

# China's president orders probe of brickyard slavery

The number of people rescued from forced labor surpasses 500 as scandals continue to plague the nation.

By CHING-CHING NI  
*Times Staff Writer*

**BEIJING** — He was a culinary student looking for his first job, and when a stranger offered him restaurant work he eagerly accepted. But the 20-year-old was taken instead to a rural brick kiln where he toiled as a slave with little food, no pay and regular beatings that nearly killed him.

Yet Zhang Yinlei is among the lucky.

He was one of at least 548 workers rescued so far in a crackdown on brick factories in north-central China, where abducted men and children as young as 8 had been sold into slavery for \$65 a head. Most of them were freed this week in raids at thousands of kilns in two provinces.

The case has so scandalized China that state media announced Friday that President Hu Jintao had personally ordered a prompt investigation.

Child labor and harsh working conditions used to be the stuff of propaganda movies used by the Chinese Communists to discredit capitalist societies. Today they are a fact of life in a country driven by its own pursuit of wealth, often at the

expense of the poor.

China's leaders, worried about the country's reputation as the sweatshop of the world, are trying to clean up its image, especially as the 2008 Beijing Olympics approaches.

Embarrassing reports, however, continue to dog them.

China was accused this week of employing children as young as 12 to produce Olympics-related souvenirs. Authorities denied the report by Brussels-based PlayFair 2008. State-run New China News Agency said students from six middle schools and two primary schools had been hired during a holiday period to "pack notebooks, not Olympics-licensed products."

The latest scandal — the slavery at the brick factories — might not have come to light had a group of 400 men with missing sons not sent out a collective cry for help on the Internet. They accused local authorities of turning a blind eye to the abuses and suggested that as many as 1,000 children had been kidnapped from Henan province and shipped to nearby Shanxi province by human traffickers who abducted their children near train and bus stations or lured them away with promises of high-paying jobs.

As a result, more than 35,000 police from Henan province and 14,000 from Shanxi province fanned out to about 10,000 kilns, detaining at least 140 suspects, the news agency said Friday. More raids and arrests were expected.

Before the crackdown, some of the fathers had been conducting their own rescue missions.

"We saved more than 100 boys on 15 different occasions," said Chai Wei, whose 17-year-old son disappeared in April from a street near their home. Chai and two other men with missing children banded together and traveled to hundreds of small brickyards in search of their children.

Some fathers went undercover. They couldn't believe what they saw.

"They start work at 5 in the morning and sometimes don't finish until past midnight," Chai said. "They get no pay and are fed only bread and water. If they try to run away, they would break their legs. Some were buried alive. We saw police pull out two bodies. One was an 18-year-old. The other was 19."

The fathers said that most of the time when they showed up, the young workers had been sent into hiding. If not, they said, there was usually a confrontation, and sometimes thugs hired by the owners would beat the parents and chase them away.

"They had completely lost their freedom," said Zhang Shanlin, the father of the rescued 20-year-old. "I saw six vicious guard dogs and seven hit men. Anyone who didn't work hard enough was beaten. There was no chance of running away." His son had refused to work and was burned all over his back with hot bricks.

"Another young man tried to run away — they burned him on

the face, leaving only the mouth," Chai said. "So he could still eat and continue to work."

The injured were given no medical treatment and were left in cramped and dirty living quarters where men had not washed for so long that sores caked their bodies. Their hair had grown down to their waists, Chai said.

Zhang said his son was finally sent to a hospital after residents' reports of the brutal working conditions to police prompted a raid. When they were freed, some of the laborers seemed so dazed and frightened that they could barely talk.

"My son told me that if he hadn't been rescued he would not be alive today," Zhang said.

One of the reasons the inhumane treatment has gone on for so long, parents say, is connections. The owner of the company involved in the case of Zhang's son's is the son of a local Communist Party official and the police were reluctant to touch him.

"Of course he knew what was going on at the brick factory," Zhang said. "He visited there several times a week, and he provided the coal and electricity that ran the place."

Despite the crackdown, hundreds more parents, including Chai, have yet to reunite with their children.

"I don't know if we will ever find him," Chai said. "It cuts like a knife. Each day we don't find him is another day for him of living in danger."

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# Reports of Forced Labor at Brick Kilns Unsettle China

By HOWARD W. FRENCH

HANGHAI, June 15 — Su Jinduo, Su Jinpeng, brother and sister, were traveling home by bus from a vacation visit to Qingdao during the Chinese New Year when they disappeared.

They were heated out of their money when they sought to buy a ticket for the final leg of the journey home, their father, Su Jianjun, said in an interview. They were taken in by a woman who provided them with warm shelter and a meal on a cold winter night. She also offered them a chance to earn enough money to pay their fare by helping her sell fruit.

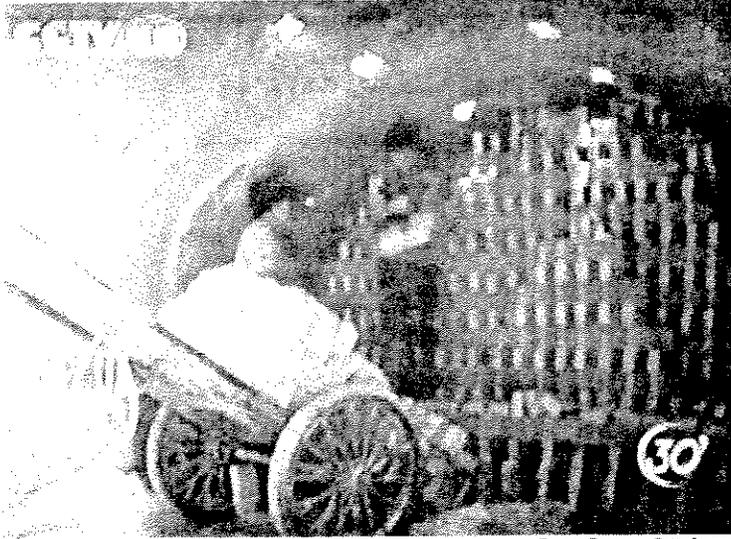
The next thing they knew, however, they were being loaded onto a bus with several other children and taken to a factory in the next province, where they were pressed into service making bricks. Several days later, the boy, 16, escaped along with another boy and managed to return home. A few days later, Mr. Su was able to rescue his daughter.

His story and many others like it have swept China in recent days in an unfolding labor scandal in central China that involves the kidnapping of hundreds of children, most in their teens but some as young as 8.

The children, and many adults, reportedly, have been forced to work under brutal conditions — scantily paid, unpaid and often fed little more than water and steamed buns in the brick kilns of Shanxi Province.

As the stories spread across China last week, played prominently in newspaper headlines and on the Internet, a manhunt was announced last week for Heng Tinghan, the foreman of one of the kilns, where 31 ended workers were recently rescued.

Mr. Su said his children were brought to the factory around midnight of the day they vanished. Once there, they were told they would have to make bricks. "You will start working in the morning, so get some sleep, don't lose your bowls, or you will be able to pay for them," he said the children were told. "They also offered them 50 renminbi for a blanket. That is equivalent to about \$8." Mr. Su managed to recover his



CCTV, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Image from a television report this week of children working at a kiln in Hongtong, in Shanxi Province. Hundreds of them were kidnapped.

## Children, many kidnapped, work in brutal conditions in China's north.

Children disappear after only a matter of days at the kiln, but many other parents have been less fortunate, losing contact with children for months or years. As stories of forced labor at the brick kilns have spread, hundreds of parents have petitioned local authorities to help them find their children and crack down on the kilns.

In some cases, according to Chinese news media reports, parents have also come together to try to rescue their children, placing little stock in the local authorities, who are sometimes in collusion with the operators of the kilns. Other reports have said that local authorities, including labor inspectors, have taken children from freshly closed kilns and resold them to other factories.

The director of the legal department of the Shanxi Province Worker's Union said it was hard to monitor the kilns because of their location in isolated areas.

"Those factories are located in very remote places and most of them are illegal entities, without any legal registration, so it is very hard for people outside to know what is going on there," said the union official, Zhang Xiaosuo. "We are now doing a province-wide investigation into them, both the legal and illegal ones, to look into labor issues there."

Liu Cheng, a professor of labor law at Shanghai Normal University, had a different explanation. "My first reaction is that this seems like a typical example of a government-business alliance," Mr. Liu said. "Forced labor and child labor in China are illegal, but some local governments don't care too much."

Zhang Xiaoying, 37, whose 15-year-old son disappeared in January, said she had visited over 100 brick factories during a handful of visits to Shanxi Province in search of him.

"You just could not believe what you saw," Ms. Zhang said in a telephone interview on Thursday. "Some of the kids working at these places were at most 14 or 15 years old."

The local police, she said, were unwilling to help. Outside one factory, she said, they even demanded bribes.

"We finally got into that place, and I saw people hauling carts of bricks

with great difficulty," Ms. Zhang said. "Some of them were very small, and the ropes they pulled left tracks of blood on their shoulders and backs. Others were making bricks, standing by the machines."

"They had to move the bricks from the belt very quickly, because they were hot and heavy and they could easily get burned or hurt by the machines."

By Friday, with the help of Mr. Su, Ms. Zhang finally located her son at a kiln near the one to which Mr. Su's children had been taken.

Another father, Cai Tianliang, said he had set out to Shanxi Province in May from his native Henan Province in search of his missing son after a local television broadcast had shown a team of television reporters and Henan parents searching the Shanxi kilns for kidnapped children.

"I thought there was a great possibility that my son was also kidnapped, so I went there twice," Mr. Cai said. "The usual thing is for an owner to have more than one factory, and to shift people without identification from one place to another."

On his first trip, which he took with a group of parents, Mr. Cai said he found few clues. On a second visit to the area, he said, he was refused police permits to enter any of the brick factories but persisted anyway.

"We located a place called the Zhengjie Brick Factory in a town called Chengbei, and at first they would not allow us in," he said, "but we kept negotiating. Finally, they let a few of us in, and they found my son inside."

Like many other parents, Mr. Cai said he was dumbfounded by the boy's condition when they were reunited.

"My son was totally dumb, not even knowing how to cry, or to scream or to call out 'Father,'" he said. "I burst into tears and held him in my arms, but he had no reaction. He was in rags and had wounds all over his body. Within three months he had lost over 10 kilos," about 22 pounds.

Mr. Cai said he tried to rescue another 16-year-old boy he found there, but was refused by the factory boss. "He said I could only take my own," Mr. Cai said, "and must leave other people behind at the kiln."

# China Rescues 'Slave' Workers

*Adults, Children Saved From Brutal Conditions; Sign of Growth's Abuses*

BY GORDON FAIRCLOUGH

SHANGHAI—Chinese authorities said they rescued more than 500 people, including dozens of children, from "slave labor" in brick kilns and coal mines, illustrating the sometimes severe abuses spawned by China's break-neck economic development.

More than 45,000 police have fanned out across Henan and Shanxi provinces to crack down on instances of forced labor. The investigation was prompted, in part, by an Internet campaign mounted by hundreds of parents who said their children have been kidnapped and sold to brickyard owners.

Revelations about the extent of the abuses, which have received wide coverage in state-owned newspapers and on television news, come at a sensitive time for China's Communist Party leaders, who are looking to polish the coun-



Rescued workers in Shanxi province

try's international image ahead of next year's Olympic Games in Beijing.

some of them children, had been kidnapped or lured to work at the brick kilns with false promises and then held against their will and forced to work long hours without pay or adequate food. More than 150 people have been arrested.

Chai Wei, a 38-year-old father from Henan, says his 17-year-old mentally handicapped son was kidnapped in April while playing outside. Mr. Chai returned Thursday from a trip to Shanxi with other parents searching brickyards for their missing children.

"We contacted the local police, but they are protecting the brick-kiln owners," Mr. Chai says. "They wouldn't help us."

It wasn't Mr. Chai's first trip to mountainous Shanxi to look for his son. After a worker reported seeing his son at a brick kiln in a town called Shangxin, Mr. Chai traveled seven hours by train in an effort to bring his son home. "But I didn't find him. They must have sent him somewhere else," he says.

Han Dongfeng, a Hong Kong-based labor-rights activist and founder of the China Labor Bulletin, says that forced labor has been a problem for more than a decade, especially in brick kilns, coal mines and small garment factories. "People think they can do anything, legal or illegal, to make money," he says.

Mr. Han credits the online campaign by the parents of missing children with prompting the authorities

to take action on an issue long swept under the rug.

The Communist Party's main national newspaper, People's Daily, carried a lengthy article Friday saying that police had stumbled by accident on slave workers at a brick kiln owned by the son of a village Communist Party boss in Shanxi province at the end of May.

The party official's son, Wang Binbin, was quoted by People's Daily as saying he began employing workers provided by human traffickers after falling into debt and being unable to afford to pay locally recruited laborers. Workers were severely beaten when the pace of their work slowed, the report said.

Mr. Wang and two others were arrested and 31 workers freed by the police in that case. But it appears to have been the online outcry by parents—through bulletin and message boards—that led to a widening crackdown over the past two weeks.

China's leaders, worried about public unease with the widening gap between China's haves and have-nots, have been trying to position themselves increasingly as the champions of the country's less well-off. So they are especially eager to be seen as taking strong measures to tackle wrongdoing, observers say.

The government is also concerned about its appearance in the run-up to the Olympics, when a surge in foreign media coverage is likely to create an image of China in the world's mind that will persist for years afterward.

Last weekend, PlayFair 2008, an alliance of global trade unions and nongovernmental organizations, charged that workers making some Olympic merchandise were being mistreated. Since the report was issued, the government and the Beijing Olympic organizing committee have scrambled to respond. On Wednesday, Chen Feng, the deputy director of the marketing department of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games, said at a news conference that, "if we find any problems, we will severely punish those violators."

The municipal government of Dongguan, a southern city where one of the factories cited by the activists is located, said that the plant did in fact employ children under the age of 16, but that they hadn't worked on Olympics-related products.

—Tang Hanting and Ellen Zhu contributed to this article.

## Forced Labor

◆ **The News:** Chinese police freed hundreds of forced laborers, including dozens of children.

◆ **The Trigger:** An online campaign by parents who say their children were kidnapped for work at brick kilns and coal mines apparently prompted the government crackdown.

◆ **What's at Stake:** The Chinese government is trying to polish its image with its own people and the world in the run-up to the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

try's international image ahead of next year's Olympic Games in Beijing.

This is the second time child labor has emerged as a national issue in a week. Last weekend, unions and human-rights groups alleged that some Olympic merchandise is being made by underpaid, underage workers. The U.S. State Department, in its annual report on human trafficking and forced labor this week, listed China on its "watch list," saying Beijing isn't doing enough to stamp out the practices.

Xinhua, the government-run news agency, reported Friday that workers,

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<http://www.weijsingheng.org/report/report2007/report2007-06/childlabor070617brickyardA280-L6.htm> which contains identical information.

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Who Will Save Our Children?

— Four hundred fathers who have lost their children shed tears of blood begging for help

We are the fathers of those unfortunate children who were tricked and taken to Shanxi brick factories for hard labor. Our children, because of their young age and inexperience in the world, because they were alone at the Zhengzhou train station, at a bus stop, under an overpass, or on the side of the road, were tricked or forced to get in a car and then taken and sold for the price of 500 Renminbi (note: about \$60 USA dollars) to the Shanxi brick factory for hard labor. Since our children went missing, we set down our lives and left our homes to search all over for our children.

After a very difficult time of searching with no news, we finally obtained accurate information. Our children were sold by human traffickers to become slaves at a Shanxi brick factory. Disregarding our personal safety, we snuck into these places a number of times, we even dressed up as workers to go under cover, finally we learned that Linfen City, and Yongji city of Shanxi Province were where the brick factories were most concentrated.

Although we had imagined countless times the danger our children faced, but when we

actually walked into the mountain gully, and passed through the rows of surrounding walls and saw the unfortunate children, we were still shocked by what we beheld: they were forced to work with both hands and feet, some of the children had long hair like primitive men and had not had contact with the outside world for seven years. Those who had attempted to escape were crippled from beatings, but this was nothing considering that some children had even had their backs branded with burning hot bricks by supervisors to the point of being badly mutilated. Some have been in the hospital for several months now after being rescued and still have not recovered. Everyday they worked more than fourteen hours and were still not properly fed. Sometimes because they were overly weary they would fool off, then the supervisor would pick up a brick and smash them over the head until their heads were cracked and bleeding. Then they would wrap up the wound with some rags and force them to continue to work. They would be struck and kicked, and were routinely beaten with a club; furthermore some children were struck until they were seriously injured, yet they would not receive treatment, they could only treat themselves at the brick factory. If they could not heal themselves or the wounds got worse, if they were nearing death the black-hearted supervisor and factory owner would take these workers and bury them alive. Because these children had not bathed for a long time they had developed severe skin diseases. The youngest was only eight years old. In order to receive a full meal he was very obedient, every day doing heavy labor that would be difficult even for an adult. Their personal freedom was restricted, in all weather there was a supervisor or thug standing guard.

Seeing pair by pair their fear-stricken and helpless eyes wrenched our hearts. Every person with a conscience, upon seeing such a situation would want to rescue all of them. But we were alone and weak, our forces too limited, we had few options. It was likely we would only be able to save our own child from Henan Province. We were guilt-stricken that we would be unable to change the fates of those children from Hubei, Sichuan and other provinces. Through our concerted efforts we were able to rescue more than forty children who had ended up in this hellhole. They were reunited with their parents. Furthermore, when we showed them photos of our children they gave us encouraging news that some of our children had been their fellow workers. But because there are many people looking for their children the cruel brick factory owner was extremely vigilant; if there were even a slight rumor he would secretly transfer them to another brick factory. This made the search for our children even more difficult.

Upon rescuing a child we would find his body covered with scars, making us cry every time. We did not know what sort of horrible experience these tender lives had been through -- even less did we know what danger our own children were facing at this moment. We are fathers, we must save our children, but in this gorge, in this unfamiliar region, the factory owners learned of our search and that made our effort even more challenging.

We are too few, at any time our children face life-threatening danger. We had no choice but to ask the government for help. We covered Shanxi countryside, county, and municipal police offices, as well as the labor department. But we were only disappointed; not only did the police ignore and brush aside our claim they even sought every means to prevent us from taking with us the children we already freed. Furthermore, when the owner of the brick factory intimidated us the police took no action. The head of the county public security bureau, at the urging of his superiors, said to us that the children went missing in Henan, the owner of the forced labor factories is also from Henan. You ought to return to Henan to report this case to the police there, as long as the Henan police step forward on this case we will cooperate completely. We were left with no choice but to wearily make our way back to Henan. But then in Henan the police expressed that they were willing to help us but unable; they explained that our children had only been illegally compelled into labor, it was not a homicide case and so it did not qualify for a police follow-up; furthermore, according to the law the crime is located in Shanxi, so the Shanxi police ought to rescue the children.

In addition, according to our information, the leading suspect in the abduction, Yang, who crippled some of the children, has already been detained by the Shanxi police. Yet, the Shanxi police said that there was not enough evidence for a case. It is obvious that this is an organized criminal gang. Every day they collect targets, from Zhengzhou and other areas they use all sorts of methods to haul people to the Shanxi brick factory. Presently at the Shanxi brick factory there are more than one thousand children, among them there are more than four hundred from Henan. If this crime is not stopped then every day somebody will go missing and this will severely impact the stability of society.

As we walked out the main entrance of the public security bureau our hearts were heavy. In this a matter of life and death for an underprivileged group, we have been able to overcome difficulties and obstacles to search for clues, but because the public security offices pass off responsibility we could not continue our search for our children. In this society that everyone calls a harmonious system, where is there respect for life? How much longer must we walk on this long path searching for our children? During this uncertain search some children's parents passed away filled with sadness, some had nervous breakdowns. We are blood relatives of these children, no matter how difficult, we will not give up. But what of our children, those vulnerable lives who need our protection, how much longer can they hold out under such devastating circumstances?

We cannot waste any time with the safety of our children uncertain, who will save our children? After two different provincial governments rejected responsibility, where should we turn for help? In such an urgent matter of life and death, who will help us?

-- Signed by more than four hundred fathers who have lost their children

(The Wei Jingsheng Foundation is responsible for the translation of this English version.)

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请求与关注:四百余位失子父亲泣血的呐喊

我们是那些不幸被骗到山西黑窑场做苦工的孩子们的父亲,我们的孩子因为年龄小、涉世未深,只身在郑州火车站、汽车站、立交桥下、马路边等地方被人贩子或诱骗或强行拉上车,以500元的价格被卖到山西黑窑场做苦工。自孩子失踪以来,我们放弃了一切,背井离乡,走遍大江南北寻找孩子的下落。在历经艰难的寻找之后,我们终于得到了确切的消息,孩子是被人贩子卖到山西黑窑场做包身工了。我们不顾自身的安危,多次潜入当地,甚至扮成打工者进行卧底,终于了解到山西省临汾市、永济市是窑场比较集中的地方。尽管无数次设想过孩子所处环境的险恶,但真正的走进大山深处,穿过重重围墙,看到那些不幸的孩子时,我们还是被眼前的情景惊呆了:在这些手脚并用、头发长的像野人一样的孩子中间,有的已经整整和外界隔绝了七年,有的因逃跑未遂被打致残,这还不算,有的孩子还被监工用烧红的砖头把背部烙得血肉模糊(后被人救出在医院救了数月也未痊愈),他们每天工作十四个小时以上,还不让吃饱饭,有时因劳累过度,稍有怠工,就会被监工随手拿起的砖头砸的头破血流,然后随便拿起一快破布一裹了之,继续干活,至于拳打脚踢,棍棒侍候更是家常便饭,更有甚者有的孩子被打手打成重伤,也不给医治,让在窑场自行治愈,如不能自愈或伤情恶化,奄奄一息时黑心的工头和窑主就把被骗的苦工活活埋掉。这些孩子身上都因为长期不洗澡长满了牛皮癣似的皮屑,他们最小的只有八岁,八岁的孩子为了一顿饱餐是那么顺从,每天都干着成人都难以承受的重活。他们被限制了人身自由,全天候有监工或打手巡逻站岗。看着他们一双双恐惧无助的眼睛,我们的心在滴血。每一位有良知的人,看到此情此景,都会想把他们都救出去,可是我们身单力薄,力量太有限,无奈之下,我们只能尽可能地解救我们河南籍的孩子,对那些湖北、四川等外省的孩子,我们为无力改变他们的命运而愧疚,经过多方协调,先后有四十余名不慎落入虎穴的孩子,被我们费尽周折解救出来,回到了自己父母身边。而且通过照片辨认,他们也给我们带来了令人振奋的消息,我们中的有些孩子

曾经是他们的工友。但由于找孩子的人多，黑心窑主警惕性极高，稍有风声，就会把他们秘密转移到其它窑场，这给我们的寻子工作带了更大的难度。

男儿有泪不轻弹。获救孩子身上的累累伤疤，让我们一次次的落泪，我们不知道这些稚嫩的生命曾经经历了怎样的劫难，我们更不知道我们的孩子正面临着怎样的危险，我们是父亲，我们要救出我们的孩子，可是在大山深处，陌生的环境，窑主消息的灵通，使我们的寻子之路难上加难，我们的力量太薄弱了，我们的孩子随时都面临着生命危险。我们只有求助于政府。我们的足迹踏遍了山西方面的乡、县、市的公安、劳动等部门，但令我们心寒的是，乡派出所不仅置之不理，还百般阻挠刁难我们带走已经解救出来的孩子，而且窑主对我们进行威胁恐吓时坐视不管。而县公安局领导在接到上级公安机关的敦促后，给我们说，孩子是在河南丢失的，强制用工的窑主也是河南人，你们应该回河南报案，只要你们河南警方出面，我们会全力配合。无奈之下，我们只有风尘仆仆地回到河南，而我们河南的警方却表示爱莫能助，他们解释说，我们的孩子只是被强制监禁非法用工，没有造成命案，够不上立案条件，再说按照法律规定，案发地在山西，应该由山西警方去解救。另外据我们了解，拐卖孩子的犯罪嫌疑人之一杨某因把拐卖来的人打伤致残已经被山西警方刑事拘留，而山西警方却还说证据不足无法立案。很明显这是一个有组织的犯罪团伙，他们每天都在搜罗目标，以各种手段从郑州或其它地方把人拉到山西黑窑场，目前在山西黑窑场的包身工中仅孩子就有一千多人，其中河南籍的就有四百多人。如果这种犯罪再得不到制止，那么每天还会有人在丢失，将严重影响社会的安定。

当我们走出公安机关的大门时，心情无比沉重。人命关天啊，作为弱势群体，我们都能够不畏艰难险阻，查找到线索，但却因公安部门的互相推诿，寻子工作只能中断。在这个人人喊和谐的法制社会里，对生命的尊重体现到什么地方？漫漫寻子路，我们还要走多远？在渺茫的寻子路上，有的孩子的父母含恨离世了，有的精神崩溃了，我们是和孩子血脉相连的亲人，无论多难，我们都不会放弃。但我们的孩子呢，那些弱小的需要呵护的生命，在这狂风暴雨的摧残之下，他们还能坚持多久？

孩子的生命安全刻不容缓，谁来救救我们的孩子？在被两地政府互相推诿之后，我们又该向谁求助？十万火急，人命关天，谁来帮帮我们？

四百余位失子父亲泣血的呐喊

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# China Captures Man Accused Of Labor Abuse

BEIJING, June 17 (Reuters) — The Chinese police have captured a man accused of holding workers in virtual slavery, state news media reported Sunday in a national uproar over teenagers and men forced to work in brutal, furnacelike brick kilns.

The man, Heng Tinghan, is accused of holding workers in a kiln in Hongtong County in the northern province of Shanxi. One worker, who was mentally impaired, died after being beaten by one of Mr. Heng's helpers, and the police rescued 31 workers, who were thin and scarred.

The police caught Mr. Heng late Saturday after a nationwide manhunt, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

He has become a central villain in a national drama over the kidnapping of hundreds of children, most in their teens but some as young as 8, forced or cheated into grueling labor in kilns, mines and foundries across Shanxi and the neighboring Henan Province.

When caught in Hubei Province in central China, Mr. Heng apologized for mistreating workers but refused to accept blame for the death of the mentally impaired man, a Hubei newspaper reported.

"I felt it was a fairly small thing, just hitting and swearing at the workers and not giving them wages," Mr. Heng said, according to The Shiyuan Evening News. "The dead man had nothing to do with me."

The scandal has tarnished the governing Communist Party's promises to build a "harmonious" society with improved rights and income for hundreds of millions of poor farmers.

The China Youth Daily called the coercion a "shocking disgrace" that exposed officials' failure to enforce labor laws. State television has reported that owners of the primitive brick-making operations ran them like prisons, with fierce dogs and beatings to deter escapes.

A police sweep in Shanxi and Henan has freed 568 people from kilns and other work sites, including 22 under the age of 18 in Shanxi, Xinhua reported. Wang Bingbing, the owner of the kiln that Mr. Heng leased, was detained in late May.

Local news reports said that from March 2006, Mr. Heng, the kiln's foreman, had coerced people to work at the site or cheated them to lure them there and then forced them to work 16-hour days and live off weekly steamed bread.

# Finally Rescued, China's 'Slaves' Detail Their Plight

Parents' Grass-Roots Efforts  
Forced Media, Police to Act;  
Beatings and 17-Hour Shifts

By GORDON FAIRCLOUGH

DINGGOU, China—In early March, Li Yaokai, a skinny 18-year-old from this small mountainside village in central China, embarked on his first trip to the provincial capital. It didn't take long for him to get dragged into a huge forced-labor scandal whose gruesome details are now coming to light.

Mr. Li had set out in search of work to help support his family. Instead, the teenager ended up being sold into bondage at a brick factory.

Moments after he stepped off the train in Zhengzhou's cavernous rail station, he says, a middle-aged man appeared and asked if he was interested in a job. Mr. Li followed the stranger outside where two others emerged from the shadows, grabbing him and shoving him into a white minivan.

"I screamed, but no one heard me," says Mr. Li, one of the first victims to



give an extended interview to the foreign press.

At dawn the next day, his abductors dumped him at an isolated brick kiln—an operation, he later learned, that was set up by the local Communist Party boss. For nearly three months, he says, he spent 17 or more hours a day hauling bricks, surrounded by guard dogs and menaced by overseers wielding iron bars.

Mr. Li is one of hundreds of former captives dubbed "slave workers" by the Chinese media. Many of them are children and disabled people rescued by police as part of a broad assault on a vast underworld of brick factories and coal mines in two of China's 31 provinces and regions. With more details emerging—including the alleged complicity of government and Communist

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Continued from Page One  
Party officials—the scandal threatens to sully the country's international image as it prepares to host the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

News of the abuses has hit hard among Chinese people disillusioned by the social and economic inequities that have often gone hand in hand with the country's shift to capitalism. But the recent events show how China's citizens and media are increasingly willing to exert pressure on political leaders.

"In the end, the government had to pay attention and find our boys," says Mr. Li's father, Li Runzhi.

His son returned home last week, his hands burned by scorching hot bricks pulled from the kilns. His body was infested with lice. "Now, I just want to sleep all the time," the younger Mr. Li quietly said Sunday during an interview at his parents' tiny, spartan home. He wore a loose-fitting orange T-shirt decorated with cartoon panda bears. His hair was newly cropped.

"I feel happy he is back...but he doesn't talk to us," says Zhang Yuqin, the teen's mother. "He used to be a very lively boy....We are not going to send him to work anywhere for a while."

Much of Mr. Li's account has been corroborated by reports carried by China's official Xinhua News Agency and the Communist Party's own flagship newspaper, People's Daily. China's state-controlled press has been filled with graphic photos of injured slave laborers in tattered clothing and detailed ac-

counts of their Dickensian plight. More than 500 people have been freed by the police so far.

The brick factory where Li Yaokai and 30 others toiled was set up by the Communist Party chief of the village and run by his son, according to authorities. Last week, Xinhua and People's Daily both ran stories trumpeting the arrest of the son and several employees. Yesterday, Xinhua reported that the party chief had been sacked.

The police raid that freed Mr. Li was one of the first in a sweep of hundreds of brick factories and mines. The operation was prompted in large part by a grass-roots movement driven by people like Mr. Li's father and other parents of abducted children. Another catalyst: a May report, broadcast on the Henan provincial television station in Zhengzhou, that detailed the abduction of workers and featured a videotape of laborers at one of the brickyards.

After the story aired, parents of missing children gathered at the TV station's offices, swapped stories and began working together to find their children. Hundreds ended up traveling to Shanxi to search brick kilns, prodding the police to act.

The campaign spread to the Internet and sparked a media outcry that forced the government to tackle a long-ignored problem. So far 168 factory operators and others have been arrested in Henan and Shanxi provinces, according to Xinhua.

Forced labor appears to

have become a widespread problem in China over the past decade, activists say, as more than 120 million people have left the security of their villages and hometowns to hunt for work. Many go to the distant and unfamiliar reaches of the country's big cities.

Traffickers either abduct people or lure them to work with false promises of good pay. Their targets are often the young and disabled, since they are the least likely to escape. China's vast, migrant work force plays to their advantage. Families may go for months without realizing their loved ones are missing. Most have no practical way to look for them if they do disappear.

The U.S. State Department, which recently published its annual report on human trafficking and forced labor, estimates that a minimum of 10,000 to 20,000 people fall prey to human traffickers each year. China remains on the State Department's "watch list," in part, the report says, because the country hasn't made "concerted efforts to investigate and punish government officials specifically for complicity in trafficking."

Mr. Li and his wife are part of a group of six families working together to find their missing sons. So far, they are the only ones whose boy has been found. "I think it's very common," Mr. Li says. "I hope we can solve this problem once

and for all and recover all of our lost boys.”

Li Yaokai's odyssey began at the Zhengzhou rail station, one of the largest in China. Nearly 150,000 people pass through the station every day, and it has become a notorious hub for human traffickers, according to a report on China Central Television last year.

After the kidnapers

Li says. He began to wonder if his son had met a similar fate.

Other parents whose children went missing from the Zhengzhou train station worried, too, prompting local TV reporters to search for clues. On May 19, the Zhengzhou television station aired the first of its stories about children being sold into bondage.

Mr. Li saw the news and

apprehended over the weekend in another province.

Government propaganda officials, meanwhile, sought to rein in media coverage. Web sites were ordered to block discussion of the events. But coverage in the Chinese press—all of which is ultimately controlled by the state in China—has continued unabated.

Some Chinese government officials had financial interests in the mostly illegal operations, authorities say. The younger Mr. Li recalls that once, while being held captive, he saw government figures visit the kiln to collect bribe money from the foreman.

Mr. Li says that he did his best to avoid invoking the ire of the overseers. “I worked hard. When I was ordered to do something, I did it,” says Mr. Li. He subsisted on a diet of bread, noodles and water. He says he was beaten twice when he became too exhausted and weak to work quickly.

“I was always looking for some way to escape,”

Mr. Li says. But he knew such an effort was fraught with risk. One boy who tried to run away was captured and beaten by the guards. They broke the boy's leg with iron bars, Mr. Li says.

As Mr. Li told his story of captivity, Liu Yunqi, the mother of a missing deaf boy, sat on a stool hugging herself. Her 17-year-old son, Cheng Xiaopeng, was abducted at the end of February after traveling to Zhengzhou with some classmates for vacation. His friends said two older men seized Mr. Cheng in the train station and dragged him off.

Ms. Liu has crisscrossed Shanxi looking for her son. After another parent reported seeing a deaf boy who resembled Mr. Cheng at a brickyard, she rushed there, only to find that the boy had been sent elsewhere.

“He's had such a hard life,” Ms. Liu says of her son. Last year, he was hospitalized for months with a kidney disease, and she worries that he may be sick again since he doesn't have his medicine.

“These people have no mercy. He can't even hear,” she sobbed. “Please help me find my son.”

—Ellen Zhu and Tang Hanting in Shanghai and Kersten Zhang in Beijing contributed to this article.



A paid worker, center, pulls a cart of bricks next to a man, right, who has been rescued by local authorities from slavery, at a brick kiln in China on June 16.

grabbed Mr. Li, he says he was thrown into a small room with barred windows that served as a holding cell. In time, he was joined by four other abductees ranging in age from 17 to 59.

The five of them were crammed into the back of a van with darkened windows and guarded by two men armed with crowbars. They were ordered to remain silent. The van drove all night and they were delivered to the brickyard early the next morning.

Mr. Li, who is 5-foot-6-inches tall and at the time weighed about 112 pounds, says he was immediately put to work carting heavy loads of bricks. He was forbidden to talk to the other workers and initially didn't even know where he was—in a remote county in Shanxi Province, more than 300 miles from his home in Henan Province.

His father says that he initially had no idea that his son was in trouble. He had left home in high spirits, determined to earn money and gain experience outside the village, the elder Mr. Li recalls.

But as time dragged on with no word from his son, Mr. Li, 49, says he grew concerned. Last year, another boy from the village had been kidnapped and taken to a brick factory in Shanxi province, but managed to escape after a few days, Mr.

called the station, looking for information. More than 1,000 different families also called, according to the TV station. Groups of parents banded together and went to the authorities calling for action. Initially, the response was tepid. The police advised Mr. Li to file a missing-persons report and suggested that he and the other parents should look for their sons themselves. “I was very unhappy and disappointed,” Mr. Li says.

Mr. Li spent weeks traveling to brick kilns in Henan and Shanxi, discovering what he believes were hundreds of children and adults being forced to work against their will. He was still searching when he received a call saying the police had found his son.

Scores of other parents launched their own rescue efforts, reporting what they found to the police and the media. Early this month, 400 fathers signed a letter demanding that the government take action and posted it online. All the attention appears to have finally resonated with the government, which called for sweeping police action.

On May 27, police raided the brick kiln where Mr. Li was working, freeing 31 people and arresting three, including the son of the party boss. The foreman and his wife fled but were

# Fast-Growing China Says Little of Child Slavery's Role

By HOWARD W. FRENCH

SHANGHAI, June 20 — There is a certain ritualistic aspect to stories in China like the one this past week about the hundreds of people, many of them teenagers or even younger, who were forced to work under slavelike conditions in the brick kilns of Shanxi Province. First, Chinese readers are horrified by a picture of their country that many say they hardly recognize, then a villain is rounded up, and finally, after a torrent of unusually blunt and emotionally charged news reports and editorials, the matter drops from view, ensuring that the larger issue goes unresolved.

The villain in the case was Heng Tinghan, the manager of the brick works, who was arrested Saturday and promptly cemented his bad-guy image by protesting that it was a "fairly small thing" to beat and abuse underage workers, and to deprive them of pay. With his arrest, and the urging of the Central Office of External Communication of the Communist Party, the story then died away. But Chinese newspapers are constantly peppered with accounts of the death and injury of child laborers, and of disputes that arise because of unusually low wages, or the withholding of pay, with no region of the country exempted.

Just within a week or so of the brick kiln story, there were several reports of labor abuses against children. A 14-year-old boy was killed in an explosion while filling a tank with naphthalene at a chemical factory near Nanjing. A 15-year-old boy was dragged into a cotton gin and crushed to death in Nanchang after working a succession of 20-hour days. And 70 girls from rural Henan Province were brought by their teacher to work at a grape processing plant in Ningbo, where their hands bled from working 16-hour shifts.

From the densely packed factory zones of Guangdong Province to the street markets, kitchens and brothels of major cities, to the primitive factories of China's relatively poor western provinces, child labor is a daily fact of life, experts here say, and one that the government, preoccupied with economic growth, has traditionally turned a blind eye to.

"In order to achieve modernization, people will go to any ends to earn money, to advance their interests, leaving behind morality, humanity and even a little bit of compassion, let alone the law or regulations, which are poorly implemented," said Hu Jindou, a professor of economics at the University of Technology in Beijing. "Everything is about the economy now, just like everything was about politics in the Mao era, and forced labor or child labor is far from an isolated



China Daily, via Reuters

Heng Tinghan, left, was arrested Saturday and protested that it was a "fairly small thing" to abuse underage workers at his brick kiln.

a combination of capitalism, socialism, feudalism and slavery."

Under President Hu Jintao, the Communist Party has made the creation of what it calls a harmonious society the government's main watchword. As part of that effort, in fact, a major revision of laws governing the rights of children took effect just this month, prompting the country's vice premier, Wu Yi, to call their adoption "a festive present for the mainland's 300 million children."

Chinese labor market experts say, however, that the country remains far from achieving even the spirit of the new law, which mandates that adequate time be set aside for sleep, entertainment and sports. In fact, many say, an overwhelming emphasis on economic growth directly contradicts it.

This was underscored by another story that emerged the same week the kiln factory abuses were revealed. Students from the Dayin Middle School in Sichuan Province, in China's interior, complained in newspaper reports about a work-study program in which they were shipped to an electronics assembly plant hundreds of miles away, in the industrial boomtown of Dongguan, which is near the coast.

The students told about having to work 14-hour days, with mandatory overtime, and having their wages withheld. In some instances, they said, those who wished to quit the program had no way of telephoning their families or paying for transportation home.

"My daughter promised to call every week, but she's been gone for three weeks and has only called once," said Zhang Ronghua, the mother of

wants to come home, that she's worked from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. and that she's constantly busy and tired."

Yuan Guangyao, the deputy manager of the factory, defended his company's arrangement with the school. "This internship is a form of cooperation between our company and the school, or rather with the county," he said. "I've been to that county myself, and I found the local people were very poor, so this initiative of having students work here is a win-win strategy for both of us."

But many of the parents see a different picture, suspecting that the factory and the school are profiting at their children's expense.

Liu Kairning, a longtime researcher on labor conditions in Guangdong Province, where Dongguan is, said the employment of students who were paid low wages and forced to work overtime was commonplace. "In Dongguan, you can even see children of 12 and 15 working in toy factories," he said. "These kids are basically from adjacent, underdeveloped provinces and they are brought by their teachers. There are laws forbidding child labor, but for work-study programs there are no specific rules, and no limitations on age, working hours or job description."

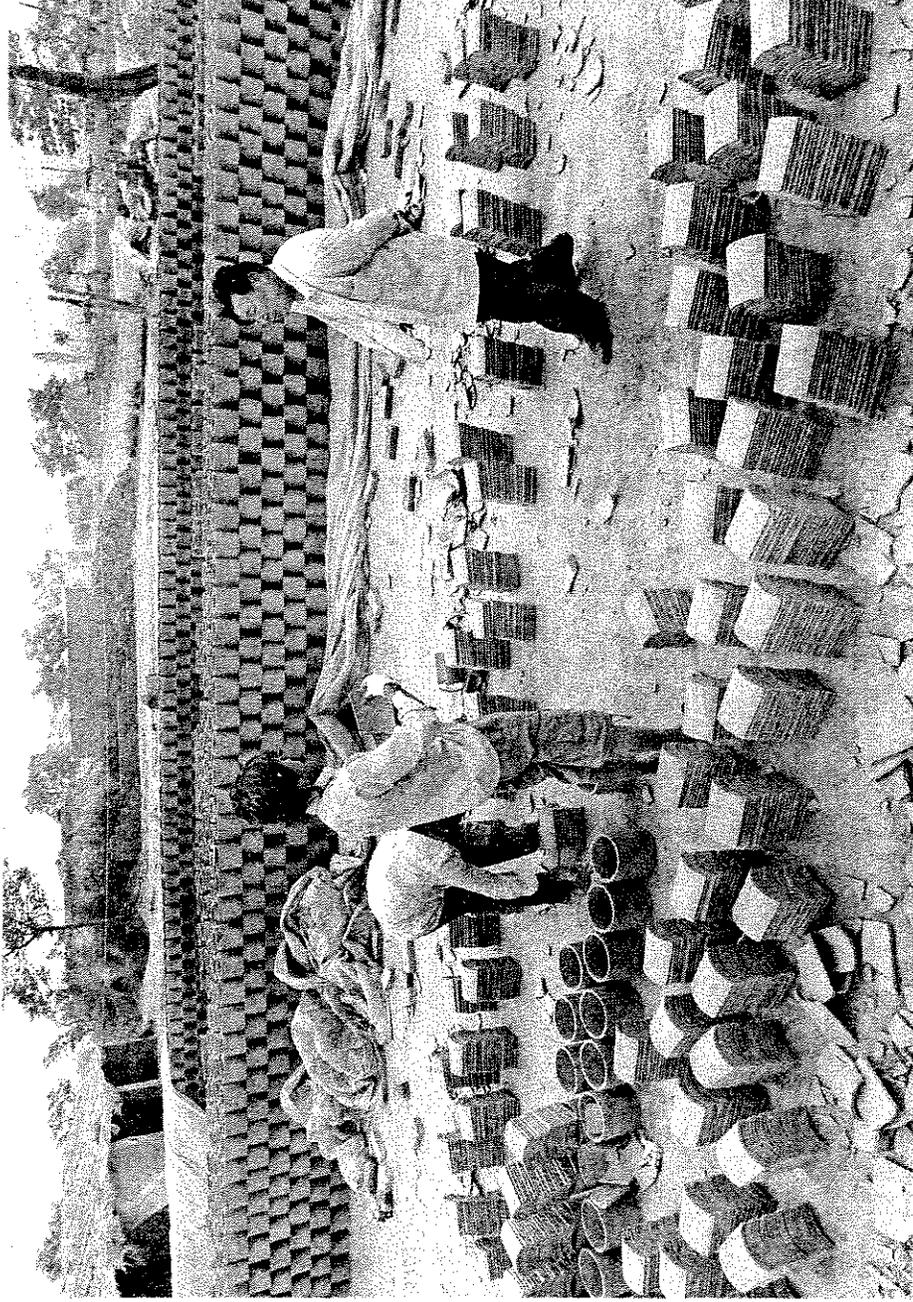
Other experts said local officials were reluctant to take any steps that would impede economic growth. Traditionally, high growth rates and social stability have been the main criteria for promotion of local officials, and in relatively poor regions providing employment, even for youths, is seen as contributing to these goals.

Indeed, in the Shanxi brick kiln case, the owner of the factory that was the focus of most of the media attention was a local Communist Party leader.

Local officials also take advantage of overlapping jurisdictions to evade responsibility. In Sichuan Province, the local officials said they had no say over working conditions negotiated between the school and the factory.

Officials at the provincial labor bureau in Guangdong Province said that labor arrangements made by a school should be regulated by the Education Ministry. The ministry did not respond to telephone calls or faxed questions on the matter.

"Each department or ministry only cares about itself," said Jin Yingjie, a labor law expert at China University of Political Science and Law. "If the law concerns its own interest, it will make an effort to apply it. But when an issue involves the intersection of more than one department,



Color China Photo, via Associated Press

A man searched for his child, one of hundreds who have been kidnapped, at this brick kiln in China's Shanxi Province.

# China Tries to Contain Scandal Over Slave Labor With Arrests and Apology

By DAVID LAGUE

BEIJING, June 22 — Chinese authorities moved to contain a widening slave labor scandal with an apology from a provincial governor for abuses that have shocked the country, and the arrest of two labor officials, state news media said Friday.

Yu Youjun, the governor of Shanxi Province in northern central China, took responsibility for the failure to protect hundreds of farmers, migrant workers and children forced to work without pay in brick kilns and other businesses, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

"As Shanxi governor, I'll take the blame for the scandal that infringed the rights of farm workers and children," Mr. Yu was quoted as saying. "I feel guilty and heart-stricken over the scandal. It has infringed the rights of migrant workers and children, hurt them both physically and mentally, and had a shocking effect

both in and out of China."

The outcry over forced labor is a serious blow to the ruling Communist Party under the leadership of President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, who are trying to promote their vision of a harmonious society sharing the benefits of the country's extended economic boom.

The reality for many workers in remote provinces, far from the booming coastal cities, is that they are vulnerable to exploitation without any protection from the government or unions, labor activists say.

Those abuses contribute to widespread dissatisfaction and anger in rural areas, where protests and demonstrations are now common.

On Thursday, the police arrested two labor inspectors from Yongji city in Shanxi who were accused of negligence and abuse of their powers, Xinhua reported.

Amid a national outcry, the central government has begun an inquiry

into the widespread exploitation of migrant workers and children in the backward province.

Some of the workers and children were abducted from rural train and bus stations or enticed to travel to the kilns with bogus offers of good pay and conditions.

Once they arrived, they were often beaten, poorly fed and forcibly prevented from leaving, according to news media reports.

The abuses were exposed in reports in China's increasingly feisty news media last week after parents had unsuccessfully pleaded with the authorities for assistance to find and free their children.

Earlier this month, more than 400 parents in neighboring Henan Province posted a letter on the Internet complaining that their children had been abducted, and sold as laborers to brick kiln operators in Shanxi.

Chinese journalists say the authorities have since tried to limit cov-

## A blow to a

## Communist vision of a society sharing in an economic boom.

erage of the abuses, which have highlighted an often unseen consequence of China's economic boom: the brutal working conditions endured by many workers in remote areas of the country.

But coverage has continued with the official news media also saying Friday that the police had placed 35 people in criminal detention and were hunting for 20 others suspected of involvement in the use of forced labor in the kilns.

There are suggestions that further abuses may be uncovered. "Forced laborers of unknown number, both

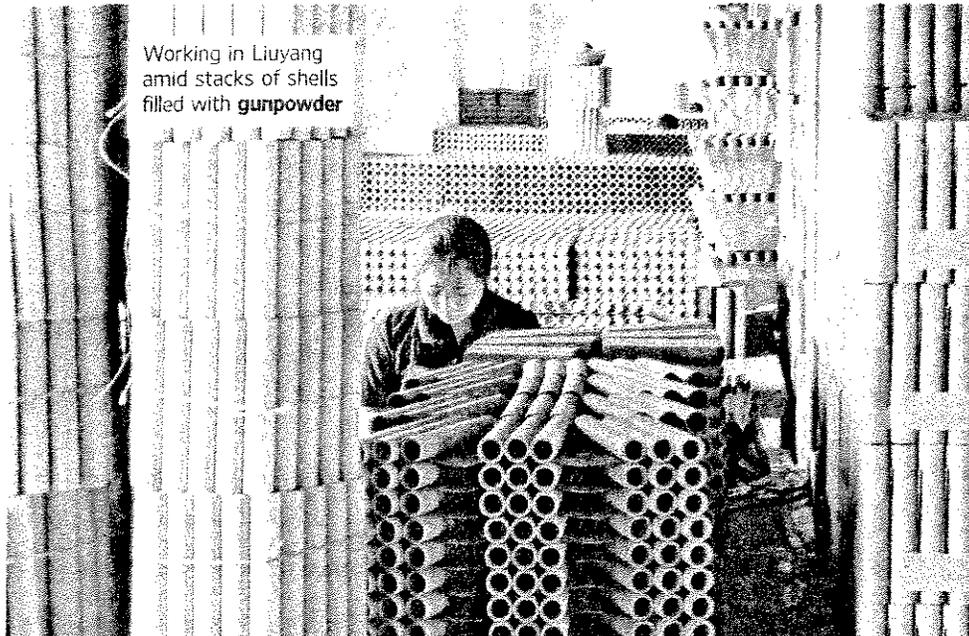
adults and children, may still be suffering," the official China Daily newspaper said, "and officials who have shielded the notorious business have yet to be brought to justice."

Investigators have rescued 359 people, including 65 who are mentally retarded and 12 children, from the kilns, the reports said. The police in Henan rescued more than 200 others, the reports said.

Employment of children younger than 16 is forbidden in China, but the investigation has exposed the complicity of local officials in the scandal, state news media reported.

China's central government has ordered provincial authorities in Shanxi to mount a full investigation and to compensate victims.

Authorities from Hongtong County in Shanxi sent teams to 12 provinces to visit the homes of victims to deliver letters of apology, pay outstanding salaries and arrange compensation, Xinhua said.



Working in Liuyang amid stacks of shells filled with gunpowder

James T. Areddy

## Behind the Boom In Chinese Fireworks

*Cheap Exports Fuel Growth  
In Backyard Pyrotechnics;  
More Li Statues Than Mao*

By JAMES T. AREDDY  
*Liuyang, China*

**A**CROSS THIS sprawling, upwardly mobile country, towns proudly proclaim they are what they make. Wenzhou calls itself China's Shoe Capital. Datang, a bit more modestly, lays claim to Sock City. And then there is Liuyang—Fireworks Capital of the World.

Nearly all the celebratory explosions set off by Americans—from the lowly New Year's firecracker to next week's mighty Fourth of July mortar—originate in Liuyang, a county nestled into the red hills and bamboo forests of Hunan. Local lore has it that Li Tian invented firecrackers hereabouts 1,400 years ago, and today statues of Inventor Li outnumber those of Chairman Mao. China's Ministry of Commerce estimates that the country produces 75% of the world's fireworks; Liuyang says it makes 70% of that—accounting for more than half of the globe's explosions-for-fun-and-pageantry market.

"In every family, at least one person works with fireworks companies," says 30-year in-

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# Inventor Li's Hometown Is Behind the Boom in Chinese Fireworks

Continued from page B1

industry veteran Yu Shunan, owner of Liuyang's Jiahua Fireworks Manufacturing Co., which exports more than half its output to the U.S. Some 210,500 people, 60% of Liuyang's population, work at home and at 1,500 factories cutting paper, forming cardboard tubes, twisting wicks and—most risky of all—stuffing gunpowder into enough fireworks to fill 29 million cases annually.

Liuyang's cheap bottle rockets, Roman candles and sparklers are helping drive a trend in the U.S. to do-it-yourself fireworks shows. The U.S. fireworks business is booming, with 45 states now allowing the legal sale of at least the most basic devices, says the American Pyrotechnics Association, a Maryland-based trade group. U.S. fireworks sales are growing despite fewer large-scale public events, such as the annual Macy's Fourth of July show in New York City, which have gotten harder and more expensive to organize because of a "a crazy quilt of regulations" after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, says Julie Heckman, the association's executive director.

Backyard shows have been the biggest growth area for the U.S. fireworks industry. Revenue is up 50% since 2000, to \$900 million last year, according to the association.

At a time of rising concern about Chinese-made products from toothpaste to pet food, fireworks from China have registered relatively few problems. Even as U.S. imports have soared, injury rates by some measures have declined—and most of those injuries have come from misuse rather than defects. Before fireworks are sent to the U.S., distribu-

tors rely on testing by a Maryland-based, industry-supported group, American Fireworks Standards Laboratory, to test them in China.

"The products coming out of China are better than they've ever been," says John Rogers, the lab's executive director.

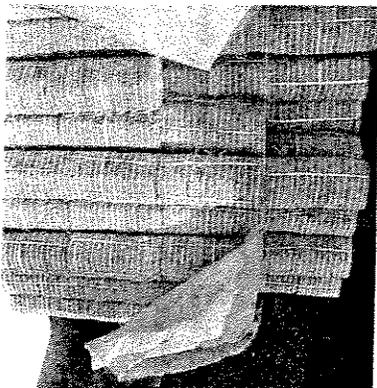
When the organization started testing in 1994, some 35% of the fireworks tested in China were rejected for not meeting U.S. government and voluntary industry safety standards. Last year, its 50 contract inspectors rejected only 7% of the fireworks in the 40,000 lots tested. While every fireworks recall since 2004—including two this month—has involved Chinese-made products, the products involved amounted to far less than 1% of total annual imports, according to U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission statistics.

In Liuyang, town elders trace fireworks to Mr. Li, a Tang Dynasty farmer who made something pop when he was fiddling with concoctions he hoped might scare bad spirits off his land. "This was the first firecracker in Chinese history," says Xiaofixian, director of Liuyang's China Fireworks Culture Museum.

But safety, as much as history, explains how Liuyang came to dominate the fireworks business. Almost everywhere else in China, officials have made fireworks companies unwelcome.

It took a terrible accident six years ago to focus China's government on industry safety. Thousands of workshops were shut down nationwide after 42 schoolchildren were blown up in their rural Jiangxi province classrooms while making fireworks. The scandal was a major international embarrassment for China's

James T. Arndy (2)



government, on the scale with this year's cases of people being enslaved to make bricks in the nation's north. Government statistics show more than 400 people die each year in China in fireworks accidents, usually ugly blasts in workshops.

At Mr. Yu's Jiahua Fireworks in Liuyang, clear precautions are taken. Gunpowder is handled by solitary workers and separated by blast walls, in buildings that are dug into small valleys. To insert the wicks, young women gently poke holes into the cardboard tubes filled with white gun-

In a small family factory in Liuyang, heavy-duty cardboard is stamped into circles to cap fireworks shells.

powder. Others, sitting on squat stools in the shadow of thousands of carefully arranged live munitions, glue on labels. Few work more than a single footstep from doors that are left open at all times.

Fireworks have never gone out of fashion in China. They remained popular even during the turmoil of China's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s when other traditions were abandoned, says Chen Gang, a third-generation pyrotechnician in Shanghai. At least once a week, Mr. Chen guides a boat around coal barges to the edge of Shanghai's historic Bund for a downtown show, often with a foreign multinational footing the bill of \$1,250 a minute.

The passion for noise and smoke is ubiquitous and year-round. Like uncorking champagne is elsewhere, lighting a string of red firecrackers is the traditional way to toast a business launch, house move or marriage. As in Inventor Li's time, the

flash and noise are supposed to scare off bad spirits.

And at midnight on Chinese New Year, street corners in big cities become blast zones where police stand aside as residents ignite rockets that shoot rapid-fire out of refrigerator-sized boxes and leave roads littered with burned paper.

When the city of Beijing rescinded a 12-year-old ban on fireworks sale last year, it was greeted as reinstatement of a birthright. State media cheered that 80% of the capital city's population lit at least one firecracker during Chinese New Year celebrations—and reported 112 injuries but no deaths.

In the U.S., fireworks on the Fourth of July is a tradition that traces its roots to 1776, when John Adams, later the second president called for "bells, bonfires and illuminations" to celebrate the Declaration of Independence.

In the same way Chinese fireworks will light up U.S. backyard this year, they have become a staple of professional shows. Philip Butler, producer with Brookhaven, N.Y.-based Fireworks by Grucci, says Chinese fireworks can cost a sixth of those made elsewhere. But Mr. Butler says Spanish and Italian fireworks are often prettier. "Does the fireworks show tell a story?" he says. "I shouldn't be only ba-ba-boom, boom boom for ten or fifteen minutes."

—Ellen Zhu contributed to this article

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ONLINE TODAY: See more photographs of the fireworks factories in Liuyang, at [MSJ.com/OnlineToday](http://MSJ.com/OnlineToday)