

The root of slave labour in China

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Another shocking news story broke in China in June 2007. It was discovered that in Hongtong county, Shanxi province, people kidnapped from rural areas were being forced to work as slaves in a brick kiln. Horrifying television footage showed them after their chance rescue - they were filthy and emaciated, with their clothes in tatters and blank expressions [1] on their faces. It was impossible not to think of the images of holocaust survivors rescued from concentration camps at the end of the Second World War.

Similar scenes occurred over the following days. After an instruction from "senior leaders in the central government" an inspection team was sent to the area. It was only at this point that local officials seemed to wake up and stir into action, beginning with a large scale investigation and rescue operation. By 22 June, several hundred "slave workers" had been rescued. Of the 3,347 Shanxi brick kilns investigated, 2,036 were operating without the proper licenses or tax registration. A total of 53,036 people were being illegally employed [2]. The investigation uncovered cases of people being kidnapped, of restriction of personal freedom, of forced labour, use of child labour, and abuse and even murder of workers.

Once over the initial shock, one begins to ask how such things could happen [3], and who should be held responsible.

A nationwide alert

The Chinese public is shaken by these events [5] because it is the first time they have seen this kind of report in the media. Those who work in the media, however, are not surprised. In 1999, a colleague at China Central Television (CCTV [6]) showed me a documentary secretly filmed by a CCTV journalist. It showed police outside Guangzhou train station stopping anyone with the appearance of a rural worker. Those who did not have a Guangzhou temporary-residence permit were immediately detained. Once at the detention centre, those with friends or relatives in Guangzhou who could confirm their identity could be released after paying a fine of 1,500 *renminbi* (£100). However, most of the migrant workers coming into Guangzhou had no such contacts.

These unfortunate people were taken to Zhuzhou in Hunan province. Outside Zhuzhou train station, the detained people could be bought by farms for 50 *renminbi* (£3.30) each. They were then forced to work for nothing on the farms. The journalist went to one of these farms, where he asked a 14-year-old boy how long he had been there. The answer was six months. The

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Also by Li Datong in **openDemocracy**:

"The story of *Freezing Point*" [4]
(12 September 2006)

"China: a 'great nation'?" [4]
(10 January 2007)

"China's contradictory signals" [4]
(24 January 2007)

journalist then asked the supervisor, who was carrying a large stick, who the workers were. The supervisor unashamedly boasted that they were "slaves". After copying down the ID card number of one of the workers from the farm's records, the journalist went back to the detention centre in Guangzhou to try to trace the worker. He was told "no such person has ever been detained here". This migrant worker had apparently left his home, arrived in Guangzhou, and then disappeared into thin air.

The documentary was too sensitive to be broadcast, as it revealed the existence of a system of slavery within China. It was marked "for internal reference" and sent to the central leadership. Afterwards, I often asked my CCTV colleague whether or not he had heard anything more about his film, and was shocked to hear he had received no feedback at all.

When I heard about the Shanxi slave-labour case, I immediately thought to myself that powerful people with no accountability must be behind the horror. Further investigations by the media [7] revealed that the existence of these kilns was no secret. Local-government departments simply fined the kiln owners, and once the fines had been paid, the kilns were left alone. This is, in effect, no different to protection money paid to the mafia. We can be certain that this forced labour and illegal deprivation of personal freedom is not confined to Shanxi, but exists throughout the country. The central government is well aware [8] of this, and has begun a nationwide investigation.

The chain of responsibility

But the main question here is: what would have happened without direct intervention from the central government? To begin with, the Shanxi provincial government euphemistically described this serious criminal case as "infringement of the legal rights of migrant workers". So far, only two labour-bureau officials from Yongji district of Shanxi province have been arrested [9], but no county-level officials punished.

These events prove that grassroots local government in China has, to a certain extent, become "mafia-ised". Public authority has become a weapon which officials can use to extract personal advantage. At the same time as the Shanxi slave-labour case, the Tangshan mafia case [10] came to light. The case centred on Yang Shukuan, a businessman and member of the Tangshan municipal people's political consultative conference. It was discovered that he owned several military vehicles including armoured cars, thirty-eight guns of various kinds, over 10,000 rounds of ammunition, and police tear-gas canisters. For years, he had used this arsenal to cheat other people out of 800 million *yuan* (£52.5 million) worth of property. Without the support of local officials, how could he have got away with all this? Many local authorities are utterly without conscience or a sense of honour.

The central government is conscious of the situation, and does not want to see such events, which seriously threaten its moral authority, taking place. This is why it has demanded that local governments "improve and strengthen their ability to govern". But it is evident that without any "improvement and strengthening" of democratic accountability, and especially of the supervision provided by a free press [11], governments will go astray. Chinese government at all levels is increasingly relying on police violence to suppress demonstrations by discontented people. Apart from violence and intimidation, nothing else seems to be being "strengthened".

If political reform is delayed even further, more serious political crises will emerge. The core aspect of reform is passing some of the power to society. Unaccountable power has led to corruption [12] as high up as the politburo, and modern-day slavery at the bottom of society. No part of the political system is clean. No surgeon would be arrogant enough to perform surgery

on himself, and the party should be the same. The diseases of the system can only be cured by reform of the system. Delaying the treatment can lead only to death.

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