



# A matter of dignity, not charity: Social injustice and health care in China

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# The question

- ▶ Social injustice and inequality as a serious challenge for every society
- ▶ An extremely big topic, but with a very specific focus
- ▶ Central question:
  - Is the popular Chinese term “*ruoshi qunti*” (弱势群体) (weak and disadvantaged groups) ethically sound?
- ▶ A Confucian ethical device
  - *zhengming* (rectifying names)

# Two cases

- ▶ “Suicide before dawn”
  - a female patient from a rural area who committed suicide because her family could not pay for the renal dialysis
- ▶ “A baby boy abandoned”
  - a young father also from a rural area who wanted to abandon his newborn son suffering from cerebral palsy and physically assaulted the doctor for having saved his son’s life
- ▶ “The reality of vulnerable families in face of serious diseases” (*Nanfang Zhoumo*, Southern Weekend, 17 Nov 2011)

# A matter of charity?

- ▶ Merits of the “*guanghuai ruoshi qunti*” Approach
  - Having good intention
  - Not straightforwardly denying the problem
  - Calling up societal attention
- ▶ Ethical problems of the term “*ruoshi qunti*”
  - Endorsing the ideology of victim-blaming
  - Encouraging the spirit of social Darwinism
  - Confusing injustice and inequality with misfortunes
  - Promoting a patronizing charity approach in formulating social policies and programs

# A matter of justice and dignity

- ▶ Fundamental ethical differences between misfortunes and injustice
  - Weak groups or deprived groups?
  - Structural rural–urban inequality
- ▶ Moral ends of good society and health care
  - Promoting social justice
  - Safeguarding human rights
  - Respecting human dignity
- ▶ Reviving Chinese traditions

# Conclusions

- ▶ The origins of the suffering manifested in the two cases are not merely individual, but social; not merely misfortunate, but unjust.
- ▶ The popular term “*ruoshi qunti*” is not ethically sound as it disguises social injustice involved.
- ▶ As for social policies and programs, it is imperative to move beyond the charity approach and to restore social justice, human rights and human dignity many suffering people are deprived of.