Complex case of sex-slave accused

In a world of illusion, truth is elusive, writes Maris Beck.

Her cellmates told her she was worse than a murderer. They set gas running in the cell block's stove and heaters and melted away, sealing the doors to their rooms and leaving her to die.

Mao Ru Zhang weeps when she remembers that night in October last year, when she struggled to breathe and fell asleep by the fridge.

There have been times when she wished she had never woken.

Ms Zhang has been accused of sex slavery, a horrible crime and one notoriously hard to prove. Witnesses are often unreliable; the truth is hard to come by. Despite Commonwealth prosecutors dropping charges against her almost six months ago, she still lives with the suspicion.

The 31-year-old's clear eyes well up when she proclaims her innocence. She denies claims by two women that she forced them into prostitution and took their money as part of an international sex trafficking syndicate. She also tells the story of her life, racked by grief as she recounts her journey from a poverty-stricken rural family dispossessed by the Chinese Cultural Revolution to the prison in Melbourne's west and out again.

Ms Zhang's bridging visa expires tomorrow and she faces deportation to China, where her lawyers and migration agent say she could face 10 years' jail, or even the death penalty, if sent to trial on charges she faced here.

Federal Immigration Minister Chris Evans last week rejected Ms Zhang's final appeal for protection — a letter from her migration agent seeking ministerial intervention — saying it "was not in the public interest".

She and her lawyers are now planning a last-minute legal battle to try to keep her in Australia.

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Suspicion hangs heavy after sex-trafficking claims

The story of Mao Ru Zhang is as grim as the circumstances she now finds herself in. To Western eyes, she herself has never been far from slavery. Her life has been arduous, from her harsh childhood in rural Sichuan province, China, to the day when, with no English-language skills, she turned up at a brothel door in South Melbourne, desperate.

Speaking to The Sunday Age though a translator, she recalled how her grandparents had been landowners who were stripped of their titles during the Cultural Revolution. She remembers her grandfather telling her that when he was young, he had more food than he could eat. But she and her younger brother and sister often went hungry.

Ms Zhang says her father scavenged for food and the family survived on a diet of pickled vegetables with chilli paste. They ate rice on special occasions, such as New Year.

When she was 15, she left for the city to earn money for her family. "I still remember that morning very clearly," she said. Ms Zhang's mother, weeping, boiled her an egg, a treat usually saved for birthdays. "My dad took all his savings from his secret stash and gave it to me and it was $1.50."

Her brothers and sisters begged her to bring them home an apple. She walked two hours to the bus stop, she said, and the bus was the first motor vehicle she had ever seen.

"One of the things I remember most vividly was when I saw all those high-rise buildings . . . Lights were on all the time. I fell in love with the city."

She found a job as a dishwasher, and worked 12 to 13 hours every day and lived in a dormitory with the other girls from the restaurant. "I was very happy. I could have rice every day, I had meat," she said.

She worked tirelessly, even through the winter when her fingers were numb, swollen and bleeding. "I told myself every day that I need to keep this job so that I could send money back to my brother and sister to continue their education."

It was three years before Ms Zhang saw her family again. As promised, she took them both an apple. "They took them and showed them to their friends," she recalls. "They only started eating the apple when I told them it would actually go off."

In 2004, Ms Zhang met her husband, a Taiwanese businessman who was able to support her family and send her younger siblings to university. "The only consolation was the cash."

She lived in a bunk-filled apartment on Little Collins St with other women from the brothel — two of whom went on to accuse her of sex trafficking.

Sex slavery is hard to prove, in part because it occurs in a world built on illusion, hidden because of stigma, made for the fulfillment of fantasy. It is a world of painted women who use false names, bordellos without signs, and bosses who hide behind bosses.

Perpetrators are often victims themselves. Lawyers and investigators who try to reconcile such a world with that of judges and juries often struggle, at both ends of the bench.

Add the complex definitions of slavery and trafficking — the movement of people by deception or coercion for the purpose of exploitation,
often involving international transactions, language barriers, the desperation of poverty and differing cultural understandings of labour standards — and authorities sometimes feel they are trying to nail a mirage.

Lawyer Fiona McLeod SC, who has extensive experience dealing with sex trafficking cases, said it was “very difficult to secure convictions for slavery offences in Australia”.

Ms Zhang was charged with keeping two Chinese women enslaved as sex workers, following a raid at the Candy Club brothel in Richmond in October 2010. Despite the charges being dropped, the Australian Federal Police maintain the women were victims of sex trafficking.

The pair, who cannot be identified for legal reasons, allege they were lured to Australia on the promise they could study. They told police that instead, an international syndicate including Ms Zhang had forced them into sex work and taken the money they earned.

One woman, in a police statement obtained by The Sunday Age, said Ms Zhang, who she described as having “a cunning way about her”, had explained “the steps to take when servicing a client” and had made it clear that “if the client complains about the service there will be penalties for you”.

“I came to learn that [Zhang] was responsible for monitoring, managing and controlling the girls that worked at the brothels,” she said.

The woman said she was forced to work in two licensed brothels, including 59 York Street, South Melbourne, (which is now under new management) and Regarding House in Heidelberg West. Her situation reminded her of “a very old Chinese saying, ‘to put a sheep in front of a group of tigers’. I felt like I was that sheep.”

The other woman made similar allegations: “Everyday I felt sad . . . and always suffered physical pain but I coped by being obedient and cooperative and trying not to think. I hoped that by being like this that one day soon they [(name deleted) and Zhang] would give me freedom.”

The case against Ms Zhang was committed to trial. But all charges — including two indictable charges of sexual servitude that were discontinued and two summary debt bondage charges — were dropped on March 26. The Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions has never explained why, saying only in a statement at the time information had emerged that meant there was “no longer a reasonable prospect of conviction”.

The CDPP declined to speak to The Sunday Age about the case. But in a letter to the Director of Public Prosecutions, Ms Zhang’s legal counsel states she believes the case was dropped because it emerged that the women had entered Taiwan previously on false passports and had prior convictions for illegal prostitution, despite telling police in their evidence against Ms Zhang that they had never performed sex work until they were forced to in

How the Zhang case unfolded

- **November 10, 2008**: Zhang comes to Australia “on holiday”. She stays when her husband returns to Taiwan, and finds work at Madam Leona’s brothel in York Street, South Melbourne.
- **September 22, 2009**: Australian Federal Police and immigration officials visit Madam Leona’s and interview the two women who would later become witnesses against Zhang. Neither tells authorities they are enslaved at this time.
- **September 5, 2010**: One of the witnesses — who has had her student visa cancelled — contacts a federal immigration officer, saying she wants to “report an agent”. Two days later she tells the Migration Review Tribunal she is a sex slave.
- **October 26, 2010**: Federal authorities raid the Candy Club brothel in Richmond, where Zhang is detained for immigration violations.
- **October 31, 2010**: Both witnesses sign their first statements to police.
- **November 1, 2010**: Both witnesses sign their first statements to police.
- **October 31 — November 1, 2010**: Both witnesses sign their first statements to police.
- **November 2010**: Zhang is charged with sexual servitude offences. She pleads not guilty and is later committed to trial.
- **March 26, 2012**: Commonwealth prosecutors drop all charges.
- **August 13, 2012**: Zhang’s visa expires.
Australia. Their credibility as witnesses, in short, was compromised.

Ms Zhang denies the women's accusations, and claims they invented their stories after being refused refugee protection in order to get protection visas to stay in Australia and work in Sydney massage parlours.

None of the other alleged syndicate members have ever been charged in Australia with slavery.

It would appear that as court witnesses the two victims were not reliable. But is there any truth to be found at the centre of these allegations?

One answer may be found in a letter written by Ms Zhang's migration agent, Marzena Siedlecka, on April 26, 2012, pleading with the government to halt Ms Zhang's deportation.

She quoted evidence of a Hong Kong University associate professor, Fu Hua Ling, which was considered in a British tribunal decision, explaining that Chinese double jeopardy laws “are intended to avoid a situation in which a foreign court treats a Chinese offender with undue lenience . . . The Chinese [authorities] may re-prosecute the offender for the same offence to compensate for the undue lenience.”

She quoted the Chinese legal definition of trafficking before writing: “It is clear that the charges — as they are laid against Ms Zhang — could be seen to satisfy the above, and to make out the offences in Chinese law. It is our submission that these sorts of charges . . . are just the sorts of charges that are likely to attract the attention of the Chinese justice system for ‘re-trial’.”

Another may be found in the ruling of a Taiwanese court, which the Taiwanese government said had sentenced two people to prison over involvement in the syndicate Ms Zhang is alleged to have links with.

AFP Commander Chris McDevitt, who headed the investigation into Ms Zhang, said the women who accused her were sex trafficking victims. “They were and remain in the AFP’s view victims of human trafficking. From our view that is indisputable,” he said.

Commander McDevitt said legitimate victims of trafficking often lied to police because they distrusted authorities and were afraid of perceptions in their home countries, where prostitution was often illegal.

“Many of the victims realise that they will be undertaking sex work in Australia,” he said. But when they arrived here, they are “abused” and put into debt bondage, which is illegal.

He said the women in the Zhang case continued to receive assistance from the federal government’s victims of trafficking support program.

If investigators received any further information about the case, they would do “anything possible to get the offenders and disrupt their business”.

“How people can denigrate another human to that level is just beyond me.”

With PETER CAI

Despite prosecutors dropping sex trafficking charges against Mao Fu Zhang, she still faces suspicion. Below: The Candy Club brothel in Richmond.

PICTURES ANGELA WYLIE MAL FMK:1_01E3H
Assistance for single parents

States and territories across the country will receive an additional $20 million from the federal government to provide training for single and teenage parents to help them join the workforce.

The Minister for Skills, Chris Evans, says the funding will give single and teenage parents on income support access to vocational training from certificate II to advanced diploma.

“The training will give eligible single and teenage parents the skills and job readiness they need to participate in the modern workforce,’ he says.

Parents will have the opportunity to discuss training options with their Job Services Australia or Disability Employment Services provider, or the Department of Human Services. Where training is the agreed pathway, eligible parents may be referred to appropriate training courses that, as far as possible, fit with their parenting responsibilities.

Those affected by changes to the Parenting Payment will be able to access the existing range of services available, ensuring they have support to go back into work.

This includes access to employment services, funding for professional career advisory services, and a more generous income test for single principal carer parents from January 1 next year.

STEPHEN LACEY