

# Understanding Pollution in China through the Lens of Environmental Justice

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**Abstract:** *Environmental Justice is based on the principle that all people have a right to be protected from environmental pollution, and to live in and enjoy a clean and healthful environment, in which the essence of the theory is about the fair distribution of environmental benefits and responsibilities. Taking mass incidents in China from the 1990s to the beginning of the 21st century as examples, this paper illustrates that the lack of understanding and demonstration of three dimensions of environmental justice: distribution, political administration, and social recognition, has fundamentally led to severe environmental conditions in China, notably in the form of heavy environmental pollution. This paper suggests to highlight the "injustice" embedded in Chinese pollution issues, which usually hidden behind the common "excuse" of rapid urbanization and economic development, through establishing the concept of environmental justice, paying attention to economic and environmental policies and focusing on humanistic concerns.*

**Keywords:** *Environmental Justice; Pollution; China*

## 1. Introduction

"Environmental justice" emerged as a concept in the 20th-century social movement led by African Americans and low-income communities in the US. For the first time, environmental consequences were linked with race and poverty and the movement sought justice in the built environment. This was in contrast to the mainstream environmental organizations, which were predominantly middle-class and mainly concerned with protecting natural ecology and neglected the serious environmental harm inflicted by urbanization and industrialization on deprived communities and minority groups. The idea was progressively developed in the US and officially defined as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies" (Bullard, 1999:7). It then increasingly became part of the language of environmental activism and political debate worldwide (Walker, 2017) in the last decade. However, as a developing country based on a different social and political system in another geographic region, China had not been engaged in this conversation for a long time.

Yet, extensive environmental degradation finally alerted the Chinese society. After the birth of capitalism and globalization, the damage to the natural environment was no longer merely a "natural ecological" issue; it was having "a substantial impact on the social and economic welfare of the Chinese, resulting in public health problems, forced resettlement, and social unrest" (Xie, 2011). The causes of China's environmental issues are often summarized as "the cost of tremendous rapidity of development and economic growth" in general. However, to understand the causality comprehensively, it is necessary to highlight the "injustice" hidden behind the common "excuse". There has been a lack of understanding and demonstration of three dimensions of environmental justice: distribution, political administration, and social recognition. This has fundamentally led to severe environmental conditions in China, notably in the form of heavy environmental pollution.

## 2. Justice In Distribution

One of the critical inadequacies in early environmental justice theories was "its sole focus on the fair processes for the distribution of goods and benefits" (Schlosberg, 2004). A number of critiques claiming over-emphasis of distributive justice tended to limit consideration of environmental justice to matters of maldistribution. However, the distributive realm remains a crucial aspect of today's discussion, as it is

still a fundamental source of environmental injustice in modern society. Dobson (1998) was one of the leading theorists whose analysis of distributive justice drew on Marxist ideas. He stated that justice was rooted in the system of production and produced "institutional classism and racism and market imperatives" (Xie, 2011). The level of wealth in society relatively determines one's access to environmental goods. It leads invisibly to the unequal distribution of environmental impacts, which means, in other words, "where one ends up in the distribution of social justice determines, in some way, one's environment" (Schlosberg, 2004).

Environmental pollution in China is directly linked with its socio-economic spatial patterns and unequal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. The past 30 years of urbanization in China have created a dual social structure, with the coexistence of urban and rural development and a wide gap between rich and poor. The dramatic imbalance of wealth has distributed people into "classes" socially and to spatially different urban and rural living environments. People living in the poorer rural areas, mostly farmers and unemployed, are among the vulnerable groups in Chinese society and are forced to become the "sacrificial" group to bear the consequences of rapid development and industrialization.

Rapid urban development and the widening gap between urban and rural rich and poor not only infringe on the rural environment, but also lead to urban-rural pollution transfer, yet cities enjoy more environmental policies. Meanwhile there is an imbalance of environmental justice between urban and rural intergenerational groups and between rich and poor groups. Farmers, as the largest victim group of environmental pollution and the least recipient of economic benefits, are seriously lacking in environmental rights protection. Rural elites and the poor have unequal environmental rights and obligations, and the disadvantaged have difficulty enjoying environmental benefits and are caught in ecological crisis (Yang, 2016). Especially during the period from 2000 to 2008, enterprises such as chemical and pesticide companies, that produced intensive pollution of the environment, were extensively built and put into use across the country without formal environmental impact assessments. This later caused serious harm to the growth of vegetables and fruits in the surrounding farmlands (Zhu and Long, 2012). The state then realized and started its top-down environmental remediation process. However, heavily polluting industries that were asked to close in the developed areas then transferred to less developed regions and continued their production with the same methods.

Because of the eagerness for political achievements and local growth, the local governments of these less developed regions reduced their thresholds for impact assessments and offered preferential policies to "welcome" investment, together with heavy pollution. This experience was later called "pollution transfer" as a "default method" during China's environmental remediation progress. Pollution was shifted from cities to rural areas, from developed to underdeveloped regions; powerful groups were avoided and the less powerful ones made compromises when facing environmental harm. These processes reflected the "polarization" of socio-economic status in China and the inequity in distribution it had initiated.

### **3. Justice In Political Administration**

Low and Gleeson (1998) highlighted the variety of social and cultural conditions as another essential consideration that often underlies the discussion of justice. Justice, as a universal moral relationship that all humans share, should be interpreted through culturally specific institutions, which vary (Low and Gleeson, 1998; Schlosberg, 2001). When discussing environmental justice in China, it is necessary to keep in mind that China is a developing country that distinguishes itself from the rest of the world with a different political system and set of cultural and civil regulations to support the development of its society. Under a top-down political model, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government monopolizes environmental governance. Even environmental protection organizations are not autonomous, but located within the state's administrative structure. Issues of injustice in the political process especially emerge when dealing with pollution, because this particular framework of politics may "suit coordination within one of the industrial sectors, but work poorly when cross-sectoral interests are combined" (Zheng, 2001; Ma and Ortolano, 2000; Xie, 2011).

To build a stable political administration at all levels of the country, it has been accepted that there may be a lack of bottom-up thinking or promotion of activism in the environmental decision-making and implementation process. However, this has ultimately made for a less practical and participatory mechanism for environmental protection and management. The stark urban centralism in Chinese environmental legislation and law enforcement gives no opportunity, or even right, for the vulnerable groups in rural and impoverished areas to participate or speak out on any issues. Farmers, homemakers, unemployed villagers, and so many others are ignored and excluded from the political process.

Wainwright's (2017) *Resigned Activism* demonstrated this reality for Chinese residents living every day with pollution in rapidly industrializing rural areas, while their diverse forms of bottom-up engagement face governmental repression and instrumental assimilation. This was the case with the survey by Mah and Wang (2017) in Nanjing, China, which revealed that people who lived near polluted, petrochemical, peri-urban villages were aware of the health risks but tended to tolerate their situation, seeking only small amounts of compensation from the industries responsible for their contaminated water and lost land. In addition, some rural regions and special groups face severe environmental injustice. For example, villagers in coal and tungsten mining areas bear more costs in the process of mineral extraction. Villagers in water source protection areas bear the responsibility of environmental protection and water pollution control without benefits, and urban residents enjoy the right to drinking water without the responsibility of water environmental protection. Compared with other social groups, migrant workers, as a special group in rural areas, are particularly confronted with environmental injustice and suffer from the double hazards of environmental pollution (Wang, 2008).

China has already published its second modified environmental law, which has taken a step toward the protection of vulnerable groups and their environmental interests, but the public's right to participate is still limited to "whistleblowing, accusation and suggestions" (Zhu and Long, 2012). Thus, challenges to the authority of powerful governmental institutions are minimized. As Hunold and Young (1998) suggested, public deliberation in the political process can transform the understanding, and so resolution, of a problem, as the process itself respects people's interests and autonomy (Schlosberg, 2004). This injustice is deeply "imprinted" in Chinese political administration denies the possibility of public awareness and engagement; it often ultimately leads to unsolved pollution issues, continuing pollution trends in less developed areas, and violent incidents among oppressed groups as they struggle with alternative approaches to defending their legitimate environmental rights.

#### **4. Justice In Social Recognition**

Another crucial dimension of environmental justice is the value of social recognition, which Schlosberg (2004) determines to be the inherent precondition for distributive justice. This approach discusses the importance of group differences and focuses explicitly on equal respect for all humans' identity, including "different social characteristics of the class, ethnicity, cultural and institutional exclusion, or experience of prior injustice by social oppression" (Fraser, 1997; Xie, 2011). Moreover, it also promotes equity in expression and the sharing of knowledge and information from all individuals to society. These factors were acknowledged in Rawls' liberal justice theory (2001) and Young's social difference examination theory (1998), and became increasingly central in the US movement for equal recognition of various racial and other identity groups. However, lack of social recognition remains a comparatively hidden form of environmental injustice, since powerful groups always take environmental benefits for granted. In contrast, minority groups are usually unaware of their lack of fundamental equality and rights (Zhu and Long, 2012).

The absence of social recognition is exceptionally conspicuous in Chinese pollution issues. Enterprises, influential organizations, and individuals only accept governmental support and suggestions from acknowledged professionals. They do not usually recognize social values and wisdom or protect the lawful rights and interests of the less powerful members of society. Furthermore, the public has limited access to environmental information and data, such as information about pollutant discharge and understanding of relevant environmental treatment technologies to counter pollution, which reflects ignorance of the dignity and needs of the weaker individuals in society.

A particular group called "migrant workers" in China is notably affected by this perspective. Migrant workers are people with rural household registration, undertaking high-intensity physical work in cities, while living in difficult conditions with relatively low incomes. This group is usually treated with indifference arising from classism, and are heavily impacted by industrial pollution. They are less educated and environmentally aware; therefore, only when the pollution endangers their life, health, and productivity will the workers choose to appeal through "skip-level" petitions or protests to call for an end to pollution, compensation, and restoration of a better environment. Nevertheless, the results are usually not ideal. The local governments often dismiss the issues and prevent the victims from reporting to a higher level of government and the wider public. Ultimately, the pollution remains and continues to have an intense impact on more vulnerable lives.

## 5. Suggestions for solving environmental justice problems

The exploration of measures for environmental injustice problems involves both theoretical and empirical levels. Theoretically, the corresponding initiatives are discussed at four levels: legal, political, social, and regulatory, based on different disciplinary perspectives for environmental injustice problems in different fields. At the legal level, a constitution on environmental rights is formulated to strengthen the legal conditions for environmental justice guarantees and to strictly comply with the law. At the political level, we should eliminate the political roots of environmental injustice, adapt the concept of national sovereignty, strengthen international cooperation, and establish a new global partnership to help resolve the international environmental justice dilemma; cultivate a global public political culture and strengthen the institutional construction of global environmental justice; improve the system of distribution of public environmental goods and curb the collusion between capital and political power in environmental governance. At the social level, establish institutional arrangements that help safeguard environmental justice, establish a public harm compensation system; improve the public participation system in environmental decision-making; at the management level, strengthen social management innovation with environmental protection at its core, and implement sustainable public governance and environmental governance equity (Wen, 2002).

Based on the above analysis, this paper puts forward some suggestions to solve the problem of environmental justice. First, all people establish the concept of environmental justice. Reduce the public's bias in the perception of environmental injustice and play the role of media in shaping the public's concept of environmental justice. It is imperative that the entire society adopt the idea of environmental justice, pay attention to environmentally disadvantaged areas and environmentally vulnerable groups, tilt policy support, narrow the gap between urban and rural areas, and break the Chinese style environmental justice dilemma. Second, pay attention to economic and environmental policies. Environmentally disadvantaged groups and regions frequently struggle with economic disadvantage, so environmental justice issues should be placed in the framework of economic theory and environmental policy, examining the multiple interactions between economy, politics, society and environment to form effective policy measures. Third, focus on humanistic concerns. The legal system and public policy need to be formulated with humanistic concern, emphasizing morality while avoiding the artificial creation of marginalized groups and environmental injustice. Especially paying attention to avoid causing environmental injustice problems when executing national and local plans. For instance, it is important to prevent the creation of environmental injustice while transferring and redistributing environmental pollutants brought on by industrial transformation and upgrading.

## 6. Conclusion

Environmental justice has still not been defined as one united theory, but remains a combination of multiple thoughts. However, there is no doubt that all ideas call for fair treatment, in which "no group of people, including racial, ethnic or socio-economic groups, should bear a disproportionate share of negative environmental consequences" (Bullard, 1999:7). Since China's reform and opening up, rapid industrialization and urbanization, along with rapid economic and social development, have created serious problems such as environmental pollution and ecological imbalance, which have led to many mass environmental incidents. From the 1990s to the beginning of the 21st century, the number of mass incidents in China has been rising, with environmental pollution accounting for half of the incidents. As a unique developing country and currently the world's second-largest economic body, China is facing severe environmental degradation. Billions of lives suffer "slow violence" from environmental pollution. Affected by the state's value orientation towards economic supremacy in the process of modernization over the last three decades, pollution issues are fundamentally rooted and deepened by environmental injustice in distribution, political administration, and social recognition. First, the unfair spatial distribution of environmental rights, benefits and burdens has resulted in the reality that some people get what they want by way of profits and benefits, while other parts of the population have lost clean and healthy air, water, land, and livelihood. Second, in China, using powerful authority and capitalism in political administration to limit bottom-up participation has become a means of environmental management. Lastly, the most hidden form of environmental injustice is the lack of social recognition in Chinese society, in which some groups of people are not recognized for social values, wisdom and rights in the environment. Therefore, in general, to understand environmental pollution in China and for the Chinese government to repair current circumstances, it is helpful to start from the root of the problem, which is the injustice that has invisibly polluted the living environment.

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