

views • letters

LI YANG

Rare earth regulation justified

A recent trip to Jieyuan village in Ganzhou city of Jiangxi province revealed the huge environmental cost some places have had to pay for the economic development during the past decade. Jieyuan is 20 minutes' drive from the city and has about 2,100 residents, whose per capita income was 4,100 yuan (\$650) in 2011. The village is famous for its limestone and related industry.

Although on average villagers earn only \$1.79 a day, they are happy with the fast increase in their income in recent years. The fast income growth, however, has not led to a better life. Many of the villagers have kidney stones, others have contracted tuberculosis and some are dying of liver cancer or lung cancer.

The limestone reserve in the village has made cement making a profitable business. But it is also a fatal source of dust pollution. The groundwater is too hard to drink, and the village does not receive potable water supply through pipes.

Jieyuan is just one example of environmental damage in Ganzhou, a main producer of rare earth in China. Statistics show the forest cover of seven counties in the city has been destroyed after rare earth exploitation increased from 32 square kilometers in 2000 to 153 sq km in 2010.

The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology says Ganzhou needs more than 38 billion yuan to restore the environment back to health, that is, if no further damage is caused. In stark contrast to the cost of environmental damage, the city's average annual profit from the rare earth industry has been only about 2 billion yuan in the past decade.

I talked to three ailing and weak widows whose husbands died of cancer. One of them told me that four

male family members — her husband, her husband's two brothers and her father-in-law — who used to work in local factories, all passed away in the past year.

Data suggest the environmental loss in China is 5 to 6 percent of the country's GDP. That is to say, the cost of environmental pollution in 2011 amounted to more than 2 trillion yuan, not counting the money needed to control pollution, some of which is irrecoverable.

As one Jieyuan villager says: "We suddenly have everything we dreamt of, but we may have nothing as suddenly because of death." Taking a cue from this, local governments should follow the path of sustainable development to protect the environment and natural resources, so that future generations are not deprived of their share of economic development.

The central authorities have realized the importance of sustainable development and are taking special measures to promote it in the country. For example, only a qualified rare earth producer can register as a legal entity in Ganzhou. Also, it must pass strict environmental assessments and keep its output below the quota imposed by relevant authorities.

Even though China's GDP growth rate declined to 7.6 percent in the second quarter of 2012, the lowest in three years, the country can no longer afford to boost economic growth at the cost of the environment. A slower economic growth is a challenge but also an opportunity. China should take this opportunity to go ahead with its plan of restructuring the economy, and has more than enough reason to strengthen regulations for the rare earth industry.

But the challenge to China's environment is not internal alone. This week news came that "the World Trade Organization has finally agreed to investigate

claims by the US, EU and Japan that China is unfairly strangling rare earth exports in order to favor its domestic manufacturing industry".

Instead of trying to fulfill their own interests by pressuring China to lift the restrictions, leaders of these developed countries should go to villages like Jieyuan to see first-hand the human and environmental destruction their demand is causing.

According to China's white paper on rare earth, released on June 20, the country meets more than 90 percent of the rare earth demand in the global market when it has only 23 percent of the world's total reserves. It also supplies more than 70 percent of the world's permanent-magnet, luminescents, and hydrogen-storage and polishing materials, which use rare earth as raw material.

Plus, China-produced rare earth materials, parts and components, as well as rare earth-end products such as energy-saving lamps, special and small electric motors and NiMH batteries satisfy the development needs of high-tech industries of other countries, especially the developed ones.

Developed countries are used to pointing the finger at China when it comes to environmental protection. But when China takes measures to protect the environment, they pressure it to lower its guard just to fulfill their vested interests. Instead of arm-twisting China into fulfilling their demand, they should support it to implement strict environmental measures, including strengthening regulations on the rare earth industry, if they really care about environmental protection.

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LETTERS

Internet as a compromise

Comment on "Empty nests a social issue" (China Daily, July 23)

The tradition of children taking care of elderly parents made sense among rural populations in the old days, especially for people who didn't have easy access to medical care or affordable living. Children shouldering moral and social responsibilities, too, made good sense then.

In more urban societies, many systems are in place to provide services for senior citizens and set elderly parents' children free to pursue their dreams with more independence from parental responsibilities. This is an ongoing part of modernization in China.

But in the real world, there is an interesting compromise: Internet. My parents in the United States are glad that I am living in China, because with the Internet they see and talk to me more often than they did when I lived in the US.

I encourage Chinese youths to buy a proper computer system for their parents, including a microphone and camera, and train their parents to use it. It can really make a difference both in the children's and parents' lives.

DON RECHTMAN, on China Daily website

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FROM THE CHINESE PRESS

The impact of Denver shooting

Twelve people were killed and 58 injured when a masked gunman opened fire at the premiere of a Batman film in the US city of Denver last weekend. Investigation shows that though the suspect had no previous criminal record, he did not have a license to use guns. This has sparked another heated debate on gun control in the US, says an article in Beijing Youth Daily. Excerpts:

The shooting in Denver has raised a vital question: How to strengthen security in cinemas. Not only the US, but also other countries have neglected the importance of security inspection in cinemas. This is especially shocking because youngsters are known to imitate the action in films, which are becoming increasingly violent, in real life.

The Denver shooting is all the more tragic because the Batman film portrays the masked hero as a man with a strong sense of justice and always prepared to help the weak and the poor.

The shooting has again triggered an intense debate on American gun culture and gun control. Though the original purpose of allowing people to possess guns is self-protection, it has also led to frequent shootings. Statistics show that more than 30,000 people die and 200,000 are injured in shootings and shootouts every year. The Denver case is the worst in the last five years.

The American gun culture has made it difficult for the administration to implement effective gun control not only because the US constitution grants its citizens the right to own and carry arms, but also because people cannot reach a consensus on the issue. Also, some vested interests, for example, arms suppliers, have drummed up support from state administrations against a ban on guns.

The Denver shooting comes when the presidential campaign between incumbent US President Barack Obama and Republican candidate Mitt Romney has reached a feverish pitch. Obama called late Wednesday for tougher background checks designed to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and the mentally ill.

It seems the Denver shooting will inevitably influence the coming presidential election.

Romance in the office

With office romances becoming increasingly common, young lovers need to handle their private lives and work hours with prudence, says an article on cqnw.net. Excerpts:

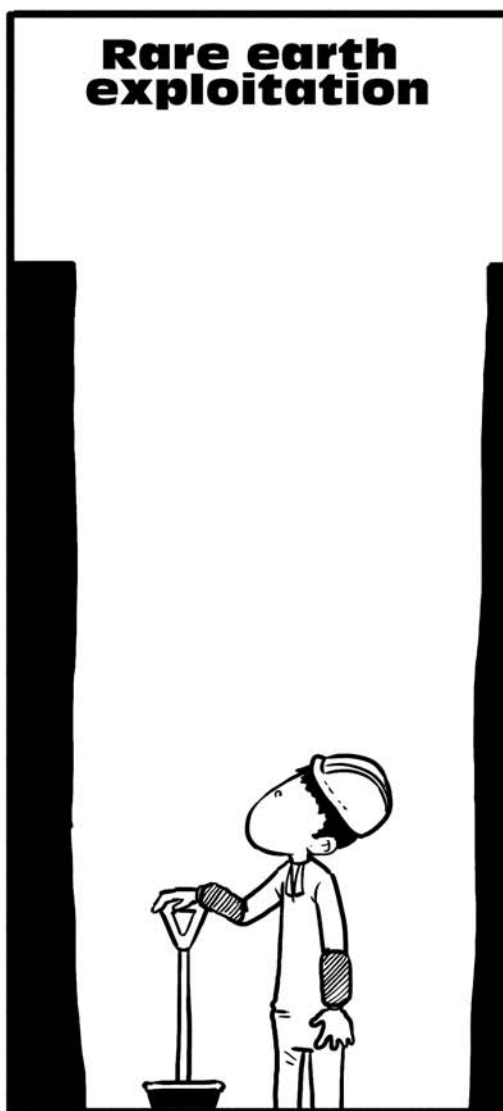
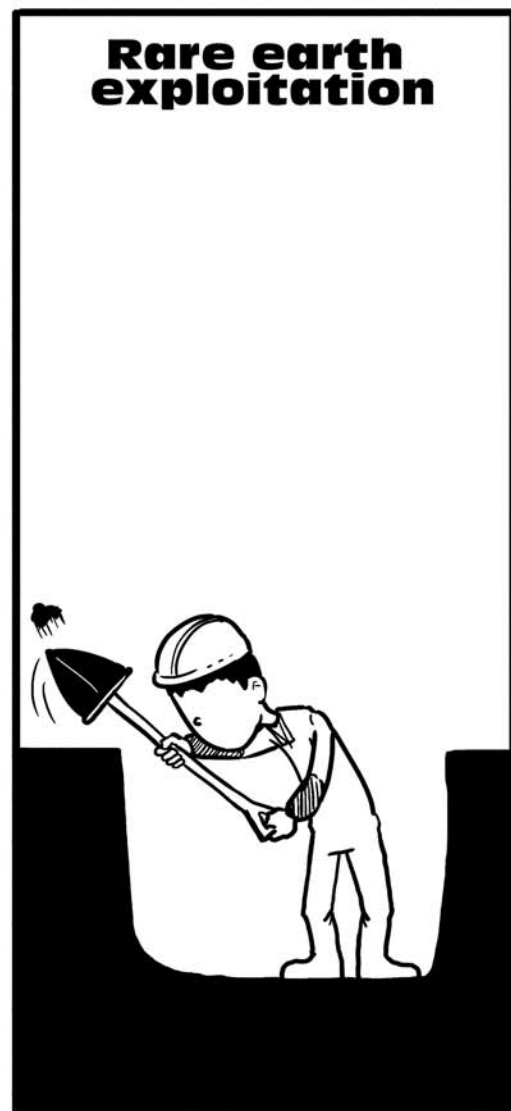
Two co-workers in a chemical enterprise in Wuhan, Hubei province, fell in love and got married two years ago. To avoid "office taboo", the couple decided to keep their marriage a secret at workplace.

But their daily role changing from a happy couple to ordinary co-workers was just too much for the husband and wife to bear. After two years, the husband finally changed his job to end their awkward experience.

Office romances can be a not-too-sweet experience for some couples, especially with jealous and/or gossipy co-workers around. That's why co-workers in love should restrain their words and actions within acceptable limits to avoid becoming the butt of colleagues' jokes and targets of hatred. Otherwise, there can be unnecessary distress in a couple's private life and workplace.

In fact, the Wuhan couple should have lived a much happier life had they not kept their marriage a secret, for office romance and marriage between colleagues are a common phenomenon today. The key point is how to deal with it, not how to hide it.

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LI FENG / CHINA DAILY

XIAO LIXIN

How to improve China's tourism industry

A joke doing the rounds on the Internet says that if Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) poet Li Bai were living today, he could have composed only half of the poems about the beautiful scenery across China because of skyrocketing prices of tickets to tourist sites.

Besides, tourism services are really poor in many places and travel costs in sharp contrast to the quality of service delivered.

Just a few days ago, a man in his 70s from Anhui province, surnamed Yao, wrote to Hainan province governor Jiang Dingzhi, complaining about being insulted by his tourist guide on Hainan island for refusing to pay the extra cost to visit the scenic spots he was scheduled to. Later, the tourist guide "dumped" Yao to fend for himself in an unknown place.

Yao is not the only one to be ill-treated by tour operators in Hainan, which aims to be an international tourist hub. Early this year, some tourists complained that they had to pay 4,000 yuan (\$626) for just three dishes.

Though Hainan officials have vowed to make more efforts to create a tourist-friendly environment and improve their tourist services, the related authorities, together with those in other parts of the country, should try to find the root cause of the poor tourist service.

To gain greater competitive edge and attract more

tourists, many travel agencies have advertised economy package tours at lower-than-normal prices, making it barely profitable for agencies and tour guides both. Therefore, their main means of making money is forcing tourists to visit self-funded scenic spots and shops. Many tour guides are not even paid by their employer agencies and have to rely on commissions from scenic spots and shops where they cajole or coerce tourists to go.

For example, the money Yao paid to the travel agency in Anhui hardly covered his tickets to and from Hainan. That means, the Anhui agency "sold" the tourists to the Hainan agency for a song, so the latter forced tourists like Yao to pay an extra 600 to 900 yuan.

Such tours leave a sour taste in the mouth for a long time. Many tourists who choose package tours find their trips rather tiring, troublesome and less satisfying than they had expected. Everything seems to go wrong. They can only spend one hour or even less at one scenic spot, merely enough to take a brief look at the scenery, click some photographs and then board the bus heading for the next site. The process is repeated day in and day out across the country.

The rising prices of tickets to tourist sites — becoming increasingly unaffordable for ordinary people — is another painful aspect of the tourism industry. The price of a ticket to Zhangjiajie, a famous scenic spot in Hunan province, is 245 yuan,

almost three times that of €10 that one has to pay to enter France's Louvre Museum. And to think that France's per capita GDP in 2011 was \$44,008 compared with China's \$5,413.

Worse, exorbitant entry fees charged by tourist sites do not necessarily mean good quality service. Sometimes, restaurant waitresses, vendors around tourist sites, and even local guides and team escorts turn a cold shoulder to reasonable requests of tourists.

So what needs to be done? China's tourism industry could start with implementing better regulation and management. Tourism authorities can improve the situation by setting up a strict and effective system of supervision and complaint-punishment mechanism, rather than indulging in empty talks to pacify angry tourists and netizens.

Professional training offered to tourism-related service staff is equally important. Also helpful would be the introduction of "mystery customers", a practice with many of the World Top 500 enterprises. A "mystery customer" is a covert assessor who experiences and objectively reports on the quality of service delivered by a shop, a restaurant or a business when customers come into contact with staff members.

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