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Plight of the wives for sale

On the mainland helpless women and girls, some in their early teens, continue to be bought and sold into misery. **Lijia MacLeod** looks at their stolen lives

On May 26, 1988, Wen Chuanying's life changed for ever. She was kidnapped, drugged and bundled on to a train that would take her thousands of kilometres from home. The next day, she was sold to a farmer for 3,200 yuan (HK\$2,976). Overnight the 14-year-old became a bride.

On the first day at the home of her "husband", Ms Wen knelt in front of him and begged for freedom. "My parents will return your 3,200 yuan," she promised.

But he was not interested. "What I want is a woman, not money," he yelled. Around the time of Ms Wen's abduction from her hometown of Guiyang, Xu Jinfeng, then 16, was snatched from her home in rural Shaanxi by a village cadre from Hebei, according to a recent report by the Beijing newspaper China Youth Daily. The kidnapper forced her to marry his brother, who was more than 30 years old.

To prevent the girl from escaping, the family locked her in a small, dingy room for 10 years, which ultimately drove her insane. Then in April an unidentified

evil broke the taboo and featured the story of a graduate student from a prestigious Shanghai university who had been sold to an illiterate peasant, Gong Changen, in a mountain village. The piece underscored the suffering of abducted women and drew nationwide attention, prompting other papers to report on similar cases.

Yet in this day, the trafficking of women remains a sensitive subject in the Chinese media.

The suffering is not confined to abductees. After Ms Wen's disappearance, her parents, both railway workers, spent months searching for her. They asked the police for help and after being told she was probably taken north, made numerous trips to search for her.

The Wens even decided against moving to a new apartment because they worried she might not find her way home. Their despair grew with every passing year. But on one November day last year, their long-lost daughter appeared on

I was frightened to death.

"Those 9½ years were hell," she says matter-of-factly. "The only thing that kept me going was my burning desire to go back home."

Youji is so remote it lacks even a postal service. Worse still, Ms Wen had no access to television or radio because electricity had yet to reach the village. She had nothing to read because her husband was illiterate and kept neither books nor newspapers at home. He did not even own a pen.

Followed everywhere by members of his family (she lived with her husband and nine of his relatives), she was foiled in each of four attempts to escape and was punished with a beating each time. But last October, when the village was finally connected to the electrical grid — the made another dash for freedom.

With her daughter in tow, she hitched a lift on a tractor to the nearest county and from there made the journey home, begging for help along the way.

Ms Wen was lucky to escape because, according to social worker Lin Bubong, many abducted women stay in forced



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In April, a 14-year-old teenager mother's suffering highlighted the plight of kidnapped women. For a week, Beijing Youth Daily run follow up stories on Kang Minge, with a picture of her breastfeeding her little boy. An orphan from Shaanxi, Kang followed her brother to a gold mine in Hebei's Yi County where she was abducted and sold as 12 year-old bride. Kang is just one of the hundred of women who have been rescued since the nation wide crackdown on human trafficking started in March this year.

Kang's traumatic experience is shared by thousands of women in China who are abducted and sold to farmers as wives. In a crowded room in a concret building in Guiyang, 26-year-old Wen Chuanying recounts her own nightmare. It all started in May 1988 when the 14-year-old went to a book store near the school to buy a math book. Very unexpected, she was detained in a small back room by two men who accused her of stealing books. She was forced to write a self-criticism, before darkness fell as she lost consciousness.

When she woke up, she found herself on a moving train. The next day, they ended up at a little inn in Anhui province, thousands of miles from Wen's home town. Farmer Qiu Chaochong came to have a look. After bargaining, a deal was struck at 3,200 yuan. He owned her and took her to his home at Youji, in the remote northeast of Anhui.

The ancient commerce in human trade, commonplace in pre-communist China, was basically eliminated by Chairman Mao through a policy of strict social control. Forced marriages, together with other feudal practices such as child marriage and polygamy, were banned, and farmers were confined to their land. However, since Deng Xiaoping's reform

and opening-up of the late 1970s, millions of rural women began to migrate to the cities for better paid jobs and the hope of a better life, just like their menfolk. That leaves some farmers in the backward areas little option but to buy a wife from elsewhere. Apart from a lack of marriageable women, what also drives families to turn to the human traders is sheer economics - it is much cheaper to buy a wife than marry one. On average, a woman costs 3,000 yuan to buy, while weddings and the requisite dowry gifts come to over 10,000 yuan in China's countryside today.

The press taboo was only broken in September 1988, when Southern Weekend', a serious but popular paper based in Guangzhou, featured a graduate student from a prestigious university in Shanghai. Her story, sold as wife to an illiterate peasant in a mountain village in Shandong drew nation-wide attention. Since the crack down began, newspapers all over the country have been giving huge coverage on kidnapping cases they uncovered. Some of criminal groups are highly organized, some times led by a family. The crackdown is a clear indication the crime has grown out of the control. According to official report, last year, there were over 7000 such cases, an increase of 11.4 per cent over the previous year. The real figure is feared much higher, though no one can tell for sure.

The suffering is far from confined to the abducted women, but also involves their families. After Wen's disappearance, her family spent many sleepless nights. They reported her case to the police; they made numerous trips north in search of her, spending all their hard-saved money. They even refused to move to a new flat, worrying she might not find her way home. All these efforts only drove them deeper into despair. Yet on one November 1997, their long lost daughter miraculously returned home, clad in torn, shabby clothes, but alive and accompanied by her own little daughter! The whole family was thrilled and overcome by tears and laughter. Wen Chuanghong recalled her shock at the dramatic change in her sister. "My sweet little sister turned into this tough woman with dark skin and coarse hands. She must have suffered greatly," Chuangyong broke off in sobs.

On the first night at her 'husband's house', little Wen knelt down in front of Qiu to beg: "Please, let me go! My parents will give you 3,200 yuan." "What I want is a woman, not money!" he shouted at her. Wen never knew his age. Maybe in his 30s, but in appearance an ancient and terrifying prospect for the teenage girl. "I was frightened to death. He was so dirty and smelly with his dark red face." The sheer memory of the nightmare sends chills through her body. But nothing would stop Qiu exercising his right over his 'purchased goods'; for him, Wen was no different from any other commodity.

At 16, she gave birth to a son and, three years later, a daughter. Becoming a mother persuaded Wen to give up her suicide attempt, but she never gave up the hope of running away. She named her children 'Huangyang' - return to Guiyang, and 'Yuanmeng' - fulfill dream. "Those nine and half years were hell. The only thing that kept me going was my burning desire to go back home." Youji is so remote and underdeveloped, it lacks even a postal service. Throughout her captivity, she did not enjoy any TV, books or newspapers, things that most girls of her age take for granted. The household lacked even a pen as the whole Qiu family was illiterate. Followed everywhere, and controlled at all times, she worked like the farmer's wife she had been kidnapped to be, busy with house chores and tilling the land. She was beaten brutally after each of her four escape attempts failed. In October 1997, electricity eventually reached the village. The reach of civilization refreshed Wen's dream - she heard home calling again. Grasping the next opportunity, she took her daughter and hitched a lift to the county seat, from which she made her hard journey home, surviving on begged food and charity.

"Many of these abducted women, those with children in particular, stay in the forced marriage. Apart from practical difficulties, they tend to 'Marry a dog, stay with a dog; marry a rooster, stay with a rooster' as the old Chinese saying goes." explains Liu Bohong, a respected sociologist and expert on women's issues from the All-China Women's Federation. Some of the rescued women who have born children have to face the most painful choice of staying or going home. 18-year-old Zhou Fenzheng changed her mind several times since she was rescued in March, Procuratory Daily reported. Two years ago, she was abducted from Guizhou and sold to a farmer in Sichuan. She could not bear to leave her child behind, but also worried that her family would not take her back. In the end, she chose to go home.

The human trafficking flow tends to be from the poor area to the poor area. Apart from plucking naive young women from rural villages, the traffickers prey on migrant women in urban job markets. Human dealers sometimes rape their cargo, while others prefer to play the virgin card to sell for a higher price. Some of the abducted women are sold to prostitution. "It is all market driven. There is lots of money to be made and there is a large market," says Wang Shan, a renowned writer, sociologist and TV producer. One of his TV documentaries was on trafficking in women, two 21 year-old women from both sides of the issue were interviewed in their prison cells. One, Pu Xiaoying from rural Sichuan,

worked at a restaurant in Beijing before its bankruptcy. Having lost her job, she herself joined a gang of traffickers to lure women into captivity. Asked if she ever thought about the misery she caused other women, she replied "I only knew I needed money to support myself and my family back home." She was given heavy sentence.

The other inmate, a well-educated girl from prosperous Nanjing in east China, was sold to a farmer in Yi County, the area Kang was abducted. For 13 months, she was chained to a pole at the family house and treated like an animal. One night her husband went out to play mahjong, leaving his brother's three children to keep an eye on her. As she tried to flee, the children attempted to stop her. In a rage, she hit out with an axe, killing two and injuring the other. When asked if she was afraid of law, she answered "What law? For 13 months, I was a sex slave, held totally illegally, and everyone in the village knew about it. I tried to set myself free, and I was caught within 6 hours." She was later executed.

Her case highlights a major hurdle in curbing the underground trade - the overwhelming sympathy towards the buyer. "In Chinese culture, a man would not be looked down upon if he buys his wife; but he would be without wife or offspring" Liu Bohong explains. Gong Changen, the peasant who bought the Shanghai student in 1988 was sentenced to six years imprisonment, for the case became famous all over the country. As the only man to be punished out of estimated 3,000 wife-buyers in Yuncheng county, Shandong province, Gong, a Communist Party member, received widespread pity and sympathy. "Why?" the head of the village Youth League asked a reporter, "He is the most decent man in the village. He paid for a wife with his own money. What's wrong with that?"

Efforts to curb the practice include the introduction of legal articles and increased legal penalties. In 1996, the National People's Congress passed a decree "Strictly Forbidding Kidnapping and Selling Women and Children". In 1997's revised Criminal Procedural Law, specific items, such as punishing the buyers, were added. A special office entitled 'Cracking Down on Kidnapping' under the Public Security Bureau was set up throughout the country. In March this year, a national hot-line was set up. In the same month, a new law was issued to give kidnappers tougher penalties with minimum 5 years to death penalty in the serious offense. "The severe punishment might have cut down the numbers, but it is impossible to wipe out the whole human trade. In the end, it is all up to the local authorities how to enforce the law," Wang Shan concludes.

The day after Wen Chuanying's unexpected return, she and her family filed a case against the two men at the bookstore, whom she strongly suspects set up the abduction. But the court has refused to accept the case for lack of evidence. Wen decided not to sue her husband Qiu Chaochong. "Despite my own feelings, I worry my children might hate me one day if I bring him to trial." According to Chinese law, a man who rapes a virgin, using violent means, can be given a 3 to 10 year sentence. Although Wen misses her son badly, she has not dare to go back to that village.

Some experts are concerned that trafficking in women will grow as China's strict family planning policy leads to a widening gender gap - some peasants abort or kill baby girls in favour of trying again for the more coveted male offspring. Others disagree: "It is true that in certain areas, the ratio of men to women is rising sharply. But I do not see the direct link between that and wife trading. The marriage pattern is, women go for men with better conditions. In the end, poor and unattractive men from impoverished, remote areas are left behind without wives," argues Professor Pan Suiming from People's University. Others go so far as to suggest a form of legalized prostitution might be a solution to the unbalanced sex ratio.

Sociologists like Liu have pointed out the damaging effects of trafficking on women, as it often fosters other social diseases like polygamy, family planning violations and child marriage, as in the case of Wen and Kang. In rural Hejian, Hebei province, one poor family with three middle-aged bachelor brothers shared a bought woman before they were reported to the police - in their defense they claimed sufficient funds for only one wife, yet all three wanted one.

For Wen Chuanying, the nightmare is far from over. "I want to begin a new life, but I do not know how," she sighs. With no skills, and limited education cut short a decade ago, the only jobs she managed to find so far are domestic helpers or similar low jobs. Teenager mother Kang Minge's shocking story roused hundreds of phone calls and letters to Beijing Youth Daily, all of who offered sympathy, help or money. One of them, a girl who was also kidnapped as a teenager, said the past nightmare still haunts her. Now, a university student, she calls to establish an organization to help the rescued women, offering consoling or possibly financial help. So far, these unfortunate women are more or less left to fend themselves without any social support.

“I had my dreams, I wanted to go to university, I want a decent job, I want to earn money for my parents. But all my dreams have been broken!” But at least, she has made her way home, surrounded by loved ones. Amid the despair of China’s poorest countryside, thousands remain trapped in involuntary marriages, a long way from home.