**A Feminist Analysis of Women Trafficking Within China with A Cross-Cultural Media Analysis of The Chained Woman Incident**

A ragged, old, thin woman sits in the corner of a crumbling, gloomy room, a chain around her neck that is fastened to a house. At the end of January 2022, a video clip of this very scene went viral on the Chinese internet. The woman in the video could not understand others or express herself well. This image shocked many people and struck many people’s hearts. Who is this woman? What happened to her? Why is she chained up in her home? Why are the living conditions so bad?

As the netizens raising these questions probed deeper and deeper, we collectively learned that the woman was trafficked to the area she now lives in and has given birth to eight children, seven of whom were boys. The collective proof of the trafficking of this woman, her miserable conditions, and increasing global discussions of the case led me to ask broader questions about women trafficking in China. In this research, I explore women trafficking within China under feminist approaches. More specifically, I examine the media coverage of the chained woman incident from both Chinese and US media. In this paper, I argue that women trafficking in China is mainly caused by long-standing patriarchy and gender inequality in China, and the vulnerability of victims should be taken into account when solving the cases. I make this argument by first reviewing the literature on the history and background of women trafficking in China, the policies and laws in China that are intended to suppress this trafficking, and cross-border women trafficking in China based on feminist approaches. I then outline my study’s methods. Next, I present and analyze my data, focusing particularly on coverage of this case both within U.S. mainstream media and Chinese social media. I conclude that although both unofficial Chinese media and U.S. mainstream media mentioned “Sexism/Gender equality/Feminism,” the invoking of the nation revealed a new perspective of viewing the chained woman incident as a political tool among public opinion.

**Women Trafficking in China**

The research on women trafficking in China has long explored how the trafficking industry works, why it exists, and possible solutions. Within this broad set of inquiries, there have been several streams of research. One stream of research focuses on the history and background causes of women trafficking in China (e.g., Ping 1993; Tiefenbrun and Edwards 2010). Zhuang Ping, for instance, argues that the 1978 Open Door Policy, which aimed to boost economic development in certain areas of China, combined with a general lack of access to formal education in rural areas, contributed to many women in rural areas believing the traffickers who said they would take them to the big cities for better employment opportunities or to learn new skills. Susan Tiefenbrun and Christie J. Edwards further discuss the imbalanced gender ratio in China, which was a result of the One Child Policy and feudal patriarchy, as many families killed their baby girls, as the fundamental cause of women trafficking in China. Other research on women trafficking in China examines the demand and supply of victims (Watkins-Smith 2022). The demand for women trafficking is mainly caused by the lingering gender inequality caused by both the gender birth ratio and young women’s migration to big cities after 1978. The rampant supply is enabled by the disciplined and clearly divided organization of trafficking, corruption in grassroots governments, and the solidity of local people, such as fighting against police together to prevent police from saving trafficked women (Zhao; Jiang and Jesús J; Ping; Tiefenbrun and Edwards).

Other scholars have focused on the current situation of women trafficking in China, including policies and laws intended to suppress this trafficking (Zhao 2003; Jiang and Jesús J 2011). Gracie Ming Zhao, for instance, argues that from 1978 till now, the policies adopted by the Chinese government have had several benefits, including its strict forbidding of women trafficking and severe but reasonable punishments. However, Zhao also points out that since there are many difficulties in determining whether a woman is willingly marrying or being sold to a man, as women are likely to be forced to prove their willingness, this determination of sentencing and convictions is subjective and therefore prone to error.

While each of these studies makes important and unique contributions to the literature on the women trafficking issue in China, almost none utilize an explicitly feminist approach – even those that examine the role of gender in trafficking. The single exception to this lacuna is an article by Amelia Watkins-Smith, in which she says she uses a feminist approach in order to examine the gendered dynamics at play in trafficking. For Watkins-Smith, a feminist approach entails “the academic understanding of the world through the lens of gender,” which is suited to examining the women trafficking issue in China as it helps fully examine “the social constructions of gender that adversely affect women in Chinese bride-trafficking.” Ultimately, she uses this approach to argue that bride-trafficking is caused by a multi-level system where multiple social constructions of gender operate separately and together, referring to broader patriarchal norms, demonstrated across time, levels of society, and different models of socially constructed gender relations (Watkins-Smith 2022). For Watkins Smith, a feminist approach to trafficking is crucial because it can show how the multi

level system constructed by perceptions of gender plays a key role in women trafficking in China since the gender imbalances of power caused by it both facilitate and justify the practice. Furthermore, feminist analysis maintains a focus on the voice of survivors and the concerns of victims.

While former studies have thoroughly examined trafficking in terms of policies as well as demand and supply, applying feminist approaches can provide new perspectives. The lingering gender stereotypes that women cannot do great things and that women should be virtuous, gentle, and obedient, along with the feudal patriarchy rooted in Chinese traditional culture, cause the belief that women are affiliated with their husbands after marriage and their only usages are doing housework and giving birth to children, especially sons. Due to this kind of belief, victims of women trafficking in China not only suffer from common sexual exploitation, which violates their sexual and reproductive rights and can also cause health problems, but also are forced to take on the burden of being an obedient mother in a traditional Chinese family, which sometimes even violates victims’ freedom and physical security, and can make it much harder to escape and regain freedom. Also, taking feminist approaches into

account means taking the sequenced harm to victims seriously, helping victims recover after being rescued, and attempting to get to the root causes so that we can eliminate the problem altogether. Due to the extreme vulnerability of trafficked women, the mental and physical torture victims usually suffer, and the bad living conditions provided to victims in forced marriages, solving the women trafficking issue in China without being victim-focused will be insufficient and limited.

One key difference between women trafficking in China versus in the majority of other countries is that in China, women are typically trafficked for the purpose of forced marriage, a dynamic known as “bride-trafficking.” Elsewhere, trafficking is often more explicitly connected to what people typically think of as sex work. While equating marriage trafficking with trafficking for sex work is inappropriate, sexual exploitation also exists in forced marriages, as the entire process rests upon understanding victims as reproductive tools (Zhao 2003). Still, most scholarship on bride-trafficking does not examine the practice in relation to other forms of forced sex work or sex trafficking.

Among the studies outlined here, the only one that approaches the topic of women trafficking in China from a feminist perspective is focused on cross-border women trafficking in China (Watkins-Smith 2022). However, cross-province women trafficking is an even more severe issue. Differences between these two forms of women trafficking in China include the number of victims, the ease of implementation and escaping legal sanctions, and the local cultural context that makes trafficking easier. Due to China’s current strict border control, cross-border trafficking of women has become very difficult and faces stricter penalties than inter-provincial trafficking. At the same time, it is not as easy to obtain trafficked women in other countries as it is within China, as sometimes Chinese parents even voluntarily sell their daughters for money due to traditional patriarchal thoughts. Moreover, inter-provincial trafficking involves the interests of some local grassroots officials, making the capture of cases more complicated. For these reasons, my feminist analysis of women trafficking in China focuses on cross-province trafficking.

**Methods**

The “Chained woman” incident that happened in Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province, China, as an exposed case of domestic women trafficking, has been widely discussed not only in China but also internationally, including by many US mainstream media outlets. To identify relevant news coverage of the case, I first searched using the keywords “chained woman” and “Fengxian.” Of the thousands of search hits, I narrowed my analysis to those published in what is widely considered mainstream media in the U.S. Identifying Chinese discussions of the case required a different approach because the government controls the media reports as well as search engines. As such, I looked for commentary on the case that had occurred within Chinese social media by searching for the phrase “chained woman.” I filtered the articles according to their number of reads and chose those with the highest number. I conducted this research in September of 2022, approximately seven months after the media initially covered this case. After I created a small archive of media coverage of the case, I then read each article carefully to identify themes that cut across texts. The themes that I consider in what follows are sexism/gender equality/feminism, invoking of the nation, and comparison to other events or social issues.

Throughout my analysis, I attempted to employ feminist principles as a central part of my methodology (Lobasz 2009; Kotiswaran 2021; van Niekerk 2018). My goal is to center my research on the victims, especially considering their vulnerability. As Jennifer K. Lobasz stated, “Feminists not only establish women as a referent of security and focus on gender-related human rights abuses but also study the manner in which gender stereotypes are used to establish and reproduce categories of practices, perpetrators, and victims.” Feminist approaches enable the research to be more victim

focused while also aiming to solve the women trafficking issue.

**A Qualitative Analysis of News Coverage**

First, most reports and articles discussed the incident by mentioning things that I coded as representing “Sexism/Gender Equality/Feminism.” For example, *The Washington Post*’s report on February 9th, 2022, mentioned that “the systemic and structural

shackles that Chinese women face have not changed,” a statement that identifies the most significant dilemma women in China face today and focuses on the long-standing gender inequality in Chinese society. And the report by *ABC News* on March 20th mentioned, “As women, we have seen how little efforts that governments and authorities have taken in countering sexual violence and human trafficking.” This quote is from one of the Chinese women interviewees of *ABC News*, whose female perspective led her to focus on the nature of the incident as “gender-based violence” and the violation of women’s rights. Moreover, one of the most widely read articles entitled “Jiangsu Fengxian chained woman incident, whose truth is not at all what you think about” on Chinese social media (over 100,000 reads) discussed the incident by using gender equality discourse. The article draws on the Chinese film “Blind Mountain,” a fact-based adaptation of the story of women trafficking in rural China, where the word “blind” in the title reveals that the entire village “turns a blind eye” to the women trafficking and exposes the villagers’ disregard for the law, morality, and humanity, showing the depressing suffocation caused by a skilled and systematic crime. The article then cites some historical statistics on women trafficking in China and analyzes the historical reasons behind this incident, namely the long-standing patriarchy and gender inequality in China. And at the end of the passage, it calls on Chinese women to speak up about this incident because “they can also be us.” In another article, which also has been widely read on Chinese social media (about 59,000 reads), a rebuttal to a statement made by Pingwa Jia, a well-known Chinese writer, on women’s trafficking representing the traditional Chinese patriarchal perspective has been made. The author argues that “Some people believe that if some poor villages do not buy brides to reproduce and reproduce, those villages will die out. If in the pre-civilization era, this idea might have some truth. However, in the present time, if it is still premised on depriving women of their free will and creating chained women, then we have no problem saying that just let those villages perish.” This argument clearly rejects the view of sacrificing women for a village’s survival, which is a rejection of the long standing oppression of women in rural China under the patriarchy. And another article with more than 100,000 reads on Chinese social media written by a self-publisher who

has long focused on gender issues in China mentioned that “No one felt that it was a crime to violate women’s rights while they were also citizens and human beings; decades later, people still do so.” Here the author brings in the history of gender inequality in China and exposes the long-standing neglect or blindness to women's rights violations with a feminist perspective. All of these reports and articles discuss the incident by invoking ideas about sexism, gender equality, and feminism. However, the reports from the US mainstream media use more general expressions and explanations, while the articles on Chinese social media discuss the incident and its background more specifically.

Second, it is notable that even though this is a case of women trafficking, there is more invoking of the nation and comparisons to other issues/topics/events in many U.S. mainstream media discussions of the case, as well as in the official Chinese media. Because of the timing of the exposure of this incident, many U.S. mainstream media mentioned the 2022 Winter Olympics held in Beijing. *The Washington Post* mentioned that “The vast majority of (Chinese) women have no chance of becoming *Eileen Gu*, but the tragedy of the woman in Fengxian can happen to anyone,” “Even as China’s glittering Closing Ceremonies ended *the Winter Olympics* on Sunday, many Chinese were preoccupied by the mystery of a woman glimpsed in a video, chained by the neck to an outdoor shed, incoherent and shivering in the cold in rural eastern China,” “Over *the Winter Games*, focus on the Xuzhou woman overtook even news of the hugely popular Chinese American skier *Eileen Gu*, with commentators calling on fans not to forget the plight of the chained woman and many other trafficked Chinese women,” and “At a time when the Chinese leadership is keen to emphasize *the superiority of its system* — one that it claims can keep its citizens safe from covid-19 as well as pull off *a successful Olympics* in the middle of a pandemic — it is the image of a lone woman chained by the neck that most threatens to undermine *China’s picture of strength and success*.” And an article published in *The New York Times* on March 1st mentioned that “The top three hashtags about the chained woman on the Twitter-like social media platform Weibo have accumulated more than 10 billion views, rivaling those about *the Beijing Winter Olympics*, which were heavily promoted by Weibo and official media

outlets.” Mentioning both the chained woman and the Winter Olympics, the US mainstream media used this incident as an arm to criticize the Chinese nation and its government, something that calls into question whether or not they genuinely cared about the incident itself. And these reports by the U.S. mainstream media did mention the Chinese government and Beijing. *ABC News* mentioned that “As women, we have seen how little efforts that *governments and authorities* have taken in countering sexual violence and human trafficking.” *The New York Times* mentioned, “It’s one of the biggest credibility challenges *Beijing* has faced in recent years. The chained woman became a symbol of injustice that brought together liberals as well as nationalistic digital warriors and apolitical moderates,” and “Even some of *Beijing*’s most devoted supporters expressed their sympathy toward the woman. They’re also worried that the poorly managed crisis could challenge the *government’s authority*.” *The Washington Post* also mentioned that “Rights advocates say that such activism shows many citizens want to hold their *government* accountable for abuses. But they are up against a *powerful state* apparatus increasingly able to silence or drown out dissenting voices.” These references to Beijing and the government clearly condemn the Chinese government’s lack of control over women trafficking and its excessive control over media coverage and what people say on social media. However, the U.S. mainstream media clearly focuses more on portraying China’s governmental failures as a power state. To some extent, these coverages point out the Chinese government’s shortcomings in the case of the chained women, but it is more of a war of opinion, using media coverage to portray China as an evil country that has no regard for human rights towards the west. *The New York Times* even mentioned, “And the topic continues to hold people’s attention online amid *Russia’s invasion of Ukraine*.” Although it does not directly equate the seriousness of the chained woman’s case with the Russian invasion, it still implies that “China is evil” through such expressions. This implication through textual expressions is not only found in the reports of the U.S. mainstream media. The Chinese official media, representing the Chinese government, mentioned, “Yang Mou Xia *(the chained woman)* suffers from mental illness, has been rescued, and has carried out further assistance to his family to ensure a warm Lunar New Year.” By referring to

the Lunar New Year, the Chinese official media is trying to evoke a warm and welcoming atmosphere that is not only an attempt to distract the Chinese people but also to counter the dark, scary, and evil atmosphere portrayed in the U.S. mainstream media. From this perspective, the incident of the chained woman has become the center of a new round of public opinion war between China and the United States.

In conclusion, both the coverage from the U.S. mainstream media and the articles from Chinese social media mentioned sexism/gender equality/feminism.” However, the articles from Chinese social media mentioned these topics very specifically with some historical, social, and cultural analysis, while the coverage from the U.S. mainstream media mentioned these topics more generally. The chained woman incident itself has become a breakthrough for the U.S. mainstream media to criticize the Chinese government and system and has become a point of public opinion for China and the United States to contend with. In this regard, Chinese social media articles have not covered much, presumably due to the censorship system of Chinese social media.

**Conclusion**

This analysis contributes to current literature as the first to adopt feminist approaches to women trafficking in China. Most previous studies about women trafficking in China focused on historical, cultural, social-economic, or legal methods. The only exception was the new research by Watkins-Smith in 2022. However, Watkins-Smith focused on cross-border women trafficking in China, while this research focuses on cross-province women trafficking.

A new way of utilizing media coverage is also adopted to conduct a cross cultural analysis of the topics of women’s rights and the struggle of public political opinion between countries. This analysis revealed a new perspective of viewing the chained woman incident as a tool to attack the Chinese government. As the Chinese official media merely reported about the chained woman incident, the overturn of Roe v. Wade in the U.S. was reported by many prevailing official media in China, including *Chinanews*, *CCTV*, and *Xinhua News*. At the same time, the U.S. mainstream media coverage of the overturn of Roe v. Wade mainly focused on the solutions and causes

rather than the court or the government, which can be discussed and studied in further research.

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