

China: Homeless children found dead in rubbish bin

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The dead bodies of five children, reportedly aged between 9 and 13, were found in a rubbish bin in the town of Bijie, in China's south-western province of Guizhou on November 6.

The incident, which has highlighted the glaring inequalities of Chinese society, has become a focal point of widespread anger over endemic poverty, and the imperviousness of the sclerotic Chinese regime to the social needs of the masses. The tragedy has “trended” on social media sites and blogs. Many noted the contrast between the social conditions revealed by the tragedy, and the lavish setting of the Chinese Communist Party 18th National Congress, which occurred the same week.

The congress took place as the ruling party was rocked by recent corruption scandals. The family of Premier Wen Jiabao reportedly has a “hidden fortune” of \$US2.7 billion, while the congress expelled senior figures like Bo Xilai and Liu Zhijun over corruption involving hundreds of millions of dollars.

The deaths of homeless children sleeping in a rubbish bin expose the claim advanced by outgoing President Hu Jintao at the CCP congress that the Stalinist regime has succeeded in “turning the poor and backward old China into an increasingly prosperous and powerful new China.”

The dead children were all from the same extended family and shared the surname, Tao. Two of their fathers had moved to Shenzhen to work as rubbish collectors, and the other was living in Bijie. Shenzhen, a “Special Economic Zone” and hub of foreign investment, is over a thousand kilometres from Bijie, a

mining centre known for its high levels of poverty.

In an article published by the official Xinhua news agency, Tao Jinyou, the father of one of the boys, explained that the children had gone out to play and had not come home for three weeks. Tao is an impoverished farm labourer in Bijie. His son had reportedly left school two years ago, and assisted his father farming. The other children were in the care of an elderly grandmother, who had impaired sight and was unable to cope with four young boys. Locals reported having seen the children living in a makeshift shed on a construction site, eating discarded vegetables, and playing with a football.

According to other media reports, the children slept in an industrial bin near the construction site on the night of November 5. They had lit a fire and closed the lid of the bin to keep warm, as temperatures dropped to around 6 degrees Celsius. While initial reports indicated that they may have been burnt to death, it now appears that they died of carbon monoxide poisoning from burning charcoal. The remains of the children were found by an elderly rag picker.

Many Chinese language internet discussions of the tragedy have referred to “The Little Match Girl”, a short story by Hans Christian Andersen that is well-known in China, and used to be taught in primary schools. In that story, a poor girl flees her abusive father on New Year's Eve and tries to sell matches to passers-by in the street, only to die of cold and hunger when she runs out of matches. One Sino Weibo “microblogger” cited by the *Wall Street Journal* commented, “I thought the little match girl was something that only happened in capitalist

societies...Why this sense of superiority about our system?"

The CCP regime, acutely aware of public hostility over social inequality, has responded by attempting to present the tragedy as a "local issue" with no broader significance. It has also scapegoated local officials and the parents of the children. Local authorities have announced that the two deputy heads of Qixingguan district responsible for civil affairs and education have been suspended, and ordered to submit an "explanation" for the incident. Other government and CCP officials have also reportedly faced disciplinary measures. Two principals have lost their jobs over the children's truancy from school.

In reality, the deaths expose the systemic poverty wracking Chinese society, and the plight of the children left behind by parents who have to migrate long distances to find work. According to figures released by China's Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2008, there are between 1 and 1.5 million children living without parental supervision in China, many of them homeless or living in makeshift accommodation. The figure does not include children who travel with their parents, as they seek work as migrant labourers.

China's internal migrants live a precarious existence, facing the prospect of homelessness, and have little or no access to social security. Migrant workers are often employed in low paid menial work, such as cleaning and collecting rubbish. They are subject to particularly severe exploitation, along with official discrimination, including regulations that make it more difficult for their children to attend college.

As a result of poverty, many migrant workers leave their children behind. Dale Rustein, from UNICEF China commented: "It's not uncommon to see several children living in a household with an elderly couple in rural China. These are the left-behind children. Right now people are coping the best they can..."

Ma Li, who runs a shelter for homeless children in Jiangsu Province told the *China Daily* that the tragedy in Bijie was bound up with a broader social crisis, and the inadequate provision of services for homeless

children. "Rescue centres don't have a long-term effective way to help these children, as they can only provide food and shelter for a maximum of 10 days," he explained. "After that, the rescue centres are required to send these children home."

The deaths of the five children in Dickensian circumstances is a direct consequence of the restoration of capitalism in China over the past three decades by the CCP regime. The new leadership installed at the CCP congress is committed to a new round of pro-market restructuring which will only widen the social gulf between rich and poor and make similar tragedies inevitable.



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