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The Maoming Anti-PX Protest of 2014

An environmental movement in contemporary China

KINGSYHON LEE AND MING-SHO HO

ABSTRACT: China has witnessed several peaceful and successful anti-PX (para-xylene) protests in Xiamen, Dalian, and Ningbo in recent years. However, the protest in Maoming in 2014 turned out to be a noteworthy exception. By using participant observation and in-depth interview data, this article raises the following observations: first, in spite of official propaganda, Maoming citizens actually understand the environmental risk of PX production because of their personal experiences with existing pollution as well as from their knowledge of the Xiamen incident. Secondly, the Maoming protest proceeded in a less organised manner, which explains its violent tendencies. Finally, the large-scale protest was able to proceed without the support of mainstream media and the middle class due to the use of online social media and local knowledge of the urban terrain.

KEYWORDS: Maoming anti-PX protest, environmental movement, social media, protest mobilisation.

Introduction

On 30 March 2014, an anti-PX rally took place in Maoming (茂名), a remote city in western Guangdong Province. Beginning in the morning, tens of thousands of protestors gathered in front of City Hall, their numbers reaching a peak in the evening, at which point a violent clash occurred, lasting until the next day. Fear among the local citizens resulted in a gradual decrease in the number of protestors until the city regained its tranquillity on 7 April.

There has been a streak of anti-PX protests recently in China. Para-xylene (PX), a chemical used in the manufacture of plastic bottles and polyester, is extracted from petroleum in a process that entails environmental and health risks. As early as May 2007, the first large-scale anti-PX protest broke out in Xiamen, Fujian Province, where not only ordinary citizens but also 105 national committee members (including Zhao Yufen, a renowned professor at Xiamen University) and dozens of university presidents and academicians took to the streets to voice their opposition. Although the local government tried to censor media coverage, the event drew international attention due to the participation of elites.⁽¹⁾ After half year's mediation, the Fujian provincial government and Xiamen municipal government finally conceded by relocating the PX project to the Gulei Peninsula in Zhangzhou on 16 December 2007. Since then, there has been a demonstrable effect of the Xiamen movement with the emergence of anti-PX demonstrations in Chengdu in 2008, Dalian in 2011, Kunming in 2013, and Maoming in 2014 (see Map 1).

While many observers have hailed the activism of the urban middle class as the birth of China's environmental consciousness, many have overlooked the PX dispute in Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province. Since the Jiujiang municipal gov-



Map 1 – The recent anti-PX protests in China © Kingsyhn Lee

ernment was able to promote the PX project in a skilful way, large-scale social protests failed to occur. As a result, Jiujiang is regarded as a model for implementing petrochemical projects by neutralising popular opposition.⁽²⁾ In February 2014, top officials in the Maoming government went to

1. Tu Chaozhua, *Xiamen PX shijian shimo* (The Xiamen PX incident), Beijing, *Zhongguo qingnian bao* (China Youth Daily), 28 December 2007.
2. Liu Xiaoyi, "Jiujiangshi dapao px kunju" (Jiujiang city overcame the obstacle to PX project), Beijing, *Minzhu yu fazhi shibao* (Democracy and Rule of Law Times), 21 April 2014, section 11.

Jiujiang to gain know-how, which they nevertheless failed to replicate back home.⁽³⁾ Unlike other cities, Maoming has long hosted petrochemical facilities. Known as “the oil town of the south” (*nanfang youcheng* 南方油城), Maoming has since 1955 been home to a production centre of the state-owned Sinopec Group, the capacity of which has grown to more than 20 million tons of crude oil refinement and one million tons of ethylene production annually, making it one of the biggest taxpayers in Guangdong Province.⁽⁴⁾ Due to its importance in China’s petrochemical production as well as its economic value, Maoming was upgraded to a prefecture-level city. While other cities have risen in protest against previously unknown environmental threats, Maoming’s petrochemical production has been a fact of life for more than half a century, thus providing a contrasting view of environmental politics in contemporary China.

The first author of this article had the opportunity to participate in and observe the Maoming movement due his native status. He conducted in-depth interviews with more than 30 protestors and 20 other citizens to obtain information concerning public perceptions of pollution, the information and network of protest mobilisation, and so on. As a pioneering study, our observation reached the following conclusions: first, Maoming citizens had a fairly good understanding of the environmental risk of PX production because of their personal experience with existing pollution as well as their knowledge of the Xiamen incident. Secondly, while there are nascent environmental NGOs in China, their presence is largely limited to major metropolitan areas, and mass membership remains underdeveloped. Lacking this resource, Maoming protestors had to resort to direct action. It is observed that middle-class environmental NGOs tend to adopt “moderate, self-contained means to tackle politically safe issues,” and their campaigns occasionally win the endorsement of environmental officials in the central government.⁽⁵⁾ Such is not the case for grassroots victims who suffer from pollution and whose self-help activism is deemed subversive by officials. Finally, even without the support of mainstream media and the middle class, large-scale protest was possible due to the skilful use of online social media and local knowledge of the urban terrain. In conclusion, we will discuss the broader implications for China’s environmentalism.

Promoting the PX project in Maoming

The PX project in Maoming was co-sponsored by the municipal government and the Maoming Petrochemical Company, with a budget of 3.5 billion *yuan*. It was first raised in the 2011 “Twelfth Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of Maoming,” which aimed at a world-class petrochemical base with the capacity for 15 million tons of oil refining, one million tons of aromatics, and 0.6 million tons of para-xylene production per year, with completion scheduled for 2014. According to the 2010 Census, Maoming’s registered population totalled 7.4 million, but only around 611,000 lived in the urban area.⁽⁶⁾ Since the Maoming Petrochemical Company’s factories are located within five kilometres of the city centre, downtown residents have suffered from toxic pollution for many years. On rainy or windy days, Maoming citizens have always smelled odours discharged by the refinery, with the result that many interviewees jokingly referred to nasal inflammation as a “local special product.”

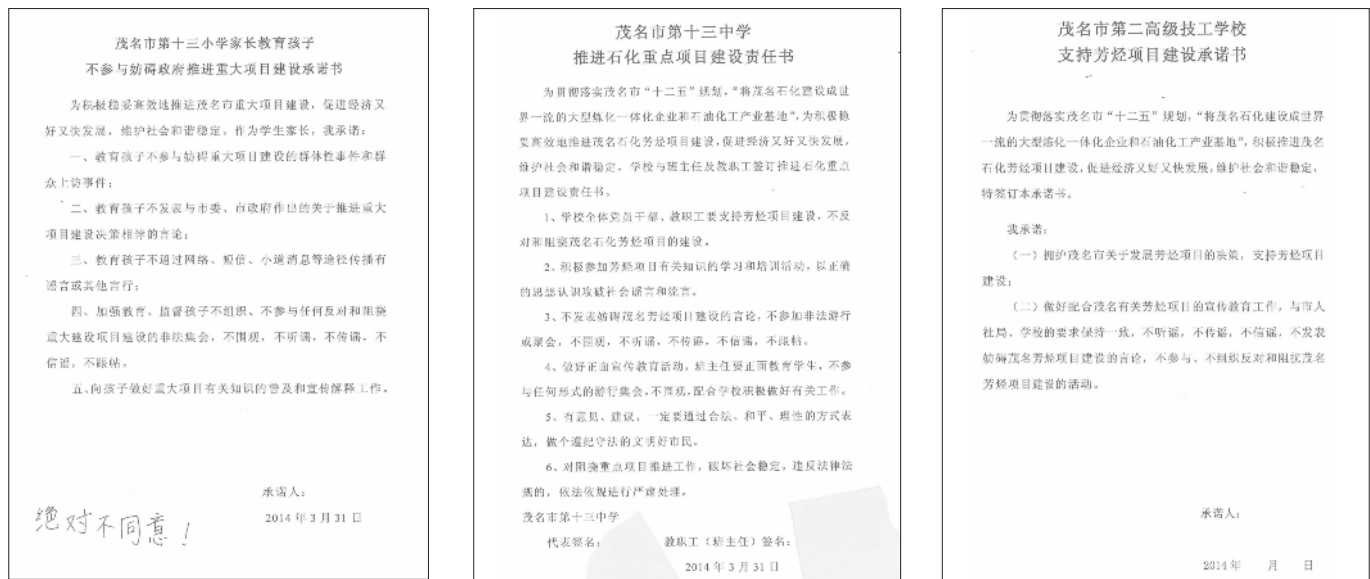
One month before the outbreak of the protest, the local government launched a publicity campaign in which the local newspaper *Maoming Daily* played an important role. As Zhou Qingshu (周清树), a journalist for *Beijing News*, revealed in an interview, the Maoming government invited media

representatives to a closed-door press conference in February and told them how to publicise this project and pre-empt the emergence of a social movement.⁽⁷⁾ Twenty press releases provided by the local Party committee propaganda department, including “Knowledge about PX,”⁽⁸⁾ “Demystifying PX,”⁽⁹⁾ and “Is PX really harmful or not,”⁽¹⁰⁾ were published in *Maoming Daily* from 18 March onward.⁽¹¹⁾ Officials were eager to demonstrate the benefits and harmlessness of PX production. The local TV station began its propaganda offensive even earlier, in October 2013, and continued even after the anti-PX protests began.

Learning from the example of Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province, as mentioned above, Maoming officials adopted a pre-emptive control measure by mobilising citizens to “sign an agreement” to forestall protest activities. In late March, the Maoming Petrochemical Company and local schools circulated a document entitled “Agreement to Support the Aromatics Project of the Maoming Petrochemical Company and Maoming Municipal Government,” which required signees to not only endorse the investment, but also to refrain from “spreading rumours.” Teachers we interviewed revealed that students who refused to hand in the affidavit were told that they could not graduate, and if those who signed were seen taking part in the protest, they would be expelled from school. Under this pre-emptive measure, the majority of students and their parents ended up signing the agreement initially. Within the petrochemical company, management carried out an education campaign for employees who did not sign the agreement. With work schedules and wages affected by demands to attend lectures on the PX project, most employees gave in to pressure from above.

However, there was a whistle-blower who became locally famous, Liang Zongrui (梁宗瑞), a staff member of the petrochemical company who resigned out of opposition to the PX plant. Liang attended many forums to provide alternative information, and he also insisted on carrying out protests in a peaceful manner. On 3 April 2014, the deputy secretary of the Education Department denied that it was the government’s intention to coerce citizens to sign the agreement, blaming it on “ill-conceived moves by some school leaders.” As explained by an interviewed senior high school teacher, such official rationalisation was highly suspicious; if the schools had not received instructions from above, they would not have acted that way. In addition, the wording of the agreements in different schools was identical, so it could not have been purely an initiative from below. The official clarification clearly backfired. One interviewed citizen viewed the official statement as a clumsy cover-up, and another senior media worker considered it an incidence of “over-hasty propaganda.”⁽¹²⁾ Public indignation rose over the official denial, as a result of which Maoming Health School students refused to sign the

3. Zhou Qingshu, “Maoming PX shijian qian 31 tian” (31 days before Maoming PX protest), *Xinjing bao* (Beijing News), 5 April 2014, section A16.
4. www.mppcc.com.cn/2012/MMSH/Profile/Introduction.aspx (accessed on 25 May 2014).
5. Yanfei Sun and Dingxin Zhao, “Environmental Campaigns,” in *Popular Protest in China*, ed. by Kevin J. O’Brien, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 160.
6. “Maoming City,” Wikipedia (Chinese version), last accessed 25 May 2014.
7. Zhou Qingshu, “Maoming PX shijian qian 31 tian” (31 days before the Maoming PX protest), *art. cit.*
8. “PX zhishi zhi duoshao” (Knowledge about PX), *Maoming ribao*, 18 March 2014, section A2.
9. Ran Yongping, “Jiekai PX de shenmi miansha” (Demystifying PX), *Maoming ribao*, 19 March 2014, section A3.
10. Shen Hui, “PX daodi youmeiyou weihai” (Is PX really harmful or not?), *Maoming ribao*, 20 March 2014, section A3.
11. Tu Chaozhua, “Xiamen PX shijian shimo” (The process of the Xiamen PX protest incident), *Beijing, Zhongguo qingnian bao* (China Youth Daily), 28 December 2007.
12. Zhou Qingshu, “Maoming PX shijian qian de 31 tian” (31 days before Maoming PX protest), *art. cit.*



Photos 1, 2, and 3 – Pro-PX agreements in the schools of Maoming. © Kingsyhon Lee

agreement en masse, followed by other high schools. Some students wrote profanities on the agreement to vent their anger. All of the interviewed citizens uniformly criticised the high-handed actions of the officials.

Aside from this official suppression of dissent, there were other reasons explaining the emergence of the Maoming protest. Maoming had long been a centre of petrochemical production, and an ethylene plant was recently built without arousing popular opposition. However, our interview data suggest three sources for the anti-PX discontent: first, the Xiamen dispute aroused public concern over the safety of PX production; second, Maoming officials were notorious for their corruption, which fuelled popular distrust; finally, Maoming residents resented the chronic pollution in their city.

Practically all of the residents we interviewed knew about the successful anti-PX protest in Xiamen through a variety of information channels, such as social media on the Internet, personal relationships, and so on. There was a shared understanding that the unwelcome PX plant had been chased out of Xiamen and sent to their hometown. A sense of unjustified victimhood as well as inspiration from the Xiamen success story lent legitimacy to local protests. The following interview excerpt is fairly representative of the views of Maoming residents:

I heard that they tried to build PX plants in Xiamen, Dalian, and Ningbo, and all were stopped after public protests. The Maoming PX plant was driven out of those places. The government intends to kill Maoming people, as if lives in other cities are more valuable and the health of people in Maoming has to suffer. If the PX plant is not toxic, as the government says, it should be built someplace else. If the PX plant can be successfully removed from Xiamen, Maoming people can do the same. (A small businessman at the farmers' market, 4 April 2014)

The protestors' reasoning was simple and straightforward: Xiamen residents did not want the PX plant because it was toxic, and the more positive things government propaganda said about PX, the more dubious it was. In the end, there was virtually no trust in the government.

Distrust of the government was aggravated by exposure of official venality. In 2014, the Communist Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection

sent more than 70 investigators to Maoming to look into allegations of widespread graft in the city government. Two former Party secretaries of Maoming, Zhou Zhenhong and Luo Yinguo, were sentenced to death with a two-year reprieve for corruption.⁽¹³⁾ Such scandals deepened the negative impression of official irregularities as well as of a cavalier attitude toward popular opinion. Maoming residents resented the fact that major policies were executed without proper consultation. Even when people accepted the view that PX in itself was not toxic, they still strongly opposed the PX project because they felt a corrupt government simply could not guarantee industrial safety.

Just a few days ago, the former chairman of the Political Consultative Conference in Maoming, Feng Limei, was investigated and prosecuted. Maoming officials are a mess and the government is simply hopeless. PX products are not toxic, but there can be problems of leakage during the processing stage. The entire city of Maoming will be affected if that happens. Who ends up suffering the consequences? I don't oppose PX per se, and China certainly needs PX, but I don't believe that a government that lacks credibility can manage PX production well. (A petrochemical company employee, 4 April 2014)

Previously, Maoming residents might have been willing to tolerate pollution because petrochemical production provided them with a livelihood. For more than a half century, the industry had offered job opportunities to local people. In particular, since children were allowed to take over their parents' positions when they retired, many families literally lived off of the petrochemical industry from generation to generation. However, after the reform of state-owned enterprises in 2000, many workers were laid off, souring the previously favourable image. Now most Maoming residents were of the opinion that while the petrochemical company might contribute to local GDP, there was not much economic benefit to local residents, who furthermore suffered from the effects of pollution.

13. Patrick Boehler, "Violence, arrests in Guangdong city of Maoming as locals rally against petrochemical plant," *South China Morning Post*, 31 March 2014.



Photos 4 and 5 – Burned vehicles in Maoming, 30 March 2014. © Mr. Yang

I believe the PX project is good for the economic development of Maoming, but will it provide employment opportunities for us? The GDP of Maoming ranks among the top contributors to Guangdong Province, but why is per capita income still so low? Obviously the city is wealthy and strong, but the people are poor and weak. Moreover, there are already two time bombs, the ethylene plant and the oil refinery, in Maoming. Can people survive if a PX plant is built this year? An explosion occurred in the ethylene plant in 2008, and as a result, well water in the nearby villages became black and undrinkable. Such pollution incidents happen frequently in Maoming. Every time it is rainy and windy, we can smell the stench of the oil refinery. Living here is simply slow-motion suicide. The special local product here is no longer lychees and longan fruit, but rather nasal inflammation. (A retired worker, April 4 2014)

Protest and repression

On Sunday morning, 30 March 2014, people who were mostly residents near the planned PX site began to gather on the front lawn of the Maoming municipal government office building. It started off as a spontaneous gathering without leadership and protest activity, and the police maintained order by urging the crowd to leave and preventing people from getting close to the government building. There was confusion among the crowd until 8:30 AM, when a young woman standing in front began shouting the slogan "Get PX out of Maoming! Give us back a clean homeland!" The protestors then became agitated, and some began distributing protest leaflets.⁽¹⁴⁾ When most of the people had received the leaflets, the crowd became better organised. The leaders directed thousands of people to march along the densely populated main thoroughfares of the city centre in order to attract more attention. When the demonstrators attempted to return to the city government lawn, columns of policemen stopped them. After minor scuffles, protestors broke through the police cordon and gathered again in front of the city government building. The morning rally had been largely peaceful, but the government did not send a delegate to meet the crowd, which became increasingly frustrated and restless.

At 3 PM, some young people began throwing eggs and bottles of urine at policemen lined up in front of the government building. After initial restraint, the police attempted to disperse the crowd at 4 PM, beating those who hurled projectiles. Protestors fled to safety, and some young people with

dyed hair and fashionable clothing were savagely beaten. According to Ms. Zhu, an eyewitness, "the situation was chaotic. Five policemen roughed up one person until he could no longer stand. Even a girl who was taking pictures was knocked unconscious." Ms. Zhu also panicked at that point and took shelter in a nearby high-rise to observe from a safe vantage point. She was shocked by the police brutality. "We protested peacefully," she argued; "How could the police beat us up?"

By 6 PM, most of the protestors were gone and only a few people remained. Two hours later, the crowd remerged just as during the daytime, with an obvious increase in young people, who kept shouting slogans and demanding that the mayor step down. An attempt to persuade young protestors to proceed in a civilised and non-violent manner produced the opposite effect. Around 9 PM, an official car approached, and an angry mob intercepted and smashed it, mistakenly identifying it as the mayor's.⁽¹⁵⁾ A young woman mounted and stomped on the car, attracting loud cheering, and finally the car was turned upside down. This daring act triggered a riot, and images of the obstruction and burning of a police vehicle at 12 AM was circulated on the Internet (see Photos 4 and 5). As the police started cracking down, the crowd was driven off and rioters were arrested. A witness described the horrible scene as a battlefield "like we saw in TV films about the Anti-Japanese War. Many young females were crying out in fear."

The crowd gathered again the following day. There were efforts to persuade people to protest without violence. A peaceful demonstration lasted for a whole day in front of the government office building, but ended without protestors being able to see any official representative. Some local policemen gently urged the demonstrators to leave, explaining their dilemma and unwillingness to use violence against local compatriots. However, a large number of armed policemen from subordinate cities (Gaozhou 高州, Xinyi 信宜, and Dianbai 电白) and adjacent cities (Zhanjiang 湛江 and Yangjiang 阳江) were deployed. The out-of-town armed police began dispersing the crowd at 6 PM, using tear gas and specialised batons. The demonstrators were so frightened that they immediately fled from the lawn. "The police were so horrible that they punched people on the ground and did not stop beating. It seemed that they were going to beat people to

14. Originally, a local realty broker prepared 50 copies of leaflets to be distributed at the rally. Seeing that they were not enough for the crowd, some people volunteered to duplicate more copies at a nearby store.

15. According to the criminal police, the car belonged to the Deputy Director of the Anti-smuggling Office, who disregarded the police suggestion to stay away from the crowd.

death," according to an interviewee. Nevertheless, protestors did not give up; they immediately returned to the lawn during breaks in the police crackdown. There were several rounds of crowd dispersion and re-gathering, and the confrontation lasted until midnight. Some young rioters who were afraid of the armed police chose to vent their anger by destroying public facilities, billboards, and roadside rails and burning police booths.

Previous anti-PX protests in Xiamen, Ningbo, Kunming, and Dalian did not experience police crackdowns, and officials eventually adopted a moderate response by abandoning the PX projects.⁽¹⁶⁾ Why was Maoming a conspicuous exception in using coercive policing? Why were protestors so angry that destructive riots resulted?

The deployment of outside armed police provides a clue to unravelling the puzzle. The local leadership in Maoming City did not have the authority to mobilise them, so the directive must have come from the provincial government. The advanced anti-riot equipment, tear gas, batons, and pepper water, were normally used in situations of second-degree alert. It can be safely assumed that Maoming officials had obtained their superiors' approval. There were direct and personal stakes involved in the PX project, since it was a joint investment with the city government, which expected to receive tax and profit, and according to convention, the local deputy Party secretary served as general manager of the Maoming Petrochemical Company. The overlap of political power and economic interest therefore hardened official intransigence.

The Maoming protest proceeded spontaneously for the most part, with people emerging as impromptu leaders to lead the crowd. Based on our interview with the "leaders," they did not belong to any pre-existing organisation, nor was there prior planning. After their arrival at the scene, they did not know the organisers' identities or the schedule for protest activities. They received the information from an anonymous Internet source and went there out of anger or curiosity. Another event on 28 April 2014 showed a similar lack of organisation. A group of villagers close to the PX construction site gathered around 10 AM because of a piece of Internet news. At first, people were just standing around and talking as if watching a play. For three hours, no leader talked to the crowd or shouted slogans. Then a group of young villagers lined up their motorcycles to form a barricade, humiliating the plainclothes police amid jeering and cheering from the crowd. A morning's protest at the construction site ended in a minor brawl.

The lack of organisation deprived the protestors of meaningful engagement with officials when the opportunity rose. On the third day of the protest, officials announced their intention to meet and negotiate with protest delegates. It was difficult, however, to decide who could represent the crowd. When some representatives were finally chosen, they were complete strangers to one another, and during the meeting with officials, they simply voiced their personal opinions rather than conveying the collective demands of the protestors. After the session with the officials, these representatives went home without explaining the situation to the crowd. The absence of leadership obviously made it impossible to win concessions from the government. Ultimately, a disorganised crowd motivated by the highly emotional appeal "getting PX out of Maoming" could be very disruptive and riotous, but they had difficulty translating their discontent into concrete demands and pressure on officials, who in turn found suppression a less costly option than good-faith negotiation.

Without organisational leadership, protestors' information came mostly from anonymous Internet sources. Widespread anger brought them to the protest scene, but since they were mutual strangers, there was low trust

among them, and suspicion of plainclothes police and agents provocateurs was endemic. The spontaneous attempt to constrain violent behaviour was doomed to fail because no participant had the legitimacy to represent the protestors as a group. As a matter of fact, the riot provided the perfect excuse for the government to utilise coercive force.

While protest activities in Maoming were mainly spontaneous, unorganised, and violence-prone, a solidarity demonstration on 1 April in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province, offered a contrasting example. The Guangzhou rally was organised by Maoming sojourners in this southern metropolis of more than ten million people. One man, who revealed his surname as "Dai" to journalists, sent an invitation to his 2,000 friends in social media for a protest at the provincial government office. Due to Internet censorship, only around 300 participants showed up,⁽¹⁷⁾ and their rally was peaceful. Guan Dongqin, an accountant in Guangzhou, raised a banner stating, "For all the Maoming compatriots, freedom is everything." In the end, the police arrested nine persons, including Guan.⁽¹⁸⁾

The apparently spontaneous and violent nature of the Maoming protest stood in contrast to similar cases in Xiamen, Ningbo, Kunming, and Dalian, where middle-class members of the community made up most of the participants and their leaders gained the opportunity to articulate their demand in mainstream media.⁽¹⁹⁾ In their protest against a waste incinerator, middle-class homeowners in Guangzhou managed to stage "rational resistance" with the intention of setting themselves apart from nearby villagers who might likewise suffer from the facility.⁽²⁰⁾ We do not imply here an inherent tendency among lower-class members of society to resort to unruly protest. As stressed by Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward in their observation on American poor people's movements, the grassroots did not experience their grievances in the abstract, but rather in daily unpleasant encounters with their superiors. Hence it was in the mundane milieu that their acts of resistance first emerged, usually in the form of mass defiance disrupting everyday routine.⁽²¹⁾ The same observation applied to the nascent stage of Taiwan's environmental movement of the mid-1980s, when the victims of industrial pollution erected barricades to bring production forcibly to a halt.⁽²²⁾

Although the scale of the Maoming protest surpassed the preceding cases, "local elites were not involved in this dispute," observed an interviewed real estate agent. The interviewed witnesses concurred that the main protest participants came from lower class backgrounds and from occupations such as karaoke bar workers, mobile phone salespersons, barbershop workers, small clothing store owners, rural farmers, and a significant number of unemployed youth. Many high-school students took part in the protest on the first day, but a subsequent demand from the city government sent them

16. Cao Kai and Zheng Caixiong, "Protests show growing concern over environment," *China Daily*, 3 April 2014.
17. Demetri Sevastopulo, "China PX plant protests spread to provincial capital Guangzhou," *Financial Times*, 1 April 2014.
18. Demetri Sevastopulo, "Chinese police detain Guangzhou protesters," *Financial Times*, 2 April 2014.
19. Jie Chen, "Transnational Environmental Movement: Impacts on the green civil society in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 19, No. 65, 2010, pp. 503-523; Yanqi Tong and Shaohua Lei, "Large-Scale Mass Incidents and Government Responses in China," *International Journal of China Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2010, pp. 487-508.
20. Amy Zhang, "Rational Resistance: Homeowner Contention against Waste Incinerator in Guangzhou," *China Perspectives*, No. 2014/2, pp. 45-52.
21. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*, New York, Vintage Books, 1978.
22. Ming-sho Ho and Feng-san Su, "Control by Containment: The Politics of Institutionalizing Pollution Disputes in Taiwan," *Environment and Planning A*, Vol. 40, No. 10, 2008, p. 2406.

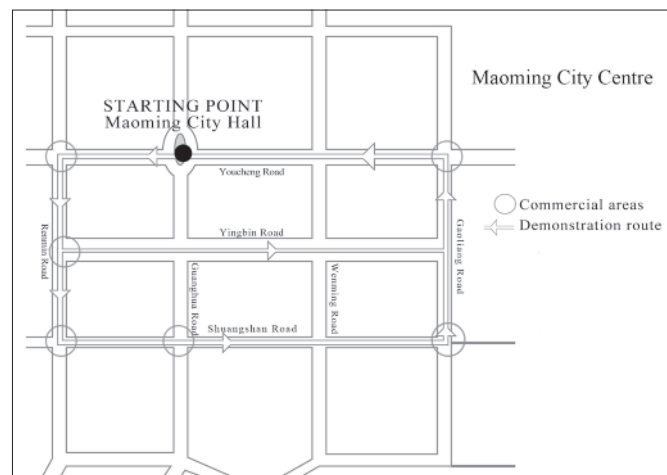
back to school, thus effectively containing student activism. Employees of state-owned banks and power companies were given lessons in ideological indoctrination, and they were prohibited from joining the protest. In short, the government was effectively able to forestall the participation of people in its directly supervised sectors. Consequently, the anti-PX protest could only recruit participants from the private sector, which was relatively undeveloped in Maoming and supported few independent middle class actors. In Maoming, where the state-owned petrochemical company dominates the city, members of the middle class usually work for the government. By pre-emptively constraining their involvement, the government deprived the protest movement of a valuable manpower resource. Without the leadership, discursive capacity, and media connections of the middle-class, Maoming protestors could only rely on mass action to put pressure on the incumbent elites.

Social media, urban space, and protest mobilisation

As soon as the protest came into being, Maoming citizens tried to contact nationally renowned media such as *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang zhoumo* 南方周末), *Southern Metropolis Daily* (*Nanfang dushibao* 南方都市报), and *Southern Daily* (*Nanfang ribao* 南方日报). There were live call-ins to the popular TV programs "Today's Focus" (今日关注) and "DV Live" to publicise the plight of Maoming. Although Guangzhou-based journalists appeared sympathetic, their superiors did not grant permission for on-the-spot reporting in Maoming. Originally, after the 30 March rally, people were confident that the powerful demonstration of local unity should attract broader media attention that might force local officials to revise the PX policy, and many people were disappointed at the neglect of the mainstream media. After four days of sustained protest, the government announced a press conference on 3 April 2014, which raised a ray of hope among the protestors. People waited again in front of the city government offices, bringing their videos and other visual images in hopes of being interviewed by journalists. The government changed the venue at the last minute and held the press conference behind closed doors, although it was simultaneously broadcast on the Internet. Only one news agency and ten newspapers were invited, and all followed the directives of the Communist Party. Domestic media with public credibility and the international press were not allowed to cover the news. This was clearly a public relations tactic on the part of officials. With long-awaited coverage in the mainstream media still unavailable, Maoming protesters resorted to sharing their videos and pictures through Internet social media – the only self-help method to circumvent official censorship.

In the recent wave of environmental movements in China, such as the anti-incinerator protest in the Panyu district of Guangzhou and anti-PX protests in Xiamen, traditional media played a critical role in the mobilising process.⁽²³⁾ Media affect the movement by validating and enlarging the scope of its frame.⁽²⁴⁾ Almost all movement activists desire media attention; for them, "no news is bad news." However, as noted above, traditional media were absent at the Maoming protest. As an alternative, protest mobilisation proceeded through online channels. Almost all our interviewees indicated that throughout the protest movement their social media, such as QZone and WeChat, were overloaded with related information. Some people decided to join the rally because they felt angry after seeing pictures of police suppression. On the second day of the riot, some bogus pictures and de-

scriptions circulated on the Internet and fuelled popular fury. One widespread rumour claimed that 15 people were dead and 80 were injured. Hong Kong media relayed this rumour without verification, and a report in *Apple*



Map 2 – The route of the demonstration in Maoming
© Kingsyhon Lee

Daily was massively circulated as "evidence of a Maoming massacre."

After the riot, the authorities made "Maoming" a censored word on Weibo (a Chinese version of Twitter), and photos of police brutality on Qzone were deleted. As a result, WeChat became the only online channel relatively free from official Internet surveillance. Information on WeChat was shared on the basis of friendship, which certainly limited the scope of its circulation. Nevertheless, this drawback was compensated by greater reliability, because receivers tended to know senders on a personal basis. At the protest scene, many participants were busy sending the latest news via social media, and some pieces were later quoted by the international media or reposted in online bulletin boards. Since there were no professional journalists on the spot to report on the anti-PX rally, participants had to play the dual role of protesting and news-making, as happened in the Xiamen case.⁽²⁵⁾ The only difference was that traditional media eventually became involved following the self-reporting by Xiamen protestors, while Maoming protestors could only rely on social media.

Aside from the Internet, Maoming protestors used their intimate knowledge of the city layout to maximise participation. Map 2 shows that the demonstration started from the lawn of the city government building and made a counter-clockwise circle. Protestors took the route via the city's traffic arteries so they could march through commercial areas, populous residential areas, and marketplaces. Upon seeing the protest procession, many people at roadside stores came out to express their solidarity by applauding or shouting slogans. Quite a few people joined the protest along the route. Mr. Yang was among the frontline demonstrators raising a protest banner. He estimated that the rally began with 1,000 to 2,000 people, but when they finished circling the city centre and returned to the city govern-

23. Yu Huang and Zeng Fanxu, "Cong yilinweihe dao zhengce changdao: Zhongguo meiti yu shehui kangzheng de huiji moshi" (From "not in my back yard" to policy advocacy: The co-empowerment model between media and protests in China), *Xinwenxue yanjiu* (Mass Communication Studies), Vol. 109, 2011, pp. 167-200.

24. William A. Gamson and Gadi Wolfsfeld, "Movements and Media as Interacting Systems," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 528, 1993, pp. 114-125.

25. Hung Chinfu, "Citizen Journalism and Cyberactivism in China's Anti-PX Plant in Xiamen, 2007-2009," *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2013, pp. 40-54.

ment, the crowd grew to roughly 7,000. Here Maoming people utilised an analogous spatial tactic to that of the Beijing pro-democracy student activists in 1989. As analysed by Zhao Dingxin,⁽²⁶⁾ student protestors zigzagged through the student quarters to attract more participants before marching through the police cordon line. Similarly, the counter-clockwise demonstration in Maoming was a mobilising strategy to make up for the deficiency in organisational resources and middle-class leadership.

Conclusion

What happened in Maoming in spring 2014 was the first anti-PX protest in China that generated bloody confrontation. It deviated from the scenarios in Dalian, Xiamen, Kunming, and Chengdu, where urban development nourished a broadly-based middle class more capable of publicising their environmental grievances due to their better resource endowment. Particularly on issues concerning homeowners' rights, China's major cities have witnessed sustained activism among the middle class in defiance of business and its political colluders to the point that observers saw broader political implications.⁽²⁷⁾ By contrast, Maoming was a petrochemical town whose economic viability depended chiefly on environmentally harmful production. Moreover, Chinese classify their cities in terms of economic and social development, and Maoming barely qualifies listing among the "third tier." As a result, disruptive protests and the subsequent repression failed to draw media and public attention. The official decision to launch the PX project was announced without proper consultation, as a result of which the leaderless and disorganised protestors could only resort to violence to express their opposition. Their initial optimism and sense of empowerment gave way to fear and indignation after the police suppression, and their hope was completely dashed after the closed-door press conference. Their protest seemed to founder in helplessness and isolation.

The government gave a vague promise in early April 2014 that the PX project would not get started until "a consensus among citizens is reached." At the time of writing (June 2014), there has been no follow-up news. According to a realty agent, local housing transactions plunged to an unprecedented low in April but quickly rebounded in early May. Clearly the riot and suppression created a temporary panic among existing or prospective Maoming homeowners, but many chose to forget what happened. There was also a tacit understanding that a so-called "consensus among citizens" would emerge sooner or later and that the PX project would ultimately proceed.

To conclude, the Maoming lesson demonstrates the formidable difficulties faced by China's nascent environmental movement. Mass environmental consciousness is visibly on the rise, and victims are willing to claim their right to a liveable homeland through disruptive protest if necessary. However, except in some major cities, critical resources for successful environmentalism, such as middle-class leadership, organisational basis, and sympathetic media, are direly lacking. At this moment, it can be safely assumed that it will take years or perhaps decades before the successful movement in Xiamen can be replicated in a social context like Maoming's. In other words, it remains a long-term project for the sprouts of urban environmentalism to take root on a national basis in China.

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26. Dingxin Zhao, "Ecologies of Social Movements: Student Mobilization during the 1989 Pro-democracy Movement in Beijing," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 103, No. 6, 1998, pp. 1493-1529.

27. Benjamin L. Read, "Democratizing the Neighborhood? New Private Housing and Home-Owner Self-Organization in Urban China," *China Journal*, Vol. 49, 2003, pp. 31-59; Luigi Tomba, "Residential Space and Collective Interest Formation in Beijing Housing Disputes," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 184, 2005, pp. 934-951; Zhengxu Wang et al., "Leadership in China's Urban Middle Class Protest: The Movement to Protect Homeowners' Right in Beijing," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 214, 2013, pp. 411-431.