

The Guardian Comments on Corruption:

One of the most reliable indications that things are not well in an economy or a society is a rise in street trading and increased harshness in enforcing the rules that control it. When people can't find proper jobs or can't stand the ones that are available, they go to the streets with a barrow-load of vegetables, a swatch of scarves or a tray of cheap plastic toys. Sometimes they have licences; often they do not. Then the police or their auxiliaries appear, one day taking bribes, the next day confiscating produce, but in either case standing between ordinary men and women and what they see as their right, and sometimes their desperate need, to make a living.

[China](#) and [Tunisia](#) are about as different as two countries could be. Yet that has not stopped Chinese critics likening the death of a watermelon vendor in Linwu, in Hunan province, last week to the case of [Mohamed Bouazizi](#), the Tunisian fruitseller whose suicide led to the fall of [Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali](#). Deng Zhengjia was apparently [beaten up by chengguan](#), officials whose job is to keep China's cities free of the untidy open-air commerce other Asian countries generally tolerate.

The Chinese concern with order verges on the obsessive, but it is especially problematic when it is combined, as it is, with serious corruption, reaching to the highest levels of party and government. People are being bullied into obeying rules while knowing that others are breaking and bending them with impunity. They lose their land for less than adequate compensation, queue in clinics only to find they must [bribe the doctor](#), and are frequently mistreated when they seek redress, particularly in cases of brutality or venality on the part of security men.

Rivalling Deng as an object of sympathy at the moment is [Ji Zhongxing](#), a former taxi driver who blew himself up in his own wheelchair at Beijing airport. He too appears to be a victim of the [chengguan](#), who he says crippled him after [a traffic incident in 2005](#).

When the evasion of planning regulations magnifies the suffering inflicted by natural disaster, as it has in the past, a particularly cruel form of suppression threatens those whose lives have already been

shattered by the loss of loved ones, although Monday's [earthquake](#) near Dingxi in western China does not seem, so far, to have a dimension of that kind.

The corruption experienced by the average Chinese citizen is petty compared to what goes on higher up. In that stratosphere, the corrupt police the corrupt. The ubiquity in China of inducements that are legal, semi-legal and illegal, with vague boundaries between the three, has created a minefield for international corporations, as [GlaxoSmithKline is discovering](#). Who in these circumstances is the corrupt, and who the corrupter?