**China's Communist party: Searching for its softer side**

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IN THE past several days, China has been doing much soul-searching. More than 300 of the Communist Party’s most powerful leaders met in Beijing and discussed ways of boosting the nation’s “cultural soft power”: an admission that for all the country’s economic prowess it lacks the magnetic draw of a country like America. Ordinary Chinese, however, have been more preoccupied with a hit-and-run accident that caused the death of a two-year-old girl. A dearth of what one Chinese newspaper commentary called “moral soft power” has been widely blamed for her demise and the seeming cold-heartedness of passersby.

The party’s meeting from October 15th to 18th was the first annual conclave of its central committee to focus on the issue of cultural soft power (a term that came into official party use after President Hu Jintao used it in a speech in 2007). The resolution it adopted ([in Chinese](http://www.chinaelections.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=216409)) spoke of an urgent need to build up such power, which Joseph Nye, an American scholar, first drew attention to 20 years ago as a component of national strength. A country with soft power, Mr Nye contended, could bend others to its will without resorting to force or payment. “Success depends not only on whose army wins, but also on whose story wins,” wrote Mr Nye in 2005 (in what, from the party’s perspective, was a [remarkably bullish article](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/1499/rise_of_chinas_soft_power.html) about the gains China appeared to be making in developing soft power).

The story of Little Yue Yue, as the Chinese media have nicknamed Wang Yue, who died on October 21st as a result of the accident eight days earlier in the southern city of Foshan, has been anything but a winning one. To many Chinese commentators, it has revealed a widespread callousness fostered by an amoral pursuit of wealth. Footage of the accident caught by a surveillance camera (be warned [it is harrowing](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzEzNDQ3MTc2.html)) showed Little Yue Yue being hit by a van, which stops and pauses, only to run over her again with a rear wheel, as its driver decides to proceed without checking what has happened. A little later a lorry rolls over her injured body. In the space of seven minutes, no fewer than 18 people walk by the bloody but still living girl before a rubbish-cleaner finally tends to her and summons Wang Yue’s mother.

The incident has triggered widespread soul-searching, with even the state-run media wringing their hands over the state of Chinese society. “These last few days the whole of China has been asking itself: is this just the way people are by nature? or have they only fallen to this state as a result of prolonged damage to their public morals?” asked one commentary in *Southern Weekend*, a newspaper ([in Chinese](http://www.infzm.com/content/64098)). The answer, most analysis has concluded, is the latter. *Caixin*, a magazine, published an article on its website suggesting that China’s political culture might even be to blame. “At the same time as people’s rights have been suppressed, people’s sense of righteousness and justice has been restrained too,” it said ([in Chinese](http://opinion.caixin.cn/2011-10-20/100315644.html)).

This outpouring began even before the central committee wrapped up its typically secretive meeting. The furore thus created a problem for the party’s propagandists. The central committee’s resolution may have implied that China was lagging behind in the development of soft power, but officials certainly did not intend to signal that China was in a state of moral collapse. The party’s main mouthpiece, the *People’s Daily*, tried to rally enthusiasm with a commentary on October 18th saying the meeting had ended “victoriously” and that the party had already succeeded in “raising the ideological and moral qualities as well as scientific and cultural qualities of the entire nation”. Little Yue Yue’s mourners have begged to differ.

There has, however, been another development in recent days that, while no less embarrassing to the party, paints a different picture of Chinese civic consciousness. An online campaign to draw attention to the plight of Chen Guangcheng, a blind activist in rural Shandong Province, has also drawn widespread attention in China (for the view of one Beijing-based supporter, Song Zaimin, [see this post](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_496662950100vacu.html) in Chinese).

Mr Chen and his family have been kept under virtual house arrest since his release from prison a year ago, with thugs deployed by local officials to keep visitors, especially supporters and journalists, away. The *New York Times* [published a fine account](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/19/world/asia/despite-violence-chinese-dissidents-emboldened-supporters-stream-to-see-him.html?_r=1&ref=andrewjacobs) of how, inspired by online reports of Mr Chen’s suffering, admirers have been making their way to his village to see him in what the newspaper called “a rare wave of civil disobedience”. It described how one group of disabled people drove from the neighbouring province of Anhui, only to be stopped at the village by guards.

On this issue too, some Chinese newspapers have broken ranks with the party. “Blocking information and hoping the inquiries go away will only lead to worse consequences,” [said the *Global Times*](http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/678927/Dont-turn-a-village-into-a-pressure-cooker.aspx), a Beijing daily. Some see signs that the internet campaign might be working, a bit. The *Wall Street Journal* [reports](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB30001424052970203752604576642741975709996.html?mg=com-wsj) that Mr Chen’s daughter is now being allowed to go to school. If China would ease up on all its dissidents, its soft power would stand a far better chance of growing.