2007

In the spring of 2007, parents whose children had recently gone missing alerted the Chinese media to the existence of a vast archipelago of 'black brick kilns' in Shanxi Province. The owners of these sites, abetted by local powerholders, took advantage of a docile workforce of teenagers who had been violently abducted or tricked, adults with mental problems, and children. As groups of parents searched the countryside in the hope of finding their offspring and new and traditional media competed with one another to cover the story in the most minute detail, the Chinese public was shocked to learn of the widespread existence of slavery in China in the twenty-first century and mobilised to put pressure on the authorities. This essay looks back to those months of popular mobilisation and their aftermath.

Slaving Away: The 'Black Brick Kilns Incident' of 2007

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5,041 days, 5,041 posts. Day after day for more than a decade, one solitary blogger has been keeping track of the time that has passed since 28 March 2007, when fifteen-year-old Yuan Xueyu disappeared from a construction site in the centre of Zhengzhou, Henan Province.[2] Every morning, this blogger—who in his 'ordinary' life is a prominent media personality in China—posts exactly the same message:

> Today it is day [x] in the search for Yuan Xueyu. Public Security Bureau of Zhengzhou, could you please tell us what progress has been made in his case? The missing workers in the black brick kilns incident in Shanxi Province remain missing. Netizens have donated 4,000 yuan as a reward for any relevant clue. The Public Security Bureau of Zhengzhou opened the case related to Yuan Xueyu's disappearance back in 2007.

Yuan Xueyu had arrived in Zhengzhou a couple of weeks before his disappearance to be an apprentice to a fellow villager—a worker specialising in setting up window frames. Like many of his childhood friends, he had been unable to resist the call of the big city that resounded in his remote rural village in China's northeast and, against the wishes of his father, had dropped out of middle school. When he heard that his son was nowhere to be found, Yuan Cheng did not waste any time. He immediately went to Zhengzhou and took up a job on the same construction site. He posted leaflets everywhere with a photo of his son and his contact details, but the only result was that strangers started to call him pretending to know the boy. Saying that his son had been in an accident, they asked him to wire them money and then disappeared. It was only after encountering other parents whose children had disappeared in similar circumstances that Yuan Cheng finally found some hope. Listening to their stories, he realised there was a good chance that his son had been kidnapped and sold into slavery to labour in a brick kiln deep in the countryside. The prospects were still dim, but at least now he had a vague idea of where to look.

In the spring and summer of 2007, bands of aggrieved parents roaming the Chinese countryside looking for their missing children made for one of the most remarkable stories of popular mobilisation and resistance in contemporary China—the so-called black brick kilns incident (黑砖窑事件). Widely reported by the Chinese media, it was a saga of unendurable pain and unprecedented camaraderie—of friendship as well as betrayal.

A Mother's Determination

The chain of events that led to the media exposure of the scandal began in March 2007 with Yang Aizhi, a woman whose adolescent son had just gone missing in Zhengzhou.[3] Desperate, she began posting leaflets everywhere, just as Yuan Cheng would do a few weeks later. However, she had a bit more luck: instead of being conned, another parent reached out to her to share the news that his two sons had just escaped from slavery at a kiln in Shanxi Province. Convinced that her son must be in a similar place, Yang immediately travelled to the area. There, she visited no less than 100 kilns, finding many young slaves, some still wearing school uniforms. After returning to Henan, she went through the missing persons announcements published in the local newspaper and eventually got in touch with five other parents in the same situation. Together, they established what the Chinese media later would call the 'League to Search for Children' (寻子联盟). In just a few months, they managed to rescue more than forty children from slavery in the kilns.

Realising the task was beyond their strength, they decided to seek help from the media. As it turned out, their stories were so outlandish that only one journalist from a local TV station in Henan, Fu Zhenzhong, agreed to accompany them in their search. He did not know it then, but he had made the right choice. On the evening of 19 May 2007, when footage Fu shot with a hidden camera of young boys wearing rags and engaged in heavy labour in kilns in Shanxi was aired on television, there was an uproar. As Fu later recalled, in the three days after the program aired, about 1,000 parents went to the TV station looking for help.[4] Seeing those images on television, parents who until that moment had had no clue about the whereabouts of their children discovered the existence of the kilns and realised that they were not alone in their plight. From that moment, it did not take them long to get together to start organising themselves into small teams to scour the Shanxi countryside.

Then, on 6 June, the aunt of a child recently rescued by the league chose to express her gratitude in a tearful post on a local web portal in Henan.[5] This post quickly went viral, finally attracting the attention of the national media. The following day, local media in Shanxi exposed a tragic story of slavery and murder at a kiln in Caosheng Village, Hongdong County, further fuelling public outrage.[6] From then, 'black brick kilns' became a household term across the whole country.

The Hidden Rules of the Kilns

For the whole summer of 2007, Chinese media offered impressive coverage of the scandal. It was revealed that the slaves in the kilns included not only teenagers who had been violently abducted or deceived with promises of a well-paid job, but also adults with mental problems and children—a docile workforce that never raised any demands. Among the lesser-known survival stories was that of Hao Dingpo, a fifteen-year-old boy who had spent two and a half years in the kilns after being kidnapped from Zhengzhou in March 2005. According to his mother, when he finally managed to escape in the summer of 2007, Hao had waist-length hair and a number on his wrist.[7] He told me that names were never used in the kiln, only numbers.[8] They had a daily production quota of 10,000 bricks and, when they were not able to fulfil it, they were savagely beaten. When one fugitive was caught attempting to escape, he was beaten to death by the guards and his body was left in the open to rot as a warning to others. Hao Dingpo claimed to have seen six people die this way, but there was no way to verify his claim as he was unable to indicate the exact location of the kiln.

Such dramatic circumstances took their toll not only on the bodies of those enslaved, but also on their mental health. When I met Zhang Shanlin in May 2008, one year after the police had rescued his son from a kiln, he expressed concern about his child's psychological health. Once lively and cheerful, the teenager had now lost all interest in everything, including his dream of becoming a chef. He refused to leave his house and avoided any human contact. He felt ashamed about what had happened to him and had recurring nightmares almost every night about his life at the kiln from which he would wake screaming.

Drawing on the testimonies of the survivors, the media was relentless in exposing and excoriating the power dynamics behind the kilns. It was evident that the kilns could exist only because many people benefited

from them. A report about the infamous kiln in Caosheng Village that appeared in the *Southern City Metropolitan Weekly* (南都周刊) quoted a former slave as saying that life at the kiln 'was like the food chain in the animal realm … This chain had six rings: the owner of the kiln, the contractor in charge of the workers [包工头], the guards, the older workers, the new workers, the mentally disabled'.[9] While the owners were invariably local, the contractors generally came from elsewhere—usually the place where they found their victims. The situation of the guards was more problematic. According to various accounts, it appears that in many kilns it was customary to promote slaves to become guards as a reward for their loyalty.[10] The case of Liu Dongsheng, a boy from Guizhou Province, is emblematic. Sold for the first time along with his mother to an unmarried man in a village in Henan when he was eleven, Liu ended up at the kiln in Caosheng Village as a slave before he had even turned eighteen. Distinguishing himself for his readiness to expose his companions' escape plans, he was soon promoted to guard and put in charge of supervising and beating the other prisoners.[11] In a trial that took place in 2007, Liu was sentenced to two years in prison on the charge of 'illegal imprisonment' (非法拘禁罪), exactly as any other guard from the kiln.[12]

The relationship between the kilns and their surrounding community was also very important. Although many accounts described the geographical seclusion of these sites, the kilns did not exist in a void. The reason local residents accepted them is because of the economic advantages they provided—stimulating local development, creating new opportunities to get rich, and eventually resulting in an enlargement of arable land, as Wang Dongji, former Party secretary of Caosheng Village and father of the owner of the notorious kiln, candidly admitted.[13] His son had taken advantage of his connections to sell bricks at special prices for public works at the local school and in the village government seat.[14] Although this arrangement caused a degree of resentment among the villagers, it nevertheless benefited the whole community—at least so the disgraced official claimed.

Support from the local community was also one of the reasons escaping from the kilns was so difficult. Since local workers were too expensive and too well protected by their families and networks to be exploitable, slaves were inevitably 'outsiders' (外地人). Sometimes local people even helped supply the kilns with the workforce they needed. This is what happened to Shen Haijun, a thirty-eight-year-old man from Jiangsu Province, who ended up as a slave in the kiln in Caosheng Village while looking for his

mother, a widow in her sixties who had been sold as a wife to an old bachelor in Shanxi by a relative.[15] Shen told journalists that, once he had arrived in the village where his mother had been sold, he had asked an elderly woman for directions. Under the pretence of helping him find a job, she sold him to Wang Dongji's son.

The higher echelons of the provincial government were also implicated. Chinese media not only reported that the mid-level bureaucracy in Shanxi was fully aware of the existence of the kilns, but also provided evidence of the direct involvement of some officials,[16] such as in the disturbing story of Henan teenager Zhu Guanghui.[17] Rescued by the police from a kiln on 27 April 2007, he was immediately sold to another kiln by a local labour inspector, who even deducted an 'agency fee' (中介费) of 300 yuan from the backpay the boy had received on liberation. Zhu was rescued again during another police operation at the end of May. In the following days, a local TV station recorded a confrontation between him and the labour inspector who had sold him. On that very afternoon, the labour inspector would deceive the boy once again, tricking him into yet another kiln. Only on 18 June was Zhu rescued for a third time and finally managed to return home safely.

The Response of the Authorities

The Chinese public had heard of the existence of slavery in the kilns long before the events of the spring and summer of 2007. A few years earlier, Chinese media had widely reported the story of Zhang Xubo, who, after graduating from a rural middle school in 2002, had gone to Xi'an to look for a job, but was deceived by a stranger and sold as a slave to a kiln in Kaolao Township, Shanxi.[18] For three months, he had toiled for more than sixteen hours a day in cold weather and was repeatedly beaten by guards. In November, when his legs were suffering from frostbite and he had almost lost the ability to work, he begged the kiln owner to let him go. The man accepted and even offered to give Zhang a lift but abandoned him in the middle of nowhere. Unable to move, Zhang spent several days in a vacant kiln, in temperatures often below freezing, before being rescued by a local. Because of the frostbite, both his feet had to be amputated. Even though, back in 2003, this story caused a great stir on Chinese media and Premier Wen Jiabao issued instructions to launch

a thorough investigation of the matter, no large-scale police operation was launched against the kilns nor was it accompanied by an upsurge of popular fury comparable with the one that would occur in 2007.[19]

The indifference with which the local authorities treated the aggrieved parents who were looking for their missing children also did not change. Back in May 2008, Wang Xiaoli, the mother of a boy who had gone missing in 2006 in Gongyi County, Henan, told me: 'When I went to the police to report that my son was missing, they declined to even open the case. They said that such situations are too common to be taken into consideration.' At the moment of his disappearance, her seventeen-year-old son was studying for the university admission exam. He was one of the best students in his school and had a very good chance of being accepted to a top university—a remarkable achievement for a boy from a poor rural area. Yet, on 26 October 2006, he went missing without a trace; he was supposed to spend a few days at a friend's house, but never reached his destination.

The media storm triggered by the aggrieved parents in 2007 marked a momentous change in attitude by the Chinese authorities. In June 2007, the central government launched a provincial investigation into the Shanxi kilns. The numbers involved were impressive, the outcome less so. According to official data, the police checked 86,395 employers, discovering that 36,286 (42 percent) of them were operating without formal permission; 4,861 brick and tile kilns were inspected, among which 3,186 (63.3 percent) were found to be lacking registration; and, in total, workers in the kilns numbered 81,000, but only seventeen kilns were found to have severe problems.[20] Among them, thirteen were using child labour. Overall, 359 workers were rescued, including 121 mentally disabled adults and fifteen children. In the meantime, the top echelons of the Party launched a campaign to 'sweep' the ranks of the local bureaucracy, with ninety-five officials punished for malfeasance and dereliction of duty.

At the same time, the Chinese leadership did not miss the opportunity to ride the scandal to pursue its political agenda. In particular, the media coverage of the kilns was instrumental in accelerating the troubled legislative progress of the Labour Contract Law, which had been stranded due to a heated public debate about the advisability of introducing new guarantees for workers' rights when economic development still depended on low labour costs (see Gallagher's essay in the present volume). After

more than three years of top-level discussions and more than a dozen blueprints of the law, the kilns scandal was an essential catalyst that facilitated its ultimate approval, and the law was passed at the end of June, right in the middle of the media storm. As Xie Liangming, then Deputy Director of the Department of Legal Affairs of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, admitted on television, if the kilns scandal had not happened: 'I think that the debate would have continued. Since the scandal deeply moved the legislative bodies, including many committee members who felt that such situations could not be understood and that it was necessary to be more severe, the Law was pushed through.'[21]

The Kilns after the Scandal

In the following years, the kilns might not have been as brazen and widespread as before, but all signs point to their continued existence. In May 2009, Chinese media reported that, in Jieshou City, Anhui Province, the police rescued thirty-two mentally disabled workers enslaved at two different kilns.[22] According to the available accounts, these people were deceived by a human trafficker—in this case, a taxi driver, who earned 200 to 300 yuan for every person he 'introduced' to the kilns. Closely guarded by thugs who did not hesitate to resort to violence, these slaves, who ranged in age from twenty-five to forty-five, lived locked in a courtyard and were forced to work ten hours a day with no pay but a few yuan for their personal expenses. The police arrested ten people, including the contractor and the owners.

In June 2010, police in Shilin County, Yunnan Province, rescued around twenty slaves from a local kiln.[23] One of the slaves, a man from Chongqing, described to journalists the brutality of the guards, who, to make him work seventeen hours a day, would beat him with steel bars and leather belts. Similarly, in December 2010, a story of the human trafficking of individuals with disabilities in Qu County, Sichuan Province, made the rounds on Chinese media.[24] In that case, mentally disabled people were enslaved with the open connivance of the local authorities, under the cover of a public shelter for disabled people. In another remarkable story, in September 2011, Cui Songwang, a reporter for a Zhengzhou television station, hung around a train station posing as a disabled man for two days, until he was kidnapped and sold to a kiln manager for 500 yuan. Cui said he was forced to work for three hours, beaten, and deprived of water before he managed to escape and report the case to police.[25] More

recent media reports tell the story of slaves who managed to escape from the kilns, such as forty-three-year-old Xu Shuhe, who was a slave in black brick kilns in Guangzhou for twenty-four years; thirty-three-year-old Fan Debao, who spent eleven years in slavery; and thirty-five-year-old Qi Zhaojun, who was deprived of his liberty for twenty-one years at a number of kilns in Shanxi Province.[26]

Yuan Xueyu is still missing—another victim of what Børge Bakken has called China's 'uncivil society'.[27] His father, Yuan Cheng, is still looking for him and, in his search, has thus far been able to save more than 100 children.[28] In all this, is there any lesson that can be drawn from what happened in the spring of 2007? Looking at the latest developments in Xi Jinping's China—the taming of critical voices in traditional and new media, the arrests and disappearances of those who speak for the weak and disenfranchised, the systematic intimidation of those who challenge the message of 'harmony' espoused by the Chinese Communist Party—one cannot but wonder whether a display of solidarity like the one that took place during that hot summer more than a decade ago would still be possible today. However, the solitary blogger's daily posts are a reminder that not everything is lost, and not everyone has forgotten. In the end, as they say: no matter how hard you try, paper cannot wrap up embers.