

Apathy or Self-Protection?

A tragic case that challenges our moral intuitions

Many of you may still recall the sad case of the toddler Wang Yue a few years ago. She was [run over](#) by two vehicles in a market not far from Dongguan. She lay on the busy street, bleeding for more than 7 minutes, while at least 18 passers-by walked around her like a speed bump, occasionally pausing to stare. A female trash scavenger eventually came to her aid, but it was too late, and she died in the hospital. The entire incident was [captured on surveillance video](#).

This horrifying incident prompted outrage and [soul searching](#). Many Chinese looked in the mirror and didn't like what they saw, while many outside China pounced on the chance to show moral superiority by denouncing the Chinese as apathetic monsters. Is it true - are the Chinese really less empathetic? Let's take a closer look.

The key question here is: why didn't people come to the toddler's aid? It may be baffling to our western readers, but [obvious to the Chinese](#). No one did anything because they were afraid to get blamed for it. It may sound preposterous, but there are countless incidents where this has happened. In 2015, Ms. Pan helped an old lady who fell and broke her arm to the hospital, yet was [accused of causing the accident](#). Thankfully, there was a surveillance video to clear her name. In another well-known case from 2011, Mr. Xu stopped his car to help an old lady who fell on the street, but ended up being accused of causing her to fall, and eventually found [liable for over 100,000 RMB](#).

The fear of “说不清楚”, loosely translating to “unable to explain clearly”, is a concept puzzling to westerners, because helping someone in need should require no explanation. However, in a cynical, dystopian Chinese society, one who lends a helping hand is presumed guilty, simply because it is inconceivable that an innocent person would possibly help. Few things anger us more than ingratitude; yet these well publicized cases manage to do so by blowing past a mere lack of appreciation, and answering altruism with malicious accusation. It is no surprise that the resulting chilling effect of betrayal has dissuaded many who would otherwise be inclined to help.

Some view this as a legislative problem; that there are no “Good Samaritan” laws protecting those who help, nor laws punishing those who don't. This view is grossly misguided. Good Samaritan laws protect those who cause inadvertent harm in the process of aid; they do not protect against a false allegation. And although a law [punishing a Bad Samaritan](#) might intuitively seem sensible, it carries profound implications, and most countries do not have such a law for good reason.

But why not? The passers-by who did nothing are clearly morally culpable, as their inaction led to suffering and death. If the law is compelled to punish a petty thief, why shouldn't it punish an act seemingly far more condemnable?

There are [good reasons](#) why the law doesn't punish all that we morally condemn. For example, if the law were to punish Bad Samaritans, where would you draw the line? If a beggar died on the street, would every passer-by be guilty? How about starving African children, many of whom would live but for our indifference? How many witnesses would come forward to testify for a crime, knowing they could possibly implicate themselves of not coming to aid? On a far more fundamental level, would we want to live in a world where the law is so invasive as to criminalize inaction and codify basic human kindness? Furthermore, a Bad Samaritan law is simply unenforceable. France does have such a law, yet even the

paparazzi who egregiously took gruesome pictures instead of coming to Princess Diana's aid [could not be convicted](#). What intuitively seemed like a good law is anything but under closer examination.

In the case of Wang Yue's death, it is tempting to assume that the inaction of the passers-by reflects a lack of empathy of the Chinese society in general. Yet in a [recent study](#) by Michigan State University, China was not shown to be particularly lacking in empathy; in fact, China was found to be [more empathetic](#) than say, Australia and New Zealand. What paralyzed the passers-by from taking compassionate action was the toxic cynicism and perceived threat of false accusation, not the lack of empathy. However, explanation is not exculpation, and having [recently come in dead last](#) among 140 countries in terms of helping and generosity, China has a long way to go.

Perhaps it is a distinction without a difference, because after all, inaction led to a tragic death. True, yet within that fine distinction lies my point – how ironic is it to accuse those passers-by of not having empathy, while not even bothering to see things from their point of view (which is the very definition of empathy)? Righteous indignation [blinds us](#) from taking a more charitable perspective, as condemning is more satisfying and requires far less work than understanding.

This leaves us with no quick fix. Obvious improvements can be made, such as raising the cost of false accusations, and removing the incentive by enabling a social safety net. These are “hardware” fixes that money can buy. However, changing the collective social attitude towards altruism is a much harder task, attainable only through a “software” change between the ears – something that usually takes generations.

Whether it's about how laws should be, or about how others think, our knee-jerk intuitions are often wrong. We should not be looking to the law to solve a problem of morality and humanity; we should be looking within. Perhaps by being more empathetic, charitable, and compassionate, we can help shape this world into one that we want to live in, even if it might take generations to get there.

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