



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

Computer age's perils beset a Chinese cottage industry

By Martin Fackler, Associated Press, 3/3/2002

GUIYU, China - Chen Wu was glad when his village became a dumping ground for discarded computer hardware from the United States and Japan.

Salvaging computer parts meant jobs for this rural area of China's southeast, though it poisoned drinking water and created an unsightly landscape of broken circuit boards and hard drives.

Chen's attitude changed two years ago, when his 11-year-old daughter grew weak, suffered nosebleeds and was diagnosed with leukemia. Two classmates also were stricken with the illness.

Teachers say more than half the students complain of chronic breathing problems.

"We did not care much when outsiders talked about the environmental pollution here. We did not see any harm," said Chen, 50, who works at a drug rehabilitation center. "But now our kids are getting sick."

Environmental groups consider Guiyu, a cluster of five villages in Guangdong province about 150 miles northeast of Hong Kong, a cautionary tale for countries, or regions, that take high-tech waste.

Over the past decade, these groups say, as much as 80 percent of the old computers, monitors and printers collected for "recycling" in the United States wound up in China, India, and Pakistan, according to a report released last week by environmental groups.

Most of this trash, which environmentalists say comes mainly from brokers and recyclers who collect old equipment from larger US businesses, ends up in Guangdong, in Guiyu and other towns.

There, workers rip through the waste, bearing brand names including Compaq, Apple and IBM, looking for every reusable part. Some components are melted to extract precious metals such as gold and platinum.

What's left, from sophisticated flat screens to low-grade plastics, is burned or dumped beside Guiyu's rice paddies and waterways. Toxic chemicals such as mercury, lead, and dioxins are released into the air and water.

The first sign of danger arose in Guiyu when fish disappeared from a river in the early 1990s, not long after the first truckloads of foreign computer waste rolled in.

Chemicals poisoned the wells, so drinking water is now trucked in. And the odor of burning plastic is so strong that classes at the nearby Dongyuan Middle School are sometimes halted.

One teacher, who gave only his last name, Guo, said about 60 percent of the students and many teachers have trouble breathing.

"The villagers here are growing richer," he said, "but their wealth is built atop the health of other victims."

This year, the United States will export as many as 10.2 million discarded computers to Asia, including 9 million to China, the environmental groups' report said.

It's hard to tell how much of it will end up in Guiyu, where the economy has come to depend on computer waste, even though a Chinese government edict banned its importation in 1996.

Environmental authorities in Shantou, a city with jurisdiction over Guiyu, say they have launched five crackdowns over the past two years, and have shut down hundreds of computer waste operations.

But most were reopened rapidly, often with the help of village officials. The Beijing government has weak control in Guangdong, a region where organized criminal gangs are strong.

Environmentalists estimate that the region now has 2,500 computer waste businesses, most of them family-run. The industry may employ as many as 100,000 people, many of them migrants from elsewhere in China.

"People in Guiyu have made a living out of waste collection for generations. They used to deal in pig bones and duck feathers. But now it's integrated circuits," said the head of the Shantou environmental bureau, who gave only his family name, Kuang.

Officials in Guiyu declined to comment.

Imported computer waste has grown into a full-fledged underground economy in this part of China, said a man who employs two dozen people stripping desktop PCs from California and Japan.

The man, who asked to be identified only by his surname Li, said he buys about 200 tons of computer waste a year from Taiwanese brokers for about \$600 per ton. The waste is smuggled via the port of Nanhai and trucked to Guiyu.

Outside Li's dirt-floor workshop, workers used reed baskets to unload a truck full of hard drives, keyboards and PC bodies.

Inside, workers ripped them apart with hammers and screwdrivers. Others sifted the debris for anything of value - tiny nuts and screws, capacitors, high-grade plastic.

In a smaller room, two women held green circuit boards over open coal fires. As the fumes of melting lead solder reddened their unprotected faces, they used pliers to pick off tiny black computer chips.

The recovered parts were separated into burlap sacks. Li said he sells them by weight to buyers, mostly from Japan.

Li makes more than \$12,000 a year, he said, 15 times the average rural salary in Guangdong.

"We're worried about our children, sure," said Li, who said he has a 15-year-old daughter.

"But what can I do? This is our livelihood."

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