

STONES IN OUR HEARTS

It is difficult to describe my despair. I am the father of a three-month-old baby, yet I could not even protect my own child. The milk powder I fed him day after day was poisonous. Can you understand how I feel? I feel so hopeless that I want to kill myself . . .” These are the words of one Chinese father.

Since the milk powder scandal broke, what I saw was finger-pointing. The manufacturers blamed the dairy farmers for mixing poison into their milk. The dairy farmers blamed the manufacturers for using unsanitary production methods. The government blamed the manufacturers for violation of rules. Premier Wen Jiabao blamed the manufacturers for their loss of conscience. The overseas media blamed the government for the media blackout.

Everyone has a point, but it pains me to witness these mutual recriminations.

Does pointing our fingers at others make us innocent?

Deng Xiaoping said that development was our highest national principle, thereby declaring local GDP growth rates as the standard for evaluating the accomplishments of local government officials. This was a progressive move during his time, replacing class struggle with a pragmatic focus on development. But today, our faith in GDP growth has become toxic.

One example of such toxicity was encountered by a journalist friend of mine who investigated a famous diet tea company in Jiangxi Province. This business was the only profitable large enterprise in town, providing jobs for the children of local cadres. Even the local government itself relied on this company to support its budget, thereby raising the company’s operating expenses. In order to cut costs, the company went as far as to lay substandard tea on the road and use

The founder of an online newspaper asks what kind of a civilization would feed poison to its infants.

By Zhai Minglei

passing cars to press the tea before sweeping it into packages. I would never have believed this story if my friend, a veteran reporter, had not seen it with his own eyes. Local governments, in their administration of cities, have become indistinguishable from the

largest local enterprises. When the referee is also a player, of course he would never blow the whistle on a violation.

Recent reports by *Caijing* magazine reveal that prior to this scandal, quality inspection for tainted milk powder was basically a no-man’s land where all products just passed through.

Since the milk powder scandal broke, foreign countries have raised suspicions about one Chinese product after another. You can call this a Western trade war against China, but in the end, we can’t deny that there are issues in urgent need of discussion.

The root of this problem inevitably touches upon our political system. For example, I live in a new building in my neighborhood, but the water main underneath has burst 29 times in one year. The residents have given up hope because the Songjiang Water Processing Plant is a publicly-owned enterprise that exercises a monopoly in our area, and there are no other suppliers. All we can do is bottle up our anger and “enjoy” their shoddy construction. The company operates all the water pipes, so it can do as it pleases. What’s true for a company is also true for a political party. Without competition or alternatives, absolute power will corrupt any party or government, no matter how benevolent its initial intentions may have been.

I once discussed politics with an outstanding Party member, who is also my senior. He said that the Communist Party built China on blood sacrifice, just like investing in a company. How can we let someone else take its assets? How can we not maintain a one-party rule? His thinking probably represents the feeling of many government officials. Leaving that last point aside, who, after all, really made this investment? Can we really say that the blood shed and the lives lost belong to a single political party? I know that young people probably see it differently: every taxpayer is like a shareholder. But this company has never held a shareholders' meeting.

Can we place our hopes in the conscience of entrepreneurs? If so, how do we explain the courts' callous rejection of all legal cases raised by the parents of infants with kidney stones? Amid all of the finger-pointing and accusations, I have not seen any pained reflection or sincerity, only superficial actions and evasion of responsibilities.

Lost trust is the worst form of bankruptcy; this is true both for an enterprise and for a people. Since the milk powder scandal broke, foreign countries have raised suspicions about one Chinese product after another. You can call this a Western trade war against China, but in the end, we can't deny that there are issues in urgent need of discussion. After all, Sanlu milk powder was featured in the first episode of the much touted China Central Television's special series, "Made in China"!

We certainly should not dismiss all Chinese people as dishonest, but we can honestly say that a general atmosphere of insincerity and deceitfulness is far more prevalent in Chinese society than in most other countries. The honest meet a sad fate, while the dishonest get rich.



A worker at a supermarket in Xiangfan, Hubei Province, removes Sanlu-brand milk formula products from shelves on September 12, 2008. Photo credit: Stringer/REUTERS

Just as I was writing this essay, I heard the news that more than 200 children at the Tiyi Nursery School in Zhejiang Province's Cixi City, whose parents pay 4,000 *yuan* in tuition each term, had been served food cooked in palm oil meant only for use in soap manufacturing. And they have been diagnosed with enlarged intestinal lymph nodes.

Chinese people, wake up, please.

The true source of our children's kidney stones is not the poisoned milk powder, but rather the stones that have formed in our hearts.

Our morals are collapsing and with them our ability to survive, so that we are poisoning our own children and elders.

While we can call the Wenchuan earthquake a natural disaster, the poisoned milk powder scandal is 100 percent manmade. How many signs from heaven does it take before the Chinese people finally understand?

In his classic *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, Gustave Le Bon wrote:

Having reached a certain level of strength and complexity a civilization ceases to grow, and having ceased to grow it is condemned to a speedy decline. The hour of its old age has struck. This inevitable hour is always marked by the weakening of the ideal that was the mainstay of the race. In proportion, as this ideal pales, all the religious, political, and social structures inspired by it begin to be shaken.

With the progressive perishing of its ideal the race loses more and more the qualities that lent it its cohesion, its unity, and its strength. The personality and intelligence of the individual may increase, but at the same time the collec-

tive egoism of the race is replaced by an excessive development of the egoism of the individual, accompanied by a weakening of character and a lessening of the capacity for action. What constituted a people, a unity, a whole, becomes in the end an agglomeration of individualities lacking cohesion, and artificially held together for a time by its traditions and institutions. It is at this stage that men, divided by their interests and aspirations, and incapable any longer of self-government, require directing in their pettiest acts . . .



Confiscated Sanlu milk powder is burnt at a garbage dump in Lanzhou, Gansu province, November 28, 2008. Photo credit: Stringer/REUTERS

With the definite loss of its old ideals the genius of the race entirely disappears; it is a mere swarm of isolated individuals and returns to its original state—that of a crowd. Without consistency and without a future, it has all the transitory characteristics of crowds. Its civilization is now without stability and at the mercy of every chance. The populace is sovereign, and the tide of barbarism mounts. The civilization may still seem brilliant because it possesses an outward front, the work of a long past, but it is in reality an edifice crumbling to ruin, which nothing supports, and destined to fall in at the first storm.¹

In the midst of his own struggle with a serious illness, the renowned writer Sha Yexin wrote of the poisoned milk-powder scandal that the entire affair not only shows the shortcomings of our political system, but also reveals how our entire cultural and moral system has decayed to its very roots. There is truth in this ailing man's words: what kind of a civilization would poison its own children?

Can a people be strong when its members lack a sense of empathy for one another? When they treat one another like warriors at battle in the coliseums of ancient Rome? When in order to put on a grandiose Olympic opening ceremony, they make thousands of

young women hop back and forth for hours on end, force grown performers to wear diapers, and allow an accomplished entertainer to suffer a paralyzing fall during rehearsals?

Stones in our hearts!

A sense of compassion has disappeared from our society, and all that remains is materialism. Adding poison to milk powder is nothing, so long as it is done for the survival of one's company and oneself. We have regressed to a primitive era before the dawn of civilization. Where are

our morals, our culture, and our beliefs?

Our society is sick. We live in a society of deception, a land where deceit runs wild, where lies masked by good intentions for the sake of so-called "harmony" run wild. Who cares about deception, as long as it is couched in lofty goals?

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Ever since the fresh and optimistic atmosphere of the 1980s was wiped away in a single sweep, materialistic desires have become the driving force of our society. With all that I have seen in the three-and-a-half decades since I was born in 1973, I have gradually come to realize that our present society is moving towards a pathological state.

When all is said and done, democracy not only provides a better way to manage public affairs, it also

allows each individual to realize his full potential. Without the possibility of democracy, those with an interest in public affairs have no options besides diving into business and doing whatever it takes to accumulate wealth. When people are forced to pursue only their own benefit and that of their families, society inevitably sinks into a state of pathological materialism: no matter how nice your home is and how well you eat, you still want more.

It is this social illness that blinds us to the suffering of others. In the pursuit of our own interests, we completely lose our sense of community, and even more importantly, our trust in and love for others.

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I have to admit that after I graduated college I was also caught up in the race for more. After all, this was the only ideology given to us by our educational and social system.

But in the end we are never happy. Our life is spent seeking an elusive happiness that we never truly experience. We spend our entire existence like a swarm of pathetic little ants or birds collecting pieces for our nest. At the end of this path we find we have sealed ourselves off in a city of glass, deaf to the cries and moans all around us.

It is this entire perspective on life that is the true source of poisoned milk powder.

When material development comes at the cost of mutual sympathy, caring, and harmony within society, such development becomes a source of evil.

All of those assurances telling us to wait for a few years for our social ills to be cured are nothing but lies.

Once our hearts have been numbed, they can only continue to harden!

Plunder is plunder. Centuries ago, the West used this theory of development to colonize the third world, and now, centuries later, we are using the same world-view to colonize ourselves.

In his final work, *The Future of Chinese Culture* (中国文化的展望), liberal thinker Yin Haiguang shifted from promoting total westernization to a more nuanced perspective affirming some of the beneficial aspects of traditional Chinese culture. Yin asserted that the part of Chinese culture most worth preserving was the power of ethics.

Having made my way through the winding alleys of our cities and the expansive fields of our countryside, I know that the foundation of our nation's morals can be found in our people. These glimmers of hope in our people are the only reason that I still have the energy to write this essay. I am not only writing this to put my own heart slightly at ease, but also to share my feelings with others who feel the same. Even if no one else will show repentance, we should still repent on our own, and hope that the heavens might give us greater clarity of mind and courage.

I am also calling for the development of a platform for public reflection and the broader cultivation of public morals. There is a song called "I Don't Want to Be a Chinese Child," and a book entitled, *I Don't Want to Be Chinese in the Next Life*. Those with money and connections have already moved abroad. All that is left on this land of ours are the simple and plain masses: we must vow to save ourselves and the country to which we are bound.

We need to stand up in the face of this poisoned milk powder scandal and do all that we can to seek a responsible media, an accountable government, and a society that values honesty. This is a civilization that once called for self-restraint and benevolent love, and for treating others as one would have others treat oneself.

Translated by Kevin Carrico

Note

1. Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (West Valley City: Walking Lion Press, 2006), 176–77.