

Pyramid scheme hits the homeless

A new local government measure that targets rough sleepers has prompted debate about how they are treated, report **Xu Jingxi** in Guangzhou, and **Hu Yongqi** and **Zhang Yuchen** in Beijing.

Zhou has been living rough in Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong province, for 22 years. An open space beneath an overpass in Baiyun district has been his home for 20 of those years. He exists by selling bottles he finds in the street. The small amount he earns this way is just enough to allow him to buy water, instant noodles and other daily items.

In 1990, he worked at a construction site in Qingyuan, also in Guangdong, dreaming of making his fortune and returning home proudly. However, when his employer delayed payment for seven consecutive months Zhou fled the site, afraid that he had been employed illegally. So he spent a week walking to Guangzhou without a cent in his pocket and surviving on his wits.

Although he can earn roughly 1,000 yuan (\$160) per month, he has never considered moving into a residential complex because the monthly rent of 500 yuan for an apartment is beyond his means.

But Zhou's way of life is now under threat. The local authorities have embedded cement pyramids in the concrete below the overpass, making it impossible for the homeless to sleep there. The move is part of the city's plans to drive all the homeless from its cities by the end of the year, according to the local TV station.

However, the government's actions have sparked intense discussion about whether homeless people should be treated with more respect.

No return

At first, Zhou didn't go home because he felt it shameful to return without having saved a decent amount of money. He gradually got used to being a tramp. "I can't go back now," he said.

Zhou often earns about 40 yuan in a morning, but that barely covers the price of his lunch. He usually takes a nap in the early afternoon and then reads discarded newspapers. Once a month, he buys a ticket for the sports lottery.

"Personally, I would rather spend the money on cigarettes," said Huang Xiangfu, one of Zhou's "neighbors". The 62-year-old rag collector always buys the cheapest smokes, costing 2 yuan a pack.

Sometimes Huang lives with his son, but his aversion to the smell of leather at the factory where his son lives means he's more often to be found on the street. "This place (the overpass) is much better than my shabby house in my hometown in Henan province," said Huang, adding that he prefers the open spaces and only returns to his son if the winter cold is too much to bear.

"I often give away empty wine bottles to the rag pickers across the road out of sympathy. But their presence affects the environment and threatens public security on the street," said Zhang Huanyin, 36, who owns a grocery store opposite Zhou's overpass.

Zhang said the street looks unsafe for outsiders and the tramps' collection of second-hand furniture could cause traffic accidents.

"Some tramps are thieves and robbers and harm passers-by. They should be driven away. But I don't think it's justified to drive us rag collectors away," said Shi Lei, a homeless man, who was the victim of child trafficking gang, having been sold by his



From top: Cement pyramids prevent homeless people from sleeping underneath overpasses in Guangzhou, Guangdong province. A homeless man sits outside the West Railway Station in Beijing. Cao Duoyun and her husband Wang Changliang live beneath the Haidian overpass in Beijing. Every day they beg for donations to buy train tickets so they can return their home in Hebei province.

uncle when he was just two years of age. "We just collect refuse and do nothing wrong."

"The hundreds of cement pyramids lined up under the overpass present an ugly picture and violate the beauty of the city," said Zhou.

Seven years ago, he saw cement pyramids embedded below an overpass in the Baiyun district of Guangzhou. "Tramps used to sleep under that overpass, but after the cement pyramids were set up they moved away," he said.

"Guangzhou is a big city. There are so many overpasses, I can always find a new place," said Zhou, adding that the local government should use its funds to build shelters for the homeless instead of simply driving them away.

A way of life

Cao Duoyun, 68, lay on a mat with her husband Wang Changliang below the Haidian overpass on Beijing's Fourth Ring Road. They were begging for donations to buy train tickets, each costing 180 yuan, so they could go home to Hebei province. However, a large part of the 10 to 20 yuan they make each day is spent on food and water.

Wang has had a cerebral embolism (a blood clot on the brain) for five years. Despite many trips to the hospital in Shijiazhuang, capital of Hebei province, his condition is unchanged. Last year the couple spent all their savings on treatment. Finally, in May, Cao borrowed 1,000 yuan as a last throw of the dice and the couple traveled to Beijing.

However, the doctors told them that the condition might not be cured even if they spent 100,000 yuan. Lacking funds, Wang admitted defeat. "I can't make money anymore and I don't want my wife to borrow," he said.

The couple has criss-crossed the Chinese capital in search of donations. Cao said they

encounter many professional beggars in the course of their travels, most of whom are healthy and are simply taking advantage of the kindness of strangers.

Some of these "homeless" have rented a basement apartment and go out looking for donations on the street, lying on the ground like beggars. It has become a kind of job for them, said Cao.

On July 16, 10 people who couldn't speak or hear were discovered begging from visitors to the Beijing Capital International Airport. Some travelers donated cash, but others called the police.

The police said that a woman from Hebei province, surnamed Su, had been organizing the begging patrols, driving the men to the airport in the early morning and then collecting the cash raised later in the day. In a single month, she earned more than 50,000 yuan.

"Su recruited the men from Hebei and Hubei provinces, claiming that they could make good money," said Jiang Chao, an officer at the Beijing Airport public security bureau. "But actually, they had to give all the cash to her."

Su was detained on charges of coercing the men to beg illegally, but has yet to face court proceedings. All the men were released.

In 2011, the local authorities in Shenzhen, an industrial hub in Guangdong, began to categorize the homeless, basing the help they received on the reasons they ended up on the street. Those whose unfortunate circumstances were shaped by mental or physical disability received more aid than people who simply didn't want to work. The idea caught on rapidly, and in April the government of Yichang in Hubei province followed suit.

Hu Zhenhua, director of the Shenzhen Institute of Urban Management, said homeless



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people can solicit donations, but have to be overseen.

Homeless people with diseases or disabilities should be given shelter at social assistance stations, providing they don't hassle people or disturb the peace in their quest for cash. However, organized begging is deemed unacceptable, he said.

In August 2009, five ministries, including the Ministry of Civil Affairs, pushed through a new regulation on the management of the urban homeless.

Any professional beggar hassling others and affecting the urban environment would face a crackdown. Vagrants unable to find a place to live could resort to social assistance stations for free accommodation.

"Our officers encourage homeless people to get help from social assistance stations. If they don't want to, the officers are forced to move them from vehicle lanes and sidewalks where they could easily get injured if cars run into them," said Zhang Jianjun, deputy director of the inspection team at the Shenzhen bureau of urban management.

Shenzhen's policy that urban management officers would be fined if any vagrants were found on the street was abolished in July, after it was criticized by netizens.

In 2005, the Guangzhou city government set up teams to patrol every district and county to provide help for vagrants at social assistance stations.



ZOU ZHONGPIN / CHINA DAILY

Born to help those in need

By **HU YONGQI**
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When Zhang Renjie visits a new city, the hotel is not his first destination. Instead, he looks for homeless people. He can remember the names of the homeless he has met in every city he has visited.

Zhang has provided food and bedding to more than 180,000 rough sleepers since 2006. Six years down the line, those he has helped are still extremely excited when they meet him again and say it's just like being reunited with a family member.

The 30-year-old operates a charity website "Owe China", soliciting donations for the needy.

More than 16,000 poverty-stricken people, whose stories have been published online, have received financial support.

In 2011 alone, about 200 million yuan (\$31 million) was collected.

The website acts as a bridge between donors and beneficiaries and Zhang earns nothing for his hard work.

His persistence and dedication have made him "almost homeless" too. He stays in cheap rooms, at friends' homes or even in the open air.

A backpack, containing a digital camera and his ID card, is all he carries.

In 2006, Zhang started the website from a shabby 3-square-meter room in Beijing's Haidian district. The room was divided by a wooden board, with Zhang living in one half and working in the other on a second-hand computer that cost 300 yuan.

Having sold everything he owned in Beijing, Zhang traveled to the provinces of Qinghai, Hubei and Sichuan to provide help for the homeless and penniless students.

He is currently in Qinghai, raising funds for Tibetan vagrants. The poor phone reception on the provincial plateau means he is rarely able to talk to family members or friends.

"He is always looking for ways to find people who are in need of financial support," said Bao Hongbei, 40, the website's only full-time volunteer.

Every day, Zhang walks roughly 20 km, seeking out the homeless. He writes up their stories and takes pictures to upload onto the website.

Last year, he was nominated for a national charity award, but declined the offer.

Instead he asked, "Can you reward me with another five years so that I can visit more places and help more homeless people and penniless students?"

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