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## A Thwarted Search for Information

By Maureen Fan  
Washington Post Foreign Service  
Monday, May 26, 2008

JUYUAN TOWN, [China](#) -- Li Shanfu met local Communist Party authorities last week, seeking information about his missing daughter.

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He got a lecture instead.

"The harmony of the whole nation outweighs a family's loss," a local legislator from another province told a semicircle of mourning parents in this devastated area. "You must be strong and let go of your suffering."

Li, a farmer, peeled away from the crowd and resumed his search for 15-year-old Li Yi, his only child in a nation whose government limits many families to just one.

Li's search has taken him into morgues brimming with bodies, teeming hospitals and makeshift offices in tents where teachers help families with the grim task of identifying dead children through photographs. Along his journey, he has bumped up against a Communist Party that is extending the paternalistic control it exerts over citizens in life to the way millions behave in confronting death.

Thousands of children died in the May 12 Sichuan earthquake; 33 percent of the 3,069 dead in Dujiangyan, the city that includes Juyuan town, were students. In hard-hit Beichuan county, 21 percent of the 8,600 dead were students. More

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Zhou Siqiang, center, lost his daughter, 15, when a school collapsed in Juyuan town. Speaking to a government official, he said, "We want justice." (By Maureen Fan – The Washington Post)

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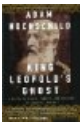
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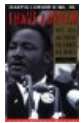



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than 7,000 classrooms across Sichuan province collapsed, according to state media reports.

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44, put her into an ambulance, unconscious but breathing. "I saw her, I took her to the ambulance myself," she said.

But officials forbade her and another relative from riding along. The vehicle, after all, had been full of injured students.

Yi's parents haven't seen her since.

Li now spends his days at the middle school waiting for party officials to arrive with news, or in a rescue tent to see if teachers have identified his daughter in a photo.

The loss has been particularly hard because of China's limits on family size, a nearly 30-year-old policy designed to curb population growth and reduce poverty.

"If my daughter is alive, I just want to find her. If she is dead, I want to find her," Li said, his mobile phone ringing with good wishes but not good news. "Now, I'm nearly 43, and there's no way to have another kid."

Li Yi was pulled from the rubble of Juyuan Middle School about 3 p.m. on the day of the quake. Her mother, Huang Qionghua,

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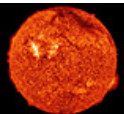
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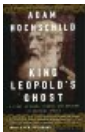
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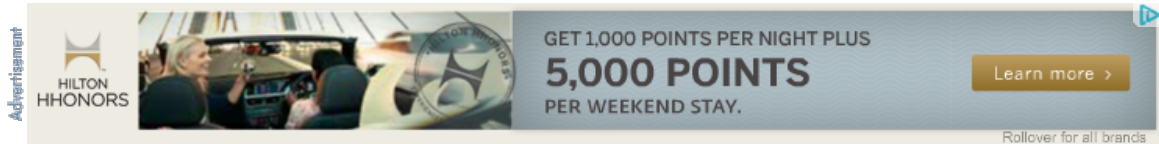


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Traditions have lasted longer in Juyuan than in many urban centers. Younger generations still respect their elders, residents said, and parents -- especially farmers who need help in the fields -- value their children as insurance policies against old age.

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Those values sometimes conflict with the one-child policy, which has helped raise millions out of poverty by preventing more than 400 million births over the last 30 years, according to family planning officials.

Because of exceptions for rural farmers, ethnic minorities and parents who are only children, the policy applies only to about 36 percent of China's families -- those who live in cities and some rural areas like Li's.

"The people in the mountains can have two children, but people living here in the Chengdu plateau like us can only have one," Li said. "She's my only child, and if we become old and cannot work anymore, she can support us."

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In 1987, Li and his wife had twin boys, but

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Zhou Siqiang, center, lost his daughter, 15, when a school collapsed in Juyuan town. Speaking to a government official, he said, "We want justice." (By Maureen Fan -- The Washington Post)

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they died just after birth. Two years later, they had another boy, but when he was 8 months old, he had stomach surgery and contracted a fatal infection.

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"We entrust our lives to our children. . .the most important thing right now is to find my daughter at any cost," Li said after lunch next to the makeshift tent he and his wife have been sleeping under since the quake. Their modest house is leaning, and a tree has pierced its roof.

Yi was in middle school and preparing to take the high school entrance exam this summer. When she asked whether to apply to a high school or a technical school, her father said he had replied, "I'm not educated; it's up to you."

He wanted to tell her to choose high school and then college, he said. "She is our only hope to help her family lead a better life," Li said.

On most days, Yi rose early and walked down a dirt road and across a canal to the middle school. She returned home at 6 p.m. and immediately launched into homework, before watching 10 minutes of TV and then cooking dinner for the family and doing the laundry.

Li's wife works the family's wheat and rice fields while he is often away working on a construction site. "In the past, I worked in Lanzhou and other faraway places. My daughter said I should work closer to home so I could see her every day," he said.

With each day that Li waits, tensions grow between the government's need to keep order and the will of parents to protect and defend their most precious assets.

At Juyuan Middle School, surrounded by buildings that did not collapse, mothers and fathers recently debated whether the builder of the school should be sentenced to death. State broadcasters set up chairs and backdrops for a televised fundraiser from the scene. Members of the Chinese news media told members of the foreign media not to "get too emotional."

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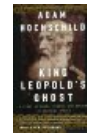


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The local legislator tried to calm the crowd. "The death of your children was an act of God," he said unpersuasively in a country whose government is officially atheist. "Why are you talking to the media? You will only embarrass the government."

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Zhou Siqiang, whose 15-year-old daughter died in the collapse, challenged him. "We are not acting against the government," Zhou said. "We just don't want our children to die in vain. We want justice."

Li stood silently next to him.

"We want to find out who constructed the school building and if there is any corruption," Zhou said. "The economic losses are limited but the psychological losses are endless. Our suffering will not be relieved for the rest of our lives."

Li said he had no interest in politics. But he allowed reporters to watch as he squatted in a rescue tent, his head in his hand, with his daughter's teacher, Huang Min.

The teacher picked up a red telephone and called Yi's classmate and best friend, who was rumored to have seen her after the quake. But it turned out to be a false lead.

"Sorry," the teacher said. "No."

Researcher Liu Songjie contributed to this report.

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