

CHINA

Toil and Trouble

Slavery is on the rise in China as the number of poor migrants increases. Beijing appears unwilling and unable to prevent it

By Bruce Gilley/DINGZHOU

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THE LOOMING SMOKESTACK of Four Sides Village appears from behind a stand of trees deep in the swaying wheatfields of northern China's Hebei province. To the casual observer it is just another mean and dirty rural factory churning out bricks for the country's building boom.

But for more than a year, this coal-blackened hamlet was the home of 27 men held as slaves, unpaid and unable to leave. They were lured from a sleepy train station in the nearby county seat of Dingzhou after travelling for days by train and bus from even poorer inland provinces.

Promises of high pay and good living soon evaporated. The men found themselves toiling 12-hour days in searing heat for no pay and living in sheds made from discarded bricks covered by bits of plastic.

They were not allowed to leave. When one of them escaped into a nearby wheatfield, managers pursued him on motorbikes, dragged him back to the camp by rope, then beat him to death in front of the others.

In mid-May, one of the slaves finally evaded the guards and found his way to Dingzhou. Local labour bureau officials descended on the camp on May 22, arresting the manager and freeing the men. Seven of them left immediately. The others opted to remain with promises of better work conditions, regular pay, home leave and a new manager.

"We used to be beaten and yelled at a lot," says one worker from Yunnan province clad in rags, whose job is to carry bricks on a wooden cart from the coal-fired kilns to the holding area where the bricks are stacked under straw mats. "It's better now. At least there's money."

Slavery is on the rise in China as migration flows grow and private business blossoms. Unlike the forced labour of China's state-sponsored prison factories, the illegal forced labour happening in the countryside is little known and even less understood. That is partly because it exists mostly in remote areas where underground or semi-legal private businesses--often brick factories, stone quarries and greenhouse farms--are plentiful. But it is also because of Beijing's embarrassment about the revival of a problem that the communist revolution was supposed to have ended.

Unlike the trafficking of women to serve as prostitutes or wives, the trade in healthy young men for the country's crash industrialization effort rarely surfaces in the official press. Foreign institutions like the International Labour Organization, which Beijing has recently enlisted to help it improve labour conditions in the country, say they have been told nothing of the country's slavery problem.

"We have no knowledge of nonstate slave labour in China at present," says Roger Bohning, director of the ILO's group on forced labour, which calls such practices "a terrible blight on human freedom."

Slavery in China, as elsewhere, is a term covering numerous labour abuses. Examples like the brick kilns of Dingzhou, where there is no pretence of normal employment, are rare. More often the victims work in debt bondage, trying to pay off alleged fees and deductions in a futile struggle that leaves them permanently unpaid and unfree.

Operators typically lure unsuspecting peasants to their camps with promises of high pay, good food and housing. Once there, they confiscate their identity papers and lay down strict rules of movement.

The earliest reports of slavery in China surfaced in the mid-1990s as the country's economy experienced a burst of growth after shaking off the dampening effects of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre. In 1994, for example, Guangdong officials, acting on reports in the local press, uncovered a vast network of 20 stone quarries in the province where slave labour was the norm. At a quarry near the town of Qingyuan, 39 workers had been locked in sheds at night and kept under guard in the pit for up to a year with no pay. A provincial official, interviewed on local radio at the time, said that forced labour was "common across the province." In 1996 another quarry in Guangdong's Zhanjiang was found to be employing 80 workers in what was described as "a concentration camp."

Why the matter did not gain greater official attention then may relate to the sensitivities of the problem. The Chinese Communist Party came to power promising liberation. That was true especially in ethnic-minority areas, where official accounts of slavery in the past are a common justification for modern-day CCP rule. Media in Xinjiang reported in 1994 the rescue of 400 ethnic Uighurs who had been forced to work as slaves in 13 illegal gold mines along the Manas River in the province, spending most of their time naked to prevent stealing and enduring daily thrashings with soldering irons.

Since last year, nationwide, reports have become more frequent. In May 2000, for example, the Three Gorges Metropolis News in Sichuan province reported that 90 farmers who had been displaced from the massive Three Gorges dam project on the Yangtze River had ended up as slaves in brick factories in the northeastern city of Shenyang.

SLAVERY FEEDS ON FAILURE

The growth of the problem appears to relate to China's yawning income disparities.

As inland incomes stagnate, peasants are turning to migration to boost their incomes, or even survive. Those from the remotest areas, who have typically not migrated, are now on the move as well. They are often the most vulnerable, having little experience away from their villages.

Slavery is generally considered an inefficient form of labour because of low worker motivation. But it can be made to work through threats of violence or death.

"Once people have lost their personal freedom and are being threatened with violence, their calculations change," says Hu Shudong of the China Economic Research Centre at Beijing University. "They are happy to get just one extra piece of bread or to avoid a beating. Their main aim is to stay alive until someone comes to rescue them. That means their best choice is to work hard."

The existence of force is often highlighted dramatically. In February, for example, officials from the Henan provincial capital, Zhengzhou, were rebuffed by 20 armed guards around an illegal coal pit in the city's outskirts that held 30 slaves. They had to return the next day with armed police, according to a report in the local Dahe Daily. They later closed down another slave coal pit in the same area that held 16 workers ranging in ages from 14-73, according to a separate report in the same newspaper.

Yet those cases appear to be rare. More often, local indifference is to blame for a situation that allows workers to be held under duress. That explains why most of the slave camps have just a few guards and no walls.

Rampant official corruption means slave-users can easily buy the complicity of government officials. That can be compounded when local officials have a stake in the operations, most of which, like the brick factories of Dingzhou, are let out to managers on a contract basis.

"Sure there are laws, but they are never enforced. Labour officials never bother us," says the manager of a brick factory in Dingzhou, one of 50 in this small county alone, who admits to keeping "several" workers against their will. "China is so big and so chaotic," he says, in mute embarrassment as he squats on a plastic stool in his hut during the factory's noon break. "Nothing is strange here."

The country's household registration, or hukou, system gives workers little rights or recourse to protection once they leave their designated place of residence. It has also encouraged an attitude, already existing from the country's strong local sensibilities, of viewing migrants as second-class citizens and ignoring their plight.

In late May, for example, five women being held and forced to work without pay at an industrial materials polishing factory in Hebei's Yanshan county took advantage of an electricity blackout to flee, according to a report in the Yanzhao Metropolis News. Police found that they had been working alongside 30 local women who had been paid normally and were free to come and go.

"The hukou system institutionalizes an attitude that it's not our people so we're not responsible for them," says Sophia Woodman, Hong Kong-based research director of Human Rights in China. "They become vulnerable away from their hukou residence."

The local indifference leads to a spectacle in which it is media and police from the home towns of workers that often ride to the rescue. The 90 displaced migrants from the Three Gorges found in Shenyang, for example, were rescued by police from Chongqing. "When they saw that the hometown government had come to rescue them, they could barely pack their bags fast enough," the Three Gorges Metropolis News said.

In another case, 100 people from Henan were rescued from a kelp factory in Shandong's Rongcheng city in May after one of them contacted the family back in Henan, who then got in touch with the local Henan Daily.

As economist Hu notes, slavery in China is preying on the country's most disadvantaged, and Beijing is offering few ideas to eradicate the blight: "Its very sad," he says. "These people are the most honest and sincere, yet they end up getting stuck in the worst possible situation where just living is lucky."