

## Child labour in China

Child labour is now a widespread, systemic and increasingly serious problem in China, says China Labour Bulletin, a Hong Kong-based NGO. In its new study, *Small Hands: A Survey Report on Child Labour in China*, it analyzes the reasons, noting that because child workers have no ability to protect themselves they generally face worse conditions than adults. This excerpt highlights the issue through the words of officials and child labourers.

**W**hen news of the Shanxi brickyard slavery scandal broke in June 2007, Chinese media reports claimed nearly a thousand children had been abducted into forced labour. Shanxi provincial government officials subsequently claimed the actual figure was 12, and, after a month-long investigation, stated without further explanation that only six of the rescued workers were actually children.

We will probably never know how many children were abducted into slavery at the Shanxi brickyards. We will probably never know how many children are working across China today, partly because “undisclosed information and data on the handling of child labour cases nationwide” is classified by the Chinese government as “highly secret.” Apart from exceptional cases, such as the Shanxi brickyard scandal, the Chinese government does not issue statistics on child labour; indeed it is unclear as to whether the authorities are even monitoring and documenting the problem. The official response...tends to be that China has passed laws prohibiting such activities — with the implication that this constitutes a sufficient response to the challenge of child labour in a developing country. Until recently, in other words, the government has largely been in denial over this issue.

The Shanxi brickyard scandal temporarily disturbed this state of official complacency, but as yet, the incident does not seem to have prompted any more systematic government investigation of, or measures to counteract, the increasingly serious problem of child labour in China. Based on the research conducted in this report, China Labour Bulletin is confident that, in the specific areas surveyed, child labour is once again on the rise. There is a demand for low-cost, low-skilled labour, which many employers seek to meet with child labour in place of more expensive, less malleable, adult labour. There is also clearly an ample supply of child labour, created by children...dropping out of school.

### A regional pattern

The origins of child labour in China and the overall hiring trends have clear regional characteristics. Child workers primarily migrate from economically disadvantaged areas to economically developed areas. Child labour is most common in developed southeastern areas like Guangdong, Zhejiang and Fujian. Nearly all child labourers are from rural households and only rarely from poor urban households.

In terms of gender, some data demonstrate that the number of female child workers is clearly higher than the number of males. We also found that, whether on the factory floors or in the streets and markets, one encounters more female than male child workers. It is often assumed that first, the gender makeup of child labour mirrors the gender makeup of school dropouts; and second, that more girls drop out than boys because, in poor households, parents are more willing to let their daughters leave school early. However, we

did not find any significant difference in the dropout rates of boys and girls. Officials and teachers from government education agencies all indicated that there is not a large difference between the number of male and female school dropouts. A possible alternative explanation for the higher number of female child workers is simply that the demand for girls in the labour market is higher.

Along with enacting legislation prohibiting child labour, Beijing has placed the child labour problem within the remit of labour bureaus at all levels of local government. Working in conjunction with agencies in charge of public security and industry and commerce, as well as labour unions, labour bureaus can conduct a “concentrated attack” on labour-intensive factories and workshops. If the use of child labour is discovered, the employer is required to dismiss the child workers immediately, return them to their parents or guardian, and pay a fine.

The bustling township of Baigou — a mere two-hour drive south of Beijing — is known as the “luggage production centre of China.” We visited a local labour bureau official there, who described that agency’s monitoring of the child labour problem:

Q: Do factories use child labour now?

A: This phenomenon does occur in a very few factories, which is unavoidable. Why do we make inspections? To put an end to the use of child labour.

Q: How often do you make your inspections?

A: We make inspections every day. There are several thousand enterprises in Baigou, and we inspect both large and small ones.

Q: Do you visit undercover, or openly?

A: We visit openly — undercover would be impossible. That would not be realistic. They wouldn’t let you in the factory door.

Q: Can you keep up with inspecting that many factories?

A: We inspect each factory at least once per year, and focus on more visits to those factories where workers have made complaints. We have now established a ratings system for factories: A, B, and C. We don’t need to visit the honest, law-abiding factories.

Q: If you discover child workers, do you immediately send them home?

A: Yes, immediately.

Q: Do you take them yourselves?

A: We don’t take them. It is the boss’ responsibility to do this. This is done under supervision. We give them a time limit to comply, and we can also punish them.

Q: How do you typically punish them?



*Child mechanics repair a truck in Shanghai*

A: Based on state regulations, a fine of 5,000 yuan per month for every child worker used.

The legal enforcement methods used by the labour bureaus have curtailed the problem of child labour to some extent, but they have also forced many employers to actively conceal their child labourers and erect barriers to inspection. In Baigou township, for example, we discovered during our survey that its several thousand luggage factories and workshops employed a large number of child workers. The front doors of these factories and workshops were locked during the day.

All the child workers we interviewed received wages substantially lower than their adult co-workers. Child workers are generally less assertive than adults and, to hold onto their jobs and meagre wages, will not report illegal behaviour to the authorities. Those child workers who are returned home and cannot find new employment may, within a relatively short period of time, end up in the streets and drift into a life of crime or become victims of crime.

The Chinese government has recently adopted policy measures to limit the supply of child labour. These include reducing the economic hardships faced by poor rural households, encouraging poor households to send their children to school; adopting measures to strengthen the compulsory education system; encouraging children who have dropped out to return to school; and implementing a “two waivers and one subsidy” policy in poor areas, whereby miscellaneous fees and textbook fees are waived and the living expenses of boarding students are subsidized. However, due to the financial constraints of local governments, these measures have been only partially implemented at best.

## Finding work is easy

Media reports indicate that child labour...is currently concentrated in electronics, plastics, garment, shoe and toy manufacturing, as well as the food and beverage industry. Within these industries, underage workers primarily engage in tasks that are highly repetitive and time-consuming, but that do not require a high level of physical strength, for example, putting beads on clothing, assembling electronic components, applying glue in the manufacture of luggage, and preparing and serving dishes in restaurants.

In Shunping county in Hebei, a Communist Party cadre explained just how easy it was for children to find employment:

Q: Where do some of the children who haven't finished middle school go to work?

A: They mainly work in local town or village factories, in shoe manufacturing, producing sausage skins, or making luggage. There are also some who work in bigger factories as security guards, or go to cities to work on construction sites or work as sales clerks.

Q: Do the enterprises accept them if they are under working age?

A: Usually there is no problem. Town and village enterprises are not like state-owned enterprises — they don't pay much attention to age. When we say child workers, we mean children under the age of 16 who go to work at 14 or 15. If the company owner asks them their age, they'll say 17. The owner usually just accepts that he or she is 17 and won't look into it any further.

## The worst working conditions

Media reports have indicated that the working conditions of child workers are generally much worse than those of adult workers — and CLB's field survey confirmed this point. The following is an official media report on the working conditions of child labourers in a clothing factory in the Haizhu district of Guangdong:

There are two tables crammed into the tiny workshop, along with two electric fans and a VCD player. The children start work at eight in the evening, and when there is a lot of work, the shift may be extended. After midnight, when the children get very sleepy, they turn on the music, and everyone nods their heads while singing along...While sewing on the beads, the children's hands are stuck by the needle dozens of times each day and their hands are full of calluses. Because their eyes cannot leave the needle and the bead, the children have all developed “panda eyes” — they cannot open their eyes wide, and are always complaining that their eyes hurt. There is a small first-aid kit in the factory, full of the painkiller analgin. After long periods of night work, many of the children suffer headaches, to the point that they cannot work.

Because child workers lack basic legal knowledge and an awareness of their rights, they are unable to make demands on their own behalf regarding wages and working conditions. Child workers from factories and workshops in the city of Xingtai, the town of Baigou, and Xisanzhuang township and Gaozhu village in the city of Shijiazhuang, all located in Hebei, told CLB their monthly wages were about 300-400 yuan. Hebei's minimum wage at the time was 520 yuan per month. These factories and workshops typically calculated wages by the piece, and shifts often surpassed the legally mandated work period, sometimes extending to 14 hours per day.

Enterprises that hire child workers typically promise to provide room and board. In Gaozhu village, clothing factory and workshop owners typically rent local residents' homes as production facilities. These small factories usually employ just a few dozen workers and utilize a two-storey house. The downstairs serves as a workshop, and the upstairs serves as a dormitory...To evade inspections by labour agencies, the child employees are shut inside the house during the day. Outside the gate of one cluster of workshops called “Gaozhu Courtyard,” a guard prevented our interview team from entering. He claimed: “The employees inside can only come out with written permission from the boss.”

On the streets of Gaozhu, a girl who did not want to reveal her name or age described the so-called “room and board” provided. She said that there were 12 girls sharing one room, and it was “really crowded.” Every day they “get up early, sleep little, and are very tired.” The boss was “very mean” to them, but she believed that “he is the boss, and he is supposed to be mean.” In these crowded working and living conditions, child workers also sometimes suffered beatings at the hands of their employers. In Baigou, a middle-aged woman told us:

Q: Are there very young people working here?

A: Yes, they even want 12- or 13-year-olds.

Q: We hear that some have to work in extremely hard conditions.

A: Many, and they are beaten if they don't work well. Some bosses are really terrible. They beat them when they don't work well, like the bosses from Jiangxi — who are very mean.

Aside from the assault on their physical health, the long-term isolation of many child labourers also inflicts great psychological damage. On a wall near a polypropylene factory in Baigou, we discovered the following graffiti, scrawled in childish handwriting: “It's a good thing to grow up in the warm embrace of your family. I really want to go home.” “I will love you forever, Mum and Dad.” “This place is death.”

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