

**Fumigation of exported containers and occupational health of workers:  
A pilot study in China**

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With more than 30 years economic reform, Chinese government is now paying more attention to the working condition and health and safety issues of workers than ever before. There are researches in China considering the occupational health of the workers of different industries, e.g. construction workers, nurses and firemen, etc. Although a number of researches have been carried out in western societies, nevertheless very little attention has been paid to the working process or the occupational health of workers in the field of container fumigation in China.

This is a pilot study of a potential international-cooperative research project. It discusses initially who is operating the business of fumigation in China and how work has been organized. It also considers the working condition and health issues of workers and their perceptions regarding their jobs. The research draws on a case study of a Chinese state-owned company fumigating exported containers. Qualitative methods are utilised, with 2 managers being interviewed extensively and 4 workers being group interviewed under the 'supervision' of the managers. The presence of the managers may prevent workers from expressing their true concerns and thus weakens the analysis to some extent. However, available data still provide some meaningful explanations as to what is happening in that particular field.

The case study shows that within the province, the business of fumigating exported containers is monopolized by the researched state-owned company. It provides training to its workers and issues them professional certificates. This state-owned company obtains credentials of operating fumigation and issues official certificates to the fumigated containers, which are highly recognized by foreign consignees. None of these could be done by any other companies in the province. Such monopolization may have some positive implications to the working condition of workers. It is observed from the work site that workers wear working suits, masks, gloves. They think the job is simple and safe. They do not report any symptoms or diseases that might be related to chemical exposure. They seem very content with their jobs.

It is possible that workers did not thoroughly express their concerns about their working condition and occupational health because of the presence of their managers. Workers are in a very weak position. Most of them are peasant workers, who are temporarily employed, offered low wages, are not provided with any social insurances and have little job security. They are specifically trained for fumigation jobs and hence they depend on their managers for work opportunities. The protection and support to these migrant workers is an important issue that needs addressing.

It is also seen that since European countries started to inspect the level of toxic chemicals in the imported containers more strictly than before, the company in the case study stops fumigating the containers exported to European countries by using toxic chemicals. Instead, heat treatment is applied. This might imply that a stricter regulation helps with the reducing of using toxic chemicals.

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