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School killings in China

Society or wilderness?

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At 7.20am on 23 March 2010, Zheng Minsheng, a 42-year-old man, indiscriminately stabbed 13 children waiting at the gate of a primary school in Nanping, Fujian Province. Eight of the children died. Subsequently, in a matter of weeks, five more school killings followed in different parts of China.¹ Between 23 March and 12 May 2010, numerous children were killed and injured.

All six killings were carried out by middle-aged men using knives, hammers or cleavers. There had been isolated cases of spree killings in China before, where children had been the main victims.² But never before had school killings on this scale occurred in China within such a short period of time. The attacks took place in different provinces several thousand kilometres apart. It is highly probable that the first attack, which was widely publicized, triggered the subsequent attacks. Hardly any news event in recent years has caused such a stir among the Chinese public, with reactions ranging from horror at the cruelty of the attacks to diffuse anxieties about a moral crisis in Chinese society. The government soon clamped down on news coverage, citing fears of further copycat killings. Yet both inside and outside China, debates continue about the motivations and underlying reasons.

Mass murders of a similar nature occur in many other societies. School killings take place in Europe and North America, and these are typically blamed on individualization, the effects of a mass media and what some identify as social breakdown (e.g. see Newman *et al.* 2004). The phenomenon of 'running amok' in Malay-speaking areas has been explained as a 'culture-bound syndrome' (e.g. Saint Martin 1999). While it is difficult to explain the Chinese school killings in terms of some pattern or other to be found in an unchanging 'Chinese culture', it may be possible to connect the killings to processes of social change, as in the case of similar incidents in the West. There are, however, differences between these killings and their Western counterparts, most notably weapons³ used and the age of the perpetrators, with the Chinese attackers being older than, for example, North American school killers.

The school killings throw a number of social and political problems in contemporary China into sharp relief. Journalists, blog commentators and scholars writing on these incidents relate the killings to rapid social change, insecurity, unemployment and inequality. Many see the killings as a sign of a moral crisis engulfing China (e.g. Fan, Yang & Zhou 2010; Moody 2010). Government rhetoric of the 'harmonious society' was dealt a blow by the murders, which many saw as a symptom of widespread social anomie.

This article will explore the media responses to the killings, which tended to involve much speculation about the wider social backdrop of the events and theorizing about what they implied about Chinese society. It will also examine the individual cases of three of the murderers, each of which appears to involve elements of revenge-taking against 'society'.

We connect the search for underlying reasons and causes of the murders with the wider search for 'society' in contemporary China. We conclude by emphasizing the gap between the official promotion of the idea of 'society' as a cohesive moral community and a parallel popular understanding of the contemporary Chinese social world as a 'savage wilderness'.

Media reactions

Initially, the media response was one of simple horror at the crimes and revulsion for their perpetrators. Just after the first murderer was executed, *Southern Weekend*, a popular weekly newspaper, printed the headline 'Now that he is executed, we are all relieved' (Chai 2010). The newspaper expressed the rage and fear of many, but was itself vehemently attacked soon after, for ignoring the broader social context of the attacks. Meanwhile, more school killings followed in quick succession.

On the day of Zhang Minsheng's execution, the third in the series occurred. By then many people had started to look for explanations beyond the personal histories of the individual perpetrators. Popular debate ensued, in particular on the internet, where journalists and bloggers wrote commentaries and discussed the incidents. Huang Hung, the *China Daily* columnist, for instance, wrote in her English blog that she was relieved when 'Prime Minister Wen Jiabao said in an interview with Phoenix TV in Hong Kong that the child murders reflect deep social problems in China. Thank goodness the prime minister actually recognizes that fact – and didn't blame the killings on freedom of the press.' (Huang 2010).

The comments of the highly regarded blogger Han Han straightforwardly identified official corruption as the underlying reason for the human calamities that led to the school killings. In a scathing post, he wrote on his blog 'you children, you died for the corruption and debauchery of your grandfathers [the old guards of the party and state]' (Han 2010). The perpetrators of the attacks were disillusioned and desperate men, Han notes, and continues: 'If they feel there's no way out in society, then killing those even weaker than themselves becomes their only way out. I recommend that all the police guarding local officials nationwide be transferred to guard kindergartens. A government that can't even protect children doesn't need so many people protecting it'.

The claim that the government failed to protect the children is poignant for Chinese readers, given the continuous attempts by the party and government to present itself as a benevolent parental authority. But while officials claim to exert their power with parental compassion and good intentions, many see them as self-interested people who help themselves to public funds. The suggestion that official corruption was the root cause of China's moral crisis – of which the school killings were the most atrocious expression – surfaced in many of the ensuing debates.

After the last in this series of school killings, the parents of a child at a kindergarten in Guangdong Province hung a banner on the fence of the school, on which they wrote 'Who are the real culprits? The government building is right next to the kindergarten!' A photo of this banner was widely circulated on the internet, and netizens soon picked up on it, and appended a satirical narrative to it:

the government made its own banner, on which was written 'Don't bother us, we have to attend meetings: the army is not far away'. The army in turn, declared that 'Smart people will understand facts: the tax-office is right over there'. The tax-office officials then wrote their banner: 'This is not our business: it was the city administrators who destroyed the foundations of people's livelihoods'. The city administrations blamed the police, the police blamed the People's Consultative Conference, the consultative conference blamed the real-estate sharks, and finally the real-estate sharks blamed the government again, and wished people a peaceful sleep. But people cannot sleep under these circumstances, which is really the kindergarten's fault.⁴

This satirical narrative drawn from the internet illustrates in a disconcerting way the search for the reasons behind social injustice in contemporary China. People want to hold government offices and institutions responsible, but each organization finds excuses and blames another. In the end, people are left with profound disquiet: horrible things are taking place and no one accepts responsibility for what is happening.

The story ridicules the concept of the 'harmonious society' by questioning the good intentions of the leadership, the party and the government: in reality, there are only atomized individuals and institutions. The idea that state and government should be held accountable for social problems makes sense against the background of these propaganda concepts, in which state and society are united as one family. Several of the six murderers also directly held the state and/or 'society' responsible for their personal misfortunes. Before we try to disentangle the links between society and state, we will examine three of the six cases in more detail.

Three cases: Revenge against society and state

Zheng Minsheng, the first killer, has attracted the most attention of the six men.⁵ He was a doctor at a hospital affiliated to a local factory. His success at the operating table and his widely acknowledged skills as a physician earned him the nickname of 'Master Surgeon Zheng' (*Zheng Yi Dao*). After the killing, many local people were astonished by the fact that 'Master Surgeon Zheng' had become such a cruel killer. People who knew him could not believe what had happened to him. His neighbours said that he was not hostile to children. In the months before the killings, they had often seen him playing with children.

As a local doctor, Zheng enjoyed a good reputation among the factory's patients, workers and other doctors. Both his brother and sister were workers at the factory. Their salaries as factory employees were relatively small, and the family lived in modest conditions. Apparently, Zheng had difficulties dealing with some colleagues, but these problems did not appear serious.

In 2002, the hospital became a community clinic separate from the factory. Zheng's relationship with his colleagues worsened, and he frequently complained that the head physician did not respect him. In 2008, Zheng was promoted and he complained more frequently about his superior. In 2009 he quit. Immediately after resigning, Zheng visited several hospitals in search of employment. At the beginning of 2010, he gave up hope of finding another job and became depressed.

Zheng testified in court that, aside from his failure to find a job, another reason for his depression was his failure to get married. Friends had tried to introduce young women to him, but every time a woman realized that his family was relatively poor, she would break up with him. In 2008, Zheng had finally found a girlfriend. The relationship lasted about a year. When Zheng left his job, the woman's elder brother persuaded her to leave him. Zheng complained to his neighbours that she had decided not to marry him because of his poverty. It seems likely that Zheng would have been under severe pressure to find a job and get married. According to neighbours, he had frequent arguments with his mother and brother about this.

Unlike the other five killers, Xu Yuyuan was from a relatively wealthy family. He had a large house worth more than a million yuan, and additional income from renting out another property he owned. His only daughter was due to wed the following October. It seemed that he was in a comfortable financial situation and he had good relationships with his children, who were doing well. But many people disliked his bad temper, and he enjoyed gambling. He had been accused of sexual harassment and domestic violence, and his relationship with his wife was not good. In 2001, Xu was accused of fraud and was sacked from his job at an insurance company. He became involved in several illegal businesses. Although his wife was running two shops, he was not satisfied with their financial situation. He wanted to earn more money but failed in the various enterprises he started, and accumulated substantial debts. A week before the killing, one of his creditors slapped him during an argument. This incident reportedly sent Xu into a depression.

Wang Yonglai, who committed suicide after his attack on five schoolchildren, was a farmer who had been involved in a village dispute. The dispute was over a plot of land in Wang's village that he had been forbidden to build on, until one day the village committee declared that villagers could build there if they paid a certain sum of money. Wang Yonglai and some other villagers had paid the requested sum and begun building. Wang's son was to get married in the house he had built on the plot. But when the houses were almost finished, officials from a higher government office found out that the village committee had issued building permits without the necessary authorization, and after a short investigation all the new houses were demolished. Wang Yonglai lost all the money he had spent on the building permit and the building itself, and he tried in vain to get compensation from the local government.

The six killers were from different backgrounds, with different experiences and possible motives for their crimes, but what they all had in common was failure and severe frustration. Of course, economic competition, social pressures and the unjust acts of officialdom cannot 'explain' the murder of innocent children, nevertheless, these were identified as the causes by both many commentators on the killings and the killers themselves.

Zheng Minsheng openly claimed that he had killed the children in order to 'take revenge against society' (*baofu shehui*) and that he himself was only partially responsible. He went on to claim that his victims, and he himself, stood together against society. 'If the real reason is not disclosed, neither the eight children nor I will close our eyes in the underworld', he stated in court, implying that he was as innocent as the children (Yang, L. 2010).

Though not so dramatically expressed, ‘revenge against society’ was also the most frequently cited motive in each of the other cases. What do people mean when they say they want to take revenge against society in today’s China? To broaden out the question a little, how are family, society and state constituted and inter-related in contemporary China?

What ‘society’ means in contemporary China

In our previous work, we have studied everyday ethics in family life in contemporary China (Steinmüller 2009; Wu 2009). Like other anthropologists who have written on this topic over the last few decades (Liu 2000; Yan 2003; Ku 2004), we have attempted to situate moral life in contemporary China within the context of family, society and state.

In his studies of suicide in contemporary Chinese society, Wu Fei suggests that, rather than pursuing a meaningful life in the context of an abstract ‘society’, ordinary Chinese people seek fulfilment from securing their place in the power arrangements within the family (Wu 2005, 2009). Ever since modernizing elites started disseminating emancipative ideas of individual freedom, equality and dignity, ideals of individualism and independence have complicated the struggles to achieve power balance within families. While these discourses offered new possibilities for self-realization, they also brought new problems and intensified domestic struggles (cf. Wu 2009: 195 ff.).

A crucial question is how public discourse and domestic practice diverge over concepts of ‘society’ and ‘state’ in contemporary China. The idea that China lacks a sphere of social association in between the family and the state has a long-standing history among Chinese intellectuals. The neo-Confucian philosopher Liang Shuming described the Chinese world view as comprising the family and the cosmos – that is, *tianxia* (‘all under heaven’). According to Liang, China lacks notions of the individual, and of society as an abstract, supra-individual association, as developed in the West (Liang 1987a, 1987b). This concept of ‘society’ itself was introduced into Chinese in the 19th century as a Japanese loan word, which in turn was a translation from European languages (cf. Liu 1995).

Like many intellectuals in early-20th-century China, Liang believed one of the main tasks of the modern state was to create and organize this abstraction, ‘society’. Sun Yat-sen, the first president of the Chinese Republic, famously remarked that ‘the Chinese people are like sand’, and hence need to be organized. This organization of society by the state was the historical task of the communist revolution: during the Maoist era, a unified and centralized state apparatus and a plethora of social organizations were set up, all of which were entangled with the hierarchy of party and state. The promotion of socialism,⁶ the consolidation of party rule, and the politics of mass mobilization led to a systematic blurring of ‘society’ and ‘state’.

A further result of the processes of state formation throughout the 20th century in mainland China has been the consolidation and dissemination of an official modernist discourse linked to state and nation. In this discourse, ‘society’ plays a decisive role as the object of modernizing efforts and the subject of a new political and moral community.

The notion of ‘society’ is, however, interpreted very differently in official and popular discourses. When party officials and intellectuals use the word ‘society’, they imply solidarity and cohesion. The promotion of the idea of ‘society’ as a moral community is intended to inspire a sense of stability and legitimize government policies. In popular discourse, however, ‘society’ is often a jungle – a space of coldness and indifference. Parents frequently scold their children in order to prepare them to ‘enter society’ (*zou shang shehui*). ‘Enter society’ here means to leave the warm space of the family, where people take care of each other, where you can live freely and don’t have to worry, for a social space constituted of strangers, where there is much danger and risk. Young people are taught to learn a new set of skills and techniques in order to survive in this wilderness. After the school killings, this notion of society as a ‘wilderness’ was frequently invoked.

Zheng Minsheng’s statement in court suggested that ‘society’ was responsible for what he had done: it was because of an unjust society that he could not get a new job, could not find a wife, and lived a life of poverty. He was an innocent victim of society, used as an instrument by society to hurt innocent children. In other words, ‘society’ was the first and final cause of his misery and the misery he inflicted on others.

In Wang Yonglai’s case, it seemed that corruption in local government was directly responsible for his misfortune. In that case, one might ask why he chose to attack innocent school pupils and not local government officials. But though horrifying and apparently irrational, Wang’s displaced act of ‘revenge’ did have an effect: after he killed the children and himself, the local government stopped demolishing houses in his village.

Targeting innocent children, the attackers destroyed the ‘only hope’ of these children’s families and their country (cf. Fong 2006). Most of those killed in the attacks were only children. As members of the one-child generation, they were loaded with expectations from their families and from the Chinese nation. The family-planning policies of recent decades was combined with the promotion of ‘population quality’ (*renkou suzhi*), and the ‘only child’ became the main object of these policies and discourses, and therefore a powerful symbol of the connection between family, society and nation.⁷

This is how these children could have become the targets of these killings. Stories such as Wang Yonglai’s, and a belief in a generalized culture of corruption in much Chinese officialdom, as illustrated in the internet discourses about official buck-passing in response to the killings, meant that many pointed the finger at the state after the school murders. The urge to blame the state is in part an ironic product of the state’s own promotion of an ideal of ideological harmony and unity of state and society. Bringing together Confucian and Maoist notions of government, propaganda reproduces symbolic equivalences between family and country, between father and ruler, in an idea of ‘kindly power’ that projects the compassion and invariably good intentions of the government.

As Yang Jie (2010: 551) points out, the state’s projection of such ‘kindly power’ serves to legitimate destruction and violence while at the same time the state employs humanitarian measures ‘to counteract or mask the effects of that destruction’.⁸ These contradictions are intermittently experienced by Chinese citizens as extremely disillusioning, and many observers assumed that Wang Yonglai and the other school killers were motivated at least in part by such frustrations.

Conclusion

We do not argue that contemporary Chinese society is a ‘wilderness’, nor that the Chinese government bears the responsibility for these murders. But both ideas were prominent among the responses to the killings. For many Chinese, it seems, society is either a hostile wilderness, or else something that has been overwhelmed by the power of the party-state: in either case, a positive or neutral notion of ‘society’ seems impossible.

The school killings have crystallized in public discourse a generalized sense of social and political alienation, and 'society' has come to symbolize this alienation.

Since the 1980s, China has seen rapid economic growth, which has raised living standards under conditions of relative political stability. For the majority of Chinese people, the 'problem of having enough food and clothing' (*wenbao wenti*) has been resolved, and 'social stability' (*shehui wending*) has been guaranteed. These achievements are frequently emphasized in official discourse.

The shift of focus in public discourse from political to economic matters, however, has also implied greater distance between high politics and everyday moral concerns. The sense of injustice and inequality has multiplied considerably, yet at the same time society as a moral community – as in 'social-ism' (*shehui zhuyi*) and 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui*) – is continually extolled in public discourse.

The government's projection of 'society' as a big family, and of itself as that family's benevolent patriarchal authority, gives rise to disappointed expectations and contradictions in everyday life, in which many people experience 'society' as an indifferent, even savage, place. Perhaps what is needed is a new understanding of 'society', a new intermediate mode of sociality that occupies a space, between state and family, where people can come together against the wilderness that many seem to be experiencing in contemporary China. ●

1. Another knife attack took place in a kindergarten in Zibo, Shandong Province, on 3 August 2010, in which more than 20 children were injured and at least four killed by a 26-year-old 'self-employed' man. See Song (2010) for a summary of Western and Chinese reports on the Zibo attack.

2. Similar attacks against schoolchildren took place in 2003 (Pinyu, Henan Province), 2004 (Ruzhou, Henan Province) and 2006 (Jiamusi, Heilongjiang Province). The Ruzhou incident of 2004 was also seen as part of a series of copycat killings, which were, however, not in such quick succession as the 2010 cases, and in which fewer children were murdered (Forney 2004).

3. The main reason why knives, hammers and cleavers were used in these killings is because such weapons are readily available, whereas guns are not available to most Chinese people.

4. This story was widely circulated on the internet. See for instance: <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/151694327> (accessed 22 Jul. 2010).

5. In the following, we rely mainly on information from Chinese newspapers and websites. The first case was widely publicized, including the details of the trial and the execution. In the remaining cases, the Chinese government limited and partly prohibited reporting. According to available official information, all six men were tried by Chinese courts, found guilty, and executed.

6. The Chinese word for socialism is made up of the words *shehui* ('society' or 'social') and *zhuyi* ('-ism').

7. See for instance Anagnost 2004.

8. Yang Jie researched the struggles of men laid off by state enterprises following privatization. The 'crisis of masculinity' they experience in the wake of losing their livelihood becomes a problem for social stability. These men sometimes turn the language of family and gender against 'kindly power' itself, by expressing their disappointment and discontent with state and society (Yang 2010).

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Fig. 1. Local residents gather at the gate of the nursery school in Taixing, Jiangsu Province, where a man injured 25 children on 29 April 2010.

Fig. 2. An injured student is taken to hospital after a knife attack took place at a primary school on 28 April 2010 in Leizhou, Guangdong Province.

Fig. 3. Responding to the attacks, government officials called for better security at nurseries and schools, and decreed additional training sessions for security personnel at primary schools.