

MORAL OUTRAGE IN CHINA

BY JENNIFER CHOU

Widespread disillusionment with Communism and growing emphasis on material prosperity have contributed to China gaining a reputation as a society lacking basic humanity and morality. But comments on a radio talk show suggest that many members of the Chinese public are striving to reinstate a moral compass for their country.

If Beijing's critics and supporters can agree on just one thing, it is probably the proposition that something is very wrong with the moral fabric of the Chinese citizenry. Visiting journalists and resident foreign businessmen comment on falling ethical standards. When an orgy involving 380 Japanese tourists and 500 Chinese prostitutes in a luxury hotel in Zhuhai came to light in mid-September, Chinese Internet chat rooms were inundated with angry postings. Some called for a boycott of Japanese goods; others lamented the deteriorating values of Chinese society, warning that as people become more concerned with materialistic pursuits, they become less concerned with the consequences of their actions.

But are things really so bad? To explore that question, the Mandarin service of Radio Free Asia expanded its daily open-phones "Listener Hotline" from one hour to two on October 9 and 10 and invited comments on the state of ethics in China. Callers were allowed up to five minutes each. Joining the program's regular host, William Zhang, was Perry Link, the renowned professor of Chinese literature at Princeton who plans to research this subject. Their exchanges with around 40 callers from across China, ranging in age from 18 to 75, suggest that the picture is not unrelentingly gloomy.

With few exceptions, the callers voiced outrage over what one of them, a Liaoning man in his fifties, called "the unprecedented and total disintegration of moral principles." An 18-year-old high school student from Guangxi attributed it simply to "the system." Nearly all argued that China lacks any moral foundation. A Jiangsu resident in his forties observed, "Sex tours existed long before the Zhuhai incident... But how do

you define morality in a society that offers no value system?"

Some faulted the godlessness of Communism for the spiritual vacuum. Others said moral decline is a result of the breakdown of Confucian values. A few attributed the slump to the widespread rejection of Marxism-Leninism as an ideological system that prescribes moral absolutes and that once held an almost religious fascination for many Chinese. Numerous callers held the one-party political system accountable for all sorts of ills that plague China - from garbage-strewn waterways to the reemergence of prostitution to rampant official corruption.

The middle-aged Liaoning resident offered, "Our media have been telling so many lies in order to keep the Communist Party in power that perhaps even the Party leaders themselves do not believe what they hear anymore." For a Kunming resident in his forties who phoned the hotline, the defining value in China today is cheating. A 66-year-old Nanjing retiree insisted that "nowadays it pays to be a bad person." And a Fujian retiree warned that the younger generation, obsessed with money but lacking ethical beliefs, could sink even deeper into an abyss where words such as loyalty, trust and civility have no meaning.

One striking feature of these calls was the palpable indignation they revealed. Hardly representative of a people in moral freefall, the callers exhibited strong moral sentiments rather than a resignation to the amorality around them.

The hosts made a point of drawing callers out on the sources of their own values and principles. A few professed to be Christians or followers of the Falungong movement, but most said they adhered to no organized religion; they were not influenced by any concept of a Last Judgment in their daily moral choices. Instead, they said they relied on an ingrained sense of right and wrong - often instilled by their parents. Several factory workers said their "natural conscience" guided them in making value judgments. A Guangdong man in his fifties described his personal motto as, "do no harm to good people."

The quality they valued above all seemed to be honesty. One Shanghai man in his fifties defined honesty as "being the same on the outside as on the inside." A 30-year-old self-employed worker said that "since time immemorial, social mores have never been this bad" because nowadays honest people are treated as "doormats." A lawyer from Yunnan confessed to wonder-

Too Many Things Forgotten...

Too many things already forgotten
 But we still want to do this and that, go here and there
 To seek limelight or play the coquette
 We forget things we did, right or wrong
 We forget people we knew, loved or hated
 We forget too our experience in the womb before birth
 Forget the fear that came with first menstruation
 We are too anxious to become strangers to ourselves
 As though the farther we fare from the starting point, the better
 We forget too many things
 Forget friends' names and the meaning of many words
 Forget that some are in jail for our sake
 Forget pretty clothes we wore in childhood
 Forget the taste of others spitting in one's face
 Just as though we live only to forget
 Just as though we only belong to things forgotten
 Everything that has been denied
 Our future will also be erased
 Our diaries and letters will be sent to ragman's place
 Perhaps, in the fire, we will remember ourselves
 Remember some extraordinary sunrises and sunsets
 Certain indications are at last connected to others
 Remember how our soul was caressed and then devastated
 Finally, realizing the significance of all these
 The bits and drops that were forgotten
 Should tell us how not to waste a life
 -If possible

— By Zhang Zhen

ing whether he should continue to teach his child to be honest since "honest people sometimes end up getting hurt." A Beijing resident in his thirties remarked, "The more corruption there is, the more people yearn for ethical behavior." And a Shanghai retiree proudly announced that one night he had found a wallet containing several hundred yuan but had returned it to its owner the very next morning.

Civility also ranked high on the list of most-desired qualities. A cab driver from Henan told the hosts that he does not charge passengers who ask to be taken to church because "they are nice people who treat others with kindness." A Changchun man expressed admiration for people with religious beliefs because "they never swear" and "never bawl people out." A college student from Guangdong labeled people who practice tolerance but are atheists "cultural Christians."

Self-sacrifice and compassion for the disadvantaged are other virtues to which the Radio Free Asia callers aspire. Several voiced reverence for the ideal of living for a cause greater than oneself. Recalling Comrade Lei Feng, the heroic model of self-sacrifice and rectitude built up in Maoist propaganda, one Jiangsu man in his fifties said he would volunteer to be a guinea pig in a medical experiment if it might lead to the discovery of a means of exterminating mosquitoes. He said, "It's

more meaningful to live for ten people than for myself." A Sichuan resident stressed the importance of maintaining "spiritual nobility." And a factory worker from Shandong recounted how people in his impoverished hometown once donated quilts and food to a homeless old woman, while others, equally poor, offered to take her in and care for her in their homes.

Caller after caller voiced similar sentiments - yet many reported loneliness and a sense of swimming against the tide. As a Gansu worker put it, "There isn't much I can talk about with my friends. All they care about is how much money everyone is making." And a college student from Guangdong deplored the "apathy of the people towards each other."

But if the special "Listener Hotline" proved anything, it is that these Chinese are not alone. A great many of their fellow citizens clearly share a passionate interest in the spiritual well-being of their nation. While the moral fabric of China is apparently in tatters, the concern expressed by these callers suggests it is not beyond repair.

Note: This is an expanded version of an article that appeared in the November 10, 2003 issue of the *Weekly Standard* under the title "Demoralized China: Radio Free Asia's 'Listener Hotline' gets an earful."