

## A Familiar Taint

The milk crisis spotlights flaws in Beijing's food system.

By [Melinda Liu](#) | NEWSWEEK

Published Sep 25, 2008

*In the latest escalation of [China](#)'s tainted milk scandal, Thursday, the 27-nation European Union banned imports of baby food containing Chinese milk. At least four countries have also barred imports of a popular Chinese brand of candy found to contain "unsatisfactory" levels of the industrial chemical melamine, which can cause renal damage and malnutrition. At least 53,000 Chinese infants became ill from ingesting baby formula spiked with melamine, which is used in making plastics, fertilizer and flame retardants; four have died. Unscrupulous Chinese suppliers have used nitrogen-rich melamine as a milk additive because its presence artificially and illegally boosts protein levels during product testing. (Last year thousands of pet cats and dogs in the U.S. were sickened or killed by melamine-tainted pet food exported from China.)*

*The controversy has spread far beyond mainland borders. Five Hong Kong children have been diagnosed with kidney stones as a result of drinking tainted Chinese baby formula. More than a dozen governments have banned or recalled products containing Chinese dairy ingredients. The scandal centers around one of China's biggest dairy producers, Sanlu, which received consumer complaints as early as December 2007 but apparently kept central government authorities in the dark until after the end of the Aug. 8-24 Olympic Games. Since the scandal was made public Sept. 11, products from nearly two dozen Chinese producers have been found to be tainted with melamine, including some of the nation's most well-known brands such as Mengniu and Yili.*

*On Monday, the nation's top food quality inspection official Li Changjiang was forced to resign due to the debacle. And 18 people, including the chairwoman of Sanlu, have been detained. That may not solve the problem, however. Award-winning Chinese author [Zhou Qing](#) argues that the real poison lies within the dysfunctional Chinese food-safety administration system itself.*

*Zhou wrote an award-winning 2006 book "What Kind of God" after conducting an in-depth investigation of a variety of toxic food contaminants in China. Before the milk scandal erupted, Zhou wrote the following commentary for NEWSWEEK about the widespread use of clenbuterol that poisoned hundreds of Shanghai residents in 2006 after they ate pork tainted with the drug. Clenbuterol-also known as "lean meat powder"-increases a pig's muscle-to-fat ratio but has adverse health effects and is banned as a meat additive in China.*

## Food Safety and Collective Leadership

*By Zhou Qing*

A few years ago, the Chinese Vice Prime Minister, in charge of agriculture, visited a hogger in Henan, a large province in central China which specializes in farming. Accompanied by provincial officials, the Vice Prime Minister discovered that some of the pigs had particularly shiny hair and well-developed muscles, while others looked very ordinary. The VIP asked why this was. A farmer replied: "The good-looking pigs are fed with lean meat powder [or clenbuterol, a banned substance]. After the pigs are killed, their meat looks very fresh and red, and sells very well. We sell that to people living in the towns. The other kind of pig we keep for ourselves to eat." The official said, "Do you know that clenbuterol is harmful to people's health?" The farmer replied, "Yes. But city dwellers have free medical care, so it's no problem."

Perhaps some farmers in China don't have any lowly targets against whom to vent their dissatisfaction, so they target city residents to show their complaints about the unfair and unjust social system. They might even want to vent their hatred by selling this kind of meat to oppressive officials.

A society without justice has no hope. And toxic food is just one phenomenon in an unjust society. Evil-doing will get worse and worse if the living conditions and the social system created by the Communist Party are not transformed.

How serious is lean-meat powder poisoning in China? Let's hear some words spoken by Mr. Xi Jinping, who earlier was the Communist Party secretary in Fujian Province before being promoted to become one of the highest leaders on the central committee. "A painter friend of mine likes to eat pig liver, but he found that whenever he did, his hand would start shaking afterwards. He went to the hospital and was told that he'd been poisoned. He stopped eating pig's liver and found that his illness went away. This shows how harmful this substance is."

Hundreds of people, including soldiers and athletes, have been poisoned by the lean-meat pork powder every year. Why has its use not been stopped, despite warnings and prohibitions?

The reason is the so-called collective responsibility system in China's food-safety administration. For instance, a pig is managed by eight separate departments, from the time of its birth to the time of its sale to the public. The breeding procedure is managed and controlled by the agriculture department, so officials there can collect fees for feed production. Epidemic prevention for pigs is managed by the board of health, which collects fees but hasn't handled epidemic prevention well.

When the pig grows up, its butchering is managed by the board of industry and commerce, which doesn't care much about the quality of the meat but rather about charging fees. When problems occur, those departments or boards pass the buck to each other.

This kind of cross-management system has caused big problems; nobody has taken responsibility for food safety. The reasons why officials in different departments

scramble for the power to control the pig business are because they want to get their claws on as much money as possible, for their own benefit.

The most frightful thing is that they, as chief food-safety managers, sometimes benefit by discovering problems with the food that they're administering. For instance, when pet food exported to the U.S. from China was discovered with problems related to melamine, and noticed by higher-level administrators, local officials took advantage of the situation to ask for more funds from their bosses.

Unfortunately, they did not apply the funds toward improving their industry, but rather for their own convenience. One might purchase a luxury car for the office at about \$40,000, but spend less than \$3,000 to buy a food safety-inspection kit—and then put the inspection kit into the car and drive the so-called "Food Safety Inspection Vehicle" around. It looks like they function effectively, but in fact, they don't care much for food safety. It's very hard to find officials who spend even 60 percent of funds dedicated to food safety on their real business!

This is a situation in which a pig isn't administered very well by up to eight different departments! We have reason to conclude that if a group of officials cannot manage a pig very well, they have a lot to be ashamed about because they're supported by our tax payers!

The key reason for so many big problems concerning food safety is the system of bureaucracy, which caused the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The Chinese Communist Party faces a great challenge. If it cannot reform its political system, it may follow in the footsteps of the former Soviet Union.

— *Translated by Dr. Wang Hanchuan*

© 2008