

## 7 Environmental protests in rural China

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China's environmental artery is bleeding. The problems of air pollution, soil erosion, and fouled water have become so grave that they are reported in the Chinese press practically every day, often accompanied by announcements of government plans to combat one ecological problem after another. What the Chinese news media rarely mention is the question of how ordinary people are reacting to the country's deepening environmental crisis. This question is addressed by looking at environmental protests in rural China, focusing on two specific cases. Environmental protests in the People's Republic are a relatively recent phenomenon. The promulgation of China's first environmental law, in 1979, has not only provided a legal basis for environmental protection but also enhanced the public's sense of basic rights in favor of justifying forceful, sometimes even violent, environmental protests. Such protests also embody a rich, culturally informed repertoire of social movements in Chinese history. Specifically, kinship, popular religion, moral concerns, and ancient tales of justice serve as crucial institutional and symbolic resources in the mobilization of protesters at the grassroots level. The interplay of these issues informs the social and cultural context in which rural environmental protests take place and are organized, usually with emphasis on ecological improvements essential for people's well-being rather than on trying to save the natural environment for its own sake.

Over the last two decades, an upsurge of environmentally related social protests has enabled many Chinese, both urban and rural, to air their grievances over the abuses of air, water, and land by industrial enterprises or development projects. These protests reflect the growing public awareness of a deepening environmental crisis, which is in effect the other side of the coin of China's vaunted rapid development in the post-Mao era. They also reveal the rising consciousness of legal rights in rural communities, partly as a result of China's promulgation of environmental laws since the late 1970s. Of special note is the emphasis in rural environmental protests on protecting people's welfare, not on preserving nature for its own sake. Informed by a historically sanctioned repertoire of popular protest, this people-centered orientation is derived from social concerns over an increasingly endangered ecological environment.

### A brief explication: why rural China?

More than 70 percent of China's people live in rural areas, mostly on land that has been intensively farmed for centuries. Over the past 50 years, the precarious ecology of soil and water, already pushed to their limits to sustain a large population, has come under even greater strain with the drive toward industrialization and rapid economic development. Ambitious development projects of the Maoist era and the post-Mao economic reforms have in many ways improved general living standards. But they have also inflicted immense environmental damage in a countryside that could ill afford it. One result has been mounting protests against industrial polluters and ill-conceived projects that jeopardize the livelihood of rural residents. I have chosen to focus on rural-based environmental protests because these have been a rarely studied aspect of rural life in China and also because so much of the environmental movement literature elsewhere has focused urban activists.

In preparation for this chapter, I reviewed official records of 278 environmental disputes dating from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Of these, forty-seven involved forceful popular protests in rural China, which ranged from collective lawsuits and petition movements to sabotage and even riots. These official records reveal how a severe conflict between unbridled development and ecological balance has placed many villagers on the front-lines of environmentally related political action in China, both in identifying problems and in seeking to solve them, by influencing government policies, the behavior of enterprises, and even court decisions. To make better sense of the rise of environmental protests in the Chinese countryside, I focus my discussion on two specific cases. Both were encountered in the course of my field research, enabling me to interview the protest organizers. Central to this discussion is an analysis of what can be characterized as a 'cultural and symbolic life-world.' I use this phrase to call attention to the ways by which environmental protests are influenced by and connected to kinship ideology, popular religion, and customary practices within the settings of everyday life in village China.

### Background information

After the most devastating floods in more than forty years hit the Yangzi River valley in the summer of 1998, Chinese officials acknowledged the contribution of human activity, even public policy, to the devastation. The settlements in flood plains had eliminated areas of water absorption for the expanding river, while excessive logging had removed forests that once helped check the rain's flow into the Yangzi. In 1950, about 25 percent of the river's middle section was forested. Since then, more than half of the forests have disappeared.

Deforestation, in fact a nationwide problem, leads to soil erosion and the consequent loss of arable land. But other forces are at play as well. From 1979 to 1986, about 19 million acres of arable land were lost under the combined assault of soil erosion, urbanization, and industrialization. Since then, another four million

acres have been lost each year. Industrial projects alone claimed 1.5 million acres a year. The degradation of water and air quality is even more disturbing. A 1988 survey of 532 rivers found 436 badly polluted; 80 percent of the waste water discharged into these rivers was untreated. In 1993, roughly 8 percent of farmlands received river water so polluted that it was unfit for use, leading to an estimated loss in grain production of one million tons. In major cities today, levels of total suspended particulates and sulfur dioxide are two to five times the World Health Organization's guidelines. Fouled air is responsible for 178,000 deaths a year, mostly in cities. Rural residents are also affected by air pollution, particularly since sulfur dioxide and nitrous oxide emissions react with atmospheric water and oxygen to form acid rain, damaging forests, crops, and human health.<sup>3</sup>

China's central leadership was first awakened to the hazards of environmental degradation in 1972, when Dalian Bay in the far northeast turned black with untreated industrial waste. In the same year, state authorities read the startling report that fish in a Beijing reservoir had been poisoned by heavy metal discharged from neighboring factories. But it was not until 1979 that China's first Environmental Protection Law was promulgated, on a trial basis. By 1989, it was revised for full implementation. During the intervening decade, the central government put unprecedented effort into environmental protection, adopting more laws, imposing heavier penalties for violations, and applying advanced technology to control pollution. One result of this effort was the creation of the National Environmental Protection Agency, established in 1979; its network of 70,000 employees has been extended to every county. More recently, a few non-governmental organizations have emerged in the larger Chinese cities. Of these, the best known are 'Friends of Nature' and 'Global Village of Beijing,' founded in 1994 and 1995, respectively. The priority of these citizens' organizations, usually led by intellectuals, is to raise public awareness of environmental issues through exhibitions, organized tree-planting trips, and tours of wildlife areas.

It was precisely during the experimental phase of China's Environmental Protection Law that environmental protests swept both urban and rural areas. Before this period, environmental protests were relatively rare, and they were often quickly suppressed by the government. Leaders of the few documented environmental protests prior to 1979 were treated harshly by local officials, and some of them were even thrown in jail and charged with a so-called 'counter-revolutionary crime.' Although subsequently removed from Chinese law, this charge was once used with devastating effect against organizers of different kinds of social protests. With the passage of the 1979 Environmental Protection Law, the government has become more tolerant of environmental protests, so long as they are not too disruptive. Most have been small-scale actions by people immediately affected by a local polluter or engineering project. These victim interest groups have almost always engaged in direct protests in the form of petitions, lawsuits, and even sabotage. Typical goals are compensation for damages, the installation of pollution-control technologies, and occasionally the relocation of serious offenders. The victim interest groups are the focal point in my discussion of the two rural cases of environmental protest examined here.

### A village's struggle for clean water

The first case involves Dachuan, a village in Gansu province, northwest China, in a decades-long protest movement against a fertilizer factory. The village and the factory are separated by only a paved road and a railroad. Most of Dachuan's 3,600 residents earn their living from agriculture. The factory is run by the provincial government and produces urea. None of its 3,000 salaried employees is from Dachuan. Since it began operations in 1971, the factory has been discharging its waste water into a stream that runs through Dachuan's fields before entering the Yellow River. This section of the river, until 1981 the village's only source of drinking water, became severely contaminated.

Through repeated protests, the village made the factory build a pipeline to deliver clean water to six of the village's eight production teams in 1981 and another team in 1992. One team was left without clean water as late as 1998. By then, the factory claimed to have invested 16 million yuan in pollution control. That the river remained contaminated, the factory said, was caused by technical problems that it was doing its best to fix. No legal action was taken by the local county government's environmental protection agency, partly because the factory is a provincial-level enterprise whose jurisdiction extends beyond that of the local county government. County and township officials also discouraged Dachuan from filing a civil lawsuit, fearing that it would cost too much money and that Dachuan still might not win against a big business whose powerful connections extended from the provincial government to the court system. Dachuan's only choice was to engage in self-organized protests.

With legal avenues barred, villagers turned to social protest. I witnessed one protest action taken by Dachuan villagers against the fertilizer factory in 1996. A flash flood had swept down the 2-kilometer-long stream that runs from the factory to the Yellow River, destroying a bridge linking Dachuan with the local township seat. Dachuan's village head and a fish merchant led 200 local residents to the factory, blocked its entrance and demanded that the factory rebuild the bridge. The factory was held accountable for repairing the collapsed bridge because the stream had once been only 20 meters wide, but the factory's daily discharge of 360 cubic meters of waste water had widened it to 60 meters. This required Dachuan to build a longer bridge for the local people to go to the township seat. The village cadres of Dachuan held the factory responsible for rebuilding the bridge over the much widened and heavily contaminated stream.

As in previous protests, the villagers cited the factory's contamination of the water and its unfulfilled obligations to Dachuan. The protesters asked the factory's security guards to tell factory officials to come out with their wives and children to drink up ten plastic bottles of water the villagers had brought from the contaminated stream. They promised never to come back to demonstrate again if the factory's Party secretary, general manager, and their families came out and drank the foul water in front of the crowd. Similar demands had been made during previous protests, usually accompanied by accusing questions: If factory employees and their families dare not drink from the stream, how can

management expect local villagers not to demand safe drinking water? Aren't the rural people as human as the factory workers? Are the lives of the village's children worth less than those of factory children? On this occasion in 1996, the factory's Party secretary and general manager, following what they had done in the past, refused to come out to talk with the agitated villagers. So a group of young people from Dachuan drove ten tractors up to the factory, each carrying a full load of contaminated water from the stream. Using rubber pipes, they shot the water over the factory wall. After 10 days of bombardment by demonstrators, the factory agreed to provide Dachuan with 150,000 yuan to build a new bridge and repair a pump to provide tap water to more than 600 people in the village's seventh production team who were still drinking from the polluted river.

The village's initial appeals to the factory had not been antagonistic. They evolved into fierce protests when the local people gradually came fully to appreciate the threat that the polluted water posed to human health and agricultural production, while the factory's corrective measures always fell short of the village's expectations. In retrospect, Dachuan's protests went through four stages. At first, the villagers were not acutely aware of how harmful the contamination was, although the factory's discharge of incompletely burned fuel already left on the water surface many patches of carbon black. They would wait for the carbon black to float downstream before drawing water for drinking and cooking. It was not until the mid-1970s, when a horse and thirty sheep went blind that the villagers began to realize that drinking from the river could be utterly harmful to human health too. Dachuan's village cadres went to the factory to voice their complaint. As a gesture of redress, one that left the problem of water pollution unresolved, the factory agreed to take a limited step of compensation by hiring temporary workers from the village and by providing the village with fertilizers at a below-market price.

The second phase of Dachuan's protest movement coincided with the breakup of agricultural communes in 1980-81, when farmland was distributed to individual households to manage. A stretch of cultivated fields along the polluted stream was turned over to households whose members numbered more than 100 people. But the stream was so contaminated that the crops along the banks were damaged from excess ammonia. When villagers working these fields demanded action to solve the problem, Dachuan's cadres led the villagers in a blockade of the factory gate, preventing the factory's trucks from making deliveries. This initial blockade lasted only one day, but then other villagers joined to demand the factory solve the drinking water problem. After three more days of demonstrations, the factory agreed to supply tap water to Dachuan's village proper.

The third phase of the village's protests began in the mid-1980s, within the context of China's birth-control policy. In a stepped-up effort, the county government restricted rural couples from having more than two children and imposed a 3-year interval between the first and second births. As forced abortions were performed, human reproduction became a dominant subject of anxious conversation among the villages. It was around this time that a fertility temple in Dachuan attracted a growing number of worshippers. Meanwhile, speculation

about the causes of stillbirths and birth defects in the village increasingly focused on the factory, prompting the village to resume its protests.

The liberalization of the Chinese economy also had a direct impact on Dachuan's protests, as seen in the fourth phase of the village's struggle against the factory, from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. In this period, Dachuan demonstrated against the factory every year, in protests ranging from small rallies to major blockades. Resentment of the factory's threat to people's health grew along with concerns over the village's fish ponds. These had multiplied from a handful in the early 1980s to more than 300 by the early 1990s, mostly for raising Yellow River Carp. The fish ponds depended on drawing water from the Yellow River, which remained polluted.

The four phases of Dachuan's protests represent a 'cognitive revolution.' By that I refer to the process whereby the villagers' understanding of water pollution advanced at several critical points, as when dozens of domesticated animals went blind, when special health problems were recognized in response to the state's population policy, and when the village's economic development was put at risk by the factory. The cumulative effect of this process was a comprehensive understanding of the damaging consequences of water pollution, rather than just one aspect of the problem as in the past. Human health, however, remained the most contentious issue in each phase of the village's struggle against the factory. This issue will be fully explored after introducing the next case.

### **Petitions for a livable environment**

This case is the first confirmed protest movement against officials in charge of local population resettlement for the Three Gorges Dam project on the Yangzi River. The petition movement unfolded in 1997 among more than 10,000 rural residents in Gaoyang township, Yunyang county (now under the municipality of Chongqing in China's southwest). Still gathering force at this writing, the Gaoyang petition movement began with accusations against local officials on three points. First, the petitioners blamed county officials for not distributing the full financial compensation that the central government already allocated for local people either to resettle on higher ground nearby or to move to other counties. Second, township officials were accused of embezzling resettlement funds. Third, the petitioners claimed that corruption among township officials and village cadres was responsible for a failed land reclamation project, which had been funded by the central government for local resettlers to move into a livable environment. The third accusation, dealing with the environmental aspects of the Gaoyang petition movement, is the primary concern of the case summary below. The relevant information is selected from three petition letters, ten government documents (including a police report), published studies of the Three Gorges Dam project, and two intensive interviews I had with the petition movement's organizers during my field research in the county of Yunyang in 1998.

The Three Gorges Dam project is unprecedented in terms of physical size and

the number of people slated for relocation. The project, whose construction began in 1994, cost at least the equivalent of U.S. \$25 billion, for capital construction and population resettlement. The government plan calls for the dam, whose construction began in late 1994, to be 185 meters high and 2,000 meters wide, holding back a reservoir extending 640 kilometers upstream. The dam's generating capacity of nearly 18,000 megawatts would be 50 percent greater than the world's current largest hydroelectric station, Itaipu in Paraguay. The first group of generators in the dam is to begin operating in the year 2003, requiring the reservoir water to rise to 135 meters above sea level. The entire project, scheduled for completion by 2009, requires the relocation of at least 1.3 million people. More than half of the resettlers, living in 1,352 villages, need new farmland to restart their lives.<sup>4</sup> An experiment for transferring some of the rural resettlers into factories to ease the pressures on land was dropped completely in 1997, as unemployment in the Three Gorges area rose to 20 percent of the industrial work force, a problem that also afflicted other parts of China in the aftermath of a government decision to restructure the state-owned industrial sector.

In Gaoyang, where the petition movement took place, the only way to find extra farmland is to build terraces on higher ground. But even the most successful land reclamation would fall far short of providing enough arable land. For Gaoyang has 25,118 rural residents and only 16,950 *mu* of arable land. This comes to just 0.6 *mu* of arable land per person, already an extremely low figure to sustain a livelihood from farming. The shortages of land are bound to become more severe in Gaoyang, considering that the Three Gorges project entails the inundation of 40 percent of Gaoyang's farmland and the resettlement of 60 percent of Gaoyang's rural residents. Since many of these people wanted to stay in the vicinity to be close to relatives and fellow villagers, they desperately looked to the land reclamation project as a way to rebuild the foundation of their livelihood.

The state provided land reclamation funds to township officials to manage and for village cadres to distribute as payment for labor. By 1995, the reclamation project was supposed to provide at least some of the relocating villagers with access to new land. But one village after another discovered that many of the so-called terraced lands were not flat, had little topsoil, and were too scattered to farm. Local officials, however, had reported to higher authorities that these were usable fields. Furthermore, village cadres and township officials were found to have falsely included in their reclamation reports already cultivated farmland and even some fields that did not exist at all. In total, the petition movement's organizers told the central government, nearly 1,000 *mu* of the allegedly reclaimed land were unusable or nonexistent. They charged that much of the land reclamation funds, amounting to three million yuan, had been embezzled by local officials.

The petitioners spelled out in their first letter to the central government what they thought would happen in Gaoyang if wrongdoing among local officials was not checked:

In the future, when desperate resettlers rush to government compounds begging for food, what then? And, what if these impoverished throngs decide to rush onto the streets of our cities and large urban areas to stage demonstrations to protest the embezzlement of compensation funds by local officials and to demand restitution of these monies? . . . If the central government takes no action until conflicts break out, the lessons to be learned will be learned too late.

To send this warning, the petitioners organized a village-by-village investigation into the so-called reclaimed lands that in fact had been never reclaimed or did not exist at all. They then wrote in the petition letter:

According to our investigation, such false claims cover the following villages: 275 *mu* by Liutou, 285 *mu* by Hongmiao, 20 *mu* by Pailou, 25 *mu* by Lishu, 128 *mu* by Gaoyang, 70 *mu* by Tuanbao, 125 *mu* by Zouma, 130 *mu* by Mingchong, 25 *mu* by Tongxi, and 10 *mu* by Tianzhuang. Together, these add up to 993 *mu* of land that was falsely claimed as reclaimed and arable land.

After the first letter from Gaoyang reached Beijing by mail, officials in the city of Chongqing were told to investigate. Chongqing had been recently separated from the jurisdiction of Sichuan province and granted a special municipality status – joining Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai – under the direct supervision of the central government. This move allowed Chongqing to incorporate smaller cities and rural counties in the upper part of the Three Gorges that had been part of Sichuan. All these cities and counties will be partially flooded once the dam is built. In fact, 80 percent of the people slated for resettlement live in these cities and counties. The remaining 20 percent are in the downstream province of Hubei.

The initial investigation by Chongqing authorities only scratched the surface of Gaoyang's problems. But it led to more investigations. Meanwhile, a second petition letter was sent to Beijing. By mid-1998, the Party secretary and five top officials of Gaoyang township were sacked. The Party secretary and one of the sacked officials were arrested and imprisoned. However, these officials were brought down not on charges related to land reclamation but because they were found to have taken bribes in the construction of Gaoyang's new township seat, which is relatively small and can accommodate only a few hundred resettlers. The failed land reclamation, by contrast, is politically explosive. It affects thousands of rural residents and its publicity may cast serious doubts as to whether the Three Gorges Dam project can deal effectively with the many problems of rural resettlement in an already bleak ecological environment.

With the reclamation problem still unsolved, local officials moved against the two leading petitioners. An internal county government document accused them of having been troublemakers during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), adding that police should deal sternly with them if they engaged in any action that might constitute a criminal offense. To eliminate support for the petitioners at the

village level, the county government launched, in August 1998, a 'laws and village security' campaign, and villagers were told to dissociate themselves from the petition movement. Fearing retaliation from local officials, the two men leading the petition movement hurried to Beijing to submit the third petition. There, they hand-delivered it to the 'Offices for Receiving People's Letters and Visits' operating under the State Council, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, and the Three Gorges Construction Committee.

The Gaoyang case shows that the petitioners were keenly aware that their challenge to official wrongdoings must be framed in terms acceptable to the central government, for their challenge raised serious questions on the feasibility of the politically glorified Three Gorges project. This case also demonstrates the strong consciousness of political and civil rights on the part of the petitioners. As the two leading petitioners told a sociology student who helped them type and print their third petition letter, their visit to Beijing was aimed at establishing an official record of their constitutionally protected right to write letters to national leaders to expose the wrongdoings of local officials.

### **Chinese culture and the nature of environmental protest**

At the beginning of this chapter, it was mentioned that the two protest movements under discussion operated within a 'cultural and symbolic life-world.' To explain exactly what this means, I first suggest that an overtly political protest may achieve an immediate success but be incapable of further elaboration. I further argue that a protest is most effective when it resonates with a society's value system and its symbolic manifestations. Among the most important of these are death rituals, cosmological beliefs, or the telling and retelling of morality tales from history. To elaborate this point, I will analyze the Dachuan case of a descent group and the local worship of fertility goddesses. For Gaoyang, my analysis is concerned with funeral symbolism and its meaning for the petition movement. For both cases, I will underscore the relevance of Chinese culture to environmental protests.

#### *Kinship and fertility goddesses: the Dachuan case*

At first glance, it would seem that Dachuan's protests against the fertilizer factory were led by the village committee in cooperation with the leaders of the village's eight production teams. A closer look, however, reveals the indelible influence of a dominant lineage in the village's organized struggle for safe drinking water. More than 85 percent of Dachuan's households are surnamed Kong and trace their ancestry to Confucius (Kong Fuzi in Chinese).<sup>5</sup> Until the early 1950s, the Kongs were organized as a formal lineage. They maintained an ancestral hall, held an annual ceremony of ancestor worship, and used the incomes from more than 200 *mu* of land to finance rituals, local defense, and a primary school. Institutionally speaking, the Kong lineage collapsed in the Maoist era but made a partial recovery later, as embodied in the reconstruction of the Kong ancestor

hall in 1991. The Kongs also dominated Dachuan politically. From 1958 to 1998, the village chief, the local Communist Party boss, and the accountant-general were all surnamed Kong, despite leadership reshuffles.<sup>6</sup>

So, given the lineage-grounded framework of Dachuan's organizational structure, it is no surprise that the village cadres tapped into the collective identity of the Kongs to mobilize protests against the factory. Above all, they emphasized the factory's threat to the ability of the Kongs to have healthy babies. This concern was a major catalyst for the reconstruction of four temples on a mountain behind the main residential area of Dachuan. Leveled by government decree during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), these temples were fully rebuilt in the mid-1980s. Six goddesses and one male deity (a water-control god) were enshrined, in the form of elaborately painted clay statues of varying sizes. Each goddess is believed to possess the ability to help women give birth, protect young children, and cure life-threatening diseases.

The new enshrinement of the six goddesses merged together two types of anxiety-ridden experience: the effect of the Chinese government's population policy and the increasing awareness in Dachuan of the fertilizer factory's threat to people's health, especially the physical well-being of women and children. In Yongjing county, where Dachuan is located, a central government policy for birth control was implemented locally through much of the 1970s. Partly because of this policy, Yongjing county's birthrate of forty newborns per 1,000 population in 1968 declined to eighteen newborns per 1,000 population in 1978. By 1982, 3 years after the central government made its rural birth-limitation policy even tougher, the annual birthrate in Yongjing county declined to thirteen births per 1,000 population. To further reduce population growth, the county government adopted a stricter quota of two births for a rural couple and imposed a requirement of 3 years of spacing between the first and second births. A second child was allowed even if the first was a boy. To quell resistance to the birth quota, the county government organized officials, doctors, and policemen into special task forces to enforce the birth quota and the spacing of births. Dachuan became the target of one of these task forces, because government officials believed that Dachuan had too many *hei haizi*, or 'black babies.' That is to say, women in Dachuan found different ways to disguise their pregnancies and hide their unregistered newborns.

The implementation of the population policy was Janus-faced. On one side, forcible means were adopted. Using intrauterine devices was compulsory, routinely checked by sent-down doctors. Tubal ligations of young women who had given births to two or more children were performed at local clinics, by force when resistance was encountered. On the other side, persuasion was utilized. Blackboards were erected at a major intersection in Dachuan and a loudspeaker system was utilized by village cadres to publicize official recommendations for public health. These recommendations, in line with national campaigns, promoted what was described as 'scientific childcare' (*kexue yu er*). Through radio and television, simplified questions and answers were provided to why having fewer children is important to the rural family and the well-being of the next

generation of young people. Specific recommendations covered pregnancy tests, breast feeding, weaning, and nutrition.

The impact of this combination of education and coercion was deeply felt in Dachuan. In interviews with six upper middle-age women who went from door to door to raise money for making deity statues, they said that local women did not associate miscarriages and stillbirths with the fertilizer factory's discharge of waste water until the government embarked on the education drive to promote scientific childcare. Moreover, they said that concerns for women and children's health were stimulated by an experimental program to immunize rural children against infectious diseases. This government-funded program brought a team of doctors from a county hospital to Dachuan every year. Local children stood in lines to receive the immunization shots while their mothers talked with the doctors and nurses. This was a perfect opportunity for village women to obtain free advice for the sake of their own and their children's health.

Repeatedly, the doctors told the inquirers that it was dangerous to drink from the polluted Yellow River. It could cause, the doctors said, miscarriages and stillbirths as well as mental retardation and stunted growth for children. The doctors' warning was made more alarming by the televised reports of environmental problems elsewhere in China. One report was about water pollution in south China and its effect on pregnant women. Among those who paid special attention to this report was the village's Party boss, who was the most powerful man in Dachuan but had no biological child of his own. His wife had suffered several miscarriages, after which the couple decided to adopt a little girl. No boys were available for adoption in Dachuan or in nearby villages. Convinced that his wife's miscarriages were caused by the fouled water, the Party boss played a leading role in the village's protests against the factory. His adopted daughter later married a Mr. Xi, a junior township official. Instead of moving out of Dachuan, she remained and her husband came to live with her. If they had two sons, the newlyweds promised at a witnessed ceremony, one would bear the surname Kong, after his mother's adoptive father, to prevent his patrilineal line of descent from breaking down.

Although Dachuan's Party boss stated in public that he did not condone the worship of fertility goddesses, he was once seen taking a portion of the food offerings from a goddess temple to bring home when most visitors had left after a midnight ceremony. The food offerings are considered blessed by the enshrined goddesses and are expected to enhance the health of children and adults alike. This expectation is based on the popular belief that people and deities enjoy a reciprocal relationship. Temple rituals suggest that deities depend on regular worship and offerings, which make them strong and powerful. So when food offerings to deities are ample and regular, supplicants can hope for a return, which includes the blessed foods to take home. There are many expressions of this belief. For example, new temple-goers in Dachuan were often told by regular visitors that they should let their children eat some of the food offerings to 'ensure peace and safety' (*bao ping an*).

Dachuan's most popular goddesses were known as *sanzhao niangniang*, or

'Three Heavenly Mothers.' Their half-life-sized statues in a temple called *bai zi gong* (the Palace of One Hundred Sons) were adorned with silk attire. Attached to their clothes, necks, and arms were homemade embroideries. Many of the embroideries were embellished with stylized fish, lotus flowers or half-open pomegranates. Because fish produce a multitude of eggs at one time and a pomegranate or a lotus flower contains many seeds, they became fertility symbols on these embroideries. Other embroideries had tiny human figures in the image of little boys, sitting atop a fish, playing with a lotus flower, or climbing out of a pomegranate. These religious artworks were constantly replaced by new embroideries from villagers seeking to have babies. After a simple rite of offering money and incense, the temple's embroidery could then be taken home. It was usually kept in a couple's bed for bringing in a boy in a timely fashion and for keeping the power of fertility goddesses inside the house to protect the baby to be born in the future.

In retrospect, the new enshrinement of fertility goddesses represented a pent-up sense of urgency to have babies quickly and safely, constituting a religiously grounded manifestation of the village's concerns over the factory's polluting water. It is hence by no means an accident that one of the major demands in Dachuan's protests against the factory was framed in terms of the continuity of the family line and the health of village women and children. More specifically, the village cadres vowed to end the protests only on one of two conditions. First, the whole village must have safe drinking water. Second, the protests could be ended if the factory's top leaders, their wives, children, and grandchildren would each drink one small bottle of the heavily polluted water fetched from the contaminated stream leading to the Yellow River. Considering that safe drinking water had been available to the families of the factory's own employees since the factory was founded, Dachuan's second condition for ending its protests was an especially stirring one. It was a demand that the factory leaders do for the villagers precisely what they had done for the protection of their own families.

#### *Funeral symbolism and internal trust: the Gaoyang case*

Organized protests in China and elsewhere in the world often embrace some culturally meaningful symbols and a politically adept language. In the Gaoyang case, this tendency was embodied in three petition letters, secret meetings to select the petition movement's leaders, and emphasis on loyalty. In the three petition letters, the central government's resettlement policies were lauded but described as being jeopardized by local officials. These letters included diplomatically phrased statements to win over central authorities by saying that the petitioners fully endorsed the goal of constructing a world-class dam to provide electricity for national development and understood that even though the project required local villagers to make considerable sacrifices, the state had designed sound compensatory measures in return. According to these letters, corrupt local officials had sabotaged central policies and had to be investigated by the state. In

other words, the articulation of grievances in these letters echoed the rhetorical themes of popular protests throughout China's dynastic history: The emperor is just and kind but his benevolence is being thwarted by evil local officials.

By contrast, the manner in which local participants were mobilized to join the petition movement could be quite threatening to the state. In launching the petition movement, village meetings were held without the knowledge of township officials, and these secret meetings resulted in the selection of forty representatives from all the fourteen affected villages in Gaoyang to form a unified petition team. By secret ballot, this team chose three leaders, who then took an oath pledging fairly to represent the participating villages. One of the three leaders was Gaoyang's retired Communist Party head. He later quit the petition movement under government pressure involving his family, relatives, and former colleagues.

The petition movement leaders' oath also bound them never to betray their comrades and supporters even in the face of official persecution. Emblematic of this resolve and as part of the plan to deliver the first letter to Beijing, the forty-member team decided to make 100 white gowns inscribed with three slogans written in black characters: 'Resettlers Want a Meeting with Higher Authorities; Resettlers Want to Express Their Grievances; and Resettlers Want to Live.' The planned trip to Beijing was immediately exposed by an informer, and local officials responded quickly. The petitioners who had been selected to go to Beijing were ordered not to leave Gaoyang and were told to surrender their petition letter to county officials. Angry officials at the township level warned a rural businessman that if he paid to have the white gowns made, as he had promised at a secret meeting, he would forfeit his business license.

It is easy to understand why the officials did not want the letter to be delivered. But why were they enraged by the white gowns? Was it simply because they would display three protest slogans? To address these questions, it should be remembered that white is the traditional Chinese color of death and mourning. It is the color of funeral trappings such as wreaths, paper flowers, poetic couplets, and attire, including caps, gowns, and shoes.<sup>7</sup> The transfer of funeral symbolism to social protests actually is an important feature of China's political culture. In Beijing, popular demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in 1976 and 1989 usurped the official mourning for a national leader, turning it into a forum to express anger with the political regime.<sup>8</sup> At Hong Kong University in 1998, a sculpture of twisted human bodies was erected to honor those killed in the military suppression of the Tiananmen protests nine years earlier. In New York City, Chinese restaurant workers paraded white wreaths in a 1996 strike against an exploitative employer. In Taiwan, demonstrations against a nuclear plant engaged in what the local newspapers called a 'battle of the coffins' when protesters carried four coffins to the plant and set up a spirit altar.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the specific symbols of death and funeral used in these situations, the ultimate statement being made was that a serious crime had been committed.

The messages intended by such funeral trappings can vary, and the Gaoyang petitioners' plan to wear white gowns for delivering their first letter to the central

government was meant not only to express grievances but also to convey their readiness to die for their cause. So high were the risks they were taking when they accused local officials and so unpredictable the consequences of their taking on the Three Gorges Dam project that the Gaoyang petitioners feared for possible imprisonment and even execution. The white gowns thus symbolized their preparation for martyrdom. In fact, as soon as she heard about the white gowns, the frightened wife of one of the petition leaders asked him for a divorce, as a way to protect herself and her children in case her husband were arrested or executed as a criminal.

The informer's disclosure of their plan to secretly visit Beijing and the withdrawal of one petition leader under pressure heightened the movement organizers' appreciation of the danger of betrayal. While speaking of their determination to go as far as dying for the petition movement, they tried hard to build internal trust by emphasizing the righteousness of their cause and the unspeakable nature of disloyalty. In so doing, they repeatedly made references to the unfortunate example of Song Jiang in *Outlaws of the Marshes*, an epic story about rebellions in the twelfth century that evolved from a written narrative from 1400 to an extended edition in 1641.

Largely a work of literary imagination based on the slightest historical evidence, the story features 108 bandit-heroes led by Song Jiang, a petty official who had numerous unpleasant encounters with the law but maintained a sense of loyalty to the throne. Even as a bandit chieftain who coined the popular slogan of 'Doing Justice in the Name of Heaven,' Song Jiang sought and received an imperial pardon; his decision to surrender his forces to the state and to lead them in government campaigns against other rebels was only grudgingly approved by his followers and set the stage for wrenching conflicts of loyalty. Song Jiang's respect for the throne rivaled his devotion to his sworn brother-rebels, who followed his lead only to meet tragic ends.

References to Song Jiang in Gaoyang's petition movement needed no elaboration; his legend had been recounted over the centuries by storytellers, portrayed in local operas, and more recently turned into television dramas. Every petitioner appreciated the irony of Song Jiang's death at the hands of corrupt officials who had him poisoned in the emperor's name. Every petitioner also knew that Song Jiang's surrender to the throne did not benefit his followers but instead led them to deadly situations from which they did not return alive.

It would be misleading to suggest, however, that the Gaoyang petitioners cited Song Jiang as a negative example while favoring other rebels in the novel who had little respect for state authorities. The petitioners wanted their grievances to be heard by the central government, which remained in their eyes the ultimate institution that might offer them real help. Like the symbolism of white gowns in confirming their willingness to die, reference to Song Jiang was an evocation of the petition movement's unpredictable consequences. In both instances, the petition leaders justified their actions by borrowing from China's cultural and historic legacies.

### Conclusion: environmental crisis and local protests

To situate the Dachuan and Gaoyang cases in the broader context of similar protests, it is important to recognize that China's environmental problems evolved into a severe crisis in the 1980s and that that crisis persisted into the 1990s. Two major transformations of Chinese society under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party were responsible for this environmental crisis. From the 1950s through much of the 1970s, the Chinese government under the leadership of Mao Zedong pursued variants of the Soviet model of development so as to transform a largely agrarian country into an industrial society. Mao's economic program resulted in a basic infrastructure for development in favor of heavy, military, and chemical industries. The introduction of rural reforms in the late 1970s and the initiation of urban reforms in the mid-1980s started off the country's transformation away from a command economy to a market-oriented one. Official statistics show that between 1978 and 1995 China's per capita GDP growth averaged 8 percent a year; other statistics suggest a growth rate of 6–7 percent. Still, whatever the precise figure, China's economic growth in these years was almost unprecedented. Only South Korea and Taiwan had similar rates.

The development strategy under Mao that laid down China's industrial infrastructure and the unbridled growth in the post-Mao era that lifted at least 100 million people out of absolute poverty have turned out to be extremely damaging to China's natural environment. Take for example Guangdong province, home to one of China's fastest growing regional economies. In 1996 alone, the Guangdong provincial government had to shut down 739 factories so as to ease the excessive discharges of waste water and waste gas that had made the air and rivers in Guangdong dangerously polluted.<sup>10</sup> And in 1997, official delegations were urgently dispatched by the central government to the provinces of Henan, Jiangsu, Shandong, and Anhui to investigate and discipline 1,562 factories for turning the Huai River, the third largest waterway in China, into a belt of blackened water too polluted for irrigation and unsafe to drink.<sup>11</sup>

Although many studies and news reports on China's environmental problems are available, no scholarly or government surveys have been conducted on environmental protests. One source to locate some information on environmental protests in China is the official publications of what is known as "selected cases of environmental disputes." Chosen for their pedagogical effect and for use in environmental law enforcement, these documents reveal that petitioning government agencies, filing lawsuits, and staging demonstrations are the three leading forms of environmental protests in rural China. Urban areas are no exception either. In fact, urbanites may be quicker than rural residents to engage in blockades, sabotage, and even collective violence, which government and court officials identify as 'extreme action in environmental disputes.' Of eighty-eight environmental disputes in urban and suburban Shanghai recorded in a case-by-case publication released by the Shanghai Municipal Agency of Environmental Protection, forty-four of these predominantly urban disputes involved 'extreme action' and only five resorted to the judicial system.<sup>12</sup> Compare this



with forty-seven disputes in rural areas recorded in two publications of the Chinese Environmental Science Press. Only eleven of these rural disputes involved 'extreme action,' whereas twenty-five were handled by the court, with verdicts rendered mostly in favor of the rural litigants.<sup>13</sup> Since these were selected cases rather than survey findings, the relevant court rulings should not be readily taken as evidence of the effectiveness of China's legal system in protecting the rural population against environmental damage. But they are indicative of the growing trend to take environmental issues to court.

The reasons behind the documented urban and rural differences with regard to the use of 'extreme action' – which often has involved collective violence – are complex and may have to do with a stronger sense of entitlement among urban Shanghai residents. Nonetheless, the use of violent means to retaliate against industrial polluters is still a significant form of protest in the rural disputes and a quarter of the recorded rural cases led to violence such as scuffles, sabotage, harassment and forceful detention of factory leaders.<sup>14</sup> The greater resort to the judicial system in the countryside, on the other hand, can be traced to the limited power of local, especially county-level, governments in imposing administrative penalties against violators of China's environmental laws. By these laws, a county-level government can punish only those enterprises operating under its administrative jurisdiction. These include county, township, village, and private enterprises. A county government, however, cannot resort to administrative penalties, such as imposing fines or shutting down facilities, to punish industrial polluters if they are beyond its administrative jurisdiction. In these situations, the power of administrative punishment, as written in environmental laws, is rendered useless.

An alternative is to ask the victims to file a civil lawsuit to be handled by the court system. That this has been done frequently explains why over half of the rural disputes I have mentioned above resulted in lawsuits. But even if a provincial-level enterprise is sued and held responsible by a county court, it would appeal and bring the lawsuit to a higher court where it expects to be judged more favorably than in the county court. This is certainly why in the Dachuan case I have discussed, the village cadres did not go to court, following the advice of township and county officials who claimed to have a better knowledge of how the judicial system would handle a lawsuit against the nearby fertilizer factory, which is a provincial-level enterprise.

And in other environmentally related protests such as that of the Gaoyang case, China's environmental laws can hardly be applied at all for political reasons or due to special government decisions. It is widely known, for example, that the construction of the Three Gorges Dam will further damage an already fragile ecological system along the Yangzi River, especially the middle and lower reaches. But since this is a state-sponsored construction project of unusual political importance, its devastating environmental impact is not subject to the possible scrutiny of the country's environmental laws. Instead, the problem has been treated by national leaders as a policy issue and as a matter of lesser importance than that of flood control and power generation.

The rise of environmental protests in China in the past 20 years is emblematic of the growing consciousness of community and individual rights among ordinary citizens as well as the cumulative effect of newly promulgated laws. In rural areas particularly, the inauguration of drastic economic and administrative changes in the 1980s and 1990s has led to a readjustment of state-society relations. Economic liberalization included agricultural decollectivization, marketization, and the legitimization of geographical mobility and the private sector. Administrative reforms were typified by the promulgation of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees and the Administration Litigation Law, in 1987 and 1990, respectively.

These changes altered the power relations in village China, sometimes weakening the political base of rural cadres and leading to incidents in which ordinary villagers took upon themselves the task of organizing the local people to defend their community and individual rights. The Gaoyang case is an apt example of this trend, whereas the Dachuan case reveals the close cooperation of village cadres and local residents in a community struggle for clean water. Both cases demonstrate that Chinese villagers can become instant political activists when their livelihood is threatened. Of course, the concrete means of organizing themselves to engage in popular protests are dependent on other factors such as government policies, bureaucratic reactions, and state laws.<sup>15</sup>

On the basis of my study of the Dachuan and Gaoyang cases and my examination of forty-seven similar rural cases (as documented in the two official publications mentioned earlier), I suggest that environmentally related protests in the Chinese countryside display four characteristics that deserve to be emphasized. First, Chinese culture plays a central role in the mobilization of participants. This is often done through appeals to kinship ties, village unity, popular religion, and the security of the rural family. Second, economic grievances, health claims, or legal demands are accompanied by distinctly moral judgments and a remarkable sense of entitlement for a society with a poor record of human rights. Third, protest organizers not only appear highly aware of the country's environmental laws, they also know the importance of taking advantage of fissures within the government to find allies or at least sympathizers within the leadership. And finally, people in rural China who do not necessarily regard themselves as the state's adversaries are capable of launching well-organized and forceful protests against environmental abuses. But the ways they go around organizing their protests reflect the centrality of particular social values and moral concerns. These protests are not meant to save an endangered environment for its own sake, independent of its relevance to people. Rather, they are aimed at seeking social justice to protect the ecological basis of human existence.

## Notes

- 1 Research for this chapter benefitted from the provision of a travel grant by the Research Foundation of the City University of New York in the 1998-99 academic year.
- 2 These official records are found in the following sources: Shanghai Municipal

- Environmental Agency Protection, *Environmental Pollution, Conflict between Factories and Masses, and Conflict Resolution* (*Huanjing wuran changqun maodun yu chuli duice*), (Huangdong Politics and Law College Press: Shanghai, 1994); Xie Zhenhua (ed.), *Typical Cases of Environmental Violations and Guidelines of Environmental Law Enforcement in China* (*Zhongguo huanjing dianxing anli yu zhifa tiyao*) (China Environmental Science Press: Beijing, 1994); Zhao Yongkang (ed.), *Selected Cases of Environmental Disputes* (*Huanjing jiusen anli*) (China Environmental Science Press: Beijing, 1989).
- 3 For more information on China's environmental crisis, see He Baochang, *China On the Edge: The Crisis of Ecology and Development* (China Books & Periodicals: San Francisco, 1991); Vaclav Smil, *China's Environmental Crisis: An Inquiry into the Limits of National Development* (M. E. Sharpe: Armonk, 1993); World Bank, *Clear Water, Blue Skies: China's Environment in the New Century* (The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development: Washington, DC: 1997).
  - 4 See Jun Jing, 'Population Resettlement: Past Lessons for the Three Gorges Dam Project,' *The China Journal*, Vol. 38, July 1997, pp. 65-92; Dai Qing (ed.) *The River Dragon Has Come: The Three Gorges Dam and the Fate of China's Yangtze River and Its People* (M. E. Sharpe: Armonk, 1998).
  - 5 For a detailed social history of this Kong lineage, see Jun Jing, *The Temple of Memories: History, Power, and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, 1996).
  - 6 For additional information on the overlapping of kinship ties and village administration in the Maoist and post-Mao eras, see Edward Friedman, Paul Pickowicz, and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1991); Huang Shu-min, *The Spiral Road: Change in a Chinese Village through the Eyes of a Communist Party Leader* (Westview Press: Boulder, CO: 1989); Jack Potter and Sulamith Potter, *China's Peasants: The Anthropology of a Revolution* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1990).
  - 7 For a comprehensive analysis of Chinese funerals and mourning rites, see James Watson and Evelyn Rawski (eds), *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1996).
  - 8 See Rubie Watson, 'Making Secret Histories: Memory and Mourning in Post-Mao China,' in Rubie Watson (ed.), *Memory, History, and Opposition Under State Socialism*, (School of American Research Press: Santa Fe, 1994), pp. 65-86; Joseph W. Esherick and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, 'Acting out Democracy: Political Theatre in Modern China,' in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds), *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China: Learning from 1989* (Westview: Boulder, CO, 1992), pp. 28-66.
  - 9 See Robert P. Weller and Hsin-Hung Michael Hsiao, 'Culture, Gender, and Community in Taiwan's Environmental Movement,' in Arne Kalland and Gerald Persoon (eds.), *Environmental Movements in Asia* (Curzon: London, 1998), pp. 83-108.
  - 10 'Locals Long for the Return of Blue Skies to Guangzhou,' *China Daily*, June 5, 1997, p. 3.
  - 11 Cai Haili, 'Can Environmental Protection Work in China?' *Harvard China Review*, 1998 1(1), 84-6.
  - 12 Shanghai Municipal Agency of Environmental Protection, *Environmental Pollution*, op. cit.
  - 13 Xie Zhenhua (ed.), *Typical Cases*, op. cit.; Zhao Yongkang (ed.) *Selected Cases*, op. cit.
  - 14 On the causalities of different forms of collective violence in the contemporary Chinese countryside, see e.g., Elizabeth J. Perry, 'Rural Collective Violence: the Fruits of Recent Reforms,' in Elizabeth J. Perry and Christine Wong (eds), *The Political Economy of Reform in Post-Mao China* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1985), pp. 179-92.
  - 15 See Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, 'The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Rural China,' *China Quarterly*, No. 143 (Sept. 1995), pp. 756-83; Minxin Pei, 'Citizens vs. Mandarins: Administrative Litigation in China,' *China Quarterly*, No. 152 (Dec. 1997), pp. 100-15.