
THE FATE OF WU LIHONG AND POLLUTION WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

By Jiang Fuzhen

The crisis at Lake Tai and the fate of environmental activist Wu Lihong makes us question the current state of China, and indicates that, without political changes, China's environment will only continue to deteriorate. There is hope, however, as we see that citizens have already been pushed to a breaking point and are determined to fight back.

Not long after local “eco-warrior” Wu Lihong was handcuffed and locked away in jail, a large-scale outbreak of blue-green algae bloomed in Wuxi’s Lake Tai. This outbreak was a serious ecological crisis which threatened the city’s water sources. While authorities have tried all possible remedies at hand, the water coming out of thousands of families’ faucets in the area surrounding Lake Tai remains malodorous and undrinkable.

Just as this outbreak of blue-green algae was being officially designated as a “spontaneous natural disaster,” preparations began for the construction of a benzene-based paraxylene (PX) plant in Xiamen’s Haicang District. This project was to be a joint venture between Taiwanese businessman Chen Youhao and the Xianglu Group. With the project’s location just 16 kilometers from the main island of Xiamen, professional analysts have forecast that the close proximity of such toxic production could have an effect equivalent to an atomic fallout upon the lives of Xiamen’s residents, who would hereafter live in perpetual fear of leukemia, deformities, and other illnesses. The broadcast of these disconcerting facts by Phoenix Television, and the quick dissemination of this news among residents through cell phone text messaging eventually led to a 10,000-strong protest on the streets of Xiamen.

Just as the people of Xiamen were standing up to protect their rights and opposing this potentially disastrous PX project, I came across another series of quite telling incidents in the newspaper: The first story told of a group of fathers who went to rescue children abducted and enslaved in the Shanxi brick kilns, yet sadly found that the local police and labor supervision departments were refusing to cooperate with their efforts, willingly protecting the deplorable practice of modern-day slavery. A second story revealed how Hainan Province’s Dingan County Business Affairs Department successfully amassed great wealth by reselling previously confiscated tainted meats to unsuspecting butchers. A third story recounted how 40 policemen in Huazhou, Guangdong Province, all lied to protect a colleague. These men all reported that a deceased individual had committed suicide by striking his head against the corner of a side table, when in actuality the policeman had tortured this person to death to extract a confession. A fourth story told of how the Jilin Province’s No. 18 Hospital not only deliberately used fake medicine, but was even overseeing the production of such counterfeit medicines on hospital grounds. While each of these stories describes largely unrelated events in areas far removed from one another, on a deeper and broader level, they reveal a current crisis in governance—power has fallen into enemy hands. These stories reveal the degree to which local governments have resorted to mafia-style methods to achieve their ends, and provide a framework to better understand Wu Lihong’s fate.

While the outbreak of blue-green algae in Lake Tai may appear to be a “natural disaster,” it becomes clear upon closer inspection that it is more of a natural bureau-

cratic disaster. It is only “natural” in the context of the corruption of the current system, of which it is indeed a natural outcome. The disaster in Lake Tai is the result of systemic pollution, or what I call “pollution with Chinese characteristics.” The systemic nature of pollution in China not only provides a backdrop for understanding the Lake Tai ecological disaster, but also for better understanding Wu Lihong’s incarceration, another “natural” and far too common manifestation of local bureaucracy and interest groups’ suppression of all attempts by citizens to protect themselves and their rights. Long before the detention of Wu Lihong, far too many courageous civil rights warriors have been framed and tossed into jails; without substantive change, such incidents will only continue.

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Wu Lihong earned his reputation as an “eco-warrior” by reporting and eventually bringing down countless polluters. Wu’s mission, however, made his life far from tranquil over the past decade: he has not only been subjected to frequent verbal intimidation and numerous incidents of damage to his home, but he has also been approached several times at knifepoint by men who threatened to cut off his hands and feet. In recent years, Wu Lihong was detained by local public security authorities over ten times, including one case of detention without charge and four formal summons to court, as well as a number of incidents in which he was brazenly handcuffed, shackled, and tormented by the authorities. In addition to all these troubles, Wu has also faced great financial pressure. In the course of gathering evidence and petitioning—through which he successfully brought down more than 200 polluting companies—he completely drained his family’s 300,000 *yuan* estate.

Wu Lihong’s most recent struggle took on Yixing City, which, located in the center of the current blue-green algae crisis, the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) ludicrously named a National Model City for Environmental Protection in October 2006. In

response to such blatant deception, Wu collected over 100 photographs and 83 water samples to file a suit against this sham title, in hopes that SEPA would rescind its official decision to grant the City of Yixing the title of National Model City for Environmental Protection. However, unlike his past confrontations with polluting corporations, in this dispute Wu Lihong was challenging a local government, which is an entirely different affair. Just as he was preparing to travel to Beijing to present his case, he was arrested by the local police. The government thus emerged “victorious” from Wu Lihong’s “final battle” to protect the environment around Lake Tai before it had even begun.

Internationally renowned water processing expert and director of the International Water Association Liu Guangzhao once said, “There is no way to treat blue-green algae. Any attempt to clean up this water has to begin from cleaning up people’s thinking.”¹ Liu Guangzhao returned to China from Australia years ago and has more than two decades of water treatment experience under his belt. Liu is able to conduct his research freely and properly in Australia or the United States, yet is ironically unable to realize his full ambitions, or to even make good use of his skills, in his homeland. In a non-democratic political system, experts often become nothing more than the slaves and “ornamental flower vases” for those in power. Even in the few rare cases in which experts have determinedly appealed for change, they have remained powerless to exert any form of pressure either upon senior officials, who insist upon doing as they please, or local interest groups, who could care less about the wellbeing of our country and people (and whose only concern is their own profit). There is no better example of this sad state of affairs than the fact that opposition from nearly 100 members of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and six prominent academics could not stop the ten billion *yuan* PX project in Xiamen.

The first phase of the much-lauded Lake Tai renewal project concluded in 2005 with more than ten billion *yuan* in investments, and the preliminary budget estimate for the project’s second phase has reached the sky-high figure of 100 billion *yuan*. Despite these massive investments, the 20 control interfaces surrounding Lake Tai tell us that only 55 percent of the total water enter-



Workers clean up algae at Lake Tai on June 3, 2007. Photo credits: REUTERS/Stringer Shanghai.

ing and exiting the lake meets relevant water quality requirements. All of those oft-repeated phrases—“meeting relevant requirements,” “a model city for environmental protection,” and the “zero-point action”—that were supposed to save Lake Tai are nothing more than lies and deceptions. The truth is that an unprecedented amount of pollution, combined with an unprecedented waste of investments in attempted cleanups, has created a major crisis that is seriously endangering local residents’ lives. We can extract three general lessons from the Lake Tai experience, which provide an initial theoretical framework for understanding the development of environmental crises:

First, wherever people do not have real voting rights, one is sure to find a stifling stench emanating from the rivers. Second, any so-called “facts” released by the government or published in the official media require third-party verification. Even more importantly, citizens should provide their own real and accurate information over the Internet to fight government disinformation. Finally, all money spent on water treatment, no matter the sum, will amount to nothing but waste without the safeguard of a transparent democratic system.

To emphasize, expert analysis shows that only 55 percent of the total water entering and exiting Lake Tai, as assessed at the 20 control interfaces surrounding the lake, meets quality requirements. In such grave circumstances, simply expanding the flow of water into the Yangtze River cannot save Lake Tai, and will only serve to further pollute the Yangtze River. There is nothing “natural” about the crisis-level shortage of clean water in China, besides the fact that it is the natural outcome of the present system’s lack of concern for the people’s health. Grassroots environmental protection groups agree that there is no way to achieve real

results in the fight against China’s environmental crisis under the current political system because there are no avenues for discussion or action on these pressing issues: all that one can do is watch the disasters spread as our rapidly deteriorating ecosystem rolls with ever greater momentum toward the brink of total ecological collapse. As expected, not only did Lake Tai experience a second outbreak of blue-green algae on June 15, 2007, but Anhui Province’s Lake Chao also experienced an identical outbreak.

This is the sad fate of Wu Lihong, and the sad fate of our ecosystem, besieged by Chinese-style pollution.

The real question now is, how can the citizens of China, whose interests have been ignored and whose rights to life and health are under grave threat, go about defending themselves in a system where oversight has essentially collapsed? Many grassroots environmental organizations have quietly appeared in response to recent developments in China's ecosystem, such as the Green Earth Volunteers, the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, Global Village, the Brooks Education Center, Friends of Nature, Homeland Watch, and Green River. Because the pollution in Lake Tai is already impossible to reverse or bring to a halt, one recent proposal recommends that such environmental organizations should strive to join hands and build a "green" wall against possible future pollution. These groups' loud opposition to the government's treatment of Wu Lihong and their open dedication to protecting Lake Tai seem to hint at the beginning of a grassroots environmental protection movement in China. All around the world, the monitoring role of such organizations is indispensable. Following the Lake Tai crisis, these groups may come to play an even more significant role in China's development, providing a channel through which citizens might begin to help and even save themselves, while at the same time developing a deterrent against local bureaucrats and interest groups who devalue human life.

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While such grassroots efforts could be easily destroyed in a single blow by the central government, a number of recent incidents indicate an emerging shift—particularly the massive turnaround from the lone hero Wu

Lihong's tragic failure to the spontaneous Xiamen demonstrations' sudden success. These episodes show that the citizens of China, who have essentially been tossed into a snowballing ecological deathtrap and left with almost no hopes for this life, have already been pushed to a breaking point and are determined to fight back. In this relatively early stage of the struggle to defend citizens' rights, individual heroes like Wu Lihong and groups of disenchanting protesters do not have to fight alone. Their power can be further amplified by modern telecommunications and the overseas media to create substantive forces of resistance against government hegemony, especially in less politically sensitive areas such as the environment. Thus, Lake Tai's blue-green algae crisis and the fate of Wu Lihong are rightfully leading us to question the reality of today's China, where lies cover the truth, power overrides the law, and wrong overturns right. It also drives us to reassess the means by which, in the current environment of helplessness and despair, the moral power residing within the population can be effectively mobilized for change.

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Notes

1. "What's Wrong with Lake Tai?" [太湖怎麼了?], *Wen Wei Po* [文匯報], June 6, 2007, <http://paper.wenweipo.com/200706/06/NS0706060001.htm>.