
 REVIEW & OUTLOOK

China's Internet Justice

The rule of law has been slow to develop in China, and Communist Party apparatchiks can still do as they please. So it's no surprise that the recent break up of a child labor ring by Internet activism is the talk of the mainland.

The case started in early May, when a Shanxi province television station aired a brief report about human trafficking. Hundreds of families with missing children soon petitioned local authorities to investigate. Most were turned away and left to conduct their own investigations. Then on June 7, 400 fathers posted the results of their personal inquiries in an open letter on a popular Chinese Internet forum. They described how their chil-

dren had been abducted and sold into slavery to work in furnace-like brick kilns in Shanxi province.

The letter quickly spread to blogs all over China, igniting national outrage. The ring, as it turned out, wasn't confined just to brick kilns in Shanxi—it bled over into neighboring Henan province, too. Local Party officials and police profited from the operations, some of which were built on Party land.

Embarrassed by these revelations, China's state media—the mouthpiece of the Party—weighed in. China Daily trotted out Qin Yuhai, Henan's vice governor

and police chief, saying reassuring things like, “We must do everything we can to fight human trafficking and rescue those held captive.”

A child slave labor case, broken by the Web, not law.

The brick kiln case is notable not just for the number of victims, but how Beijing manipulated the coverage of its belated response. It put on a huge show of force, rolling out 35,000 policemen to raid 7,500 cites. State media were ordered to applaud the Party's response.

The Party's rescue mission was staged to quell public discontent—not out of any real obligation to upholding the rule of law. Which brings us to the real problem:

The Party can't wholly enforce the rule of law without allowing a free press, and it can't loosen the reins on the press without exposing its own corruption. It's a catch-22, and China's citizens, especially its poorest, are the ones who suffer.

Some citizens, like the brick kiln fathers, are brave enough to take justice into their own hands. Armed with the Internet, they now have a mechanism to do so. Citizen-reporters and whistleblowers are finding ever more creative ways to slip through censors to dig into issues mainstream media can't touch. This is encouraging for those who believe freer flows of information will slowly change China. But there's a long road ahead, and many more brick kilns to uncover.