

*Greenpeace Report on
China Reveals
"The Dirty Secret behind
Jeans and Bras"*

Source: New Cloth Market

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Greenpeace – one of the leading non-governmental organizations in China pushing for an end to the poisoning of country's water and illegal e-waste trade – has recently published a report examining two textile industry towns in Guangdong province. The report reveals some shocking facts about the level of pollution caused by textile factories located in these major production centers. The study has shown behind-the-scenes look at how clothing is produced in these factories. The report says that these scenes "may make you think twice before queuing up for buying these clothes". The summary of this report is reproduced below through the courtesy of Greenpeace.

From April to October, we visited Xintang, the "Jeans Capital of the World," and Gurao, a manufacturing town 80% of whose economy is devoted to bras, underwear, and other clothing articles.

Blue jeans are much dirtier than you might ever guess. That cool distressed denim wash is the result of a several chemical-intensive washes. Fabric printing and dyeing involves such heavy metals as cadmium, lead and mercury – not stuff that you want to be getting near your bare skin!



Wastewater discharge from a jeans washing plant

Greenpeace testing found five heavy metals (cadmium, chromium, mercury, lead, and copper) in 17 out of 21 water and sediment samples taken from throughout Xintang and Gurao. In one samples, cadmium exceeded China's national limits by 128 times!

Xintang



Xintang is famous as the "Jeans Capital of the World" – it produces over 260 million pairs of jeans a year, equivalent to 60% of China's total jeans production, and 40% of the jeans sold in the US each year.

Factories large and small fill the streets of Xintang, as well as family workshops housed in makeshift sheds. 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.

Xintang's jeans and apparel business began in the eighties, and in the last thirty years its output has rocketed. Its economy revolves around the complete production chain of jeans: from spinning, dyeing and weaving, to cutting, printing, washing, sewing and bleaching.

Yet villagers we met complained about the printing and dyeing factories' wastewater discharge into the local river, which flows into the Pearl River Delta. "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, " said Lin Zhixin, a migrant worker from Sichuan who works in jeans sewing.



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In this satellite image, the smaller river flows from Xintang into the Dong River, which eventually leads to the Pearl River Delta.



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This boy is working with his parents at a small jeans workshop in Dadun Village in Xintang. He earns 0.15 yuan for snipping loose thread ends off one pair of jeans; in one day he can do about 200 pairs.



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Workers at a jeans factory must search through wastewater every morning to scoop out the stones, which are washed with the fabric in industrial washing machines to make stonewash denim.

Gurao

As soon as visitors enter Gurao, they are greeted with billboards everywhere advertising lingerie and underwear. The town is filled with family workshops, factories, and markets

of all shapes and sizes, all dedicated to making and selling underwear. Not surprisingly, Gurao has earned itself the nickname "the Capital of Sexy. "

In 2009, Gurao produced more than 200 million bras – enough for every third woman in China to have one. But this prosperity has come at the cost of the degradation of the local river, the Xiao Xi.

Villagers nearby say that the dirty, fetid river is no longer fit for drinking or laundry. Fish no longer live in the river. People living near 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.

"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," said Ren Shan, a migrant worker from Guizhou.



A boy walks barefoot in the wastewater discharge from a fabric dyeing factory in Gurao.



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These five children go to school during the day, but work at night and on weekends. Three are local children, and two are from Hunan and Guizhou. They get 0.30 yuan each for every 100 bra straps that they attach to a machine accessory, which will be used in the next step of the bra assembly process. In one day they can earn 20 to 30 yuan each.

Just the tip of the iceberg

Unfortunately, Gurao and Xintang are not alone in China. They are just 2 out of 133 textile manufacturing cluster towns. Without substantial changes to government regulations and industry practices on hazardous chemical use and release, cities like Gurao and Xintang will continue to exist throughout China.

We call upon the government to implement strict monitoring over factory wastewater discharge, while the industry should disclose safety information for its hazardous chemicals, clean up its discharge, and set a target and timeline to phase out its hazardous chemicals. Without such improvements, this age of fast fashions will cost us our environment.

The local government is responsible to regularly sample and monitor these factories. But they are not doing enough. There are thousands of factories in that area. The information out there is quite limited.

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