

DG desk, October 08, 2010

I have not been able to write anything of value for the Intranet for sometime now. However I wanted to bring to your attention the story of a simple farmer in China who has become an environmental activist. How I got to know about him is because he has agreed to provide the trust fund which the IPCC set up for fellowships on climate science, a significant sum of money. IPCC set up this fund to help create capacity in developing countries in the field of climate change. The Nobel Peace prize award money that the IPCC received has gone for this purpose, and it is nice to know that a simple farmer in China is willing to support this cause. What we are planning to do is to select deserving professionals from developing countries to undergo training in established institutions to gain expertise on various aspects of climate change. I attach a story about Wu Lihong for your information.

Wu Lihong and fellow environmental activist Chen Faqing used to joke about going to jail. The two grassroots warriors, farmers born in villages surrounded by rice paddies in Jiangsu Province, knew that they were taking huge risks by challenging the local authorities responsible for polluting the nearby rivers that feed Lake Tai. As a boy, Wu swam in the enormous pristine lake, which was exalted by Tang dynasty poets. Painters and scholars on their way to the teahouses in Hangzhou used to stop on its beaches to rest, inspired by the majesty of the craggy shoreline and the waters lapping against bamboo forests. But in the last two decades, the lake's poetic past has been symbolically washed away in China's new commercial frenzy. Today, the 935-square-mile lake, the lone source of drinking and bathing water for two million people, lies in the middle of the country's most industrialized region—the workshop of the world—and the joke between the two friends has become a harsh reality. In April, Wu Lihong was arrested and charged with extortion, and in August, he was sentenced to three years in prison. A month earlier, while Wu was still awaiting trial, I went to a village near Lake Tai, where Chen showed me plastic bottles of polluted lake water collected by his friend before the arrest. "People like Wu are pushing for real change in this country," Chen said, shaking the bottles filled with brown, yellow, black, and even orange water. "He raised awareness of the environmental problems here, but we are up against rich corrupt bosses and officials."

The next day, at Turtle Head Park, where I boarded a ferry with dozens of Chinese vacationers, the lake water along the beach resembled thick, oily paint. The color was an eerie neon green. "What's that stinky smell? It's disgusting!" uttered one tourist from Sichuan, who had come with her son on summer holiday. A fishy chemical odor was wafting up off the lake. "Blue-green algae," said a local tourist. A tour guide told us that the government is trying to fix the problem, but he was afraid the cure might kill all the fish in Lake Tai.

Wu is not your typical environmentalist. In China, most activists are either urban professionals, working through nonprofit organizations, or university students. But Wu, 40, is a plainspoken farmer turned sound-equipment salesman who decided along the way that he couldn't tolerate the environmental devastation around him. When local authorities brushed off his complaints, he simply went over their heads and brought them to the attention of provincial officials. "This is a guy who is not afraid to let you know what he thinks," says Daniela Salaverry, who heads the China program at Pacific Environment, a California-based nonprofit that supports Wu's efforts. "He will get in your face." Wu has paid a price for his persistence: He lost his job, was severely beaten, and was regularly threatened by local officials long before his arrest. "We believe the charges brought against him are a result of his environmental advocacy work," says Salaverry. "Local authorities were concerned that he was making too much noise."

The central government has known about the Lake Tai pollution for years. With the rise of unregulated industry and large-scale farming over the last two decades, the lake has become seriously contaminated with nitrates and phosphates. Although Beijing spent millions of dollars trying to clean it up, hundreds of small private

chemical factories are still operating along the banks, churning untreated wastewater into tributary rivers and the lake itself.

Angered by the blatant disregard for national regulations, Wu, whose village of Zhoutie is full of factories, became a one-man green movement. He would sneak around the lake, snapping photographs of pipes discharging chemicals—and then supply the pictures to local and foreign newspapers, to the provincial environmental protection agency, and to fellow activist Chen, who posted them on the Web site he had established. Wu was particularly outraged that, despite the pollution, which had turned the waters unearthly shades of blue and green, nearby Yixing, home to many chemical factories, had been selected by Beijing as an environmental model. To Wu the choice was a clear sign of dirty deals, and he planned to sue the national environmental protection agency in protest.

But Wu had made several enemies—from factory bosses exposed by his investigations to local officials who were angry about losing face. In 2003, he was beaten by thugs, and left with three broken ribs. "You'd better be careful, otherwise they're going to arrest you," Wu warned his friend, who had also been threatened.

"What am I afraid of?" replied Chen. "Let them arrest me. What great leader in the world hasn't spent time in jail?"

Wu had laughed in response. "You're a funny guy," he said.

But on April 13, it was Wu, not Chen, who was targeted. Some 20 police cars zoomed into his small village, blocking all exit points. According to Chinese press reports, more than 50 officers swarmed Wu's house and arrested him, leaving behind his wife and daughter. The timing—just a week before Wu planned to go to Beijing to sue the government—suggested political retaliation. And the drama surrounding the arrest seemed out of proportion to the alleged crime: Wu had allegedly extorted \$2,000 from a factory boss in 2004 and about \$5,000 from the village party secretary in 2006.

For months following the arrest, security agents were posted at the front and back doors of Wu's home, to monitor anyone who might want to meet with his wife, Xu Jiehua. In an interview in a Chinese newspaper, she acknowledged that her husband had done business with a local factory owner and, when the boss failed to pay him, had forged authorization on his invoice to try to get the money. But she denies that Wu did anything wrong. "They just want to shut him up," she told me over the phone.

China's leading environmental organizations wrote an open letter on behalf of Wu, demanding that the government ensure an open and just trial. But soon after, government officials threatened to shut down the organizations' Web sites if they didn't remove the letter. They all complied.

While China's central government is modernizing and striving to establish the rule of law, freewheeling capitalism has swept across the countryside, fusing itself to lawless, autocratic traditions. The booming villages surrounding Lake Tai, near Shanghai and Nanjing, are in the most developed region of China. Far from Beijing's control, thousands of private factories built by farmers like Wu manufacture everything from toys to electronics to chemicals. Few have wastewater treatment systems, and even those factories that do often don't use them, to keep costs down.

Corruption and bribery are rampant. Decentralization has brought economic freedoms but few of the restraints—regulatory controls, protection of workers' rights, checks on local authority—considered important in the developed world. Speaking out against factory bosses carries real risks, but Wu didn't back down. "It is

shameful that we can't drink water from the lake," Wu told the South China Morning Post last year. "The chemical factories and officials should be blamed. I want them to admit their responsibility so we will have clean drinking water again." Wu added that he was "both physically and mentally exhausted from fighting such a big group for so long."

The central government, on the other hand, realizes the enormity of the environmental problems caused by uncontrolled development and is starting to make amends. According to official statistics, some 70 percent of China's urban water supply is not fit for drinking or fishing; 30 percent of its river water is not fit even for agricultural or industrial use. In response, the government has passed a series of environmental laws, most recently requiring governmental agencies and factories alike to divulge waste disposal practices. Taking advantage of China's new freedoms, more than 2,800 environmental NGOs—mostly in the cities—are raising awareness of pollution, even challenging industrial projects: Activists succeeded in blocking a huge dam project on the Nu River that threatened to displace 50,000 indigenous people and destroy the habitat of some 80 rare and endangered species. "There has been a radicalization of the environmental movement," says Elizabeth Economy, author of *The River Runs Black*, about water pollution in China, and director of Asia studies at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. "Now they are talking about issues of social justice."

Even so, the battle to clean up the environment has just begun. The Chinese government is leery of public advocacy like the student movement of 1989, which moved too fast and ended in a brutal crackdown. Activists today face a dilemma: Most think that the only way to get things done is to work with the system. China's new laws may not be perfect, but they exist—and can be used to push for change. But to environmentalists like Wu and Chen who are struggling at the village level, where such laws are often ignored, polite tactics are meaningless. "Those guys in Beijing are wishy-washy," says Chen. "We are the hard-liners." More cautious environmentalists in Beijing acknowledge that the peasants have shown extraordinary bravery. Being a hard-liner "is the only way to get things done at that level in China," says Economy.

And Wu did get things done. As a result of his investigations, the Jiangsu provincial government has shut down more than 200 factories near Lake Tai in recent years. "Wu's contribution was very important," admits Liu Qingsong, a Jiangsu environmental official who worked with the activist. Two years ago, the agency even nominated Wu as one of China's top ten environmentalists. Now, the Jiangsu environmental protection agency is worried that Wu's arrest will, by association, taint its work. Wu may have ruffled many feathers, but his warnings about Lake Tai were validated when, a month after he was arrested, blue-green algae erupted, poisoning the lake and cutting off access to drinking and bathing water for two million people. The story—and Wu's arrest—were reported in newspapers all across China. Local officials said the algae outbreak was caused by drought and hot weather and deemed it a natural disaster, drawing criticism from experts and the state media.

But after the algae outbreak, Beijing sent investigators to Lake Tai to look into the causes. The problem was so severe that Prime Minister Wen Jiabao came to the lake region and apologized to residents. Following the investigation, several local officials—including the party secretary of Wu's village—were demoted, and Beijing ordered the local government to shut 500 factories by the end of 2007.

"Wu Lihong doesn't have to do this environmental work," Chen says. "He could live a comfortable life. But he feels a sense of responsibility. He is fighting for the next generation. This is true greatness!"