

## *China, Culture, and Product Recalls*

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Pet food, toothpaste, and now toys — tainted products coming out of China are not only making American consumers nervous, but there are reverberations back home, too... It’s even led to talks between China and the U.S.<sup>1</sup> “Back home”, in this case, being China itself. Just a short time ago, a Chinese toy industry executive, Zhang Shudong committed suicide over a lead-tainted toy scandal.

But Americans shouldn’t cheer that somehow this tragedy foretells of a change in Chinese practices, at least not in the short term, despite a CCTV report today that China’s Head of the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection, and Quarantine is moving to improve the product quality of Chinese exports<sup>2</sup>. A quick check of the site of China’s official news agency, Xinhua, today barely revealed a mention of the problem.<sup>3</sup> So, it’s no time for rejoicing. That’s because Americans don’t quite understand where these scandalous manufacturing practices come from — that is, why do the Chinese *do* this kind of thing? — and why they’ll be more such scandals in the future.

Of course, it’s not all Chinese that do this — in fact, it’s noteworthy that Singapore and Taiwan are exporters of products that are considered of the highest quality. There’s something about the traditional way of thinking in Mainland China about manufacturing that’s behind all this...

It’s easy to fall into stereotypes here, saying that the Chinese by nature are sloppy or careless. But the issues is more subtle than that, and two important cultural factors explain why the Chinese manufacturers have been engaging in these dangerous practices. One factor is *expediency*. In greatly simplified terms, we can say that the Chinese are

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<sup>1</sup> See BBC News, “China Plans Safety Talks with US”,  
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/6949002.stm>>.

<sup>2</sup> CCTV International, Biz China, “China to Improve Food Quality”,  
<<http://www.cctv.com/program/bizchina/20070820/107117.shtml>>.

<sup>3</sup> 新華社 (Xinhua News Agency / NCNA - New China News Agency), <http://www.xinhuanet.com>

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pragmatic and are less concerned with abstract principles — and those principles include manufacturing standards. Expediency means cranking out products as quickly and cheaply as possible. In the Chinese mind, the negative consequences of such practices can always be dealt with later, and this pragmatism means that to the Chinese those consequences, in fact, don't really exist at the present time. Closely connected with this principle of expediency is the Chinese expression, *cha bu duo jiu hao le*, translated as “so-so is good enough”. Unfortunately, in China this expression sometimes becomes a manufacturing principle.

The second factor behind these scandals of low-quality and tainted goods is more complicated, and I'll have to give the short version here: China never had an Industrial Revolution. The West's move into mass manufacturing was a long process, a process that had about two centuries to develop not just technology, but also standards and ethics. Sure, places like Japan took a shortcut on the road to industrialization, but they also consciously imported Western models of management, not just the technology. Taiwan based its industrial model to a great extent on the Japanese model, and Singapore had the influence of both the Japanese model and the British. But even Taiwan has had some bumps on the road to quality manufacturing, and you can check out a critique I wrote back in 1996 on this subject, entitled “Teaching Concepts of Quality”, available on my website ([www.s2r.biz](http://www.s2r.biz)) and on my blog ([hinter-net.blogspot.com](http://hinter-net.blogspot.com)). Mainland China started most of its major industrialization in the Communist era, when the emphasis was much more on beating the West than on quality or safety. Nowadays, the emphasis is no longer ideological — it's monetary — but the bad habits remain the same.

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