Trends Organ Crim (2013) 16:31–48
DOI 10.1007/s12117-012-9167-z

China's stolen children: internal child trafficking in the People's Republic of China

Anqi Shen · Georgios A. Antonopoulos · Georgios Papanicolaou

Published online: 17 June 2012

Abstract Trafficking in children has attracted worldwide attention in the last two decades primarily due to its links with global migratory movements and the role 'transnational organised crime' is perceived to play in these. Internal trafficking is largely ignored primarily because of a preoccupation with cross-border, transnational migratory movements. Arguably, the growth of the relevant literature has given rise to certain widespread perceptions about the uniformity in the trade characteristics and actors under the common rubric of 'trafficking in human beings'. By capitalising on direct linguistic access to a wide range of Chinese open sources, the purpose of the article is to offer an account of the various dimensions of the issue as they present themselves in the particular Chinese context. Our main concern has been to perform a systematic presentation of this material in light of the extant wider literature. In the Chinese case the combination of socioeconomic, political and cultural factors set a complex picture that highlights the shortcomings of dominant ways of thinking about the phenomenon. This complex picture serves usefully to cast doubts with regard to how the criminal activity itself is being conceptualised as well as to perceptions of victimisation embodied in current discourses on human trafficking.

Keywords Child trafficking · Organized crime · China

Introduction

Trafficking in children has attracted worldwide attention in the last two decades primarily due to its links with global migratory movements and the role transnational organised crime is perceived to play in these, and, increasingly, it has been taken up by both journalistic (see, for example, Kelly 2009) and academic inquiries. Such attention has not been even by any means. Most related studies are concerned with

A. Shen · G. A. Antonopoulos (✉) · G. Papanicolaou
School of Social Sciences & Law, Teesside University, Middlesbrough TS1 3BA, UK
e-mail: g.antonopoulos@tees.ac.uk

the European, North American and Australian contexts, although exceptions do exist (e.g. Salah 2001; UNICEF 2002; Terre de Hommes 2004; Aronowitz and Peruffo 2004). Additionally, *internal* trafficking is largely ignored primarily because of a preoccupation with cross-border, transnational migratory movements. Arguably, the growth of this literature has given rise to certain widespread perceptions about the uniformity in the trade characteristics and actors under the common rubric of 'trafficking in human beings'. It has thus become more difficult to recognise that trafficking in children "is not a uniform business and operates very differently in different cultural and political context" (Shelley 2003: 123), and that different geographic contexts, which have largely been ignored by the international academic community, may provide valuable insights into the causes and social organisation of the phenomenon. What the lack of more detailed knowledge places in doubt, of course, is the very viability of public policies aiming to suppress the phenomenon.

This article turns to the examination of such a less studied but potentially very important case, the People's Republic of China (hereafter China). Indeed, the trafficking of children in China has a long history and is culturally embedded to the point that is not universally viewed as criminal, but simply as a 'tradition' (Ming Zhao 2003; Channel 4 2007; Spiegel 2010). In China, trafficking in human beings gradually died out in the 1960s (Chu 1996); however, it re-emerged in the early 1980s since when the number of suspects for women and children trafficking has been on the increase (Kang 1999; Wang 2008; Mao 2001).

Trafficking in children in particular has become the new tendency in the last decade. In 2004, for instance, 41 % of all recorded trafficking incidents in China involved children (Zhang 2006). It is estimated that 70,000 children are kidnapped in China every year and traded on the black market (Channel 4 2007). Apart from the changing scale of the child trafficking phenomenon, the characteristics of child trafficking have also changed, and as a result it has attracted the attention of some high echelons of the Chinese establishment who consider it a 'lucrative business'. For instance, an expert from the Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB) of Ministry of Public Security (MPS) explains, "compared with trafficking in women, trafficking in children is more profitable and easier" (Zhang 2006: 19). Child trafficking is not only

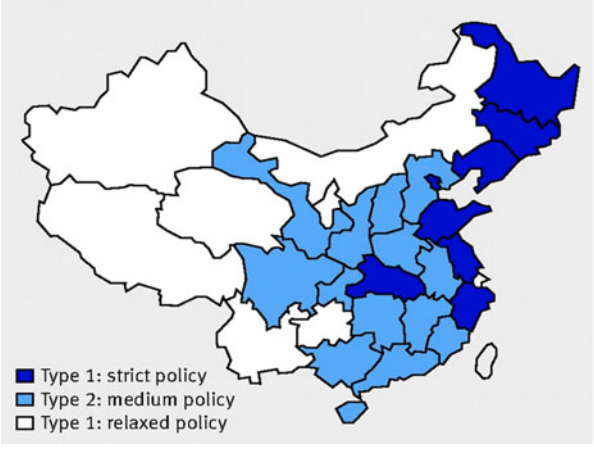

Fig. 1 Variation in implementation of the 'One Child Policy'. Source: Zhu Xing et al. (2009)

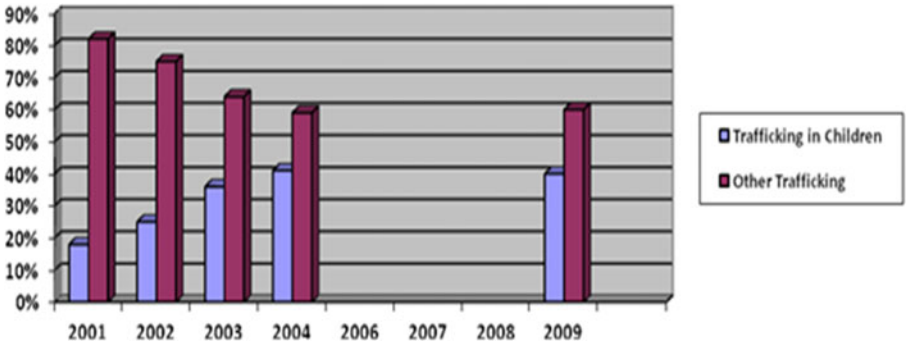

Fig. 2 'Trafficking in Children' versus 'Other Trafficking'. Source: Zhang (2006); Social Outlook Editors (2009); Chinanews.com.cn (2010) (Chinanews.com.cn (2010) provides the figure from April 2009 when the Campaign started until 28 December 2009.)

perceived as a lucrative trade and a crime that causes mental and physical harm to the trafficked victims, but also a serious social problem that jeopardises the stability of the Chinese society. For example, at a high level, Bai Jinfu, the former vice-minister of the MPS, pointed out that "human trafficking is directly associated with serious violent offences, such as murder, kidnap, robbery, rape… It severely endangers public security in our society" (Mao 2001: 5).

China's Criminal Code 1997 replaced the previous offence of 'abducting and selling in human beings' with the offence of 'abducting and selling women and children' 'for the purpose of trading' by deception, abduction, purchasing, selling, receiving or sending, and transferring trafficked women and children'. Legally speaking, 'children' are defined in the *Chinese Child Protection Law 1991* and the *Law of Adoption 1998* as those who are under the age of 14. Trafficking victims under the current Chinese trafficking legislation do not include male adults and children at the age between 14 and 18. Trafficking in male adults and children at the age of 14 and over for the purpose of forced labour, slavery and/or sexual exploitation may constitute other criminal offences, such as false imprisonment, kidnapping, causing grievous bodily harm, organising prostitution, etc. in accordance with the current law.

This article aims to look into the context and social organisation of *internal* child trafficking in mainland China, a topic on which there is very little empirical research and evidence. Several reasons account for the scarcity of research. Firstly, researchers are faced with the problem of access to human traffickers (see Zhang and Chin 2002). Secondly, there are historical, cultural and political obstacles to conducting *empirical* criminological research in China, and they have been expounded by a number of researchers (e.g. Heimer and Thogersen 2006; Liu 2008). Public officials are not to disclose information about crime-related matters, neither are they willing to express their personal views on any potentially sensitive matter which may jeopardise the image of the agency they work for or of the state. In the case of trafficking in children in particular, 'the Chinese government does not want outsiders to know about the crisis…' (Channel 4 2007). Furthermore, there are also *technical* restrictions for Chinese and non-Chinese researchers having to do with the country's geographical, demographic and administrative divisions. There are 34 provinces in China as well as autonomous regions, municipalities and special economic zones. Combined with the

wide dispersal of the population, there are ethnic differences and an extremely diverse context, which does not allow generalisations to be made when researching one area, while financial costs make empirical research in all areas an even more difficult endeavour. In addition to presenting impediments for prospective researchers, these geographic and demographic features along with the circumspect attitude of the Chinese state have ensured that statistical information is not collected and disseminated by the Chinese administration at least to the extent of other countries (Brewer et al. 1996).

The information supporting this study is drawn from open sources, following a strategy which has been used in previous works on illegal markets (see, for example, Shen et al. 2010; von Lampe et al. 2011). Apart from a general literature and internet search, we searched the Chinese academic database 'Zhi net', a database including all Chinese journal articles and newspaper articles, by using the keywords 'child trafficking' *('guai-mai-er-tong')*. We also conducted a random online search by using the same keywords. The purpose of this was to obtain child trafficking cases detected across China including those are possibly not included in the 'Zhi net' database. We obtained child trafficking-related articles published from 1996 to 2011. The sources were carefully selected in order to cover child trafficking in *all* provinces of mainland China. Some of the sources used are cited indicatively in the text.

On the other hand, the sources we have used refer to only those cases, which the authorities came across thus ignoring many cases of undetected 'successful' trafficking. There is also possibility that the official and media accounts represent the phenomenon in a sensational and morally charged manner (see Zhong 2009). We neither adopt our sources' representations of the entities involved in the business, nor the moralistic language often used. Rather, we only use the purely 'technical' information to make inferences about the particular business.

Supply, demand and facilitating factors for the child trafficking business in China

There is a number of supply, demand and facilitating factors for the child trafficking business *in* China. Some are common to other geographical contexts, whereas other need to be understood within the unique local historical, cultural, socio-political and economic context of China.

Poverty

Poverty is the fundamental supply factor for child trafficking in China. It is worth noting that significant economic disparities exist among China's eastern, central, and western regions. Families in hardship and with no sustainable livelihood primarily (though not exclusively) in the west and central regions sell or abandon additional children. A 'specialised child production base' was discovered in Yunnan province in which women gave birth to children for the purpose of selling them to make money and maintain their family daily lives (Lu 2009). There are also people who actually view having children and subsequently selling them as a way out of poverty. The

saying among farmers in the southwestern province of Yunnan cited in Spiegel (2010) is indicative of that mentality: "If you want to make money, you should bear children instead of raising pigs". Shenzhen statistics also show that 30 % of the trafficked children were sold by their own parents and the major reason was financial hardship (Xinkuai 2011).

Culture, tradition and the 'one child policy'

Traditionally, parents in China have favoured large families (Ebenstein 2008; Dowling and Brown 2009) and believe that 'the more children, the better life' (*'duo zi duo fu'*). The Chinese culture is male-dominated, and Chinese parents have historically preferred sons to daughters, and despite the rapid industrialisation and changes in China in the last 40 years, gender preferences for children have survived the transition (Ebenstein 2008). Therefore, boys are viewed as of higher value than girls (Chung 2006), as traditionally it is boys who carry the family name and are believed to prolong the family's existence. Still today in the rural areas the number of male family members symbolises the status and power – the larger numbers, the more respect for the family. Sons are traditionally expected to take responsibility for their parents when they are old, whereas daughters have been expected to care for their husband's parents (Dowling and Brown 2009).

This cultural norm is in conflict with the 'One Child Policy' – a measure has taken by the Chinese government since 1979 in responding to the fast growth of population in China. 'One Child Policy' is more of a misnomer since there is a variation in its implementation (*relaxed policy*, *medium policy* and *strict policy*), which naturally affects the most populated regions of the country (also including the ones with the highest rates of development) (see Fig 1). In addition, minority ethnic groups such as the Uighurs and the Tibetans living in the west and southwest of the country are permitted to have more than one child.

The particular policy emerged from the political belief that China's economic development would be compromised by rapid population growth and has been in place despite the political, social and economic changes that have occurred since the late 1970s (Kane and Choi 1999). Penalties for having more than one child include removal of privileges in education and healthcare as well as demotion or even loss of jobs (Dowling and Brown 2009). However, the 'One Child Policy' often provides the very platform for the facilitation of the business since it engenders a situation which can be understood, in Passas's (1999) terms, as a (national) "criminogenic asymmetry" that traffickers exploit.

High profits and low risks for traffickers

In China, just like in other contexts, individuals engage in this criminal activity because of the high profits and low risks involved. Child trafficking is perceived as "a business that does not require (start-up) capital" (Zhu 2001: 67). The price of a child varies in different regions and may also be affected by various factors and circumstances such as the health of the child, their age and gender. For example, for the purpose of adoption, boys are generally more expensive than girls, and older children are cheaper than the younger ones (He 2007). A few months old 'good

looking boy' is worth 10000 to 11000 Yuan,[1] whilst a 1 or 2 year old boy could be sold at 17000–18000 Yuan.[2] In poorer areas, price could be higher than richer regions as the latter have a bigger supply of children (Channel 4 2007). In Tonghua, a city in North China, the average price is 20000–30000 Yuan[3] per child (He 2007), whereas in Fujian province a boy can be sold at a price of at least 10000–20000 Yuan[4] (Li and Ni 2005). In Kunming, Yunnan province, baby girls are sold to foreigners for 800–4000 Yuan[5] each (Wedgwood et al. 2007). The price range provided by the notorious infant 'wholesale centre' was from 1000 to 8000 Yuan[6] per infant (Hongfeng 2000). In trafficker Wang Li's words, 'it is all about negotiation' (Channel 4 2007), but whichever price is reached, child trafficking is certainly a profitable business.

Compared to trafficking of illegal commodities such as drugs, trafficking in children, especially infants, is thought to have very little risks because in those cases discovered by the authorities, the victims are too young to be able to reveal their traffickers or recall any details about the trafficking process. Moreover, very often there is no connection and contact between the seller and buyer once the transaction completes, and trafficked victims may be re-sold numerous times which makes identifying the trafficker(s) more difficult or impossible. Additionally, unlikely trafficking drugs, child trafficking does not attract intensive law enforcement attention, therefore, it involves a lower level of risks for traffickers.

Loopholes in law and ineffective law enforcement

One of the factors that enables the supply of children for the black market is the loopholes available in the current law in China. For example, a parent who gives away their own children does not amount to crime unless it is done for the purpose of gaining profit. Where the crime constituted, it is likely to result in the forfeiture of illicit gain and/or an administrative fine by the police (see Qiu 2001). By law, buyers of trafficked children are criminally liable, and there is a maximum 3 years' imprisonment attached to this crime. However, in reality, this only happens where the buyers have abused the trafficked children and/or impeded the 'rescue' operations on the part of the authorities.[7] Ou et al. (2001: 20) encapsulate the view of several authors and legal experts suggesting that 'such treatment [of the traffickers] is too lenient and given the harm of child trafficking, is not proportionate" and that "…most buyers are not held criminally responsible for purchasing trafficked children".

Beside the loopholes in law, rules and regulations are not always effectively enforced (see Davies and Shen 2010). It has been no exception in the case of child trafficking. The household registration system has been adopted in China since 1949 to serve as a means of policing and social control and it monitors all citizens (Chen 2002). Any Chinese citizen looking for a job, being admitted to school at any level, applying for an identity card and/or marriage certificate, etc. is required to have a

[1] Approx. US$ 1500–1650
[2] Approx. US$ 2700–2850
[3] Approx. US$ 3000–4500
[4] Approx. US$ 1500–3000
[5] Approx. US$ 120–600
[6] Approx. US$ 150–1200
[7] Section 241(6) of the *Chinese Criminal Code* 1997.

valid household registration record. In theory, this would be an effective mechanism that prevents illegal adoption and child trafficking. However, the implementation of this system is problematic, and people can find their way to have trafficked children officially registered (Zhangzhou Normal University Research Unit 2006). Guo and Xiao (2007) suggest that there are three irregular channels to have children officially registered:

(1) Buying a Birth Certificate from the local health centre and then using it to obtain a Single Child Family Certificate. With both certificates, a child can be registered;
(2) Buying forged documents to achieve *adoptive parent status* and relying on which the trafficked child can be registered;
(3) Paying an administrative fee and a fine, so that the purchased child can be treated as a child of unauthorised birth but officially registered.

Once a trafficked child is officially registered, they gain legal identifications, and together the trafficking 'facts' are concealed.

Often there is an issue of lack of resources to policing child trafficking. Mapping trafficking networks and traffickers, and tracking and rescuing trafficked children require enormous police resources; however, these resources are not available to the provincial/local authorities (Sun 2000). When detecting a Yunnan trafficking ring, for example, the estimated budget was 500000 Yuan[8]; however, the local government could only afford 21000 Yuan[9] for the police to carry out the operation (Mao 2001). This could be one of the reasons why lack of police action in child trafficking is observed (see Channel 4 2007).

Regional economic imbalance, movement of people and 'floating populations'

From the late 1970s, when the reform and 'opening up' policy started to generate job opportunities in urban centres, internal migration increased. Peasants moved from their homeland to seek better lives in the big cities. They become what is known as 'the floating population' (Bakken 2005: 71). The 'floating population' is not subject to the citizen household registration, and tend to be at a high risk of criminal victimisation (Zhou and Liu 2006; Bakken 2005) including (child) trafficking (see Jiang 2000). In the context of this internal migratory process a significant population of children are left behind in rural areas by their migrant parents often under the inadequate supervision of grandparents or other guardians or even handed over to foster centres. According to statistics from Guizhou City, the vast majority of more than 200 trafficked children reported in 2001 were from 'floating population' families (Zhu 2001). In addition, from January 2002 to May 2004 amongst 352 missing children at the age of one to seven, 99.4 % were children of 'floating' families. Statistics from Beijing, Shanghai and other large cities reveal similar trends (see Gen 2007; Zhang 2006), whereas according to a Chinese Government estimate cited by the *Financial Times Weekend Magazine*, the number of the 'left-behind children' currently reaches 58 million (Hille 2011: 20) providing for a potential pool of victims.

[8] Approx. US$ 75200
[9] Approx. US$ 3160

The scale and nature of the child trafficking business in China

In China there is no system to record 'human trafficking'. We have informally tried to approach an acquaintance of the first author, who is a senior prosecutor in Nanjing. We asked whether we could have a discussion about child trafficking issues, and our request was declined because, as he suggested, child trafficking is "a sensitive matter". Although internal trafficking is an open problem in China and the media are not banned from reporting such cases, it appears the annual official figures of internal human trafficking either do not exist due to lack of a sufficient system of recording, are kept confidential due to political sensitivity, or both. The erratic figures in relation to human trafficking we provide in this article are published by different institutions or agencies with various objectives and for various purposes.

In the past decade the victims of trafficking were largely women, whilst in recent years, child trafficking is significantly increasing. Fig. 2 illustrates the changing ratio of trafficking children and women (other) over the years. The figures of the last available year (2009) indicate that child trafficking victims were approximately 40 % of the known trafficking victims.

The aforementioned official statistics possess a number of limitations relating to the lack of knowledge of or ambiguity about the data collection procedures. In addition, due to the nature of available statistics one cannot make any inferences about the scale of the phenomenon.

Process of trafficking

'Recruiting' victims

Child trafficking includes new born babies, young children and teenagers. The chosen methods depend on the age of children, purposes of trafficking and circumstances in individual cases. New born babies and children at very young ages may be obtained through various channels including collecting abandoned ones, receiving unwanted children from their parents with or without payment, purchasing from other traffickers, stealing or even using force or violence to snatch infants or young children.

Traffickers may obtain abandoned children for free. In a case also known as the '3.17 Infant Trafficking Case', 86 baby girls were abandoned between October 2002 and March 2003 in garbage bins, and were collected and sold by rubbish pickers (Sun 2007a). During the investigation of this case, ten more girls were found to be abandoned by their parents in Yulin and Xinye (both in Guizhou province) (Sun 2007b). Abandoned girls are generally unauthorised ones, i.e. an additional child of the family or an 'illegitimate' child of unmarried couple (The Law Department 2007: 36; Xing and Jiang 2007).

Young children can be purchased by the traffickers. Unwanted new-born babies are bought from their parents, private clinics or illegitimate midwife services. The majority of them are girls (Zhang 2006). It is not uncommon for married couples to 'produce' children solely for profit gain (Qiu 2001; Sun 2007b). Families in financial hardship may also seek to sell additional children in exchange for money and this has been the case in Uighur community in the West of the country. In some places,

traffickers even establish 'collection stations' and 'wholesale centres' for large-scale trafficking operations (Sun 2007b).

For older children, deception and abduction are the most common methods. Children are tempted with snacks, toys, pocket money, etc. (Zhu 2001). The detected cases reveal that female traffickers often play a crucial role in tempting children (Li et al. 2002; Tang 1999; Tian 2007).

Teenagers (and sometimes their parents) tend to be deceived with fraudulent job offers such as working in factories, building sites and restaurants. In Xinjiang (Uighur) Autonomous Region, for example, teenage girls were told to receive 1500 yuan[10] per month for working as a waitress, but they were actually forced to work as 'call girls' in nightclubs (Li 2000). In another case, traffickers paid a lump sum to the parents of teenage children for allowing their children to be taken away to 'work' in the cities. These children were later forced to commit street crimes (Wedgwood et al. 2007). Teenagers were also found to be sold by the acquaintances of their family (Zhang and He 2008). In recent years, it is found not uncommon for traffickers to use violence or coercion in the 'recruitment' phase. Children are stolen, abducted through anaesthesia, snapped or kidnapped through serious bodily harm was inflicted on their parents or carers (Zhu 2001; Sun 2000). Existing evidence shows that among the trafficked children for the period of 1980–2000, 36 % were abducted from private homes, 21 % were snatched from public spaces and 6 % from schools (Ren 2004).

Transporting trafficked children

Traditionally, children have been trafficked from the economically underdeveloped areas to the developed urban regions with some exceptions. Wang's (2005) account, for instance, shows that in the last two decades the economically developed urban regions of the East such as Zhejiang, Fujian, Jiangsu and Shandong have been the receiving regions, whilst Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan and Xinjiang have been the sending regions. It is also worth noting that these are not only less developed but also the ones in which there a relaxed child policy. It is not uncommon, however, for trafficked children to be transported and sold within or between rural areas (see Zhu 2001). There is a wide and diverse range of reported transportation means of trafficked children: on foot, by train, car and motorcycle or by truck depending on distance, availability of means of transportation on the part of the trafficker, number of children or, simply, convenience. There have also been instances in which several infants were put together in one knitted carrier bag to be transferred (Li 1999a, Li 1999b). In many occasions involving young children, in order for bystander and authorities suspicion not to be raised, and in order for the transportation process to be facilitated, trafficked children are fed with sleeping tablets en route (Wang 2009).

Selling children

Healthy and 'good looking' boys at the age of three or four are the most popular category for the traffickers because of the opportunities for profit (Fu 2000). Similar to legitimate business transactions, agreements may be signed between the wholesaler

[10] Approx. US$235.

and the buyer. According to Fu (2000), the sale agreements include even warranty clauses such as that the buyer can exchange the baby if he/she is later found to be unhealthy. If unsatisfied, the buyer can return the baby and get refund within 3 days after purchase. Normally, a deposit is paid in advance and the whole amount is paid when the child is received (Zhang and He 2008).

The fact that children are viewed as commodities is exemplified that in many cases there is some 'quality control mechanism'. When choosing a child to buy, the buyer may go with the seller to the hospital to have the child medically checked before making the payment (Zhangzhou Normal University Research Unit 2006). In a case we came across, a buyer brought back a baby girl for exchange as he discovered a spot on her head. He was refunded and the girl was sold to another buyer at a reduced price. Similarly, it is possible for the wholesalers to seek refund from their 'suppliers' (Hongfeng 2000).

Trafficked children are sold for a variety of purposes. These are:

- *Illegal adoption.* The research shows that both boys and girls are wanted for the purpose of adoption, although boys are much more expensive than girls. Trafficked children are largely bought by ordinary families who have problems in producing children (Wedgwood et al. 2007; Sun and Li 2005). It is worth noting, however, that in a case reported in 2005, the scheme involved the sale of three babies to a *legal* orphanage (the Hengyang Social Welfare Institute). The orphanage official was willing to buy the three babies, as well as the other babies since 2002 because when foreign parents adopt a baby or child from a Chinese orphanage, they usually donate a large amount of money (US$ 3000–5000 per child) to the orphanages (Goodman 2006 cited in Meier and Zhang 2008: 88; see also The Economist 2011).
- *Forced marriage.* Girls (and women) tended to be abducted and sold to be the wives of impoverished men. In many rural areas, it is a tradition for a man and/or his family to buy girls for wedlock (see Forum of Rural Area Development 2000). In some localities, this is explicitly called 'maiqing' ('bought marriage') (see Lin 2002). In those rural areas, the problem is that it costs 20000 to 30000[11] to marry a local woman. Once you built and furnished a house that added up to more like 40000.[12] But it only costs a few thousands to buy a wife (Channel 4 2007). This is the reality. Often buying a wife is not seen as a crime but as part of the cultural milieu of rural China. Li (2001: 68) reports just one of the many similar accounts we came across in Chinese media:

  '14-year old Nan-nan was dragged into a car by a woman on her way to school. She was forced to drink a bottle of milk and lost consciousness. When she woke, she was in a place she had never been. A few days later, she was taken to a market and photographed with a stranger. Later a marriage certificate was given to her, on which that photo was attached. She attempted to escape many times but was always brought back by the villagers who knew she was bought by the family…'.

[11] Approx. US$ 3170–4760

[12] Approx. US$ 6340

- *Labour exploitation.* Trafficking in children for the purpose of labour exploitation started to emerge and became an issue in the 1990s (Feng 2007). The Shanxi 'illegal brick kiln' incident is a high profile case that caused an outrage across China (Hilsum 2007) and that shocked the central government (China.com.cn 2010). 359 workers were 'rescued' from the illegal brick kilns, amongst whom 15 were children and the youngest one was only 12 years' old. "They were abducted, locked at the worksite, forced to work for more than 15 hours per day and never got paid…' (Xinhua News 2007; Zhongxin Net 2007). In this and other similar cases, trafficked children were found to be threatened with violence, beaten up and raped in the factories (Xinjing News 2008; China Economy Net 2008).
- *Sexual exploitation.* Child trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation is also a relatively new trend in human trafficking in mainland China. Teenage girls are deceived by fraudulent job offers such as factory or restaurant work and sold into underground brothels for prostitution. Statistics show that about 60–70 % of the women including teenage girls were deceived into prostitution while searching for other employment. The Ministry of Public Security suggests that labour and sexual exploitation-related trafficking including of children gradually replaces the traditional purpose of human trafficking in China (Tang 2007).
- *Street trading, begging and committing street crime.* Trafficked children are sold to individuals who force them to carry out street trading such as selling flowers, shoe polishing, and acting in street 'kid shows' (Wedgwood et al. 2007; Guo and Xiao 2007; Zhang 2008). Disabled children (primarily) are also used for begging as they are thought to be able to gain more sympathy from the public. It have been reported that trafficked children *deliberately injured* by their exploiters and forced to beg money has become a distinctive feature of the local informal economy in the Henan and Anhui provinces. The Chinese Central Television reported in a well-known wealthy village in Fuyang, Anhui Province, the villagers made their fortune by using disabled or injured children whom they purchased to beg in cities (see Xu and Kai 2007). Finally, it is found that traffickers employ children to conduct pickpocketing, robbery, drug dealing and other criminal activities. In Jiangmen, Fujian Province, for example, a trafficking group with nine associates controlled 68 trafficked children, whom were taken to the nearby towns and cities on a daily basis for pickpocketing (Zhu 2001). Li (2000) and Wedgwood et al. (2007) also observe that children from the minority ethnic groups were trafficked to cities and used for stealing.

Actors and patterns of cooperation in the child trafficking business in China

Sole individuals have traditionally been involved in the trafficking of children in China. From the detected cases, it appears that individuals do not normally have a criminal record or even a history of trafficking, but are in a position to access children, take up one opportunity and operate as one-off 'jump up merchants' (Dorn et al. 1992). In the 1970s and primarily in the 1980s child trafficking involved mainly individuals who abducted a child through deception and sold him/her to someone they knew (Zhang 2007). For example, a man sold the son of his workmate

to an interested buyer in another city for 10000 Yuan (approximately US$ 1500). At the time he was arrested, he used to work as a vegetable seller (Dong 2000). A large number of individual traffickers involve people who abuse a position of trust such as school teachers. In one of the cases we came across, a teacher sold a 12-year old girl and her 5-year old brother (Du 2000).

In the case of systematic or large scale trafficking, the business tends to have a naturally defined horizontal 'structure' with independent, autonomous 'entities' involved in the process. This is something that is observed in other trades in China (see, for example, Shen et al. 2010). In some cases individuals act as intermediaries who link disconnected actors of the business or assist in the sale of children by identifying potential buyers. Generally, what merely exist are individuals or small groups forming temporary collaborations. There is some evidence that these collaborations often emerge through family and ethnic ties (primarily among the Uighur community) (see Zhu 2001).

There is a range of individuals from various socio-economic and geographic backgrounds, who directly or indirectly engage in the cigarette counterfeiting business in various ways and play different roles in the trafficking process, according to competencies and skills. The different roles are as follows: (1) *'Organisers'*: these are individuals in the position to initiate trafficking schemes due to their legal status and/or employment. For instance, in a number of cases 'organisers' involved directors of orphanages; (2) *Recruiters*: These are individuals who recruit children for the trafficking business, and they are often people from the same community as the children themselves; (3) *Sellers*: in many cases, though not all, the recruiter and the seller are the same person. Sellers are mainly local residents who are familiar with the market, its peculiarities and 'needs' (Zhang 2007). There are 'wholesalers' and 'retailers' of trafficked children, depending on the number of children sold; (4) *Facilitators*: these are individuals who may not be involved in the sale or other aspects of the business but facilitate actively other actors. For example, it has been reported that some owners of rented houses used by traffickers not only 'turn a blind eye' on the business but they also assist traffickers in identifying (prospective) buyers (see Zhu 2001).

The involvement of women in the business

It is well documented that human trafficking is a business in which women assume an active and prominent position (see, for instance, Siegel 2007). In China, women play a recognisable role in trafficking operations, and they act as either recruiters or facilitators of the trafficking business. Tang (1999) observes that the majority of child trafficking incidents involve women. In a study carried out by Ou, Hongyan, a researcher in the Intermediate Court of Yunnan Qujing County, amongst the nine cases studied there were in total 73 traffickers, 64 % of them were women (in Zhao and Peng 2009). Women are thought to have advantages in sheltering and transferring children as "usually they are less likely to be suspected" (Tang 1999: 11). When being asked, they normally disguise as the children's mothers. It has also been reported that lactating women were recruited deliberately to shelter and transfer trafficked infants (Zhang 2007). Women traffickers may be 'organisers' too. The notorious 'Infant Wholesale Centre' was run by a woman called Niu, Xiannu along with her two daughters (Hongfeng 2000). Similar to other contexts, previously trafficked women

may become traffickers themselves once they have the opportunity to recruit young girls into prostitution. For example, a Guangdong case involved the sexual exploitation of 105 girls by three female traffickers who were all former trafficking victims (Jiang and Zhao 2000).

Child trafficking, local protectionism and corruption

Provincial governments in China are being treated as enterprises by the central government in terms of economic performance and success (see Chen 2002). In this context, local officials focus largely on local economic performance and regional reputation, including local social stability that will accordingly demonstrate their personal achievement and individual performance. This nexus of activities geared towards the benefit of the local, rather than that of national is termed as 'local protectionism' (*'Di-fan-bao-hu-zhu-yi'*). Local protectionism allows national policy to be bent, outcomes to be exaggerated and problems to be concealed in order for local benefits and sometimes simply individual benefits of local officials to be protected. Local protectionism plays a part in existence and expansion of child trafficking. Due to local protectionism, purchasing children becomes a culturally accepted and also overlooked activity (Cui 2000; Sun 2001; Li et al. 2002). Some local officials recognise that purchasing trafficked children is illegal; however, they "are sympathetic towards the families who had spent good money on purchasing a wife or a child", [and they suggest that] these families should not be made double loss, i.e. the loss of purchasing money and the loss of the wife or child purchased)" (Zhu 2001: 67). In cases where significant profits are made from forced child labour by the local businesses and even street dealing or begging, local officials chose to turn a blind eye, because they view this as successful local entrepreneurial cases (e.g., Tong and Qiu 2001).

In the case of forced labour involving trafficked children, local governmental authorities have failed to perform their functions in managing, supervising and inspecting the small scale private businesses, such as coal mines, brick kilns, local factories and other private enterprises which regularly use trafficked children (Shou 2007; Feng 2007; Southern Weekends 2007). It might be fair to say that these local officials have facilitated child trafficking business by omission or at least negligence. In some extreme cases, local officials had hampered or prevented the investigation into child trafficking and rescue operations. For example, in the high profile 'illegal brick kiln' case it was revealed that in responding to the crime report from the parents, who found out their children were forced into slavery and sought rescue, the local police ignored the crime report and attempted at persuading the parents to report to the police in the neighbouring region (Feng 2007; see also Hilsum 2007). Channel 4 (2007) recorded that during a private rescue operation, a girl was successfully rescued amongst a group of trafficked victims. The rescue team had to leave the region without delay because the traffickers had good relationship with the local police station(s). It is also revealed that local public officials had actively participated in the child trafficking businesses. In several cases, corrupt officials were found to have engaged in several parts of the trafficking process, and/or have bought and used trafficked children in their private businesses outside their formal employment/office

(Yang 2008). Some provided identity documents to traffickers or protected them from the police detection by disclosing the confidential details of the planned operations (Tong and Qiu 2001).

Discussion and conclusion

The nature of our examination of trafficking in children in China cannot lead to any conclusive results regarding the nature or the scale of the phenomenon. The complex picture that emerges from our account, however, does raise certain questions whose significance for the study of human trafficking extends, we believe, beyond the Chinese context. In the Chinese case a combination of socioeconomic, political and cultural factors impinges upon the organisation and process of trafficking and serves usefully to highlight the shortcomings of dominant ways of thinking about the phenomenon. Approaches towards trafficking since the late 1990s have been precipitated, arguably, upon the notion of 'transnational organised crime': trafficking, in other words, is being understood predominantly as a manifestation of cross-border criminal enterprise that is predatory in nature, assumes fairly robust organisational forms and involves generally uniform characteristics and recurrent patterns of activity regardless of particular economic, social or cultural context (e.g. Shelley 1999; Europol 2007). An important shortcoming of this understanding, as Hobbs and Cunnighan (1998): 289) have argued, is that 'global-transnational-international studies of organised crime…ignore or substantially underestimate the importance of the local context as an environment within which criminal networks function".

The Chinese case offers an instance for further critical evaluation of that notion, and not merely in the sense that it underscores *internal trafficking* as a significant problem. It can be, of course, argued that in a country as large and diverse as China, socioeconomic and cultural disparities as well as local and regional administrative practices create conditions similar to those underpinning transnational human trafficking. Passas's concept of 'criminogenic assymetries', of 'structural discrepancies, mismatches and inequalities in the realms of the economy, law, politics and culture' (1999:402) that can be observed to exist within a globalised world order, just as useful for approaching the problem within the territorial confines of a single country. Regionalism and local protectionism in Chinese administrative regimes, as well as disparities in the development of economy and the variation in the enforcement of the population control policy across China's regions, regardless of the other expediencies that justify their existence, may nevertheless involve a criminogenic potential too, which is concretely manifested as trafficking in human beings, and children in particular. Interestingly, this criminogenic potential is also proving resistant to the Chinese central state's renewed and apparently quite firm commitment to the suppression of the trade in human beings. This observed contradiction would offer further support to the idea that current key institutional design choices in the issue area of human trafficking, such as the 2000 UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which promote the harmonisation and enforcement of prohibitions through international law may be decidedly undermined by conflicting goals in a state's policy making internally (Papanicolaou 2011; Papanicolaou and Antonopoulos 2010).

Doubts also emerge with regard to how the criminal activity itself is being conceptualised as well as to perceptions of victimisation embodied in current discourses on human trafficking. The idea of a lucrative *business* is rather undermined by the largely individualised and disorganised forms of the activity. Parental decisions play a preponderant role in determining the 'supply' of victims and more generally appear to shape the horizontal, fragmented and opportunistic structure of the activity. It appears the particular cultural and socioeconomic conditions, tradition and poverty, appear capable of creating a constant and voluminous flow of bodies, the exploitation of which by 'organised crime' is one but not the primary possibility.

Particularly when viewed from the standpoint of families experiencing hardship and acute difficulties in sustaining their livelihood, the commodification of children could be understood as a survival strategy for the family on one hand, and as a possible strategy of social mobility for the children involved on the other. Such an interpretation pivoted on the significance of poverty and cultural values does not refute the significance attributed to such as dysfunctional families and the problematic personal circumstances of the victims as 'push' factors (e.g. Tumlin 2000), but would account at a structural level for the prevalence and cultural acceptance of the phenomenon. Additionally, the resurgence of trafficking in children recently coincides with a period during which China is more intensively exposed to the forces of global free market capitalism and neoliberalism and thus the deepening inequalities and increasingly entrenched poverty that these engender (Harvey 2007). Such developments are also likely to exacerbate existing contradictions within the Chinese administrative apparatus and thus China's capacity to articulate uniformly effective responses towards the issue at national, regional and local levels.

The combination of the above factors would suggest that the criminogenic asymmetries underpinning the issue of trafficking in children in China are likely to become wider in the future and making doubtful the curbing of the trend we detect in our analysis in the near future. What our analysis suggests is that the opening up of the possibility of more effective responses will depend on a close monitoring of the local trends and patterns of the Chinese trade in children.

References

Aronowitz AA, Peruffo M (2004) Trafficking in human beings and related crimes in West and Central Africa. In: Sumner C (ed) The Blackwell companion to criminology. Blackwell, Malden, pp 394–414

Bakken B (2005) Comparative Perspectives on Crime in China. In: Bakken B (ed) Crime, punishment and policing in China. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, Oxford, pp 64–99

Brewer JD, Guelke A, Hume I, Moxon-Browne E, Wilford R (1996) The police, public order and the state, 2nd edn. Macmillan, London

Channel 4 (2007) Dispatches: China's stolen children. Channel 4, 8 October

Chen X (2002) Community and policing strategies: a Chinese approach to crime control. Polic Soc 12 (1):1–13

China Economy Net (2008) Reveal the chain of trafficking in children for cheap labour in Dongguan: they were traded like vegetables. Available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/employment/2006-09/23/content_5149469.htm on 3 August 2010

China.com.cn (2010) More than a thousand of children have been trafficked to Shanxi Black Brick Kilns: that has shocked the central government. Available at http://china.com.cn/city/zhuaiti/node_7022678.htm. Accessed on 3 August 2010
Chinanews.com.cn (2010) The Ministry of Public Security has achieved the positive effect in anti trafficking operations. Available at http://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/news/2010/01-08/2062568.shtml. Accessed on 3 August 2010
Chu H (1996) Dealing with the six harms. The Procuratorate Press, Beijing
Chung RC-Y (2006) Human trafficking for sexual exploitation: psychological and cultural impacts. Global Stud Rev 2(3):10–11
Cui S (2000) How can anti-trafficking be so difficult? The Time Wave 6:26–28
Davies M, Shen A (2010) Questioning suspected offenders: the investigative interviewing process in the People's Republic of China. Criminol Crim Justice 10(3):243–259
Department TL (2007) Does selling a child by his parent constitute offence of trafficking in children. Government & Rule of Law 7:36
Dong F (2000) The no. 1 case of breaking the trafficking network' in Wuhan. Chutian Owner 8:32–35
Dorn N, Murji K, South N (1992) Traffickers. Routledge, London
Dowling M, Brown G (2009) Globalisation and international adoption from China. Child Fam Soc Work 14 (February):352–361
Du C (2000) A teacher became a child trafficker. Par Mor & Cl Gov 4:25–27
Ebenstein A (2008) The 'missing girls' of China and the unintended consequences of the one child policy. J Hum Resour 45(1):87–115
Europol (2007) OCTA—EU organised crime threat assessment 2007. Europol, The Hague
Feng J (2007) The issue of child labour has alerted Chinese society. Available http://www.beijingreview.com.cn/zgsy/txt/2007-07/10/content_68607.htm. Accessed on 3 August 2010
Forum of Rural Area Development (2000) Be careful of the human trafficking trap. Forum of Rural Area Development 13:42–44
Fu S (2000) For the mothers' smile: report on tackling child trafficking cases by the Public Security Police in Ji'An Region. Police World 7:4–9
Gen L (2007) Discuss recording and investigating missing person incidents. J Polit Sci Law 24(6):110–113
Guo X, Xiao L (2007) Discuss the reasons of purchase of trafficked women and children and the counter measures. Journal of Jiangxi Institute of Education 28(6):93–96
Harvey D (2007) A brief history of neoliberalism. Oxford University Press, Oxford
He X (2007) Baby, let's go home. China News Weekly 29:54–55
Heimer M, Thogersen S (eds) (2006) Doing field work in China. NIAS Press, Copenhagen
Hille K (2011) Love you and leave you. Financial Times Weekend Magazine, February 5/6, pp 18–23
Hilsum L (2007) An outrage too far. New Statesmen, 25 June, pp 30–31
Hobbs D, Cunnighan C (1998) Glocal Organised Crime: Context and Pretext. In: Ruggiero V, South N, Taylor I (eds) The new European criminology. Routledge, London, pp 289–303
Hongfeng S (2000) Cracking down the infant wholesale centre. The Countryside World 7:14–15
Jiang C (2000) Tackling trafficking women and chilren. Theor Stud 6:60–61
Jiang W, Zhao C (2000) Hundreds of teenage girls were trafficked for the purpose of prostitution. Twists and Turns of the Procuratorate 6:30–33
Kane P, Choi CY (1999) China's one child family policy. Br Med J 319(7215):992–994
Kang S (1999) Current criminality in China: the circumstances, characteristics and tendency. Academic Journal of Jiangsu Policy Academy 3:116–121
Kelly A (2009) Uganda fights rise in child sacrifice. The Observer, September 6, p 39
Li D (1999a) Concern about anti human trafficking. Law and Life 10:10–13
Li Z (1999b) Always remember counter human trafficking. Chinese Women's Movement 8:27–29
Li S (2000) Anti-trafficking actions in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. The People's Congress 9:20–23
Li D (2001) A 14-year old girl sold to be a wife. Law and Life 4:66–68
Li N, Ni M (2005) Discuss the prevention and law enforcement against trafficking in children. Journal of Yunnan Police Officer Academy 4:67–69
Li J, Li N, Ni C, Zhang L (2002) Analysis of the characteristics of trafficking in children in Kunming City. Journal of Yunnan Public Security College 4(42):63–65
Lin Y (2002) Comprehensive ethnicity studies. The Central University of Nationalities Press, Beijing
Liu J (2008) Data sources in Chinese crime and criminal justice research. Crime Law Soc Change 50:131–147
Lu N (2009) To attack trafficking we must root up poverty. Social Outlook, Issue, 9
Mao M (2001) Travelling tens of thousands miles to conduct the large scale anti-child trafficking action. Twists and Turns of the Procuratorate, 7

Meier PJ, Zhang X (2008) Sold into adoption. Cumberland Law Review 39(1):87–130
Ming Zhao G (2003) Trafficking of women for marriage in China: policy and practice. Criminol Crim Justice 3(1):83–102
Ou J, Li L, Tan Z, Liu Y, Wu D (2001) The legislative flaws in the chinese trafficking law and the ways of improvements. Journal of Guangxi Administrative Cadre Institute of Politics and Law 16(2):19–22
Papanicolaou G (2011) Transnational policing and sex trafficking in South-East Europe: policing the imperialist chain. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke
Papanicolaou G, Antonopoulos GA (2010) Review of 'crime war and global trafficking: designing international cooperation' by C. Jojarth. Global Crime 11:365–368
Passas N (1999) Globalization, criminogenic asymmetries and economic crime. Eur J Law Reform 1 (4):399–423
Qiu S (2001) Apply law to deal with the case of selling children by their parents. Journal of Social Science of Hunan Normal University 30(May):18–20
Ren X (2004) Trafficking in children: China and asian perspective. Presentation to the International Bureau for Children's Rights, Montreal, Canada, 20 November
Salah R (2001) Child trafficking in West and Central Africa: an overview. Paper presented at the first Pan African Conference on human trafficking organised by Wotclef at the International Conference Centre, Abuja, Nigeria, February 19–23
Shelley L (1999) Transnational organised crime: the new authoritarianism. In: Freeman HR, Andreas P (eds) The illicit global economy and state power. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, pp 25–51
Shelley L (2003) Trafficking in women: the business model approach. Brown J World Aff 10(1):119–132
Shen A, Antonopoulos GA, von Lampe K (2010) 'The dragon breathes smoke': cigarette counterfeiting in the People's Republic of China. Br J Criminol 50:239–258
Shou B (2007) The President apologised: please be kind to Shanxi people. Southern Weekends, 6 July. Available at http://news.dayoo.com/china/gb/content/2007-07/06/content_2868845.htm. Accessed on 13 August 2010
Siegel D (2007) Nigeriaanse madams in de mensenhandel in Nederland. Justitiele Verkenningen 33(7):39–49
Southern Weekends (2007) Child labour re-emerging in Shangxi. Southern Weekends. Available at http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2007-06-21/102713279674.shtml. Accessed on 3 August 2010
Spiegel (2010) China's child-trafficking epidemic. Spiegel Online, May 21, available at http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,696129,00.html. Accessed pm 3 October 2011
Sun G (2000) Thinking of offence of trafficking in women and children. Journal of Hubei Public Security College 6(63):49–51
Sun Y (2001) Thinking about the current circumstances of trafficking women and children – a case study in Huaiyin, Jiangsu Province. The Society, 4
Sun X (2007a) Gender imbalance threatens national security. Forum of Chinese Cadres of Party and Politics 9:11–12
Sun W (2007b) The legal consequences of selling a child of one's own. China Soc Welfare 4:53–54
Sun X, Li B (2005) Current circumstances and countermeasures against cross-border trafficking in women and children. Around Southeast Asia 7:71–76
Tang N (1999) The Chinese police anti-trafficking actions in 1999. Government & Rule of Law 11:10–13
Tang Y (2007) Remove the weaknesses in the anti-trafficking law. Outlook Weekly 37(September):6
Terre de Hommes (2004) Report of activities, 2003. Terre de Hommes, Geneva
The Economist (2011) Illegal children will be confiscated. The Economist, July 23, pp 10
Tian D (2007) The good and bad luck of the illegitimate babies. Law & Life 4(2):6–8
Tong C, Qiu D (2001) Current characteristics, causes and countermeasures of trafficking in women and children. Journal of Sichuan Police College 13(1):33–36
Tumlin KC (2000) Trafficking in children in Asia: a regional overview. ILO and IPEC, Jakarta
UNICEF (2002) Child Africa in West Africa: policy responses. UN Children's Fund, Innocenti Research Centre, Florence
von Lampe K, Kurti M, Shen A, Antonopoulos GA (2011) The sorcerer's apprentice: the changing role of China in the illegal cigarette trade. Presentation at the 11th Annual Conference of the European Society of Criminology Rethinking Crime and Punishment in Europe, Vilnius, Lithuania, 21–24 September
Wang J (2005) A case study on receiving regions of trafficking in women and children in the five Eastern Provinces of China. Zhejiang Academic Journal 4:200–215
Wang Q (2008) The expanded research on China's anti-people trafficking policy in Zhao, Binzhi. Crim Law Rev 19:384–411

Wang X (2009) Anti-trafficking together. Watch the East Weekly. Available at http://www.lwdf.cn/oriental/cover_story/20090527142435936.htm. Accessed on 11 August 2010
Wedgwood K, Sun T, He Y (2007) Child trafficking: protecting children in a society on the move. Available at http://www.cdb.org.cn/qikanarticleview.php?id=680. Accessed on 10 August 2010
Xing H, Jiang B (2007) What is the nature of selling one's own children. Journal of Henan Judicial Police Vocational College 9:53–56
Xinhua News (2007) The incident of Black Brick Kiln: 359 workers were rescued and the President of Province apologised. Available at http://www.gov.cn/zmyw200706d/content_659342.htm. Accessed on 3 August 2010
Xinjin News (2008) Child labour in Dongguan: beyond the bottom line of social justice. Available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2008-04/29/content_8070720.htm. Accessed on 3 August 2010
Xinkuai Bao (2011) Shenzhen publishes child trafficking statistics: 30 % trafficked children were sold by their own parents. Available at http://www.ngocn.net/?action-viewnews-itemid-77749. Accessed on 14 February 2012
Xu F, Kai D (2007) Attention and thoughts from the incident of Shanxi Brick Kilns. Available at http://economy.guoxue.com/article.php/13110/2. Accessed on 3 August 2010
Yang W (2008) Discussing the restoring of the offence of trafficking in human beings. Hubei J Soc Sci 3:150–152
Zhang B (2006) How can China tackle the trafficking in women and children. The People's Police 6:18–21
Zhang P (2007) Network-structured trafficking in women and children and the corresponding investigative measures. Journal of Shanxi Police Academy 15(2):67–71
Zhang L (2008) Explore human trafficking: an analysis of family, marriage and gender. Journal of Shanxi Normal University (Social Science Edition) 35(6):93–95
Zhang S, Chin KL (2002) Enter the dragon: inside Chinese human smuggling organisations. Criminology 40(4):373–768
Zhang D, He L (2008) The groom's father rescued the trafficked teenage girl. Contemporary Family Education 8:22–24
Zhangzhou Normal University Research Unit (2006) The research report on illegal and irregular adoption of children in Yun'nan and Guangxi Provinces. Zhejiang Academic Journal 1:213–218
Zhao R, Peng Y (2009) Why trafficking in children cannot be prevented despite repeated police actions. Available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2009-03/24/content_11064648.htm. Accessed on 24 June 2010
Zhong LY (2009) Communities, crime and social capital in contemporary China. Devon, Cullompton
Zhongxin Net (2007) 359 workers including 15 child labourers were rescued from the Xianxi Brick Kilns. Available at http://www.chinacourt.org/html/article/200708/13/260032.shtml. Accessed on 24 June 2010
Zhou Y, Liu Y (2006) Looking into the missing population. The Northerners 9:30–32
Zhu W (2001) The characteristics, reasons and law enforcement measures against trafficking in women and children in Guangdong Province. J Polit Sci Law 18(1):66–68
Zhu Xing W, Lu L, Hesketh T (2009) China's excess males, sex selective abortion, and one child policy. Br Med J 338:1211