

## Comparing Two Recent Environmental Protests in China

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This article compares the differing stance taken by Chinese authorities towards two recent environmental protests in China. Dissimilarity is evident both in propaganda and in its response. A massive environmental protest in a small but economically significant port city of Dalian in August 2011 turned out to be a success, an unusual development in China. The protest was aimed at a chemical factory in Dalian, which manufactures Paraxylene, a crucial ingredient of polyester. It was also in the news due to the triumphant Xiamen protest in 2007 forcing the government to relocate a plant using Paraxylene from Xiamen to a less densely populated area. The chemical plant in Dalian is positioned 50 yards behind the sea wall and a tropical storm could potentially trigger a chemical leakage. Dalian, second major city of Liaoning Province serves as a financial hub and international port of North East Asia. The municipal authority's assurance of closure of the plant and its relocation is considered as a remarkable shift in government's attitude. The Dalian protest is an example of the effectiveness of social media used largely by the middle class to register their voice on issues of public concern in China. This new wave of protest is issue based rather than anti regime in nature.

On the other end, Luliang chemical plant controversy could fetch little media attention since it is located in rural Yunnan, one of the poorest provinces of China. Chromium, a carcinogen had been dumped in large quantities despite repeated reports of cancer cases from the local farmers and doctors. The local administration expressed their helplessness as the area was converted it to an industrial zone and policy decisions upon directives from the national level. Local protests in Luliang were repressed with use of brute force.

Chinese economic upsurge gave birth to a moderate middle class that enjoys the benefit of liberal policies and are relatively more supportive of the government. They no longer aspire to anti- regime movements like the Tiananmen Square incident. The urban middle class prefer 'issue based' and 'risk free result oriented' protests though the government pursues the traditional tactics of banning the media and social networking sites.

It is clear that the nature of protests differs due to socio economic and political factors in China. Dalian, located in the wealthy coastal lines of north eastern China is an outcome of Chinese liberal policies and the white collar inhabitants of this area who can be categorised as the 'new middle class' generate a new brand of environmental activism triggered with the help of internet and mobile phones. The large number of protesters who assembled at Dalian asserted their political right to have a pollution free environment. Hence they were eager to have a peaceful demonstration which is 'issue based and risk free', whereas Luliang protesters were less in number, only one fourth of the Dalian and they belonged to agriculture oriented economy. Geography

also contributes to the indifference exhibited by the regime towards Luliang as it is easy to hide such irritants if it happens in the countryside. Notable point is, the protests in Luliang have been put down and grave health concerns of local inhabitants ignored despite the fact that Chromium is a deadly carcinogen and its impact on health and the environment has been documented in the area.

Dalian and Luliang exemplify escalating environmental concerns across China.

Comparing these two also sheds light on the disparate response of the authorities in handling these protests. While Dalian highlights the mainstream story of middle class success in China and Luliang is a reflection of rural neglect.

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