

Anna Lora-Wainwright

Doomed to Suffer in Silence? Living with Pollution in Industrialized Rural China

China's rapid emergence as an economic power over the past quarter century has been accompanied by growing concerns over environmental impacts, particularly in terms of pollution. Food safety scandals, large-scale pollution accidents, and widespread, persistent, and routine pollution feature regularly in the media, both within China and beyond it. Clusters of cancer, infertility, birth defects, and other pollution-related health problems are a major matter of concern for China's citizens, who are increasingly taking action through civil litigation, environmental NGOs, the media, complaints and petitions to state institutions, and mass protests. Largely middle-class protests against anticipated pollution took place in 2012 in Qidong, Shifang, and Ningbo and were covered widely by international media. Academic studies have drawn attention to the role of the media, environmental NGOs, and civil litigation in potentially helping implement environmental protection measures.

Most environmental suffering, however, takes place far from the purview of journalists, courts, and NGOs. Equally, much citizen action is small in scale, relatively unorganized, and premised rather differently from the language of the media, courts, and NGOs. The everyday struggles of people living with pollution are hugely diverse (see Lora-Wainwright 2013b). The vast majority of Chinese people suffer in silence, are unsuccessful in their attempts to put an end to pollution, or are co-opted by polluting enterprises into seeing it as inevitable. This is especially the case when not only the local (and central) governments depend on industry but people themselves rely on it for employment. Such reliance is at its starkest in areas that have traditionally been poor and have few other sources of income. There, local governments face hard trade-offs between long-term sustainability and short-term needs to provide employment and public services. In this context, environmental regulations are largely overlooked because polluting firms provide employment and pay taxes. This happens largely with the acquiescence of locals, raising troubling questions over their potential for aiding environmental protection.

If we are to truly make sense of citizens' potential for championing sustainable development, we need to look at the intricate processes through which citizens themselves

approach environmental health threats, whether they accept them, and why. For the past decade, I have been interested in experiences of illness and healing in the Chinese countryside (Lora-Wainwright 2013a) and since 2007 I have focused on the extent to which pollution is regarded as a cause of illness and with what consequences (2009, 2010). This has involved in-depth fieldwork on how villagers understand and respond to pollution-related health risks in sites engaged in intensive resource extraction and processing in Yunnan, Hunan, and Guangdong provinces. It is typically assumed when villagers do not demand an end to pollution that this is due to their ignorance of the risks it poses. To the contrary, my fieldwork has shown that those living with pollution have a sophisticated awareness of the risks they face. Yet over time they learned that they cannot demand an end to pollution and that concerns with health effects are not a productive focus for their demands. The case of a severely polluted Yunnan village I call Baocun will serve as an example of how and why this happens and with what consequences.

Baocun is a large administrative village that depends heavily on phosphorous extraction and processing. The main employers are a large phosphorous fertilizer plant, Linchang (a pseudonym), several smaller plants, and local mines. Living in a symbiotic relationship with phosphorous mining and processing on a large scale, locals are alarmed by what they call “poison air” emitted by local industries. They blame it for air and water pollution, crop failures, and deaths of livestock. They also venture complex accounts of how pollution may be causing locals to experience frequent inflammations of the respiratory tract, painful joints, and gallbladder and kidney stones— all of which are common local ailments and are epidemiologically correlated to forms of pollution present locally. Comparisons with the past and with other places, and direct observation and experience of its effects have convinced villagers that pollution causes an increase in “strange illnesses,” illnesses that were unseen in the past and grew concomitantly with industry. They believe living there results in a shorter lifespan. They talk of a putrid smell (“like dead mice”), irritated eyes, and teeth dropping out among those working in close contact with raw material.

All these examples point to locals’ acute concerns for the potential dangers presented by industry. However, they also readily doubted their own ability to attribute specific illnesses to pollution. If asked directly whether their symptoms could be linked to pollution, they pervasively commented “I am not sure.” Environmental health justice movements typically materialize when those affected move from individual illness experiences to the



Industrialization in rural China, 2009. (Courtesy of the author.)

social discovery of a disease (the awareness that others are affected) and the politicization of the disease (Brown 2007). This did not happen in Baocun. Villagers had a sense that a number of ailments were common locally, but hesitated in linking them to pollution. They raised several other possibilities, such as physically demanding work, individual vulnerability (for women, children, and the elderly), genes, and a weak immune system (see Lora-Wainwright 2013c).

Their uncertainty surrounding illness causation is reinforced by experiences over the past few decades. When industry (and pollution) first started, they presented a petition demanding it should stop and staged several blockades. The basis for their collective action was a concern for the environment (damages to crops and livestock) and for their own health. However, their attempts either failed or resulted in a tweaking of the distribution of benefits. This allowed some locals to draw income and opportunities from industry and made them complicit with its presence. Consequently, villagers learned to protect themselves from pollution in largely individualized ways rather than engaging in collective action against presumed health damages. Their collective complaints are targeted at damaged crops rather than harm to health or demanding a decrease in pollution.

This shift is due to the embedding of industry in the locality. The local government maintains a very close relationship with local industry, taking the lead in securing compensation deals and controlling the employment of unskilled workers in Linchang. Local industry and mining attracts a large number of migrants to Baocun, most of whom engage in low-paid and hazardous work. Locally registered residents also benefit from industry through employment opportunities, a growing service sector, and a range of land rental fees and pollution fees, which only they (not migrants) are entitled to. Locals' life experience and opportunities (as well as dangers) have become inextricable from industry (Lora-Wainwright et al. 2012). Industry has created an increasingly stratified community, divided between those registered locally (and entitled to compensation) and migrant workers. Locally registered residents in turn are a diverse group: some have become managers of private mines and industries, others have opened thriving local businesses, and yet others rely on unskilled labor in the industry for income. With such diverse structural positions and uneven benefits, the local community has little sense of cohesion or shared interests, and they approach pollution largely as an individual or family matter.

The Baocun case brings to light very powerfully the intertwining of (1) uncertainty; (2) local perceptions of industry, pollution, and illness; and (3) power relations and social, political, and economic configurations (see Auyero and Swistun 2009). The local political and economic context is central to maintaining citizens' uncertainty about pollution's effects on their health. The fact that protests initially involved demands for better pollution control and better health shows that the present subsiding of these demands is not merely due to a lack of awareness or uncertainty. Rather, uncertainty is reinforced by the current social and political economic setting. Through years of living with industrialization, pollution has also become routinized and normalized. It is experienced as an inevitable fact of life. Reactions to pollution cannot be separated from the many other challenges locals face—such as finding work, paying for healthcare, and improving their family homes. For those with a Baocun *hukou* (registration), job opportunities and compensation rates have tied them to the locality while failing to provide enough wealth to enable them to move elsewhere unless relocated by the industry. They are trapped between having a strong sense of the harm of pollution and yet feeling that they can do little to stop it.

In this context, complaints focus on elements for which individual households can more easily gain compensation (damage to crops), and which have proven more successful

in obtaining redress so far. The more visible, positive, and quantifiable outcomes of industry (work opportunities and compensation) overshadow the much more elusive and potentially contestable effects of pollution on the body, which remain the object of suspicion rather than certainty. Local power relations, opportunity structures, and interactions with the industry and the local government have disciplined villagers into making demands that comply with the economistic and materialistic approach to welfare put forth by the industry. Conversely, harm to bodies came to be constructed as difficult to prove not only scientifically, but also socially, politically, and economically. The result is that industry is asked to compensate for damages rather than prevent them from taking place again in the future.

This fragile balance is probably typical for much of industrialized rural China, and it has worrying implications. First of all, development is accompanied by staggering human costs and a deeply uneven distribution of costs and benefits. Industry has created a stratified community where “each cares for their own.” Collective resistance is seen as unfeasible since entitlements are not the same across the social spectrum. Migrant workers—who constitute much of the labor force essential to the running of these factories—are paid menial wages, suffer much of the burden of pollution, have poor to non-existent welfare insurance, and are not entitled to compensation for pollution, for this is reserved for locally registered residents. This divide-and-rule strategy, however, is unstable. While local residents may get benefits denied to migrants, many work alongside migrants doing the same menial and dangerous jobs. If a growing part of the population begins to feel that the distribution of benefits is unfair, discontent might grow. This is particularly the case when, as in a site I studied in Hunan province, pollution remains but resource extraction ceases to benefit locals. Even if this dire situation does not result in violent protests, it produces disillusioned, self-abnegating people subject to environmental health threats whose effects they are painfully aware of but which they feel powerless to stop.

This brings me to my second point. Any talk of a search for an “adequate life,” let alone a good life, in these settings is profoundly euphemistic (Zhang 2011). As this case shows, those living with pollution have learned to regard it as an unavoidable part of their natural surroundings. Likewise, their parameters of what constitutes a good life have been adjusted to what they conceive as possible. A clean environment is not on their list of possibilities. This is surely the deepest manifestation of environmental injustice: not

only do they live with pollution, but they do not feel entitled to demand any better. Unlike in the post-materialist model where an increase in wealth leads to greater care for the environment, here partial (and uneven) benefits from industry shift concerns away from demanding an end to pollution and instead requesting compensation for damages incurred. This highlights the difficult compromises that those who live in the shadow of industry have to make. Whether and how they mount complaints against pollution is not only an economic decision but also a deeply moral one.

This status quo is inherently unsustainable. Nobody can predict to what extent this unrelenting, uneven, and unfair environmental suffering will result in protests that challenge the government. My research has shown that the underlying (and growing) awareness of pollution's harm may escalate into violent protests when particular episodes (acid leaks, explosions, or other severe events) bring it to the fore. At the same time, it has also suggested that the longer pollution continues, the more the community sees it as inevitable, especially when their attempts to oppose it have been unsuccessful. That people do not protest, that cries for help remain unheard or silenced as they stop thinking they can demand a healthier environment, is in many ways an even bigger tragedy than when they try to resist it, as in the cases we repeatedly hear about in the media. While so many feel resigned to live in an unhealthy environment, it does not mean they are content with it. They are all too aware that there are others further up the ladder benefiting more and suffering less. In this context, citizens could play a crucial role in stopping pollution, but we first need to understand how powerless some of them have come to feel in its shadow.

Acknowledgement: The author is grateful to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Social Science Research Council for fieldwork funding (RBF/SSRC-CEHI/2008-01-07) and to a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship (RF-2012-260) and a Writing Residency at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center for supporting writing on this project.

References

- Auyero, Javier, and Débora Alejandra Swistun. 2009. *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Phil. 2007. *Toxic Exposures: Contested Illnesses and the Environmental Health Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lora-Wainwright, Anna. 2009. "Of Farming Chemicals and Cancer Deaths: the Politics of Health in Contemporary Rural China." *Social Anthropology* 17 (1): 56–73.
- . 2010. "An Anthropology of Cancer Villages: Villagers' Perspectives and the Politics of Responsibility." Special issue, *The Journal of Contemporary China*. 19 (63): 79–99.
- . 2013a. *Fighting for Breath: Living Morally and Dying of Cancer in a Chinese Village*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i.
- , ed. 2013b. "Dying for Development: Pollution, Illness and the Limits of Citizens' Agency in China." Edited collection, *The China Quarterly* 214 (June): 243–393.
- . 2013c. "The Inadequate Life: Rural Industrial Pollution and Lay Epidemiology in China." In "Dying for Development: Illness and the Limits of Citizens' Agency in China." Edited collection, *The China Quarterly* 214 (June): 243–54.
- Lora-Wainwright, Anna, Yiyun Zhang, Yunmei Wu, and Benjamin Van Rooij. 2012. "Learning to Live with Pollution: How Environmental Protesters Redefine Their Interests in a Chinese Village." *The China Journal* 68: 106–24.
- Zhang, Everett. 2011. "Introduction: Governmentality in China." In *Governance of Life in Chinese Moral Experience*, edited by Everett Zhang, Arthur Kleinman, and Weiming Tu. London: Routledge.