



China's disabled exploited as slaves

Sunday, February 27, 2011

LA Times

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Reporting from Xian, China

At 30, Liu Xiaoping is more boy than man, with soft doe eyes that affix visitors with the unabashed stare of the very young and glisten with reluctant tears when his bandages are changed.

It takes effort not to show the pain of the wounds that read up and down his body as a testament to the 10 months he was held captive at brick factories in the Chinese countryside.

His hands are as red as freshly boiled lobster from handling hot bricks from a kiln without proper protective gloves. On the backs of his legs, third-degree burns trace the rectangular shape of bricks, a factory foreman's punishment for not working fast enough. Around his wrists, ligature marks tell of the chains used to keep him from running away at night.

Liu was found wandering in the small town of Gaoling, north of Xian, on Dec. 22, 10 months after his family reported him missing. He was wearing the same clothing as when he'd disappeared in February, but the trousers were glued to the festering wounds on his legs and the gangrene of his frostbitten feet stank through the gaping holes in his shoes.

Despite his injuries and an intellectual impairment, he was able to tell how he'd been tricked by a woman who bought him a bowl of soup and promised him the equivalent of \$10 per day, good wages for manual work in rural China.

Instead, he became a slave.

"They took advantage of my brother because he has a mental disability," said his 26-year-old brother, Liu Xiaowei. "They forced him to work, beat him, tortured him, and then when he was too weak to take it anymore, they threw him out on the street."

In an adrenaline-paced economy with a chronic shortage of manual laborers, ruthless recruiters often prey on China's mentally disabled. The worst offenders work with the brick kilns that are feeding a seemingly insatiable appetite for the new apartment complexes and malls cropping up around the countryside.

"The brick factories can never get as many workers as they need. The work is heavy and a lot of people don't want to do it," said Ren Haibin, the former manager of one of several brick factories where Liu said he had worked. "Possibly the mentally disabled can be intimidated and forced to work.... They are timid and easier to manage."

In the Beijing offices of Enable Disability Studies Institute, a nongovernmental organization, director Zhang Wei reels off a list of more than a dozen cases over the last decade in which people were enslaved in appalling conditions, each more nightmarish than the last.

Young women have been sold by psychiatric hospitals as sexual partners and wives; mentally disabled young men have been imprisoned as forced laborers in coal mines and brick factories. In 2008, a brick factory owner beat a young man to death for an escape attempt. In December, Chinese authorities rescued 11 workers who had been sold by a supposed charitable organization for the disabled to a brick factory more than 1,000 miles away.

Reports on conditions in the factory said the workers hadn't been allowed to bathe in more than a year and were fed the same food as the boss' dog.

"Every year there are cases like this," Zhang said. "The worst are when they are violating the rights of the disabled in the name of charity."

Police often won't exert much effort when a mentally disabled person disappears, he said, and even if they're rescued, their testimony is not taken seriously because of their impairment.

"This is not like when a child goes missing. Police will just assume they've run away," Zhang said. Some families, he says, won't even bother to report. "They might feel that they've been relieved of the burden."

That was not the case with Liu Xiaoping. He comes from a loving family who occupy the ground floor of a shabby apartment in southern Xian, where his father sells remedies to people too poor to afford a doctor. Since Liu escaped from the brick factory, he has shuttled between home and the hospital, while his family tries to raise money for skin grafts.

Liu doesn't speak much. When he does, the words come slowly but clearly, as though they've required some concentration. He left school in the third grade, when it became clear that he'd never be able to read or write beyond an elementary level.

But he was strong and healthy. Neighbors would always call on him to help harvest wheat and potatoes and he would hang out at the market looking for odd jobs unloading trucks or carrying parcels.

"He wanted to stand on his own feet," said younger brother Xiaowei. "He was kindhearted and thinks that everybody else is too."

On Feb. 28, 2010, the night of the Lantern Festival that ends the lunar New Year holiday, he and his family were visiting relatives in Shanyang, a town south of Xian. That night, Liu failed to come home, something that had never happened before. His family reported him missing the next day and printed posters that they distributed around the neighborhood.

Little did they know that he had been transported almost 100 miles away to Gaoling, a rural county where there are dozens of brick factories tucked deep in the countryside. They might never have found him if not for another family who'd also lost a son to the brick factories.

He Wen went missing June 2. The 35-year-old had been psychologically troubled since his late teens, when he'd suffered a breakdown after failing an exam. He was unable to hold a regular job but could unload trucks and was proud that he'd managed to buy his own television set.

The afternoon he disappeared, a nephew overheard him taking a telephone call from a woman who'd offered him a job that would provide more than \$10 a day, meals and a free pack of cigarettes. He rode away on a bicycle.

His father, He Zhimin, is a 62-year-old farmer with unruly whiskers and hands that tremble as he fingers photographs of his missing son.

"I was suspicious as soon as I heard about this supposed job offer. I started asking around and people told me stories about the brick factories," He said.

He went to the local police, but they told him to file the report in nearby Gaoling. The police there sent him back.

"They kept kicking me from one place to another," he said.

So he launched his own investigation. Every afternoon, he'd go out in a three-wheel motorized cart, handing out fliers and business cards with images of his son's square-jawed face. Somebody printed out a map from Google and he marked the locations of all the brick factories he heard about: 58 in Gaoling alone.

Four workers at one factory said He Wen had worked there earlier in the summer and they gave his father directions to other factories nearby. An elderly woman had seen the younger He walking toward downtown Gaoling. Construction workers erecting an apartment complex thought he might have worked there.

"People kept saying they'd seen my son, but by the time I'd get there, he'd have disappeared."

In December, somebody telephoned to say a homeless man who looked like his son was sleeping on the street in Gaoling. He rushed over. He could see that the unshaven, dirt-encrusted man looked like his son: the same height, close in age. But he was not.

Disappointed, he returned home. His wife was furious.

"How could you leave that boy out on the street in winter? Maybe it was our son, after all. Even if he's not, he's somebody's son," she badgered her husband.

After a sleepless night, he drove back to Gaoling. The homeless man was still out in the street, but he was too delirious to give his name. He tried to take him to the police and to a hospital, but nobody wanted to take him in. Finally, he called a journalist, who matched the young man's description to that of another young man reported missing.

He was Liu Xiaoping.

As Liu recovered in the burn unit, his brother coaxed the story out of him. Liu told of the beatings and burnings, of the food so meager that he lost 20 pounds, of being chained at night and guarded by vicious dogs, about being shuttled among three brick factories.

He identified a photograph of He Zhimin's missing son as one of 11 disabled workers imprisoned with him. He also picked out from police photographs the woman who tricked him and a man known as Lao Fang, a nickname meaning "Old Fang," the foreman who beat him and the other workers.

He described in detail the location of the three brick factories where he'd worked, one of them where the workers had recognized the photo of He Zhimin's son.

That factory lies at the end of a straight dirt road through fallow corn fields 10 miles from Gaoling. There are a few houses out front, and in back a partially underground room lined with chambers containing brick ovens. Although it was closed for the winter, the manager, Wang Youqiang, was on duty.

"Look around if you like. There's no evidence against me. It's all just rumor," he told a visitor.

Wang acknowledged that it's hard to find workers — "Business is great. We sold 27 million bricks last year and would have sold 30 million, if we had the labor" — but denied using the disabled. "If you say otherwise, show me the proof."

But Ren Haibin, who was manager until June, when he says he retired because of ill health, confirmed most of what Liu Xiaoping claimed. He said the factory contracted with a man named Fang who would supply and supervise mentally disabled workers. Fang's mistress recruited them with the promise of \$10 a day in wages.

In fact, the going rate for healthy workers was about \$14 a day, whereas the factory paid Fang \$4.50 per day for each mentally disabled worker, of which \$1.50 was spent on food. The rest went to Fang.

"They made promises they didn't keep," Ren said. "The money went into Fang's pocket. The workers never saw it."

Ren said he never saw Fang beating a worker, but added: "He was not a kind person.... Maybe if they didn't work up to a certain level, there would be no food."

Fang could not be reached for comment. Telephone numbers he had used were disconnected.

In the two months since Liu was found wandering, local authorities have visited many brick factories in the area, requesting lists of workers' names and where they've come from. But no one has been arrested and Liu's family has yet to receive compensation for his medical bills.

"I thought this should be so simple, an open-and-shut case, but it has proved so complicated," said his brother Liu Xiaowei. "I'm very disappointed that our society hasn't done more to protect people like my brother."

He Zhimin, meanwhile, is no closer to finding his son. He fears that whoever is holding him may have spirited him far away to avoid detection. It's not an unreasonable fear; when the disabled workers were rescued in December in Xinjiang, one was found to have been transported 2,000 miles across China.

He Zhimin continues to go out every afternoon, driving through the countryside near the brick factories, thrusting fliers into the hands of passersby.

By now, most people recognize him, so they simply shake their heads: No, they haven't seen his son.

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