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 polices 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
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.