furthermore, the strong link between the number of adoptions per thousand, the frequency of child trafficking, and the high proportion of victims sold by their guardians should bring much-needed attention to the problem of child trafficking from a different angle. As noticed by others (Chen, Ebenstein, Edlund et al., 2015; Johnson, 2002; Johnson, Banghan, and Liyao, 1998; Lid, Larsen, and Wyshak, 2004), the current market of child trafficking is built on the current legal regulations and practices of adoption. When the demand of adoption cannot be satisfied or is encumbered by the lengthy adoption process, prospective parents may turn to the black market to fulfill their needs, which may reinforce the son preference and gender stereotypes.

The current research is limited in the following respects: First, we retrieved all the sentencing documents from the official CJO website where the court documents, above all, only represent a small proportion of child trafficking activities in China. For instance, as the final outcomes of a complicated legal process, the sentencing documents may represent only a small fraction of all the cases initiated by the Criminal Justice Agencies. Furthermore, the definition of child trafficking we adopted from Article 240 of the Chinese Criminal Law restrains our analysis to a narrow scope. It also bears repeating that, although it is required by the SPC that courts from all levels upload their sentencing documents, certain types of files are exempted, especially those deemed “inappropriate” to publicize. As we mentioned above, the number of cases we have might only be one-third to half of totally number of cases. Second, we are lacking the necessary information to evaluate the effects of possible selective uploading or purposeful deletion of cases on our study. In addition, since many measures included in the regression model were considered as indirect and crude, for example, regional dummies and SRB as indirect control of cultural difference on son preference, the findings must be interpreted with caution. Finally, but not least, the origins of some of the victims were not mentioned in the sentencing documents, leaving a substantial proportion of information missing. Hopefully, in the future, the Chinese Court will adopt a more streamlined format when recording court cases. Until then, cautions should be taken when making further inferences based on our analysis.

5. Conclusions

Neither child trafficking nor infant purchase has been widely studied; Given the lack of reliable data in China, it is hardly to obtain the accurate annual number of children trafficked. Nevertheless, our analysis represents an attempt to broaden the current understanding of child trafficking in China. Our research may promote evidence-based strategies for fighting against child trafficking in China. For instance, data from our research can be used to inform location-based policing tactics that would concentrate additional law enforcement in the identified hotspots and high-frequency routes, which would be a both efficient and straightforward method to catch traffickers.

Authors’ Contributions

Both XIN and CAI contributed to the design and implementation of the research, analysis of the results, and writing of the manuscript.

Ethics

No ethics approval was required for this study.

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Conflicts of Interest
The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Supreme People’s Court. (2016). *The Provisions of Judgments on the Internet by the People’s Court.*


