

Chinese government seeks to head off outrage over human trafficking

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For months, the Chinese government has been trying to contain widespread anger over human trafficking. The issue erupted at the end of January, when a woman's plight in Feng County of Xuzhou, in the eastern province of Jiangsu, sparked social media attention.

At a State Council meeting on March 29, Premier Li Keqiang declared: "Trafficking and trafficking in people is harmful and must be brought to justice as soon as possible, and officials who neglect their duties must be severely punished."

This was Li's third statement on human trafficking in a month. The Chinese police earlier also announced an anti-trafficking operation, to continue until the end of the year.

In January, a video began circulating on the Chinese internet, showing a middle-aged woman wearing thin clothes, locked in a dilapidated house with a long iron chain around her neck. The video was released by a social work volunteer, and although it was not explicitly stated, online public opinion quickly pointed out that the woman was likely to have been abducted.

The video garnered nearly 2 billion views on social media, causing much online discussion. Local officials issued several inconsistent announcements, which only further aroused doubts and concern.

With China's news media heavily censored, people had to dig into the story for themselves and constantly questioned the official statements.

On February 17, at the instigation of the central government, Jiangsu Province established an investigation, which issued a series of five notices, some correcting earlier ones, finally admitting that the woman was a victim of human trafficking.

The authorities said the woman, known as Yang Qingxia, had been trafficked out of the southwestern province of Yunnan in 1997 and sold twice by human traffickers in Feng County.

As a result, 17 officials from Feng County and Xuzhou City were punished to varying degrees. That has been officially defined as the final result of the incident, and

discussion online has been strictly censored. But the central government has felt compelled to launch an anti-trafficking campaign.

At the National People's Congress meeting on March 5, Li proposed to "severely crack down on the phenomenon of abduction and trafficking of women and children, and protect the rights and interests of women and children." On March 11, at a press conference at the conclusion of the congress, he said: "We are not only heartbroken for the victims, but also angry about such a thing."

Nevertheless, the public concern has continued. On social media platforms, a number of literary or artistic works related to trafficking have received renewed attention and discussion. These include "Black Vortex," a reportage about a large-scale abduction of women, "Ancient Sins," a documentary that investigates trafficking in China, and "Blind Mountain," a film based on the true story of a female college student being abducted. By discussing these works, people evaded the censorship.

The anger over the human trafficking case in Feng County was intensified by the official cover-up of the truth. Reports and information from journalists and others were removed, and investigators who visited the site were threatened and harassed by police and government officials.

According to a United Nations report, China cracked 208 cases of human trafficking in 2017. But the large number of missing persons that occur each year has led to the widespread belief that this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Proponents of middle-class identity politics have attributed the problem to "a patriarchal society." But the root cause lies in the restoration of capitalism in China. As the WSWs has previously analysed and reported:

"The rapid expansion of capitalist production and market relations in China is being accompanied by the revival of a myriad of social evils abolished or mitigated by the 1949 Revolution—prostitution, sale of women, drug trafficking, child labor, corruption at every level of the state."

Reports and research essays have pointed out that the large-scale revival of human trafficking in China began in the

1980s, and the 1980s and 1990s became the period with the most cases of human trafficking in contemporary China. It has been called the “Twenty Years of Trafficking.” The WSWS drew attention to this historic regression in the 1990s:

Another pre-revolutionary relic which has made a comeback is the sale of women as brides and concubines. This feudal practice was outlawed after 1949 and largely disappeared, but began to revive in the late 1970s with the turn to market relations under Deng Xiaoping. Women are either sold by their parents, usually desperately poor peasants in the more remote and backward regions, or kidnapped by gangs who act as middlemen, transporting the women hundreds of miles and then selling to them to prospective husbands. Retarded women are especially targeted because of their greater docility in the role of domestic slaves.

Press reports indicate that the price of a woman ranges from 2,000 yuan to 5,000 yuan (about \$400 to \$900), and that the number sold must be in the hundreds of thousands yearly. In 1990 alone, according to official government figures, 10,000 women were rescued after being kidnapped and sold. Far more are unable to escape, as most are illiterate and unable to communicate with their families. Some 65,000 people were arrested for trafficking in women in 1989 and 1990 combined. Until 1991 kidnappers of women generally received a sentence of five years in prison, the same penalty meted out for stealing two cows.

During this period, agriculture was almost entirely privatised following the dissolution of rural communes in 1978, and this led to high levels of rural poverty and unemployment. Under these conditions, Zongzu forces in the countryside began to revive. Zongzu is a movement connected by blood and family relations. It was part of the rural order of Chinese feudal society, in which family or individual property and social rank were attached to clans.

In many areas, Zongzu directly influenced the election of village committees. In order to maintain their rule in rural and township areas, local Chinese Communist Party (CCP) bureaucrats cooperated with Zongzu forces.

These relations have been strengthened since President Xi Jinping took office in 2013. He has put forward the concepts of “cultural revival of rural sages” and “construction of family traditions” as a part of his program of “national

revival.” “Rural sages” refers to the figures in feudal Chinese society who had Zongzu-related status in rural areas.

In October 2014, when Xi Jinping presided over the 18th collective study of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee, he stated: “To govern China today, we need to have a deep understanding of our country’s history and traditional culture, and we also need to have a deep understanding of our country’s ancient state governance and governance wisdom and make positive summaries.”

This instruction has resulted in the restoration of backward ideas from the feudal era, and has become the ideological source of many human trafficking cases, as well as explaining why many local bureaucrats do not act or even acquiesce in such cases.

At the same time, the extreme imbalance of regional development has increased the demand for population migration from economically underdeveloped areas to economically developed areas. According to official data, from 1990 to 1999, the average annual income of farmers in Yunnan Province was 964.88 yuan, while that in Jiangsu Province it was 2,166.69 yuan—more than twice as much. Such huge economic disparities contributed to the main routes of human trafficking during this period, from rural areas in the southwestern provinces to rural areas in the eastern regions.

From the late 1980s to the 1990s, the peak period of the “migrant worker wave” into the cities also became the peak period of trafficking cases, with female migrant workers and children being the main victims.

The online discussions and protests triggered by the abducted woman in Feng County have highlighted the continued existence of this backwardness. The commodification of human beings and the resulting criminal activities are just one example of the social diseases produced by the capitalist market in China and internationally.



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