

Sacrificing and Saving the Environment: The Case of Shanxi

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Sitting across a tea table in the living room, a local official shared her thoughts on my question about Shanxi Province's image as a coal producing province in people's mind:

"You should write about how we overcome air pollution, and that the sky is so much clearer than twenty years ago. When I was a student studying in the city, our clothes got so dirty everyday, our faces got black right away. But now, we can see the skies again."

The health and environmental impacts of the extractive industry are severe. Resource-dependent communities that live near the extractive industry's energy source are the ones who suffer the most from water, soil and air pollution, as well as from respiratory diseases. However, not everyone in the affected community responds to pollution in the same way. How they respond depends greatly on their position in the political economy.

Shanxi Province is the largest coal mining center in China, only second in size compared to Inner Mongolia. The communist government has long considered Shanxi as the main energy resource provider for the country, ignoring the province's long history of being a trade and banking center since 1600s. This emphasis on coal production and the economic contribution of the energy-intensive industries have led the provincial government to prioritize it, as the central government is putting a lot of pressure on provincial government to perform well in terms of GDP. Easy access to coal and political pressure propelled the development of heavy industry. Consequently, less efforts are

devoted to developing agriculture and service sectors in Shanxi, which resulted in the current impasse and challenges in re-structuring the economy into one that depends less on the extractive industries.

Another macro consequence of being a coal mining center is environmental pollution, especially air pollution. In 2013, the Chinese government declared a war on air pollution, which has become a unifying ideology and policy tool for the government to re-structure its institutional system and legitimize its role as the protector of the nation-state and its air quality. This policy also provides legitimacy and funding for the provincial government to implement other related environmental policies, helped forms linkages across different agencies and businesses, and affords a common language for interpreting social reality. Afforestation policy was one of those policies that has been incorporated into the war on air pollution strategy by the central government due to its potential in mitigating greenhouse gas emission and carbon sequestration.

My research examines communities that are located in areas where coal is not geographically accessible, or cost-effective to extract. These communities suffer less from air pollution, and rely on other natural resources for development, namely their land for smallholder agriculture-based economy. Unlike their neighboring communities in Shanxi, where people benefited from the rapid economic development accompanied by the mining industry boom in the last few decades, the communities that I study rely on agriculture and afforestation in both cultivated and uncultivated area for economic development. Local officials view afforestation as the locus for institutional performance and the afforested landscape as a banner of triumph for Ecological Civilization, a term long used by the central government to promote nation-building and address the negative environmental impacts brought about by rapid economic development. Afforestation is incomparable to mining in terms of the revenue it generates, which are reflected by different levels of urbanization in these communities. In coal-dependent communities, the air and environmental quality is visibly poor, coated with a layer of black dust on roads, buildings and grounds. But the grandeur of their city-scape filled by modernized high-rise buildings was uncommon in other rural areas, and their roads were bustling with traffic. In communities without coal production, the air is fresher and the sky is bluer. However, the size and number of the buildings in the city center are a lot smaller.

In addition to understanding the mining impacts produced by the larger macroeconomic forces, the ways local residents respond to these different precarious placement is part of my larger research question about environmental relations in a strongly bureaucratized society. As a researcher, I learned about how local residents articulate their identity and actions in relation to the discourse on air pollution in the larger geographical region. More importantly, how they position themselves in relation to nation-building through sacrificing and saving the environment.

Sacrificing the environment

When I asked a similar question regarding Shanxi Province as a coal producing center, a local cow-farmer responded with a mildly proud and bitter sentiment:

“We gave everything to them! The prosperity of this country is built on our hardships.”

The cow-farmer was from a neighboring town and arrived to my study site to sell a small load of coal for household usage. He was a truck driver for transporting coal before inheriting the livestock business from his father. He learned a bit about the coal business and was still doing minor trading because of its relatively high profits compared to earnings of a farmer.

Before the Chinese government declared a war on air pollution, coal production and other heavy industries, such as iron and steel, were the primary pillars of Shanxi's economy. A shared identity among residents of Shanxi Province is that they played a role in building the country by sacrificing their environment, health and labor, be it willingly or unwillingly. The conflicting sense of suffering and benefiting from a production system in a rapidly developing nation is not uncommon. In areas where coal was costly to excavate, residents often held a bitter and envious attitude towards counties that are able to modernize faster and grow their wealth because of coal. But these resource-based advantages in economic development are becoming constraints and obstacles for local government to continue hedging their bets on coal under the mandate of the war on air pollution. Regulations and increasing government control on clean energy production, price of coal and corruption in coal business had drastically decreased the amount of coal production and its profitability in the last five to ten years. Once pressured to provide energy for development, Shanxi is now carrying the burden of cleaning up the consequences brought forth by it. Communities that live in counties without coals – about 30% of Shanxi's counties – are now formally tasked with the role of greening the environment.

Saving the Environment

One of the ways the Shanxi government adapts to the new policy against air pollution is to re-direct their development priority towards the making of electric cars, especially for public transportation. Taiyuan, the capital city of Shanxi, becomes one of the twenty Electric Vehicle Capitals in the world identified by the International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT) in 2018. Another policy priority that fits the circumstances and geographical making of Shanxi is afforestation. Shanxi has large amounts of quarries and disturbed land as a result of mining. Together with its fragmented hilly landscape, which is difficult to cultivate by machinery, this region has a lot of potential for afforestation and ecological restoration compared to alternative ways of development, such as industrialization projects in flat plain areas.

Local officials in areas without coal invested their energy and time into afforestation and other ecological restoration projects, including repairing the coal industry's negative impacts on the environment. Local officials are proud to see visible changes in landscape and decreases in air pollutants, soil erosion, and sand storms. But farmers in these areas do not view these improvements in environment as positively as officials. Lacking alternative pathways to improve their economic well-being compared to their neighbors, farmers and local residents in general stated that they do not benefit from afforestation. Rural development policies and education system reform has much more direct impact on their livelihoods, which is based on low-skilled jobs and subsistence agriculture. Afforestation may provide partial income (0-20%) for farmers, but not the main source. Without proper institutional, technical and financial support, planting trees on cultivated land creates environmental and financial risks for farmers. In comparison, local officials

in areas with coal mining business did not do much about conserving and greening the land until the past few years, hence the lower involvement and development in afforestation projects by both farmers and officials in these communities.

Local officials are not the only one putting their time and money into saving the environment. A domestic grassroots organization from Beijing working on protection of endangered keystone species considers themselves as the pioneers of the New China. Another non-profit organization that has worked in the region for over 13 years view themselves as laying the groundwork for future rural development by reforestation and preserving the landscape. They identify themselves as patriots. A farmer who had the chance to participate in the afforestation project reflected on the sense of empowerment he felt when he was able to gain the symbolic and tangible benefits of preserving the once degraded land.

Moreover, local officials in the city would proudly point to the construction of charging stations for electric cars, and tell the story of how they battle with air pollution through regulations and negotiations with tangled networks among the political institutions, bureaucracy and big business. These on-going “battles” and “wars” do not have clear starting or ending point, and are visible in media and breathable in everyday lives. Air pollution, coal-mining, and afforestation have become a common language for expressing both frustrations and passions of nation-building by those who suffer from and those who find purpose in it.

Conclusion

Research literature and media tends to pay more attention to the impacts of environmental pollution in China through the lens of globalized notions of environmental conservation, centralized governance structure and public health concerns for communities. Indeed, air pollution in China has become a global cautionary tale for environment protection. It is also a reminder of how people in all positions of the political ecology are navigating the constantly changing and contradictory sentiments and identities in the project of nation-building.

Main photo: Small coal truck (Credit: Liu)