

## Lifting the Veil on Polluters in China

8 minutes

This program includes close captions and an interactive transcript when viewed as part of the Global Environmental Justice Documentaries collection

[00:00:15.17] The inspectors came calling recently at this massive textile factory in the eastern city of Hangzhou. The plant is part of the San Juan Company, one of the icons of China's rapid rise as a manufacturing powerhouse. It produces two billion feet of patterned and dyed fabric each year for garment makers and fashion houses around the world.

[00:00:38.96] This plant also produces some 60,000 tons of wastewater. And a 2013 investigation found it was not being adequately treated. Manager Wong Wei says millions of dollars were invested to upgrade the system.

[00:00:54.61] [SPEAKING CHINESE]

[00:00:57.08] Today, we invited IPE in to show them our changes, our improvement in environmental protection, so their inspectors can see we are in compliance with government requirements.

[00:01:07.84] But IPE, the inspectors, are not from the all-powerful government. The Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs is a small non-government organization.

[00:01:18.05] IPE has been a real force of nature here on environmental issues. They are completely unique. IPE's Ma Jun, he's one in a billion.

[00:01:28.97] Ma Jun.

[00:01:33.12] IPE's founder, Ma Jun has won international awards for environmental activism that has taken on China's powerful industrial establishment. He's done so with political savvy and technology, says Linda Greer of the Washington based Natural Resources Defense Council, which has partnered with IPE.

[00:01:52.16] I think he's an astute observer of what are the problems and how can they best be solved in China. But Greer says it's the world's moral responsibility to solve China's pollution problem.

[00:02:05.66] The world made a decision to concentrate its manufacturing in one country, more than 50% of the manufacturing of the world occurs here. It's like we took the pollution from the United States and Europe and other parts of the world and just centered it here.

[00:02:20.96] Ma was an investigative journalist in the 1990s when he began documenting the toll of China's industrialization, environmental and human.

[00:02:30.49] And like in those kinds of village, a group of old ladies kneeling down in front of me, holding a bottle of polluted water and hoping that they would get help. This is the voice that got wronged in this complex, globalized supply chain system.

[00:02:54.41] Hundreds of millions of Chinese have been exposed to health hazards, he says, and things are approaching a tipping point.

[00:03:01.18] If we don't handle that right, this will not just threaten our social stability, but it could hinder the very economic growth itself.

[00:03:13.40] It's not hard to get a sense of public concern, even anger.

[00:03:17.37] [SPEAKING CHINESE]

[00:03:19.34] The air is not good, and it's getting worse and worse, very bad.

[00:03:24.20] At the sidewalk barbershops outside the industrial city of Tianjin, people shared their feelings, though not their names.

[00:03:31.81] [SPEAKING CHINESE]

[00:03:33.71] You do feel the pollution when you breathe. It's a lot more polluted than before. The water is also polluted and our food.

[00:03:40.58] [SPEAKING CHINESE]

[00:03:42.68] The officials are corrupt. People with money can buy favor, corrupt officials are everywhere. Ma Jun says this growing political will in Beijing to tackle the environment crisis, standards have been tightened and factories are now required to report their emission levels in real time.

[00:04:01.91] [SPEAKING CHINESE]

[00:04:04.10] IPE puts this dense information into a database accessible to the general public on the web and now on mobile.

[00:04:12.65] This is a large power plant just outside the industrial city of Tianjin and it's one of thousands of industrial sites across the country that are monitored. And that information is readily available to anyone who's downloaded the IPE app onto their smartphone.

[00:04:27.92] As it turns out, this plant today is well within the range of allowable emissions. As you can see, there are dozens of plants being monitored. Some of them are in the red zone. And the one that we're standing in front of comes in at 33.

[00:04:44.22] By itself, this information has minimal impact. Local officials where factories are located are rewarded for economic growth for creating jobs. They're often indifferent about

pollution, says Greer. One of my favorite expressions I've learned in China is one that says the sky is high and the emperor is far away. That there is sort of a nobody will ever know mentality down there at the provincial and local level.

[00:05:10.66] So IPE has taken its concern to the global level, to customers of the polluting factories. Ma says they are much more sensitive about their public image. When they found the Hangzhou factory out of compliance, for example, IPE contacted big buyers, including Nike, Walmart, GAP and H&M.

[00:05:32.11] Of course, they made very clear commitment to sustainable manufacturing and sourcing. And we just want to hold them accountable for that.

[00:05:45.32] [SPEAKING CHINESE]

[00:05:47.44] IPE convinced our brand customers not to place any order from any supplier who did not meet their environmental requirements. IPE is trusted by the public, and we can trust their data.

[00:05:58.19] Because of its size, Wong says his company was able to afford the \$30 plus million dollar upgrade. But he says that may not be true of all suppliers who are often pressured by their brand customers to lower costs. Ma Jun says the solution is to make information accessible to all parties.

[00:06:16.86] Many stakeholders would like to join the efforts, including, including even the polluters themselves. When they pollute it's not because morally they have a problem. But more because the mechanism now is rewarding those who cut corners to save costs. So I think that we can level the playing field.

[00:06:42.16] One way IPE and its American partner, NRDC, do that is by publishing an annual transparency index.

[00:06:50.62] And today I like to announce the top 100 brands and their rankings and scores.

[00:06:57.07] The index ranks international brands on how they've dealt with suppliers that are violating pollution laws.

[00:07:03.07] Scores have been on the rise. And a score for Apple has exceeded 70 points.

[00:07:10.21] Apple ranks number one. Ironics and stat company initially declined to work with IPE. Today Apple and several global brands like retailer Target are willing partners who use the group's data as a resource.

[00:07:24.52] We look at IPE to ensure that there are no irregularities. What is the progress of our suppliers that have irregularities that need to be reported?

[00:07:35.77] Other American companies like Macy's, JC Penney, and Victoria's Secret were rated at zero. They insist they have their own systems of environmental protection and say they've never heard from IPE.

[00:07:48.43] Ma says it's possible they may not have heard of his group since non-government organizations are small and relatively new in China. This is a time for the NGOs in China to build its capacity and reputation.

[00:08:03.40] In time he expects, more companies will come onboard, especially as IPE adds their brand names onto the next version of its mobile app. He says it will link brands to the factories being tracked so consumers can make informed purchases.

[00:08:19.30] First of all, a little bit about the Natural Resources Defense Council.

[00:08:23.29] IPE's American partner says Western consumers also have a moral responsibility to buy green, even if that means higher prices. China's pollution problem is caused by about 1/3 by export to America and to Western Europe.

[00:08:39.62] So this pollution is our pollution. And I think we have an ethical obligation to help reduce it. And even as China begins cleaning up, she and Ma Jun fear the global supply chain will migrate to less expensive countries eager, as China was a generation ago, to attract new factories but lacking the systems to safeguard the environment.

[00:09:02.62] For "Religion and Ethics Newsweekly," I'm Fred de Sam Lazaro in Tianjin China.