

Girl's death prompts moral soul-searching in China

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BEIJING (RNS) Road inspector Guo Mingyi donates his modest salary to the needy and has given blood 79 times. He's worked five years' worth of overtime during the past 16 years and arrives two hours early to his job at a state-owned mining firm.

Guo says his "Good Samaritan" approach to life reflects the attitude of most Chinese. He insists that the tragic tale of Wang Yue, a little girl who was run down and left to die on a busy market street as people passed by, is not typical of his country.

"More and more Chinese want to stand up and help other people," said Guo, 53. The apparent indifference to a grievously injured toddler lying in the street "does not represent the true moral strength of China."

Many Chinese say the lack of compassion shown to the girl, who died of her injuries on Oct. 21, symbolizes the moral failings of an increasingly selfish society obsessed with making money.

"We should look into the ugliness in ourselves with a dagger of conscience and bite the soul-searching bullet," said Wang Yang, Communist Party boss of Guangdong province.

The video, captured by a security camera and seen worldwide, showed that the bleeding toddler was ignored by 18 people either walking or riding past before she was helped by a scrap picker, whose shouts summoned her mother nearby.

A survey conducted by China Youth Daily, a Communist Party newspaper, found that 88 percent of respondents agreed that the increasing indifference among people was the real cause for the toddler's death. As for why 18 people passed by the girl,

71 percent of respondents thought they were afraid of bringing trouble on themselves.

The death has prompted debate on whether legislation is needed to force people to help strangers in need, and also to protect Good Samaritans from false accusations of wrongdoing. Some teachers and other leaders said they hope China will take new approaches on moral instruction and community spirit.

The prospects for change appear dim, however, as China's ruling party appears to be falling back on traditional, top-down methods to raise moral standards.

The broadcast ministry has ordered the nation's popular satellite TV stations to run "morality-building" shows and cut down on reality TV and other "overly entertaining" shows.

In addition, college students in Beijing are being summoned to hear the stirring tales of Guo Mingyi and other "moral models," a variant on the "model worker" awards China has propagandized since 1950. This ethics roadshow forms one of thousands of events organized annually by China's network of party-led "civilization offices."

Such old methods "are useful but certainly not enough" to combat China's moral crisis, said Li Maosen at People's University in Beijing. "During the last 30 years, when people emphasize economic results, they are often more selfish and self-centered."

Role models remain tough to copy in a country where moral education is linked to political indoctrination, he said. Instead of abstract ideas, Chinese want guidance on what they should or should not do, Li said.

"People should also be encouraged to seek their own initiatives. The future of China's moral promotion is based on the promotion of civil communities," he said.

In the southern boomtown of Shenzhen, bordering Hong Kong, Cai Weijun has been trying just that. "In Chinese society, people help those they know, but if they don't know them, they may consider their own interests first," he said.

To foster more community spirit, Cai established a "Happy Posthouse" program last year using activities such as singing to unite residents. The results were encouraging, he said, until the independent project folded this year from lack of funding.

In Beijing's Yongshan community, which translates as "Forever Kindhearted," there are no such worries, as its party-led civil management practice was chosen this month as the model for the entire city.

From hounding litterbugs to chasing off street vendors and breaking up marital disputes, the 180 members of Yongshan's "Citizen Exhortation Team" vow to clean up their neighborhood, boost civic pride and raise moral standards. By year's end, all of Beijing's 1.1 million city volunteers will be re-branded into similar groups.

Wearing the red armbands that identify them, Sun Xiuying, 53, a retired cleaner, said residents here would respond far more quickly than those who failed toddler Wang Yue. Sun admits she has been sworn at a lot, but still considers her unpaid job a grand honor.

"At first my family didn't understand, and said I should focus on our home, and not bother with public matters," she says. "But everyone must look after our community, or it'll be chaotic. Now they understand and are proud of me."