

WHAT KIND OF HEAVEN?

A LOOK AT THE SAFETY OF CHINA'S FOOD

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FORWORD:

As I pick up my pen an image comes to mind of polar bear hunters. The hunters first kill a seal, then pour the blood into a bucket. They place a sharp, double-edged knife into the bucket, and once the blood has frozen, they put it on a path that they know the polar bear will walk along. When the bears smell the blood, they start licking greedily from the bucket, enjoying it more and more, until they finally cut their tongues on the blade hidden inside the frozen liquid. Unaware of what is happening to them, the polar bears then slowly die while swallowing the blood pouring from their tongues.

There is a tradition in Chinese culture that if some part of your body is ailing, you should eat an animal's body part that corresponds with your own sick body part. This concept of eating anything (apart from tables) that has legs, is particularly strong in Guangdong Province. There, people eat all kinds of strange and exotic animals and live seafood. The most horrifying thing is that people there even eat the so-called 'human soup'. Female foetuses that have been aborted because of the one-child policy are used to make a soup that is consumed for its supposed nutritious value. And the foetuses have mostly been aborted from unmarried migrant workers who work in the factories of the Pearl River Delta. This is certainly not make-believe. A photographer friend of mine from Guangdong Province has a large collection of photographs he has taken that document this trade.

A restaurant in Harbin serves human placenta, which in the traditional fables is said to have miraculous curative properties. The restaurant has produced colourful posters advertising this dish. Many local residents have talked about this phenomenon at length, wondering whether this wasn't tantamount to cannibalism. It does seem a very perverse thing to do. The placenta is bought from a local hospital. When they sell this placenta, the hospital staff display a high degree of professional morality. They supply the buyers with

lab test reports to prove that the placenta was free from the hepatitis B virus, or any other dangerous pathogen.

A specialist in gynaecology has stated that the supposed benefits of eating placenta are not medically proven, and are based solely on local custom and superstition. An article published in an important Beijing newspaper pointed out that the miraculous strength that is believed to derive from eating placenta has not yet been proven. But whatever its nutritious value may be, the placenta still comes from a human body, and so should have no place on a restaurant table. That should go without saying. The fact that people have taken the idea of building up one's strength through eating nutritious food to such an extreme that they are prepared to eat human placenta shows how far this traditional concept has been pushed. In fact, placenta has been served in restaurants in the cities of Chongqing and Nanjing, and Shanxi Province, creating a lot of debate there as well.

The perverse killings that took place recently in Jiamusi in Heilongjiang Province is another example of this strange idea of 'nutritious food'. A man who had been sentenced to 8 years in prison for raping young girls, killed a total of 28 people in the three years that followed his release. Most of his victims were pre-pubescent boys. The majority of these boys had met the killer on an internet chat room called 'Tianqi'. On the bed of this serial killer, the police found four corpses. The faces of all of them were unrecognisable. Some had ears missing, or eyes missing, but all of them had their stomachs opened and organs removed, and all of them had been castrated. In China, there has always been a belief that to strengthen the power of a man's penis, the man should himself eat a penis. This is why all over China you can find restaurants serving roast goat penis, stewed bull penis, dog penis soup, and other such strange dishes.

Perhaps it is down to karma then that the deadly SARS virus first broke out in Guangdong. This virus was spread by the masked civet, one of the wild animals that the people there like to eat the most. In just six months, the SARS virus spread through all 29 of China's provinces, infecting about 9000 people and killing more than 800. The economic cost of this outbreak in Asia amounted to about \$40 billion, and as well of this there are of course the long-term psychological consequences, and the danger of the virus returning again. The Bird Flue virus that first caught the world's attention in 1997, also

sprung up from Guangdong – the province that is such a large consumer of wild animals. Since the beginning of this year alone, more than 150 million chicken and ducks have been incinerated in an attempt to stop the spread of the disease.

Another piece of news to come from this province is that nearly 10 million people in Guangdong suffer from cardiovascular disease – making it the province with the highest rate of this disease. Indeed, cardiovascular disease has now become Guangdong's number one killer. It accounts for two thirds of all deaths that take place in the province each year. And the disease is spreading 3.6 times faster than any other disease in China. One can't help thinking that the heavens are sending a warning sign to this province that is filled with so many gluttons.

When Premier Zhu Rongji was Mayor of Shanghai he almost died from Hepatitis A. In the Spring of 1988, the spread of Hepatitis A through Shanghai created an unprecedented crisis in China's urban public security. In April of that year, the disease reached its peak. During just 16 days of that month, the papers reported that more than 10,000 people had contracted the disease. The newspapers that piled up on the desk of Shanghai's new mayor made him very anxious. A total of more than 400,000 people had caught the disease from eating the tiny ark shell – a very popular seafood in Shanghai. Schools, factories and shops all closed down. It has been said that the financial cost of this 'ark shell storm' was more than 3 billion yuan. In 1988, when Hepatitis A was at its worst in Shanghai, a Chinese medicine that was believed to help cure the symptoms of this illness, which usually was worth just a few yuan, sold for the same price as a television set. And ten years later, when SARS broke out in Guangzhou, a bottle of vinegar (thought to be able to kill the virus) sold for more than 200 yuan a bottle! But even after these terrible outbreaks, wild animals are still eaten in Guangdong Province, and ark shells are still selling out in the restaurants of Shanghai.

In today's world, in which people have become more and more closely tied to the computer, you only have to type in the words 'food' or 'eat' in a Chinese search engine, you will find that the words that crop up the most in the list of results are 'safety' and 'poisoning'. This is an ironic state of affairs in a country that has prided itself on its fine cuisine. Sun Yatsen, the Guomindang leader, once said, 'China's civilisation has fallen behind the rest of the world. Only its food has continued to improve – to such an extent

that no country in the civilised world can match it.' If he knew what the situation was like today, I'm sure that he would feel ill at ease.

Western historians have, through the ages, questioned how it was that the great Roman Empire fell so suddenly. Excavations in Cirencester in England from 1969 to 1976 came up with some important findings. The excavations were of grave mounds dating from the 4th and 5th Centuries BC. Archaeologists found 450 human skeletons, and discovered that the levels of lead in the bones were more than 80 times higher than normal. And the levels of lead in the infant bones were even higher. It is probable that most of these people died of lead poisoning.

The Ancient Romans were always very proud of their water supply systems. They tended to use lead pipes to transport their water. The Romans also used lead cups to drink from, and lead pots to cook their food in, and they even used lead oxide instead of sugar to make their wines. Consuming lead at such high levels will inevitably leave one listless. In the long term, such high consumption of lead will also have a serious affect on fertility. In the latter periods of the Roman Empire, the emperors often encouraged the citizens to have more children, perhaps because they were afraid of declining fertility rates. It has now been proven that lead poisoning is harmful to fertility, so it is quite possible that it was one factor which led to the decline of the Roman Empire.

Of course, it wasn't the only factor. But how was it that the Eastern Roman Empire was able to survive 1000 years after the fall of the Western Roman Empire? There were far fewer lead mines within the boundaries of the Eastern Roman Empire, forcing the citizens to use clay to make their cups and cooking pots, instead of lead – which they still considered to be superior. It really does seem to be the case that, as a French nutritionist once observed, 'To know the fate of a race, first look at what they eat and what they drink'.

Everyone around the world has now accepted that the safety of food has become a political issue. Especially since, after the events of September 11th, terrorist organisations have threatened that the food and water supply will become one of the targets of their biological warfare. In China, the politicisation of food was revealed in early 2004, when rumours coming from many paediatric hospitals about the sharp rise in the rates of

premature puberty were deemed to be politically dangerous by the government, and efforts were made by the authorities to quash the spread of the rumours.

In early 2004, a rumour spread that the government had imposed a cover-up of the fact that Beijing clinics were reporting large numbers of cases of children reaching puberty prematurely.

Through various contacts, I managed to meet with a well-known doctor at a gynaecological clinic. One morning, I was waiting in the reception area of the clinic, and saw a professional woman in her thirties walk up to the registration counter. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would never have believed that the very mature looking girl standing next to her was only seven-and-a-half years old!

Afterwards, the doctor friend told me that during the consultation, she discovered that this little girl had already started menstruating, and had developed breasts the size of ping pong balls, and that her thighs were as fat as a girl in her late teens. I asked the doctor the reason for this, and she replied that in fact premature puberty is not uncommon these days in Beijing. Other seven year old girls who had started menstruating had also come to see her at the clinic, as well as six year old boys who had started to grow facial hair! The cause of this phenomenon is the existence of antibiotics in children's food products. Although these products are popular with children, the children are unable to deal with the traces of antibiotics, so the chemicals accumulate within their bodies, leading to premature puberty. The most dangerous products are chemically polluted seafood.

After further research, I discovered that seafood products, which have traditionally been believed to build body strength, are not only harmful to children's health, but also to the fertility of adults.

Chinese culture has always placed a strong emphasis on the concept of food being used as a tonic, to promote good health. In Guangzhou Province, there is a saying that 'As long as it has wings, the people will eat anything, apart from planes'. The people of that Southern province will eat all kinds of strange and exotic seafoods, even going as far as eating human dumplings. The female foetuses that are aborted because of the One Child Policy are then used to stuff dumplings with, and these are considered to be very nourishing. Many of these aborted foetuses belong to female migrants working in the

Zhujiang Delta, who fall pregnant out of wedlock. Undeniable proof of this phenomenon was revealed to me by a photographer friend of mine who took many photographs of these dumplings being made in Guangdong Province. Perhaps it was fate then that a certain wild cat that the Guangdong people enjoy eating very much became a carrier of SARS, and meant that this dangerous disease first reared its head in Guangdong Province. Perhaps God was exacting his revenge on all those people who dared eat human dumplings.

Let's return to the topic of seafood. People have always been prepared to pay high prices for seafood, as they believe it is nutritious both to adults and children. But if you eat seafood that has had its growth speeded up with antibiotics, not only will you not gain strength, you might find that your family line dies out. And more worrying still are the effects it has on the growth of children. In Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Shaanxi and other provinces, I have seen that when it comes to the yearly cleaning of fish ponds, peasants not only clean the mud from the bottom of the ponds, but also cover the base of the pond with a thick layer of contraceptive powder. The reason they add these contraceptives and antibiotics to the fish and prawn ponds and tanks is that these chemicals not only protect the animals from many diseases, they also increase the speed of growth of the fish. Many of these fish farmers have told me that they never eat the fish that they farm. And on several occasions in different fish farms in Guangzhou, I have seen the peasants cover the base of their ponds with crushed contraceptive pills!

Now it's the case that the more expensive seafood is, the less safe it is to eat it. This is already an open secret among the restaurant traders of Beijing. Especially dangerous are eels and soft-shelled turtles. A normal soft-shelled turtle weighing two jin would usually take about two years to grow, but now these turtles can grow to this size in just two or three months! In this world which is becoming more and more like a large village, a disease in one place is bound to spread to another. China produces vast quantities of agricultural products, and these dangerous seafood products are gradually attracting the condemnation of institutions in Japan, the US and Europe. The Chinese government, which is used to controlling the country with lies, has countered these complaints with a lie which they themselves don't believe. They say that the reason that the harmful chemicals have been found in the fish products is that the girls who scoop the

seafood from the water often cut their hands on the shells, and apply antibiotic cream to the wounds. The government asserts that traces of these chemicals then find their way into the food products.

Today, many hundreds of million people suffer from illnesses connected with polluted food or water. Many new food related illnesses have cropped up, affecting large numbers of the world's population, but this problem hasn't yet received sufficient attention from the relevant local public hygiene authorities. Food related illnesses are one of the most common illnesses suffered by children, and they have become the number one cause of death in childhood in developing countries. 1.5 billion children under the age of 5 suffer from diarrhoea each year, and 3 million of these will die from the condition.

The consequences of these illnesses are enormous, especially in developing countries where the economic resources to deal with health and hygiene problems are already stretched to the limit. The serious cases of food related illnesses that have cropped up all over the world are caused in the main by issues relating to changes in food production and transportation.

In China, the media has focused public attention in unprecedented levels on the issue of food safety, with reports on the presence in pork of clenbuterol – the so-called 'lean-meat powder'; pesticide residues on vegetables; sodium formaldehyde sulfoxylate on grain products and rotting bamboo; and formaldehyde in seafood products. The fact that people in the street are now asking themselves 'Is there anything that is safe for us to eat now?' is inevitably making the government feel nervous.

The traditional Chinese saying that 'Food is the people's Heaven shows the importance of food in people's daily lives. The father of a friend of mine called Zhou, when asked by a foreigner what religion the Chinese believed in, thought for a while, and replied, 'Food!'

But when SARS broke out in the spring and summer of 2003, and professor Zhong Nanshan – one of the two Chinese people who received international praise for their conduct during the crisis (the other one was Dr Jiang Yanyong, who insisted on the need to 'use truth to save humanity') – spoke out on the issue of the safety of food, the Chinese people, who had until then been ignorant about this topic, asked themselves

angrily, 'Who is it who has punctured our 'heaven' in such a way? Who can we trust now? Is there anything we can trust?' After this, everyone started talking about the safety of food. Zhong Nanshan, with his sense of professional ethics and duty to tell the truth, stated that, without knowing it, the Chinese people were committing a form of slow, mass suicide.

In the spring of 2004, during a conference held by the Guangzhou office of the National People's Congress, Zhong Nanshan, who was himself an NPC deputy, said, 'The problem of the safety of food is getting more and more serious by the day. In fifty years, most of the population of Guangdong Province will have become infertile.' This once again caught the attention of the media. The newspapers that had a sense of social responsibility published the following extracts from Zhong Nanshan's speech:

'The problem of the safety of food is already a very serious one. Unsafe food accounts for the rise of many serious illnesses in Guangzhou.

'The increasing rates of contraction of intestinal cancer, cervical and ovarian cancer in Guangzhou is related to the increased use of pesticides, additives and preservatives in food production.

'Due to increasing problems with the safety of food, sperm counts have declined sharply. In the past, sperm counts of 50 million to 100 million were normal, but now 30 million has become the norm. Today's sperm counts are nearly a half of what they were forty years ago. If necessary measures aren't taken to solve this problem, in fifty years time many people will find that they are unable to have children.'

Around the world, there have been many cases of the misuse of medical drugs. For example, the use of thalidomide in the 1950s to treat morning sickness in the early months of pregnancy resulted in the birth of many physically handicapped babies who had only a 50% chance of survival. In Germany, 8000 such children were born, in Japan 1000 . . .

When thalidomide was give to pregnant rabbits and monkeys, 100% of them suffered miscarriages. Even in the smallest doses, some chemicals can produce serious side effects for people who are sensitive to them. The 'crab crisis' that broke out in 2003 across China was caused by the presence of chloromycetin on the crab's shell. Tiny amounts of this substance are sufficient to kill those who are allergic to it.

Over the ages, unsafe food has affected people indiscriminately – even the great and the mighty have fallen victim to this problem. Beethoven is just one unfortunate example.

In the past, historians have always suggested that Beethoven died from syphilis. Although they tried to explain this away by claiming that it was only natural that a genius should lead a decadent life, the feeling still remained that his death revealed a flaw within his character.

But fortunately, a small group of researchers that included geneticists, anthropologists, historians and medical experts have recently been able to remove this slur on Beethoven's reputation. The leader of this group said that they were not carrying out a simple research into the composer's illness, instead they were conducting a piece of 'very important scientific research. Because the historically important secrets hidden in the bones are beyond anything we could have imagined.' The study they had planned was to find out about the lives and deaths of fifty historically important people. What did they eat? What habits did they have? What illnesses did they contract? The answers to all these questions were to be discovered by analysing the DNA of the corpses.

After studying a strand of hair from Beethoven's corpse, which had been preserved for nearly two hundred years, they discovered that this great composer had not consumed large quantities of sedatives. After Beethoven's death, his private secretary had blamed the doctor for administering lethal quantities of drugs.

Nor did the scientists find any large traces of mercury in the hair. At the time, syphilis was treated with mercury, so the fact that there was no trace of it in his hair proved that he didn't contract the disease.

In the end, the scientist came up with a rather disturbing theory. They suggested that Beethoven died from eating, over a long period of time, polluted fish from the Danube River. They also claimed that this poison could have led to Beethoven's loss of hearing.

Having read this, I flicked through some biographies of Beethoven, and found that he often liked to have a drink with a fishmonger friend of his. So it was his drinking habit, and love of fish that led to this great composer's downfall. What a tragic loss of a great genius.

Professor Zhu Weijie, who comes from Guangzhou, just like Zhong Nanshan, and who works in Jiannan University's Reproduction Immunity Research Centre, gave further weight to Zhong Nanshan's assertions through his studies of lean-meat powder. This powder, which is officially called clenbuterol, was originally used to treat bronchial asthma. But because it had serious side effects on the heart, its use was prohibited. When pigs were given feed that was laced with this powder, however, it was found that their meat became leaner and richer in protein. When humans consumed this meat, they would suffer from giddiness, nausea, trembling limbs and heart palpitations. Some people even suffered heart attacks, sunk into a coma and died. As a consequence, a worldwide ban was placed on the use of clenbuterol in pig feed.

Following research undertaken by Professor Zhu's team, it was found that tiny quantities of clenbuterol were sufficient to cause problems in the growth of the foetuses of pregnant mice, and sometimes even lead to miscarriage. What effects similar doses would have on the foetuses of human females has not yet been discovered. But one can only imagine that if they cause problems in mice, they will also cause problems to humans. The consequences would be especially serious during the early months of pregnancy. And because these chemicals are slow to be eliminated from the body, they can have long-term effects on the health of those who consume them. As well as researching its effects on fertility, the centre is also carrying out research on whether this chemical can cause disability or cancer.

In July 2004, I interviewed Zhao Hong, Deputy Head of Jiangxi's Nanchang University, who is also a delegate of the People's Political Consultative Conference and an expert on the issue of food safety. He said that urgent measures have been taken to test food for the presence of lean-meat powder, and grants have been awarded for the setting up of a foundation that will look into issues relating to the safety of food. I was very impressed at how Professor Zhao used every opportunity available to him to publicise the importance of the issue. He has said that 'Feeding lean-meat powder to pigs, feeding contraceptive drugs to finless eels and loaches is commonplace. . . Many illegal food production companies use these kinds of "high-tech" means to make large profits, without any consideration of the effect they have on the public.' Lean-meat powder

poisoned 484 people in Heyuan City, 200 people in Shunde. This chemical is instilling great fear in the people. What are the relevant authorities doing to deal with this matter?

On 20 May 2004, during the 'Half Hour Economic Show', reporter Ma Hongtao interviewed Deng Xiuying, the head of the team that was investigating the Fuyang Milk Powder scandal, and asked him whether he was nervous about the food he ate. Deng said, 'Today the people are saying – look, first there's something wrong with ham, then we can't eat dried meat floss, then it's Chinese chives. They don't know what's safe to eat any more. I'm a member of the public too, and I have the same concerns as they do.' It would be quite natural for a politician to speak like this in the West, but it's very unusual indeed in China.

An article entitled 'A study of food poisoning cases caused by lean-meat powder' published in the People's Liberation Army's Preventative Medicine Magazine on 21 April 2003, was particularly shocking. It stated that on 2 July 2002, 80 soldiers ate pig's liver that contained residues of lean-meat powder in their canteen. Of these, 20 suffered food poisoning in varying degrees, which is 25% of the total. Firstly, they started suffering from muscular twitching, especially in the hands; then they began to suffer from dizziness, headaches and heart palpitations; the next day they experienced pain in their facial muscles, listlessness in their legs, and a few of them felt nauseous, but did not vomit.

After enquiries were made, it was found that the food served in the canteen was obtained in accordance with the guidelines set out by the army – it was all bought from the wholesale outlets run by a higher regiment of the army. And when cooking the pigs' liver, the army cooks had correctly boiled the liver in water before stir-frying it. All the people who had been poisoned by the liver recovered, either entirely or partially. After thorough investigations, it was ascertained that the poisoning had been caused by the pig liver, and that the liver contained traces of lean-meat powder. So it was a case of chemical food poisoning.

But this case of lean-meat powder poisoning didn't happen in some remote mountain village, or some cheap roadside restaurant – it took place in an army canteen that was controlled by strict food safety guidelines, and it poisoned soldiers – the 'Great Wall of Steel' that all our school textbooks talk about so much.

Instant noodles, which Western countries have always regarded as being junk food, are not very highly valued by the Chinese either. In 2003, an estimated 65 billion packets of instant noodles were consumed, of these, 27 billion were consumed in China. So China is the largest consumer of instant noodles in the world. On average, a Chinese person eats 21 packets of instant noodles a year. Last year, the global consumption rose by 6.6 billion, and China's consumption rose by 4.6 billion packets. After China, the largest consumers of instant noodles in the world are Indonesia, Japan, the US and Korea. This 'global food' first appeared in the market in 1958, developed as a fast food by Japan. But the quality of the instant noodles consumed in China is a question of great concern.

The quantities of junk food eaten by Chinese people have led to a vast increase in the number of Chinese developing diabetes. According to Professor Welslyn, an American specialist in Diabetes, 10% of Americans whose parents immigrated to the US from China suffer from diabetes, and more and more of them are dying from the disease, and other diseases related to it. And as this second generation of ethnic Chinese continue to overeat and lead sedentary lives, these trends can only become more serious. Those in authority have said that the high rates of diabetes among the Chinese community can be explained by genetic factors, changes in diet and lifestyle and lack of information.

There has always been a custom in China of officials taking advantage of their office to feast at the expense of the state. This ancient custom has reared its head again in modern times, with the current widespread practice of officials holding extravagant 'Imperial Feasts'. There is a common saying now that 'the officials eat so much that they destroy the reputation of the Party, and destroy their stomachs as well!' This shows how much the people despise these greedy, corrupt officials.

Newspapers have reported that in Wuchuan, an economically backward town in the west of Guangdong Province, there is not sufficient funds to buy school text books. But when a national inspectorate looked into the accounts of the local education department, they found that this poverty-stricken department had spent 6 million yuan on dining expenses in just one year and a half. That means that the average daily eating expenses for the department were 4000 yuan. They ate at expensive restaurants, but claimed on the expenses that these were 'simple, fixed-menu restaurants'. They used the

restaurant receipts to take out huge amounts of cash from the department funds, which meant that millions of yuan went missing.

I have also found out from the national supervisory department that in 2003, a total of 1128 middle to high-ranking cadres were questioned about their huge dining expenses, and many of them were removed from their posts. These kinds of greedy and corrupt officials are responsible for eating their way through 200 billion yuan of China's GDP per year.

1. THE GLOBAL PROBLEM OF FOOD SAFETY

Food has offered a means of survival for Chinese people all over the world – the millions of Chinese restaurants that fill Chinatowns across the world are proof of that. It is through eating at these restaurants that many Westerners first gain their knowledge of China. For them, China has become synonymous with Chinese food. The large quantities of agricultural and food products that China exports to the rest of the world has also raised many questions within European and other countries, causing inevitable frictions in international trade relations.

More and more Western countries are developing a taste for Chinese soy sauce. This has been encouraged by reports that soy sauce contains 10 times more antioxidants than red wine. Due to the rise in appetite for oriental foods, last year there was a 10% increase in consumption of soy sauce in the UK. For many Westerners, soy sauce has become one of their staple ingredients.

But recently the Food Standards Authority in the UK has reported that some of the soy sauce on sale in the UK contains excessive amounts of carcinogenic substances. Some oriental food suppliers in the UK have had to take back many of the products that have been deemed to be unsafe. According to *The Times*, the FSA checked 100 different types of soy sauce, and found that 22 of them contained levels of 3-MCPD that were above the maximum levels permitted by EC regulations. All of these 22 brands were imported from China, Hong Kong or Taiwan. As far as China is concerned, the products that are exported are always of relatively superior quality. Recently, news has emerged that in China soy sauce is being manufactured from hair. The producers of this fake sauce buy up discarded hair from hairdressers and ferment it. It has acquired the nickname of 'hair water'.

This hair water has not only been used for industrial purposes, it has also been used to flavour fake soy sauce with. Compared with other amino acids made from fermented beans or grain, these amino acids made from hair are not only cheap, they can also comply with the superficial quality standards set for soy sauce. In a few places in Dongbei and Hubei, most of the hair is bought from hairdressers, for prices of about 1 yuan a kg. After the hair has been sorted, it is sold on to Shandong and Hebei provinces

for 1.8 yuan a kg to factories that make amino acid essence from it and sell it on to the rest of the country. Some small factories use this essence to brew a cheap 'hair soy sauce', which they then sell on to restaurants and markets. So the trade in human hair in some places has become very successful. In some areas of Hebei, 'specialist hair villages' have sprung up, the roads lined with hair wholesale shops which sell hair that has come from all over the country. The hair undergoes some basic processing and is then sold to Hebei, Shandong, Sichuan and Chongqing. Amino acids created from human hair contain arsenic, lead and other dangerous substances which harm people's liver, kidneys, blood system and fertility, and can lead to cancer. Perhaps this trade is China's tiny and veiled revenge for the opium war that Britain waged on the country.

China is still a developing country whose economy depends on its mainly agricultural exports. What has changed since the Opium War is that the enemy it faces attacks it now, not with gunboats, but with high-tech food quality checks. The US and Europe use these high-tech inspections of food safety to build a 'soft barrier' against the imports of agricultural products from developing countries. First, they set up their own food safety standards which ensure that the imports from poor countries will be unable to enter the Western markets, then the West ensures that the harmful substances that their exports contain will be unable to be detected by the poorer countries, which gives the West an advantage in the international trade markets.

Those who possess advanced technology always have the upper hand.

It is only because the Western countries have all the best cards that they are prepared to pull down the 'hard barrier' and replace it with a 'soft barrier'. The various forms of 'soft barrier' include: technical barriers concerned with meeting environmental guidelines and animal hygiene standards; market and consumer barriers related to laws regulating the consumer market; barriers set up related to 'green' and safety issues which are part of the new trend in trade protectionism that attempts to protect the domestic economies of the West from imports that do not contravene WTO guidelines; finally, barriers have been set up with relation to Western countries' natural environment, geography and climate in order to protect specific domestic needs. These are barriers which China, a major exporter of agricultural products, has to face.

The case below is proof of this situation:

At a shrimp farm in the islands of Zhoushan in Zhejiang Province, a group of fishing women dressed in cheap, colourful summer clothes, were chatting away as they peeled shells from shrimps. Then one of the women shrieked as her finger was yet again cut by the sharp shell. She took out a tube of antiseptic cream and smothered it over the wound, then went back to her work.

The fact that these women, who work so hard for their living, smear these ointments onto their hands without a second thought, has led to many different kinds of infections in the shrimp ponds. These infected prawns, which are frozen and exported abroad, have been rejected by many countries, causing a financial loss of billions of yuan for China. This in turn has led to many Chinese authorities attempting to deceive and hoodwink international bodies, trying to convince them that there are no dangerous substances in their seafood products.

In early 2001, Austria's Greenpeace organisation tested the toxicity of seafood products for sale in Austria, because some people who had eaten frozen shrimp from a local Carrefour supermarket had developed allergic reactions. It was discovered that some prawns sold by the German Ristic company contained the banned element arsenic. It was then revealed that these frozen prawns came from China's Zhoushan.

Europe then immediately stepped up its inspection of Chinese seafood products. By October 2001, there were already 90 batches of Chinese seafood that were discovered to contain excessive quantities of arsenic and residues of other poisonous substances. These batches included eel from Fujian, and shallow water lobster from Jiangsu Province.

On 28 January 2002, the UN's grain organisation and the World Hygiene Organisation declared at a conference in Marrakech that, 'From 31 January, the import from China of seafood products (apart from shellfish) into Europe is no longer banned.'

This ban on Chinese shellfish led to loss of \$623 million for China. 95 Chinese enterprises were affected by this ban, each one losing an average of \$3-5 million. The ban also affected the livelihoods of 49,600 Chinese labourers, and many tens of thousands of Chinese fishermen. It was a catastrophic blow to China's seafood industry.

In January 2002, the US FDA came out with a warning about Chinese prawn products. They declared that on 24 May, Louisiana authorities had tested all imported lobster and prawn products for traces of arsenic. Then Florida did the same.

In March 2002, the Housheng Province of Japan announced that they would carry out thorough investigations of animal products imported from China, and declared that 11 medical products imported from China contained dangerous chemical residues.

According to statistics from the Department of Agriculture, following an EC ban on all animal product imports from China, there was a 33.5% drop in Chinese animal products exported to Europe, and serious drops too in exports to Asia and Africa. In the last five months, the animal product exports have dropped by a further 12%.

On 6 February 2002, UK's FSA reported the results of a study it had carried out on honey, and announced that 7 brands of honey imported from China had dangerous levels of chloromycetin. It advised that all imports of Chinese honey be banned.

Following the Hong Kong ban on imports of Chinese eel, it was found that many freshwater fish supplied to Hong Kong and Macau by China contained carcinogenic levels of the chemical Malachite green. So imports of these fish from China were also drastically reduced. Singapore also banned imports of Chinese eel that contained Malachite green. Hong Kong undertook a study of freshwater fish from China, and found that of 19 varieties, including guihua and carp, seven contained dangerous levels of Malachite green. This chemical is very cheap, and is effective in curing diseases of the fish skin. It also helps the scales remain shiny after the fish has died, making it hard for customers to discern whether the fish is fresh or not. But eating fish treated with this chemical can alter human cell structure and lead to cancer.

70 to 80% of freshwater fish sold in Hong Kong comes from China, so the consequences of toxic freshwater fish are more serious than those of toxic eel. Suddenly, there was a huge drop in sales of freshwater fish in Hong Kong. The local fish suppliers complained that customers had no way of knowing where the fish they sold came from. They demanded that the government take the necessary measures to ensure that the public knew that the freshwater fish farmed in Hong Kong was safe to eat. If the government didn't do this, the fish suppliers were afraid that local fish industry would collapse.

And just at this time, Chinese media reported on the terrifying ways in which eels were being farmed. Mr Ju Lin reported that the eel farms used ten or more different chemicals every day, feeding the young eels with chemicals including flavomycin and

chloromycetin. The eels are fed these chemicals, then taken to market the next day, while the chemicals are still in their systems. He said that the way the farmers catch finless eel is even worse. 'When finless eels burry themselves in the mud, they are hard to catch, so the farmers sprinkle on loads of potassium permanganate to poison them. Once they are dead, they are easier to catch.'

A Mr Liang, who sells leather, told how large quantities of scrap leather are sold to fish, chicken and pig farmers who use them as animal feed. He said that large quantities of chemicals are used in the production of leather, and much of the leather ends up as scrap. 'In China, many people make a living by buying up this scrap, grinding it to a powder, mixing it with rice powder and salt and selling it off.' He said that many people buy scrap from Hong Kong leather factories run by immigrants from China's Northeast, and make animal feed from it, which they sell to Hong Kong's three hundred fish farms.

Not long after, a news programme broadcast by an independent Russian television station reported that hygiene officials in a city in the far east of the country found that there was mercury in pork imported from China. Many of the customers only discovered that the pork contained mercury after they removed it from the oven, and found that the oven was lined with drops of the dangerous chemical. One woman called Ilina Bulajina said to a TV reporter: 'What's frightening is that, not only I ate the roast pork, but my whole family, from my mother to my grandchildren ate it, as well as the soup I made from the bones.' Some of the people who ate the meat have already been taken to hospital for checks.

Mercury is a very dangerous substance. Meat sellers inject mercury into the meat in order to increase its weight, so that they can sell it for a higher profit. It's not easily detected. But this substance is toxic, and in the opinion of the Russian customers, this trade is tantamount to 'killing people for money'. The trade can only harm further the already bad reputation of Chinese products abroad.

The Taiwanese Hygiene Department recently carried out checks on all large crabs, and found that, in Penghua County, there were three supermarkets that sold crabs and eels imported from China which contained 0.04 ppm of DDT and other carcinogenic substances. Once DDT enters the fat deposits of human beings, it stays there forever, and

in serious cases can cause liver cancer. Taiwan banned the use of this chemical a long time ago. The authorities consequently warned Taiwanese customers to avoid buying agricultural products imported from China.

On 6 March 2002, the Chinese consulate in Hamburg received news that two honey manufacturers in Schleswig-Holstein used honey from China that contained chloromycetin and other toxic substances. And of 7.3 tonnes of eel imported from China, 480 kg also contained chloromycetin.

Furthermore, according to a Southern German newspaper, some primary animal products imported from China have been found to have continual problems concerning dangerous chemical residues. Last February, in the Black Forrest region, Chinese pig intestines for making sausage skins were found to contain chloromycetin. And two weeks ago in Schleswig-Holstein, chloromycetin was also found in Chinese crabs.

In fact, this problem has not only been confined to Germany. The UK, Spain, Netherlands, and other EC countries have also found dangerous substances in animal products imported from China. In the past, frozen chicken, shellfish and beef products have been banned from Europe because they have failed to meet quality regulations. Following the bans, the Chinese town of Qingdao has suffered the most serious financial losses. It has lost \$210 million of revenue from seafood exports – a third of the total national loss. Zhejiang Province (especially Zhoushan and Ningbo) has lost \$100 million in revenue.

In January 2001, Japan, which had always considered China to be its ‘vegetable garden’, chose to carry out thorough tests of all vegetables imported from China, testing 100% of the varieties imported. On 20 March, 18 types of frozen vegetables were tested; in July, all frozen vegetables were tested. Soon, headlines started appearing in the Japanese press saying that frozen spinach imported from China contained pesticide levels 180 times higher than those allowed. The Japanese journal, ‘The Economist’, followed up by reporting that ‘vegetables imported from China seem to have been soaked in pesticides.’

Soon, Japanese customers, who had become accustomed to buying imported Chinese vegetables, suddenly started avoiding them. Some Japanese supermarkets stopped stocking vegetables from China, and restaurants started preferring to change their

menus rather than serving dishes that contained Chinese vegetables. Some Japanese tourists even decided to cancel planned tourist trips to China. They were afraid of eating food in China that was filled with dangerous chemicals.

After this, Japan introduced much tougher regulations concerning the import of Chinese vegetables. As a consequence of one particularly severe month, many tens of thousands of farmers in Shandong Province in China suffered great economic hardship.

Because of high chemical residues found in Chinese agricultural products, the EC placed a ban on Chinese primary animal products. After that, Switzerland, Japan, Korea and other countries did the same. And Germany and the Netherlands made it even more difficult for Chinese animal products to enter their markets. These technical barriers lead to a great drop in China's agricultural exports.

On 31 January 2002, China had many arguments with the EC concerning food safety. EC medical experts advised that a temporary ban should be placed on the import of all Chinese meat and seafood. They said that the regulatory system of Chinese food was very faulty, and that the Chinese exports of meat and seafood contained antibiotics such as chloromycetin. They advised that the ban should include Chinese rabbit meat, chicken, honey, molluscs, shellfish, and frozen prawns. This will obviously have a huge impact on the Chinese exports to Europe, which currently earn revenues of several hundreds of millions of Euros.

Chloromycetin has for a long time been banned outside China for use as an additive to animal feed, because it can lead to a lethal condition of anaemia. A Beijing consultant for the agricultural product industry said that the levels of antibiotics in food products in China are slightly higher than they are in the US and the UK, but the Chinese food that is exported has to meet higher standards. He said that the reports made by the EC concerned only a few Chinese food companies. Wang Nianzu, a researcher at the East Asian Department of Columbia University, said that there were many problems with the safety of Chinese food, but that these problems could be solved.

According to Reuters, this is the first conflict that has broken out between the EC and China concerning the problem of food safety. In May last year, the EC got rid of a series of bans against Chinese frozen chicken imports. The bans had been put in place five years ago following concerns over food hygiene. Furthermore, the EC ban on the

import of frozen prawns from China last year because of detected traces of chloromycetin, lead to a large scale food scare, and 200 tons of frozen prawns were returned to China.

On 6 May 2004, after reports that Longkou rice noodles from Shandong Province in China contained carcinogenic substances, the largest supermarket chain in Singapore decided to stop importing all Longkou rice noodles. Singapore used to import 22,000 tonnes of Longkou rice noodles a year, but due to safety reasons, some traders decided to temporarily stop importing these noodles, until the government came out and stated that the noodles were safe to eat. Singapore has since stepped up its own food check system, so as not to be caught out in this way again.

Canada's Food Safety Department then carried out its own tests on the Longkou noodles, linking up with the Chinese government and Hong Kong food safety organisations. Although no problems have been found as yet with the Longkou noodles sold in Canada, the Canadian customers have avoided buying them. Marc Richard, from Canada's Food Safety Department, said that although the department could carry out their own tests, the fastest way of checking the safety was for the Chinese government and the relevant Hong Kong food safety organisations to supply them with the relevant documents. He also said that more than 300 Chinese food products imported into Canada are found to have quality and hygiene problems, and are returned to China by the authorities.

On 21 June 2006, Hong Kong's Food and Environment Hygiene Department announced that some food products imported from China had illegal levels of chemicals in them. Hong Kong commentators said that the Chinese government should strengthen its policies on food safety, otherwise the Hong Kong consumers would lose their trust in Chinese food imports.

At the same time that the Chinese media is reporting more and more cases of fake, substandard food, the Hong Kong authorities have examined 133 different types of food, to check for levels of preservatives, additives and pollutants. Zhong Weixiong, an assistant at the Hong Kong food and environment office, announced the results of the tests on 19 June, saying that seven of the food products were found to have levels of chemicals above the maximums allowed by the Hong Kong authorities. They discovered that the Yanshan turtle paste made in Nanhai in Guangdong had sorbic acid; the

Guosheng dried melon from Fujian Province contained high levels of aluminium; Haitian soy sauce from Foshan in Guangdong, Kangdi orange juice from Shenzhen, Hailian dried turnip from Hiuzhou in Fujian and Hongqiao roasting sauce from Guangzhou all contained dangerous levels of benzoic acid. And Zhengjin peanuts from Guangzhou contained aflatoxin.

In the second half of 2004, events related to food safety scares caused a loss in trade worth \$510 million. This year, from January to May, because of the outbreak of bird flue in some areas, the reorganisation of the Japanese seeding system, and new rules relating to the import of food products into the US, China has been importing \$500 million worth more food products than it has been exporting. Guangdong Province alone imported \$590 million worth more food than it exported in 2003. There has also been a drop of 20% in food from mainland China sold in Hong Kong. And the loss of trust in domestically produced food in China has led to an increase in demand for imported food products. 370 times more food is now imported from Argentina than it was a few years ago.

Of course, China has restricted the import of products that do not meet its standards. For example, in March 2002, due to the outbreak of mad cow disease, the Chinese government announced that it would ban the import of some Japanese cosmetics and food ingredients. On 30 July, some seaweed imported from Japan was found to contain high levels of mercury, and had to be returned. On 21 April 2002, a batch of Dutch pig intestine skin used to make sausage skin was found to have chloromycetin, and was also returned . . .

According to a report from the EC, on 1 August 2005, the EC changed the levels of thiodan residue permitted in food products from the previous 30mg/kg to 0.01mg/kg. With regard to the tea produced in Zhejiang Province, the majority of it would fail to meet with these standards. Although the new regulations will only come into force in December, they have already started to have an effect. According to the Hangzhou customs statistics, Zhejiang exported 403.9 tonnes of tea to the EC in August 2005, worth \$782,000, which is a drop of 36.2% and 43.1% respectively when compared with the same period of the previous year. There are three or four major problems with respect to the export of Chinese tea: pesticide residue; heavy metal content; presence of dangerous

biological and synthetic substances used to bulk the tea up. Any one of these problems is enough to damage the prospects of the export of the tea. At present, furthermore, 90% of Chinese food product enterprises have to deal with technical barriers to trade set up by the international community.

Li Jiange, of the State Council's Development Research Centre, said that the problem of the safety of food is the main reason for the setting up of technological trade barriers. The problem of food safety in China is related mainly with problems concerning: the agricultural environment; animal disease prevention system; the production, processing and selling of its agricultural products; and its food safety standards system.

Following the trends of globalisation and free trade, the traditional tariff barriers are being pulled down. So, Western developed economies are now increasingly using technical barriers to prevent Chinese products from entering their markets.

Professor Chen Yishen, a famous expert on agricultural matters, and deputy head of the State Council's Development Research Centre, recently revealed the following worrying statistic: last year, China's production of vegetables was 440 million tonnes. In the end, 70% of this was either thrown away or left to rot, mostly because of issues relating to food safety.

He also said that, according to Mr Rubin, member of the FDA and FAO, from August of last year to January of this year, the FDA sent back 634 batches of food imported from China, mostly because of problems with quality, and high levels of pesticides and additives. Because China faces such high pressure from its huge population, it has always tried to achieve maximum agricultural output in order to meet the high demand for food. So the standards for the quality and safety of agricultural products have never been rigorously enforced. For example, in order to ensure that fruit and vegetables reach the markets as soon as possible, producers often use growth enhancers and hormones to speed up the ripening process, which leads to increases in production but falls in quality and texture of the fruit, and food safety, with potentially fatal consequences on the health of the consumers. China now uses 200,000 tonnes, and over 1000 different types, of agricultural chemicals a year, some of them are even illegal. Once these chemical pollutants have entered the food chain, it is very hard to get rid of them.

I remember when I was studying in Moscow in 1999, an event related to the safety of Chinese food which damaged the reputation of Chinese people living in the city, and made even the most innocent of us feel ashamed. It was the end of the 1990s, when, after the success that the rich businessman Mo Qizhong had in buying up Soviet planes and selling them to China, many Chinese businessmen rushed to the Soviet Union to try and make their fortunes. One Chinese man who was more trustworthy than Mo Qizhong exported containers of instant noodles by train to Moscow, and imported containers of Russian metal.

This Chinese businessmen chose the brand of instant noodles that 'the whole world knows' - ones made by a Sino-Taiwanese joint venture – and exported a whole train of them to the USSR. But when they reached the Soviet border, the customs inspected them and found that the levels of bacteria far exceeded the maximum set by law. The Soviet media made a big fuss about this, and there followed newspaper cartoons about the poor quality of trainers sold by the Wenzhou traders, showing a Russian wearing his 'designer' trainers: he is about to leave his house, but as soon as he sticks a foot outside his door, the shoe starts to fall apart. Suddenly all the Russian skinheads started picking on the Chinese community living in Russia. And the Soviet police started keeping a close eye on the community as well. Then the Vietnamese community started complaining to the Chinese, because they were often mistaken for Chinese by the Russians and so would also often be picked on or arrested. Although this event created a storm in Russia, when I returned to China, no one there had heard anything about it. Except for a few friends who worked in the media who said no wonder that during that time that particular instant noodle manufacturer suddenly stopped putting its adverts out.

Some experts say that the best way for China to deal with the international technical trade barriers is to improve the quality of its agricultural products. Han Junceng, head of rural affairs at the State Council's Development Research Centre, pointed out that the problem of the safety and quality of China's agricultural produce is now not just a problem of public hygiene, but also one which has an impact on China's international trade, the income of Chinese peasants and the development of the food industry.

So how can we win this new battle in the international trade war that has been brought about by problems of food safety? I believe that, firstly, the government must use

the same resolve that it employed while tackling the problem of SARS, invest sufficient funds and manpower to set up food safety regulation system and standards that meet with the needs of China as well as the rest of the international community, creating its own 'Green Great Wall' with the help of scientists and business leaders who work in this field.

Secondly, the government must have the courage and boldness to face the reality of the situation. Lies told with relation to the safety of food with have grave consequences. Officials should be accountable and responsible, and anyone not up to their job should be got rid of, just as it was with SARS. Officials that deceive the higher authorities, complaining in the international arena about foreign countries returning Chinese food products, when they themselves know perfectly well that these products do not meet with international standards, should be dealt with severely.

The problem of the safety of food isn't just a simple food problem, or an economic problem. It is a new trade war, just like the Opium War was, and it is a war that we can't afford to lose.

2. LEAN MEAT POWDER

A food safety officer once told me an unbelievable story about the use of ‘lean meat powder’ in China: When a provincial official was taking a very high official from the Department of Agriculture around a pig farm, they noticed that some of the pigs had particularly shiny hair and well-developed muscles, while the others looked very ordinary. The important official wondered why this was, and the farmer replied: ‘The good-looking pigs are fed with lean meat powder, after they’re killed, the meat looks very fresh and red, and sells very well. We sell that to the people in the towns. The other kind of pig we keep for ourselves to eat.’ The important official said, ‘Do you know that the powder is harmful to people’s health?’ The farmer replied, ‘Yes. But the people in the town have free medical care, so it’s no problem.’

The only time that I have seen a provincial-level official talk on the media about lean meat powder was on 22 August 2001, when the famous reporter, Wang Xiaoya, talked to Xi Jinping, leader of Fujian Province, about polluted food. Xi Jinping looked into the camera and said, ‘The first thing I did when I came to Fuzhou was to look for a restaurant. To tell the truth, eating out now is a very worrying thing to do. We are afraid that the rice contains poison, or that the vegetables have too many pesticides left on them . . .’

When Wang Xiaoya asked about the situation of lean meat powder in Fujian Province, Xi Jinping said, ‘At first, lean meat powder was made as a scientific experiment. 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 hospital and was told that he had been poisoned. He stopped eating pigs liver and found that his illness went away. This shows how harmful this substance is.’

New discoveries are a mixture of magic and science. This has always been my rather immature opinion. I have always felt that science and magic are like a pair of twins, and the long term consequences that science has on humanity are like a double-edged sword. No one can tell whether, in the future, it will have a positive or negative influence on the world.

If scientists don't maintain a sense of feeling for their fellow man during their research, then their discoveries can have the opposite effect than that which they had hoped for.

Richard Feynman, the American scientist who won the 1965 Nobel Prize for his research in nuclear physics, is an interesting case. One day, while he was travelling with some friends, this great scientist entered a Buddhist temple. He met a monk, who said, 'People who come here think that they gain the key to Heaven, but they don't realise that this same key can open the gates of Hell.'

Feynman suddenly realised that this was even truer of science itself. Science can bring mankind both happiness, and disaster.

If one looks at the science column of the US Time Magazine, one can see that about half the content is about scientific discoveries that have just happened or are about to happen. Science has helped bring about the industrial revolution, and provide the means to feed our growing population, as well as preventing people from catching many diseases, thus prolonging life spans and reducing death rates. But the scientists, who hide away in their little corners, are not only finding cures for diseases, and trying to clone human beings, they are also creating genetically modified food, and new additives that will make vegetables grow faster. Mad Cow Disease, which was first discovered in the UK, is believed to have been caused because the cattle were given feed that was contaminated with MBM prions. The feed was made from the fat of boiled sheep carcasses. When the cattle ate the feed that contained the ground bones, they developed the disease. When humans eat this infected beef, they develop vCJD, which has a 100% death rate, and for which there is no cure. Is it man who has made the cows mad, or the cows who have made man mad? But the scientist who thought of using these carcasses for the feed probably thought he was doing a good thing, by not letting them go to waste.

At the beginning of the 1980s, an American scientist unintentionally added some chemicals commonly used in cough medicine to some pig feed. Ten years later, the benefits that this chemical brought about have been completely outweighed by the negative side-effects.

Perhaps the more developed a country becomes, the closer it gets to danger, and death. What is unforgivable though, is that companies in developed countries sell new

products, which have not yet been fully tested, to developing countries, using these less sophisticated consumers as their guinea pigs.

This so-called lean meat powder has caused great damage to China's food safety, economy, and traditional eating habits. (I have searched the internet, but have still been unable to find the name of the company that first came up with this product.)

The United Nation's FAO statistics state that in 2001, China produced 42.4 million tonnes of pork, which is 46.1% of the world's total pork production, making it the biggest producer of pork in the world.

According to China's Statistics Bureau, from January to May 2003, the average pork consumption per person in China was 1.78 kg per month, making 62.23% of all meat eaten. Every year, the 1.3 billion population of China eats an average of 200 kg of grain, over 100 kg of vegetables, and over 20 kg of meat. It is clear that food safety not only affects the lives of 1.3 billion people, but also has a deep impact on the country's economy.

Following the restructuring of the rural production system, China's meat production has increased in a startling way. In 1980, pork accounted for 88.8% of China's total meat production; in 1985, China's poultry production started to exceed that of the US, making it the largest poultry producer in the world; in 1990, China again produced more meat than the US, making it the largest meat producer in the world. And from 1988 to 1998, China's consumption of meat more than doubled. Chinese people are no longer herbivores, as they have traditionally tended to be. They are now carnivores.

As more and more pork was produced, people started paying more attention to its quality. In the past, Chinese people liked to eat fatty meat, but now they preferred eating lean meat. In 1960, fatty pork was considered to be the best quality meat, and was sold for 0.95 yuan a jin. Less fatty pork sold for 0.84 yuan a jin, while lean pork sold for just 0.75 yuan a jin. In the early 1980s, when fatty pork was no longer more expensive than lean pork, Hong Kong lean pork was already selling for 11 yuan a jin, while fatty pork had dropped to 0.8 yuan a jin, making it more than ten times cheaper than the leaner variety! Today, lean meat sells for about 8 yuan a jin, while fatty pork sells for just two or three yuan a jin. These are big price changes.

Rearing a pig on lean meat powder is much more expensive than rearing it on ordinary feed, and many pig farmers can't afford the chemicals, or the longer time it takes to rear the animal. The cost of rearing a pig on lean meat powder is about 1,600 yuan a kg; the price it sells for, however, is 2500 yuan a kg. The lean meat powder pigs have shiny skin and well-developed muscles, so look attractive to the buyers, and after the pig is killed the meat looks pink and fresh. Because lean meat pigs sell so well, the buyers visit the farms and specifically ask for pigs reared on the chemical. These pigs sell for about 20 yuan more than ordinary pigs. It takes about ten to twenty days for the chemical to have its effect. The cost for the farmer is only 8 yuan, but he can earn a profit of as much as 22 yuan, which is a 275% profit! This is just like what that old bearded philosopher Marx said – as soon as there is a suitable profit, capital will come flooding in. If there's a 10% profit, capital will rush in; if there's a 20% profit, it will become excited; if there's a 50% profit, it will be prepared to take risks; if there's a 100% profit, it will be prepared to break the law; if there's a 300% profit, it will be prepared to break whatever law necessary, even if the risks are fatal. The lean meat powder pig trade is just 25% short of the 300% profit margin that Marx was talking about. It is inevitable that with such a lot of money at stake, the trade will develop in a mad and perverse way.

Eating meat has always been an activity full of meaning for the Chinese. It is a sign of one's rank, one's social position. In ancient times, high officials were given meat rations; meat became a symbol of power. Confucius himself said that he left one region because he was not given a proper meat ration by the authorities. He left, not because he couldn't afford to buy meat himself, but because he felt that the failure to give him a ration was a personal insult.

The importance of eating meat in traditional Chinese society is well illustrated by the folktale 'The lost pork skin': A poor man was afraid of people finding out that he lived off sugar and vegetables. One day he got hold of a piece of pork with a thick skin, and hung it behind his door. Before he left his house every day, he would wipe his lips across the skin so that people would think that he'd been eating meat. But unfortunately the skin was stolen by a wild cat, and he became the laughing stock of the village. Although this is just a folktale, it shows the importance that Chinese people place on eating meat.

A friend of mine who used to work in a meat distribution depot was able to buy pig's head and trotters, and the fattiest pieces of meat, without ration coupons. At the time, everyone else in China was almost starving; we all needed to have ration coupons to buy meat, and even then, we could only get our hands on the leanest pieces. Lean meat was considered the worst meat of all - eating it was a sign of one's lack of power and ability.

I remember how each year at Spring Festival, my father would ask my cousin to get hold of a piece of the fattiest meat he could find. We would then deep fry the fatty rind and make dumplings out of it. My cousin then married the prettiest girl in the area, and I was convinced that the reason he was able to find such a beautiful wife was that he had the 'special authority' to get his hands on fatty meat. In 1990, the wife, who was now mother of his two children, divorced him, and he went mad. That's another story of course, but it is a sign of how much times have changed.

In the early 1980s, for example, every year at Spring Festival, villages would find the fattest pig, stick flowers on its head and give it pride of place in the street parades. There would always be talk of who had reared the heaviest pig, how so-and-so's pig weighed nearly 1000 jin!

At the time, if a pig weighed 100 jin it would be considered to be a fat pig, but soon they started weighing up to ten times that much. This had a large impact on the incomes of farmers. In the 1980s there was a saying that went: 'With just one bicycle and two baskets, the farmers can earn more than Premier Hu Yaobang'. This referred to how farmers would transport their pork by bicycle to the local markets, and make their fortune there.

But as consumers started preferring to eat leaner meat, farmers had to find ways of producing it. And it was just at that time that scientists started developing the lean meat powder that was later sold all over the world, and proved to be so harmful to people's health. It is not surprising that Professor Borg, of Huston University, said, with reference to scientific advances and their impact on society, said, 'In some way, we are seeing history repeat itself.' This is inevitably how one feels when one looks at the development of meat products. To solve a problem one must go back to the roots. So let's take a closer look at the lean meat powder issue.

The early 1980s was a very ebullient time in the US. It was a time of great hope and creativity, especially in the field of high technology and biological research: computers, which were to earn the US so much money from the rest of the world, were just taking off; scientists had already succeeded in cloning frogs from a few stem cells. The vast profits that these scientific discoveries created made the public forget about the need to properly regulate them.

So it was that in one American company, a young, unknown researcher inadvertently added clenbuterol to pig feed, and a miracle happened! This chemical was then added to cattle feed as well, and soon this doctored feed was being sold to the whole world. Large profits were being made, and everyone seemed to be happy, especially those countries and companies who were making money from this business. But this state of affairs was not to last long.

Spain was the first country to report casualties of the lean meat powder: in March 1990, 135 people from 43 Spanish families, perhaps after seeing a particularly good bullfight or football game, sat down to eat the Spanish speciality: beef liver soup. Everyone who ate it suffered serious food poisoning, experiencing, in varying degrees, heart palpitations, muscle spasms, headaches, nausea and hot and cold flushes. People suddenly became more scared of lean meat powder than they had been of 'mad cow disease'. This was the first reported case of food poisoning from the chemical.

Slowly more proof of the harmful effects of the chemical started to appear in the US and Europe: from March to July 1990, 125 cases of lean meat powder food poisoning occurred in central Spain. From January 1992 to 1994, 232 people were poisoned by the chemical in northern Spain, 97% of them had suffered after eating pig liver. In 1995, 16 people in Italy and 22 people in France were poisoned by the chemical . . .

While the Western scientists were trying to find a way to deal with the negative side effects of the chemical, two years after the mass poisoning incident in Spain, China started to import lean meat powder from abroad, claiming that the substance had great results in producing a higher proportion of lean meat in pork. It was sold to many feed factories along the Chinese coastal regions. Only the benefits of the chemical were talked about, no one mentioned the danger it posed to people's health. In 1996, when yet more people were poisoned in Italy after eating contaminated beef liver, the sellers of the

chemical in China maintained that the benefits of the chemical outweighed its drawbacks. Science had lost its sense of morality, and had become a key that opened the gate of hell.

The most disturbing case of lean meat powder poisoning was one reported by Mr Fang Liwei, of the Zhejiang provincial politburo. Three days before his daughter was due to take her high school exams, she suddenly said, 'Dad, my hand is shaking, I can't even draw a straight line.' The parents took her to hospital and found out that she had been poisoned by some soup that her mother had made from a chicken that had been fed lean meat powder.

High school exams are vitally important to people in China, they determine children's futures, and the lives of their families. But this lean meat powder had destroyed this family's future.

There is another case, which makes one believe a little in karma. On the eve of the Duanwu Festival this year, a peasant woman made 1.5 kg of rice parcels. Her family had reared pigs on lean meat powder, and had unintentionally put 50g of the leftover chemical into a pot that contained bicarbonate of soda. The woman poured this contaminated powder into the rice. Seeing that the rice hadn't turned yellow, she assumed that the soda powder was out of date, so washed the rice and went to borrow some soda powder from a neighbour. That afternoon at 4 o'clock, the woman sat down with her son, her daughter-in-law and her four-year-old grandson to eat the rice parcels. An hour later, the four of them started vomiting, having heart palpitations and stomach cramps. They went to the local clinic, and were transferred at 11:20pm to the local hospital for emergency help.

According to the medical experts, the clenbuterol in lean meat powder, if eaten in large quantities, can disturb one's heartbeat, and can, in serious cases, be fatal. Fortunately, the woman had washed the rice, thinking that the soda was out of date, thus avoiding a more serious disaster.

The case that has attracted most attention both in China and abroad, however, is the one that was reported on recently in Liawang Weekly. In May 1998, less than a year after the Hong Kong hand-over, 17 people in Hong Kong were poisoned after eating pig offal from mainland China. Reports of this case were featured in Hong Kong's 'Dongfeng Daily'. Hong Kong's more liberal press was able to bring this issue to the

attention of China's leaders, and now that the taboo on the subject had been lifted, the media in mainland China started reporting on cases as well.

The first case of lean meat powder poisoning to be reported in Mainland China happened in 1998. A Miss Wang went to visit her family in Guangzhou, and after she had eaten contaminated pig liver, she and the five other members of her family started suffering from shaking limbs, headaches and breathlessness.

Miss Wang said that she had bought 8 ounces of pig liver from a meat stall in Baiyun District. She brought it home and fried it with ginger, and started eating it with her family at 6:30pm. Two adults and three children ate the dish. By 9pm, the six of them were all suffering from the symptoms listed above. They went to bed and tried to sleep it off. The next day, Wang's 58-year-old mother's condition got worse, and she was taken to hospital with suspected chemical food poisoning. Suspecting that it was the pig liver that was to blame, Wang sent the leftovers of the dish to be tested by Guangzhou's disease prevention centre. It tested positive for clenbuterol, proving that the pig liver contained the lean meat powder that had been banned for use in animal feed. Lean meat powder had already been discovered in pig liver in China, but this was the first time that it had led to a case of food poisoning.

In April 1999, two athletes had eaten meat contaminated with lean meat powder, and after the chemical was detected in their urine samples, they were both banned from the competition.

On 12 January 2000, 12 people in Hangzhou were poisoned after eating meat containing lean meat powder. According to reports, from 3pm on 19 January to 6am on 20 January, more than ten people in the outskirts of Hangzhou developed heart palpitations and chest cramps and other symptoms of food poisoning. The stewed meat they had eaten tested positive for lean meat powder. This meat had been bought in a local agricultural market.

According to incomplete statistics, a further six cases have occurred in the rest of Zhejiang province. People have tended to develop reactions to the chemical twenty minutes after consuming it, although some didn't have reactions until four hours after eating it.

In August 2001, a vet in Longkou called Li Yangrong, started to work for a pig farm. He found a bag of lean meat powder in the chemical store room. In September of the same year, a farmer called Lu Haiwen asked Li how he could make his pigs more profitable, and Li told him that he had some lean meat powder, and could sell it to him. Lu Haiwen then bought 500 g of the powder from Li.

On 3 December, Lu Haiwen sold nine pigs that he had reared on lean meat powder to Mr Chen, who ran an abattoir in Jutan. The next morning, Chen sold the meat to various different meat traders and to 10 different local markets. This contaminated meat poisoned 630 local villagers. Fortunately the local hospital was able to deal with these cases very promptly – no one lost their life.

On 26 August 2001 it was reported that lean meat powder had poisoned another 530 people. The case happened in the northern corner of Xinyi in Guangdong province, and it's one of the largest cases of lean meat powder poisoning to have occurred in China so far. The meat in question had been reared by a pig farmer called Liang Jiangyong, and came from three pigs. According to the local government, 530 people were admitted to hospital after this case, three hundred of them were students, the rest were villagers. Liang was arrested, and admitted that he had indeed fed his pigs with the banned lean meat powder. This contaminated feed comes, on the whole, from two sources. The first is from underground factories in Sichuan, Zhejiang and Guangxi, which produce illegal additives including lean meat powder; the other source is from underground factories linked to legitimate food additive factories in Guangdong. These illegal substances are then sold on to the farmers along with the legitimate substances. The reason that so many people fell ill so quickly in this case was that the farmer was greedy for high profit, and fed his pigs excessive amounts of the powder.

On 17 November 2001 the first case of lean meat powder poisoning was reported in Beijing: on 2 November, fourteen people who had eaten pork liver for lunch were taken to Xiehe Hospital. They were suffering from muscle cramps, heart palpitations and nausea etc. After receiving medical care, most of them made a recovery, and all of them were eventually able to leave hospital.

The Beijing Hygiene Department revealed that tests it made on 86 pigs for sale in the Beijing markets showed that 25% had been fed lean meat powder. These figures are similar to those found in the Department of Agriculture's tests.

On 7 November 2001, a case of mass poisoning related to lean meat powder occurred in Heyuan in Guangdong Province. 484 people in the town were admitted to hospital after eating contaminated pork.

On 8 November of the same year, two farmers who reared their pigs on lean meat powder were arrested. They said that they obtained all their feed from the Jinguan animal feed wholesale depot in Heyuan. On 9 November, Chen Huqiang, head of the depot, was taken into the police station for questioning, and seven suspicious-looking bags of feed were found hidden in the depot. The bags had no labels on them, no sell-by dates. Tests proved that these bags did indeed contain lean meat powder. On 10 November, Lin Qingyuan, head of the Taishan Zhongyang feed company who supplied this product to the depot, was also taken to Heyuan for questioning.

On 25 March 2002, it was reported that at 10am on 14 March, a three-year-old child was admitted to Suzhou University's Children's Hospital with a suspected case of lean meat powder poisoning. Apparently, the day before, the child's family had all eaten pig liver for lunch, and soon the mother and grandmother had started suffering from racing heartbeats, shaking, and palpitations, and then the child started suffering too. The three of them were taken to hospital.

Over the next couple of days, a total of 26 people were taken to Suzhou hospitals suffering from the same symptoms. All of them had eaten pig's offal - 24 of them had eaten liver and the other two had eaten lungs. The offal had been sold by four different meat traders in the local agricultural market. The offal had come from Jiaying in Zhejiang Province. It was later found that the offal that the patients had eaten contained levels of lean meat powder that were five times more than the permitted levels.

In April 2002, a case of lean meat powder poisoning occurred in Shenjiang in Guangdong. It occurred on 4 April, in Zhuwu village, when 35 villagers ate pork and pig offal bought from a private butcher called Zhu. Soon after eating it, 31 of them started suffering from headaches, dizziness and listlessness. The pork was analysed, and discovered to contain lean meat powder. Apparently, the pigs in question had developed

throat infections, and the farmer had bought some throat medicine from an unknown trader. The pigs were killed just five days after being given this medicine.

On 21 October 2003, 62 people were poisoned by lean meat powder in Liaoyang, and this stirred up a lot of debate in the country. The Department of Hygiene sent experts to the region to investigate the outbreak, and the local authorities spent 180,000 yuan on testing the pigs in the area.

On 14 March 2004, nearly one hundred people in Jitan village in Guangdong went to hospital, suffering from food poisoning after eating pork containing lean meat powder that the villagers had bought from the local market. The pork came from another county, but had been tested by the local hygiene department.

On 3 April 2004, it was reported that lean meat powder had poisoned a grandfather, father and son. One night at 11pm, the teenage son of a Mrs Wang from Dongyuan village started suffering from a headache, palpitations and racing heartbeat. Then her 70-year-old mother started suffering from similar symptoms. When the local clinic diagnosed that they were suffering from food poisoning, caused by the pig lung soup that they had drunk that evening, which was found to contain lean meat powder.

What is particularly worrying is that lean meat powder has been found in chicken and fish. Of course, when faced with such evil practices, the relevant government authorities have stepped up their measures to tackle them.

On 21 November 2002, the first court case against use of lean meat powder was held in Fujian. The accused were Ye Taohua and Jia Jianping, manager of the Nanping Jiufeng animal medicine shop and Sanyuan animal medicine shop respectively. In January 2001, Lin Shengqiang sold 30kg of lean meat powder, knowing well that it was banned as an additive to animal feed, for 100 yuan to a Mr Liang Zhenhua, who kept some to feed to pigs, then sold 20kg to Jia Jianping. From April to June of the same year, Jia Jianping, knowing well the dangerous side effects of the chemical, sold the 20kg of lean meat powder to Lin Yangseng, Lin Yanggen and Gao Wen to use in pig feed. In the spring of 2002, Ye Taohua sold 20kg of lean meat powder for 135 yuan to Liang Zhenhua. He kept some to feed to his own pigs, then sold 14 kg of it to Ceng Yangmei and Chen Xiurong.

All the pigs that these farmers had reared tested positive for lean meat powder. Ye Taohua and the others were sentenced to five months in jail, and were given fines of 3,000 yuan.

In Ningxiang in Hunan, Li Yumei was sentenced to 2 years in prison, and given a fine of 6,000 yuan for selling pigs fed with lean meat powder.

In August of this year, Li Yumei bought 50g of lean meat powder for 50 yuan, and fed it to the pigs that she reared. Her husband then sold these pigs to a man from a different province. When the local authorities were carrying out tests on the pigs in the area, Li Yumei's pigs tested positive for lean meat powder, and she was dealt with according to the law.

On 11 February 2003, Shen Rengdong, whose lean meat powder contaminated pork had poisoned 22 people, was finally arrested after running from the law. He was sentenced to five years in prison and a 10,000 yuan fine.

On 23 August 2002, Shen Rengdong sold his contaminated pork at his meat stall in Hangzhou market. Two days later, a Mrs Yan was poisoned by the pig liver she had bought from him. After the local authorities carried out investigations, they found that Shen Rengdong didn't have the necessary papers that would allow him to sell pork, or pig liver, that came from outside Hangzhou. Although on 1 September, the market reminded the stall holders that they were forbidden from selling pork from outside the area, Shen Rengdong continued to sell pork that he had secretly bought from Haiyan, knowing very well that it was contaminated with lean meat powder. He continued to do so until 9 September, when 22 workers at Hangzhou's Huajia cotton factory were poisoned by his pork.

In 2001, again in Zhejiang Province, 80 people were poisoned by contaminated pork. A meat seller in Huzhou bought a pig from a Mr Mou that he knew had been reared with lean meat powder, killed it, and sold it, thus poisoning 80 people. He had to pay compensation of 23,443.50 yuan. The seller then took Mr Mou to court, and the judge agreed that Mr Mou should also be held responsible for this crime, and should reimburse the meat seller some of the money that he had paid out in compensation.

In January 2003, the show 'Focus' reported on a case of lean meat powder animal feed that took place in Chongqing, Guizhou, Zhejiang, Shanghai and Jiangsu. On 3 June

2002, the Yongchuan agriculture department of Chongqing received a report from the public that the Yuanlin brand of animal feed from Guizhou that was selling locally contained lean meat powder. Because the case involved Chongqing and Guizhou, and 55 tones of animal feed, it cost more than 600,000 yuan to investigate. The team working on the case arrested two brothers with the surname of Wu. The team found that the Wu brothers had many fake labels with names of feed factories in Zhejiang, as well as forged documents and licences. The Wu brothers admitted to having doctored the animal feed they sold with lean meat powder. They had bought the chemical from Zhu Wei in Shanghai, who was immediately arrested. Zhu Wei revealed that the lean meat powder was bought in Jiangsu, but when the police went to find the man who had sold it to him, they discovered that he had gone on the run. The Wu brothers and Zhu Wei were given punishments according to the law.

There are many other people who have been punished for selling lean meat powder, or feeding it to animals. In 2002, the Department for Trade and Industry received 83,235 complaints from the public about food products – the highest number of complaints of consumer-related issues. And of complaints about meat, most concerned the issue of pork contaminated with lean meat powder. In the second half of 2003, the Department of Hygiene received information about 116 serious cases of food poisoning which affected 3,643 people, and most of these cases were caused by irresponsible use of chemicals like lean meat powder during the rearing process. Faced with such a serious and widespread problem, government authorities have been busy taking the appropriate measures:

In March 1997, China's Department of Agriculture banned the use of Beta stimulants in animal husbandry.

In the second half of 1998, the government banned the use of stimulants in rearing of pork that was to be exported to Hong Kong. If any pigs tested positive for stimulants, the pigs would be destroyed so that none of the meat could be sold in Hong Kong.

In 1999, the Department of Agriculture drew up detailed regulations banning the use of lean meat powder in animal feed, and banned the rearing or selling of pigs that had been fed with lean meat powder.

On 29 May 1999, the State Council issued regulations on animal feed and the used of additives in animal feed, clearly forbidding the use of lean meat powder in animal feed.

On 3 April 2000, the Department of Agriculture sent an emergency notice to all local government departments around the country calling for a nationwide search and confiscation of lean meat powder.

In early 2001, the Department of Agriculture issued information on two methods by which the presence of lean meat powder could be detected in pork.

In June 2001, the Departments of Agriculture, and Trade and Industry issued another notice reminding local governments that lean meat powder was an illegal substance, and that it was against the law to add it to animal feed, as it seriously damages the healthy development of the animal husbandry industry and the safety of animal products.

In 2002, The Department of Agriculture repeated that lean meat powder, together with ten other specified additives, was forbidden to be used in animal feed. The Minister of Agriculture himself said that, in some places, lean meat powder was still being detected in live pigs, and that the implementation of the ban against lean meat powder should be more thorough.

After that, the governments of Shenzhen, Fuzhou, Xiamen, Shanghai and Beijing stepped up their attack on lean meat powder, bringing in relevant measures to curb its use.

On 17 March 2004, eight government departments came together to issue a joint statement declaring that the fight against the use of lean meat powder must be stepped up. They said that the regulations on the levels of chemical residues allowed in meat products must be adhered to, that the animal feed and animal medicine industry must be properly regulated and systemised, that drugs meant for human consumption must not be allowed to find their way into animal husbandry industry, and that the areas where lean meat powder is being produced must be rooted out, and then strictly controlled.

Given the fact that everyone, from the State Council to the ordinary consumer, is aware that the use of lean meat powder is forbidden, how is that that this chemical is still being found in meat?

First, I will recount something that I came across during my research.

I was in a town in Southern China, visiting a food product department in a university, trying to find out more about how lean meat powder is detected in meat. Through various connections, I was able to have immediate access to the people who carry out the tests. I accompanied these technicians to many abattoirs in the area to take urine tests from the live pigs. Whenever we came back to the university, the technicians would seem very gloomy. At first, I thought that it was because their testing procedures were not up to the job, but when I asked them the reason for their bad mood, the answer they gave shocked me.

This inspection team had developed a certain trust in me. One young member of this team told me, 'I know you want to write about this matter. Let me tell you, in this town it's impossible to get a negative urine test. But without any negative tests, we aren't allowed to carry on with our work. It's such a waste of time. If we want to get the results that are wanted from us, we have to drive hundreds of kilometres into the countryside, and take samples from the pigs who are left to roam the fields. It's even harder when we try to test the meat. The meat we get from the local abattoirs or meat markets have terrifying levels of lean meat powder! And we can't go back to the countryside and kill a pig in the fields, just to get 2g of pork that will test negative. It would not only waste our time, but also our money.'

I couldn't help asking, 'Why don't you go to those big supermarkets? Their standards must be higher. The supermarkets are supposed to be more trustworthy.'

'Just the opposite,' he replied. 'According to our research, the pork sold in supermarkets is even worse. The supermarkets tend to use their own pig farms. And it's only when pigs are reared in large quantities that the use of lean meat powder becomes profitable. There are so few people testing the meat, and the testing process is so expensive, we already have our work cut out testing the meat in the markets, so we really don't have time to start testing the supermarkets as well. And those supermarkets are such big organisations, with complicated sourcing procedures, even if you did go and test their meat, you probably wouldn't be able to do much with the results.'

This kind of story reminds me of an article I read in 'China Economic Times' – a paper that is nearest to the kind of newspaper one finds in the West – which talked of the fact that poisonous meat was for sale at the Beijing Zhongguancun branch of the world-

famous Carrefour supermarket. Carrefour has had many problems with its food quality recently. In August 2003, a customer complained that he suffered severe diarrhoea after eating some sushi that he'd bought in Carrefour. That night, the Department of Hygiene sent officers to make tests on food sold at Carrefour's Guozhan branch, and took all the suspect sushi off the shelves. One regular customer, who heard that the Beijing quality inspectors had found that Carrefour's vegetables had pesticide residues that were above the maximum levels allowed, sighed and said, 'If a big supermarket like this can't guarantee the safety of the food it sells, where else can we go to buy our food with any peace of mind?'

In September 2003, the Shanghai and Hangzhou Trade and Industry Departments announced that fake Maotai liquor and Huangzhidi wine was found for sale at Carrefour branches. 500 hundred fake bottles of Maotai were confiscated from the shelves.

On 24 January 2004, Beijing food safety inspectors found that Maliandao rice and glutinous rice didn't have the required QS quality and safety mark, and demanded that they be removed from the shelves.

On 12 April 2004, customers complained that the jellied fruit that they had bought from Carrefour contained shards of glass. After this fact was reported on the television news, the municipal trade and industry department demanded that the product be removed from the shelves.

On 2 July 2004, the Beijing quality inspection team announced the results of tests it had made on the levels of pesticides and dangerous heavy metals found on fruit and vegetables. Carrefour was listed as one of the retailers that sold toxic fruit and vegetables, and its Guancun branch sold sprouting broccoli that had traces of dimethoate.

After this series of problems, Carrefour's reputation for high standards in quality and safety was severely damaged.

Faced with these discoveries, the most that the authorities do is take the goods off the shelves and issue fines, because they know that many other retail establishments have quality standards that are far worse than Carrefour. But if the same discoveries were made in Carrefour in their home country, the supermarket would certainly not be let off so lightly! Perhaps they believe that there is one way of doing things in France, and a very different way of doing things elsewhere.

Returning to the conversation described earlier. I asked whether the local officials knew how serious the problem was.

He answered: 'Of course they know. They are in charge here. They only do what is in their own interest. The leaders of the provincial department of agriculture want to see increases in production, so of course they are in favour of lean meat powder. And if any problems occur, they won't have to deal with them – they'll be dealt with by the provincial department of hygiene. So you often hear the deputy head of the provincial department of agriculture say in public: don't listen to what those university people are saying, carry on eating meat (meaning the stuff that contains lean meat powder), because no one has died of it yet! The deputy head of the provincial department of hygiene has less clout than his counterpart at the department of agriculture, but one time when the two of them were talking about lean meat powder here, they got into a big fight.'

This is typical of the way things happen in China. It's not surprising that a representative from the EU said to the Chinese delegate Long Yongtu during a debate on the import of Chinese food products, 'Your Chinese meat isn't fit for human consumption!' The internet is now full of articles headed 'How come eight government departments can't sort out one pig?' If no one in government takes responsibility for this important issue, what conclusions should we, the taxpayers, make? If this situation continues, we will have no choice but to say, 'If eight government departments can't deal with one pig, than these officials who live off our hard-earned money are no better than pigs themselves.'

When I asked what other reasons there were for the failure to deal with the lean meat powder problem, my friend replied gloomily that the real reason was that the low-level officials who are meant to deal with this problem are themselves secretly involved in the lean meat powder business. With the help of my friend, I carried out research of my own in some regions of Jiangxi and Henan Province, and was startled to find that almost 100% of officials who were responsible for dealing with lean meat powder had stakes in pig farms. So restricting the use of lean meat powder would cause them personal financial losses. Although it was hard to gain any concrete proof of corrupt practice, one official in Henan admitted to me, 'We officials down here are no better off than any of these poor peasants. We all have to live you know! These meat traders come here, and

say they want to buy pork that's been fed lean meat powder. Some of them even bring bags of the powder, and promise the farmers that if they feed it to the pigs the meat will sell for much more. We all need to eat, you know. Anyway, no pigs here have ever tested positive for lean meat powder!

My friend also mentioned another reason for the problems. He said, 'The testing process is very problematic. The equipment we use now is all imported from abroad. Each testing kit costs over 2,000 yuan, the instruments cost 100 to 150 yuan each. A urine test costs about 100 yuan. The costs are high, and you have to wait about four or five hours for the results. If you're testing pork or pig liver, you have to wait a day for the results. This is another reason why controlling this problem is proving to be so difficult. Not only is the cost of testing high, but also lean meat powder can be made by any ordinary drug factory, you can buy it everywhere. It's cheap and easy to use. Since the government controls the animal feed quite strictly, farmers end up buying lean meat powder and adding it to the feed themselves. So if the government wants to tackle this problem, they will have to use cheaper, simpler and more effective measures.'

'Has there been any progress in this direction?' I asked.

'Quite a few companies are looking into this. Apparently there's a bioengineering company in Zhongde that's having some success.' I told him that I was planning to visit that company as part of my research. Before I left, my friend told me, 'On no account reveal the real name of the company, or their address.' I understood why he was saying this, but I couldn't help feeling a little depressed.

The more I learned of China's poor reputation for food quality abroad, the more depressed I felt, and the more worried I became for those farmers who make a living rearing pigs. Pork products are China's second largest animal product exports, accounting for 20% of the total. Because of the problem of chemical pollution, Chinese pork has often been banned or returned from Europe, Japan and the US. Europe is China's second largest importer of pork products. After the European ban on Chinese primary animal products, Chinese animal products exported to Europe fell to \$330 million from January to September 2002, which is a drop of 15.6%. So pork producers in China suffered severe financial losses as a result. According to the statistics, there are about 100 million pig farmers in China, so this matter has a direct impact on 100 million people.

It is up to the government now to take bold steps to tackle the problem of lean meat powder. But faced with the huge technological trade barriers set up by Europe and the US, and the high costs of testing pork in China, what can we do?

But the month I spent in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, at an enterprise park set up by people who had returned to China after studying abroad lifted my mood a little.

The enterprise park was located in a beautiful setting. The Jiangxi Zhongde Biological Company was situated in this park. My first impression on arriving at this high-tech company was that this was a truly professional enterprise. I booked in to a nearby hotel, and over the next few days learned more about what the company did.

It was a limited company which focused on the testing of food safety. Their motto is 'Whatever Zhongde does, we think about the impact it will have on future generations.' They put people first, and their goal is to use technology to help society.

The company employs many people who have gained master degrees and phds abroad, as well as graduates from China's Xiehe Hospital and Jiangxi's Dongde United Research College. The company has already gained intellectual property rights that have reached, or nearly reached, international standards.

These facts I gained from the company's brochure. But it was not these that impressed me most – rather, it was the people I met during my time there, and the work that they did.

In the laboratory, Chen Gaoming, the company's technical inspector – a graduate from the Military Science Academy – showed me the process of testing for lean meat powder. They used a white card about a third of the size of a matchbox, and placed on it either three drops of pig urine, or three drops of blood squeezed from pork meat, then fifteen minutes later a red line would appear in a little square on the card, indicating that the liquid tested positive for lean meat powder.

Mr Chen told me that these cards were much cheaper than the testing kits that were imported from abroad, and the testing time was a great deal shorter. The process was also easier, and the results more accurate. When I asked for the exact cost of the test, Chen looked embarrassed and said, 'That's a secret, but to give you a rough idea, each testing card is under 100 yuan.'

Chen told me that he hopes to retire at the age of 35 and spend his life fishing. But it will need a lot of determination from his part to give up the comfortable lifestyle that his job provides for him.

Later, Xiong Yonghua and Lai Weihua, two masters graduates, told me more about the different ways of testing for lean meat powder in animal feed, animal drinking water, pork and offal. The process is very simple, and even someone as clumsy as me was able to get their head around it after being shown a couple of times.

Xiong was a very open and direct man. The reason he first chose to specialise in food safety was that he wanted to work in a cake factory! Lai was also very friendly, always smiling. He chose this profession because his father had worked in the industry as a high official in the agricultural department.

Not long after joining this company, these two men rose to positions of vice chairmen – proof of their great abilities. But the man who interested me most was Qian Wei, the company chairman. He had a big temper, a big voice and a big appetite. This man, who had worked on many major projects, such as large scale electricity plants, is an example of the kind of man who ‘walks the big roads with a big heart’, as the saying goes.

When I asked him why, with his background in electricity production, he had decided to invest his money in food safety, he said, ‘When you invest, you’re always looking for high returns. But only services which meet the demands of the market offer high returns. China’s population is huge, and the top levels of it are very concerned about food safety. And with the Olympics coming in 2008, there will be more focus on food safety. So of course there’s a big market out there. And it’s not only a question of making money - we’re also doing something to help society. Food safety has an impact on every home, every person. No matter how rich or poor you are, everyone’s got to eat, and everyone has wives, children and parents that they are concerned about.

‘And there’s another reason. I myself am quite a nationalist. I have always tried to avoid using Japanese products. It’s not because I’m tight-fisted, it’s just my way of dealing with our history. My colleagues and I decided to invest in this area because it offers China a way of breaking through the high-tech trade barriers, even if we make just a chink in the wall, it would still be worth it.’

When I asked him about the company's contribution to food safety, he replied proudly, 'We have already made a fast lean meat powder detection card. In July of this year, it gained the approval of the Department of Agriculture. We are now applying for a food safety contribution prize that is awarded by the National Medium and Small Enterprise Foundation. Because our test cards are simple to use and cheap, and the results it gives are accurate, lots of places have started using it – Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and other major cities, even Shandong, Hebei, Sichuan and Hunan provinces are using it. And the custom office at Shenzhen has ordered 50,000 of our cards, to test the pigs that are exported to Hong Kong. We will develop our activities in the field of food safety in the future. We have already succeeded in finding a way to test for the huangqu bacteria, and it's this bacteria that Europe is always bringing up when criticising China's food safety record. I think if you really love your country, you don't express it by smashing things up when your nation's football team lose a match. In this world, where a country's might is decided by its levels of technology, our only hope of improving China is by raising its levels of technology. Biotechnology hasn't been around for very long, so we have a chance to take the lead in this area. But we must all try and work together. You can't just keep all the best things for yourself.

'Although I'm no expert in this area of research, the other managers and I have some experience in supervising such projects. Our company have built the right foundations, and we have set up an experiment lab in conjunction with the Zhongde United Research College, using some of the most technologically advanced equipment available in the world. At the same time, we have very broad and frequent contact with famous experts from the Xiehe Medical University, German food technology organisations and the field of microbiology.

'I should mention that Henan's Baiou Company has also had some good results in producing fast testing methods for lean meat powder. You should go and pay them a visit. You could also put them in touch with us. I always think that the more contacts you have, the better!'

I admired his attitude very much. I had seen how China might find a way to break through the technology trade barrier set up by the West, and seen the professionalism of China's high technology workforce. I wish this workforce much success, because their

work has an impact, not only on their own lives, but on the future position of China on the international stage.

In complete contrast to this are reports of the illegal selling of lean meat powder. The complexity and ruthlessness of this trade is worse even than the heroine trade.

First, I will talk of events I witnessed when visiting an industrial estate in Huazhong. It was August last year, through someone in the know I made contact with a seller of lean meat powder. I told him that someone in my family had developed a disease, and needed some lean meat powder to treat it. He sold me some. At first he seemed very suspicious, and my friend had to convince him that I was legitimate before he reluctantly agreed to sell me some. First I gave him the money and my address, then he promised to post the lean meat powder to me by express delivery. But I was afraid that it wouldn't arrive, so before I left, I took a small pinch of lean meat powder and put it into my pocket. My friend and I got on a bus back to the nearest town, and nearly an hour into our journey, three or four motorbikes drove past and blocked our path. They were waving knives in the air. They came onto the bus and pulled me out. Fortunately, I have some experience with people like this. I told them again that I wanted the powder for my sick relative, that's why I stole a pinch of the stuff, and in the end they let me go.

3. HEAVEN IS RIPPED APART

It has always been the case that totalitarian systems govern the country through lies – that has been the case from Stalin to Chairman Mao to Saddam Hussain.

‘What is the biggest problem in the world? Food is the biggest problem.’ This remark was made by the world-famous tyrant, Mao Zedong, after his early research into Chinese society. Today, the problem of food is more serious than ever for the 1.3 billion population of China. Because of the long-term consumption of unsafe food products, the health of a vast number of children is at risk, and the fertility of the adult population has been gravely damaged.

In China, the people have always worshipped a very complex variety of gods and religions. They have had Buddhism, Daoism, they have worshipped Goddess Guanyin, Jesus and Erlang. But perhaps over China’s long history, the thing that the Chinese have worshipped and feared the most is the sky, or ‘heaven’. And for thousands of years, this heaven has had a deep influence on Chinese society.

For the ordinary Chinese people, heaven decides what is right and what is wrong. It is common to hear people say, ‘Whoever has lied, heaven will strike down with five bolts of lightning’, ‘If someone has cheated, heaven will bring disaster to us’, and if someone makes a promise they will say, ‘May the blue heaven three inches above my head be witness to me’. This shows how deeply the Chinese have taken the concept of heaven into their hearts. When it comes to worshiping at Spring Festival every year, the Chinese people will first worship heaven, and then the earth, their master, relatives and teachers.

Let us look at the expression ‘The people take food to be their heaven’. The common expression that goes: ‘When you leave your house you must remember to buy seven things (matches, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar and tea); or ‘When you leave your house you must remember to do five things (eat, drink, piss, shit and sleep), it is always food and eating that are most prominent. It has become something of a joke that when two Chinese people meet each other in a public toilet, the first thing that they say to

one another is, 'Have you eaten yet?' Even in jail, the prisoners who are condemned to death traditionally say before they are about to be executed, 'After I die I want to come back as a ghost that eats itself to death'. This shows how important food is to the Chinese people.

It is easy to see how the Chinese have come to worship food in the same way that they worship Heaven.

Perhaps the person who most understood the importance of food in Chinese history was Chairman Mao himself. His father once swore at him, saying, 'You really are a lazy good-for-nothing, all you do is eat all day!' But a few years later, Chairman Mao was to write in the 'Xiangjiang Pinglun': 'What is the most important question in the world? Food is the most important.'

This showed the deep understanding Chairman Mao had of the situation of Chinese peasants, and of their psychological state. And it was because of this deep insight that Mao was able to chase the KMT to Taiwan, and triumph over the internal feuds that plagued his Party.

Given this long history of veneration of food, what is the situation with regard to food safety in the 21st Century?

The long history of snacks.

Perhaps the biggest difference between food in the West and in China is that Chinese people like to eat lots of little snacks whereas Westerners prefer one 'main meal'. In the West, restaurants and fast food outlets produce standardised meals, where quantities are strictly regulated. But the Chinese have a long history of eating snacks. Traditionally an agricultural country, when farmers went out onto the fields, they would bring snacks with them to eat and to share with friends, or would swap them with farmers from neighbouring villages. The quality of the snack was important – it would indicate how skilful the wife was in the kitchen and help the family to maintain their 'face'. So over the centuries the quality of these snacks became better and better, so that gradually, all over China, one could find snacks that were both delicious and safe.

I remember when I was studying in Moscow in 1999, an event related to the safety of Chinese food which damaged the reputation of Chinese people living in the city,

and made even the most innocent of us feel ashamed. It was the end of the 1990s, when, after the success that the rich businessman Mo Qizhong had in buying up Soviet planes and selling them to China, many Chinese businessmen rushed to the Soviet Union to try and make their fortunes. One Chinese man who was more trustworthy than Mo Qizhong exported containers of instant noodles by train to Moscow, and imported containers of Russian metal.

This Chinese businessmen chose the brand of instant noodles that 'the whole world knows' - ones made by a Sino-Taiwanese joint venture – and exported a whole train of them to the USSR. But when they reached the Soviet border, the customs inspected them and found that the levels of bacteria far exceeded the maximum set by law. The Soviet media made a big fuss about this, and there followed newspaper cartoons about the poor quality of trainers sold by the Wenzhou traders, showing a Russian wearing his 'designer' trainers: he is about to leave his house, but as soon as he sticks a foot outside his door, the shoe starts to fall apart. Suddenly all the Russian skinheads started picking on the Chinese community living in Russia. And the Soviet police started keeping a close eye on the community as well. Then the Vietnamese community started complaining to the Chinese, because they were often mistaken for Chinese by the Russians and so would also often be picked on or arrested. Although this event created a storm in Russia, when I returned to China, no one there had heard anything about it. Except for a few friends who worked in the media who said no wonder that during that time that particular instant noodle manufacturer suddenly stopped putting its adverts out.

The instant noodles manufactured by purely Chinese companies are even more cause for concern. Recently a peasant woman in Xinyang, Henan Province, bought two packs of instant noodles from a street stall in her village because she had no time to cook a proper meal. That afternoon, when she had finished eating the two packs, she started to have a stomach ache, then vomited violently. She went to a local doctor who told her she was suffering from food poisoning and she had to pay more than 1000 yuan of her hard-earned money in medical treatment. And how are instant noodles manufactured in the countryside? An informed source who works in an instant noodle factory told me the dark truth behind this business.

He said: 'I'm a very ordinary man. This area is famous for making the well-known brands of instant noodles – 'China Dragon' and 'Three Princes'. Some local businessmen bought some second hand equipment and employed some technicians from the 'China Dragon' plant and produced some fake China Dragon noodles. Now there are seven or eight other factories producing counterfeit noodles. They copy the style of 'Master Tang', 'China Dragon' and 'Three Princes', and as long as the packs look similar that's enough. But to cut down on the costs, the manufacturers use left-over oil bought from restaurants in their flavouring, so when you eat the noodles there's always a dirty, inky taste. When they go and buy the oil from the markets, people always ask, 'What are you buying this for?' Our employees just say that they need it to make soap with, ha ha! No one believes them, of course. There's no soap factory around here. In fact they just buy it up and treat it a little, then sell it off to the guys who make doughnut sticks and fried sweets. There are lots of snack factories in this area.'

He went on to say, 'The frying process of instant noodles is in fact the worst part of this business. Because not one of these factories change the oil that they fry the noodles in. And some large-scale businesses even do the same! If you want to change the oil, you have to shut down the whole plant, and who wants to do that? A lot of the local people know how bad these instant noodle factories are, so most of the product is sent off and sold in other areas. None of the people who make the noodles ever eat any of them themselves. Another factory I know produces fake Three Princes noodles.'

I think that when people eat snacks, their trust in what they are eating and the need to 'keep face' is more important than the actual eating of the snack itself. But now these snacks that have such a long and glorious history strike terror in people's hearts.

The Pride of Sichuan: Pickled Vegetables.

Let's just look at pickled vegetables. Although pickled vegetables were first made in Sichuan, there is hardly anyone in the whole country who hasn't tasted this delicious snack. But now when you visit Sichuan, your friends will say to you: 'Do you like pickled vegetables? There's a factory in Chengdu that pickles the vegetables in DDVP. In the past everyone in Sichuan would have pickled vegetables with their meals, but now the

managers of some pickled vegetable factories say that, 'We don't eat any of these pickles in Sichuan, we sell them to people from other provinces.'

After some secret interviews, I finally uncovered the truth about this business. The most important part of the pickling process is the soaking. I noticed that the salt used in the pickling was not only whiter than most salt, but the grains were finer. So I asked, 'How come it's so white?' The manager said, 'This salt is bought on the black market. It's cheaper by 50 yuan a jin.' Later in the yard outside, I saw printed on the bags of salt the terrifying words, 'Industrial Salt', and 'Not for human consumption.'

The workers of this factory showed me in another yard neatly arranged piles of this industrial salt. I asked, 'Have you always used this salt?' They said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Do the other factories use it?' And the workers all nodded in reply. A few days later I returned to the factory, and noticed lots of little insects crawling around the vats of pickled vegetables, and I asked why there were so many insects. The manager said, 'When we soak the vegetables there are always a lot of insects, but when we add the chemicals they all disappear.' A little later, a worker started adding chemicals to the vats. I asked what the chemicals were and the worker replied that they were insect killers. He also said that to ensure that no insects got to them, the pickles would be sprayed with insecticide every two or three days until they left the factory. When I asked exactly what kind of insecticide it was, both the manager and the workers said that they didn't know. Because there was no label on the bottle of the chemical they used, I took a small sample of the red liquid, put it in a sealed container and sent it off to be checked by the China Food Import Export Investigation Centre, and was told that this chemical was 99% strength DDVP . . .

Only about a third of the pickles produced in Chengdu meet with the regulations imposed by the Chengdu Quality Inspection Department. On 16 June 2004, the Chengdu Quality Inspection Department announced the results of its survey into pickled vegetables. Of 70 batches of products produced by 56 factories, only 16 batches made the grade, which is a pass rate of just 22.86%. 17 batches had levels of additives above the maximum allowed. It was also discovered that 9 batches did not have as much product as labelled and 48 batches had labels that were inaccurate or had insufficient information.

The Quality Inspection Department has requested that all those companies that didn't make the grade rectify their mistakes.

Guizhou's Sour Fish Soup.

In Guizhou there is a saying that 'If you don't eat something sour for three days, your legs will go soft'. The Guizhou restaurants have become famous for their sour fish soups, but recently 215 of them have developed some serious problems. On 16 June 2004, it was found that in 215 restaurants, there were high levels of opiates in their soup and flavourings, and the authorities have ordered these restaurants to be closed down. Zhang Xin, deputy head of Guizhou's Anti-drug team, told me that the Anti-drug team joined forces with the disease prevention centre and the food quality inspection department to launch a campaign against the addition of opiates to food products. A combined investigation team carried out research in to 2642 restaurants in Guiyang, Bijie and Liupanshui, and found that in 215 restaurants, the food sold contained traces of opiates in varying quantities. During the campaign, 3,200 grams of opiate seeds and 1,700 grams of opiate shells were confiscated. The relevant authorities have closed these 215 restaurants, and ordered 36 other restaurants whose problems were a less serious to undergo retraining. It is said that many Guizhou restaurants that specialise in beef, lamb, dog, and spicy soups add opiates to their food so as to encourage their customers to return. Wei Tao, the deputy head of the Guizhou Disease Prevention Office, told me that some of the soups served at the restaurants contain traces of morphine, some in rather high quantities. He said that if the customers drink this soup over a long period of time they can become addicted to it, and their dependency might even drive them to take harder drugs.

Again in Guizhou, a recent survey undertaken by the National Hygiene Authority discovered that of the 30 street stalls selling fried dough sticks that they inspected, the levels of aluminium in the sticks all exceeded the national standards. Not one made the grade. One of the stalls even sold sticks that had aluminium levels 11 times higher than those allowed. The reason for this was that the street traders had little knowledge of food safety, and during the cooking process added too much alum to the dough.

Oil Boiled Fish.

According to one food producer, the restaurants that serve 'oil boiled fish' tend to use the same oil over and over again. What usually happens is that after the fish has been eaten, the waiters pour the remains through a sieve so that the left over oil collects in a steel container, then at night they remove the water from the oil. When they use this oil again they have to add large quantities of chillies so as to disguise the fact that the oil isn't fresh. This is how 'oil boiled fish' has now become 'saliva boiled fish'.

If you told the customers who love to eat oil boiled fish that the oil their fish is swimming in is the oil left over from the previous customer's dish, how would they feel? One manager said that using the oil over and over again makes it taste better. And now chilli oil crabs have become very popular in Beijing. People form queues outside restaurants that serve this dish, waiting for up to three hours. But many rumours are being spread about the dish. The first is that the restaurants use dead crabs, not live ones as advertised. The second is that the insects living in the crabs can give people amoebic dysentery. These rumours led to a sharp decline in demand for the dish, even though there was no concrete proof for them.

Cold Skin.

'Cold Skin' is a famous snack from Shanxi's Guanzhong district. With the success of various Shanxi comedians, these snacks have become popular all over the country. But recently some terrible facts were found about some cold skin that was sold in Beijing: it was discovered that one illegal manufacturer made cold skin by kneading the dough with their feet, and adding urine and saliva to the mixture.

'Cold Skin' noodles are famous throughout the country, and women especially like to eat them in the summer. But on 18 June 2004, a 17-year-old worker in a cold skin factory in Chaoyang District told a reporter the disgusting way in which this snack was made. He said that they kneaded the dough as though they were washing some heavy coat, sometimes when they were too tired to mix it by hand they would get into the container and knead the dough with their feet. If any dough dropped onto the dirty floor, they would just pick it up and fling it back into the container. They would never bother to clean any of the implements they used at the end of the day. After they went to the toilet, they would never wash their hands. Seeing this, the boss would just laugh and say, 'Don't let

anyone else see you do that!’ On three or four occasions, when the workers had been sworn at by their boss or had had their pay reduced, they would even piss into the dough, and on one or two occasions the worker also saw an angry colleague spit into the container of boiling noodles. The young worker also said that there were more than ten other children working in the illegal factory with him. The boss had brought them over with him from Shanxi, the youngest was only 14 years old. They had no health certificates, and many of the children didn’t even have identity papers.

Duanwu Rice Parcels.

The Duanwu Festival is traditionally a time when the Chinese public pay their respects to the concepts of compassion and justice. And the quality of some of bamboo rice parcels that are traditionally given as offerings to the ancient hero Qu Yuan, have recently also been the cause of great concern. For the illegal traders who lack any sense of morality, each new festival is just another chance to make money.

On the Duanwu festival of 11 June 2004, the Beijing departments of Town Management, Industry and Commerce, and Hygiene went to inspect an illegal factory in the Jinding Road area that was producing bamboo rice parcels. They confiscated five tonnes of parcels, and a batch of illegal ingredients, with a total value of 180,000 yuan. This illegal factory didn’t comply with any of the basic hygiene regulations, there was rubbish everywhere, the four workers working there had no health certificates or right to work. It was a completely illegal operation.

According to Beijing’s trade and industry department, the illegal manufacturers of rice parcels add borax to the rice, to make sure that the rice retains its elasticity and doesn’t stick to the bamboo leaf. This chemical is in the main used in the ceramic and glass industry, and in China it is strictly forbidden to be used in food production. The acidity of borax can damage the stomach, and can lead to nausea and vomiting.

One busy market day during the Duanwu festival, I was walking through a village in Beijing’s Chaoyang District, and came across a filthy little workshop that was illegally producing rice parcels. The workshop made hundreds of parcels a day. In the small yard there were seven or eight stoves, on each one of them were big metal pots with rice parcels boiling inside. The floor was scattered with burnt charcoal, and because it had

been raining a lot, the place looked very dirty. Three men dressed in flipflops and shorts were washing the bamboo leaves in buckets of dirty water. Next to this filthy water were boxes of rice parcels waiting to be cooked. The boxes were dirty as well, they looked like they hadn't been cleaned for a long time. There was another batch of parcels that were soaking in a grimy vat. The workers said that they put them there to keep them fresh.

Illegal Tofu.

On the same day another discovery was made about tofu production. Since 1 July 2003, the production of tofu has been systemised, and the sale of unpackaged tofu has been banned. But in some suburban markets, some traders are still selling this unhygienic, unpackaged tofu. Usually this unpackaged tofu is sold directly to hotels, restaurants, companies and school cafeterias. Because it is cheap, and the rules against it are loosely implemented, this unpackaged tofu is still being bought and sold. This illegal tofu is now also being seen for sale in markets, although its sale there is more covert. This 'black' tofu is often sold at times when the inspectors are known not to visit, or sometimes the tofu is delivered straight to the customers' homes.

According to one tofu manufacturer, they once followed an illegal tofu producer from his factory to the Baliqiao market, and saw that they had changed the 5am delivery time to 2 or 3am. Another person in the know told me that these factories had very low running costs – 2000 yuan at the most. The only equipment they would have would be an electric grinder, an old petrol barrel and a rubber tube.

First they pour the yellow beans into a cloth bag, without bothering to check for any grit or stones, then they dunk this bag into some water and start grinding the beans up. Then the mixture is rinsed in a sieve and pressed down for a couple of hours and that's it. The man told me that this kind of tofu has a protein content of just 4%, whereas tofu produced by the legitimate factories have protein contents of 70 to 80%. 'To tell you the truth,' he said, 'these illegal traders aren't selling tofu, they're selling water!'

In Xian alone, it has been estimated that local people eat about 27.8 kg of tofu per person per year, so with a population of 4 million people, the demand for tofu in Xian is about 91,200 tonnes a year. That is 490 tonnes of tofu and tofu related products a day. 78% of people said that they ate tofu at least once a day. But 80% of tofu in Xian is

manufactured without licence, in dirty little workshops. The local government therefore banned the selling of unpackaged tofu. But although this ban has been in place for a month, illegal tofu is still for sale all over Xian. In one small market, there were five illegal tofu stalls. Flies would fly back and forth over the unpackaged product. XXX

The Chinese have been eating tofu for thousands of years. Apparently there are many Chinese people living abroad who are trying to promote tofu as the healthiest food for the 21st Century. But stories like these will inevitably damage the reputation of tofu abroad.

We are seeing more and more of these famous snacks being destroyed before our eyes: the Guanshengyuan mooncakes filled with rotten ingredients, the DDVP pork legs from Jinhua, the poisonous minced meat from Taiqiang, Pingyao's toxic beef. Then there was all the news about pork contaminated with 'lean pork powder', and poisonous beansprouts. Guanghai salted fish is one of the most famous products to come from Taishan in Guangdong Province. Recently news broke out that the Guanghai salted fish was in fact preserved in DDVP. A reporter visited a salted fish factory in Wanglong village – where most of these factories are to be found – and was told by a worker there that the manufacturing process was very simple. First the fish was covered in salt, then cleaned, dried, packed in a box and sold. The most important step of this process was the washing of the fish. The reporter saw that when the fish was being washed, some liquid was added to the wooden vat, and as soon as it was added, white foam started to rise from the surface of the water. The worker explained that this was an agricultural chemical – DDVP – and it was used as an insecticide. The floor was covered with salt. The workers would walk back and forth across it. There were even droppings in it from the chickens that lived in the yard outside. Although it was produced in this shocking way, the salted fish sold very well. People would travel down from the North to buy it. Most of the customers came from Guangzhou, Jiangmen, Huidong, Huizhou, and some even came from Hunan and Guangxi.

In the past we used to say that 'Food is the people's heaven', but now, following all these food scares, the people have lost all sense of trust in the food that they eat. It might not be too much of an exaggeration to talk about a 'food hygiene fear': rice is

polished with metals, noodles are filled with additives, fruit are covered with chemicals that speed up the ripening process and increase their growth, and vegetables are covered with pesticides . . . Who can remain calm when faced with such a frightening situation?

Below is a selection of reports that have come out recently on the safety of our food.

On 5 July 2004, the China Youth Daily reported that a survey had discovered that 82% of the public are afraid about the safety of China's food, and that 90% of people interviewed had encountered a problem with food safety. More than half of the people felt were afraid about the food that failed to meet the government standards, others were afraid about the fake food products and food sold beyond its sell-by date. This survey was carried out in May and June of this year in 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities.

Another government department announced that Chinese consumers only had 50% confidence in the safety of food. Recently, the authorities of Jianggan district in Hangzhou have uncovered four illegal beansprout production workshops. Out of date chemicals and bleach powder were found lying in one of the workshops. Not only were the workshops unhygienic, dangerous chemicals were added to the beansprouts during production. Who would dare eat beansprouts that have been produced by workers who had to wear face masks during the production process?

Huang Hai, assistant to the Department of Trade, said that the situation of the safety of food in China is still very serious, 8% of food does not meet with hygiene standards, 7% of vegetables contain illegal amounts of pesticide residues, and only 50% of consumers have confidence in the food they eat.

Let us look at the following examples:

1. About a third of the cancers people develop are caused by the food they eat. In October 2001, in a conference of experts in Beijing, it was estimated that about 200,000 to 400,000 people are poisoned by food a year, causing some alarm among consumers. The experts pointed out that fruit and vegetables have been found to contain traces of organophosphorous pesticide, which can damage nerve functions, and in severe cases can

be fatal. The levels of heavy metals and nitrites on fruit and vegetables can have an accumulative, long-term effect, and can lead to cancer and softening of the bones.

2. The Hainan coconut producers use illegal additives. On 6 June 2004, Coconut product manufacturers in Hainan were found to be using alarming levels of banned pesticides. In the next ten days, the Hainan authorities made checks on 41 coconut product manufacturers, and found that 17 of them had no hygiene licenses, 9 of them had no business licenses, 7 of them used chemicals that were dangerous to people's health. They checked products made from coconut, and found that half the products (more than 90 tonnes), contained hydrogen peroxide, sodium hydroxide, magnesium sulphate, ammonium sulphate, and other such dangerous industrial chemicals. Two companies that used illegal chemicals are in the process of being investigated by the police.

3. Poisonous lily stalks are now for sale in markets all over the country. On 13 March 2004, the Hygiene Inspection Team of Shenyang discovered 7 truck loads, a total of 24.5 tonnes, of lily stalks contaminated with levels of sulphur dioxide that were 200 times higher than those allowed. Then it was discovered that in the areas where most of the lilies are grown – Pingxing County in Henan and Dengdong County in Hunan, this 24.5 tonnes was just the tip of the iceberg. According to the Hygiene Office of Hengyang City, the 24.5 tonnes discovered in Shenyang came from Dengdong, but also Shanxi and Fujian, indicating that the addition of sulphur dioxide during the production of this product was common throughout the country. Yang Wu, president of Hunan's Yang Wu Lily Stalk Company, told me that 'There are more than two or three thousand tonnes of poisonous lily stalks produced this year.'

The toxicity of these lily stalks is caused by the additive 'Jiaoya Powder' (sodium pyrosulfite). 30% of this additive is sulphur dioxide. According to China's 1992 'Safety standards for food additives', it is illegal to add sulphur dioxide to lily stalks, whether it's to act as a preservative or a whitening agent.

A food stall holder from Dengdong told me that in 1992, Pingxing County in Henan Province started cultivating lily stalks. They borrowed the production techniques

from Dengdong, adding sulphur products during the processing. As soon as the lily stalks were picked, the farmers would tip them into large plastic bags, then add sulphur powder. Every 100 jin of stalks would have about 5-6 jin of sulphur powder. Working on the basis that 8 jin of fresh lily stalks produces about 1 jin of dried flowers, then every 25 jin of dried stalks would have about 1 jin of sulphur dioxide in them.

‘We are not eating lily stalks, we are eating sulphur dioxide!’ Li Yingwu said. This is only the first step. Sulphur products are added during the drying and other processes as well, so that by the time they reach the dinner plate, the stalks are bound to have sulphur dioxide levels that are hundreds of times higher than those allowed.

According to the research, if people consume high levels of sulphur dioxide they will develop symptoms of poisoning – dizziness, nausea, diarrhoea, lethargy, stomach aches etc, and in the long term will suffer liver and kidney damage. Sulphur dioxide consumption can also lead to cancer. The presence of high levels of sulphur dioxide in lily stalks is a time bomb waiting to explode. But the farmers are unaware of this problem, and they themselves eat their crops every day.

4. Toxic Salt. Poets and philosophers in the West have used salt as a metaphor for love and friendship, and the Chinese have traditionally regarded salt as one of the seven things you must remember to buy when you go out shopping, but now salt is poisoning us too. In China, 403 people have been poisoned by the salt they have eaten, and two people have died. In this year’s warning issued by the Department of Hygiene, people were advised to buy salt only from reputable sources, and on no account buy milk on the black market.

‘Sulphur salt’ has additives added during processing to maintain the salt’s colour. This additive is very poisonous. If you consume three grams of it you will die. Serious poisoning leads to such symptoms as: headache, dizziness, chest aches, breathlessness, palpitations, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea etc. At higher levels, symptoms included loss of concentration, restlessness, loss of consciousness, breathing problems and even death.

A report from the Department of Hygiene also said that Wanjiadenghuo Restaurant in Puzhong, Shanxi Province poisoned 168 people, and that Chunfaengteng in Gan County, Shaanxi Province, illegally used sulphur salt, which poisoned 115 people.

117 people were poisoned by illegal stall holders using sulphur salt in Changchun, Jilin Province. In Xianning, Hubei Province, three people in one family were poisoned by consuming the salt, two of them died . . .

But now there are more and more cases of private traders selling illegal salt. Recently, the salt office of Sichuan province received reports that more than a thousand tonnes of illegal salt had been brought by rail into Sichuan from Hubei and Qinghai. The packages are labelled with the words: additives, ground rice or clay. After following the consignments for over two hours, the authorities felt that they were on the verge of being found out. So they went immediately into the goods carriage and opened the packages. Inside they found 54.8 tonnes of illegal salt. They immediately arrested the two drivers of the train. Later, the authorities confiscated 110 tonnes of illegal salt in Chengdu train station that had come from Hubei. After preliminary investigations, that most of the salt was for industrial use, not human consumption. From December of last year, to February this year, more than 1,800 tonnes of illegal salt made their way into Sichuan from Hubei. According to the authorities, a profit of 400 yuan can be made by selling one tonne of illegal salt. If the traders put this salt into small, faked packages and sell it as real salt, then they can sell it for 1,100 yuan a tonne, which is a 700 yuan a tonne profit. There are many factories making illegal salt in Hubei and Qinghai, and most of it goes to Sichuan Province, where the demand for salt is very high.

According to the experts, industrial salt is in the main used for the production of alkali, soft water for boilers, dyes, soap and washing powder. It is dangerous if used for human consumption. It contains sulphuric acid which can cause long-term poisoning. People only have to eat 0.2 to 0.5g of sulphuric acid for them to be poisoned. If they eat 3g, they can die. And industrial salt doesn't contain iodine, which is vital for human health. Without iodine, people lose about 10 to 20% of their intellectual powers, and in children it can lead to stunted growth and mental retardation.

In Xian, 1.82 tonnes of illegal salt was confiscated, which had been supplied to 53 agricultural markets, 600 restaurants, 139 supermarkets, 6,360 private enterprises, 118 construction sites, and 170 school cafeterias.

Another 203 tonnes of illegal salt was confiscated from Jimo Market in Shandong. Without the proper licenses, from 1999 to July 2004, 203 tonnes of salt were sold in Jimo

Market by three private entrepreneurs. These three men have been given sentences of eight months, one year and six months, respectively. Shandong's took the opportunity to clamp down on all illegal sale of salt in the province, and confiscated 92 tonnes of illegal salt in Jinan alone.

In order to ensure the safety of salt during the festival period, the authorities of Jiangsu province are undertaking a large-scale clampdown on the sale of illegal salt. According to a salt affairs official, the province has already confiscated more than 1000 tonnes of illegal salt this year. In Danyang city, the authorities discovered fake Danyang New Generation sea salt for sale in a local supermarket. A Mr Huang was arrested, who revealed that he was working for a Mr Dai, who two hours later was also arrested. 250 jin of fake New Generation salt was found in his lodgings. And later, 1125 jin of the salt was seized from his warehouse. Dai admitted that he had sold 2.4 tonnes of the fake sea salt, and 1.6 tonnes of table salt. The salt had been bought from Pudong in Shanghai in October, then sold secretly in seven small supermarkets in Danyang. The fake packaging of the salt was of very high standard, most people wouldn't be able to tell the difference between the real and the fake. But the manufacturers were unable to obtain license numbers, so all the packets were labelled with the same number: 2130592466468853184. After tests, it was found that this salt contained no iodine, but had many substances that were harmful to human health.

5. Variety of Food Poisoning Cases: On 11 June 2004, the Beijing authorities warned the public not to eat raw salmon, so as to avoid listeria poisoning. At the same time, Beijing's Department of Industry and Commerce warned people to eat only in moderation dried vegetables, fruit and nuts, as 87.1% of these products did not meet with the regulations regarding sulphur dioxide content. Again, on the same day, the Department of Industry and Commerce named 43 products that contained illegal amounts of additives. On 21 July, Beijing's Office of Hygiene and Food issued a warning to the city's residents not to eat sea snails. Because on 13 July Yinchuan city had discovered a serious case of toxic sea snails – 55 people were poisoned and one person died. The sea snails themselves weren't toxic, it was the poisonous substances they had eaten that made them so lethal.

It is dangerous to eat vegetables in the summer. During the summer there are many insects on the vegetables, and farmers use more chemicals than at any other time to kill them off. The worrying thing is that these insects become resistant to the chemicals over time, and so as to kill them off, some farmers secretly use highly toxic pesticides and chemicals that the governments has forbidden to be used on vegetables. And few farmers wait the full 15 days after the application of pesticides before taking the vegetables to market. In the recent case of poisoned green vegetables in Wuzhou, Jiangxi Province, the farmer had taken the vegetables to market just five days after spraying them with pesticides.

There have been many other cases of serious poisoning of food products. At noon on 8 June 2004, 15 staff members of Beijing's Yuxi Solar Energy Company were poisoned by unripe beans. On the same day, the canteen of the Luoyang Office in Beijing added 28 grams of sulphur salt to 18 jin of chicken, causing 16 people to be poisoned. And on 6 May, during a wedding feast in Dahe village, in Hunan Province, a hundred people fell sick. The County Department of Hygiene suspected that the problem was with the chicken legs that were served. On 19 May, more than 100 students of Changchun University fell sick after eating egg fried rice served in the canteen. The poisoning was caused by the addition of sulphur salt. On the 17 and 18 May, pupils at a primary school in Shicheng County, Henan Province, suffered from food poisoning, 47 of them were taken to hospital. The cause was found to be that the food was dirty and full of bacteria. On 18 July, 9 employees from a company in Beijing's Chaoyang District ate at 'Guandong Duyipin' Restaurant, and ordered the restaurant's speciality dish: tripe. After the meal, the 9 people felt nauseous and light-headed, and the hospital diagnosed that they had been poisoned by sulphur salt.

The 'beautification' of food.

In this superficial age of ours, a swathe of beauty parlours have opened to meet the cosmetic needs of the adult population. But few people know that while the artificially produced beautiful people walk down our streets, the food products in our markets are also undergoing cosmetic treatments.

Wenling City in Zhejiang Province is famous all over the country for its prawns. The prawns from that area are yellowy pink, and look delicious, but behind this delicious exterior lies a dark secret. A local manager involved in the prawn processing business told me that the processing treatment is quite simple.

First the prawns are cooked in boiling water, then they are dried and peeled. The most important step of this process is the cooking. The colour of the prawns depends on the length of cooking time, so it is important to get it right.

The secret, though, is to add some red powder to the cooking pot, and to keep adding it during the cooking process. The colour stays on the prawn after the drying process for two or three months. The prawn producers in the area all use this red powder. According to various investigations, this red powder is called 'Liangcanghua Essence', commonly known as 'acid red 73'. It is mostly used as a wood dye, and is forbidden as a food additive because it can cause cancer.

Pinglu County in Shandong Province is famous for its fruit. A few illegal canning businesses buy cheap, unripe strawberries, peaches and apricots and put them into cans. Central Television Station's 'Weekly Quality Report' showed how in Xinchao Canning Factory, the workers would pour onto strawberries potassium sorbate to stop rotting and the growth of bacteria, then they would bottle the strawberries, and so as to make them look fresh, the workers would pour a red liquid into the bottles, a carmine colour, so that the green, unripe strawberries are transformed into red strawberries. And the method of turning white peaches into yellow canned peaches is even more horrifying. First the white peaches are put in a steel vat, and the skin is removed using industrial caustic soda, then they are soaked in lemon yellow and sunset yellow dyes and boiled, so that the white peaches turn a yellow colour. After that, sweeteners and sodium cyclamate are added, the cans are labelled and sent off all over the country.

The beautiful cakes that are made for Chinese New Year always look appealing. But the beautiful exterior often hides dangerous, illegal contents. A New Year Cake shop in Shanghai's Pudong District fumigates its cakes with a sulphur powder to preserve their shop life, whitens them with industrial bleach, and even uses cheap industrial sodium hydrosulphite to make the cakes look fresh. According to a worker in this shop, they were

not the only company to use sulphur powder and sodium hydrosulphite, many other factories have used them for some time.

Recently the Nanjing hygiene quality inspectors have banned all products from the 'Haibawangjia Tianxia' Company, because it has been found that they have altered the dates of quick-freeze products that have passed their sell-by dates, and put them on the market again. It was found that this company would scrape off the old sell-by dates and replace them with new ones before trying to sell the products off again. For suspicious customers, there is now no difference between products that have no sell-by dates printed on them from those that do, as they can't be sure that the sell-by dates have been tampered with. How can people eat these kinds of products with any peace of mind? And many supermarkets sell loose dumplings, mixing up the fresh ones with the out of date ones. The factories just put the old dumplings into new bags and send them off to the supermarkets to be sold, and no one is the wiser.

On 1 June, this kind of thing happened in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province. Seeing that the date on the 30,000 bottles of soft drinks had nearly arrived, the unscrupulous manager of the 'Ketaolu' drink company decided to wipe the dates off using some kind of glue, then printed a new sell-by date that was a full thirteen months later than the old one.

Many customers wonder how it is that products that have passed their sell-by dates are not destroyed, but are instead returned to the manufacturer who then changes the dates and sells them again. Who is responsible for destroying products that have passed their sell-by dates? What have the relevant government bodies done about this situation?

There are many strange things that happen in food production. The Many Fresh Oranges drink processing company produces drinks that have no trace of real orange in them. What you find in the company's factory is not oranges but nearly ten different kinds of sweeteners, flavourings additives and colourings. This was seen in April 2004 in their factory in Nanchang. The drink is just made from tap water and a great deal of additives that far exceed the maximum levels set by the government.

Even more worrying is the so-called 'organic green tea' that purports to be of no danger to public health, but that in fact contain high levels of pesticides. The Xuanlang Tea Company of Shizi, Anhui Province, cultivates 20,000 mu of tea. It is supposed to be

a model for organic farming in China. A reporter from CCTV visited several tea farms in the locality and found that many farmers who had contracted land in the area were in fact using phosphate fertilisers (methamidophos), Jiaji 1605 and other such toxic agricultural chemicals. In the tea factory, the reporter found that the workers were adding glutinous rice powder to the tea, so as to make the thick, fresh tea leaves curl up. In the Number 3 Jingzhi Tea Company of Xuanlang it was discovered that the rice mixture sprayed on the tea was black. This meant that even the 'dregs' of the tea could be sold for the same price as the proper tea.

There have been many suspicions about the dried milk pieces produced in China, with rumours that they contain no fresh milk. These rumours have damaged the domestic dairy industry. There has been a recent loss of trust in the safety of milk pieces. Many supermarkets have taken the product off their shelves or have demanded to see authenticity documents from the manufacturers. All milk pieces have been removed from the shops in Chongqing, and in Guangzhou, the customers have demanded refunds for the milk pieces that they have bought.

Recently, Beijing's Quality Inspection Department made an investigation into meat products and canned foods, and found that only 75% of the meat products met with the safety regulations. The main problem with the meat products was that they used high levels of benzoic acid. Half of the canned food didn't meet with the regulations. Only 66.7% of tinned tomatoes met with the regulations. The largest problem here was the quality of the ingredients and the high levels of additives. On 6 August, the department announced the results of an investigation it made into drinks that use carbonic acid. It looked into 30 drinks produced by 29 Beijing companies, and found only 18 met with the regulations - that is a failure rate of 69%. During the investigation it was discovered that the levels of saccharomycete and sulphur dioxide were too high.

Jiangsu Province has recently investigated 543 cake manufacturers, and found that of 113 cakes tested, only 65 met with the regulations, which is a pass rate of just 57.5%. After that the Jiangsu Hygiene Department warned customers to take care when buying unpackaged food products.

In Hunan, there is a tradition of pickling vegetables in earthenware pots. There is a fish head dish cooked with these pickles that is particularly famous in this region. But a

quality inspection team in Hunan's Qiuyang City found in the Xiangbei Market, a factory whose 60 square metres of floor space was covered with more than 80 black plastic bags, and that in the salty water in which the vegetables were being pickled were floating dead black and white cockroach-like insects.

An inspection team of Beijing's Haidian District investigated a private supplier of dried radishes, and found that 25 tones, or more than 1300 boxes, of 'Qianjiang' dried radishes that were headed for Beijing's expensive hotels had levels of formic acid that were 5 to 7 times higher than those allowed.

On 11 April, the National Quality Inspection Department announced that they had found four products that contained illegal quantities of brightening agents. These were: 'Qinlaoda' flour produced by Xian's Qinlaoda Food Company; 'Meidian' noodles produced by Shanghai's Meidian Company; 'Fengtao' flour and 'Fengtao' noodles produced by Nanjing's Chuangxin Food Company. They also announced that a survey into white and brown sugar in 2004 found serious problems with the white sugar produced by Haikou's Jingshan Sugar Company, Yunnan's Fulong Sugar Company, Yunnan's Xingfu Sugar Company, and Yunnan's Bafang Sugar Company. The main causes for concern were the high levels of sulphur dioxide residues, insufficient levels of sucrose, high quantities of dirt and grit, and unsatisfactory labelling.

While I was carrying out some research into 'Lean Meat Powder' in Jiangxi Province in July 2003, I travelled around for a while and found that in Nancheng City there were some serious problems with food safety. Below are some of the reports I collected from local newspapers.

On 18 May, Nancheng Evening Standard reported that the Nancheng bakeries often alter the sell-by dates of the breads they sell. They make biscuits out of bread that is about to go mouldy, and they take the crust off the mooncakes sold at the Mid-Autumn festival and use the stuffing again, spreading the stuffing onto bread rolls, making a cheap fruit bread. And in the markets of Nancheng, you can now find poor quality pale sesame seeds that have been dyed using industrial dyes and sold as high quality black sesame seeds.

On 9 July 2004, the Jiangnan Daily reported that the Jiujiang City's quality inspection team, in just two months, found four companies that were manufacturing fake,

substandard products: fake coca cola and orange drinks made with caramel colourings and flavourings; bean products made with left-over oil bought from restaurants; the presence of benzoic acids on green vegetables; pickled vegetables containing high levels of sulphur products and covered with mould. On the same day, the team closed down two illegal enterprises: one that put fake 'Hong Kong Tianyu Soy Sauce' into old bottles. The team confiscated 120 cases, containing more than 1440 bottles. They also confiscated 60 barrels of tap water that was labelled 'Beijing Teli Pure Water' that were stored in a dark lavatory.

On 16 July the Nancheng Evening Standard reported that a woman trader in the Nancheng market, was selling off the 'yellow meat' of sick pigs as 'pork', using fake documents. This meat is not for human consumption. If it is eaten people will suffer from diarrhoea and nausea.

On 27 July, the Nanchang Daily reported that 'rubbish meat' was being sold in 20 markets in Nancheng. The pigs' mammary glands, lymph nodes and various other dirty 'off cuts' are sold in the main to small restaurants, pork fat businesses, or to manufacturers of dumplings who mix this bad meat with the better meat to make their stuffings.

In July the Jiangxi Province quality inspection team carried out some test on vegetable oil, soy sauce and cold drinks sold in the province. 88.7% of the vegetable oils met with regulations, 60% of peanut oil met with regulations, the most serious problem with these oils were the high levels of residues of solvents present; butter was found to be too sour in many cases, and to have high levels of mould. Only 64% of soy sauces met with regulations, and the problems with these were low levels of amino acids and proteins and incorrect levels of ammonium salt. 20% of cold drinks didn't meet with regulations. Only 63.6% of iced lollies met with regulations, and the problems with these were the fact that the protein quality and fat content didn't comply with regulations, and that the labels were not up to standard.

The most serious problem was found with the stewed food products produced by the 'Huangshanghuang' company of Gongqing, Jiangxi Province, which caused large scale food poisonings in Nancheng and Fengcheng, leading to the hospitalisation of one

hundred people. This greatly damaged the reputation of this company in the area, and the relevant branches of this company were closed by the authorities.

After the poisonings of 22 June, the Nancheng authorities investigated the case and were able to announce to the public the real cause. A branch of Huangzhanghuang had ordered too many ingredients during the Duanwu Festival, and because they didn't employ adequate anti-bacterial measures, staphylococcus spread to toxic levels.

Soon afterwards, the quality inspection teams of Qingshanhu district confiscated 12,000 yuan's worth of food products from 5 retail outlets, and burned them publicly in a Nanchang market. A survey found that 52% of consumers hoped that after being dealt with properly, Huangzhanghuang would return to business. But 18% of consumers said they would be afraid to buy their products again. Xu Guifen, the chairwoman of the Huangzhanghuang promised that all of their products would undergo health and safety checks, and that gaining the trust of the consumers was of utmost importance to the business. The company told its workers that food safety was the top priority.

The day before I left, on 24 July, the Jiangnan Daily had a front page article on Nanchang government's checks into the safety of vegetables sold locally. I hope that with the help and support of the media and the local government, the problem of the safety of food in the area can be solved.

Every Sunday at 12:30, CCTV broadcasts 'Weekly Quality Report', and this has already become one of the station's most popular shows. The reason for its increasing popularity is the fact that it regularly reports on the problem of the safety of food. Many viewers tune in especially to learn about cases that no one could dare imagine were true. For example, using highly carcinogenic alum on pumpkin seeds meant for human consumption; the 'beautification' of fruit; adding chemical fertilisers to rice noodles etc. The beginning of the show starts with the words, 'You won't believe anything you see, but we will do everything we can to get the proof that you need.' Each case that they expose is astonishing and disturbing.

But while exposing these dark secrets, CCTV provides detailed information on how the criminals operate. So, in a situation where the governments' laws have limited power to deal with these criminals, are these television programmes actually giving people the information they need to be able to copy these crimes?

And another worry is, just how far can 'Weekly Quality Report' go? What kind of pressure will it receive in the future? It is clear that since the programme broadcast on 4 July, the well-known show 'Interviews on Important Matters' has produced fewer exposés. But what kind of pressure has 'Weekly Quality Report' faced? Who has been trying to control the programme? I hope this is just paranoid speculation.

Migrant worker's rice.

'Migrant workers' rice', which contains the highly carcinogenic 'huangqu' toxin, is mainly eaten by the peasant migrants working in the cities and large institutions like schools that buy food in large quantities. These toxins can stay in the body for 15 to 20 years. This food can cause problems that in the future will lead to social unrest.

The migrant workers are already at the bottom of the social ladder, working for pitiful pay. On top of this, it has now been revealed that their bosses, in an attempt to save money, feed them with cheap rice containing the carcinogenic 'huangqu' toxin. Recently this cheap 'migrant workers' rice' has been found in markets in ten provinces and cities, including Hebei, Heilongjiang, Liaoning and Tianjin. Four reporters from CCTV's 'Time Line' programme went to markets in Langfang, Hebei Province, Harbin in Heilongjiang Province, as well as in Beijing and Tianjin to look into this situation.

The reporters found that this unsafe, stale rice was openly on sale even in Beijing and Tianjin. In Langfang's agricultural products market, half the rice stalls were selling this 'migrant workers' rice', but most of it was hidden in a back room. Compared to other rice, the migrant workers' rice was yellow and smelt a little mouldy. Someone in the know told me that this migrant workers' rice has always been for sale, and is in the main sold to construction companies, it is just that this year it has sold in larger quantities than before. A 46 jin bag of migrant workers' rice sells for just 48 yuan. A rice seller will only make about 1 yuan on each bag of normal rice sold, but although this migrant workers' rice is a third of the price of normal rice, the rice seller can make at least 7 or 8 yuan a bag on it.

Since it is already well known that most of this rice is sold to construction sites, the canteens on construction sites have found ways of trying to disguise the rice they use. They soak the rice and rub it, which gets rid of the yellow colour and removes a lot of the

smell of mould, so that the grains of rice look big and white. The television reporter secretly interviewed one stall holder who said that he buys batches of 400 bags, and sells them very quickly. Another stall holder was able to sell 4 to 5,000 jin of this rice a day.

A reporter secretly interviewed a boss of a construction site, who said that there were 300 migrant workers working on his site. Since he had started buying 'migrant workers' rice' his costs had been cut a lot, in fact he was able to make total savings of about 5000 yuan a month.

According to the journal, 'China Quality: 10,000 miles', it's not only Hebei and Helongjiang where this problem is serious, the cities of Beijing and Tianjin also sell this rice in large quantities. Stale rice has been found in many large agricultural products markets in Beijing. The reporter saw 100 tonnes of this stale rice for sale in Beijing's Liulitun market. One stallholder there said that he sold 30 tonnes a month. On this basis, the migrant workers in Beijing must consume more than 10,000 tonnes of stale rice a year.

Stale rice is not fit for human consumption. It can only be sold on auction, to businesses that have special authorisation to make fermented drinks. Hu Xiaosong, the Deputy Head of China's Agricultural University said, 'The huangqu toxin is about ten times more poisonous than the qinghua toxin. Once it enters the body, it causes serious damage to the liver, and can lead to liver cancer. According to research, cancer can develop just 24 weeks after consuming this toxin, it is the most highly carcinogenic toxin found to date. And this is what the migrant workers are eating every day.

This stale rice isn't only eaten by migrant workers, it's also served at universities and work cafeterias, and sold to some food manufacturers. The reporters also looked into where this stale rice was coming from, and found that most of it came from the Northeast – in particular Liaodong in Liaoning Province and Wuchang in Heilongjiang Province. And Beijing has its own migrant workers' rice. Some of it comes from state-owned rice storehouses, and some from stale rice auctioneers. This stale rice not only an issue of food safety, it is an issue that reveals the true nature of our morality and political system.

Recently CCTV 'Weekly Quality Report' has revealed that in Bengbu in Anhui Province, fruit jelly factories use edible gum instead of fresh fruit to produce cheap fruit jellies. As well as gum, they add a variety of different additives that are strictly forbidden by the government, preservatives, brightening agents, saccharine, colourings, and

flavourings. Their equipment is very basic, and their hygiene levels are far below the standard. Bengbo is Anhui's main producer of fruit jellies, there are about 100 different factories making them there, and the area has become famous for producing cheap jellies. There are nearly 50 different brands of fruit jelly produced in the city, and they sell for about 1.5 yuan a jin, or as little as 0.7 yuan a jin. The ingredients for good quality fruit jelly cost at least 0.6 yuan a jin. The local bosses said that the fruit jelly is made with artificial fruit. This so-called artificial fruit is not treated in any way, but put straight into the jelly pots. The boss told the reporter, 'In Bengbo, the price of the fruit jelly just about covers the cost of the plastic packaging. It's very low. We only make a few cents a crate, so we have to rely on selling large quantities of the product.'

The case of the Fuyang Substandard Milk Powder:

Pesticides on fruit and vegetables can lead to diseases of the nervous system in children, and even death. Heavy metals and other chemicals found in fruit and vegetables are slow to take effect, but in the long term can lead to child cancer and leukaemia. Children in the cities are known to suffer from these problems, so one can imagine that in the poverty-stricken countryside, the health problems children face are even worse.

In Fuyang, which was the birth place of both the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, and today's highest leader, Hu Jintao, substandard milk powder led to alarming cases of 'big-headed babies'. News of this spread throughout the world, and focused everyone's attention on the problem of the safety of China's food.

A few days ago, a friend returned from a trip abroad, and told me that while he was travelling from the US to Canada, he met an American who had little knowledge of Asia. The American couldn't tell whether my friend was Japanese or Chinese, so my friend explained that he was a Chinese man who had emigrated from Hong Kong in the 1960s. As soon as he heard this, the American's eyes glazed over and he kept saying, 'big-headed babies, big-headed babies.' My friend didn't know what to say.

The case of the substandard milk powder in Fuyang County led to one hundred babies falling sick, and the death of thirteen babies. After the media broke news of this shocking case, it attracted the attention of people from all levels of society. According to a report by the Central Television Station, substandard milk powder was already being

sold in the markets of Fuyang as early as 2003. On 10 April 2003, huge sales of substandard milk powder in Fuyang led to more than a hundred babies falling ill, and the death of ten babies. On 7 August 2003, a baby called Rongrong was taken to hospital. On the 13th, this baby, who had only lived for 130 days, died. She suffered severe liver and kidney failure, and inflammation of the guts which lead to partial decay. Earlier this year, the Department of Commerce of Fuyang County uncovered 33 cases of substandard milk powder being sold. But this didn't put a stop to the activities of these illegal traders – recently the same department has discovered another 45 cases of this fake product being sold in Fuyang.

Following the reporting of the case of substandard milk powder in Fuyang, the media also revealed cases of poor quality milk powder being sold in large quantities in Cao County in Shandong; milk powder that can lead to cancer being sold in Shantou, Guangdong Province. In the markets of Lanzhou, toxic milk powder was found. And substandard milk powder was also found Guangdong, Hainan, Hubei, Zhejiang, Sichuan, Guangxi, Henan, Gansu, as well as the markets of the capital city, Beijing. So one can only imagine how many other places in China are selling this illegal product, and how many children's lives are at risk. The consequences of this horrific trade have been reported quite well by the media, and the central authorities have not entirely turned a blind eye to the issue. I would like to express my admiration for the professionalism of the people in the media who have reported so tirelessly on this issue, and writers on the internet who have posted reports on the issue, helping to increase the transparency of society. But apart from that, I don't know what to say.

When the media put before the public's eyes pictures of the huge and deformed heads of those young babies, no one could help but be angry and distraught. When this news came to light, Wen Jiabao, the head of government and premier of the State Council, held many meetings, instructing the relevant departments to deal strictly with the criminals involved in these cases, and the central government has been continually sending teams out to try and speed up the investigations. People hoped that the horrifying cases of big-headed babies would, in this way, be dealt with properly.

But this has not been the case. The first thing to come to light was the case of Department of Industry and Commerce of Taihe County in Fuyang deceiving the

investigation teams sent down by the State Council – the teams involved in ‘fighting the fake’ were themselves involved in ‘fabricating the fake’. At 10pm on 23 April, the Office of Fair Trade of the Department of Industry and Commerce of Taihe County held a meeting in a room on the third floor of the department’s building, and announced that the staff’s duty that night was to fabricate more than 140 documents relating to the investigation of substandard milk.

Each document was to include chapters such as ‘Description of the Case’, ‘Interview Records’, ‘Decisions on Punishments to be Given’, and receipts of fines taken. Following the principle that ‘Whoever reports on a case should deal with the case’, each member of staff became responsible for ‘fabricating’ anything from several, to several dozens of different cases.

What is even more laughable is that the Fuyang Department of Industry and Commerce reported these fake investigations to the media. Following this, the media was full of stories along the lines of ‘The Fuyang Department of Industry and Commerce has filed cases against 189 relatively large scale trade in substandard milk powder’.

And of these 189 cases, 148 were filed by the Department of Industry and Commerce of Taihe County. Fuyang’s Department of Industry and Commerce is divided into ten town and county departments, so Taihe’s 148 cases far exceeded the number of cases brought by the nine other departments. The cases that were chosen were all relatively large scale, involving large amounts of products and money, complicated histories and unfortunate consequences. Smaller, less complicated cases were dealt with by merely issuing an on-the-spot fine.

In reporting these 148 cases, Taihe County’s Department of Industry and Commerce were hoping to appear conscientious in their duties. Other, more modest departments reported far fewer cases. But after the Taihe County department reported these cases to the municipal authorities, the cases were just left hanging in the air. Although notices of arrest were issued, there were no decisions taken on the punishments to be given out.

In the middle of April, Anhui Province’s Department of Industry and Commerce informed Fuyang City’s Department of Industry and Commerce that they wanted to look into the documents relating to these 189 cases. When the Fuyang authorities called for the

relevant documents to be sent to them, they discovered that only 8 of the cases that Taihe had looked into were genuine, and so there were only 8 sets of documents that they could pass on to the provincial authorities. In the afternoon of 23 April, the investigation teams sent by the State Council arrived in Fuyang, and started looking into the cases of substandard milk powder discovered in the area. And on the very night that they arrived, Lu Shaoxia, the Deputy Mayor of Fuyang, instructed dozens of staff in the Office of Fair Trade of Taihe County to work through the night fabricating documents. But there was worse to come.

On 24 April 2004, the State Council's investigation team personally discovered 890 bags of 'Three Generations' substandard milk powder manufactured by the Wuwangwo Sweet Factory. This powder had been already been publicly declared unfit for consumption by the Municipal Department of Industry and Commerce.

According to Xu Xueshun, the head of Taihe's Department of Industry and Commerce, the Fuyang Municipal Party Committee and municipal government, and the leaders of Taihe government took this matter very seriously, and that very night the county's Department of Industry and Commerce held an emergency meeting and decided to sack Ji Dengjuan, the head of Chengdong's Industry and Commerce Office, Wu Hai the deputy head, as well as Chen Chunsheng and Song Ying who managed the Dongcheng's Industry and Commerce Office. On 25n April, news of these sackings was reported to the State Council's investigation team. On 26 April, the news was reported by the Central Television Station and the Fuyang local media.

But when reporters visited the Taihe County's Industry and Commerce departments on 4 June, they discovered a notice pinned to the wall of the Chengdong Office with the names and the photographs of all the office's staff. They saw that the four men: Ji Dengjuan, Wu Hai, Chen Chunsheng and Song Ying, who had been supposedly sacked more than a month before, were still on the list. On the door of the office there was even a list showing which members of staff had been on duty in May. From the list, the team could see that the four men were either 'awaiting duty' or 'on duty' throughout the month.

Although the cases of substandard milk powder had captured the attention of the highest levels of government as well as the public at large, the investigation team, on

what was already their second visit to Fuyang, was able to discover substandard milk powder for sale in the markets. The local Industry and Commerce departments had only concerned themselves with reporting the cases to the higher authorities, but had taken no effective action, and had failed to sack those officials responsible. They had deliberately deceived both the State Council's investigation and the general public.

When it came to light that many of the documents relating to cases of substandard milk powder in Fuyang had been fabricated, the managers responsible were finally sacked, but these men felt that they were in fact being punished for deeds committed by the County's leaders. They protested strongly against this second dismissal. When the truth about the initial 'fake dismissals' was reported by the media, Xu Xueshun, the head of Taihe Industry and Commerce Department, was also dismissed. Following his dismissal, he said that the initial dismissals were instigated by the county leaders. Another of the four men, Chen Chunsheng, asserted that Fu Xiaoyang, the Deputy Head of the department, said that, 'We have no choice but to sack you. If we don't punish you, then we will have to punish the County leaders and the Secretary of the County's Party Committee. You are being punished to save them. I promise you that you can all continue to work and receive a salary.' Xu Xueshun said repeatedly that Chen Chunsheng and Song Ying's fake dismissals were forced through by the Taihe County Government, and that he received many personal calls from the county leaders who told him specifically whom to punish. In fact the dismissal of these two men was not justified as there was no evidence to incriminate them. But the county leaders insisted that the men must be dismissed and that by seven o'clock the next morning, news of their dismissal should be reported to the municipal government. So Xu Xueshun's hands were tied. He had no time to carry out any further investigations. The higher authorities insisted that he should first dismiss the men, then deal with the necessary formalities.

The events that followed were even harder to believe.

When the investigation team finally left Fuyang, the free medical care offered to the big-headed babies came to a stop. The young parents of Yueyue, who was born in October last year, were driven to despair. Yueyue's parents are both peasants from Songzai Village in Taihe County. Not long after Yueyue was born, her mother's milk supply dried up, and she was fed 'Sunlight Baby' milk powder, which was later to enter

the blacklist of substandard milk powder. (It was found that this milk powder's protein content was only 2.13%.) On 25 April this year, Yueyue's parents saw a television report on the State Council's investigation team arriving in Fuyang to look into cases of substandard milk powder. They looked at their baby, and saw that her head was swollen, but that her hands and feet were no larger than they had been the day she was born, and that she was unable to sit up steadily on the bed. They felt that something was wrong, and took her straight to the Taihe County Hospital. On 25 April, Yueyue was fortunate to receive free medical care from the hospital. But after the investigation team left Taihe County on 27 April, the 'free lunch' came to an end. Taihe County Hospital said that Yueyue's free medical treatment would have to stop, and the reason given was that she didn't meet with the conditions for free treatment. Yueyue's parents had limited financial resources, and so had no choice but to take her away from the hospital. The parents and grandfather then worked tirelessly for six months, making 4700 yuan, which they spent on further treatment, but this wasn't enough and on 2 May this year, they once more had to take Yueyue away from hospital because of lack of funds.

It has been said that in the countryside of Taihe and Funan Counties, babies are still suffering from consequences of consuming blacklisted, substandard milk powder, but because their cases haven't been appraised, they have been unable to receive free medical treatment, and have to be cared for at home.

Another piece of news to come out is that two months after the investigation team left, the illegal traders had still not been dealt with. Little Aoqiang was a 'hero' of the Fuyang substandard milk powder fiasco. He was born on 6 August last year, and developed normally until, a month after using the 'Nilu' milk powder, he developed a particularly high fever, and other symptoms that were diagnosed as typical of babies whose nourishment had suffered from the consequences of consuming substandard milk powder.

On 23 June, Aoqiang's parents, on his behalf, brought a case against some of the illegal traders of substandard milk powder in Fuyang. The Food Trade Department of Taihe County was opened in August 2001, and registered by Liu Jie, who was one of the men that Aoqiang's parents were suing.

The illegal selling of substandard milk powder had devastating effects on the health of Aoqiang. During his medical treatment, Aoqiang could only be injected in his scalp, so his head was covered with needle pricks. The skin looked like that of a plucked chicken wing, it was a horrible sight. He hovered between life and death many times. This innocent baby had no expression of anger on his face, or tone of complaint in his voice. He just silently had to endure the consequences of consuming the substandard milk powder: arrested physical intellectual development, weakness and susceptibility to illness etc. Later he will face severe obstacles when it comes to his education, employment and prospects of marriage. The fake milk powder has not only severely harmed his health, it has also created a heavy financial burden for his family. His parents can no longer live normal lives.

The court decided that the family should be awarded 250,000 yuan for physical and emotional damage, of which 150,000 yuan was for Aoqiang, and 50,000 yuan for the parents.

According to an informed source, the accused stayed at home throughout the proceedings, although the court said that they had gone on the run. Two months after the State Council's investigation team had left, the accused had still not been arrested.

These are the so-called 'public servants' whose salaries are paid for by our taxes. These are the officials who are constantly spouting the need to follow the 'Three Represents' and uphold the principle of 'The people's interests are paramount'. But in reality these 'servants' are deceiving and harming their so-called 'masters'. The Chinese authorities have controlled society for the last fifty years through fear and lies. Can anyone still remember Premier Zhou Enlai standing before the public and famously promising to bring about the Four Modernisations before the year 2000? Lies and fear have in fact controlled China for thousands of years, eroding our sense of morality. And our fears and uncertainties about the future are easily exploited by those in power. The promises or apologies that are announced in public have lost all credibility, and we can't help but remember the criticism that was once directed towards Confucius: 'He talks of benevolence, justice, politeness, knowledge, trustworthiness, but from his belt hang a knife and a wooden stick!'

Food is essential to our survival and reproduction, and vital to the political stability and social development of the country. The problem of the safety of many of our food products is the result of our reckless 'overspending' in recent years. We have run up overdrafts on our society, environment, personal relationships, trust. When we consume beyond our means, we lose our sense of morality, and this has allowed phenomena such as the production of unsafe food to take place. 'Daily Quality Reports', which continually reports on cases of unsafe food products, is now one of Central Television Station's most popular programmes. But are people watching this merely to learn how to produce these fake products? In the system we live under, it is more dangerous for officials to tell the truth than to lie.

The Party and government leaders have achieved power by lying and deceiving (people like Cheng Kejie who have adopted Lin Biao's old maxim that 'if you don't lie, you can't achieve great things'). There is now a saying among the people that goes, 'The villages deceive the counties, the counties deceive the towns, the towns deceive the provinces, and the provinces deceive the central government,' and it is no surprise that the saying has become so popular. It is my opinion that the only way to deal with these lies is to create a system that would ensure that no official would dare lie. The system would reward those who told the truth and punish those who lied. In this system no official would be forced to say things that they themselves didn't believe to be true. The example set by the government in these matters is of vital importance. So why is it that the problem of the safety of food is so widespread? I think it is because the officials who pretend to deal with the problem are in fact turning a blind eye to it, because they benefit financially from this illegal trade.

Let us return to some of the terrible food-related incidents that have occurred over the last few years:

- From December 1987 to February 1988, 300,000 people in Shanghai contracted Hepatitis A during an outbreak of the disease in the city.
- In June 1996, 157 people were harmed and 36 people died after drinking fake wine produced by Yunnan's Huaize Industrial Alcohol Company.

- From 27 June to 21 July 1996, 192 people were poisoned, 6 people seriously injured, and 35 people died after consuming rice wine produced in Huaize County in Yunnan Province, which contained dangerous levels of formaldehyde.
- From early June to mid-July 1997, 255 people were poisoned and 73 people died after eating wild mushrooms in Yunnan's Simao region.
- In February 1998, more than 200 people were poisoned and 7 people died after drinking fake alcohol sold in Shanxi's Suozhou, Zhanshou and Datong regions.
- In 1998, 200 people were poisoned and three people died after consuming pork oil which had been stored in vats that had previously contained mechanical oil.
- In January 1999, 46 students were poisoned in Guangdong; and in June of the same year, a hospital treated 34 people who had been poisoned by eating vegetables that contained traces of dangerous pesticides.
- In 1999, 51 athletes competing in the National Urban Games, were poisoned by food bacteria.
- In August 1999, 700 people in Guangdong's Qiqing city were poisoned after eating cooking oil that contained liquid paraffin.
- In 2001, 5,000 people were poisoned and two people died after eating wild mushrooms in Jiangxi's Yongxiu County.
- In 2001, 20 people were poisoned and two people died after eating Hemai fish in Guangxi's Luchuan County.
- From 1 to 7 November 2001, 484 people were poisoned by lean meat powder in Heyuan in Guangdong Province.
- On 4 September 2001, 6,000 students were poisoned by contaminated bean milk in Jilin.
- In 2002, 100 people were poisoned and five people died after eating wild mushrooms in Tuanjie Village in Hunan Province.
- In 2002, 3,000 students were poisoned in Changchun after eating bean milk that had gone bad.
- In May 2002, 37 students aged eight to fourteen were poisoned after unintentionally eating muskmelon that contained jiaji 1605 and miewulin pesticides. They all recovered after receiving emergency medical care.

- On 13 June 2002, 78 people were poisoned after eating tongxin green vegetables that had traces of the jilin pesticide.
- On 8 July 2002, 80 tourists in Haiko developed blood poisoning.
- In February 2003, a woman died after being poisoned by red dates in Shenyang, Liaoning.
- On 19 March 2003, 3000 students were poisoned and 3 died in Haicheng, Liaoning, after eating poisoned bean milk.
- In April 2003, SARS broke out in China, causing economic losses of billions of yuan.
- On 6 June 2003, 87 people were poisoned in Guangxi colleges and high schools after eating rice noodles that contained the illegal additive 'diaobaikuai'.
- On 3 July 2003, some illegal factories made a form of soy sauce from human hair. 76 tonnes of it were sold to the public, the remaining 9 tonnes were seized by the police. It was found that the human hair soy sauce contained lead and other harmful substances, and the colouring they used contained 4-methylimidazole, which can give people convulsions or even epilepsy.
- On 28 July 2003, rice in Guangzhou was found to contain dangerous levels of huangqumeisu B1 bacteria. Three illegal rice processing workshops were found, and 300 tonnes of substandard rice was confiscated from them.
- In February 2004, the Department of Hygiene received reports of 21 serious cases of poisoning, in which 448 people were poisoned, and 14 people died. Of these, nine cases took place in the home, involving 40 people being poisoned, and 9 deaths; 10 cases took place in work canteens, in which 403 people were poisoned and 3 died; the remaining two cases poisoned five people and killed two people. Nine cases took place in schools, causing 399 children to be poisoned, and one to die.
- In April 2004, 100 small children were harmed and more than 10 died in the Fuyang substandard milk powder case.

In May 2004, the Department of Trade and Industry carried out a survey of 24 different food products selling in Yueyuang in Hunan Province, Lanzhou in Gansu, Chengdu in Sichuan, Nanchang in Jiangxi, Changchun in Jilin, Zhengzhou in Henan, Langfang in Hebei and Nanping in Fujian. Only 65.8% of the food product met with the government

standards. The results of the survey showed that there are five main problems concerning the safety of food in China:

1. The use of poisonous and harmful chemicals during food processing, especially in dried food and seafood. In a market in Yueyang, the banned additive diaobaikuai was found in 65 types of seafood, vegetable products and bean products; and sulphur dioxide was found on fruit and vegetable products.
2. The excessive use of additives, especially in bean products. In Huafeng Market in Chengdu, the government found 29 meat and bean products that contained 7 different kinds of illegal additives
3. Worryingly low levels of food hygiene. In the Shengli Market in Nanping, Fujian, the government seized ten types of food products that contained dangerous levels of heavy metals and mercury.
4. Low nutritional value of some food products, especially dairy food. In Jingang market in Lanzhou, Gansu, the government seized 32 types of food which had levels of fat and protein that were lower than they should have been.
5. Unsatisfactory labelling of food products. The labels on some food products do not indicate the levels of additives, colourings, type of sweeteners. The labels of drinks that contain dairy products or vegetable protein do not indicate levels of protein, or the names of additives, preservatives, or sweeteners used.

When one looks back at all the food scandals that have occurred in recent years, one can't help repeating the mantra that the Japanese 'devils' muttered in the old films: 'All conscience is destroyed!' But we can't allow ourselves to forget all the terrible things that have happened. These food products are bought with the hard-earned cash of our people, and the price they have to pay is their lives, which they can only live once. We can't just sit back passively and allow these things to happen. In 1987, during the outbreak of Hepatitis A in Shanghai, you could sell a bottle of Banlangen medicine [used to treat symptoms of Hepatitis] for the price of a much sought after television set. And ten years later in Guangzhou when SARS broke out, a bottle of vinegar [thought to help kill the virus] could sell for as much as 200 yuan! This is not fantasy, this is really the world we

are living in. One can't help remembering what Julius Facik said: 'Man – remain vigilant!'

After I had visited the Dadi company in Jiangxi, I visited a Buddhist temple. The lama had been an economics professor in Beijing before turning to Buddhist studies. When I asked him for his opinion on how to deal the problem of the safety of food in China, he recited from the scriptures, saying that those who do evil will never live in peace.

The lies told about the safety of our food create serious problems that will be hard to deal with in the future. We should deal with this issue in the same way that we dealt with SARS – if the officials aren't up to the job then get rid of them! The stubborn officials who view the discussion of the safety of our food as a phenomenon with negative consequences are the diseased, malignant cells in the body of our nation.

If the safety of our food is to be improved, then the government must use its power and resources to work hand in hand with the people, and deal with these illegal activities in a just way, for example by implementing modern and transparent laws, rather than the traditional method of resorting to coercion.

Otherwise, if satisfying our basic daily needs for food and drink becomes a highly dangerous activity, then what hope is left for our society? Any talk about the need to build a harmonious society would sound ridiculous.

A few days ago America's Free Asia Chinese language radio station telephoned me, to interview me about a new case of 'big-headed babies' brought about by substandard milk powder sold in Zhuzhou, Hunan Province. This is less than a year after the Fuyang milk powder case which led to over 100 big-headed babies. Just like SARS, the problem of substandard milk powder is considered to be a 'negative news story', and has therefore been hushed up by the authorities, but the problem continues to exist and pose a threat to humanity. Without knowing it, our race is unconsciously heading towards mass suicide. In my opinion, all Chinese people, from the top echelons of society to the bottom, are in need of urgent, spiritual rescue.

4. NEW GODDESSES MEND THE HOLE IN OUR HEAVEN

In the natural world, the heavens are a layer of air that envelops the earth. In this thick layer of air, there is a thin layer of ozone, which acts as a protective umbrella, sheltering us from ultraviolet rays and preventing the earth from overheating.

But now this sky is encountering problems. The ozone layer is fast depleting, there is a big hole in the layer over the South Pole, with a reduction of 40% of the ozone in that region. And this hole is getting larger all the time. So, above our heads, the heavens have been ripped apart. Where the hole has opened, the ultraviolet rays are able to penetrate to the earth's surface. These rays have a long-term impact on human health and the ecological system. Excessive ultraviolet radiation can lead to increases in respiratory diseases and cataracts in the long-term, and it can harm people's immune system and cause large increases in skin cancer. In 1985, scientists warned the world that they had discovered a definite hole in the ozone layer above the South Pole (the size of two Chinas). The thickness of ozone layer in that region had diminished by a half. Suddenly people became concerned with the ozone layer. The possible consequences of the destruction of this layer were too terrifying to contemplate: mass starvation, blindness, millions of people dying from skin cancer, floods, and cities disappearing.

In 1987, environmental planners at the UN persuaded 24 countries to sign the Montreal Protocol concerning the destruction of the ozone layer. It stated that by 2000, the industrialised nations should stop manufacturing and using chlorofluorocarbons, and that developing countries should do so by 2010. In 1990, about 60 countries signed a convention in London agreeing to stop the manufacture and use of these substances. In November 1992, 86 countries sent delegates to the UN environment conference in Copenhagen. At the end of the conference, an agreement was signed that brought forward the date by which developed countries would stop producing chlorofluorocarbons from 2000 to 1996.

Through the means above, we are now carrying out a mission in which 'new goddesses mend our heaven'. In ancient China, there was a legend that, in heaven, the water god and fire god got in a fight, and ended up ripping the sky open and leaving a great hole. The Goddess saw that a great calamity had occurred, rode over on her horse and sewed up the hole herself with five-coloured thread. She cut off the four feet of a giant turtle and used them as pillars to hold up the sky, enabling the people to resume their lives in peace.

Now that the people's heaven – food – is being more and more polluted every day, the government is attempting to find ways in which to mend the holes that have been ripped through it.

The National People's Congress has shown immense strength in tackling this problem, and finding ways for the people to mend their broken heaven.

In 2003, on the eve of the closure of the 10th Congress of the CPPC, the Department of Trade and Industry announced that there were ten major areas that were still of concern to consumers, and that most of the complaints received from consumers concerned the safety of food. The CPPC took notice of this and said, 'The people regard food to be their heaven. Now we see contaminated meat, pesticide vegetables, poison rice. What has happened to this heaven?'

The Chinese people have lost the sense of security that their old heaven used to give them. This year, more than 200 delegates to the NPC came up with 8 plans, and the CPPC came up with 27 plans. In some provinces, the issue of the safety of food has become a top priority for local governments.

In March 2004, at the time of the second meeting of the 10th National People's Congress, delegate Chen Yichun, who had been transferred to Beijing from Zhejiang in 1984, and had been deputy general secretary of the 8th and 9th Congress, talked of a plan to step up the regulation of food safety, which stated that, 'The people have commonly regarded food to be their heaven. The safety of food has an impact on the lives of our entire population. There is another saying that goes: illnesses enter the body through the mouth. Many illnesses are caused by the food we eat. There are many food products on sale today that are of inferior quality . . .'

The safety of food became one of the hot topics of the time. In the second meeting of the 10th Congress, 30 delegates suggested that food safety regulations should be drawn up without delay. They said that as there were no clear laws regulating food safety, and that the National Food and Drugs Regulation Board were unable to get to the roots of the problem. The rules were soft, the power to regulate weak, the manpower was dispersed and the market regulation was in disorder, making it very hard to implement any guidelines. They suggested eight ways of helping the situation: 1. Bring in laws regulating the safety of food; 2. strengthen the testing system; 3. establish standards that

will guarantee safety of food; 4. strengthen the regulation of enterprises; 5. guarantee that food is produced in safe and hygienic environments, thus tackling the root of the problem; 6. step up the fight against fake and substandard food; 7. strengthen the forms of food safety management; 8. improve the system of food market inspection.

After this, the State Council immediately set up a television and telephone conference on food safety, highlighting the importance of the Safe Food Project, showing how vital it is to the people's interests and to social stability.

In March 2004, both the NPC and the CPPC repeatedly brought up the issue of food safety. Delegates such as Xie Kezhe brought up the suggestion of establishing a Food Safety Inspection Management Law. He said that it was important to deal with the issue within a proper legal framework, rectifying problems in existing laws, reducing the problem of conflicts between the legislative and administrative arms of the law.

Chen Yingxun, a CPPC delegate, and Deputy Head of Zhejiang University's Environment College said that China had started trying to systemise the food market as early as 1 August 2002. There are already a million people working within nearly ten government departments on issues related to food safety inspection. This excessive manpower has led to wastage, and to officials 'passing the buck', with no one department accepting to take responsibility. The main problems now are that the laws and regulations are not up to standard, there is no appropriate enforcement system, and the inspection powers are too weak. If the public is to regain its trust in the safety of food, the government must take responsibility for the issue.

Xiao Tianren, NPC delegate and mayor of Luzhou, Sichuan Province, said that the unifying of standards was crucial. He said that the shift to mass production in the meat and vegetable industries was conducive to the implementation of government control of food safety. He also talked of the need for inspection standards to be established for food entering the market, with relation to pesticide residues, for example. Thirdly, he said that food suppliers should have sufficient financial resources and a fixed production location. At the same time, he called for an increase in resources to deal with suppliers who were operating in illegal ways.

Gao Lipu, the NPC delegate and researcher at the Vegetable Research Centre of Beijing's Nonglin University, said that there should be laws governing the wholesale

food market. The laws in place did not apply to unprocessed agricultural food products, which account for the bulk of food for sale in the wholesale markets. When vegetables are found to have excessive amounts of pesticide residues they face bans in local markets, but that doesn't prevent the traders from taking these toxic vegetables to other markets to sell. In this way, it is hard to safeguard the health of the consumers. When substandard food is found in the West, it is either seized or destroyed.

Luo Shaojun, NPC delegate and head of Hangzhou's Tea Research Centre, said that a survey conducted from 2001 to 2003 found that 70% of food businesses in China were small family businesses employing less than ten people, where it is hard to guarantee the quality and safety of food produced. Because the laws regulating the industry are so confused, and their implementation is so unsatisfactory, the illegal producers do not get the punishments that they deserve. Since the costs of producing fake food are so low, even those who are punished are not put off from continuing with their illegal activities. If agricultural production is to match the standards of industrial production, the agricultural production must be made to conform to set standards. The systemisation of agriculture can only be considered to have succeeded if consumers are able to buy vegetables in the market without having to worry about levels of pesticides.

Shi Sixian, member of the Central Committee, and Deputy Chairman of Shanghai's CPPCC, said that there are many problems remaining in both the production and retailing of food. The food hygiene law only deals with 104 pesticides, allowing their use in 45 different types of food products. But in the West, similar laws deal with 176 pesticides and their use in 75 different food products, making the regulation much more thorough.

In order to safeguard the safety of food, the appropriate regulation systems must be put in place. Firstly, while improving the food safety law, regulations concerning food hygiene must be implemented. The current food hygiene law is out of date and insufficiently broad, leaving many legal 'blind spots'. Secondly, there should be more foresight in the food safety system. The government should not wait until the food safety problems have happened, or have been reported on by the media, until they start to deal with them. The problems should be dealt with at source. Thirdly, where problems of food safety have occurred, the people responsible should be severely punished, and

investigations should be carried out on the government department involved. Fourthly, people manufacturing fake food should be chased out of the industry. Finally, food safety standards should be made to be the same throughout the country, and inspection technology should be improved.

Professor Xu Zhihui, delegate to the NPC, and member of Beijing's Dingye Solicitor's Office suggested that a professional organisation to deal with the problem of food safety should be swiftly put into place. This would unify and harmonise the law enforcement, inspection, control and scientific research, thus facilitating the regulation of food production, processing, packaging, transport, retailing, and import and export.

Li Taoying, the Hebei NPC delegate said misuse of pesticides, and the addition of toxic substances during the production of pesticides is still widespread. And the excessive use of growth enhancers are of especial danger to human health. The production, sale and use of agricultural products should be systemised without delay. The laws in place governing agricultural products have proved to be ineffective, and there are no laws controlling the levels of pesticide residues. So the laws in place should be reformed. At the same time, research should be carried out on the impact of pesticides and fertilisers on the environment and the quality of agricultural products. Enterprises should be encouraged to produce agricultural products with low levels of pesticide residues, and more education should be given to peasants concerning the scientific use of fertilisers.

Although these high officials take their responsibilities very seriously, I personally have greatest respect for the NPC member Jiang Deming. Although I had much contact with him during the writing of this book, I was never able to meet him face to face. So all I can do is try to piece a picture of him together from the material I have at hand:

Jiang Deming is a member of the NPC, deputy chairman of the Sheyang County Agricultural Technology Centre. He has attracted a lot of media attention because, for the past four years, he has continually argued for the setting up of an agricultural product quality and safety law. Jiang Deming has bone cancer and lung cancer, and has had to have his left leg amputated. His own personal misfortune has led him to call for

‘preventing diseases entering from the mouth’. On 11 March 2004, Jiang Deming said, during a meeting of the NPC, that laws should be swiftly drawn up to guarantee the safety of agricultural products, and that agriculture should be strengthened by law and technology, thus promoting the development of the rural economy. Wen Jiabao said that he was a fine example of someone overcoming their personal disabilities, saying, ‘You say that our work is difficult, but I think your job is even harder. It is the government’s responsibility to put right the problems you have mentioned. I think that your two suggestions are very good.’

Jiang Deming has particularly strong feelings concerning food safety. In 1990, he contracted bone cancer and had to have his left leg amputated. In 1994, the cancer spread to his lungs, and he had a piece of lung and two ribs removed. After 16 painful sessions of chemotherapy, he reflected on the cause of his disease, and knew that he had contracted it from the food he had eaten. He looked into research on the link between pesticides and cancer, and found that 100,000 serious poisonings had been caused by consumption of food with excessive levels of agricultural chemicals. His sense of social responsibility led him, at every opportunity available to him, to say: ‘How many people are eating poison every day? Why are the pears we eat today so large, but not sweet – it’s because they have been cultivated with growth stimulants. Carp now are big and fat because they’ve been fed on contraceptives. In the past it took 7 years for them to grow so big, but now it takes only seven months. But when children eat these carp, they risk reaching puberty prematurely. Watermelons and bananas are difficult to transport, but it’s not a problem anymore. The fruit are now picked before they are ripe, then sprayed with ethephon before they are sold. That is why one finds red watermelon with white seeds. When we eat seafood, we can sometimes detect a petrol taste. That is because of the heavy metal and mercury pollution, and these chemicals can cause minamata disease, as well as dementia and blood disease. There is a lake in Hubei. The local fishermen never eat the fish they catch from it, because they taste of petrol. But this huge lake produces 500,000 jin of fish a year. The locals turn them into fish balls, deep fried fish pieces, or dried fish and sell them in the urban markets!’

These evil practices are an insult to the public. The illegal practices must be dealt with according to the law. Thanks to Jiang Deming’s continual focus on this

issue, the high echelons of the government have gained an understanding of it. His concern and bravery means that he has become the conscience of our nation. His actions and words are helping to mend the big hole that has been ripped through our heaven.

In the legend, the goddess travels to Kunlun Mountain to fetch the magic stone. But where can we get the stone that will mend the hole that has been ripped in our own 'heaven'? The answer is in the West. We must adopt the same methods of inspection and management, and adopt the administrative techniques that they have developed over the centuries. In the US, the food and drug management is a powerful system. The food safety system is supported by the law and by business, guaranteeing that food safety is always of a relatively high level. The main bodies responsible for this issue are the DHHS, FDA, USDA, FSIS and EPA. There is also the CDC, NIH, ARS, The FSIS deals with the safety of meat, household poultry, and eggs. The FDA plays a large role in educating businesses and the public. If a food product has not been tested by the FDA for its levels of additives or pesticides, it is not allowed to be sold to the public. The EPA safeguards the health of the public and the environment, preventing harm caused by agricultural chemicals. APHIS is in the main concerned with protecting animals and preventing them from catching diseases. So the FDA, APHIS, FSIS and EPA use the food safety laws to guarantee the safety of food and protect the health of the consumers.

But can the stones from these distant mountains mend the hole in our heaven? I think this all depends on whether the government can work hand in hand with the people on this issue, making it clear where responsibilities lie. Officials dealing with the matter must take the issue seriously, only then can they gain the trust of the people. The government must set up the necessary legal framework to deal with the issue. What we are faced with are criminals who are prepared to do anything to gain their 300% profits. We can borrow the strict legal framework adopted by Hong Kong when it first built its market and social systems. But these illegal traders must be dealt with in an open and transparent way, according to the law.

The process of mending the hole in our heaven will be a long-term one. There is no magic cure that will solve the problem overnight. The problems we are facing today are the result of many years of crazy overspending. In the past it was the case that the poorer you were the more worthy you were, leading to ten years of poverty and

isolation. But then, in the wild race to get rich that followed this period, people lost control, and started spending like 'greedy cats'. They overspent on society, the environment, emotions, trust . . .Overspending made us lose our moral standards. Whether directly or indirectly, this is one of the reasons that the safety of our food is deteriorating every day. The example below is proof of this.

On 8 March 2004, in Kyoto, which had been twinned with China's Shanxi on 16 July 1983, a terrible thing occurred. At 7:50 am, the workers at a poultry farm discovered that their boss and his wife had hung themselves from trees that stood 100 metres apart. In the damp mist of the morning, these two corpses looked like two question marks.

The boss had been the head of the local agricultural business society. He and his wife had committed suicide because they had hidden the fact that their poultry had contracted bird flue. They were 67 years old.

On the same day, at the customs office at Nanning in China, 113 tonnes of frozen chicken were destroyed by the inspectors, because the area of the US that they had been imported from had reported cases of bird flu.

On a nearby hillside, a hole ten metres deep was dug, and 6 trucks transported the American frozen chicken and dumped it into the hole. The chickens were then sprayed with antibacterial chemicals. That night, after the media had left, the Xinxing Food Products Company paid some illegal entrepreneurs 20,000 yuan to go and retrieve the chicken from the ditch. The chicken were then brought to the company warehouse and stored in the deep freeze. When the Guangxi authorities heard of this, then went straight to the warehouse and seized the toxic chicken. Knowing that they were in serious trouble, the company immediately found a couple of scapegoats among their employees and sacked them. But thanks to pressure from the media and the public, the two employees revealed the truth about the situation to the authorities. However, the boss of the company still maintained that the two employees had acted alone in stealing the chicken, and that the crime had nothing to do with the company. But this assertion was ridiculous. How could these employees have had the authority to drive these expensive trucks, then open the company's warehouse?

The Chaoxian Daily 15 June edition reported on how the Korean Jingxiang food company had made dumplings from left-over materials. On the 13th of June, the boss of

the company had committed suicide by throwing himself off a bridge. In his will he had left a note calling for businessmen to always be honourable. 'If the Korean dumpling manufacturers don't clean up their business, then we shall never recover from this.' He also told consumers not to lose faith in the food producers.

These two neighbouring countries have a strong tradition of honour. People show repentance for their sins by committing suicide.

Today, when you open the newspaper on your way to work, or look out of your car window at the posters on the wall, or turn on your television at night, what you will see most is adverts for various drugs and medicines. Should we take this as some kind of warning? Will we really have to 'spend the first forty years of lives earning money, and the next forty spending money trying to keep ourselves alive', as the saying goes? In the past, opium made our country 'the sick man of the East'. What will our unsafe food turn us into today?

While I was researching this book, I took every opportunity available to me – whether I was meeting a friend in an office, or going out to a restaurant – to get my hands on a newspaper. Every day I would come home with piles of newspapers. My son would complain, 'You don't do any work, you just read through your piles of newspapers. You're no better than a government official!'

But I couldn't get rid of this habit. In today's Beijing Entertainment Daily I found three articles that were of interest. On the front page was an article with the headline: 'Nine Outlets are Found to Sell Vegetables with Toxic Levels of Pesticides.'

It said that a survey had found that 10.6% of vegetables on sale in Beijing had toxic levels of pesticides. Nine supermarkets and wholesale outlets were found to be selling substandard vegetables, and three of these were well-known Beijing vegetable retailers. Supermarkets were found to be particularly at fault, as the correct inspection procedures had not been put in place.

Six dairy product drinks were found to be unfit for human consumption. On 4 August 2004, 40 drinks produced by 40 different dairy product drink manufacturers in 10 cities were tested, and only 29 were found to meet the required standards, which is just 72.5%. The Wangfujing and Tiankelong markets in Beijing promised that they did not

sell the 6 substandard drinks, and that if any were found on their shelves, they would remove them immediately.

On 7 August, 109 people in Ningdu County, Jiangxi Province, suffered food poisoning symptoms such as diarrhoea, vomiting, fever, after attending a banquet, and had to be rushed to hospital. The next day, a few of them were able to return home. Investigations suggested that the food that they ate was contaminated with dangerous bacteria.

I searched the newspapers for stories like this. In the main, these stories tend not to get reported on, as they are usually kept secret by the authorities. But these secrets are like cancerous cells attacking the body of our people – they make us question the truth of every story we come across. At first people are angered by the fact that these matters are hidden from us, but then they become resigned to the situation, and lose all hope.

What future is there for a society which has been reduced to a such a state of numbness and despair?

In my opinion, the reason that the illegal entrepreneurs dare tear at our ‘heaven’ in such a despicable way, is that they know that the officials will turn a blind eye to it, refusing to take responsibility to sort out the problem, and trying to hide the matter from the eyes of the public. Even more worryingly, some officials are lining their own pockets from these illegal activities. The only way to deal with these problems is to make changes in the political system. We must deal with the illegal organisations that manufacture and sell the unsafe food, but more importantly, we must also deal with the officials who have failed in their duties to tackle the problem. We must educate the public that ‘The people regard food as their heaven, so food safety must be our top priority!’

Because, if satisfying our basic needs for food and drink becomes a risky and dangerous activity, what hope is there left for our society?

THE END.