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China's Horrible 2008

By [Sreeram Chaulia](#)

For China, 2008 was highlighted by the successful hosting of the Summer Olympics in Beijing under the watchful eyes of the world. However, the year was also marked by tragedies such as the Sichuan earthquake, the melamine-contaminated milk scandal and a spate of coal mining accidents. The resulting cover-ups from these two affairs, argues Sreeram Chaulia, are symptomatic of the Chinese government's internal incompetence.

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The year 2008 was supposed to be a red-letter year for China, whose ambitions of attaining superpower status in world politics reached an apogee with the hosting of the most expensive Olympic games in history. However, much to the chagrin of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the crowning glory of the Olympics lasted only for the few weeks when the sporting extravaganza was ongoing.

The more lasting image of China that emerged from the rest of the "Year of the Rat" has been one of unmitigated disasters in public welfare and public relations. Starting with the uprising of Tibetans, 2008 turned out to be the Middle Kingdom's annus horribilis that sowed serious doubts about its claim to have entered the big league of most powerful nations of the world.

The year 2008 demonstrated that the Chinese state is internally sclerotic and incapacitated.

Notwithstanding still healthy economic growth amidst a global downturn, the country's string of accountability failures revealed a state whose capacity and willingness to work for social good is under question.

When the Sichuan earthquake struck with devastating ferocity in May, over 7000 schoolrooms collapsed like cardboard shelters and killed several thousand children and teachers. Aggrieved parents could not but note the contrast of neighbouring buildings remaining intact even as the "tofu schools" caved in, and were certain that they were the victims of corrupt deals between contractors and local CCP officials in

Sichuan.

The state machinery went into full swing to cover up the extent of this scandal and resorted to traditional bullying tactics to sanitise the streets from angry agitating

parents. From hush money to overt threats, the CCP used all means available to suppress exposure of this embarrassing affair, which implicated the venality of its local cadres and exposed the dark underbelly of the cement-and-brick modernisation miracle that was said to be transforming the urban landscape of the country.

Premier Wen Jiabao scored some brownie points in the Western media by projecting himself as a "weeping grandpa" who mourned with the commoners at the sites of destruction in Sichuan. But his carefully crafted exercise of displaying the compassionate side of the CCP could not hide the state's deceit and crackdown over the school construction scandal.

China's architectural achievements, symbolised by Shanghai's jazzy metropolitan skyscrapers and Beijing's Olympic facelift, came into sharp contrast against Sichuan's "tofu schools" to lay bare the harsh realities of the country's imbalanced development and misplaced priorities.

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In September, a massive infant milk formula scandal rocked China and took the sheen off its already disreputable food and drug regulatory system. Four children died and an estimated 94,000 babies were hospitalised across the country for consuming milk powder containing the chemical melamine, which was deliberately used by profit-hungry manufacturers as a cost-cutting protein ingredient.

The state responded belatedly to the spreading epidemic of babies with stones in kidneys and took token measures of firing a few company executives and party office bearers.

What has come to light since these haphazard reactions were publicised is that the toxic milk powder was being produced by dozens of Chinese companies with the knowledge of CCP cadres in a classic crony capitalist mode of operation. "Grandpa Wen" apologised to the people saying that he felt "extremely guilty" about the episode, but his comrades induced or threatened parents interested in filing class action lawsuits against the Sanlu Group of companies, which was the largest offender.

As in the case of distraught families of the Sichuan earthquake, affected parents were offered silence money and threatened with dire consequences if they went to court. Local state officials took the additional precaution of warning lawyers against representing the parents.

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What is worse, according to The Telegraph, the CCP decided to "suppress the bad news" even though Sanlu had admitted as early as August that its formula was contaminated. The apparent reason for brushing it under the carpet was that the Olympics were about to open and the CCP was afraid that the milk powder scare might arouse "social instability." For all the cosmetics of "Grandpa Wen's" benevolence, the state is presently not allowing class action-style legal suits against milk manufacturers owing to fear of its own role being uncovered.

Wen Jiabao has also made a habit of issuing contrite statements whenever mining accidents kill poor labourers in different parts of China. With the world's worst rates of mining fatalities per annum (an average of over 5,000 deaths), China has failed quite miserably in enhancing the safety of individuals working in this extremely hazardous industry. In an all-too-familiar drama, local party leaders are found to have close rent-seeking relations with owners of coalmines and act collusively to downplay deadly accidents that occur almost every month.

Coal fuels the engine of China's industrial juggernaut and is a strategic mineral for its electricity generation. Given the high stakes of this "Black Gold" for Chinese industry to be competitive, the lives of mine labourers are cheap fodder in the eyes of the technocratic party elites. To confound matters, Chinese cabinet ministers have gone on record to assert that some mining accidents were "natural disasters" in which nothing could be done to rescue the trapped workers.

The callousness with which authorities have addressed this perennial human tragedy, wherein about 13 miners are killed every single day, stands out in comparison to the spirit of Chinese high modernisation beliefs that "nothing is impossible" and "sky is the limit." China has won fame and admiration around the world for building highways

and rail lines in record time with the motto, "Faster, Higher and Stronger."

The system that has rapidly combated poverty and improved standards of living is, however, paralysed and slow in detecting and punishing gross misuse of power and privileges by party apparatchiks and their private sector partners. The system that executes more persons for corruption than any other country in the world is blind and deaf when the corrupt happen to be party bigwigs and the victims are the powerless masses.

For the CCP to take corrective reforms against repeated governance failures would amount to political suicide. China's problems are thus condemned to a vicious circle of official denial, suppression and repetition. While the country's acceptability as a reliable partner for development has risen in Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia, the "China model" of growth leaves a heavy trail of human suffering and injustice.

Propositions like the "Beijing Consensus," which offer a template of inhumane modernisation for aspirant developing countries, need to be rejected straightaway lest they replicate the suffering of poor Chinese people at the global level.

The year 2008 demonstrated that the Chinese state is internally sclerotic and incapacitated. Whether China's irreparable domestic ills will ultimately stymie its external quest for acceptance as a global superpower remains to be seen. In the meantime, it is clear that being a victim of the system in authoritarian China is a far worse fate than that of a citizen of another country at a similar level of economic development.

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