

Chen Ajiang, Cheng Pengli, and Luo Yajuan, eds., translated by Jennifer Holdaway, Qi Di, and Wei Han, *Chinese “Cancer Villages”: Rural Development, Environmental Change and Public Health*

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The phenomenon of “cancer villages” in China became a popular topic that triggered widespread discussion in the 2000s. The general public considered “cancer villages” to be polluted places with a high incidence of cancer cases due to China’s rapid industrialization and agricultural development. Since 2004, Professor Chen Ajiang and his colleagues Chen Pengli, Li Caihong, Li Qi, and Luo Yanjuan have conducted field investigations in villages to analyze the impact of pollution on health. Based on the information they collected, the edited volume *Chinese “Cancer Villages”: Rural Development, Environmental Change and Public Health*, originally published in Chinese in 2013, explores the variable relationship between pollution and disease. Using an interdisciplinary approach combining natural and social sciences, Chen and his team members argue that the emergence of “cancer villages” is both a scientific and a social problem. “Cancer villages” are associated not only with chemical substances in the biological world but also with the economic activities, social structure, and cultural heritage of rural China.

This book is built upon extensive field research conducted in villages in Henan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, and Guangdong. Chen and his team consulted a variety of sources, including reports of medical tests conducted by government agencies, historical documents concerning local development, and informal data gathered by villagers. The book contains ten chapters. Except for chapters 1, 9, and 10, each chapter focuses on one specific “cancer village.” Chapter 1 introduces the origin of the study and the research process of “cancer villages.” Chapter 2 discusses the multiple factors that contribute to cancers in Huangmengying Village (Henan), including industrial pollution from upstream of the Shayin River, unusual chemicals resulting from geological factors, and the lifestyles villagers.

Chapter 3 uses the case of Dongjing Village (Jiangsu) to show the conflicts between local officials and villagers, the limitations of media reports, and the incapability of environmental laws to handle the actual situation concerning industrial pollution. Chapter 4 includes new research added to the English version of the book. The chapter examines the impacts of floods, waterlogging, and a water engineering project on the environment of Lianshui County (Jiangsu) in historical context. Particularly, the penetration of fertilizers and pesticides into the drinking water supply after 1949 caused a high incidence of esophageal cancer. As economic circumstances had improved since the 1970s, water-related health risks declined due to the construction of tap water plants and deep wells.

Focusing on the Xiqiao Village (Zhejiang), chapter 5 explores villagers’ understanding of health risks from daily experiences, such as the extinction of fish and shrimp in rivers and the appearance of red rashes on their hands and feet. After active resistance to pollution failed to bring results, villagers switched to less intense measures to avoid contact with polluted water. Their selection of resistance strategies was influenced by the fact that most enterprise owners were locals. These owners were both beneficiaries and victims of industrial pollution, and they had strong social ties with the ordinary villagers around. Chapter 6 concentrates on a state-owned farm (Jiannan Village) in

Jiangxi. This case demonstrates that the scientific correlation between cancer and pollution was not the villagers' main concern. Instead, their complaints and petitions put pressure on the local government to increase access to running water and receive financial compensation from factory work. Chapter 7 compares two different attitudes toward environmental protest in Guangdong. Liangqiao villagers, troubled by the pollution of the water supply, used every means to inform the public of the terrible situation. Unlike Liangqiao villagers, Shangba villagers worried about the negative impacts of being labeled as a "cancer village" by the mass media. As the problem of water pollution was eventually resolved, Shangba villagers were more concerned with the local image and the sale of farm products.

Chapter 8 discusses Guangdong residents' complaints and growing mistrust of waste incinerator plants and the local government. In this case, rumors and misinformation in media fostered people's anxiety and restlessness. They believed the existing waste incinerator plant was responsible for the high incidence of lung cancer and opposed any plans to construct a new plant in the city. Chapter 9 provides a summary of three cases discussed in chapters 5, 6, and 7. Chapter 10 then examines the various strategies villagers adopted to mitigate environmental health risks. It is argued that there are two major obstacles for common villagers to understand the relationship between pollution and disease—one is the lack of professional medical knowledge, and another is the low information transparency concerning pollution. In this situation, villagers tended to rely upon common sense knowledge and news collected from acquaintances to avoid exposure to the harmful effects of industrial pollution.

The authors present "cancer villages" from multiple perspectives and discuss how local government officials, usually under the pressure of investment targets and of political performance evaluations, allied with polluting enterprises to not disclose information to the public. For villagers, their claims about the cause of disease came less from scientific knowledge than from anger toward unresponsive governments and factories, worries about health hazards, and discontent with the uneven distribution of the costs and benefits of pollution. Additionally, the authors discuss the duality of mass media. Positively, new media platforms offered an outlet for repressed voices and attracted public attention to the problem of pollution. Negatively, media reports sometimes contained false information that easily misled the public, which later posed obstacles for local economic development.

Another intriguing aspect of the book is the application of historical research methods to the experiential approach used in "cancer village" research. In Chen Ajiang's latest study (chapter 4), environmental history provides a new dimension to understanding the long-term interactive process between environmental change, social development, and public health. In this process, natural changes in the water environment of Lianshui County led to the construction of water engineering projects with the aim of disaster prevention, disease control, and agricultural intensification. However, the conversion of dry fields to rice paddies polluted farmers' drinking water sources and caused new health risks. Although the historical narrative is more descriptive than argumentative, the combination of historical analysis with the sociological study of environment and health issues greatly expands the source of information and the scope of the investigation.

The book's clear language, rich photos and charts, and vivid descriptions of villagers' lives make it a helpful resource for undergraduate and graduate students in both natural and social sciences. Common readers who are interested in industrial pollution, public

health, and environmental protests, even without much prior knowledge of Chinese “cancer villages,” would also find the contents of this book interesting.

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