



Pictures of missing children.
Photo: Daniele Dainelli, Contrasto

Slaving Away: The ‘Black Brick Kilns Scandal’ Ten Years On

Ivan Franceschini

In the spring and summer of 2007, bands of aggrieved parents roamed the Chinese countryside looking for their missing children, whom they learned had been kidnapped and sold as slaves to illegal kilns. Thanks to the involvement of Chinese media and civil society, the so-called ‘black brick kilns incident’ became one of the most remarkable stories of popular mobilisation and resistance in contemporary China. Now that ten years have passed, are there any lessons that we can draw from this moment in history?

3,653 days, 3,653 posts. Day after day for ten years, **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. 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 of 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 incident of the black brick kilns in Shanxi province remain missing. Netizens have donated four thousand 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,

which resounded particularly strong in his remote rural village, 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 in the same construction site. He posted leaflets with the photo of his son everywhere, 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 some 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 that there was a good chance that his son had been kidnapped and sold into slavery in a brick kiln somewhere in the countryside. The prospects were still dim, but at least now he had an idea where to look.



Yuan Cheng on the road searching for his son.
Photo: Daniele Dainelli, Contrasto

In the spring and summer of 2007—in what came to be known as the ‘black brick kilns incident’ (*heizhuanyao shijian*)—these bands of aggrieved parents roaming the Chinese countryside looking for their missing chil-

dren made for one of the most remarkable stories of popular mobilisation and resistance in contemporary China. It was a saga of unendurable pain and unprecedented camaraderie—of friendship as well as betrayal. It was a story that deserved to be told and it quickly piqued my interest and sparked my imagination. I wrote both my **first book** and **one of my earliest media reports** on the incident. Instead of focusing on the dark side of slavery and exploitation, I decided to emphasise on the positive side of the mobilisation of Chinese civil society in support of these aggrieved parents. It was indeed an amazing display of solidarity, something that remains awe-inspiring even today. Now that ten years have passed, are there any lessons that we can still draw from this story?

A Mother's Determination

The **chain of events** that led to the explosion of interest in the kilns scandal began in March 2007 with Yang Aizhi, a mother whose sixteen-year old son had recently gone missing in Zhengzhou. After covering the city with posters, Yang was contacted by another parent who told her that his two sons had just escaped from slavery in a kiln in Shanxi province. Convinced that her son had to be in a similar place, Yang immediately left for the area. There, she visited no less than one hundred kilns, finding many young slaves, some of them still wearing school uniforms. After going back to Henan, she got in touch with five other parents in the same situation through the missing people announcements published on the pages of a local newspaper. Together, they established what the Chinese media later termed the ‘League of the Search for Children’ (*xunzi lianmeng*). In just a couple of months they rescued more than forty children from slavery.

Realising that their task far outweighed their strength, they decided to seek help from the media. As it turned out, their stories were

so difficult to believe that only one journalist, Fu Zhenzhong of the City Channel (*dushi pindao*), a local TV station in Henan, accepted to follow them in their search. He made the right choice. When, on the evening of 19 May 2007, the footage of young boys wearing rags and doing heavy works in kilns in Shanxi that Fu had shot with a hidden camera was aired on television, there was an uproar. As Fu later **recalled**, ‘in the three days after the airing of the feature about the kilns, about one thousand parents came to the TV station looking for help.’ On that day, mothers and fathers that until that moment had not known where to look for their children discovered the existence of the kilns and realised that they were not alone in their plight. It was then that these parents started organising themselves in small teams to scour the Shanxi countryside.

Then, on 6 June, the aunt of a child recently rescued by the League expressed her gratitude in a **tearful post** on a local web portal in Henan province. This post, which was shared by more than three hundred thousand people all over the country, finally managed to attract the attention of the national media. From that moment on, ‘black brick kilns’ became a term of common use throughout China.

The Hidden Rules of the Kilns

For the whole summer of 2007, the coverage of the scandal on the Chinese media was impressive, with journalists and media outlets competing with each other to describe the reality of the kilns in the smallest detail. Even the Party struggled to keep up with this avalanche of information. It came out that the slaves in the kilns were not only teenagers who had been deceived with the illusion of a well-paid job or abducted with violence, but also adults with mental problems and children, a docile workforce that never raised

any demands. Among the lesser-known survivor 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, whom I interviewed back in May 2008, when he finally managed to escape in the summer of 2007, he had waist-long hair and a number on his wrist. According to his testimony, names were never used in the kiln, only numbers. They had a daily production quota of ten thousands bricks and, when they were not able to fulfil it, they were savagely beaten. When a fugitive was caught attempting to escape, he was beaten to death by the guards and the body was left in the open to rot as a warning to others. Hao Dingpo claimed to have seen six people dying this way, but there was no way to verify his claim as he was never able to indicate the exact location of the kiln.

The conditions in the kilns had a dramatic impact not only on the body of the slaves, but also on their mental well-being. When I met Zhang Shanlin in May 2008, one year after the police had rescued his son from a kiln, he was worried because the boy, who once had been lively and cheerful, had lost any interest in anything, including in his dream of becoming a chef. The teenager refused to leave his house and avoided any human contact. He not only felt ashamed about what had happened to him, but he also kept dreaming about his life in the kiln and woke up screaming almost every night.

The media were relentless in eviscerating the local dynamics behind the existence of the kilns. It was evident that the regime of the kilns could exist only because many people benefitted from it. A **Nanfang Zhoumo report** quoted a former slave as saying: ‘[The life in the kiln] was like the food chain in the animal realm... This chain had six rings: the owner of the kiln > the *baogongtou* [i.e. a subcontractor in charge of all matters related to the workers] > the guards > the older workers > the new workers > the retards.’ While the owner was always a local person, the *baogongtou*

generally came from somewhere else—usually the place where he found his victims.

The relationship between the black kilns and the local communities was also very important. Although many accounts described the geographical seclusion of these places, local people were well aware of these realities. The reason they accepted them is that the economy of the kilns had **its advantages** for the local community, since they stimulated local development and created new opportunities to get rich. Support from the local community was also one of the reasons why escaping from the kilns was so hard. Since local workers were too expensive and almost impossible to exploit due to the protection coming from their familial networks, slaves were inevitably ‘outsiders’ (*waidiren*). Sometimes local people themselves contributed by supplying 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 a kiln while looking for his mother, a sixty-year-old widow who had been sold as a wife to an old bachelor in Shanxi by a relative. Shen told the journalists that, once he had arrived in the village where his mother had been sold, he had asked an old lady for directions. Under the pretence of helping him find a well-paid job, she sold him to the local kiln owner.

The higher echelons of the Party-state did not fare any better in the media. Reports not only highlighted that the middle-level bureaucracy in Shanxi province was fully aware of the existence of the kilns, but that some officials were even complicit in perpetuating slavery. One of the most unbelievable stories of all was that of **Zhu Guanghui**, a young boy from Henan. Rescued by the police from a kiln on 27 April 2007, he was immediately sold back to another kiln by a local labour inspector, who even deducted an ‘intermediation fee’ (*zhongjiefei*) of three hundred yuan from the back salary of the boy. Zhu was rescued again during another police operation at the end of May. In the following days, a local TV

station managed to record a confrontation between him and the labour inspector who had sold him. Nobody could have imagined that on that same afternoon the labour inspector would deceive the boy once again, selling him to yet another kiln. Finally, on 18 June 2007, Zhu Guanghui was rescued for a third time and managed to get back home safely.



Yuan Cheng holds the photo of his missing son in his hand.

Photo: Daniele Dainelli, Contrasto

The Response of the Authorities

The stories told by families of the missing children were filled with desperation and highlighted the indifference of the local authorities. Back in May 2008, Wang Xiaoli, the mother of a boy who had gone missing in 2006 in Gongyi county, Henan province, 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 admissions exam (*gaokao*). He was one of the best students in his school and

had a very good chance to be 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 somehow disappeared before reaching his destination.

The media storm triggered by the aggrieved parents changed everything, at least for a few weeks. In June 2007, the central authorities reacted launching 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 (forty-two percent) of them were operating without any formal permission; 4,861 brick and tile kilns were inspected, among which 3,186 (63.3 percent) were found to be lacking any registration; in total, the workers in the kilns numbered eighty-one thousand, but only seventeen kilns were found to have severe problems. Among them, thirteen had incidents of child labour. On the whole, 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 being punished for malfeasance and dereliction of duty, while President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao **raised their voices** asking for further investigations to reveal cases of corruption related to the kilns.

At the same time, the Chinese leadership could not miss the opportunity to ride the publicity wave of the scandal to promote its political agenda. In particular, the media coverage of the kilns was used to accelerate the **troubled legislative process** that led to the passage of the Labour Contract Law, then stranded due to the emergence of a heated public debate about the advisability of introducing new guarantees for workers’ rights at a stage in which economic development was still fuelled by low labour costs. After more than three years of top-

level discussions and more than a dozen blueprints, the kilns scandal was an essential factor that facilitated the ultimate approval of the Law, which was passed at the end of June right in the middle of the media storm. **Xie Liangming**, then Deputy Director of the Department of Legal Affairs of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, declared: ‘[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.’



Migrant workers in Zhengzhou.
Photo: Daniele Dainelli, Contrasto

The Kilns After the Kilns

Ten years later, the kilns might not be as widespread as before, but all the 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 in two different kilns. According to the available accounts, these people were deceived by a human trafficker, in this case a taxi driver, who earned two to three hundred yuan for

every person that he ‘introduced’ to the kilns. Closely guarded by thugs who did not hesitate to resort to violence, these slaves, whose age varied from twenty-five to forty-five, lived locked in a courtyard and were forced to work ten hours a day without receiving any wage besides a few yuan for their personal expenses. The police then arrested ten people, including the *baogongtou* and the owners.

In June 2010, **Chinese media reported** that the police in Shilin county, Yunnan province, had rescued about twenty slaves from a local kiln. One of the slaves, a man from Chongqing, described to the journalists the brutality of his guards who, in order to make him work seventeen hours a day, beat him with steel bars and leather belts. Similarly, in December 2010, a **story of human trafficking of individuals with disabilities** based in Qu county, Sichuan province, was widely reported in the Chinese media. In that case, everything was happening 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 five hundred 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. 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 in a number of kilns in Shanxi province.

Yuan Xueyu is still missing, another victim of what Børge Bakken has called China’s ‘**uncivil society**’. His father Yuan Cheng is still looking for him and in his search has, thus far, been able to save **more than one hundred**

children. In all this, is there any lesson that can be drawn from what happened ten years ago? Looking at the latest developments in Xi Jinping’s China—the taming of the 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 of ten years ago would still be possible today. However, the solitary blogger’s daily post is a reminder that not everything is lost, that not everybody has forgotten. In the end, as they say, no matter how hard you try, paper cannot wrap up embers.

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