

Urban development issues in China's Cities: Part One

The economic boom in cities and rapid environmental degradation in populated areas

“It is up to local residents to save Taihu Lake” – Qiu Feng, journalist and commentator

Source: *Zhongguo Xinwen zhoukan*, China Newsweek, No. 20, 1997.

Abstract: In late May - early June 2007, the contamination with blue-green algae of a large portion of Taihu Lake resulted in the deterioration of the water quality in the region. Seventy percent of water resources in the city of Wuxi was contaminated, directly affecting the drinking water supply of 2 million inhabitants who rushed to snap up bottled water in stores. Emergency measures by the Municipal government for dealing with the cyanobacteria early in May were insufficient to prevent the epidemic or effectively control the unpleasant odour of the city's tap water.

Large-scale spreading of the blue-green algae occurred. All experts agree that the main cause was a very high increase in organic matter in the lake water. Clean-up efforts over the last ten years, as now, have attracted public attention. Over 10 billion yuan (€988 million) have been spent on these efforts, although the Municipal government recognizes that results are far from satisfactory. The initial goal of effectively managing polluted waste water from industry, intensive farming and households has not been met; pollution is in fact on the rise, increasing the eutrophication of the lake .

The economic boom in cities has rapidly increased the overall volume of pollution. Industries in coastal areas are moving inland where regulations are less strict and pollution treatment policy is less developed. Moreover, the population of the Taihu Lake basin is rapidly expanding, and farming techniques are evolving. Business is booming in the region and now represents 10% of the country's GDP and 16% of national revenue, but pollution has become a serious problem. Undeniably, the municipal government wishes to solve the pollution problem and has doubled its efforts to do so. But the quality of water in Taihu Lake has been sacrificed for economic development and the career ambitions of certain local leaders – a calculated choice on the part of the municipal government. Experience has shown that a “treating while polluting” approach does not yield sufficiently positive results.

To fight pollution, the onus must be placed on the communities that are the cause of the pollution and who suffer its consequences; the people who live here generation after generation and who feel a responsibility for those that will come after them. Tens of millions in the Taihu Lake region face a dilemma: should the municipal government continually be allowed – and encouraged – to sacrifice the environment for economic development and new sources of wealth, or should urban growth be controlled and ecological and environmental concerns be better addressed? The response to the Taihu Lake crisis has been clear – citizens are getting involved, debating over current policy and establishing the links between local development and pollution.

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