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# THE XIAMEN DEMONSTRATIONS AND GROWING CIVIL CONSCIOUSNESS

**By Zhao Dagong**

*When the authorities block channels for the expression of public opinion, citizens have no alternative but to take to the streets.*

On June 1, 2007, more than 20,000 people demonstrated in the streets of Xiamen without a permit from the Public Security Bureau to protest plans to build a paraxylene (PX)<sup>1</sup> chemical factory in their city. At nightfall, dozens of Xiamen residents continued to stage a peaceful sit-in in front of City Hall. The possible consequences of “breaking the law” no longer deterred the citizens of Xiamen from undertaking the largest demonstration in a major Chinese city since June 1989.

Before the demonstration, more than one million Xiamen citizens sent out cell-phone text messages opposing the PX chemical factory project. All contained the same warning: “Taiwanese businessman Chen Yuhao’s Xianglu Group has invested in a joint venture project to build a chemical factory to manufacture paraxylene (PX) in Haicang District. Making this deadly poison [here] would be like dropping an atomic bomb on Xiamen Island. It would mean that in the future, the people of Xiamen would live with leukemia and deformed children.”

Street demonstrations are a means for citizens in a modern citizen society (*gongmin shehui*)<sup>2</sup> to exercise their right to free expression. In democratic societies, exercising this right to demonstrate is not a problem; nor is it a problem even under the “one country, two systems” regime in Hong Kong. But under mainland China’s dictatorial system, the Communist authorities have effectively deprived citizens of this legitimate right. Although China also has a “Law on Assemblies, Marches and Demonstrations,”<sup>3</sup> public security bureaus never issue demonstration permits to citizens who

apply for them. On the rare occasions that permits are issued, they are for small demonstrations organized by the authorities themselves.

After Chinese troops fired on students and crushed the democracy movement on June 4, 1989, the Chinese Communist authorities realized that street demonstrations threatened the foundations of their dictatorship. It was for that reason that on October 31, 1989, they promulgated the “Law on Assemblies, Marches and Demonstrations” to stop citizens from exercising their right to demonstrate and express their opinions. In the 18 years since, the Chinese government has continued to insist that “stability overrides everything.” As a result, the Chinese government has made every effort to conceal the growing social contradictions behind China’s economic boom by blocking access to the Internet, online discussion forums, blogs and other methods citizens use to petition the authorities and express their opinions.

But ordinary people still take to the streets when they can no longer endure social injustice, oppression and exploitation by those who wield power and wealth. The authorities have been unable to stop countless spontaneous protests, particularly in the countryside where heavily polluted areas and neighborhoods have been gobbled up by government officials and rich businessmen. In such places, ordinary people have taken to the streets again and again, placing local governments in a constant state of anxiety.

In April 2005, the farmers of Huashui Township in Zhejiang Province clashed with the local authorities while staging a protest against chemical plants that were polluting the environment and threatening their livelihood.<sup>4</sup> Although the farmers paid a heavy

price—armed police put down the protest by force and arrested several of them—ultimately rights defenders scored an important victory, and the factories were shut down. Today, the most recent protests by the citizens of Xiamen against the government’s PX chemical factory project have alarmed the authorities so much that the city government has announced a “postponement” in the construction of the chemical factory. Demonstrators standing up for their rights have once again scored a seminal victory.

### **CITIZENS DEMONSTRATE IN DEFIANCE OF AN UNJUST LAW**

When ordinary people have been deprived of their means of livelihood by a savage dictatorship, they no longer fear death. When people no longer fear death, why threaten them with it? The citizens of Xiamen faced the threat of evil laws and prison by taking to the streets in protest, and as a result, the authorities reconsidered their construction project. This shows that if citizens endure their anger in silence and allow government action to harm the collective public interest, the authorities will feel no scruples in violating citizens’ rights more and more. But if citizens rise up and take a stand, the authorities may yield ground, and may even be forced to accept the popular will.

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With officials and wealthy entrepreneurs colluding in a frenzied pursuit of profits in utter disregard for the lives of ordinary people, construction projects are springing up like mushrooms throughout China and polluting the country’s land, water and air. While pollution treatment takes second place to the pursuit of profit, polluting industries generate the GDP growth that wielders of power showcase as a mark of their achievements. But the fact that pollution seriously damages the health of the powerful as well as the disenfranchised ultimately lends broad appeal to environmentalists’ arguments, and many of the Xiamen protesters were solid members of the middle-class.

Because the regime has blocked channels through which citizens could have expressed their views, they have no alternative but to demonstrate without a permit. Wu Lihong, a farmer who in 2005 had been nominated by the Jiangsu Province environmental agency as one of China’s “Top Ten Environmentalists,” was arrested by the police in April, a few weeks before an algae bloom fed by pollution in Taiwu Lake forced the city of Wuxi to shut off its supply of drinking water. Shrugging off Wu’s arrest, Yang Weize, the city’s Communist Party committee secretary, said that Taiwu Lake’s pollution was an inevitable consequence of industrialization. The citizens of the lakeside city of Wuxi ought to follow the example of the citizens of Xiamen and demonstrate against pollution and for the right to a clean environment.

### **GROWING AWARENESS OF CIVIL RIGHTS**

The fact that the citizens of Xiamen have been willing to take to the streets to demonstrate and thereby risk persecution shows that their civic consciousness is continuing to grow. The old Chinese saying that “everyone

**A public protest against the construction of a chemical plant in Xiamen on June 1, 2007, was the largest public demonstration in China since the 1989 Democracy Movement. Photo: Associated Press**





Protesters calling for the Xiamen chemical plant to be scrapped were rallied through a mobile-phone text message campaign. Photo: Associated Press

sweeps the snow on their own doorstep and ignores the ice piling up on the neighbor's roof" speaks to the traditional tendency to consider only one's own interests and meekly submit to oppression. The Chinese authorities have persistently used force to suppress growing civic consciousness among the Chinese public. China has a constitution, laws and many regulations, but the government is unwilling to let citizens wield these rights-protection instruments.

To be sure, many citizens have very low levels of civic consciousness; they live in fear of the government and neither know nor understand the law. A few years ago, journalist Zhao Yan and legal scholar Li Boguang offered legal assistance to farmers seeking compensation for confiscated farmland and found their efforts enthusiastically welcomed. The simple act of providing farmers with information about laws and regulations to defend their rights shamed and enraged the authorities, who threatened, harassed and ultimately arrested Zhao and Li on trumped-up charges.<sup>5</sup>

The development of the Internet and the spread of information is contributing to the growth of civic consciousness among China's citizens. But it goes without saying that the million text messages sent out in Xiamen would have been useless without the civic consciousness of Xiamen residents. Likewise, the fact that the Xiamen authorities did not respond to the protest with brute force may signify progress, but it may also indicate that the government is afraid of citizens' growing civic consciousness.

### **PROTESTING POLLUTION IN DEFENSE OF CITIZENS' RIGHTS**

China has ample environmental protection mechanisms in place at both the central and local government levels. A comprehensive set of environmental laws and regulations—more than 30 in number—have been passed since 1989, including the Water Pollution Prevention and Control Law (*Shui wuran fangzhi fa*), the Air Pollution Prevention and Control Law (*Daqi wuran*

*fangzhi fa*), the Radioactive Pollution Prevention and Control Law (*Fangshexing wuran fangzhi fa*), the Regulation on the Environmental Protection Management of Construction Projects (*Jianshe xiangmu huanjing baohu guanli tiaoli*), the Solid Waste Pollution Prevention and Control Law (*Guti feiwu huanjing wuran fangzhi fa*) and the Marine Environmental Protection Law (*Haiyang huanjing baohu fa*). The main impediments to implementation of these laws are situations in which government officials collude with the enterprises that cause the pollution.

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In recent years, as the number of environmentally related protests has grown, the authorities have also ostensibly increased their investment in environmental protection, while continuing to protect polluters and destroy the environment. During this time, ordinary people have been the only ones who have really made a stand against environmental pollution, and only because they have been driven beyond the limits of endurance. In this process, agencies of state power at all levels have almost always stood in opposition to the common people and have even used armed force and underworld thugs to suppress protesters. As a result, the anti-pollution activities of ordinary people are treated as anti-government activities.

In Xiamen, for example, the polluter was a chemical company, but the project was initiated and approved by the government. Local people may strongly oppose a project that threatens to pollute their town, but when economic growth, a career-boosting project and the interests of corrupt officials are at stake, the government charges ahead with no consideration for the life and health of the people. Consider the result if, instead, the public had been consulted about the proposed PX chemical factory project in Xiamen, and the objections of opposition parties and revelations of independent media organizations had been made public. Could the

project have been approved? Of course not. Nor would the citizens of Xiamen have had to take to the streets to voice their opposition.

The environmental rights struggle is, in fact, an expression of citizens' dissatisfaction with the government. But it is not the only such struggle—struggles by farmers for land rights, by workers for labor rights and by residents against arbitrary eviction are also the struggles of ordinary people against their government.

Translated by Paul Frank

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**Translator's and Editor's Notes**

1. Paraxylene is a petrochemical feedstock used to make polyesters, which have applications in clothing, packaging and plastic bottles. According to the *Shanghai Daily* of June 4, 2007, "Paraxylene is a highly polluting and carcinogenic petrochemical, which will also increase the chance of fetal abnormality."
2. Ping-Chun Hsiung et al. translate the term *gongmin shehui* literally as "citizen society" and explain that it "embodies a political conception of civil society in which political relationships between state and society are based on principles of citizenship, rights, representation, and rule of law." Ping-Chun Hsiung, Maria Jaschok, Cecilia Nathansen Milwertz, *Chinese Women Organizing: Cadres, Feminists, Muslims, Queers* (Berg Publishers, 2001), p. 279.
3. The *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jihui youxing shiwei fa* was ratified by the tenth meeting of the executive committee of the Seventh National People's Congress on October 31, 1989. See Human Rights Watch, "We Could Disappear At Any Time" *Retaliation and Abuses Against Chinese Petitioners*, [hrw.org/reports/2005/china1205/6.htm](http://hrw.org/reports/2005/china1205/6.htm).
4. For an account of the Huashui protest, see Mark Magnier, "As China Spews Pollution, Villagers Rise Up," *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 2006, posted on the Web site of Pacific Environment, <http://www.pacificenvironment.org/article.php?id=1900>.
5. Zhao Yan was ultimately sentenced to three years in prison on an unrelated (and apparently trumped-up) fraud charge in August 2006. See "Zhao Yan Appeals Against Three-year Sentence on Fraud Charge," Reporters Without Borders, September 4, 2006, [http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=18663](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=18663).