Pollution and Protest in China: Environmental Mobilization in Context*

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Abstract

This article focuses on environmental controversy in a Chinese rural community. It shows that Chinese villagers may protest against anticipated pollution if the environmental threat is effectively framed. In the face of real and serious pollution, villagers may seek to redress environmental grievances by piggybacking on politically favourable issues. However, when the pollution is caused by fellow villagers, environmentally concerned villagers may remain silent owing to the constraints of community relations and economic dependency. These findings suggest that the relationship between pollution and protest is context-dependent.

Keywords: framing; issue piggybacking; political opportunity; community relations; economic dependency; China

In 2005, farmers in Huaxi 画溪,[1] Zhejiang province, forced 11 polluting factories off their land.[2] Initially, they had challenged the potential polluters in anticipation of future pollution problems. Later, when the polluting factories moved to their community and began to cause the expected damage, the villagers continued to protest, but strangely their claims were mainly land-related rather than environmental. In contrast, Huaxi has long had a cottage industry of recycling plastic waste, which was a major source of pollution, yet the villagers had never staged a protest. These puzzling phenomena raise questions about the relationship between pollution and protest. Why did Huaxi villagers protest against anticipated pollution? Later, why did the aggrieved villagers mainly

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1 Huaxi formerly had been a town in Dongyang county, Jinhua city, Zhejiang province. In October 2004, it was merged with its neighbour, Huangtianfan, and became a part of the new town of Huashui. Huaxi is also the name of a village consisting of six sub-villages. Huaxi No. 5 village was the main force of the environmental struggle examined here, but most villagers in the former Huaxi town also participated.

2 For media reports on the Huaxi environmental contention, see Song 2005; Markus 2005; Watts 2005.

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focus on land-related claims? Finally, what explains the silence of the villagers in the face of pollution produced by their own plastic waste recycling businesses?

Many studies have demonstrated that the relationship between pollution and protest is not linear. Serious pollution does not necessarily motivate protest whereas protest may occur without any real pollution. In some NIMBY protests in developed countries, affected communities have often taken action against proposed polluting facilities.[3] In China, the Xiamen "PX Incident,"[4] the Guangdong "Anti-Nansha Petrochemical Project,"[5] and the protest against a waste project in Qidong 启东[6] all show that Chinese citizens are also becoming increasingly environmentally concerned and may organize protests against anticipated pollution. However, these examples have mostly occurred in urban areas.[7] According to media reports, Chinese villagers almost invariably turn into violent insurgents when pollution takes a toll on health and threatens livelihoods.[8] The first episode of protest examined here, however, is a case about Chinese villagers protesting against anticipated pollution.

A frequently discussed factor mediating the relationship between pollution and protest is framing.[9] The literature on framing shows that the same phenomenon may be viewed in different ways by different people.[10] For example, an illness linked to environmental pollution may be viewed as a matter of individual hygiene, or it may be framed as an outcome of environmental pollution.[11] The interlocking of issues, such as environmental pollution and illegal land requisitions, produces even more leeway for framing. For example, in environmental contention, protesters aggrieved by pollution may piggyback on issues unrelated to pollution, thereby allowing more opportunities to maximize the vulnerability of their opponents.[12] Protests aiming to redress environmental grievances do not necessarily proceed with environmental claims.

Economic dependency complicates the relationship between pollution and protest.[13] As Gould rightly points out, "what is the 'stench of pollution' to an outsider may be 'the sweet smell of money' to local residents." "Economic blackmail," for instance threats of unemployment or economic decline, can smother any potential environmental protest in dependent communities.[14] Furthermore,

3 Boudet 2011; Thornton and Tizard 2010; van der Horst 2007.
4 Xie 2007.
5 Huang 2009.
6 Perlez 2012.
7 Wasserstrom 2009; Johnson 2010.
8 For such media reports, see Qi 2011; Dou 2009; Cui 2009.
9 For discussions and critiques of the concept of framing in the study of social movements, see Benford 1997; Benford and Snow 2000.
10 Shmueli et al. 2006; Vaughan and Seifert 1992.
11 For example, Lora-Wainwright 2010.
12 Ungar argues that environmental claims are more likely to be honoured when they "piggyback on dramatic real-world events" because such dramatic events bring attention to issues that are otherwise neglected. See Ungar 1992. Other studies have shown that frames which tap into a hegemonic discourse or are consistent with the opportunity structure tend to be more politically effective. See Koopmans and Statham 1999; Diani 1996.
13 See van Rooij 2010; Lora-Wainwright 2010; Tilt 2006; Gould 1991.
14 Gould 1991.

efforts by polluting corporations, for example the provision of alternative sources of water, may deflect criticism and impede protest mobilization.[15] Even though economic dependency can account for the silence of dependent residents, it cannot adequately explain why independent residents in some communities do not engage in challenging actions.

In our study, we found that villagers may protest against anticipated pollution if the environmental threat is effectively framed. In the face of real and serious pollution, they may seek to redress environmental grievances by piggybacking on politically favourable issues. However, the same villagers may remain silent about serious pollution caused by fellow villagers owing to the constraints of community relations and economic dependency. These findings suggest that the relationship between pollution and protest is context-dependent.

This article draws on both interviews and archives. The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with 122 informants from early April to late July 2007. The interviewees included protest leaders, village cadres, township cadres, municipal officials and ordinary villagers. Owing to the sensitivity of the topic, the interviewees were selected in a snowball fashion. With exceptionally good access to both local officials and protesters, it was also possible to collect archival materials, including petition letters, leaflets and posters penned by villagers, work diaries and reports written by local officials, official regulations, meeting records, and an internal *Daily Report* (*Meiri yibao* 每日一报) that meticulously traced what happened each day.

The Perceived Threat of Anticipated Pollution

In October 2001, local authorities began construction of a chemical park in Huaxi. Dongnong 东农 Company, a notorious pesticide factory, was to be relocated to this park. The Party secretary of Huaxi No. 5 village opposed this move and attempted to stop it. He consulted an expert, investigated the polluted village where the company was then located, and penned a leaflet entitled "A portrait of Dongnong Company" (hereafter referred to as "The portrait"). The Party secretary anonymously sent about 150 copies of the leaflet to influential Huaxi villagers. It was received on about 17 October, and a protest was staged primarily during the following three days.

"The portrait" framed the environmental threat from Dongnong Company in a way that resonated with Huaxi villagers' cultural values about lineage and offspring. The emphasis was on the potential destruction of their lineage because the pollution might harm the "quality" of their descendants.[16] First, it depicted the frightening scenario in the village of Luzhai 陆宅 which had already been polluted by the company:

15 Solecki 1996; Gould 1993.

16 This is reminiscent of Jing's argument about how local cultural values suffuse rural environmental protest. See Jing 2000.

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> Waste water and gas discharged from the former Dongnong Company have been damaging the environment for miles around. Underground water is not drinkable in the vicinity of the polluter. People inhaling poisonous gas easily catch respiratory and liver illnesses. Crop and fruit yields have been seriously depressed, sometimes without any harvest. Villagers dare not eat what they grow on the land. All kinds of fish have died in the river into which the waste water flows. The land around is desolated. Carcinogenic substances from heaps of chemical waste at the Luzhai factory site have seeped into the land so deeply that the adverse effects will not be eliminated even after hundreds of years. The pollution has endangered the survival of the offspring of Lu 卢, the most prestigious lineage in Dongyang 东阳.[17]

"The portrait" continued by listing the products manufactured by Dongnong Company as well as seven dire consequences if the factory were to move to Huaxi. The first two consequences were described as follows:

> (1) Villagers' health conditions will deteriorate. With lowered immunity, we might catch all sorts of diseases, and this will increase our medical expenses.
> (2) The quality (*sushi* 素质) of our descendants will be lowered. The mortality and deformity rates of newborn babies will increase. More children will be born with mental retardation and even more will fail to be admitted into colleges or the army.

"The portrait" used powerful rhetoric. It enumerated the previous protests against the company, noting that the provincial governor had issued an order to shut down the factory. It warned villagers that a gas bomb might land in Huaxi. "The portrait" concluded with a call to arms to Huaxi villagers: "It is better to die fighting today than to be killed by poison tomorrow!"

The environmental threat described in "The portrait" caused panic and generated a sense of injustice among the villagers for three reasons. First, the villagers were able to confirm through various channels the veracity of the claims. Some called acquaintances in Luzhai and others personally visited the polluted site.[18] Second, the villagers believed that the relocation of the company to Huaxi would be unjust and questioned it in the following ways: "If the company harmed urbanites, won't it also harm us rural residents?"[19] and "If the chemical factory is not toxic, why does it need to be relocated from Luzhai to Huaxi?"[20] Finally, Wang 王, the surname of most residents in Huaxi village, like the Lu in Luzhai, was also a prestigious family line. Many villagers worried that their lineage would be destroyed by the chemical factory.[21]

The majority of villagers in Huaxi learned about the potential environmental and health dangers from Dongnong Company through "The portrait."[22] Prior to the appearance of the leaflet, the villagers' only complaint was about the low rent that the company would pay for the use of the land. One villager recalled:

> When letters containing "A portrait of Dongnong Company" arrived and copies of "The portrait" were posted on village walls, the focus of the villagers' complaints changed [from the low rent] to the toxins produced by the company. The leaflet was also distributed in neighbouring

17 Authors' translation.
18 Interview with a protest leader, 23 June 2007.
19 Ibid.
20 Interview with a villager, 10 June 2007.
21 On lineage as a basis for rural environmental protest, see Jing 2000.
22 Interview with a protest leader, 15 July 2007.

villages. All of the villagers directed their attention to the issues related to the toxic polluter, and everyone was very angry.[23]

One villager stated that "people were emotionally charged at that time, and most villagers thought 'The portrait' made its point."[24]

The environmental threat depicted by "The portrait" prompted the villagers to take action. One villager, who later testified in court, said: "I was so worried. The leaflet said the company was toxic and it was harmful to our health. I therefore posted the leaflet on the wall near the front door of my house."[25] Other people acted collectively. Two villagers, whose houses were closest to the industrial park, produced 1,000 copies of "The portrait" at their own expense and pasted them on walls throughout the village. They also had their wives distribute copies in the market. One villager recalled:

> Anyway, we thought that we had started the campaign, so we had to make a big fuss about it. We had to make sure that every villager in Huaxi knew about it. We hoped that all the villagers would stick together and prevent the company from establishing a base here.[26]

Three other villagers started a door-to-door campaign the day after they received "The portrait." They circulated "A joint appeal to villagers in Huaxi No. 5 village," which soon gathered more than 600 signatures. The appeal called for a referendum regarding the relocation. It contended that even if the relocation plan were approved through a referendum, the company should be required to sign a document with supplemental terms stipulating its responsibilities to observe environmental regulations strictly, provide safe drinking water, offer villagers free medical check-ups, and clean up any pollution on the land after the expiration of its lease.

Concerned about the safety of their health and crops, villagers seized every opportunity to question the local officials about whether or not Dongnong Company produced poisonous waste. Xu 许, the Party secretary of Huaixi town, repeatedly reassured the petitioners that: "Dongnong Company will meet all our environmental criteria. Its waste water will be clean enough to brush one's teeth with and to cultivate fish, and its waste will be able to be used to feed our pigs."[27] Despite these promises, he failed to reassure the anxious villagers. On the evening of 20 October 2001, dozens of villagers went to a restaurant where Party Secretary Xu was dining with his associates to demand another dialogue on the environmental issue. Again, Xu exaggerated the environmental safety of Dongnong Company, but this time his response infuriated the villagers. Some villagers shouted, "Drag him to the chemical industrial park! Make him take a look and smell the waste water!"[28] The call was answered: after Xu was dragged to the industrial park, where thousands of villagers had already

23 No. 287 criminal verdict, Dongyang People's Court, 2001.
24 Interview with a protest leader, 23 June 2007.
25 No. 287 criminal verdict, Dongyang People's Court, 2001.
26 Interview with a protest leader, 22 June 2007.
27 Interview with a villager, 29 May 2007.
28 Interview with a protest leader, 15 July 2007.

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assembled, he was forced to walk around the park with bare feet and to smell the foul waste water from the two factories. After Xu was rescued by a village cadre and sent to the hospital, the villagers destroyed the fence around Dongnong Company and smashed the doors and windows of the other two factories. Some vandalized property and stole computers or telephones. This became known as the "October 20th Incident," which marked a high tide but also the end of the first episode of the Huaxi environmental struggle.

The protest failed to prevent the relocation of Dongnong Company. Worse still, 12 villagers were prosecuted for disturbing social order and ten were jailed for between one and three years. The Party secretary of Huaxi No. 5 village, although not on the scene during the incident, served the longest time behind bars. As the author of "The portrait," he was blamed for inciting the "October 20th Incident."

The events in Huaxi indicate that an effectively framed environmental threat may motivate Chinese villagers to engage in protest. In this case, "The portrait" provided Huaxi villagers with information about the impending environmental threat. It rendered the environmental threat convincing by depicting a real environmental disaster. Its powerful rhetoric motivated the villagers to take action and created a sense of injustice among the villagers, and the outrageous response by the township secretary aggravated this sense of injustice and became the immediate trigger of a violent riot.

Political Opportunities and the Piggybacking of Issues

The contention in 2001 was a single-issue protest during which villagers concerned about an immediate environmental threat took action to oppose the relocation of a polluting factory. However, environmentally concerned actors do not necessarily base their protests on purely environmental claims. They may link environmental problems to other issues so as to apply multiple pressures on local authorities.[29] If they perceive more opportunities from other issues, they may even adopt a detour strategy, pursuing environmental claims by seeking redress for other grievances.

The 2001 protest in Huaxi failed to prevent the relocation of Dongnong Company, but it significantly influenced subsequent protests. First, the harsh official response to the "October 20th Incident" forestalled further protests for two and a half years, thereby clearing the way for the relocation of the plant and a large expansion of the park. It was not until April 2004 that Huaxi villagers once again attempted to voice their discontent by initiating a year-long collective petition. However, after failing to address their environmental grievances through institutional channels, on 24 March 2005, the villagers once again resorted to

29 For issue linkage strategies, see Cai 2010. Issue linkage is also a prominent practice in international negotiations, since by linking unrelated or loosely-related issues, negotiators may gain extra leverage. See McGinnis 1986; Sebenius 1983; Stein 1980.

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direct action, blocking the road to the industrial park and maintaining a round-the-clock vigil for two successive months. Ultimately, they forced 11 of the polluting factories off the land.

The harsh response to the 2001 incident also forced Huaxi villagers to adopt a more innovative detour strategy. They pursued environmental claims by seeking redress for land-related grievances (*jie tudi wenti zuo huanbao wenzhang* 借土地问题做环保文章)[30] in order to overcome the obstacles in proving the relationship between pollution and damage to the environment and health.[31]

Following the expansion of the park, the environment in Huaxi became seriously degraded. The park grew to occupy 960 *mu* (about 64 hectares) of land and, at its peak, contained 13 factories, mainly producers of chemicals, pesticides, dyes and pharmaceuticals. Nearly all of the factories generated a substantial amount of water and air pollution. According to a deputy head of Huashui 画水 town, pollution caused by the production of weedkillers and defoliators did the greatest harm to vegetation, causing most plants to die[32] and vegetables to rot.[33] An investigation by the local government after the protest indicated that the pollution from the park had affected about 11,685 *mu* (about 779 hectares) of land.[34] Worse still, those agricultural products that remained did not sell owing to fears of poisoning.[35] This upset the villagers who had long considered their hometown as a place of natural beauty. Villagers living off the land suffered even more as they had not only lost their income from planting cash crops, but also had to buy in vegetables for their own use from other towns. Consequently, the price of vegetables surged after the establishment of the industrial park. These events ultimately presented a real danger to the livelihoods of the villagers.

Huaxi villagers understood the potential adverse health effects of chemical pollution from earlier industrial accidents. Environmental illnesses usually develop in a chronic fashion. During normal production, victims may have difficulty finding evidence to link their illnesses with the pollution. However, they can immediately identify adverse health consequences after accidents occur. An "Urgent report," submitted to the local government on 12 February 2004, described the suffering after one industrial accident: "A gust of toxic and fetid gas was suddenly discharged from the chemical park. The smell was awful. Villagers had difficulty breathing. Many cried out anxiously: 'It is hard to bear! Intolerable!'" Another serious accident occurred on 18 October 2004 when a pipeline at Dongnong Company ruptured and leaked toxic gas into the air. An activist wrote in his diary:

> There was a foul smell in the entire Huaxi village. The eyes of the villagers began to sting. The stench was like ammonia and caused the villagers to shed tears continually. Some senior

30 From the record of a meeting held by the Dongyang city government.
31 On this obstacle, see Briggs 2006.
32 Interview with a town leader, 29 June 2007.
33 Hu 2004.
34 Huashui Town Government 2005.
35 Interview with a villager, 27 May 2007; interview with the Huaxi village head, 3 June 2007.

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villagers fainted instantly. A few students on their way to school painfully squatted by the side of the road [and could not move forward]. Many babies continued crying until they were hoarse … The scene was too tragic to describe.

The villagers believed that pollution from the industrial park had affected their health, but they understood that it would be hard to prove the relationship between pollution and their illnesses. As one villager said, "Who can see the effects of the pollution on the body?"[36] Based on this understanding and the failure of their protests on purely environmental grounds in 2001, the Huaxi villagers linked their environmental problems to the issue of illegal land requisitions, since the chemical park had been built on illegally seized land. As demonstrated by the 22 petition letters that we collected, the Huaxi protest leaders framed their claims mostly in terms of violations of land-related regulations. This approach, which we refer to as the piggybacking of contentious issues, although reminiscent of the issue linkage strategy studied by other scholars,[37] is in fact quite different. The Huaxi villagers essentially made land-related claims, rather than environmental claims, even though their ultimate objective was to oppose environmental pollution.

The piggybacking of issues is used to take advantage of specific political opportunities. From 2002 to 2005, political opportunities opened up for both environmental and land-related protests, but to varying degrees. There were two new opportunities for environmental activists: the passage of the Environmental Impact Assessment Law on 28 October 2002; and the publicity campaign, called the "environmental storm" (*huanbao fengbao* 环保风暴), launched by the State Environmental Protection Agency to promote enforcement of the new law. However, in their petitions Huaxi villagers seldom cited environmental regulations in support of their claims; instead they frequently cited land regulations. According to the diary written by an activist from 4 August to 14 November 2004, the daily resistance in Huaxi overwhelmingly focused on the land issue. The protest leader disclosed that, "We demanded our land back in order to force them to close the polluting factories."[38] The local authorities understood perfectly well this strategy of issue piggybacking. During a meeting of township cadres, one official pointed out: "The villagers, like leeches, are insisting that the local government relocate the chemical park and return their land."[39] At the same meeting, the director of the Huashui Land and Resources Station noted:

What the villagers most strongly oppose is the environmental pollution from the chemical park. Air and water have been polluted. Water is not potable and vegetation cannot grow. The villagers know that the factories cannot stand without the land. Therefore, they altered their strategy to demand back their land.[40]

36 Interview with a villager, 27 May 2007.
37 For example, see Cai 2010.
38 Interview with a petitioning activist, 24 May 2007.
39 From the working diary of a Huashui town leader.
40 Ibid.

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Most Huaxi villagers were not opposed to their land being used for industrial ends, but they were opposed to it being used for the building of polluting factories. This was further confirmed by a villager who questioned local officials during the 2005 direct action: "Why did you place toxic factories in our village? Why didn't you introduce food factories, processing plants, or furniture companies here? Didn't you notice that there were thousands of people living in the vicinity of the chemical park?"[41]

Four factors contributed to the formation of this piggybacking strategy during the Huaxi environmental struggle. First, Chinese environmental regulations are generally ambiguous and do not effectively address environmental problems. It is often impossible for victims, not to mention resource-poor farmers, to obtain evidence and establish a causal link between industrial pollution and its adverse consequences. Even with a strong case and a good lawyer, victims of pollution still have no guarantee that they will reach a satisfactory settlement in court.[42] Second, many polluting factories are built on land that has been seized illegally.[43] This forms the basis for the detour strategy of pursuing environmental claims by seeking redress for land-related grievances. Third, compared with the vague environmental laws, land-related regulations are more straightforward. It is relatively easy for ordinary citizens to prove land abuses by consulting the relevant regulations. That is why the Huaxi villagers, according to the 22 petition letters that we collected, always began their complaints by confidently identifying the clauses in the land regulations that had been violated by the local authorities. Accusations levelled at the polluting chemical factories were secondary, and in fact some petitions made no mention at all of the environmental issue.

Finally, owing to the pressures from an increasing number of protests against illegal land requisitions, the central government was committed to enforcing the land regulations.[44] From 2003 to 2004, the central government issued a series of land regulations to discipline local governments.[45] One such regulation, promulgated on 30 December 2003, presented the greatest threat to the survival of the illegal industrial parks by stipulating that:

> All kinds of developmental zones established by county authorities and below should be shut down. More importantly, to demonstrate its commitment to enforcing the regulation, the central government has formulated selective incentives for lower-level governments: if they carry out self-checking and self-rectification (*zicha zijiu* 自查自纠), the local authorities will receive

41 Interview with an activist, 15 June 2007. Yu Jianrong, a researcher of contentious politics in China, has made similar observations. At a 2007 conference, he pointed out that: "Villagers might not be able to file a lawsuit based on environmental claims, but they might do so by claiming illegal occupation of their land. We recently noticed a case in a region of Shanxi where villagers did not claim that a factory had polluted the environment. Instead, they argued that the factory was illegally occupying their land." See Yu 2007.

42 For more information on procedural hurdles in tapping legal channels, see Briggs 2006.

43 For example, in Zhejiang 489 of 758 industrial parks or developmental zones had to be shut down, mostly due to illegal occupation of the land. See Tian 2004.

44 According to Chen Xiwen, director of the Central Rural Work Leading Group, land-related mass incidents accounted for about 50% of the total mass incidents taking place in rural China. See Chang 2007.

45 We collected seven important regulations issued by various ministries of the State Council during the period from February 2003 to April 2004.

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more lenient treatment. Otherwise, if during the spot checks conducted by the central departments their violations are exposed, they will be severely punished.[46]

Most local governments carried out self-checking and self-rectification in order to avoid punishment.[47] They issued notices revoking the licences of the illegal industrial parks within their jurisdictions, but they often had no intention of enforcing the revocations.[48] On 16 April 2004, the Zhejiang provincial government published a notice in the *Zhejiang Daily* concerning the cleaning up and rectification of the developmental zones. The chemical park in Huaxi was on the list of sites to be shut down. Forced to follow suit, on 26 July 2004 the Dongyang county government issued 14 similar documents. These documents stipulated that factories in the Huaxi chemical park should return any illegally seized land to the villagers.

The Huaxi villagers acted mainly in light of these land-related documents. First, even though they were still subject to repression, the notice published in the *Zhejiang Daily* emboldened the villagers to begin a new round of protests. Second, the villagers urged the local authorities to enforce the regulations. For example, after obtaining the 14 documents issued by the Dongyang county government, the villagers sent a letter of appeal to the county government and the Huashui town government. The letter stated that:

> According to the decision made by the People's Government of Zhejiang province to close Huaxi chemical park, the "Decisions of administrative sanction on illegal land use" issued by the Dongyang Land and Resources Bureau, and other relevant regulations in the Law of Land Administration … villagers in Huangshan 黄山 village, Huaxi, will organize to force the factories to move off our land. If the factories fail to leave, we hope the Dongyang county government and its relevant departments will urge the factories to return our land.

The head of Huashui town confirmed that the documents issued by the Dongyang government had provided the Huaxi villagers with a protest weapon. He noted: "The decision presented a great opportunity for the villagers … They argued that the government should order the factories to be shut down. They then would have to move off the land."[49]

During the 2005 direct action, protesters in Huaxi formulated an even more distinctly land-oriented frame of protest. A widely circulated poster read: "Give back our land, and we want to survive; give back our land, and we want to be healthy; give back our land, and we want our offspring to prosper; give back our land, and we want a clean environment." In this frame, "giving back our land" served as an indirect method to achieve the goals of keeping the environment clean and maintaining good physical health.

This strategy contributed to the success of the Huaxi environmental protest.[50] The easily identified abuse of the land regulations not only legitimated the Huaxi

46 From a regulation stipulated in the document entitled "The working plan on further managing and rectifying land market order," issued by the Ministry of Land and Resources on 21 February 2003.
47 Tang 2003.
48 Ibid.
49 Interview with a town leader, 7 June 2007.
50 There were also other important contributing factors, for example the involvement of the Society of Senior Citizens as a mobilizing structure.

villagers' protest, but also constrained the local government's use of repression, as the Party secretary of Huashui town noted in his report:

> The chemical park was based on land illegally or semi-legally seized. This offered some of the masses in Huaxi No. 5 village an excuse to file petitions, and that was also the reason why the local government could not stand tough during the protest.

Community Relations, Economic Dependency and the Silence of Contentious Villagers

After the 11 polluting factories were forced out of Huaxi, one might think that some villagers, especially the protest leaders, would have become converts to the issue of environmental protection.[51] The protest did promote environmental concern among villagers in Huaxi, as some interviewees have noted: "The masses now pay more attention to pollution."[52] Several protest leaders even tried to establish an environmental NGO.[53] However, this did not guarantee that the villagers would take collective action against all environmental problems in the locality. Local conditions, especially community relations and economic dependency on the polluting enterprises, mediate the translation of environmental concern into environmental action.

When the first author visited Huaxi in April 2007, she found it difficult to associate the people in this village with the protesters who had fought so fiercely against chemical pollution and who had won a huge concession from the local authorities. Many parts of Huaxi were covered with huge piles of plastic waste. Hundreds of family-run plastic waste recycling workshops dotted the landscape. These recycling workshops caused great harm to the environment and to the health of the villagers. Untreated waste water discharged from the workshops covered the roads, seeping into both the soil and the drinking water supply. In addition, shrill noises emitted during the plastic shredding process could be heard throughout the day. There was also a stench from melting plastic and burning waste. Surprisingly, there had been no serious protests against the pollution caused by this cottage industry. Some former protest leaders were even participating in this polluting business. Why were veterans of the earlier environmental protest movement not taking a stand against the pollution caused by this industry?

Both the villagers and the local officials knew about the adverse effects of the pollution caused by the plastic waste recycling. One woman recalled that she had felt an unbearable itch after one of her feet had accidentally slipped into a ditch that was full of waste water from a plastic waste processing workshop.[54] During a focus group interview, all of the six participating villagers agreed that the pollution was serious and was causing health problems. One of the most prominent

51 On the impact of popular contention on activists in rural China, see O'Brien and Li 2005.
52 Interview with a protest leader, 15 July 2007; interview with a villager, 29 May 2007.
53 They failed to establish the organization in the end.
54 Interview with a villager, 24 May 2007.

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activists in the Huaxi environmental protest, who was now in the business of plastic waste recycling, admitted that the money he was making could not offset the environmental damage caused by his business activities.[55] Local officials exaggerated the severity of the pollution from this cottage business so as to imply that the Huaxi villagers' protests against the pollution from the former chemical factories were unreasonable. For example, the Party secretary of Huashui town commented sarcastically:

> They collect all kinds of waste plastic bags holding chemical products and then clean them; during this process the waste water seeps into the ground. Believe me. The pollution is several times more serious than that from the former chemical factories.[56]

A deputy head of Huashui town strongly agreed with the Party secretary. Another deputy head of the town mentioned that in Minghuan 明焕, a village adjacent to Huaxi, almost every household was engaged in this business and that the village remained enveloped in a foul cloud of smoke. He stated that the pollution caused by plastic waste processing was far more serious than that emitted from the former chemical factories.[57]

Two main factors affected the translation of environmental concern into collective action in Huaxi. One was economic dependency. Plastic waste recycling had long been a pillar industry in Huashui town.[58] The town boasted the largest market for plastic waste in east China. In 2007, approximately 20,000 people in Huashui lived off this cottage industry, with turnover that year amounting to over 2.4 billion yuan. More than ten enterprises had a turnover of ten million yuan, and many more workshops had a turnover of over one million yuan.[59]

In contrast, the former chemical park brought nothing but harm to the villagers. There were over 1,000 employees working in the 13 factories before the 2005 protest, yet only around 20 of them came from the villages in Huashui town.[60] Most officials thought that if more local villagers had been employed by the polluting factories, the protest would have never occurred. They often referred to the Hengdian 横店 Group[61] as an example.[62] Officials believed that the Hengdian Group was able to suppress any protests because most of its employees were local villagers. Therefore, the Group had ample network resources to deal with popular resistance. As the former Party secretary of Huashui town explained: "If anyone within the Group makes trouble, he will soon be fired. As a result, no one dares to resist. If any village makes trouble,

55 Interview with a protest leader, 31 May 2007.
56 Interview with a town leader, 28 May 2007.
57 Interview with a town leader, 29 June 2007.
58 Most recycling workshops were in Huaxi village.
59 Chen and Jiang 2010.
60 Interview with a town cadre, 20 June 2007
61 The Hengdian Group is a large-scale privately-run business located in Dongyang. It has about 200 subsidiary companies. More than 1,000 corporations are related to the Group in varying degrees.
62 Interview with a police officer, 21 June 2007; interview with a town cadre, 20 June 2007; interview with a town leader, 17 July 2007.

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the employees from that village will have to return home and engage in thought reform work."[63] Another township cadre agreed that when local people benefited from the polluting companies, "things did not get out of hand."[64]

The rationale that economic dependency impedes environmental mobilization holds true in Huaxi. A key activist in the Huaxi environmental protest, who also considered the pollution from the plastic waste processing industry a serious threat to the health of the local people, lamented that there were "too many workshops related to this business"[65] and thus it would be impossible to take action against the pollution it produced. In Minghuan village, nearly every household was becoming rich from this business. More than 100 families in the village owned a car, which was (and is) a luxury in the countryside. As a result, most villagers seemed to be quite satisfied with the status quo. A prominent local entrepreneur explained: "The pollution is very serious in the village, but the masses do not have any complaints because they have reaped benefits from the recycling business."[66]

The distinction made by villagers between pollution produced by *wairen* 外人 (outsiders) and *zijiren* 自己人 (insiders) has had a negative effect on the mobilization of anti-pollution protests against the plastic waste recycling cottage industry. *Zijiren* could be family members, relatives, friends, or others with whom one has established a special relationship. For rural residents, people from the same village or the same town are considered to be *zijiren* and are often treated differently from *wairen*.[67] During our focus group interview, when the villagers were asked why they did not take action to address the pollution from the cottage industry, a former environmental activist answered bluntly: "Those workshops belong to our fellow villagers."[68] Other interviewees revealed that they did not take action against their neighbours because they did not want to damage relations in the neighbourhood.[69]

However, the history of contention has indeed left a mark and to some extent has blurred the boundary between pollution produced by *wairen* and pollution produced by *zijiren*. After the 2005 protest, the villagers began to monitor the two surviving factories that were operated by local entrepreneurs. According to a report on "Our living environment," submitted to the Dongyang county government by the Shunda 顺达 Dyeing Corporation on 28 August 2006, it was

63 Interview with a town leader, 17 July 2007. For using social ties to repress protesters, see Deng and O'Brien forthcoming.
64 Interview with a town cadre, 20 June 2007; also see Gould 1991.
65 Interview with a villager, 19 July 2007.
66 Interview with a local entrepreneur, 18 July 2007.
67 Tilt's study finds that local residents are especially aggrieved when outsiders (*waidiren*) run the polluting enterprises in their community but they bear the brunt of any pollution. See Tilt 2010, 94.
68 Interview with a villager, 27 May 2007.
69 It is worth noting that during the 2005 environmental protest, the two factories in the chemical industrial park operated by local entrepreneurs were treated much more leniently. In the end, they survived the protest even as the factories operated by "outsiders" were forced to shut down.

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clear that the factory was very "disturbed" by the villagers' environmental oversight:

> Since May this year, the Society of Senior Citizens in Huaxi No. 5 village has been sending members to our company to monitor us. Sometimes it's two or three villagers; sometimes larger groups. We once received three delegations in a single day, with one of them consisting of more than 70 people.

Conclusion

Our study of environmental protest in Huaxi shows that there are complex reasons for rural environmental protest in China and that pollution and protest are mediated by social and political contexts. Environmental damage in itself is an insufficient condition for the occurrence of protest. If citizens perceive a serious potential threat, they may protest in the absence of actual environmental damage. If political conditions favour other issues more than the environmental problems, they may seek to redress their environmental grievances by piggybacking on politically favourable issues. Finally, we have shown that, owing to the complexities of community relations and economic dependency on polluting enterprises, villagers may not engage in protest activities, even when they face actual pollution and health hazards.

The strategy of issue piggybacking has implications for grassroots environmental protest. Protests based solely on environmental claims are often powerless, but the interlocking of different issues makes it possible for victims to address environmental grievances by piggybacking on other issues that present greater political opportunities. The adoption of this strategy reflects both the constraints and the resourcefulness of social actors. In spirit, it is consistent with the strategies of rightful resistance.[70] Yet, at the same time, it also reflects the specific challenges faced by environmental protesters and the ambiguities and contested nature of environmental claims. Although not a focal point of our analysis, the difficulty of linking health threats to environmental pollution certainly made piggybacking land-related claims onto the protests a strategic choice. We would not be surprised if this strategy were to be used in future protests related to environment-related health issues.

Our study supports the argument made by some scholars that values are embedded in people's social and economic relations.[71] The implication of our findings is that the chances of environmental protest are contingent upon these other conditions and values. It means that the politics of environmental protest aimed at addressing rural environmental grievances must go beyond environmental pollution concerns to encompass broader issues such as socio-economic inequality, rural–urban imbalances, community values and social relations, as well as accountable governance.

70 O'Brien and Li 2006.
71 Tilt 2010; Lora-Wainwright 2010; Bauer 2006.

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