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Democracy Dies in Darkness

SUNDAY, JANUARY 6, 2019

Chinese censors crack down on tweets

Police head to doorsteps
to pressure Twitter users
to delete messages

BY GERRY SHIH

HONG KONG — The 50-year-old software engineer was tapping away at his computer in November when state security officials filed into his office on mainland China.

They had an unusual — and nonnegotiable — request.

Delete these tweets, they said.

The agents handed over a printout of 60 posts the engineer had fired off to his 48,000 followers. The topics included U.S.-China trade relations and the plight of underground Christians in his coastal province in southeast China.

When the engineer did not comply after 24 hours, he discovered that someone had hacked into his Twitter account and deleted its entire history of 11,000 tweets.

“If the authorities hack you, what can you do?” said the engineer, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of landing in deeper trouble with authorities. “I felt completely drained.”

In Beijing and other cities across China, prominent Twitter users confirmed

in interviews to The Washington Post that authorities are sharply escalating the Twitter crackdown. It suggests a wave of new and more aggressive tactics by state censors and cyber-watchers trying to control the Internet.

Twitter is banned in China — as are other non-Chinese sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. But they are accessed by workarounds such as a virtual private network, or VPN, which is software that bypasses state-imposed firewalls.

While Chinese authorities block almost all foreign social media sites, they rarely have taken direct action against citizens who use them, preferring instead to quietly monitor what the Chinese are saying.

But recently, Internet monitors and activists have tallied at least 40 cases of Chinese authorities pressuring users to delete tweets through a decidedly low-tech method: showing up at their doorsteps.

Even for a country accustomed to censorship, a crackdown on Twitter is surprising because the service, like Google and Facebook, is used by a relatively small number of people, at least by Chinese standards.

An estimated 10 million Chinese use Twitter, according to some tech-industry watchers. (Twitter does not issue statis-

'Twitter has become their biggest target to take down'

tics on China.) That is a minuscule figure compared with those on government-approved messaging and app sites: 1 billion for WeChat and hundreds of millions on Weibo, according to state figures.

But in the past two years, as the space for political speech has all but vanished in President Xi Jinping's China, Twitter has played an increased role. It has become a cyber-window to the outside world, a release valve for the disaffected, a virtual teahouse for politically minded Chinese at home and abroad.

Bankrupt mom-and-pop investors fume about the lack of financial regulations. Disgruntled farmers pass around videos of land seizures or police thuggery. Muslims from China's far west share pictures of loved ones locked away in state-operated reeducation centers.

It has started to resemble the free-wheeling Twitterscape in other tightly controlled nations such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

And to the Chinese Communist Party, that means it is a rising threat.

"Twitter is the fastest, simplest, most important gathering place if you care about Chinese politics. It's extremely hot right now," said Ho Pin, the New York-based publisher of the Mirredia Group, a leading purveyor of sensitive Chinese political news.

In late November, the wife of renowned photographer Lu Guang took to Twitter to seek help for her missing husband, believed

to be detained by police. (His name is censored on the Weibo service.)

Last summer, when the Chinese government tried to break up a nationwide labor movement, tech-savvy student supporters informed the world via Twitter.

An elite class of businesspeople with ties to the upper echelons of the Communist Party as well as media professionals are increasingly sneaking peeks at the banned service, according to Ho.

"They all read it," he said. "For the government, the threat exceeds that of anything else. Twitter has become their biggest target to take down."

That's precisely what's happening now.

He Jiangbing, a financial commentator, said police came to his Beijing living room to warn about his tweets.

Days earlier, officials visited the Guangzhou home of Ye Du, a well-known writer and supporter of the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, to hand him a printout of 802 tweets he needed to delete, Ye said in an interview.

Meanwhile, all 30,000 tweets from the account of Wu Gan, an activist serving an eight-year prison sentence, were deleted in November, which suggested a government hack, said Yaxue Cao, a Washington-based activist.

Cui Haoxin, a Muslim poet, was taken to a police station and interrogated recently — partly because of his tweets calling attention to Islamophobia in China.



PHOTOS BY YAN CONG FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

He Jiangbing, below, shows his Twitter profile on his phone in China, where the site is banned. Twitter has played an increased role in recent years as the government clamps down on political speech.



“They not only violated my personal freedom of speech, but they’re effectively violating a foreign company and a foreign country’s Internet sovereignty,” Cui said.

Interest among Chinese users skyrocketed in early 2017 after the fugitive billionaire Guo Wengui began using Twitter and YouTube to air sensational — and largely unsubstantiated — allegations of corruption against Chinese leaders.

The campaign would have been unthinkable on Chinese social media. But it played out dramatically over several months on Twitter, drawing in a new generation of Chinese users.

For months, Guo and his supporters shared corporate records and satellite images of California mansions allegedly linked to senior Communist Party officials.

“We tend to see cycles of tightening and relaxing, and China is clearly in a tightening phase currently as the economy slows down and domestic and intentional challenges loom large,” said Dali Yang, an expert on Chinese politics.

The Ministry of Public Security and the Cyberspace Administration of China, the Internet regulator, did not respond to requests for comment.

The first time Chinese state security actively sought out Twitter users was in 2011, when Chinese dissidents, inspired by the wave of uprisings in the Arab world, tried to use the platform to mobilize protests, said Yaqiu Wang, a China researcher at Human Rights Watch.

After that movement fizzled, Chinese authorities have kept an eye on the plat-

form but, until recently, rarely intervened. That helped cultivate Twitter’s reputation as a safe space for an improbable and colorful cast of Chinese voices.

The veteran journalist Gao Yu, for one, tweets prodigiously despite living under house arrest after being charged with leaking state secrets in 2015. Bao Tong, a purged 86-year-old Communist Party official and former top aide to Chinese leader Zhao Ziyang, set up an account last year and hurls daily criticism of the Xi administration to 137,000 followers. (Calls by foreign journalists to Bao’s home are frequently cut off, but his access to Twitter appears to be rarely interrupted.)

He, the Beijing-based columnist, said there are fears that a full-scale crackdown on Twitter would choke off the last online venue in China for open intellectual debate.

Last year, He wrote pointed comments on Weibo and WeChat urging the Chinese central bank to lower reserve requirements for lenders because, in his estimation, the Chinese economy was struggling.

“I never touched politics. I’m not a dissident, and I’m not a celebrity,” he said. “They still took away my voice.”

When police visited him last month to warn him about tweeting, He did not promise to stop. He’s not sure he could.

“We go to Twitter because we have no choice,” He said. “For people like us, if you have to hold in your thoughts, it feels like dying.”

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Luna Lin in Beijing contributed to this report.

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2019

Chinese troops sit on Afghan doorstep

While U.S. looks for exit,
rival tiptoes into region
it has flooded with cash

BY GERRY SHIH

NEAR SHAYMAK, TAJIKISTAN — Two miles above sea level in the inhospitable highlands of Central Asia, there's a new power watching over an old passage into Afghanistan: China.

For at least three years, Chinese troops have quietly monitored this choke point in Tajikistan just beyond China's western frontier, according to interviews, analysis of satellite images and photographs, and firsthand observations by a Washington Post journalist.

While veiled in secrecy, the outpost of about two dozen buildings and lookout towers illustrates how the footprint of Chinese hard power has been expanding alongside the country's swelling economic reach.

Tajikistan — awash in Chinese investment — joins the list of Chinese military sites that includes Djibouti in the strategic Horn of Africa and man-made islands in the South China Sea, in the heart of Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, Chinese President Xi Jin-

ping's economic ambitions over the past seven years have brought a wave of major investment projects, from the resource-rich Caspian Sea to Cambodia's coastline.

The modest facility in Tajikistan — which offers a springboard into Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor a few miles away — has not been publicly acknowledged by any government.

But its presence is rich in significance and symbolism.

At a moment when the United States might consider a pact that would pull American troops out of Afghanistan, China appears to be tiptoeing into a volatile region critical to its security and its continental ambitions.

Already, the retreat of old powers and arrival of the new are on display in Tajikistan, a tiny, impoverished country that served as a gateway into Afghanistan for U.S. units in the early phases of the 2001 invasion.

During a recent trip along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border, The Post saw one of the military compounds and encountered a group of uniformed Chinese troops shopping in a Tajik town, the nearest market to their base. They bore the collar insignia of a unit from Xinjiang, the Chinese territory

As U.S. looks for exit in Central Asia, China seeks influence



GERRY SHIH/THE WASHINGTON POST

Chinese troops have been stationed in these buildings for the past few years near Tajikistan's border, close to a strip of territory in Afghanistan that China fears could be a gateway for extremists.

where authorities have detained an estimated 1 million Uighurs, a mostly Muslim ethnic minority.

The crackdowns against the Uighurs have been internationally condemned as a violation of human rights, but the Chinese government says they are part of a campaign to insulate its restive far west from Islamic extremism seeping in from Central Asia.

"We've been here three, four years," a soldier who gave his surname as Ma said

in a brief conversation while his Chinese comrades, guided by a Tajik interpreter, bought snacks and topped up their mobile SIM cards in Murghab, a sprawl of low-rises about 85 miles north of the base.

When asked whether his unit had intercepted anyone crossing from Afghanistan, Ma smiled.

"You should be aware of our government's policies about secrecy," he said. "But I can say: It's been pretty quiet."

Scarce public information

Details about China's activities at the facilities, some of which bear the Chinese and Tajik emblems, are not made public. Also unclear are the arrangements over their funding, construction and ownership. Satellite imagery shows what appear to be two clusters of buildings, barracks and training grounds, about 10 miles apart near the mouth of the Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of territory in northeastern Afghanistan.

The Post separately spoke to members of a German mountaineering expedition who said they were interrogated in 2016 by Chinese troops patrolling the Afghan corridor, near the settlement of Baza'i Gonbad. Photos provided by Steffan Graupner, the expedition leader, showed Chinese mine-resistant armored vehicles and equipment embossed with the country's paramilitary logo. Taken together, the findings add

weight to a growing number of reports that China, despite public denials, has been conducting security operations inside Afghanistan.

China's Foreign Ministry declined to comment and directed questions to the Defense Ministry, which did not respond to requests for comment.

In a statement, Tajikistan's Foreign Ministry said there are "no People's Republic of China military bases on the territory of the Republic of Tajikistan," nor "any talks whatsoever" to establish one.

Analysts say the Chinese encountered by The Post may be paramilitary units under the command of the central military leadership but technically distinct from the People's Liberation Army, China's main war-fighting force.

U.S. officials say they are aware of the Chinese deployment but do not have a clear understanding of its operations. They say they do not object to the Chinese presence because the United States also believes that a porous Afghan-Tajik border could pose a security risk.

China's encroachment into Afghanistan is "fascinating but not surprising — and should be welcomed by Washington," said Ely Ratner, executive vice president at the Center for a New American Security, who was a deputy national security adviser to then-Vice President Joe Biden.

"We can and should foist



more responsibility for Afghanistan on China,” Ratner said. “They don’t want a target on their back, but they’ve been free-riding on U.S. dollars and lives for security.”

Despite harboring concerns about militants in Afghanistan for decades, China has been loath to be seen as siding with any party in the conflict, much less to put boots on the ground.

Instead, China’s state-owned companies and banks have inked infrastructure deals, mining concessions and loans across Central and South Asia, the poor and turbulent belt that makes up its backyard. Its diplomats, who have robust ties with Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Taliban, have talked up China’s role as a regional peace broker — never a peacekeeper.

But China’s global posture is changing under Xi, who has shed the country’s long-standing isolationism and spoken loftily about restoring its great-power status.

People’s Liberation Army (PLA) strategists increasingly advocate for pushing beyond the Chinese mainland with deployments that follow in the wake of the country’s expanding “haiwailiyi,” or interests abroad, said Andrew Scobell, a Chinese security expert at the Rand Corp.

“China’s peaceful rise has encountered a complicated and severe situation,” Maj. Li Dong wrote in a 2016 journal article as part of a PLA assessment of China’s overseas military strategy. He pinpointed the Central Asian frontier as one of three top flash points along with the Korean Peninsula and the East and South China seas.

China’s deployments abroad lack strength and “flexibility,” Li wrote. “China should push the construction of its overseas military presence gradually.”

A rugged chessboard

In 2017, China unveiled a naval base in Djibouti that gave it a foothold in the Middle East and Africa. It steadily installed infrastructure — and later, weaponry — in the contested South China Sea. A recent Pentagon report predicted a PLA base could appear soon in Pakistan — a prospect China has denied.

Beijing’s moves have been similarly opaque in the rugged mountains spanning Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China: the same chessboard where czarist Russia and the British Empire vied for influence 150 years ago.

There will be “no Chinese military personnel of any kind on Afghan soil at any time,” Col. Wu Qian, the Defense Ministry’s spokesman, told reporters in August.

In private, the Chinese tell a slightly different story.

In late 2017, the Development Research Center, an influential think tank under China’s cabinet, invited a handful of Russian researchers to its central Beijing offices. In what was billed as a private seminar, the Chinese explained why China had a security presence in Tajikistan that extended into the Afghans’ Wakhan Corridor, according to Alexander Gabuev of the Carnegie Moscow Center, a Russian participant.

The Chinese researchers took pains to describe the outpost as built for training and logistical purposes — not a military occupation. They also sought to gauge Russia's reaction with questions: How would Moscow view China's move into its traditional sphere of influence? Would it be more palatable if China deployed private mercenaries instead of uniformed men?

"They wanted to know what Russia's red lines were," said Gabuev, who has held similar conversations with scholars working under the Chinese intelligence agency. "They don't want Russia blindsided."

In the 1990s, a Uighur separatist group, calling itself the East Turkestan Independence Movement, rose in Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban and threatened attacks against China. Although Western officials and analysts question the ETIM's ability to carry out significant attacks, it heralded the beginning of an extremist threat facing China.

Since 2014, hundreds, or most likely thousands, of Uighurs have left China for Syria, and Chinese officials, like their Western counterparts, have warned about the prospect of fighters there decamping for Central Asia as they lose territory. In 2016, the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan was targeted in a suicide bombing that Kyrgyz authorities attributed to the al-Nusra Front in Syria.

'You never saw us here'

To make the days-long overland journey across Tajikistan, from the capital,

Dushanbe, to the remote canyon held by Chinese soldiers, is to witness a landscape altered by an even more irrepressible force than the troops: Chinese money.

In the west, Chinese-built coal-fired plants loom over the skyline, providing electricity and heat to the capital's residents. In the east, Chinese-funded hospitals and schools rise from the hardscrabble countryside. In the south, Chinese-financed tracks circumvent a crucial Soviet-era railway that had been shut down by Tajikistan's neighbor, Uzbekistan. Stitching it all together are Chinese-bored tunnels and Chinese-laid asphalt that cut hours off trips along the country's winding east-west highway.

The projects reflect Tajikistan's strategic position in China's Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI, an ambitious infrastructure investment plan to pull the Eurasian land mass into its economic embrace. China, through a single state bank, held more than half of Tajikistan's external debt as of 2016, up from none in 2006, according to 2017 Tajik Finance Ministry data.

In the soft-power stakes, the United States and Russia both appear to be losing relative ground to China, which provides scholarships for undergraduate Tajiks and military academy training for up-and-coming defense officials.

Susan M. Elliott, former U.S. ambassador to Tajikistan, said China's generous aid and funding should be applauded but viewed with skepticism. In the past year, a handful of countries that have taken Chi-

nese investments have reconsidered BRI deals amid allegations of corruption and low feasibility.

“If someone’s offering money to build roads and help put power lines up, it’s hard to turn that down when you have no alternative,” Elliott said. “This is a strategic and important part of the world, and we need to continue our strong partnerships with Tajikistan and other countries in the region.”

In many ways, the shifting geopolitical currents play out on the windy streets of Murghab, established as an army outpost in the 1890s by Russian Cossacks.

These days, it is Chinese troops who are dropping by in their unassuming minivans to pick up provisions.

“We don’t think about them, and they don’t bother us. They buy my water and snacks. It’s good.”

Safarmo Toshmamadov, shop clerk

Aiperi Bainazarova, a part-time manager at the only hotel in town, said locals believed there were scores, maybe hundreds, of Chinese troops who stayed on base. They mostly come to town to buy phone credit. Sometimes they buy hundreds of kilograms of yak meat at the price of 30 somoni — about \$3 — a kilo, she said.

“It helps the economy,” said Bainaz-

arova, 21, an ethnic Kyrgyz who studied on a Chinese government scholarship in Shanghai.

Despite the Chinese government’s insistence on keeping things secret, its troops’ periodic visits to Murghab’s bazaar, a row of shipping containers converted into storefronts, are anything but.

Safarmo Toshmamadov, a 53-year-old ethnic Pamir shopkeeper, said they have come to her for maybe three years. Some attempt a few words of Russian — although they always come accompanied by Tajik interpreters, she said.

“We don’t think about them, and they don’t bother us,” Toshmamadov said, shrugging. “They buy my water and snacks. It’s good.”

One afternoon outside Toshmamadov’s store, a Post reporter saw Ma, the Chinese soldier, who was initially surprised to encounter another Chinese speaker.

He spoke guardedly but affably about his deployment, which he explained was secret.

“You should know our government’s standard policies around revealing information,” he said. “So don’t tell your friends.”

When asked to pose for a photo together, Ma recoiled.

“Remember,” he said, walking away. “You never saw us here.”

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Anton Troianovski in Moscow, Yuan Wang in Beijing and Dan Lamothe in Washington contributed to this report.

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Democracy Dies in Darkness

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In China, the rush to riches sees a region turned to ruins

Deadly chemical blast underscores depths of unchecked corruption

BY GERRY SHIH

XIANGSHUI COUNTY, CHINA — A deadly factory explosion in 2007 didn't kill Ren Guanying. Nor did the chlorine gas leak that sparked mass panic in 2010.

When countless smaller industrial accidents struck this smog-choked belt of Jiangsu province over the years, they spared her, too.

The 58-year-old factory worker's luck ran out on March 21. An explosion at Tianjiayi Chemical Co. ripped through an industrial zone and the surrounding countryside, killing at least 78 people and injuring more than 600.

Ren's body was found on a country road not far from a 300-foot-wide crater, said her daughter, Ma Li.

"We used to always worry whenever we heard a blast, until we got numb to it," Ma said in her shattered home about half a mile from the chemical plants. "This place was like a time bomb. This time, it finally

got my mom."

To the residents of Xiangshui county, about 200 miles north of Shanghai, the Tianjiayi explosion on March 21 wasn't so much an accident as an inevitability.

Over the past two decades, local officials have transformed this once-overlooked coastal expanse of wheat and rice farms into one of China's major chemical-production centers, tripling the region's economic output in the process.

But the reckless search for economic salvation condemned the community instead. The toll, locals say, has been polluted rivers, toxic soil, four major explosions in 12 years and a litany of smaller accidents that turned the terrifying into the routine.

Three years after a similar blast in Tianjin killed more than 170 people southeast of Beijing, the Xiangshui disaster is a reminder of the domestic challenges facing President Xi Jinping, who has vowed to pursue safe, "high-quality" development but also keep the sagging economy and employment numbers afloat.

A deafening boom from the Tianjiayi plant jolted Ma from her nap around 2:30 p.m. Broken glass was everywhere. When



IMAGINECHINA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

An aerial view of the debris of the chemical plant operated by Tianjiayi Chemical Co., after an explosion killed at least 78 people last month. The blast further polluted China's Xiangshui county.

Explosion highlights toxic costs of growth

she rushed outside, she saw neighbors lying on the ground, injured or dazed. Others fled, running down the street through a cloud of thick dust that looked like a sandstorm.

A sour stench hung in the air.

"It was like the end of the world," she recalled.

Ma called her brother, who was working in a nearby factory. He was alive, but badly cut all over the right side of his head, which faced a window. "Then I called my mom and started panicking," she said, holding back tears, "because no one picked up the phone."

In the aftermath, the Beijing News quoted witnesses who said a spark in a hazardous-waste storage unit may have set off the explosion in the industrial park, where 65 chemical firms were located, creating shock waves felt miles away and a 2.2-magnitude tremor picked up by seismologists.

Residents say they had complained for years about the unchecked rise — and amply documented negligence — of the chemical plants just a quarter-mile from

their village.

Public records show local inspectors found 13 safety violations at Tianjiayi in February 2018. The company was fined at least a half-dozen times over the past five years for improper treatment of hazardous waste.

Workplace deaths have trended lower in China over the past decade as central leaders changed performance metrics for local officials to place more emphasis on safety and less weight on meeting economic targets.

Still, more than 100 workers die every day on average, said Geoffrey Crothall of the China Labor Bulletin, a nonprofit organization in Hong Kong. And the true number of fatalities may be much higher, he added, because incidents involving few deaths often go unreported.

“Every time this happens, the government goes through the same routine,” Crothall said. “They carry out an investigation. They say lessons will be learned, the guilty will be punished, measures will be taken.

“But nothing changes.”

A danger to speak up

Halfway between glitzy Shanghai and Qingdao, an affluent port city with a famous brewery and breezy beach villas, this impoverished stretch of China’s coast has long felt like an afterthought.

Local officials tried to change their luck 15 years ago by assiduously courting heavy industry, mostly chemical producers. The payoff has been dramatic: Xiangshui

county’s gross domestic product rose from \$1.5 billion in 2009 to \$5.2 billion in 2018, according to the local government, which says three industrial parks account for more than 90 percent of the economy.

Today, nearly 70 industrial firms, two steel mills and a power plant rise from a low plain dotted by smokestacks and cranes. The highway to Shanghai is lined with government banners urging outside investors to jump on the Xiangshui bandwagon, which has “merged tracks with Shanghai.” Giant letters along a county road spell out “PhSO₃H” — an acid compound produced here — like an art deco lawn sculpture.

Development came at a cost. New companies began habitually dumping and burying toxic byproducts. When farmers sought compensation to relocate from encroaching factories, they were often denied, sometimes violently, they said.

“We demanded to be moved, but what was the use?” said a farmer surnamed Cai, whose 79-year-old father died when the roof of his small brick hut collapsed in the blast. “You speak up, and they beat you like hell. So we don’t even dare to speak up.”

Industrial pollution became so rampant that several northern Jiangsu communities gained notoriety in the 2000s as “cancer villages.” In the case of Dongjin, 40 miles from the recent blast site, villagers sued a local chemical company after 100 residents were diagnosed with cancer. In response, the firm in 2006 offered a “subsidy” of \$11 to each resident.

That same year, Kong Lingyi, the

long-serving deputy environment protection chief in the region, which includes Xiangshui county, told reporters that was the price of progress.

“People would definitely choose food and clothing over environmental protection, not because we are stupid, but because we have no choice,” Kong was quoted as saying.

While local officials, including Kong, were trailed by persistent allegations of cronyism and corruption for a decade, the chemical industry flourished. Business executives like Zhang Qinyue, the boss of Tianjiayi Chemical, seemed untouchable.

In 2017, Zhang was given a suspended prison sentence of 18 months and slapped with a \$149,000 fine after being sued for dumping 120 tons of industrial waste.

But soon he returned to work.

“Why was that he is still the boss?” said Gao Xiaomei, a resident of Wangshang village, the area closest to the blast. “Who is supporting him? Who is giving him the power to gamble with people’s lives and blood?”

Zhang, who has been detained and placed under investigation in connection with the latest blast, could not be reached. Officials at the local environment protection bureau hung up when asked for comment.

Even if Zhang did not receive favorable treatment from local cadres, as residents widely suspect, he was certainly seen as a crucial force. Despite its seemingly impressive gains, Xiangshui county’s economic

results perennially lagged behind those of almost every other county in the region, which put its leaders under pressure.

“It’s not shocking that if you’re an official who still has to keep your growth numbers up, you might say, ‘I’ll take my chances with factories’ compliance’ if they’re tripling the GDP,” said Raymond Fisman, a Boston University economist who has studied the confluence of political factors and Chinese workplace safety.

Zhong Zhichun, a native of Hubei province who came to work at Lianhetech factory near Tianjiayi, said business owners were cozy with regulators, and employees in the industrial zone were almost always informed days before inspections took place.

“This is about corrupt officials and money,” Zhong said

Late last month, near the blast scene, police roughed up and detained reporters as well as Zhang Wenbin, a well-known environmental researcher.

Xi was on a trip to Europe — where he pitched billions of dollars in Chinese investments to Italy and France — when the crisis struck, and he called on the government to “strengthen guidance of public opinion.”

Government censors immediately scrubbed searches for “Xiangshui,” by far the most-searched term on the social media platform Weibo, according to the censorship monitor FreeWeibo.com. The comments that remained overwhelmingly praised the government’s emergency

response.

Circling the streets in Wangshang recently, Gao, the local resident, pointed out collapsed ceilings and metal doors in front of every home that caved inward like crumpled tinfoil.

Her tone stiffened when she spotted groups of local Communist Party officials wearing hard hats walking through the wreckage to offer residents external repairs.

“They’re forcing us to fix our windows and paint our facades so they can show higher-ups how they’ve done reconstruction,” Gao said. “But how do we dare to sleep in our homes with cracks in the walls? They’re putting makeup on a corpse.”

To ‘get rich is glorious’

Frustration threatened to boil over on March 26, when more than 500 people rallied outside a hotel a few miles down the road from Wangshang, where officials were staying to demand relocation and compensation.

After one official chided the protesters for demanding payment and cautioned them against challenging the Communist Party, a wall of paramilitary police closed in to seize and disperse the crowd, according to eyewitnesses, including Gao, and video they recorded on their smartphones.

Hours later, the Xiangshui county government appeared to relent, promising affected residents the option to relocate, according to state media. Many were not

satisfied with the sum being offered; others admitted it was difficult to move away despite the risks.

One resident, who gave his surname as Gu, said almost every family he knew had already sent their children away to live with relatives. His children had gone, too, but he and some of the neighborhood men were going to stick around. It’s the only home he’s known.

“You don’t see children in the street, do you?” he said. “If our generation dies, we die. If we choke on poison gas, so be it. But the children, if you can save one, you do that.”

On March 27, the Ma family gathered around a table to consider the legacy of the smoldering industrial zone.

Ren, the deceased matriarch, had worked for years as a factory cleaner for around 2,000 yuan, or \$300, per month. It was decent pay, better than laboring on the family’s 1.3-acre farm, said Ma.

“It’s not that there hasn’t been economic benefits, but it’s not worth it,” Ma concluded. “Who dares to live here?”

Outside, the village’s main drag was emptying as migrant workers headed home and residents sought refuge elsewhere. Across the street, a red government banner fluttered stubbornly against a white-washed wall.

It reads: “To shake off poverty and get rich is glorious.”

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The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

SUNDAY, MAY 26, 2019

In China, voices from the vanished

STUDENTS MAKE ‘IF I DISAPPEAR’ VIDEOS

Officials cracking down on Marxist labor activism

BY GERRY SHIH

BEIJING — The video opens with the 21-year-old sociology student facing the camera. His voice quivers as he recounts his interrogation — his humiliation — for days at the hands of Beijing police.

The officials pressured him to quit labor activism and drop out of Peking University, he says. They slapped him until blood streamed from his nose. They jammed headphones into his ears and played hours of propaganda at full volume.

On the last day, he alleges, they had him bend over a table naked and spread his buttocks, joking darkly that they would teach him how to insert a listening device.

“This all happened on campus,” Qiu Zhanxuan seethes in the video he recorded in February after he said the police released him, temporarily, after a four-day ordeal.

“If I disappear,” he adds, “it’ll be because of them.”

Qiu disappeared April 29.

State security agents seized him that day from Beijing’s outskirts, his classmates say. Qiu’s offense? He was the leader of the Marxist student association at the elite Peking University, a communist of conscience who defied the Communist Party of China.

Over the past eight months, China’s ruling party has gone to extraordinary lengths to shut down the small club of students at the country’s top university. Peking University’s young Marxists drew the government’s ire after they campaigned for workers’ rights and openly criticized social inequality and corruption.

That alone was provocative. In recent years, China’s leaders have been highly sensitive to rumblings of labor unrest as the sputtering economy lays bare the divides between rich and poor — fissures that were formed, and mostly overlooked, during decades of white-hot growth.

But the source of the dissent carried an extra sting for the government. Peking University, after all, educates China’s best and brightest, the top 0.1 percent of the country’s high school graduates. And its rebellious young Marxists were doing something particularly embarrassing: They were standing up for disenfranchised workers

Student activists caught in middle of activism crackdown



SUE-LIN WONG/REUTERS

About 50 university students from Beijing and elsewhere attended a demonstration in August in support of unionizing plant workers at Jasic Technology in Shenzhen, China.

against the state.

They were, in other words, emulating the early Communist Party itself.

Today, at least 21 members of Peking University's Marxist society — including its slight but steely leader Qiu — have been placed under house arrest or have vanished altogether. Scores more are regularly hauled in for interrogation and live under constant surveillance. Months of clashes, five waves of arrests and an influx of plain-clothes police have, at moments, turned a world-leading university into a surreal battleground.

The story of Peking University's Marxist club — as told by four members who remain secretly active and who spoke on the condition of anonymity for their safety, their supporters, and a trove of writings and videos left by activists anticipating arrest — illustrates the anxious political atmosphere in China, where idealistic students who embrace the party's own ideology can be suppressed just like any other political threat.

It poses wider questions that go to the heart of modern China: What exactly does the Communist Party stand for? What



OBTAINED BY THE WASHINGTON POST

Qiu Zhanxuan, the former leader of the Peking University Marxist society, has been missing since April 29.

gives it the right to rule?

Since rising to power in 2012, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has repeatedly warned his Communist Party that it needs to win back the public's faith by alleviating poverty, rooting out corrupt officials and ramping up nationalist education and propaganda work. But often, the public just doesn't buy it.

"The government stopped caring for workers long ago. It only cares about holding onto power and wealth," a 20-something Peking University Marxist who asked to be identified as Michael said by encrypted messaging app. (Many young Chinese people use Western nicknames.)

All over China, social friction has been

rising, inflamed by decades of breakneck growth.

In the south, labor disputes are ticking up again after falling for a decade. In the north, Beijing officials provoked a national outcry last winter after they forcibly expelled communities of migrant workers from the capital. In China's heartland, a city last year was occupied by thousands of decommissioned, jobless soldiers petitioning for compensation.

Each challenge to authority was supported, in part, by students.

"The government is scared because the domestic contradictions are growing," Michael said.

"Once you study Marxism, you know real socialism and China's so-called socialism with Chinese characteristics are two different things. They sell fascism as socialism, like a street vendor passes off dog meat as lamb."

Singing 'The Internationale'

Sprawling behind large gates made of vermilion-painted wood and curved tiles, Peking University's campus in northwest Beijing has been, for a century, home to China's intellectual vanguard and future leaders, its troublemakers and its revolutionaries.

A young Mao Zedong found Marxist-Leninism when he worked in the cam-

pus library. Peking University's students marched in the May 4, 1919, protests against Western colonialism, a seminal moment in Chinese political activism. The same school led the occupation of Tiananmen Square, 30 years ago in 1989, before the government sent in soldiers and tanks, killing hundreds, perhaps far more.

As China promoted dizzying free-market reforms in the 1990s, some Peking University students cut the other direction.

The Marxist association was formed in 2000 by students concerned about the economic dislocation and inequality already percolating around them.

In the years that followed, the students would travel weekly to textile and electronics factories in Beijing's outskirts. They joined assembly lines and slept and ate in dormitories to taste life at the foot of society.

For many, it was an ideological crucible.

A Marxist student who asked to be identified as Lucy worked at a print factory moving books and applying labels in southeast Beijing. She spent 12-hour shifts doing repetitive motions thousands of times, until her back was sore and her legs numb.

She was lucky she didn't have to provide for a family on the \$300- to \$450-a-month salaries like the workers beside her, she said.

"But it was precisely the experiencing and understanding of workers' lives that put you on the path of actually practicing

Marxism," she said. "That painful suffering is the daily existence for 300 million Chinese."

In 2013, the group established a "workers home" on campus modeled after the social club formed in the 1920s by the Communist Party founding father and Peking University alumnus Deng Zhongxia.

The young Marxists would offer night classes on labor law, play chess and dance with the university's cafeteria workers and janitors. On May Day and at year-end, students recalled, as many as 400 university workers would show up and sing "The Internationale" or early communist songs such as "The Ballad of the Anyuan Road Miners" that commemorated Mao organizing a 1922 strike.

Their membership swelled, too, to include humanities majors, medical students and budding scientists.

There was Zhan Zhenzhen, who was raised in a brick hut in Henan province by a single mother and didn't know what staggering wealth looked like until he arrived in Beijing. There was Yue Xin, the daughter of a well-off Beijing family who brought the #MeToo movement to national attention in China.

And there was Qiu, their leader, who arrived on a rare full scholarship in 2016 after he won the gold medal in the national Chemistry Olympiad.

In a written statement he would later release, Qiu described his political evolution.

Qiu's father, laid off by the state dur-

ing China's 1990s reforms, had managed to start a new career with his technical skills. But Qiu's uncles, who lost their jobs, were left behind as China veered toward capitalism.

"My father got on the last bus of 'Reform and Opening Up,' " Qiu wrote, using one of the slogans from China's turn toward a greater free market. Qiu recalled how his uncles couldn't even afford to make \$1.50 bets when the family played mah-jongg.

"I felt the sense of inferiority in my cousins' eyes," he wrote.

Pun Ngai, a sociologist at Hong Kong University who has known the student group for years, said Qiu idolized a charismatic older member of the society named He Pengchao, who had obtained a PhD in environmental science at Peking University but left his career to start a labor nonprofit in Shenzhen.

By his second year, Qiu joined the Marxist club and switched his major from chemistry to sociology.

On the WeChat social network, Qiu started posting on social issues. He turned his avatar into a picture of him clenching his fist in a Communist salute in front of a bust of Li Dazhao, the party co-founder.

That year, Qiu, a sophomore, became the group's president.

A leftist blogger from eastern China who knows Qiu said it's possible the government is holding some young Marxists until after the sensitive anniversary of the Tiananmen crackdown on June 4, and then

will release them on the condition that they give up activism. But the government tried that before, he said.

"They would grab them, rough them up a bit, scare them, then release them," said the blogger, who spoke on the condition of anonymity over fear of reprisals from officials. "But then the students would go right back to activism."

He chuckled. "It's like they're not scared of dying," he said.

Warning shot

Last July, the students got word that workers at a welding equipment plant near Shenzhen, called Jasic Technology, were struggling to form an independent union and clashing with factory bosses and police.

About 50 students traveled south to help, not just from Peking University but also from Renmin and Tsinghua universities in Beijing and schools in southern and eastern China. Cramming into a large apartment, they churned out online essays that got hundreds of supportive responses. At night, they rallied Jasic workers in the streets with megaphones.

Their triumph was short-lived.

On Aug. 24, police in riot gear raided their apartment, leading to a brief scuffle before dozens of students and workers were detained. Most were released, but four went missing, including Yue, the prominent feminist.

In the aftermath, state media sent a warning shot to the students.

In a report, the official Xinhua News Agency avoided mentioning the involvement of students in the Jasic protests. But Xinhua reported that Jasic workers were receiving funding from an illegal, foreign source. Such allegations in Chinese state media can portend prosecutors bringing serious subversion charges.

When they returned to campus, the students were individually summoned to meet with police. One student, Lucy, recalled the police offering her a choice: confess that they broke the law and quit activism, and the police would drop the matter, maybe even help her secure a spot in graduate school. Don't confess, they said, and she could be forced to drop out and be arrested.

The conversations, Lucy said, were "totally unvarnished."

In the weeks after that, the disappearances started to mount.

An officer at the Yanyuan police station near the university, where students said they were usually interrogated, declined to comment about the cases or about Qiu and his allegations of mistreatment. Peking University declined to answer faxed questions.

'Looking at a reflection'

As the Marxist students came under attack last year, they sought help from Hu Jia, a veteran dissident who sits on the opposite end of the political spectrum.

Hu, who has been jailed in the past for advocating Western-style democ-

racy, loathed how the students called for a reprise of the Cultural Revolution and wrote essays larded with propaganda language. But he helped introduce them to foreign diplomats and human rights organizations, he explained, because they seemed "righteous."

They had the potential to be the most serious threat to the government since the Tiananmen protests, Hu said.

"The Communist Party knows there is no greater threat than a movement that links students with the lower class," Hu said by telephone. "They're looking at a reflection of their early revolutionary selves."

Perhaps sensing the potential for unrest, the Communist Party in October appointed Qiu Shuiping, a former head of the Beijing branch of the Ministry of State Security — the feared foreign and domestic spy agency — to be Peking University's new top official.

But the more authorities clamped down, the more the students defied them by airing what was happening on Twitter and the hosting service GitHub, services beyond the reach of Chinese censors.

They publicized how unidentified thugs beat up their Marxist schoolmate Zhang Shengye on campus in November before taking him away. They posted pictures of Qiu, their leader, being stuffed into a black car in broad daylight on Dec. 26 — one of several run-ins he had with state security. An uploaded video from Dec. 28 showed campus security clearing Marxists from a science building, ending with a stu-

dent sprawled on the ground.

That day, the university issued a decree that effectively disbanded the club.

To irritate the plainclothes agents who followed them, some members would continue to get together anyway — to do calisthenics. Qiu kept leading “work experience” trips for a few more months. The authorities had enough on April 29, when they seized Qiu and four other students from a Beijing factory at 8:17 a.m., the club reported in an online post. Those five haven’t been seen since.

“I don’t support students being naive, opposing the government,” Qiu Shike, a socialist writer and Xi supporter who is influential within some elite Communist Party circles, said carefully. “But to handle them with force seems a bit low. Why not take the high road? Have an open debate with them, or talk sense into them about why they’re wrong?”

As the number of missing students ticked up in recent months, those who still had freedom prepared “open letters”

to be published in case they were seized. The remaining Marxists, coordinating in secret, recently started releasing the letters at a slow drip.

They saved Qiu’s video and letter to release on May 4, on the anniversary of the protest that inspired their Communist revolutionary heroes a century ago.

Qiu’s letter defiantly recounted his personal life and his experiences with the police. “The deeper the persecution, the greater the blows, the more hatred one remembers in his heart,” he wrote.

In the accompanying video, Qiu seems more vulnerable. He ponders what kind of abuse workers who challenge government authority must suffer in prison, and whether he might join them himself. But his voice hardens by the end of the three-minute recording.

“We’ll fight together, advance and retreat together,” Qiu says, and then raises a clenched fist.

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The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2019

China tightens its grip on ethnic Hui

State crackdown on Muslims creeps into country's heartland

BY GERRY SHIH

LINXIA, CHINA — Worrying signs first emerged two years ago in this Muslim pocket in China's heartland. Calls to prayer, once broadcast from local mosques, fell silent. The Koran, banned from sale, vanished from bookstores.

Members of the Hui minority, who number 10 million, hoped that the state crackdown would not arrive here, in the fertile valleys and loess hills of Gansu province, as it had in Xinjiang, the homeland of the other major Muslim ethnic group in China, the Uighurs.

Hope faded in April. Government cranes began appearing ominously over Hui mosques. A video surfaced on social media showing workers taking apart the Gazhuang mosque's gold dome, then smashing it into the prayer hall. Local Hui saw an unmistakable metaphor: The Communist Party, which once handled religious life here with a light touch, now ran roughshod over it.

"Women were crying; others, like me,

couldn't believe what was happening," said Ma Ha, a 40-year-old owner of a noodle shop. "We had 40 years of religious freedom. The winds are changing."

Under its leader, Xi Jinping, China's government has intensified efforts to assimilate ethnic minorities and curtail religions, such as Islam, that it considers carriers of foreign influence. For two years on the Xinjiang frontier, China has sent hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of Uighurs to what it calls reeducation centers, where they are taught to renounce their religion and culture and embrace new state-prescribed identities as secular Chinese.

That tide of "Sinicization," as Chinese policymakers call it, is surging nationwide. A recent, unescorted trip through Gansu, a corridor that once ushered Silk Road caravans and Islam into imperial China, revealed an accelerating campaign to assimilate another Muslim minority, the Hui, a Chinese-speaking people with no recent record of separatism or extremism.

The campaign targeting the Hui does not feature mass internment or pervasive digital surveillance, the most striking aspects of the Xinjiang crackdown. But it is a purge of ideas, symbols, culture, products — anything deemed not Chinese. It perme-



JOHANNES EISELE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Ethnic Hui leave a mosque in March 2018 after Friday prayers in Linxia, in China's Gansu province. China's Communist Party has engaged in a "Sinicization" campaign to assimilate ethnic minorities.

Xi's 'China Dream' may cost Hui their way of life

ates life, in ways existential and mundane.

Domes and minarets are lopped off mosques and replaced with curving Chinese roofs. News broadcasts are forbidden to show pedestrians wearing traditional Hui skullcaps or veils. Arabic script is outlawed in public spaces, so practically every restaurant has a sun-beaten facade with dark traces where the word "halal" has been scraped off.

Strict new quotas throttle religious education to the degree that some Hui intellectuals predict their people could

become largely irreligious, like most of China, in two or three generations.

Pressures are mounting against the Hui, the distant descendants of Persian traders, at a moment when the Communist leadership is stoking nationalism among the ethnic majority Han to bolster popular support. In officials' speeches, on television and across billboards, one frequent refrain is the "China Dream" — Xi's vision of restoring China's historic power and wealth, its culture and its pride.

"The great rejuvenation of the Chinese people is actually a narrow-minded, xenophobic kind of nationalism," said Li Yunfei, an imam from eastern China and one of the last dissident Hui writers. "Anything that is defined by them as coming from abroad,

they strive to eliminate through administrative means.”

An April 2018 Communist Party directive obtained by the Germany-based World Uighur Congress advocacy group showed the party’s central leadership instructing local authorities to reverse what it deemed to be growing “Saudi” and “Arab” influences in architecture, clothing, religious practice and language.

Although the contents of the directive were confidential, government offices nationwide have issued general statements confirming they were implementing its orders.

The 22 million followers of Islam are not the only people touched by China’s assimilation drive. Christian church steeples and crosses have been taken down across the country. When party bosses inspected Tibetan regions in August, they told local officials to implement Xi’s “important words on religious work,” tighten control over monasteries and “focus efforts to Sinicize religion.”

Ambitious social re-engineering will be seen as one of Xi’s legacies, said Vanessa Frangville, a professor of Chinese studies at the Université libre de Bruxelles in Belgium.

By curbing religion, the party “removes potential opponents to power,” Frangville said. “To control the whole population through technology and ideology — it’s what leaders dream about.”

‘We’ve regressed 40 years’

For centuries, Gansu was a land of transition. In the hills where the Tibetan highlands flatten into prairie, sprawling Tibetan monasteries exerted a greater gravity than the emperors of faraway Beijing. In the Daxia River valley, Sufi preachers and devout warlords had turned an old Silk Road hub called Linxia into a Hui bastion decades before communists swept through in 1949.

Today, Beijing wants to make its influence felt.

On a recent morning, a local imam ushered a visitor past a flagpole with a flapping red Chinese banner that officials insisted on installing earlier this year. Along a courtyard wall, propaganda bulletins reminded worshipers of their foremost loyalty: the communist state before Allah.

“Islam has been in China 1,300 years. Other than 10 years of the Cultural Revolution, it’s always been passed down generation to generation without a break,” said the imam, who, like almost everyone in Gansu, spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of government retribution. “We’ve regressed 40 years to the Cultural Revolution.”

Sitting in his classroom, where the number of religious students had plunged 90 percent in one year as new quotas took effect, the imam spoke about how the Koran was banned from sale and local publishers who printed the hadith — collections of the prophet Muhammad’s sayings — were jailed.

Most destabilizing, the imam said, was the sense of foreboding.

Hui officials felt unsure about how to please the central government, so they erred on the side of caution, the imam said. Everybody else — from wealthy Hui businessmen to poor farmers — felt “completely paralyzed,” he said.

“The Xinjiang policy is already being implemented here. At least we’re moving in that direction,” the imam said. “We’re born and raised Chinese. Our passports are Chinese. Our forefathers are Chinese. How do you want us to be more Chinese?”

Down an alley from Linxia’s Binhe mosque, one of at least three in the city facing what officials euphemistically call “renovation,” a day laborer named Ma Junyi seemed strained as he spoke about the shifting sands.

Residents were uneasy about new restrictions that cut the madrassa’s class sizes down to 30 — a quota enforced by random checks, Ma said. Youngsters under 18, such as his 9-year-old daughter, were forbidden to set foot inside the mosque courtyard.

“We know leaders have their reasons,” Ma said. “But how can we pass on our traditions? It feels like we’re going extinct.”

An American model

In 2008 and 2009, China was rocked by race riots in Tibet and Xinjiang that left hundreds of Han, Uighurs and Tibetans dead.

In the following years, a remarkably

open discussion about China’s ethnic policy flourished on campuses, in journals, even on television. Two of the most influential voices were Hu Angang, a conservative intellectual at Tsinghua University in Beijing, and Hu Lianhe, a midcareer official who later soared through the Communist Party ranks.

In 2011, the two Hus, who are not related, teamed up to publish essays critiquing long-standing policies that recognized China’s 55 ethnic minorities, offered them preferential treatment on matters such as college admissions, and carved out regions where peoples such as Uighurs and Tibetans lived with some autonomy.

The Hus pointed out that religious and ethno-nationalist impulses played a role in the demise of the Soviet Union — a cautionary tale that the Chinese Communist Party studies obsessively. They called for an “upgrade” of the policies and pointed to a model that they thought China should consider: the United States.

“The early melting pot policy ... was a powerful ‘Anglo-Saxonization’ policy, mainly assimilating other ethnic groups into Anglo-Protestant groups,” they wrote in a paper that traced waves of U.S. immigration from southern Europe and later Latin America. “Although the norms of pluralism have become very strong in recent years, the fact remains that ethnic differences are tending to disappear.”

The articles sparked controversy in China. But today, they are the most-cited papers on the subject, said Hu Angang.

They helped propel Hu Lianhe to become a top official; last year, he defended China's Xinjiang policy before a United Nations panel in Geneva.

In an interview and in emails, Hu Angang said his ideas were often misunderstood in the West. He did not espouse forced assimilation, he said, but the wisdom of China's ethnic policies was proved by data showing the standard of development in Xinjiang and Tibet outstripping neighboring countries stricken by poverty and chaos.

"Ethnic harmony and social stability are the greatest, most important public good, but invisible and intangible like fresh air."

A quiet demise

Weeks after Linxia was stunned by the video of grieving worshipers wailing next to their crushed Gazhuang mosque, a retired village party secretary sat in a nearby farmhouse picking at a plate of stewed chicken.

Was China cracking down on Islam? Nonsense, he said.

First, he said, the Linxia government is paying to rebuild the Gazhuang mosque — with a Chinese-style roof. Workers did drop the dome, but it was an accident. And the video that went viral was uploaded by mischievous young Hui who have since been punished with 24-hour detention and released. The party was not only beneficent, he said, but also lenient.

"Why is a dome so important?" the

official said as he shuffled to a coat rack and removed his Hui skullcap in favor of a sun hat. "I can swap out my hat. You can swap out a dome. The government's not saying you can't be Muslim, or forcing you to be Buddhist or Christian!"

Residents had voiced worries about the direction things were headed, he conceded, but quickly dismissed the thought. "I tell the people they need to trust me, we are not in danger," he said. "And the people trust me."

The bottom line was that China had the right to do things its way, he said.

"How can Americans possibly lecture China about religious freedom?" he said. "How many Muslims has America killed in Iraq and Afghanistan? If you ask the Muslim world if they prefer America or China, I believe they would say China."

In a high-rise near Linxia's modest downtown, Suleiman, a 30-something public-sector employee, said local government officials and Communist Party members, most of whom are Hui, were caught in a particular bind.

Party members and civil servants are prohibited from making hajj pilgrimages, the obligation of every Muslim, according to Suleiman. Linxia city employees cannot be seen praying, and Hui contractors are asked to take off skullcaps when they meet officials for city business.

Suleiman said the government policies seemed almost mild compared with rhetoric on Chinese social media, where popular Han nationalist accounts often sound

warnings about sharia law, halal food and other alleged Islamic conspiracies corrupting Chinese society.

Chinese Christians are also under pressure from the state, Suleiman said, but there seemed to be no widespread antipathy toward Christians, no explosive potential.

“I’m afraid someday there will be mass movement against Muslims,” he said. “I’m terrified, because China has been easily gripped by mass movements since ancient times.”

To journey through Linxia, where eight great mosques, a bazaar and warlord estates once composed the center of Hui life, is to see the Sinicization campaign unfolding with a meticulous logic.

Along the highway approaching the city, a wall of black tarp perfectly blocks

drivers from seeing the Jiajianan mosque’s minarets being pruned in the distance. On the main commercial avenue, officials covered up Islamic arches with stone slabs featuring a Chinese motif, chrysanthemum flowers. In a government-run museum, curators removed skullcaps and headcarves from mannequins in an exhibit on Hui culture.

In the next room, an exhibit on local history celebrates how the region’s mosques were rebuilt during the 1980s. It omits a piece of context: Many were razed earlier, in 1957, by communist zealots during a mass frenzy whipped up by Chairman Mao Zedong.

The Hui in Gansu today do not suffer violence, only a quiet demise, Suleiman said: “They’re slowly boiling us like frogs.”

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The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

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Amid a lifestyle revolution driven by China's growing middle class, millions of food-delivery drivers eke out a dangerous living



A breakneck life in the big city

BY GERRY SHIH WITH PHOTOS BY YAN CONG IN BEIJING

Zhang Pei dragged on a cigarette and pulled up his pant leg: four fresh scratches, some swelling around a sprained ankle. As far as occupational injuries go, his recent spill was nothing unusual for his line of work. Zhang, 27, is among an estimated 3 million “waimai xiaoge” — food-delivery

Two couriers emerge from a food court holding packed lunches this summer in Beijing. In China, some 400 million people use their smartphones to order food delivery — up to several times a day.

For ‘delivery lads,’ China’s gig economy holds daily perils



YAN CONG FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Zhang Pei, a food-delivery driver, departs a food court in Beijing this summer with four bags of lunch orders in one hand and a cellphone in the other to check the location of his first delivery. He works 14 hours a day, six days a week, running orders for Meituan-Dianping.

lads or boys — who buzz through China’s streets every day on scooters. They dodge pedestrians. They thread through traffic. One-way signs? They are for others.

And many have scars, scrapes, scabs — or worse — as evidence of the risks.

Comprehensive official data is unavailable, but police in Shanghai say a delivery boy is seriously injured once every 60 hours on average. In Shenzhen, just north of Hong Kong, the food-delivery boys account for 12 percent of all traffic acci-

dents. In Nanjing, northeast of Shanghai, about three delivery boys are injured every day on average.

In the past 18 months, local media around the country chronicled 13 deaths and published 125 accounts of serious accidents. The news reports offer a tiny — but tangible — glimpse into the chaos: stories of riders who die in late-night hit-and-runs, of head-on collisions into trucks, of electrocutions during rainstorms.

“My wife begs me to do something dif-

ferent, less dangerous,” Zhang said, grinning. “But the money is good.”

That’s because China is becoming a delivery nation.

A lifestyle revolution

Some 400 million people use smartphones to order piping-hot meals to their doorstep — up to several times a day.

It’s part of a lifestyle revolution in China as its growing middle class reshapes the country, a high-tech network made possible by low-tech, low-cost labor.

It’s also a system of frenetic workloads during meal hours and through bad weather, of unforgiving dispatch algorithms and unruly traffic, close calls and sometimes fatal crashes.

And at a time when governments worldwide are grappling with the regulations — and implications — of delivery apps such as Uber Eats or Deliveroo, China’s \$36 billion food-delivery industry offers a vision of the gig economy taken to a chaotic extreme. Even authorities are taking notice of the grueling and dangerous conditions.

“It’s necessary to fundamentally change the takeout platforms’ logic of [valuing] ‘speed only’ for ‘profit only,’” the ruling Communist Party’s official mouthpiece, the People’s Daily, said in a 2017 editorial. “Can these platforms have more humane algorithms and let the delivery boys have more time on the road? Can users be more empathetic and understanding?”

Perched outside a shopping street frequented by Russian traders, Zhang acknowledged the dangers that come with his job. But it brings a decent living for a seventh-grade dropout from the countryside outside Handan — a bleak central China steel town perhaps best known for coming in dead last in nationwide air-quality rankings.

Zhang works 14 hours a day, six days a week, running orders for the giant company Meituan-Dianping. Zhang says he averages about \$1.10 per delivery and \$1,000 a month. If he works extra hours, particularly during freezing winter months, Zhang can haul in \$1,500 a month, more than what some software coders can make.

As soon as Zhang turns on the Meituan app around 7 a.m., the automated dispatch system starts flashing jobs on his screen based on his position with the chime: “You have unconfirmed deliveries. Please respond as soon as possible.”

The pressure to accept multiple orders is high, Zhang said, because riders who decline jobs are punished by Meituan’s algorithm. The highest-earning riders, called “Happy Runners,” must accept 99 percent of orders they’re assigned.

‘Nothing quite as stressful’

As orders peak that day around 11:20 a.m. — white-collar workers in Beijing typically sit in large groups for lunch at noon, sharp — Zhang is often juggling more than 10 orders at the same time, ferrying in his scooter’s insulated box

a smorgasbord of Shanxi noodles, Starbucks lattes, dumplings and dim sum.

Zhang coolly plunges along streets against the flow of traffic, blows through intersections, ducks into high-rises and sprints up stairwells to drop off meals with minutes, sometimes seconds, of his allotted time left to spare.

The time crunch is made worse because the software doesn't calculate road closures and traffic controls that crop up overnight. Yet riders get penalized for late deliveries, and if a customer files a complaint on Meituan's app, they could be fined their entire day's earnings or booted off the platform altogether.

"Know your terrain, constantly calculate in your brain, and move with precision," Zhang said.

Since he started working at 15, he's sewn jackets, welded steel on construction sites and assembled basketball backboards on a Guangdong factory line.

"But that was all physical energy," he said. "Delivery exhausts your mental energy. There is nothing quite as stressful."

As accidents involving delivery riders became widespread in recent years, the two large food-ordering platforms that dominate the Chinese market — Meituan and Eleme — have tweaked their dispatch algorithms to be less demanding, riders said. On rainy days, for instance, they can be late a few minutes without penalty.

Chinese police say reckless delivery boys are also to blame and have proposed measures such as installing tracking chips

to punish bad driving.

One of Zhang's Meituan co-workers, who spoke on the condition that he be identified only by his surname, Li, said he rides against the flow of traffic and blows through red lights on a near-daily basis. Police fine him often but do not pose much of a deterrent: Most traffic tickets are paid off for about \$3.

"Who wants to run red lights and break traffic rules if the time pressure isn't so hard?" Li said. "I do it because otherwise the customer would file a complaint, and I'd be banned from delivering."

Push for safety

A Meituan spokeswoman said the company requires mandatory road-safety training at the time of hire for its 2.7 million delivery workers and regularly offers refresher courses. The company declined to comment further.

In the past two years, delivery drivers in a handful of cities, including Shanghai, have managed to form unions and campaign for better labor conditions — moves that required a level of tacit support from the Chinese government.

Labor researchers say authorities should be more proactive.

Cheng Xusen, chair of the e-business department at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing, said Meituan and Eleme outsource delivery to hundreds of small companies with different levels of training and job protections. Most drivers work without contracts,

leading to problems such as inadequate injury compensation.

“It’s the regulator’s job to close that loophole,” Cheng said. “At the end of the day, the government needs to do more to ensure workers’ legal rights.”

But for many workers like Zhang who have held other menial jobs across China, delivering food in the big city still appeals with its good pay and sense of freedom.

Zhang can take off every Sunday to do laundry and relax in the 50-square-foot room he shares in far east Beijing with a delivery boy who brought him into the business four years ago.

During midafternoon down times, he’s glued to his phone chatting with his friend Chen, a co-worker who crashed into a guardrail and tore a knee ligament while rushing a lunch delivery this summer. Chen

has been recovering at home in Inner Mongolia on a diet of porridge and dried dates — he’s eager to get straight back to work.

During most weeks, Zhang calls home to his wife and two sons three or four times. After he fell off his scooter in August, Zhang took the 4½-hour bus ride back to his village, where his young family lives in the two-bedroom apartment he bought for about \$27,000 with his earnings.

As Zhang rested his leg, his wife asked whether he might finally decide to find a different job.

He gave the answer he gives every year, he said: “Maybe next year.”

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Wang Yuan, Lyric Li and Liu Yang contributed to this report.

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Democracy Dies in Darkness

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LAM YIK FEI/GETTY IMAGES

In China, a city ‘built on our bones’

Incurable silicosis has ravaged the workers who drilled the bedrock for Shenzhen

BY GERRY SHIH

LEIYANG, CHINA — Ill and defeated, Xu Chunlin approached the railing, the limits of a search for justice.

Before him was a 30-foot plunge into Shenzhen’s rush-hour traffic. Behind him stood police he had just clashed with. On

the overpass with him were about 80 other former construction workers mulling the same desperate calculus.

Leap now? Or wait to die when their lungs gave out?

The journey that led them to that bridge began in the early 1990s. The men were young and healthy then, wide-eyed

Since the 1990s, Shenzhen, China, has grown from a scruffy boomtown to a cosmopolitan hub of 12 million.

migrant laborers from rural Hunan province. Shenzhen was a scruffy border boomtown to the south — not yet today's cosmopolitan hub of 12 million — where they flocked for off-the-books jobs as drillers.

Many Hunanese worked for years, even decades, boring into the bedrock to build subway lines and the foundations of Shenzhen's whole cityscape. But they didn't know the inadequacy of the \$1.50 cotton masks they were given, or the irreversible harm of inhaling silica dust that caked their faces once their drills bit into granite-streaked crust.

More than 100 former laborers from Hunan have died in the past decade from silicosis, an incurable condition caused by inhaled dust particles that scar and harden the lungs.

About 600 more are suffering or slowly dying, the leaders of worker groups say. Three dirt-poor communities in Hunan that once survived off their earnings — even saw progress — are now mired in debt and grief while surviving workers spend their little savings and energy to clamor for compensation.

Two stories of China

The lives of Hunan's drillers trace China's diverging realities.

One story is reflected in the gleaming skylines they built: the backdrop for a prosperous middle class of 400 million people who live in China's cities and power



GERRY SHIH/THE WASHINGTON POST

Wang Quanlong was one of about 80 sick drillers who threatened to kill themselves in 2018 if Shenzhen authorities did not pay compensation for pneumoconiosis.

its economy. Another story is framed by struggle: a vast, rural underclass that still toils in hazardous conditions, lacking documentation or means to seek redress except through confrontation with the government.

Forty years after China shifted away from its socialist system — and the promise of cradle-to-grave care for workers — the country is settling hard questions accumulated in the rush to modernity.

Who benefited and who suffered? Who is owed compensation and who should pay up?

Since early 2018, Hunan's ailing drillers, led by Xu and others, have traveled more than a dozen times to Shenzhen to demand help. In early November 2018, hundreds of them occupied a government complex before police dispersed them with batons and pepper spray — further aggravating their weak lungs.



GERRY SHIH/THE WASHINGTON POST

Money made in Shenzhen allowed families in Leiyang, China, to build bigger and bigger homes.

Drillers’ lives trace China’s dualities

It was during that standoff — according to the accounts of four protesters, activists and news accounts — that workers cornered by police on an overpass threatened to commit mass suicide by hurling themselves onto an eight-lane highway.

Xu, one of the protest leaders that

night, said he was ready to die for the cause.

But he also felt responsible for these men, he later explained. He was one of the first Hunanese to bring fellow villagers to Shenzhen in the 1990s, setting off a chain of success and tragedy that would unspool over 25 years.

Standing on that overpass, Xu said, he yelled at the men to back away from the ledge and the madness. Keep calm, he told them, and fight another day.

“China is like a cart. It won’t move forward if you don’t push,” he later said. “If you’re not afraid of dying, you can accom-

plish anything in this country.”

Ghost homes

Steep sandstone ravines carve across Sangzhi county, a part of Hunan province with little industry or even agriculture. But multistory homes with faux-European balustrades line county road 420. They are the rewards of laboring in cities like Shenzhen — and monuments to the human cost.

“Everyone builds a big house and then there’s no one to live in it,” Gu Zhongping, a former driller, said as he drove along, pointing out homes with a former Shenzhen worker dying or dead.

Gu Hejian, in the house with red posters for his son’s wedding, doesn’t expect to live much longer. Zhong Yichuan, who lived behind a corner store, died two years ago. Wang Zhaogang died in April and was buried by 10 ill workers counting the days themselves.

More than 26 former drillers in Sangzhi county have died of lung disease since 2009, according to residents, who say deaths are accelerating, with about 100 others who are seriously ill. In two other Hunan counties, Leiyang and Miluo, about 500 villagers who worked in Shenzhen have been diagnosed, according to workers’ representatives.

Although official figures are unavailable, a Hunan city-level document found online supported the villagers’ claims. A 2017 health check showed that 290 villagers, mostly in Sangzhi, had silicosis.

Work-related lung diseases have held

steady or declined in developed countries as jobs such as coal mining waned and safety standards rose. In China, cases are growing.

In 2018, about 873,000 Chinese workers had pneumoconiosis, a broad class of lung disease, up from about 559,000 in 2000, according to China’s National Health Commission. Love Save Pneumoconiosis, a Beijing nonprofit, estimates the true number of sufferers to be much higher — possibly about 6 million.

Chinese officials, who are drawing up new plans to study the crisis, say 23 million workers are at risk of getting the disease. That’s far more than the 11.5 million at-risk workers in India, 2 million in the United States and 1.7 million in Europe estimated by health authorities and researchers.

Workers who inhale dust and tiny mineral crystals found in rock and sand do not immediately feel symptoms. But over months, sometimes decades, the lodged particles do devastating damage.

Walking, even talking, becomes difficult. Lying flat creates the sensation of suffocation, so most patients sleep sitting next to a small oxygen machine. In the latter stages, they suffer heavy wheezing, steep weight loss, frequent bouts of colds and fevers. Pneumonia and tuberculosis can easily turn fatal. Sooner or later, the lungs simply give out.

Behind a trash-strewn basketball court that serves as a village square in Sangzhi county, a country doctor, Li Li, watched Cheng Xiangyong, a 49-year-old who was

doubled over the couch in her office, coughing up long, thick goop.

“He should have 1½ to three years to live,” Li predicted as she prepared familiar drips: ambroxol to dissolve mucus, aminophylline to dilate air passages and an antibiotic.

Three of her silicosis patients recently died. Sick workers keep streaming in. The one-room clinic she converted out of a ramshackle storefront doesn’t have proper medicines, equipment or, Li admits, know-how.

But for sick workers in the remote hills who need care several times a month, it’s better than a two-hour drive to a city hospital or six hours to the provincial capital, Changsha, she said.

“We have so many people like this,” Li said. “I tell them not to come. I can’t handle them. I can’t handle the risk.”

As he clutched a table, Cheng’s hoarse wheezes filled the room. He had drilled on and off in Shenzhen for 13 years until 2017, when his symptoms surfaced. His weight recently plummeted from 156 pounds to 114.

Cheng worried about dying as quickly as his friend Gu Erhu, whose lungs failed Aug. 14 just hours after they spoke. Cheng worried about not having money to buy his own casket, about leaving his wife, Chunyue, and his 82-year old mother to fend for themselves.

“We’ll manage,” Chunyue said, smiling across the table. “There is no other way.”

Free-market laboratory

Shenzhen had a population of 30,000 in 1980 when China’s Communist leaders designated it the country’s first free-market laboratory. Within decades, farmland and mangrove swamps would turn into factories for the world’s iPhones, Asia’s fourth-largest stock exchange, and high-rise towers and digs for the super-rich such as \$4,000-a-night St. Regis hotel suites.

Shenzhen’s economic output soared from \$4 million in 1980 to \$340 billion in 2018. Officials have often marketed the city as China’s window to the world.

For Xu Chunlin — decades before he thought about jumping from the bridge — Shenzhen was a path out of hardscrabble Leiyang county in Hunan.

A short and badly underfed 21-year-old in 1989, Xu first ventured 500 miles south that year with four brothers to work at Shenzhen construction sites. He returned for Lunar New Year with 5,000 yuan (about \$710 in today’s money), he recalled, and immediately spent it all on more than 3,300 pounds of rice to pile in a granary so his family could recover to their healthy body weights.

Within four years, Xu was working as a middleman. That meant introducing villagers to Shenzhen’s subcontractors, who set aside half the positions at work sites for the Hunanese. Sometimes the jobs were worth \$45,000, making Xu a relatively rich man on his cut.

“Everybody in the village wanted to know me because I had jobs,” he said, sit-



GERRY SHIH/THE WASHINGTON POST

Xu Chunlin first traveled to Shenzhen in 1989 and later introduced other Hunan villagers to construction jobs there. He made a relative fortune and has a nice home, but he is terminally ill.

ting in a three-story brick house he built in Leiyang county with elaborate copper doors. “Every boss in Shenzhen wanted to know me because I had men.”

The Hunanese crews relied on hand-held jackhammers and controlled explosives to open the ground, sometimes 150 feet deep. They would then pour concrete into the pits for pillars that bore a building’s load.

“Pay attention and be safe,” one Hunan worker, Zhong Pinxie, recalled bosses saying before they threw him onto a site with almost no training. In those early years, he said, he was given a simple conical mask to cover his mouth and nose. He didn’t wear

goggles or earplugs before going down a four-foot-wide pit for four-hour shifts.

Zhong worked so many drilling jobs that he learned Shenzhen’s subterranean geography. The new subway line in Luohu bored easily through crumbling rock. In the Nanshan flats, where malls and Shenzhen University rose, it was granite-streaked earth that kicked up thick dust.

“When the drill bit touches,” Zhong said, “it’s like a cannon goes off in your face.”

That’s precisely what would cause the opaque globules that dotted his lungs in X-rays last year — a telltale sign of advanced silicosis. But Zhong didn’t know

that at the time; few did. Education and awareness on worker safety was scant, and symptoms of lung disease wouldn't surface for several years.

The middleman Xu had shifted into administrative work by 2008, when a construction engineer handed him a one-page document about pneumoconiosis and said quietly: "Don't do this job too long."

"I thought he must know something," Xu said. "But from beginning to end, none of the companies or government ever did any publicity about cause or effect."

Off the books

By 2009, silicosis was becoming difficult to ignore. Media reports started to surface about subterranean drillers falling ill. Groups of workers from Leiyang started petitioning Shenzhen authorities, who agreed to give payments of as much as \$15,000 to those who could prove their employment.

But for the vast majority of drillers, that was impossible.

Since the 1980s, when China's economic reforms unshackled peasants from their land and sent them streaming into cities in search of work, nearly 300 million migrant workers have occupied a legal gray area.

As it embraced free enterprise, the ruling Communist Party neglected workers from the countryside, members of the very class it ostensibly championed.

Despite a 2008 law requiring all employers to offer written contracts, just

35 percent of migrant workers signed them in 2016 — a number that is falling, according to China's National Statistics Bureau, which has stopped releasing data. A 2014 nationwide survey by Love Save Pneumoconiosis found that just 7 percent of workers with the disease reported ever signing a contract.

The construction industry — a sector that accounts for a quarter of all work fatalities — is known for relying on subcontractors called *baogongtou* who hire workers informally, said Eli Friedman, a China labor expert at Cornell University.

The system, he said, "pushes risk to the bottom."

Work-injury insurance also has lagged. China launched a national plan only in 2004. Today, about 80 million migrant workers, or roughly 27 percent, are covered, officials said in May.

Shelly Tse, director of the occupational health studies center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, said the Shenzhen workers were further handicapped by the latent nature of pneumoconiosis.

"By the time workers feel progressively worse 10 years later, they can't identify which company they worked for when they contracted the disease," Tse said. "Companies may already be bankrupt."

'Justice doesn't exist'

With little hope of compensation for workers, grief — and anger — boiled over in rural Hunan last year.

Xu, the former middleman, watched

the death toll in his villages tick up to more than 70. Six sick men committed suicide. Local clans like the Caos, who buried three brothers who contracted pneumoconiosis in Shenzhen, were devastated.

So was Xu's own family. Four of his brothers, who worked in the Shenzhen pits, had died, the youngest at 26. Xu, himself diagnosed with terminal silicosis, was well off financially, but Leiyang county was struggling.

"We had to do something," he said. "People need to survive."

Similar scenes were playing out in Hunan's Sangzhi and Miluo counties, as ill workers began mobilizing to take their demands to Shenzhen, where they joined forces.

On Nov. 5, 2018, a large group of workers, furious about a lack of progress, occupied the government compound and demanded to see Shenzhen's mayor. They slept overnight on mats and by the night of Nov. 7, more than 300 workers had gathered at the scene.

After 8 that evening, authorities made their move. Videos from the incident show riot police with pepper-spray guns flushing the protesters out of the government complex. The retired workers keeled over on the pavement outside, coughing, as paramedics whisked away the injured.

Dislodged from the building, scores of angry protesters regrouped, then veered



GERRY SHIH/THE WASHINGTON POST

Wang Quanlong's home is filled with drugs and oxygen bags to relieve symptoms of pneumoconiosis. The disease is incurable and often leads to a slow, painful death.

toward an overpass, where they threatened to jump, said three petitioners from Leiyang and Sangzhi. It was a final gambit.

It worked.

Police rushed to block the crowd surging onto the bridge. By midnight, city officials had emerged to appeal for calm alongside cooler heads like Xu.

Negotiations began at 11 the next morning. Weeks later, a deal was announced: Shenzhen would pay silicosis sufferers between \$17,000 and \$35,000 and cover medical costs moving forward. Yet many still were not satisfied.

In the absence of robust courts, China often settles labor disputes this way, said Mary Gallagher, a political scientist at the University of Michigan. Rural petitioners organize mass, repeated demonstrations; officials hope to appease them with one-off

payouts. “But they never acknowledge the systemic failures,” she said.

Clashes between the Hunan petitioners and authorities have continued. Dozens of workers hoping to return to Shenzhen or Beijing to seek more money have been repeatedly intercepted and, on at least one occasion, roughed up by police, petitioners said.

Stricken villages have become closely surveilled. During one trip to Sangzhi county, a Washington Post reporter was surrounded by plainclothes security officials and forced to leave the province. Authorities harassed villagers who were interviewed during another visit.

Xie Decai, Sangzhi county’s deputy director of propaganda, denied official wrongdoing and said he held 10 meetings with villagers.

“Some are still unhappy, but it’s not a matter of whether they get compensation, it’s a matter of how much,” Xie said. “As far as we are concerned, the matter is settled.”

The dispute isn’t settled for a Sangzhi county protest leader who sat in a farmhouse plotting his 13th or 14th trip to petition in Shenzhen or Beijing. He got \$24,000 in compensation for silicosis, but the money wasn’t enough to raise his children, said the protest leader, who feared official reprisal and spoke on the condition

of anonymity.

“Justice doesn’t exist in this society,” he said. “It has glory and wealth and skyscrapers built on our bones.”

In a picturesque valley across Hunan, the former middleman Xu, 51, didn’t speak of compensation. As villagers fell ill one by one over the years, he said, some families begged for help, others cursed him for finding jobs for drillers in Shenzhen.

“I did it with good in my heart,” he said. “How could we have known?”

In the past two years, he has spent \$12,000 feeding and lodging protesters in Shenzhen. He advises families of pneumoconiosis petitioners across the country on WeChat. He checks up on Leiyang widows whose husbands once followed him south to work. He’s still petitioning.

All he wanted was a public accounting of the disease by the government, he said, not money.

Xu waved a hand at his big house, at the empty rooms. If he had never found drilling, he said, they might be filled with his brothers, his nieces and nephews.

“It’s conscience.”

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The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

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Paying the price for China's mineral wealth

BY GERRY SHIH

DACHANG, CHINA — Day and night, overfilled trucks rumble down Nanjiu Road in the saw-toothed hills that stretch to the Vietnam border. It's a procession at the heart of one of China's most hazardous industries.

The trucks load up on metal ore in the valley below, where 13 miners died in October in underground shafts laden with tin, copper and zinc. Then the trucks motor up the mountain toward belching smelters — the culprit, researchers say, behind arsenic levels in Dachang's dust reaching more than 100 times the government limit.

Across southern China — far from the affluent coasts and Beijing's gaze — a vast metals industry has fed the country's manufacturing boom and sated global demand for components used in products from smartphone batteries to electric motors to jet airframes.

China's production of material such as aluminum, copper, lead and zinc, known as base or nonferrous metals, has soared

as the country has become the world's factory floor. Combined output was 57 million tons last year, up from 6 million in 1998, according to the China Nonferrous Metals Industry Association.

But some of the country's most isolated, impoverished communities are paying the price.

In Guangxi, a balmy southern region that has some of China's most concentrated mineral deposits, large tracts of farmland lay wasted by runoff carrying cadmium and lead. Metal miners toil in shafts deadlier than China's notorious coal pits.



GERRY SHIH/THE WASHINGTON POST

Jingxi County villagers stand near a facility run by Xinfu Group, an aluminum producer that has brought \$2.4 billion in investments to the county but drawn clashes with residents over its pollution.

As its notorious coal pits get safer, China's metal miners still face dangers

Villagers roll up their sleeves to show deformities caused by ingesting food contaminated by heavy metals. Residents wait daily for shipments of fresh water.

In the past decade, China's top leaders have steadily tightened regulations on the metals industry, including introducing the country's first soil pollution law last year.

After an eight-year study that began as a state secret, the Chinese government said in 2014 that 20 percent of the country's farmland was contaminated and a third of its surface water unfit for human contact. Top officials said last month that they had set aside \$4 billion to clean up contaminated soil — similar to the U.S. Superfund — yet it's a fraction of the \$1 trillion that some Chinese experts predict is needed.

A review of soil and water data, interviews with environmental researchers, and a 500-mile journey through Guangxi illustrated how the sheer financial cost is only the tip of the challenge facing China.

"Central leaders may have a great vision," said Song Guojun, a former environmental-protection official who studies policy at Renmin University. "But at the local level, there is no transparency, no upward accountability, no money."

As a result, metal producers appear to

operate with a degree of impunity — and leave a toxic trail — as they transform crude mountain ore into the essential nuggets of modern life. There are zinc slabs for coating steel, copper cathodes for wires and transformers, and grains of nickel matte, a step in making purified nickel used in batteries and other products.

From his soot-smearred home on Nanjiu Road, Wei Shujian has watched the trucks multiply since the 1970s.

"They are unstoppable," the farmer growled, wheezing from an incurable lung disease caused by dirty air.

Wei nodded toward the hillside, where a huge elevator reached deep into the source of fortune and grief: the mines.

'No other choice'

Meng was sitting deep underground at the end of a 1,000-yard mineshaft, waiting to start his shift around 7 p.m. on Oct. 28, when the damp air was blasted by a shock wave.

Meng fled in a trolley to the surface, where he listened to the groaning earth: A branch of the Qingda No. 2 tin mine had collapsed. State media later said two miners were confirmed dead and 11 "had no chance of survival" inside the mine, about 10 miles north of Dachang.

Twenty years ago, Chinese coal miners had, statistically speaking, the deadliest job on Earth. Today, more metal miners are dying — 484 in 2017 — than their coal worker counterparts, according to the most up-to-date government data.



GERRY SHIH/THE WASHINGTON POST

Huang Guiqing's arms and legs are deformed after he spent years eating crops and drinking water laced with cadmium. More than 46 other residents of Huang's village were poisoned as early as the 1970s from a lead-zinc mine's wastewater.

That's partly because China's coal mine safety has improved significantly under pressure from Beijing. But less attention has been paid to the metal industry, where about 83 percent of outfits are small and loosely run.

"The fundamental situation hasn't changed," a government cabinet spokesman said. "Production accidents are extremely likely."

The Qingda No. 2 mine, run by a local mining boss, Chen Xiangsheng, is a case study.

Filings with the Industry and Com-

merce Bureau show that a government inspection in August found that Chen's mine didn't obtain approval for an expansion and that its construction blueprints "lacked authenticity." Chen was fined twice in June for "substandard equipment and facilities" and "illegal production."

Yet his mine kept humming around the clock, employing about 800 locals like Meng, a 32-year-old father of two young children.

Chen's small operation paid \$1,140 a month, Meng said. The state giant Gaofeng, which owns a maze of shafts directly under



Dachang's streets, is considered more professional but pays \$300 a month.

"You can't raise a family on that," said Meng, who spoke on the condition that his full name be withheld. "The difference is, private bosses go wherever there is ore. State companies might leave it if it's dangerous."

After the Oct. 28 collapse, local authorities briefly froze mining in the county. One month later, Dachang's miners were heading back to their shifts. The township of 30,000 lives in the shadow of a single industry with a chilling legacy.

In 2000, a toxic tailings pond broke and washed away an entire village, killing 28.

Dachang's worst accident came a year later. Local officials tried to cover up a flood that killed 81 miners; the news got out after a week. Prosecutors later said that the mine contributed a third of local tax revenue and that its owner, the richest

man in Guangxi, had transferred 15 percent of company shares to local officials.

The mines north of town continue to regularly experience explosions and collapses, killing one or two workers, residents said. Fatal accidents are not always reported.

"These tuhuangdi" — local tyrants — "get away with everything," said Pan, a fruit seller who quit mining last year at age 34.

Many Dachang residents, like Pan, declined to give their full names for fear of reprisal. One taxi driver trembled when he was asked to drive by a three-story home owned by the mining baron Chen. After Chen's mine collapsed in October, local authorities said, they arrested eight executives.

Meng shrugged off his recent brush with disaster, which he called "unavoidable." He's considered working as a security guard, he said, but would prefer going back to a small mine.

"If you want higher pay around here," he said, "there is no other choice."

Lead-poisoned children

Outside the mines, the risks don't end. Water used to separate the valuable minerals must be carefully stored and treated. The minerals are then purified at temperatures up to 1,800 degrees at smelters — a process that, without proper controls, releases harmful levels of heavy-

metal byproducts including lead, cadmium and arsenic into the atmosphere.

Researchers from the Guangxi Institute of Occupational Technology and Nanning University sampled dust on road surfaces around Dachang. A study published in June said they found heavy-metal concentrations far above national safety limits: arsenic at 111 times, cadmium at 55 times and lead at 2.45 times.

Heavy-metal levels inside homes were only slightly lower, according to the researchers.

Off National Road 210, Wei Chun, a farmer, said more than 20 out of 25 children in his village, Tanghan, tested positive as early as a decade ago for excessive lead levels in their blood. For years, he said, county officials gave households with poisoned kids 30 eggs and liters of milk every month as compensation.

In another village, Tanghuang, people pointed to chestnut trees that no longer bore fruit and loquat trees and squash vines that turned yellow during summer rainstorms. Evaporating puddles left reddish circles on the ground, they said.

Between the villages was a swollen lake covered in a shimmering film. A sample of the water contained eight times the lead content deemed safe to drink by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, according to an independent lab test commissioned by The Washington Post.

Unlike in the United States or Australia, many polluted areas in China overlap with its southern agricultural heartland,

which poses unique challenges. National panics have broken out in the past decade after consumers discovered high heavy-metal content in rice grown near smelters.

China has “a phenomenon of mining-agriculture mixed areas,” said Chen Nengchang of the Guangdong Institute of Eco-Environmental and Soil Sciences.

Yet talk of rehabilitating spoiled farmland often collides with reality.

In Daxin County, a four-hour drive south of Dachang, Huang Guiqing passed the field office of a soil cleanup operation and sighed.

“They’re still doing preparatory work,” he said.

In a bare living room, Huang struggled with a paper folder, his fingers distended like misshapen balloons. Growths the size of golf balls bulged out of his forearm and elephantine ankles. His documents told the full story: Huang spent years eating crops and drinking water laced with cadmium.

More than 46 other residents of Huang’s village were poisoned as early as the 1970s as a lead-zinc mine funneled wastewater for years into a ditch that locals used to irrigate their fields of cassava and sugar cane. The stream turned turbid, Huang said, “the color of soy sauce.”

Officials came in 2000 and found soil cadmium levels 30 times the national limit. But the local government didn’t take action except to pay each resident 15 kilograms of rice, according to a letter the villagers wrote pleading for help.

The mine went bankrupt in 2002.

It wasn't until 2015 that local officials responded.

In a directive to various departments and residents, a copy of which Huang provided, the local government acknowledged that it had neglected the disaster but said its hands were tied. "The polluted area is vast and the cleanup cost is tremendous," officials wrote, estimating a \$33 million bill. "The financial resources of Daxin County are utterly limited."

The directive set a deadline for soil cleanup in late 2017. Then there was a new date that came and went: late 2018.

"Maybe they'll start in 2020," said a villager, Wei Tianlai, 68.

Local government agencies did not respond to faxed questions and requests for comment.

It's the same story for communities across China, where local authorities are grappling with a sharply slowing economy and soaring debt levels.

"There are pressures on national expenditures," said Chen Youjian, chief scientist at BCEG, an environmental remediation firm in Beijing. "As for the historical debts incurred, we do what we can."

Red mud, undrinkable water

In 1986, Chinese officials informed leader Deng Xiaoping of Guangxi's wealth of aluminum deposits. "It must be done!" Deng famously snapped back.

Two decades later, Xinfu Group, an aluminum conglomerate from northern China, has brought \$2.4 billion in invest-

ments to sleepy Jingxi, the next county over from Daxin.

"You can see this from space," Huang Qi said as he strode across a dam holding back a small valley filled with goopy red mud.

It was a reservoir of spent bauxite — aluminum ore — left by Xinfu, which has been locked in repeated disputes with locals going back 10 years. Three times in the past 18 months, waste has seeped out of such reservoirs, jamming underground rivers, flooding village streets and rendering the local reservoir water undrinkable.

In June, dozens of locals blockaded a Xinfu facility for three days to demand water before police dispersed them.

Chen Wenxi, a Beijing-based environmentalist, helped sue Xinfu on local villagers' behalf in August 2018, seeking \$2.8 million in damages. A preliminary hearing in local court in June lasted 15 minutes, he said. Chen has sought Xinfu's environmental records, but the government denied him on the grounds that they were state secrets.

"There are biases, certain political factors, when one side has so much money and the other side is so poor," Chen said.

Xinfu, whose chairman sits in China's National People's Congress, has been named a "core enterprise" in Jingxi's five-year development plan.

Huang Lituo, a Jingxi deputy propaganda chief, acknowledged several "unavoidable" industrial accidents involving Xinfu. The local government would

hold it accountable for the cleanup, he told The Post.

In recent months, the local government has fined Xinfu \$15,000 for illegal prospecting. Officials have also ordered the company to truck in potable water to communities stranded without it.

But the influence of Xinfu's presence is undeniable. Last year, Xinfu contributed more than \$100 million in tax revenue, more than any other source.

"If not for Xinfu, we couldn't carry out poverty alleviation, build schools, build kindergartens, build medical clinics," said Huang Lituo.

Huang Hua, a villager in his 30s, saw bitter irony in depending on the firm for survival.

"We were fighting a water war with

Xinfu," he said. "Now if Xinfu moved away, we might actually die of thirst."

Huang Hua looked out a car window at the Caterpillar excavators chipping away in the distance, turning verdant mountain faces into rust-colored terraces.

He wondered what Beijing was like and what he could possibly do to get help from the Chinese president himself.

"I wish Xi Jinping would see this," he said, referring to China's leader.

Then he quoted a proverb suggesting central authorities can have little sway over local affairs: "But the mountains are high, and the emperor is far."

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Wang Yuan and Lyric Li in Beijing contributed to this report.