

# Problems in Chinese Local Governance: Case of Chained Mother in Xuzhou

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## 1. News Highlights

On January 28, 2021, “Xuzhou Brother Yixiu,” a user of the Chinese version of TikTok, posted a video of a peasant woman in Feng County, Xuzhou, who was imprisoned in chains and became a mother of eight children.<sup>1</sup> The video quickly went viral across China and overseas via the Internet, sparking a public outcry that called for the local government to investigate whether human trafficking or sexual assault was behind the crime. However, the official report of Xuzhou’s Feng County was evasive, initially stating that “everything was legal and in order” and that “Yang (the woman) was suffering

from schizophrenia,” but the public was not convinced. On February 17, the Jiangsu provincial government, under public pressure, set up an investigation team into “the Case of Chained Mother in Feng County” and released a report on February 23, identifying the mother of the eight children and the causes and consequences of the incident, and penalized the 17 people involved.<sup>2</sup> On the same day, *Xinhua News Agency* and *CCTV* also released a long interview report to endorse the investigation report. However, the local government had lost its credibility, and most people did not believe the truthfulness of the government report. Hu Xijin, former editor-in-chief of

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1. “Understanding the ‘Case of Chained Mother’ of Xuzhou, China: Public Anger Reveals the Problem of Human Trafficking,” *Central News Agency*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202202080353.aspx>.

2. “Chinese Government Sets the Tone: The Investigation Results of the Xuzhou ‘Case of Chained Mother’ Released, 17 Officials Punished,” *Radio Taiwan International*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.rti.org.tw/news/view/id/2125318>.

Global Times, commented on his personal *Weibo* account, “The Xuzhou ‘Case of Chained Mother’ is sounding an alarm that official credibility is already extremely fragile.”

## 2. Security Implications

### 2-1. “Case of Chained Mother” exposes China’s local governance problems

On the development of the “Case of Chained Mother,” the local government released a total of five investigation reports. First, on January 28, the Feng County Publicity Department said that Yang married her husband, Dong Zhimin, in 1998 and suffered from mental illness. On January 30, the Feng County Joint Investigation Team released the second report. On February 7, the CCP Committee of the Xuzhou Municipal Government Joint Investigation Team released a report confirming that Yang was originally from Yunnan, had traveled to Jiangsu for medical treatment, and was lost there. The report also stated that Yang suffered from schizophrenia and severe periodontal disease. Three days later, the Xuzhou Investigation

Group issued another notice stating that Dong Zhimin and the couple who had abducted Yang had now been subjected to compulsory criminal measures. But some netizens have compared photos on the Internet and suspect that the woman is not “Xiaohuamei” of the Lisu Tribe from Yunnan as stated by the official report, but possibly “Li Ying,” the daughter of an armed police officer serving in Tibet. On February 17, an investigation team was set up directly by the CCP Committee of the Jiangsu provincial government. The final investigation report was released on February 23, confirming the woman’s identity and announcing that three cadres, including Feng County Party Secretary Lou Hai, County Mayor Zheng Chunwei, and Publicity Minister Su Bei, had been punished. They were penalized by the reinstatement of their party positions, dismissal from their posts, and removal from office for covering up the incident and releasing false information, while 14 other officials had been “double fired.”

The “Case of Chained Mother” has again exposed China’s malfunctioning local official authority under centralized leadership. The incident took place at the beginning of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Since it was initially

investigated by the county party committee's propaganda department, it's clear that the local government did not regard the incident as a major social case but rather that "maintaining stability" and "ideological propaganda" were the main considerations. Facing the social pressure, the local government and police agencies reacted passively in a "bit-by-bit" manner and did not handle the case effectively. The authorities even detained people who went to Xuzhou to investigate the "Case of Chained Mother" and deleted the relevant postings, arousing public discontent. As said by Deng Yuwen, a scholar and longtime China observer, the case reflects that due to the "Tacitus Trap" developed in China with the long-standing bad relationship between the government and the people, trust in the government has been lost.<sup>3</sup>

## **2-2. Case reflects loss of media oversight in China**

As the incident continues to be actively discussed by the public, the "Case of Chained Mother" has gradually

risen from the local level to a nationwide concern. Compared to Chinese netizens who continued to dig up relevant information and foreign media doing the same such as *Deutsche Welle*, official Chinese media at all levels remained silent on the incident; *CCTV* only forwarded the official report from Feng County. One of the few exceptions was *Caixin Media*, which tracked the related public opinion on the Internet. Official media reporters, who used to be able to reflect public opinions to central and local cadres through channels such as reporting or internal affairs, have been deterred by self-censorship from covering topics unfavorable to local governments at will. For local governments, "speech control" is the usual measure when sensitive public incidents occur; they tend to exclude mainstream media and self-media from participating in the investigation to downplay the issues as much as possible. This bureaucratic attitude conflicts with the development of the Internet generation and could further exacerbate the social governance problem in China.

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3. "The Tragedy of the Xuzhou Mother of Eight Children Embodies a Multi-faceted China and a Faithless Government," *The News Lens*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.thenewslens.com/article/162794>.

### 3. Trend Observation

#### 3-1. CCP's "fire line" tactic is no longer working

Since the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2019, the mayor of Wuhan prioritized "political education" and "economic development" important to the central government over the alertness to public health emergencies, thus missing the best opportunity to control the epidemic. In the "Case of Chained Mother" in 2022, the local government tried to blur the focus and whitewash the situation, causing a public outcry. These incidents all reflect the governance crisis of local governments in China. The common point of similar incidents is that the local governments initially tried to cover up the truth; as the incidents developed, the handling processes "gradually escalated," and the central government eventually held the relevant local cadres accountable.

However, with the development of Chinese society, people's consciousness of their rights, the protection of women's rights, and the defense of disadvantaged groups have been further recognized. In particular, the public has long been dissatisfied with how the local

governments still protect officials when social issues involving people's lives and properties, eventually only penalizing local officials to "create a fire lane." This "central penalizes local trouble" model will continue to drain China's administrative resources and sow the seeds of distrust in public power.

#### 3-2. Can democracy sprout when "public opinion becomes the judge" ?

Since the "Case of Chained Mother" came to light, the incident has developed rapidly under the close attention of netizens, even revealing the serious problem of human trafficking and women's status in Chinese society. The development led Chinese Supreme People's Court President Zhou Qiang to talk in a meeting of the National People's Congress on March 8. He stressed that China would continue to punish crimes of trafficking women and children severely while strengthening judicial protection for abducted women and children. In addition, the case also demonstrates once again the importance of public scrutiny. Due to the local government's cover-up of the truth and the collective failure of the official media to speak out, it was only through the spontaneous concern and evidence

collection of netizens and the self-media that the officials had to comply with public opinion to reveal the truth. In the future, whether the lack of transparency in government information that forced citizens to use the Internet to collaborate would form a “public opinion scrutiny mechanism with Chinese characteristics” and how effective it may become are worthy of further observation.

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