

2011

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Rithmire, Meg, "Dalian's Past, Dalian's Present, Part 1" (2011). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 867.
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Dalian's Past, Dalian's Present, Part 1

August 15, 2011 in [China Behind the Headline](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)
By Meg Rithmire



Where is Dalian, the city that has just made its way into international headlines due to large-scale demonstrations in its central square? Ask this question in China and “Dongbei” is the one word answer you are likely to get. And you can’t argue with it. The term means simply “Northeast”—with the first character the same one that’s in the song “Dongfang Hong” (The East is Red) and the second the same one that’s in Beijing (literally: Northern Capital)—and on a map of the country, Dalian is right up there in the right hand corner (the red dot on the image above taken from Wikipedia’s page on the city).

One of the first things to note about this Dongbei city, though, is that it has started to be more *dong* and less *bei*, so to speak. It has begun to have less and less in common with cities that neighbor it to the north (many of which have gone from being centers of Mao era crash industrialization to becoming economically troubled rust belt locales) and more and more in common with booming eastern seaboard ports to the south (many of which, including most famously Shanghai, have done well in the Reform era). While many other Dongbei cities (Daqing, for example), struggle against unemployment, are marred by blighted post-industrial urban landscapes, and contend with a bevy of environmental problems, Dalian enjoys not only exceptional wealth but also a reputation as an excellent place to live and work, thanks in large part to how it has become integrated into global economic systems. It has been praised as the “[Bangalore of north Asia](#)” and called “[China’s best business city.](#)” It has also amassed a number of [awards](#) acknowledging the quality of its urban landscape and handling of environmental issues: it was declared an “Environmental Protection Model City” (Huanbao Mofan Chengshi) in 1992, a “Sanitation Model City” (Weisheng Mofan Chengshi) in 1991, and was the first city in China and second in Asia to be included in the UN “Global 500” for livable environments in 1995. The city’s landscape—the built as well as natural environment—is revered throughout the region; it is a prime destination not only for migrants but also wealthier retirees who seek healthier air and access to fresh seafood.

In light of all this, it is striking that the largest protests to break out in Dalian since 1989, the ones that exploded last weekend, would concern an environmental issue: the main aim of demonstrators was to force the closure of a chemical plant. And it is notable as well that protests did not occur when two of Dalian’s northern neighbors experienced incidents

associated with pollution and toxic spills. Nearby Harbin (whose architecture was the subject of James Carter's [recent post](#) on this site), had to shut down the city's water supplies [for four days in 2005](#) as a result of a benzene spill into the Songhua River. And that spill was a result of a [chemical plant explosion in Jilin City](#), another regional hub, which killed or injured dozens of people and resulted in a massive evacuation. But neither Harbin nor Jilin residents took to the streets six years ago.

Yet, in Dalian, middle-to-upper class residents who live in the city's downtown area, twenty kilometers from the industrial zone in which the PX chemical plant is located, have been agitating to demand the factory's relocation. Dalian's economic and political trajectory since reform and opening sheds some light on why.

Dalian's success was a function of early open door policies bestowed by Beijing, natural geography, and the efforts of an effective and charismatic mayor—Bo Xilai, who was central to Dalian politics from 1985-2000. Now famous for presiding over the Chongqing Model and a "Red Revival," Bo began his political career as the party secretary of Maqiaozi, a small village about 35 kilometers east of the city center. In 1985, Maqiaozi became the site of the Dalian Economic and Technology Development Zone (ETDZ), the very first such zone nationwide.

When Bo ascended to the Mayor's office in 1992, he initiated sweeping changes to the city's physical landscape as a major part of efforts at reform and growth. These changes involved a spatial division of labor within the city of Dalian: the development zone to the east would be home to the city's manufacturing base, and the downtown area would be home to commercial and residential development as well as the burgeoning service sector. Realizing this spatial division of labor involved major campaigns to relocate downtown industrial enterprises, campaigns that were accompanied by the rhetoric of removing "polluting enterprises" to the suburbs to improve quality of life. Constant appeal to the environmental benefits of locating industry outside the city to both protect residents' quality of life and Dalian's environmental reputation offset objections over the inconvenience of suburbanizing jobs and the loss of downtown residences.

In this sense, the PX plant protests reflect the political legacy of Dalian's transformation. Dalian residents share a sense of entitlement to a high-quality urban environment. Many of the city's newer residents were drawn to Dalian because of the environment, and its older residents perceive a safe and clean city as their hard-won prize from rounds of economic reforms and relocations. Protest placards with slogans like "[Love Dalian, Reject Poison](#)" underscore the centrality of the urban environment to the city's political self-image.

In another sense, the protests are somewhat surprising to Dalian watchers. A consequence of the city's spatial division of labor and the distance between downtown and the development zone has been a remarkable gulf between the "old city" and the "new." The development zone is home to a largely migrant population and downtown to the more traditional, long-time Dalian residents. If the better-off, downtown residents of the old city are considering the zone as part of their "backyard" in the PX protests, this is perhaps suggestive of growing integration of city and suburbs in larger Dalian. Whether this concern will extend to the dozens of other chemical and petrochemical companies in the development zone remains to be seen.

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