

'Let the Leaders Go First'

Shan Ying

In 1994, 325 children including 36 teachers died in a fire, after they were ordered to keep seated and let 25 communist leaders from the education department walk out of the building before them to escape the fire. "Let the leaders go first!" was the last sentence these victims heard.

On December 8, 1994, the Education Department of Kelamayi City, Xinjiang Province, put on a show to welcome 25 higher-level officials from the "Free Education and Literacy Assessment Team", with 796 primary and middle school students being organized for the "special theatrical performances" to entertain the 25 leaders at the Friendship Theater.

Due to the stage curtain being too close to the light, it caught fire. With the burning fireballs falling from the stage above, one of the Kelamayi Department of Education officials ordered the students over the microphone: "Everybody sit down. Don't move! Let the leaders go first!"

The students were very obedient and remained sitting in their seats. They waited for the 25 officials to exit from the front row to the rear. Then the teachers began to organize the students to evacuate. However, at this moment the lights were extinguished, the fire had spread around the theater and the only exit at rear of the theater was engulfed in flames.

Therefore, the best and most critical time for students to evacuate had been missed. Each school sent their best-performing students to the show. Of the 796 students and teachers from 15 schools, 323 died and 132 suffered burns (Note: another report said: 325 died and 135 were injured, using the numbers given in court judgments), including 288 innocent primary and middle school students.

Heroes

Regarding the 40 plus teachers, 36 perished and the state of their bodies showed that they were genuine heroes. The 25 Kelemayi communist officials had been sitting closest to the source of the fire and furthest away from the emergency exits, but miraculously all survived and walked out the door unharmed.

Kuang Li was the original Assistant Party Secretary at the Education and Training Center of

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Xinjiang Petroleum Administration Office. When the raging fire engulfed the theater, she did not command anyone to open all security doors and help evacuate students, but only considered her own escape. When she saw there was no way to go through the exit, she went into the restroom, locked the door from inside and refused to allow anyone else in. After the fire, she pointed to the student's body on the ground just outside the restroom, and proudly showed it to the reporters: "I am very experienced in escaping with my life."

There was one class of 42 students. 36 were burnt to death and 6 were burned. One survivor of this class was a poor little girl who could not afford to wear school uniform and had not attended the theater.. On the morning of December 9, the girl went to school on time, knowing nothing about it at all, and walked into the classroom. At that time, the entire city had just woken up from the whole night of confusion. In other words, Kelamayi had never slept that night. The majority of teachers who did not participate in the activities at Friendship Theater were busy dealing with the aftermath of the victims. When school teachers who were still insisting on normal work in other grades or classes saw her lonely figure, she asked: "Teachers, where have our classmates gone?" When they realized this student's situation, they could not control their feelings but held her and cried. .

Shortly after the matter, the Education Department official who stood up and shouted, "Let the leaders go first!" was redeployed and promoted, and also became the mayor.

Under the foot of Genghis Khan hill about 8 kilometers west of Kelamayi City, a place called Small West Valley Cemetery C Area, each tombstone has a photograph with a child's face. The tombstones are engraved with the same date – "8 December, 1994".

In addition to an Internet-site, that is the only place where a memorial ceremony is held for them.

A second year middle school student Jin Sumin recalled that, "We all stood up, a woman stood in front of the leaders' seats, and used her microphone to stop us from being in confusion, sat down, and then we sat down. Two boys, who were usually very naughty, did not listen to her but ran away and they were the only two children in my class who were unhurt."

At that time, Su Hao (a pseudonym) sat quite near the back row, and got a clear view. He

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described the view in that critical moment, "At that time, most leaders sat in front of the middle row. When they required us to stay and not to move, I saw them spread slowly on both sides, gradually backing away from the aisle."

There is no memorial to commemorate the loss of 325 students and teachers any where in the city.

Every year at Qingming and on December 8, Yuan Ce Li always comes to his daughter's grave. Yuan Yuan and her small friends are buried in the cemetery known as the Small West Valley. Their tombstones are engraved with the same date and same cause of death. However, Mr. Yuan told us, the victims' family's have not received their childrens' death certificates or certificate of public sacrifice.