
REFLECTIONS ON THE STRUGGLE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

By Huo Tao

When government malfeasance caused an ecological crisis, ordinary citizens took a peaceful stand to protect their environment.

June 5, 2007, was the thirty-sixth World Environment Day (WED). The overall theme of this year's WED was "Melting Ice: A Hot Topic?" and the theme for the Chinese region was "Reducing Pollution and Building an Environment-Friendly Society." To mark WED, the Chinese government published "China's National Climate Change Program" on June 4.¹ At the Group of Eight (G8) Summit in Heiligendamm, Germany, an agreement was reached on June 7 to "seriously con-

sider" reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent by 2050. At an outreach session hosted by the G8 leaders on June 8, Chinese President Hu Jintao declared, "China has persistently implemented a people-centered concept of making comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable scientific development; has actively promoted sound and rapid economic and social development; and has taken the road of civilized development characteristic of the development of production, an affluent life and a good ecological environment." The fly in the ointment is that China is currently experiencing an environmental crisis of unprecedented proportions that is directly attributable to government mismanagement.

Workers scoop out some of the algae choking Taihu Lake in June 2007.
Photo: Reuters



ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS CAUSED BY BAD GOVERNMENT

On May 29, 2007, Taihu Lake in Jiangsu Province was rapidly covered by a blue-green algae bloom that caused a drinking-water crisis in the lakeside city of Wuxi. To dilute the algae, the local government promptly diverted more than 100 million tons of water from the Yangtze River, thereby averting an environmental catastrophe and quelling the anger of the local population.

As a result of the Wuxi water crisis, some local enterprises were investigated and prosecuted on charges of illegally discharging untreated wastewater into the lake, and five government officials in the nearby city of Yixing, which is under the jurisdiction of Wuxi, were accused of dereliction of duty and given administrative demerits and dismissals. But the corrupt high-level officials who wielded the actual decision-making power got off scot-free.

Prior to this, Wu Lihong, a native of Zhoutie Township in Yixing County, had spent years campaigning for authorities to clean up Taihu Lake. He had reported to the authorities that local chemical plants were illegally discharging untreated wastewater into the lake, depriving the 80,000 inhabitants of Zhoutie Township of potable water and causing many villagers along Caoqiao River, one of the waterways that flows into Taihu, to die of cancer (Wu Lihong himself has been battling cancer). But in April of 2007, the Yixing authorities put Wu Lihong behind bars on charges of having blackmailed local enterprises by threatening to expose how they were polluting the environment. In the meantime, China's State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) included heavily polluted Yixing as one of 68 Chinese cities considered models of environmental protection.

Government officials in Xiamen, Fujian Province, behaved in an even more overbearing and arbitrary way than those in Wuxi. On March 19, 2007, *China Business News* published an article revealing that 105 members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) had jointly signed a "Proposal Recommending the Relocation of the Haicang PX Project in Xiamen."² Spearheading the proposal was CPPCC member Zhao Yufen, a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and professor of chemistry at Xiamen University. The article quoted him as saying, "PX is paraxylene, a dangerous, highly carcinogenic chemical that causes a high rate of fetal deformations, and the PX project is located in the densely populated Haicang District."

The *China Business News* article also quoted SEPA's Huan Pingsi as saying that the project had been approved by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), and that SEPA had no authority to make any decision regarding the relocation of the project.

Despite this challenge from the CPPCC, the public exposure of the project's potential environmental impact, and the public's opposition to it, He Lifeng, secretary of the Fujian provincial Party committee and the Xiamen municipal Party committee—who had long grown accustomed to closed-door dealings—refused to back down. On May 24, *Oriental Outlook Weekly*, published by China's official Xinhua News Agency, ran an article quoting He Lifeng as saying at a private meeting,

"Unify thought and understanding. The [CPPCC] members are entitled to their opinion, but we don't pay any attention to them. We have to speed up the project."³

At the behest of He Lifeng and others, on May 28 the *Xiamen Evening News* published a 10,000-word interview with the Xiamen City Environmental Protection Bureau director who was responsible for the Haicang PX project.⁴ On the morning of May 29, the Xiamen municipal government instructed various government departments to carry out preparatory "stability and unity work" and to announce that the PX project was proceeding smoothly. But in a sudden reversal, on the morning of May 30, Xiamen vice-mayor Ding Guoyan called a news conference and announced a temporary halt to the Haicang PX Project. An imminent environmental crisis was thus averted.

THE REASONABLE DEMANDS OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

According to a report by *Southern Weekend*, the Xiamen authorities ultimately and reluctantly adopted a conciliatory attitude because of a strong public backlash against government malfeasance:

May 27 was a cloudy day in Xiamen, with intermittent rain. On the tourist boats to Gulang Island, in the bustling roadside restaurants on Shahe Road and even in the remote villages in Haicang District, everybody was talking about the Haicang PX project. "Did you get the text message?" In no time, this question had become a standard greeting formula among residents of Xiamen. The Internet had already become a place for citizens to exchange information and voice their concerns. At popular Xiamen Internet forums such as the Little Fish Community and Xiamen University's public online bulletin board, posts discussing the PX project drew tens of thousands of page views. "Protect Xiamen" and "Give me back my blue sky" were frequently seen post headers.⁵

Among all the messages expressing public sentiments, one particular text message stood out for its rationality

and ability to mobilize people. It also expressed what most people were thinking. Although the situation has changed, I am still moved by the humanity and caring that is evident in this message, which reads:

Here is what the people of Xiamen ought to do:

- Don't be afraid. Talking about the CPPCC's top proposal is not a crime, and you won't be arrested.
- If you have a blog or online forum, please republish this story: "A Controversy Over the Safety of a 10 Billion *Yuan* Chemical Plant Project in Xiamen." Republishing a news story from a legal Chinese newspaper isn't a crime, and you won't be arrested for doing so.
- If you're afraid to do this, please talk soon to your friends, family and colleagues about this business. They may know nothing about the situation.
- If you're still afraid, just tell your immediate family and your closest friends about it.
- If you're not afraid, you should tell your friends in Zhangzhou and Quanzhou [two other cities in Fujian Province]. They are also in danger.
- You only need to say these few things and you'll be all right:
- This chemical plant project is objected to by 105 CPPCC members, including some of the most authoritative experts.
- For safety reasons, the PX project ought to be located at least 100 kilometers from the nearest city.
- To this day, the people of Xiamen are being deprived of the right to know the implications of the PX project. This proves that it is against the popular will.
- If the project goes ahead, it will cause an economic slump, a fall in property prices and a decrease in the number of visitors in Xiamen. It will also give the people of Xiamen a reputation for weakness and stupidity.
- If the project goes ahead, the probability that you will get cancer will be much higher.
- You don't have to perform any acts of heroics. Just let everyone around you know about this event.

This well-reasoned text message closed with a stirring appeal: "For the sake of our children and their children, take action! Join the March of 10,000 at 8 AM on June 1. We are marching to City Hall! Wear a yellow armband! When you read this text message, send it on to all your friends in Xiamen!"

On June 1, Children's Day, tens of thousands of Xiamen citizens wearing yellow armbands and carrying placards, many with their children by their side, bravely took to the streets to voice their concerns. This was the largest street rally in China since the democracy movement of 1989. It was also more reasonable, moderate and effective than the demonstrations of 1989. In other words, despite intimidation and enormous pressure from the regime, the people who mobilized popular opinion had the awareness and the wisdom to understand and respect the interests of ordinary people as well as the risks they were taking. Rapid progress has been made in this respect.

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In Wuxi the situation was different. The Xinhua Web site reported that a certain resident of Wuxi, who had spread a "rumor" by cell-phone text message saying that "carcinogens in Taihu are 200 times the acceptable levels," was arrested by the police on suspicion of disrupting public order and was held in detention for 10 days. Clearly, there was a miscarriage of justice. What a dictatorial regime labels as "spreading rumors" is, in civilized Western societies, the fundamental human right to "speak unwisely."

The arrest of an innocent citizen by the police in Wuxi calls to mind the old Chinese saying, "Officials are free to set the town ablaze, but ordinary people are not even permitted to light lanterns." By 2005, the authorities had spent a staggering 10 billion *yuan* on water management in Taihu Lake, but the lake's environmental problems were not brought under control and the city



Construction of a chemical facility in Xiamen was halted after protests in June 2007. Photo: Associated Press

of Wuxi was plunged into a water crisis. The local authorities should have apologized to the local population and taken effective measures to solve the problem. Instead, they arrested an ordinary citizen on charges of “spreading rumors.”

NOW THAT THE DUST HAS SETTLED

On June 4, 2007, NDRC director Ma Kai announced at a news conference at the State Council Information Office that the city of Xiamen had temporarily suspended the Haicang PX project and would now proceed to solicit opinions from the public and various experts. A few days later, CCTV news reported that SEPA would send experts to conduct an environmental assessment of the PX project in Haicang, and on the following day, Shen Canhuang, deputy secretary-general of the Xiamen city government, declared at a news conference that the municipal government would rigorously cooperate with and promote the environmental assessment work.

Now that the dust has settled, rights defenders would

do well to make a reasoned assessment of the way local authorities flouted the will of the citizens of Xiamen throughout this episode.

The citizens of Xiamen expressed their opposition to a chemical plant project that threatened their health and life. Their aim was to protect their environment and their beautiful city, not to solve the problems of abuse of power and government mismanagement. No graffiti, Internet postings, instant messages or cell-phone text messages carried even a hint of political agitation or violence, nor were there any efforts to turn the issue of environmental protection into something different.

The Xiamen Party and government authorities, on the other hand, tried to prevent light from being shed on the chemical plant project, politicized the issue and operated in a “black box” (behind closed doors). They removed countless Web pages about the PX project, covered graffiti with propaganda posters, banned the sale of a *Phoenix Weekly* (Fenghuang Zhoukan) issue that included an article about the project, and made it very difficult for the media to publish anything about the public debate.

On the afternoon of June 2, the Xiamen Network Web site posted an announcement entitled, “Statement by Xiamen University Professor Zhao Yufen Issued through the Xiamen University Information Office,” which read: “(1) In the past few days, Chinese Academy of Sciences member Zhao has not given any interviews to the media, nor has he authorized the media to publish [his] views about the Xiamen PX project; (2) Academician Zhao thinks that the decision by the Xiamen city government to postpone the PX construction project and to conduct an environmental assessment of Xiamen’s [project] planning is practical and realistic and amply demonstrates that the municipal Party committee and the city government respect science, respect the popular will and take environmental protection seriously.”⁶

The citizens of Xiamen aimed to protect their environment and their beautiful city, not to solve the problems of abuse of power and government mismanagement.

On June 4, *Xiamen Daily* (Xiamen Ribao) published an article with the byline Xia Zhongping attacking “demons and monsters” who manipulated “so-called authorized information,” and “unscrupulous media organizations that make groundless accusations and even publish fabricated stories.”⁷

Shanghai journalist Hong Cha, however, defended the reporting of Zhao Yufen’s comments:

The *Financial Times* (Jinrong Shibao) had already conducted an interview with Zhao Yufen at the end of May, and so had I and a journalist for another newspaper on May 31. At that time, certain interested parties in Xiamen, along with some other media organizations, informed the Central Propaganda Department of this. Fortunately, there is a recording of my interview, otherwise I would probably have been accused of being a backstage manipulator.⁸

Another article around that time quoted a local store

owner as warning demonstrators, “You should think before you act, and you shouldn’t let yourself be used by people with ulterior motives.”⁹ Likewise, the *Xiamen Evening News* (Xiamen Wanbao) published an article bylined Su Mu, who wrote, “Some people with ulterior motives are flaunting the banner of ‘Save our Hometown’ and using all sorts of improper methods to seduce and trick others into joining the street rallies. . . . I trust that the judicial authorities will punish them severely in accordance with the law, and will show no leniency toward them.”¹⁰

Despite this shameless intimidation by the local media, it is fortunate that humanistic commitment and scholarly integrity prevail at Xiamen University. It is fortunate that China still has journalists with intelligence and integrity. It is fortunate that during their protest against the PX plant, university professors, journalists and especially tens of thousands of citizens of Xiamen exercised the utmost forbearance and self-restraint in the face of Party and government officials devoid of the most basic scruples, as well as their shameless mouthpieces. Thanks to the protesters, the Xiamen incident did not end like the Tiananmen massacre of 1989, a historical tragedy that set Chinese society back immeasurably.

In the face of intimidation by a regime that cannot bear transparency, the most effective and powerful approach to defend rights is action that’s open and above-board and in accordance with the law. The success of the environmental rights defenders in Xiamen was above all due to the fact that they understood and respected the interests of ordinary people and the risks they were taking, and demonstrated a concern and openness that struck a chord in people’s hearts. Unlike traditional revolutionary propagandists, they did not demand that people sacrifice life and property, make revolution for the sake of revolution, seek freedom for the sake of freedom, or engage in politics for the sake of politics. As Lu Xun once said, “Revolution is to let people live, not to make people die.”

In today’s China, which lacks the most basic human rights guarantees, rights defenders can best overcome the forces of fear and intimidation by identifying problems that directly affect the community and by advancing people’s interests with the utmost transparency,

conscientiousness, sensitivity and reasonableness. Only then will they be able to mobilize their fellow citizens to gradually come out from under the shadow of political intimidation and say “No!” to those who wield power.

The organizers of the Xiamen demonstrations employed this very strategy. The cell-phone text message quoted above clearly and factually described the stakes and risks involved, and gave Xiamen residents the courage to emerge from the shadow of fear. As exemplified by the Xiamen authorities’ attempts to intimidate the local population, fear is an essential instrument of the regime. Democratic activism respects individual rights and freedoms; it provides citizens with factual information about the stakes, risks and costs involved, respects the wishes of participants and lets them choose for themselves. Resistance is not without sacrifice, but people must be able to weigh benefits and costs to decide for themselves whether they want to make a sacrifice, and if so, how much of a sacrifice.

In the coming years, demonstrations in defense of environmental and other rights will grow in frequency and intensity in China. Now that the first step has been taken, as long as rights defenders carefully consider the interests of ordinary people, stay as close as possible to their outlook and concerns, and remain practical and realistic about what can be achieved under existing conditions, a series of low-key symbolic actions may well mature step by step into a civilized constitutional democracy.

Translated by Paul Frank

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Notes

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3. “Baiming zhengxie weiyuan nanzu Xiamen baiyi huagong xiangmu [A Hundred CPPCC Members Are Unable to Stop 10 billion Yuan Chemical Plant Project in Xiamen],” *Oriental Outlook Weekly* (Liaowang Dongfang Zhoukan), posted on NetEase, May 26, 2007, <http://news.163.com/07/0526/00/3FCJU17S00011SM9.html>.
4. “Haichang PX xiangmu yi an guojia fading chengxu pizhun zaijian [The Haicang PX Project Has Completed All Approval Procedures in Accordance with State Laws and Regulations and Is Currently under Construction],” posted in two parts on May 29, 2007, on the Web site of the Xiamen Municipal Government, http://www.xm.gov.cn/xmyw/200705/t20070529_164540.htm, http://www.xm.gov.cn/xmyw/200705/t20070529_164539.htm.
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7. Xia Zhongping, “Manyi zanhuan jianshe Haicang PX xiangmu: Bie haole shangba wangle teng [Temporary Suspension of the Haicang PX Plant Construction Project: Don’t Forget the Pain after the Wound is Healed],” *Xiamen Daily* (Xiamen Ribao), posted on Xiamen Net, http://www.xmnn.cn/xwzx/jrjd/200706/t20070604_223159.htm.
8. “Zai shinian kanchai boshang guanyu Zhao Yufen yuanshi shengming he Xiamen wumao de zhenglun [The Debate on the Ten Years Chopping Wood Blog about Academician Zhao Yufen’s Statement in Xiamen],” <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/1676634/>.
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10. Su Mu, “Ling zai bi xin, fa zai bi xing [Orders Must Be Trusted and the Law Must Be Enforced],” <http://www.360doc.com/showWeb/0/0/535855.aspx>.