

Intimate Pollution

Chapter 1: A Description of Xintang and Gurao

From April to October of 2010, Greenpeace visited the towns of Xintang and Gurao in Guangdong Province, to document firsthand industrial pollution and its impact on the environment and the lives of local residents. Greenpeace recorded visual pollution, testimonies by local residents and migrant workers and conducted desktop research to obtain a comprehensive depiction of the two towns.

1 Xintang: The Jeans Capital of the World

1.1 An Introduction to Xintang

Xintang is not unusual in the Pearl River Delta: like many industrial towns here, it is a newcomer to wealth and prosperity, with bustling streets and new buildings. Located south of Zengcheng city, the town is on the north bank of the Dong River, one of the main tributaries of the Pearl. However, one aspect sets Xintang apart from other industrial towns in China: denim is everywhere.

The town's landmark is Xintang Jeans City, a new 1,000-*mu* (666.7 sq m) wholesale market on Xintang's most important road. Other roads and alleys in town are crowded with factories large and small, all involved in some part of the jeans production chain. Everywhere people are busy making and processing jeans by hand – in the markets, in the commercial areas, and even in villages and in front of houses. Women, the elderly and children often do some simple thread-cutting jobs to supplement the family income. From morning to night, workers toss down piles of finished clothing and raw fabric from the second and third floors of factories, in preparation for loading on to trucks. These trucks and motorbikes can often be seen criss-crossing Xintang, linking up the many steps in the process that transforms raw cotton into the modern world's favorite apparel.

Xintang's jeans and apparel business began in the eighties, when encouraged by Mainland China's economic reforms, Hong Kong businesses and local villagers started opening private enterprises in Guangdong province. In the last thirty years, Xintang's output has rocketed: its jeans industry alone accounts for a third of Zengcheng city's industrial output. Xintang's economy evolves around the complete production chain of jeans: from spinning, dyeing and weaving, to cutting, printing, washing, sewing and bleaching. In 2002, the China National Textile and Apparel Council named Xintang "China's Jeans Town". In 2008, the CASS Institute of Industrial Economics awarded it the title of "Best Denim Clothing Industrial Zone among China's 100 Best Industrial Zones."

According to local government statistics, in 2008 Xintang produced more than 260 million pairs of jeans, more than 60% of the national production that year. This is equivalent to 40% of the annual U.S. consumption of jeans. Xintang jeans are exported to Russia, the United States, the European Union, Hong Kong, and many other countries and regions, making up 40% of China's total exported jeans.

Xintang Profile

Total Area	251.51 km ²¹
Local Population	215,000 ²
Migrant Population	500,000+ ³
Industry Practitioners	180,000, or 25% of the total town population ⁴
Number of supporting businesses	4,000+ ⁵
Percentage of supporting businesses among the town's total business	60% ⁶
2008 jeans production	260+ million
Annual industry output value	RMB 28.78 billion ⁷

1.2 Pollution in Xintang

Dadun on the eastern end of Xintang, was the first village to develop the jeans industry, while Xizhou Village on the western end, only recently became involved with a new industrial zone.

Dadun was one of the first villages in Xintang to collect together multiple jeans enterprises in the 1980s. By 2009 there were nearly 3,000 jeans and jeans-related factories and manufacturers packed into just a few square kilometers outside Dadun⁸. Many of these factories are involved in the washing and dyeing of denim, a chemical-heavy process that easily contributes to water pollution. As a result, Dadun is also one of the earliest villages polluted by jeans production.



This satellite map from 2003 clearly shows the sharp contrast in water color as a small tributary from Dadun enters the Dong River.

The severe pollution caused by the washing and dyeing processes has not only worried local residents, but has also drawn the attention of the provincial government. In 2006, at the government's request, a series of dyeing and washing plants were closed or relocated, which has indeed resulted in some degree of localized environmental improvement in certain areas around Dadun. Yet this is not a cure, but rather merely relocating the source of the pollution – the factories – to another site. As a result, Xizhou village, on the western end of Dadun, became the next victim of pollution.

Like most villages, Xizhou formerly relied on agriculture for its livelihood. As a large-scale textile industrial park slowly developed nearby, however, it too began to feel the impacts of industrial pollution. Villagers reported that many of the industrial park's dyeing and washing plants have relocated from Dadun. Since these plants have started operations, the once pristine river encircling Xizhou has become a black ditch dividing the village and the industrial zone. This ditch eventually flows into the Dong River.

The Xizhou villagers say that when the factory discharge is severe, the river water is not merely polluted but toxic. The smell is putrid and unbearable, and any skin contact results in itching and even festering. Though villagers once fished and drank water from the river, now they dare do neither of these things and must pay for tap water.

“It used to really stink here. It was all the discharge from the dyeing factories. Now the factories are gone, and the environment has improved.”—Lu Hua (pseudonym), a shopkeeper in Dadun Village

“It's not that we don't want them to make a profit. My family also has to rely on sewing jeans to make a living. However, the production process must be clean and not pollute the environment.” —Lin Zhou (pseudonym), a Xizhou villager

Though the washing and dyeing steps of the jeans production process has a severe impact on the nearby environment and local residents, its impact is much worse on the lives of the workers directly involved. In Nizi village, south of Xintang and between Dadun and Xizhou, is a cluster of crude little brick houses that serve as residences for migrant workers. Here too is a small tributary that feeds into the Dong River. Mr Liu, from Sichuan province says that every morning, at 4am when the waters recede, the odor is so nauseatingly foul that it nearly makes people vomit. Mr. Luo comes from Hubei and sews jeans in Xintang. He says that his fingers, like those of many other workers here, have become permanently stained blue from the fabric. After a decade of working here, he no longer notices the constant itching of his skin.

**“Everyone says that people who work in dyeing and washing have reproductive and fertility problems. My cousin once worked in a dyeing plant. He died of pleurisy.”
---Liu Zhixin (pseudonym), from Sichuan, currently works in packaging but formerly worked in sewing**

2.2 Gurao: The Capital of Sexy

2.2.1 An Introduction to Gurao

Gurao is a prosperous little town in northwestern Chaoyang District, Shantou city, Guangdong province. New buildings and factories line the streets, which are clogged with people and cars during rush hour. Unlike other economically developed towns, however, Gurao is famous for its unique bra and underwear industry.

Gurao’s streets are filled with family workshops, factories, and markets of all sizes, all dedicated to making and selling underwear. As soon as visitors enter town, they are greeted with billboards everywhere advertising lingerie. Not surprisingly, Gurao has earned itself the nickname “the Capital of Sexy.”

According to the local government, more that 80% of Gurao’s business and manufacturing is related to the underwear industry. In January 2004, the China National Textile and Apparel Council and the China Knitting Industry Association named Gurao “China’s Famous Town of Knitting Underwear” In 2009, Gurao produced more than 200 million bras – enough for every third woman in China to have one.

Gurao Profile

Total Area	71.8 km ² ⁹
Residential Population	150,000 ¹⁰
Migrant population	Approximately 140,000 or more ¹¹
Industry Practitioners	75,000 ¹² , or about 25% of the total population
Number of supporting businesses	3,000 (Including 1,080 enterprises and over 2,800 family workshops ¹³)
Percentage of businesses in town related to underwear	80% ¹⁴
Production in 2009	200 million bras, 150 million other garment articles, 50 million articles of underwear and knitted fabrics, and over 300 million meters of lace, embroidery, and knitted fabrics ¹⁵
Annual industry output value	RMB 3.85 billion ¹⁶

2.2.2 “A Beautiful Stream No More”

Gurao is economically prosperous and industrially developed. Yet during our investigation of this famous underwear town, we found a stark contrast between the “sexy” image of the lingerie industry and the polluted state of the local rivers.

The Xiao Xi (“little stream”) is Gurao’s local river. Buildings and roads have already “paved” over the river upstream, turning it into an underground river. It now emerges above ground from the downtown area, flowing past the Gurao Middle School and Ximei Village before finally ending in the Lian River. As one of the coastal rivers in eastern Guangdong, the Lian is considered to be one of the life-giving “mother rivers” of the Chaozhou-Shantou region. Yet in recent years, it has also become the most polluted of

eastern Guangdong's five major rivers, with a water quality rating of below Grade V, according to 2009 figures from the Ministry of Environmental Protection.¹⁷

South of Gurao town, Ximei village got its name, "Beautiful Stream," from the formerly scenic Xiao Xi. Though not as prosperous as the town, Ximei is starting to have some small- to medium-sized underwear manufacturing workshops and factories. Most of the villagers have given up farming and now work in the underwear factories or in related industries.

From an economic point of view, Ximei has benefited from the underwear industry, while the polluted Xiao Xi river has become a casualty of the industry. In turn, the village is a victim of the river, now black and reeking when it flows through the village. When the wastewater contains dyes, the river turns into various different colors. The village's name is no longer true.

The Xiao Xi today has essentially lost its function as a river bringing up water from beneath the ground. Ximei villagers say that the dirty, fetid river is no longer fit for drinking or laundry. Fish no longer live in the river. Now the village relies on tap or bottled water for drinking, while the well supplies water for laundry and other daily activities.

Villagers who live close to the river complain that they must frequently endure the stench from the wastewater, and when the river overflows, their yards and homes are flooded by wastewater.

"When I was little, we could swim and fish in the stream. Now my son doesn't even know how to swim at all, he has nowhere to learn. The water is too dirty - normally no one in the village is willing to touch it." ---Liu Wusheng (pseudonym), resident of Ximei Village.

"Our well water is already becoming unusable. We can't drink it, and it fades the color of our clothes." ----Liang Shaoping (pseudonym), a shopkeeper in Ximei Village

According to government statistics, more than 140,000 migrant workers are working in Gurao, and they, too, are affected by Xiao Xi's pollution. A few households of migrant workers from Guizhou and Sichuan provinces live by the Xiao Xi river, opposite the Gurao Middle School. Most of them work in the nearby underwear factories. Their salaries vary according to their work load. For example, a worker on a bra assembly line is paid 0.10 yuan per bra if his task is simple. A worker that can assemble 300 to 500 bras per day can make 30 to 50 yuan, with a monthly wage of approximately 1,000 to 2,000 Yuan.

The houses of these migrant workers all face the black, stinking Xiao Xi stream. The putrid odor from the river wafts easily into their tiny rooms. The residents tell us that they have gradually become accustomed to the smell and rarely notice it anymore. Yet when

the wastewater discharge is at its heaviest, the noxious fumes from the river are still powerful enough to make people physically ill with dizziness and nausea.

“The water is discharged from the dyeing factories upstream. Sometimes it smells really awful. And every time the color of the water is different – I’ve seen every color imaginable.” ---Ren Shan (pseudonym), a worker from Guizhou

¹ Xintang Government official website, http://www.xintang.gov.cn/Category_1/Index.aspx (accessed on November 1st, 2010)

² Idem

³ Idem

⁴ People’s Government of Xintang, *Xintang Jeans*, 1st Issue, May 2010, Page 11

⁵ Idem

⁶ Idem

⁷ Idem

⁸ *Zengcheng Daily*, <http://www.jeans.gov.cn/co4244.html> (accessed on October 30th, 2010)

⁹ Gurao Government official website, <http://www.gurao.gov.cn/gurao.aspx> (accessed on October 30th, 2010)

¹⁰ Idem

¹¹ Idem

¹² Gurao Government website, <http://www.gurao.gov.cn/show.aspx?id=18> (accessed on October 30th, 2010)

¹³ Gurao Government website, <http://www.gurao.gov.cn/gurao.aspx> (accessed on October 30th, 2010)

¹⁴ Gurao Government website, <http://www.gurao.gov.cn/> (accessed on October 30th, 2010)

¹⁵ Xintang Government website, <http://www.gurao.gov.cn/gurao.aspx> (accessed on October 30th, 2010)

¹⁶ Xintang Government website, <http://www.gurao.gov.cn/show.aspx?id=18> (accessed on October 30th, 2010)

¹⁷ *Nanfang Daily*, Worse than Grade V, Lian River’s pollution is not to be ignored any more, <http://nf.nfdaily.cn/nanfangdaily/nfrb/200902150033.asp> (accessed on October 30th, 2010)