

The verdict isn't out on the Shanxi Kiln Affair: “media need to go deeper”

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Were it not for the voice of determination given by Shanxi Governor Yu Hongjun in Southern Weekend [in which he said investigation of the affair was not yet complete], the public could only assume this bit of nasty news that shamed the nation has been left open-ended. Early news estimates revealed that perhaps more than 1,000 underage workers were slaving away in the illegal kilns of Shanxi. The overwhelming majority of Shanxi kilns are operating unregistered, and their long-standing operation is made possible by a Web of officials offering them protection (保).

The Shanxi Brick Kiln Affair shocked the whole nation. The disgusting nature of details [of the affair] was one reason. Another was the widespread nature [of abuses of this kind]. And yet, following a mass catharsis of public anger, the affair rapidly atrophied. In the story, at least as it unfolded in the media, the oppression of workers in Shanxi brick kilns was reduced to the [limited] exploitation of workers at the Wang Bin Bin brick kiln in Caosheng Village (曹生村), Guangsheng Township (广), Hongdong County (洪洞), Shanxi Province. Contrast this with the more than 300 rural workers liberated in a blanket search of Shanxi. Still, we've been offered only one final verdict [in the media and by the government], and the specifics have been left out. As for the illegal kiln in Hongdong County, even as people were pleasantly surprised by the speed with which the case was handled by law enforcement, the story was dramatically muted into one or two crimes by three to five people: unlawful detention [of workers] and deliberate harming [of workers] . . .

The Chinese people, roused with a shared anger, saw this primarily as [an instance] of barbarism and inhumanity. But the scene in the courtroom has lately been meek . . . How is it this heartbreaking story has been transformed into a dark comedy?

No, said Yu Hongjun, that's not how it is! The illegal kiln affair will not be left hanging (不了了之), he said. He pledged that every problem revealed via the Internet, by the media or by the public would be investigated and the truth found out, that there would be no amnesty for the guilty. This should not be an insincere pledge. His speech indicated that a large-scale investigation was moving forward. We lack any specific reports on the nature of these investigations, however, and the media seem to be sitting on their hands waiting for the next breeze session (通气会), to get their paws on the next official press release in which verdicts are rendered but no details offered. When exactly did the media give up its active role in defining the issues and become an echo wall for officially released information?

Two things in particular concerning the media's handling of the Shanxi Kiln Affair are inexplicable. One is the shallowness of reporting. Much news in the case early on was slapped together from unverified popular rumors and Web chatter. Subsequent reports failed to go deeper into the heart of the story, generously yielding free space for the subsequent “authoritative” version [offered by officials]. Secondly, after the affair broke, the media quickly turned the focus of the

news story, neglecting investigation of the enslaved workers and their families, and of the tyrannical boss and the power clique that protected him. The focus turned [instead] to officials and law-enforcement as they worked to clean up the situation. [See ESWN translation of Southern Weekend report here]

It also owes to the lack of factual reporting that we have such a hard time understanding why the media would behave in such a way. A few investigative reporters have said that local officials stood in the way of a deeper investigation. Is this the true reason [for the lack of factual reporting]? Is it the complete reason? It's hard for us to say. Looking more carefully, we should realize that when our highest national leaders have issued a statement [on a story], when the attention of the whole nation is drawn [to a story], and when local leaders still inhibit investigation by journalists, this is itself a major news story that should be splashed across the front page. But we didn't see that major story ... What is wrong with the media? Is it weak and ineffectual? Is it lazy and jaded? Is it timid and cowering? Is it lacking in professionalism? ...

It was by dint of being reported by the media that the Shanxi Kiln Affair become a public event. The media was for this reason an important force in this public event. News reports and editorials, the feelings and demands of the public, and the attitude and actions of the government -- it was the interaction of these three that pushed this event further and deeper. The responsibility of the media was not only to report on official actions. Nor was it merely to transmit the will of the people. More important was [the need to] take an independent stance, to go in search of the truth with a spirit of skepticism, to break through the riddles, to reveal the dark corners [others] try to cover up. Only under such a situation [in which the media plays these roles] can reports on the actions of officials be believable. Only under the force of such a media can the actions of the government be legitimized in the eyes of the public. Only when the media plays such a role can there be real dialogue and understanding between the public and the government. Only by building close interaction between the government, the media and the public can public events become the kind of public events that bring together the various forces of society ...

The affair at Wang Bin Bin Kiln ... is already being tried in the courts. According to Yu Hongjun this should just be the beginning, and is far from the end of the Shanxi Kiln Affair. High-level officials have repeatedly expressed their determination that the case be investigated thoroughly. Perhaps the people can wait for a completed examination paper. Perhaps they might also find in that completed examination paper an answer to their anger, a righting of wrongs. But as for that examination paper, the media have not yet finished their homework.

[Posted by David Bandurski, July 6, 2007, 4:45pm]

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