

Chinese journalist arrested for reporting homeless children's deaths

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Li Yuanlong, the journalist who broke the story of five homeless children being found dead in an industrial rubbish bin in Bijie, in China's south-western province of Guizhou, has reportedly been sent on a forced "vacation."

The children apparently died of carbon monoxide poisoning after lighting a coal fire to stay warm in the bin in which they were sleeping. Their deaths quickly became the focal point of popular hostility to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime. Bijie is a centre of coal mining, known for its high levels of poverty. The incident, along with criticism of the authorities, featured prominently on social media sites and blogs. (See: "China: Homeless children found dead in rubbish bin").

Li Yuanlong's reports, which were then followed up in the mainstream media, have thus become something of a political problem for the CCP regime.

Li's son, Li Muzi told the *South China Morning Post* his father had been taken by authorities at 1 p.m. on November 21 to Guiyang airport. Li Muzi said his father was put on a plane, and sent on a "holiday" to a tourist destination that he did not want to reveal. State Security Bureau agents routinely use this kind of forced "holiday" against dissidents. The victims are locked up in secret detention locations, in order to intimidate and even physically abuse them.

Li Muzi, who is a student in the US, and regularly communicates with his father by email and phone, explained: "My father told me he received several phone calls before he was taken from home... Apparently they [the Chinese authorities] are trying to

prevent him from helping other reporters follow up on the incident."

Li Fangping, a lawyer and friend of Li Yuanlong, indicated that he spoke to the journalist by phone, while Li was being driven along a highway to a resort somewhere in Guizhou. Reports indicate that Li's wife was also sent away. In the *South China Morning Post* article, Li's son said his father had asked him to remove a blog posting about the deaths of the homeless children, in the hope that it may shorten the forced "vacation."

This is not the first time that Li Yuanlong has faced punishment as a result of his investigative journalism. He had worked as a reporter for the *Bijie Daily*, the main newspaper in the city. In 2005, he was sacked by the paper, and imprisoned for two years, for writing too many "negative" stories, especially on rural poverty.

Li told his lawyer at the time: "I write lies and clichés all day and I feel repressed. I want to be able to say what I think... The reality inside China is about inequality of wealth, corruption of officials, unjust administration of law, restriction of speech, etc... As an intellectual, I have the obligation to criticise and expose these phenomena." He was charged with "inciting subversion of state power." Since being released from the jail, he has been unemployed, but has posted investigative stories on an online Chinese language news site.

Li's arrest is a sharp warning that the new CCP leadership under Xi Jinping, installed at its recent 18th congress, will be just as ruthless in suppressing political opposition as its predecessors. The congress laid down

an agenda of launching a social onslaught against the conditions of working people by further opening up the Chinese economy to international capital, inevitably widening the gulf between rich and poor.

The tragic plight of the children, whose parents were migrant workers, has resonated with broad layers of the Chinese population, increasingly concerned by growing social inequality and the CCP regime's failure to address the social problems confronting ordinary people. Official figures from 2008 estimated that there were between 1 and 1.5 million children living without parental supervision in China. According to *Caixing*, the country's leading business newspaper, however, there could be as many as 58 million "left behind" children.

The attempt to censor Li appears to be part of a broader crackdown on dissent. Zhai Xiaobing, a worker in the financial sector, was arrested on November 7 by Beijing police, apparently for a cryptic "tweet" he posted about the CCP congress. Twitter is blocked by China's Internet police, but it is estimated that around 35 million people in China access the site, using proxy servers and virtual private networks.

Zhai's tweet about the CCP congress read in part: "The Great Hall of the People suddenly collapses, only seven of more than 2,000 people inside survive. Later, one-by-one the survivors die in strange ways." It seems that the tweet was referring to the horror film "Final Destination," using it as an analogy for the destabilising factional warfare that developed within the CCP after the arrest of former Chongqing party secretary Bo Xilai in March.

The tweet reflects widespread hostility to the political machinations that occur behind the backs of the people. The public knew little about what was going on at the very top, except that the factional struggle resulted in the exposure of massive levels of corruption in the highest echelons of the party.

A report in the *Wall Street Journal* stated that the Miyun detention centre in Beijing confirmed that Zhai was being detained there, and indicated that he had been arrested for writing "a micro-blog post containing

false information on the Internet." Friends of Zhai have said they have since been unable to contact his wife, and have raised concerns that she may have disappeared. An online petition calling for Zhai to be released has circulated widely, and has received hundreds of signatures.

The Chinese regime's nervous reaction in arresting dissidents like Li Yuanlong and Zhai Xiaobing indicates it is acutely aware of growing hostility to social inequality, endemic corruption, and poverty, and is immediately responding to any oppositional voices with police-state repression.



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