

Lora-Wainwright, Anna. 2017. *Resigned activism: living with pollution in rural China*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. ISBN: 9780262533850. Paperback (\$30.00), eBook (\$21.00).

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The threat that pollution presents to human health is gaining awareness, and this book is an example of it. Anna Lora -Wainwright's latest book, *Resigned activism: living with pollution in rural China* traverses the debate between the human costs of development, new social movements and environmental health activism. Based on a comparative ethnography of three case studies, the author reflects on how communities face problems of pollution and health produced by industrial, mining and recycling activities in three different geographical zones in China. The book introduces the concept of "resigned activism" as an analytical tool to understand the complexities that local dwellers face and the feeling of powerless to transform their reality.

Lora-Wainwright holds a PhD in Social and Cultural Anthropology from Oxford University, and a MA in Chinese Studies and BA in Anthropology, both from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Currently, she is Associate Professor in the School of Geography and the Environment and the School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies (SIAS) at the University of Oxford. Her interest in health and environment issues in China dates back several years. She wrote *Fighting for breath: living morally and dying of cancer in a Chinese village* published by University of Hawaii Press in 2013. In that book, she undertook an ethnographic study in an endeavour to understand how local dwellers make sense of cancer when there is no consensus on its causes, and how they care for sufferers. This book was a major contribution to the literature on "cancer villages" in China.

In this new book she applies an interdisciplinary approach, engaging and examining the intersections between academia, government and citizens. Chapter 1 is a very good introduction for readers unfamiliar with social movement theory and environmental health activism. It also situates the reader in the particular political and economic patterns within the Chinese context that are key to address and understand "Chinese environmentalism" (p.166). Chapter 2 refers to six cases of "cancer villages" which are defined as "clusters of high cancer incidence typically correlated with pollution" (p.33). In this chapter, drawing on Ajiang Chen's contributions (Chen 2013), she describes the different forms of mobilization and the obstacles faced by these communities when addressing health damage.

The following three chapters (Chapter 3, 4 and 5) cover three case studies of "Resigned Activism." The first case study concerns an industrialized village contaminated by phosphorous and other pollutants in Yunnan (Southwest China) where poor local inhabitants and migrant workers are aware of their toxic environment but they accept it, as the polluting activity is their only source of income. The second looks at pollution related to lead and zinc mining in Qiancun (Central China) where local people reduce the pollution problem to water contamination, and the third delves into an e-waste disposal site in Guiyu (South China) where due to the economic and social interdependence of economic activity the local people adjust parameters of health to accept pollution. The conclusion chapter contains a comparative analysis.

Based on these cases, the author discusses "resigned activism" as addressing the link between activism and resignation, between domination and resistance. She uses the term "resigned" when local people acknowledge and accept the polluting conditions as the status quo and part of their environment or "toxic natures" (p. xxiv). She also refers to the expression *Mei banfa* or "no way" reflecting on the feeling of powerlessness of local people to curb pollution and actively face the negative impacts of these industries. Why do people not protest if they are aware that their health is being damaged by pollution? The author effectively shows the realities of environmental health activism in China, thus making a great contribution to social movement theory and to environmental justice studies, convincingly analysing *why* it is that people do not protest. At the same time, she invites the reader to reflect over what activism means, drawing on Scott's previous work on "daily forms of resistance" (Scott 1985) and the concept of "environmental suffering" (Auyero and Swistun 2009).

In this sense, the book allows us to understand how the uncertainty and complexities of health issues can make resistance difficult to organize. In these cases, people recognize the negative health impacts

associated with pollution but choose not to organize against it (p.169). Lack of action is not always the consequence of a lack of knowledge. Other topics that this book addresses are health inequalities (how wealthier residents escape pollution by buying bottled water or leaving the community when there is peak contamination), and the role of the media and NGOs in bringing social protests to light.

Firstly, in the three cases, pollution has affected the locality for decades, leading to long term health effects examples of "slow violence" (Nixon 2011). Secondly, many people do not protest or mobilize because they cannot easily correlate their health issues with a specific contaminant or pollutant (there is a lack of concrete scientific evidence). Thirdly, there is a degree of economic dependence of the local residents on the polluting activity. Further, strategies such as monetary compensation might also present a challenge for mobilization.

In sum, I found this book motivating and due to a high level of detail, supported by photos and maps, the author makes the reader travel with her in China. However, I would be interested to see a further exploration of several elements. First, a discussion of the power behind scientific evidence, delving into the Post Normal Science perspective to discuss how and by whom science is produced, and how the "scientific evidence" of health damage has been built (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1993). Uncertainty plays a role, but sometimes it seems that it is "manufactured" by companies to hide information and traces of a particular pollutant. This hinders the possibility for compensation, reparations, de-contamination and other forms of mobilizations to address pollution.

Secondly, inclusion of a gender approach to the different perceptions of toxic exposures. Are women who don't receive an income from polluting activities as likely to express resignation? How does pollution affect their economic and social activities when they have to take care of an ill partner or children? How do women and men react different to compensation strategies? The author mentions some gendered traits (p.74) and based on an interview, she shows the notion of the female body as a reproductive tool: "a woman has to avoid toxic environments if she has not yet a child or husband". However, a further extension of gender perspective and economies of care might give interesting results.

The sensibility with which the author has conducted fieldwork in this area of health issues shall be acknowledged and highlighted. Conducting fieldwork in the Chinese political climate poses difficulties, particularly for non-native researchers such as the author. The success of Anna's fieldwork therefore deserves recognition. Undoubtedly, this book represents a great contribution for environmental social science. The author shows the complexities at a local level, not viewing communities always as a homogenous actor and as a victim of polluting projects. It certainly uses a novel lens to look at environmental conflicts and political ecology.

References

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