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Tainted Love

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Forget about any barbequing. Taiwan is just beginning to recover from one of the worst typhoons in recent memory. Super Typhoon Sinlaku spent the entire weekend over the island, meandering up the east coast, doing a loop-de-loop around Yilan, moving northwest and doing a second loop-de-loop around Danshui, before taking another jaunt to the west and finally tramping off to the northeast. Mountain areas have been inundated with between 3 AND 5 FEET OF RAIN, resulting in numerous casualties (7 dead and 14 missing so far) and catastrophic damage (bridges washed out, riverside hotels toppled or swept away, crops destroyed, etc.)

And, as if that weren’t bad enough, there is also the possibility that some of our mooncakes may have been contaminated with melamine (三聚氰胺). While the typhoon was wreaking its dreadful havoc, Department of Health inspectors were launching a frantic search among retailers whose operations spanned nine cities and counties, due to fears that a total of 1,000 25-kilogram sacks of potentially toxic milk powder imported from China’s Sanlu Group may have been used in locally processed or packaged foods. According to Chinese health ministry officials, while none of the contaminated milk powder was “exported to other countries or regions”, some was sold to Taiwan (referred to by the aforementioned officials as “a region of China” or 我國台灣地區). To make matters worse, the Taiwan government does not test Chinese food imports for melamine, and current estimates indicate that over 1,200 kilograms of the stuff has already found its way into consumers’ bellies. The government has now banned all imports of Sanlu dairy products.

Taiwan’s food scare is nothing compared to the terrors Chinese parents are facing, however. Melamine-tainted infant formula produced by Sanlu has already been blamed for the deaths of at least two infants, and over 1,200 children have fallen ill; some 340 are still hospitalized, with 53 listed in serious condition. To make matters worse, the company may have known of these problems many months ago, with New Zealand dairy giant Fonterra (which owns a 43% stake in Sanlu) claiming that it had called on its joint venture partner to recall its tainted product weeks before adequate action was taken. Some newspapers (including The China Times 中國時報) are even claiming that the story was kept under wraps in order to avoid a loss of face during the Olympics. The facts have yet to be determined, but it is absolutely gut wrenching to watch suffering babies and their heartbroken parents. Be it the financial crisis in the U.S., or the food products scandals in China, once the government gives the wolves responsibility for protecting the flock, it is always the innocent lambs who suffer.