
FURTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT CHILD SLAVERY IN CHINA'S KILNS

By Liu Xiaobo

Liu Xiaobo examines the issue of child slavery in the black kiln scandal, criticizing the Chinese authorities' ability to maintain monopolies. He laments, "A ruling clique that makes maintenance of its own monopoly on power its first priority cannot treasure the lives of its people, including those of its children."

It has been nearly two months since the shocking news of the "black kilns" run on slave labor in Shanxi came to light. But consider the storm of public opinion at home and abroad demanding greater accountability; or the numerous instructions, the staff, the apologies, and the tens of thousands of police who blanketed the site in their investigations; and especially the Shanxi authorities' urgent command that all slaves be rescued within ten days. By comparison, the way the case has ended all seems a bit too mechanical. The phenomenon of slave labor kilns, widespread for over a decade, has now been reduced to a single black kiln in Caosheng Village, Guangshengsi Town, Hongdong County. Very few perpetrators have been prosecuted and the charges have been reduced to three: illegal detention, forced labor, and malicious injury. The charges of illegal child labor, abduction, kidnapping, and child abuse have vanished. The court's decision was to sentence kiln supervisor Zhao Yanbing to death and to sentence labor contractor Heng Tinghan, from Henan, to life imprisonment. Other defendants were sentenced to terms ranging from nine years to 18 months.

The contrast between the reaction to the case and the way it has ended is most glaring in the various punishments meted out to involved officials. On July 16, the authorities announced that numerous cases of malfeasance by officials were being investigated. Ninety-five Party cadres and public officials were to be subject to Party disciplinary action. The number is considerable,

but the quantity masked the poor quality. All those disciplined were low-level local officials; the highest-ranking were from Hongdong County: County Party Secretary Gao Hongyuan received a serious warning, Deputy County Party Secretary and County Head Sun Yanlin was removed from office, and Deputy County Head Wang Zhengjun received a serious warning and administrative dismissal.

Such minor penalties for such major crimes hardly seem acceptable. It is an act of greater injustice to the victims, contempt for popular public opinion, and a travesty of justice. Yet, no matter how loudly the Hu-Wen central government proclaims "putting people first," and no matter how sincere the review and apology of the Shanxi governor appears to be, it all falls short. None of it serves to truly eradicate the system that produced slave labor on a large scale, nor can they rescue the Communist regime from the bankruptcy of its political integrity and authority. In other words, no attempt by the authorities to deal with the case of the black slave kilns will stand up to further interrogation.

Question No.1: *Why was the official effort to rescue child laborers so ineffectual?*

On June 5, a "blood-and-tears"¹ appeal was posted on the Internet on behalf of 400 fathers. "The child abuse incident in Hongdong has caused a sensation, but this is only the tip of the iceberg; more than a thousand lives are at risk . . . save our children!" Two weeks later, the majority of these fathers had still not recovered their children. On June 20, the fathers again posted an appeal online, saying in an open letter that though over 100 children had been rescued through family efforts, most of them were not from Henan. Many children still had not been found or may have been moved. They appealed

for a continued increase in rescue efforts and proposed that the search be enlarged to a nationwide scope.

At the same time, public opinion continued to clamor for government accountability. For example, a June 27 editorial in the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, headlined “Is it possible to rescue everyone without exception?” and asked, “Is it possible to leave evil no quarter, to rescue every victim? If all we have to rely on are high-sounding words from Shanxi officials, the rescue will fail. Right now, the government has to examine itself more thoroughly, society must cooperate more sincerely, and citizens must come to a deeper awareness, before actions to rescue illegal slave laborers can be completely successful, and every victim rescued. That is the only way to thoroughly eradicate an environment in which slave labor flourishes. This is more urgent and concrete than political posturing.”

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As I complete this article, no new progress has been made in the rescue of the child slaves. The number of child slaves disclosed in the mainland media was only one hundred or so, just ten percent of the over one thousand missing children. This shows that for all its advantages and its enormous resources, the government comes off badly in this test of strength against the triads.

Given the blanket investigation by tens of thousands of police, the results of the rescue operation are shockingly pathetic. Does this mean criminals are out of control? Or does it mean the government is incompetent? One can only answer: The latter.

We know that our authoritarian government has a monopoly on major social resources, yet its performance serves up a difficult paradox: to stabilize its power and to gain special rights and privileges, it suppresses civil rights, monitors dissent, controls the media, and

involves itself in corruption and embezzling public property. In these endeavors, the government and its officials are not only competent, they are experts and will stop at nothing! Numerous police cars and police can be mobilized to keep a single dissident under observation. Yet in serving the people, in providing social justice, improving social welfare and righting wrongs, the government and its officials are not only incompetent, they are completely and hopelessly inept. In fact, the government has long been aware of the widespread practice of child slavery.

Question No. 2: *Why are Chinese officials so thick-skinned and cold-blooded?*

On the instructions of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, the Hongdong County government sent 11 working groups to 12 provinces and cities to personally deliver letters of apology, wages, and condolences into the hands of the rescued farm laborers. The Party Discipline Commission also intervened in the investigation of misconduct by officials involved in the incident. On June 20, Premier Wen Jiabao presided at a meeting of the State Council at which Shanxi provincial governor Yu Youjun presented a review of the case on behalf of the Shanxi provincial government. On the 22nd, the State Labor Protection Department, the Ministry of Public Security, and the All-China Federation of Trade Unions Joint Working Group held a press briefing in Taiyuan at which Yu Youjun apologized to the farm-laborer victims in the black kiln incident and their families on behalf of the provincial government, and made a self-criticism to the people of the province.

On June 28, NPC deputy Wang Quanjie, from Shandong, sent a letter to Shanxi governor Yu Youjun, “An appeal for the resignation of the Minister of the Shanxi Provincial Office of Labor and Social Security.” In his letter, Wang Quanjie pointed out:

The recent Shanxi black kiln affair has shaken the whole country . . . and has been universally condemned. Shanxi governor Yu Youjun presented a review of provincial authorities’ behavior before the State Council, apologized to the victims, and made a self-criticism to the people of Shanxi. But those at the vortex of the affair, those who directly supervise



A boy from Yunnan, after being rescued at a brick kiln at Liuwu Village in Yuncheng, in China's Shanxi Province Friday, June 15, 2007. Photo credits: AP.

labor and employment, the officials of the Shanxi Provincial Office of Labor and Social Security, remain in place. Not a single person has come forward to take responsibility, not one has apologized to the people. Only a few courageous labor supervision departments and public security departments have come forward. People want to know: Does the labor supervision department bear no responsibility when something this big happens? . . . Can the head of the Shanxi Provincial Office of Labor and Social Security lead provincial rescue efforts with a clear conscience? Article 82 of the PRC Law on Civil Servants clearly provides that “[l]eading members who make serious mistakes in their work, or are in dereliction of duty, causing major losses or adverse social impact, or who bear major leadership responsibility for accidents, should take the blame and resign from leadership positions.” This term, “resign,” is a great step forward for the legal community. Only when negligent officials are made to

resign will officials have the confidence of the people. . . . When serious accidents occur on a government official’s watch, that official should resign. This is conventional political behavior. It shows sincere respect for the duties of office, a fear of public opinion and voluntary acceptance of public supervision. It is a manifestation of the human shame reflex. But there are officials who withstand public censure through an application of the principles of “the thick and the black,”² clinging to their respected official posts. These officials not only have no fear of public opinion, they have no shame. . . . Finally, I again solemnly appeal to the Minister of the Shanxi Provincial Office of Labor and Social Security, who bears inescapable responsibility in the black kiln incident, to face public complaints from across the country and have the courage to accept responsibility. He should see that the time has come and bow to the will of the people. Let him resolutely resign and act the part of an upright official by apologizing to the citizenry!

In spite of the public outcry and demands for the resignation of high Shanxi officials, there have been no provincial-level or bureau-level resignations to date. Why? Why doesn’t the central government call for accountability from these provincial officials? Why do the media focus attention on the black kilns of Shanxi while turning a blind eye to the authorities in Henan, where most of the missing children are from? In these circumstances, the Shanxi governor’s self-criticism and apology amounts to little more than a meaningless performance.

In Shanxi, it is the county- and town-level officials who have been punished, while the Party and government organs and officials in the Linfen District have simply been ordered to undergo inspection. According to a July 16 report on chinanews.com, the Shanxi provincial Party committee had instructed the Party committees of Linfen City and Yuncheng City to undertake a thorough inspection, while the provincial government had instructed the governments of Linfen City and Yuncheng City, the Provincial Office of Labor and Social Security, the Provincial Ministry of Land and Resources, and the Provincial Industry and Commerce Bureau to submit thorough reviews to the provincial

government. The leading official in each city and in the cadre system made reports to the assembly.

The truth, however, is that those who should apologize and resign are in no way limited to Shanxi. High officials in Henan should also come forward to accept responsibility. If we examine the chain of events in this case, it is clear that criminal activity in Henan has been no less important than that in Shanxi. Among the missing minors mentioned in the appeal letter issued by the 400 fathers, over two-thirds are from Henan. That so many children should be missing for so long in Henan illustrates the extent of human trafficking there, such that it has become one of the primary sources for slave labor. Clearly, when so many fathers have failed to find their children after an extended search, the public security organs in Henan are concealing the facts. This is an extremely serious instance of misconduct and the public security organs in Henan should admit their responsibility. At the very least, Henan governor Xu Guangchun should do as Shanxi governor Yu Youjun has done, and make a public apology to the victims and their families.

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What makes Communist Party officials at all levels so cold-blooded and irresponsible is the privatization of public authority under the Chinese Communist system and its monopoly on official appointments. The Communist Party ensures its one-party dictatorship and its privileged class of vested interests through firm control of the appointment and removal of officials at all levels. It is thus taking power out of the hands of the people, and using it as a private tool of the Party. As a result, officials are produced at every level, not from the bottom up through a mandate of the people, but rather from the top down. Such a mechanism for filling official posts means that officials work towards self-gain, rather than in the best interests of the people. For example, in an interview with *Southern Weekend*,

Shanxi provincial governor Yu Youjun deflected responsibility onto the central government. He said, “The central government sent me to Shanxi, charging me with a heavy responsibility. The NPC selected me as the provincial governor. Expectations were high; I had to defend the territory, to share the central government’s burdens, and relieve the people’s woes.”³

It is not just the provincial-level officials who have not resigned. Not one of the leading officials of Hongdong County and Linfen City who bear direct responsibility in the black kiln case has yet resigned. For a long time, the public security organs in Shanxi and Henan did nothing about the reports of missing children. Yet no high police officials in that province have publicly acknowledged misconduct. A judicial system that is a tool of dictatorial party power will inevitably create a situation in which the law can be enforced against ordinary citizens, but in which nothing is done to address official collusion.

Question No. 3: *Why, when black kiln slave labor has existed for so long on such a large scale, is it only now coming to light?*

In a civilized country, the discovery of child slavery would be headline news tracked by all major media outlets—even if it involved only a few people. But in China, when the Shanxi case came to light, sending shockwaves around the world, headlines in the mainland media remained firmly occupied by the comings and goings of CPC leaders. Positive news and promoting the government is still the core of Chinese news reporting. The responsibility for this situation lies firmly at the door of the CPC Central Propaganda Department, the Press and Publication Administration, and other authorities. They are like ideological watchdogs set at the government’s gate to monitor the media, forcing it to act as the Party’s mouthpiece, depriving the public of its right to know and the press of its freedom.

As a result, China has no freedom of the press or freedom of expression. There are longstanding restrictions on the media which long ago became an official tool for keeping the people ignorant. The flow of information is strictly controlled, keeping information concealed from the public, and often leading to major crises. Furthermore,

when a great public catastrophe is exposed, the CPC manipulates the media to turn villains into benefactors, bad government into good government, and misdeeds into achievements. It uses this sort of prominent press coverage in its attempt to repair the shattered Hu-Wen image. So when the shocking Shanxi “child slavery” case was exposed, coverage of the child slaves’ experiences and whereabouts gave way in the media to reportage on the reaction of Hu, Wen and other high officials. The parents’ search for their children was replaced by the rescue activities rolled out by the local government. As a result, the government monopoly of the media once again fulfilled its magical function: its reports of the words and deeds of officials high and low were given pride of place, and the words and deeds of the victims, for the most part, were only available on the Internet.

Question No. 4: *To this day, why has there been no effective control and containment?*

These issues in China’s black economy—its abuse of workers, large-scale use of child labor, and trafficking in children—have existed for a long time. Such shocking cases as these are not uncommon. Yet it is precisely because unlawful and criminal behavior like the use of illegal workers and child slaves were not brought to a prompt halt long ago that such activities have developed on a vast scale. Behind enterprises of all sizes that use criminal means to enrich themselves there are vested interest groups, local government, and officials who act as “protective umbrellas” for criminal elements. These authorities gloss over their actions with high-sounding rhetoric, calling it “developing the local economy” and “ensuring peace.” Chinese society has thus become one where there is a nexus of officials and criminals: criminal forces have official authority and official authority acts criminally. For example, the majority of rich and powerful criminals all have NPC or CCC titles; official power draws on criminal power to keep things in order.

True, this official-criminal nexus means that the illegal kiln boss and the local official should bear responsibility. The central government, however, has no effective means of dealing with this rampant collusion between officials and criminals, or with protectionism at the local level. These outrages have been allowed to go on for so long that whether the reason for it is an objective

“cannot” or the subjective “will not,” the result is the same: connivance between officials and criminals at the local level. And this leads one to wonder whether this may not also be happening at the highest policy-making levels of the central government.

Question No. 5: *By what standard can a Party congress that is indifferent to these social ills call itself a public institution?*

The highest authority in China lies with the NPC and its representatives. The law clearly provides that the NPC has the responsibility to oversee every government department. However, setting aside the tiny number of representatives who act according to conscience, why was there such widespread indifference toward this vile malfeasance at the local government level? According to recent media reports, there was one NPC deputy from Hunan who struggled with the illegal kilns over a period of nine years, but his NPC body and the other deputies never got involved. How does a Party congress like this call itself a public institution? Does such a Party congress still have the nerve to claim it represents the people?

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Under the Chinese system, the lack of supervision from the NPC has been a longstanding issue, on a par with the longstanding abuse of power by the government. This is because the NPC and the government have their source in the same party dictatorship; both give priority to serving that party dictatorship. For example, farmers make up the largest segment of the population, at 80 percent. Yet within the People’s Congress System, they are the most vulnerable, receiving only a quarter as much representation as urban residents, who make up the remaining 20 percent. But the people in general have no genuine representation under the system of People’s Congresses: the Standing Committee of the Politburo is the chair of the NPC, local Party heads serve as directors of the people’s congresses at all levels, and members of the ruling

Party and government officials at all levels account for upwards of 70 percent of deputies in the NPC.

When the Party bestows authority to the NPC, it is reduced to being a rubber stamp for Party power. When officials and NPC deputies are one and the same, there is no separation between the right to govern and the power to supervise. Systematic oversight does not exist. If officials are People's congress deputies, how is it possible for them to supervise Party and administrative power? How can they supervise power that is in their own hands? Haven't you noticed that the father of kiln boss Wang Binbin of Caosheng Village, Guangshengsi Town, Hong Dong County, Linfen City, Shanxi, is Wang Dongyi, an archetypical "official-deputy unit" at its most basic level? He is the secretary of the village Party branch; at the same time, he is a two-term deputy in the Hongdong County People's Congress.

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Question No. 6: *Why, since Hu and Wen came to power, have there been repeated catastrophes that evolved into major public crises and international sensations?*

Each of these crises should have been nipped in the bud. Some examples include the SARS crisis in 2003, the Songhua River water crisis in 2005, and the series of public safety crises arising in 2006 that involved toxic food products and fake medicines.

The main reason lies in concealment and inaction by an authoritarian central government. If not for the fact that the Internet cannot be totally blocked, and that there are people of conscience exposing the truth of these crises and thus forcing a response from the Hu-Wen government, the consequences would be disastrous. In this sense, the Internet is truly God's gift to the Chinese people for defending their rights.

Specific to the black kiln child slavery case, the Hu-Wen

central government cannot slough off onto local government responsibility for mistakes made, for wasn't that local government appointed by the central government? They cannot even excuse themselves on grounds that information was "concealed" or "not received."

As early as March 8 this year, Yang Aizhi, a resident of Zhengzhou in Henan Province, began to look for her child, Wang Xinlei, who is not yet sixteen years old. At the end of March, Yang Aizhi and another parent from Meng County, Henan, whose child was also missing, went to Henan together to search for their children. They went to over a hundred kilns, but did not find them. In early April, with five other parents of missing children, Yang went again to search in Shanxi, but still with no success.

On May 9, Henan TV Metro Channel reporter Fu Zhenzhong and the parents rushed to Shanxi, where the reporter secretly filmed the tragic scene at the black kiln and recorded a television report headlined, "Crimes too numerous to record; Tragedy beyond comparison." When the report was televised, over 1,000 parents responded. On June 5, a posting appeared on Henan's online River Forum with the subject line: "The vile way of criminals! A 'blood-and-tears' appeal by 400 fathers whose children were sold to Shanxi kilns." On June 11, Yang Aizhi sent an urgent appeal to Premier Wen Jiabao, a mother's tearful appeal.

Then the media began to focus on the black kiln slavery incident. Over three months were wasted between March 8 and June 15 when Hu, Wen, and other top officials finally issued instructions. During all this time, searches by parents, exposure on Henan TV, and an Internet appeal for assistance by 400 fathers, failed to get the attention of the central government.

It is especially galling that as early as 1998, nine years ago, Chen Jianjiao, the chairman of Xinguan Town, Shimeng County, Hunan Province, and deputy of the Provincial People's Congress, had been struggling against black kilns in Shanxi, Hebei, and other provinces, and had rescued hundreds of trapped workers, many of them children. Eventually, on September 8, 2006, out of a sense of powerlessness that came after battling alone for a long time, Chen wrote directly to Premier Wen Jiabao. In

order to solve the overall problem of black kiln slave labor, he proposed a nationwide cleanup of “black kilns,” and a comprehensive rescue effort.

However, the deputy’s letter sank like a stone. There was no response from Wen Jiabao or from any relevant department of the central government. Imagine if Wen Jiabao had responded to Chen Jianjiao’s letter with alacrity, brought the black kilns under control, rescued the slave laborers, attacked criminal kiln bosses and investigated officials guilty of misconduct. Things would have been resolved at least six months earlier. Having treated a letter from a Provincial People’s Congress deputy in this manner, shouldn’t the Hu-Wen central government have come out to apologize to the victims when the case broke? If the central government treats a deputy of a Provincial People’s Congress so rudely, how will it treat an ordinary citizen who has no power?

The Hu-Wen duo’s favorite act since coming to power has been “putting people first.” They repeal custody and repatriation regulations, they change the policy toward SARS, they write human rights into the constitution, give relief from agricultural taxes. They travel the countryside, helping migrant workers negotiate for wages, selling peaches for farmers, spending the eve of the Spring Festival down a mineshaft, wearing old sports shoes, crying over people’s grievances any number of times. . . . Through a media monopoly that carries news of their doings every day of every month, Hu and Wen have created an image of “putting people first.” However, their closeness to the people is a matter of superficial expression, for TV appearances. The coldness is in the bone, in the secret deals by which decisions are made. They are, after all, the leaders of the current oligarchic authoritarian clique and they must maintain their authoritarian power and the primacy of the vested interested groups formed by special privilege. It is impossible for them to give priority to mainstream public opinion, grievances of the people, or the interests of society. They make highlighting government achievements and displaying a bright and positive image the media’s primary task. It would be impossible for them to allow the media to examine their feet of clay. Disclosure of this “black kiln child slave” crime has once again punched holes in their promises of accountability and the myth that they put people first.

It is not a lack of humanity on the part of individual officials that makes the Hu-Wen regime so cold-blooded, but the brutality of the authoritarian system itself. An authoritarian system will never learn to respect life and protect human rights. A ruling clique that makes maintenance of its own monopoly on power its first priority cannot treasure the lives of its people, including those of its children. It is precisely because an authoritarian system does not treat people as human beings that such heinous crimes take place.

In short, authoritarian power is as cold as ice. All eyes are on the prize of obtaining an official position; they cannot allow themselves to feel. Throughout the years since they came to power, Communist dictators have demonstrated that they care only about their own power; human life does not matter. Without systemic change, evils like the black kilns will hardly be affected, let alone rooted out.

July 16, 2007, at home in Beijing

Translated by J. Latourelle

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Notes

1. The appeal letter (Chinese only) is available online at: <http://news.qq.com/a/20070608/002356.htm>. To learn more about what you can do on this case, visit HRIC’s website: Human Rights in China, “HRIC Action Bulletin: Shanxi Slave Labor Case,” June 28, 2007, <http://www.hrichina.org/public/contents/category?cid=44161>.
2. “Thick-faced (shameless) and “black-hearted” (cruel), two qualities claimed by Li Zongwu (1917-1989) in his book (*Hou Hei Xue*) to be the keys to success throughout Chinese history.
3. “Frank Remarks from Yu Youjun about the Black Kiln Incident,” *Southern Weekend*, July 5, 2007.