

THE ENVIRONMENTAL YELLOW PERIL

BY YU JIE

The contamination of the Songhua River, affecting millions of lives in China and Russia, demonstrates that China's development policies and obsessive secrecy imperil the entire world.

On December 2, 2005, Xie Zhenhua, head of the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), resigned from his post. According to circulars issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, SEPA "did not attach enough importance to the accident and did not adequately anticipate the possible severe consequences of the accident, and therefore should be held responsible for the losses." As a result, "The Party Central Committee approved Mr. Xie's resignation."

Zhou Shengxian, formerly head of the State Forestry Administration, replaced Xie. Mr. Zhou's resume indicates that he has been promoted gradually up the ladder after starting out as a basic-level cadre in Ningxia. Essentially, he has no professional knowledge or background in environmental protection. Can a person like him provide the leadership necessary to address SEPA's lackluster performance? In any case, while Xie Zhenhua is the highest official to resign over the Songhua River disaster, is he actually the person responsible?

The secret cost of rapid economic development

The publicly stated cause of the severe contamination of the Songhua River was an explosion at a China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) factory in Jilin Province on November 13, which caused toxic benzene, aniline and nitrobenzene to flow into the river. However, the true cause of the catastrophe was CNPC's attempt to resume production immediately after the blast instead of sealing off the affected area, thereby allowing hundreds of metric tons of toxic chemicals to spill into the Songhua. On November 23, the river's benzene level measured 108 times greater than the normal level in an area extending some 80 kilometers. When this contaminated water flowed downstream to the city of Harbin in Heilongjiang Province, it caused the largest citywide water supply shutdown since the Chinese Communist Party took power. Hundreds of thousands

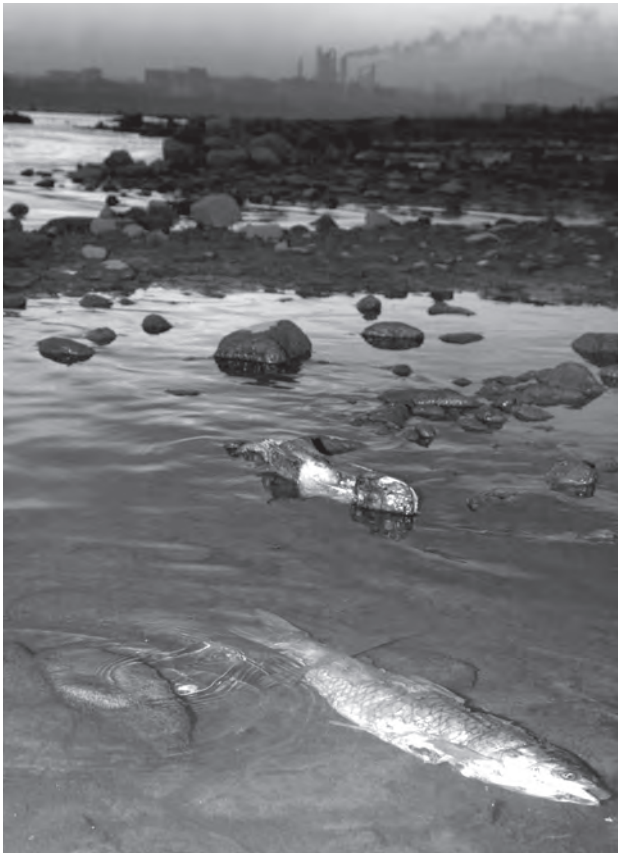
of citizens panicked over the water shortage, and when rumors spread that a major earthquake was about to hit the city, residents fled their homes at a rate far surpassing that during the week-long national holidays.

Who are the chief culprits behind the Songhua river disaster and the cut-off of Harbin's water supply? This was no isolated incident, but an inevitable result of China's rapid, lopsided development over the past twenty years. A Chinese official once said: "No country with a GDP consistently in the double digits suffers serious problems. Such an economic miracle deserves nothing but praise." But how exactly has this economic miracle been achieved?

China's economic growth has been attained through massive consumption and predatory stripping of energy resources, through irreversible pollution and destruction of the environment, through exploiting the blood and sweat of a hundred million virtual slave laborers and millions of prisoners. In fact, China's energy consumption per unit of GDP is double that of Japan, and has required the sacrifice of innumerable innocent lives in mining accidents as well. This distorted development of the economy has been essential to the Chinese Communist regime in concealing its crisis of leadership, and has required an increasingly elaborate fabric of deceit to enshroud a chronic disregard for human life. Chinese premier Wen Jiabao was interviewed in December by the French newspaper *Le Figaro*. When asked about the Songhua River incident and the mine accidents, he stated without blushing, "As a government responsible for its people, we always put people's lives, health and safety first."¹ This is simply a sick joke.

Wen Jiabao's crocodile tears

China's media reported intensively on the Songhua River disaster, partly because officials were unable to block the news, but also because they needed the media to participate in various tasks relating to the aftermath. Media disseminated official warnings to affected residents not to drink the water, and emphasized the government's concern for the people through stories illustrating "the fish and water relationship" between the army and the people. Nevertheless, some more conscientious media outlets analyzed the underlying reasons for the tragedy and offered measured criticism of the performance of various levels of government. This reflected a "collective



Dead fish in the Songhua River following the November benzene spill.

Photo: Reuters

rebound” by the Chinese media, which after more than a year of official suppression seized the opportunity to disclose as much truth as they could.

This catastrophic water contamination incident largely obliterated what tattered credibility the Chinese Communist regime had retained. As during the SARS crisis, Wen Jiabao personally went to Harbin to try to calm the populace, displaying the flow of tears that the public has come to expect of him. But while Wen Jiabao’s tears during the SARS crisis won him an image of deep-felt concern for the people, they gained no points for the regime during the Songhua river disaster. The Internet abounded with bitter satires such as, “In the old days, Liu Bei’s tears could win him a third of China’s territory; today, Premier Wen’s tears couldn’t get him a cabbage.”²

While Jiang Zemin was still in power, the Chinese people saw the Central Committee as having “two centers,” one good and one evil, and were willing to credit every evil deed to Jiang Zemin while giving Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao the undeserved benefit of the doubt. Now Jiang has disappeared from the political stage, leaving Hu and Wen with no bogeyman to hide behind. The Chinese people have gradually slipped into an emotional fatigue after too many of Wen’s morose displays and have turned to the cheerier diversions of the Supergirl singing contest. In any case, Wen’s tears are hardly likely to be effective against this kind of chronic systematic ailment.

“Rule by lies” is the real source of instability

The Chinese Communist regime has stressed the importance of “stability above all,” failing to acknowledge that the threat to stability is rule by lies. A key reason for the Songhua River disaster and the Harbin water crisis was the central government’s incitement of local officials to conceal the truth for 10 days before acknowledging the extent of contamination. On November 21, Harbin’s government suddenly announced it was cutting of water supplies for four days in order to “overhaul citywide water pipe networking facilities.” Confronted by the media later on, Zhang Zuoji, governor of Heilongjiang Province, shamelessly described the Harbin government’s announcement as a well-intentioned lie meant to calm Harbin residents and gain their understanding and support.

Local officials had learned not to take the initiative on concealing information regarding major incidents after the mayor of Beijing and China’s Minister Health were removed during the SARS crisis. They only concealed information this time under orders from the central government, reportedly in order to give the central authorities time to dispatch troops to the affected areas. Once the troops were in place, factual information was released piecemeal. Clearly, this is a regime that treats its own people as enemies and uses lies to defend its survival.

Accidents such as the Songhua River disaster have occurred repeatedly throughout Chinese Communist Party rule. In one tragedy during the Cultural Revolution, a reservoir wall burst, killing hundreds of thousands of people, but the tragic event goes unmentioned in media reports from that time, and has disappeared completely from China’s official historical record. Western media have cited the reservoir tragedy as the greatest environmental disaster of the twentieth century, but an educated and well-informed person such as myself was never previously aware of it. What an abysmal vacuum we live in!

In the later part of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong had a famous conversation with Richard Nixon’s daughter and her husband. By then, Nixon had resigned as president because of the Watergate scandal. It was hard for Mao to understand that the president of the world’s greatest imperial power could step down over such a minor issue as employing listening devices against political rivals. He generously suggested to his guests, “Have your father come to China as my guest and I will rehabilitate him.”

Today’s rulers of China are still “Little Mao Zedongs.” From the top leader to the lowest village Party secretary, they all treat lying as an instinctual survival tactic. Despite the indestructible facade of this lie-dependent regime, it is a house of cards that will collapse at the slightest disturbance.

Autocracy is the bane of the world

The Songhua River disaster became an international incident when it affected Russia, and the CCP made a rare and well-publicized apology to the Russian ambassador through Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing. Given the Chinese leadership’s extreme sensitivity regarding its reputation and its strict “no regrets” policy, the apology to Russia indicates that the contamination must have been extremely serious. Moreover, the authorities took the initiative to provide relevant data to Russia at the earli-

est opportunity, and warmly received Russian environmental protection experts who came to investigate. China's official media reported that the Russians were "deeply pleased" with China's attitude.

However, Russian news media reported that the contamination would seriously affect the daily lives of more than one million Russians, and the long-term environmental damage would require further assessment. The Chinese government has intimated that it is willing to compensate Russia for its losses, but the amount of money at stake is one of those "state secrets" that cannot be disclosed to the Chinese taxpayers who are footing the bill. And as the Chinese government has always followed the rule of "presenting a gift to a friendly nation, but not to the house servant," China's own millions of victims will likely receive no compensation at all. These victims must wonder if they were born in the wrong place and of the wrong nationality. When our rulers treat their own people as second-class citizens, how can we criticize racism in foreign countries?

The Songhua River disaster has risen to the status of an unshirkable international incident. Russia has never been concerned with human rights problems in China; although Russia has arrived at a preliminary stage of democratization, its foreign policy is based on pragmatism and balance of power, not moral or value issues. In recent years, due to a mutual interest in countering the U.S., Russia and China have established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), engaged in joint military maneuvers, and have developed a generally cozy relationship. Yet, for the CCP this is like opening its door to the "polar bear" that has loomed as China's greatest threat for the last 100 years. And for Russia, cooperative efforts such as selling munitions to an autocratic neighbor are certain to backfire.

An autocratic regime, especially that of a huge nation such as China, is bound to extend its systemic wickedness beyond its borders to poison the whole world. The so-called "yellow peril" is not a racial peril but a systematic peril. For example, the sandstorms that have affected northeast Asia in recent years are linked to the worsening environment in northern China. If China were a democratic nation, it would have to take environmental protection seriously and bring the sandstorms under control. Another example is the construction of a power plant on the Nu River in Yunnan Province, which will have a disastrous effect on the ecology of neighboring Southeast Asian nations. The Chinese government has paid no heed to protests from those nations.

The Songhua River disaster is a clear warning to the world: an undemocratic nation cannot be a responsible actor on the international stage; it deserves no trust, no matter how good its words may sound.

Translated by Wang Ai

The original Chinese article was posted on the Web site of HRIC's Chinese monthly online journal, *RenYu Renquan*: http://www.renyurenquan.org/ryrq_article.adp?article_id=379.

NOTES

1. A transcription of the *Le Figaro* interview was posted on the Web site of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t224972.htm>.
2. Liu Bei was a warlord during the Three Kingdoms period. The tearful sincerity of his appeals won him an alliance with the famous strategist and statesman Zhuge Liang, which allowed Liu Bei and another warlord, Sun Quan, to defeat rival warlord Cao Cao.



An unspoiled stretch of the Nu River in Yunnan Province, where a new power plant is proposed. Photo: Reuters