China takes big risks in its quest for shale gas

BY KEITH BRADSHAW

Residents of this isolated mountain valley of terraced cornfields were just going to sleep last April when they were jolted by an enormous roar, followed by a tower of flames. A shock wave rolled across the valley, rattling windows in farmhouses and village shops, and a mysterious, pungent gas swiftly pervaded homes.

"It was so scary — everyone who had a car fled the village and the rest of us without cars just stayed and waited to die," said Zhang Mengao, a hardware store owner.

All too quickly, residents realized the source of the midnight fireball: a shale gas drilling rig in their rural hamlet.

This verdant valley represents the latest frontier in the worldwide hunt for shale gas retrievable by the technology of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. It is a drilling boom that has upended the energy industry and spurred billions of dollars of investment.

Like the United States and Europe, China wants to wean itself from its dependence on energy imports — and in Jiaoshizhen, the Chinese energy giant Sinopec says it has made the country's first commercially viable shale gas discovery. Its efforts could also help address another urgent issue, as Beijing looks to curb an overwhelming reliance on coal, which has blackened skies and made China the largest contributor to global warming.

But the path to energy independence and a cleaner fossil fuel is fraught with potential pitfalls.

Threats to workplace safety, public health and the environment all loom large in the shale gas debate — and the

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