

Shh! Everyone has the right to a quiet life

Wang Yong

With the advent of summer, some air-conditioners in the neighborhoods may rumble or even rattle, often due to poor maintenance or improper installation. These droning machines can become an unbearable source of noise pollution at night when you try to sleep or meditate.

In the past, you could object to their continued use if you were able to demonstrate that their noise level, measured in decibels, exceeded a legal limit. With the implementation on June 5 of a revised national law on the prevention and control of noise pollution, you can better defend your right to rest.

The revised law has redefined “noise pollution” to target and combat noises other than those with clear emission standards. For example, we can’t decide how loud is too loud in the case of a barking dog, but its noise will now be classified as pollution if its owner fails to take reasonable precautions to avoid causing harassment to others.

In other words, even if there are no legally defined emission limits in terms of decibels, certain noises can still be identified as pollution if no lawful measures are taken to prevent them from interfering with people’s work or lives.

Not only pets but also modified motor vehicles with disturbing sounds and rowdy restaurants can become potential “perpetrators” of noise pollution, even if they are not yet subject to any legal emission standard.

Low-frequency noises, such as those produced by buzzing refrigerators, droning air-conditioners, or whirring fans, are also susceptible to being classified as noise pollution, regardless of their decibel level.

“Low-frequency noises may not be loud, but they are very penetrating because they spread through air with constant force,” Yang Weicheng, a noise control technology expert from the China Household Electric Appliance

Research Institute, told China Consumer News on June 7.

“For example, once operational, an outdoor air-conditioner can emit vibrating noises that bother both the user and his or her neighbors, because its prop may resonate with walls and floors.”

In many cases, such noises fall within the legal emission limits established for air-conditioners or other home appliances. That is why, in the past, a complainant of low-frequency noises had little recourse to timely redress when “noise pollution” referred only to sounds that exceeded clear emission limits.

In the same interview with China Consumer News, Guo Chibing, an expert on home appliance maintenance, described the penetrating power of low-frequency noises as follows: “A closed door or window may shut out high-frequency noises, but cannot stop low-frequency noises.”

Tougher on noises

A greater emphasis on people’s right to rest, as demonstrated by China’s revised noise pollution law, speaks volumes about the country’s concern for public health. China recorded over 2 million public complaints about noise pollution in 2020 alone. (The figures for 2021 have not yet been released.)

The revised law took effect on June 5, World Environment Day. The “coincidence” confirms China’s willingness to address a broader range of noises, which have increasingly become a major source of pollution.

According to the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, noise pollution is second only to air pollution in terms of public complaints and criticism.

Furthermore, according to the ministry’s latest official annual report



on China’s noise prevention and control, noises from daily life, such as those produced by consumer electric or electronic equipment in or near a neighborhood, have received the most public complaints, dwarfing those from industrial production processes or construction activities.

The same report points out that China’s major cities still have room to improve when it comes to creating a quiet life at night, particularly around residential communities and cultural sites.

My experience may be a footnote in the overall picture of pollution.

In 2012, I relocated from downtown Shanghai to a suburban district. Over the last decade, as small, polluting plastics factories gradually relocated or closed, local quality of life has improved, with significantly reduced air pollution and industrial noises.

My main concern about environmental health right now is sporadic neighborhood noises caused by poorly maintained public equipment in our

residential community, such as air-conditioners and water pumps, or by some neighbors who turn on TVs in their bedrooms at midnight.

The new noise prevention and control law not only defines all disturbing sounds as potential sources of pollution, giving people more power to protect their right to a quiet life, but also encourages neighbors and property management personnel to work together to solve problems through constructive consultations and communications.

In some ways, neighborly negotiations can be extremely beneficial. For example, at 11pm on Tuesday, a young couple was still playing table tennis in a public hall of our property management office, which faces my bedroom across a narrow pedestrian path. I was not sleeping then because I was too pre-occupied with how to write this article. The constant sounds of the ball hitting the table, along with the players’ excited shouts, were loud enough at midnight to keep me from having uninterrupted thoughts.