
SEEING GREEN—STANDING UP FOR FARMERS IN CHONGQING

By Li Miao Lovett

Small environmental groups battle with industrial giants in China's most populous industrial center.

From a small, well-equipped office overlooking the cityscape of bustling Chongqing, Wu Dengming recounts the early battles against illegal logging that put Green Volunteers League in the spotlight. In 1998, his group discovered that virgin forests in federally protected areas of Sichuan were being clear-cut to pave the way for housing developments. Wu secretly led reporters from CCTV into the Hongya forest, risking reprisal from local thugs as well as the powers governing the state-owned broadcasting network. But the gamble paid off, and when CCTV publicized the illegal operations, the developers were sent packing and the clear-cutting stopped.

As president of the 12-year-old NGO, Wu is now a seasoned activist who understands the inner workings of China's political system. He has faced death threats and his researchers have been arrested, but Wu believes in the potency of grassroots action. "We are a small NGO," he said, "but our human capacity is as powerful as a bomb."

His group halted the construction of the Jiulongpo Power Station through the efforts of volunteers who held forums and wrote petitions and reports to the government. Wu is visibly proud of those who have rallied to the cause, of the 20,000 college students who declared opposition to the Nu River dams, and another 10,000 who signed a petition to stop the Minfeng Nonghua Group from dumping toxic waste into the Jialing River.

It's often an uphill battle, however, to advocate for environmental protection when a booming economy and deep ties between local governments and industry stack the odds in favor of business interests. The campaign against Minfeng appeared successful; the city government of Chongqing agreed to shut down the plant in 2003. But on the prescribed day, business continued as usual, and the local press was censored from printing stories about the intended closure.

Wu and his team have been unfazed by the setbacks. His volunteers, from academics and college students to farmers from surrounding communities, continue to monitor and report on environmental degradation in the Chongqing municipality and neighboring areas of Sichuan Province. In 2003, student activists from Green Volunteers League protested outside one of several chemical and paper mills dumping waste into

the Xiao'an Xi River. Volunteer investigators uncovered the effects of untreated sewage and industrial dumping—blackened forests, residents and schoolchildren sickened by pollution, and a cesspool of toxic chemicals contaminating the local river, which flows into the Jialing and on from there into the Yangtze River.

Construction of the Three Gorges Dam has tamed the silt-laden Yangtze along a 200-km stretch. Each year, 750 million cubic meters of waste from households and factories are being dumped into this reservoir. The consequences of impounding a tremendous volume of water between the city of Chongqing and the dam site at Sandouping have been a major concern of Wu's. Yet local governments tend to focus on the economic realities; they rely on revenue from businesses, and the shuttering of factories translates into a loss of jobs, tax money and investments.

The deeper problem, as Wu sees it, is the disconnect between the rich and poor sectors of society. In its dizzying pursuit of private wealth and economic development, China has become more prosperous, he says, but morally poor. Getting rich may be glorious, and nowhere is the display of wealth more flagrant than in the ritzy skyscrapers and storefronts of Chongqing's Yuzhong district. Yet dire poverty lurks in the shadows where scavengers and rural migrants struggle to survive in a metropolis of more than 30 million.

“If there's no poverty, how can there be wealth?” said Wu. “Without a derriere, how can there be a brain? Our social values encourage people to be on top; no one wants to be at the rear end.”

“What's lacking in China is *jiaoyu*,” Wu continued with an emphatic glance, referring to what he sees as a lack of moral education orienting individuals toward the greater good of society.

At 66, Wu has seen China's evolution since its early days under Mao's rule. He has worn numerous hats, as a peasant and laborer, a soldier in the People's Liberation Army, a Party official who worked in local government. He is critical of the corruption that has become rampant in a culture where business deals are routinely conducted through bribery and collusion.

“I've seen this country go from the promise of Communism to the degeneration of values, from a landless peasantry that acquired land, and has once again lost out.”

Besides fighting industrial pollution through grassroots action, Green Volunteers League works with rural communities to increase productivity in sustainable ways. Agricultural experts provide training for peasants to improve farming practices and increase crop yields. “You couldn't use a manual to encourage farmers to adopt these methods,” said Xiang Chun, who coordinates the NGO's programs. “The experts show them the results of experimentally grown crops. They need to see the benefits for themselves.”

There's also an initiative to promote organic farming as a way to supplement peasant incomes. However, degradation of the environment remains a challenge. “You need a



Green Volunteers League founder Wu Dengming. Photo: Li Miao Lovett.

healthy environment to grow crops organically,” said Xiang, “but pollution issues—such as acid rain—make it difficult to find a solution.”

The challenges faced by rural communities in Chongqing are systemic throughout China. At a presentation for the College Students’ Green Forum, researcher Yang Yong detailed the country’s long-term plans to channel water to the arid north through the South-North Water Diversion Project by tapping the Yangtze and other southern rivers. Yet the city of Chongqing, at the confluence of the middle Yangtze and Jialing Rivers, has been coping with water scarcity for the past two years.

Through initiatives like the Green Forum, Green Volunteers League is educating young people about ecological issues such as the rampant development of dams and the impacts of deforestation. Youth volunteers have gone to areas of the upper Yangtze, the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau and the ancient forests by the Hejiang River to conduct investigations. The training program, conducted annually, enlists students from more than 20 colleges and universities in Chongqing.

“Our vision is far-reaching, but our resources are limited,” said Wu. He sees the strength of the organization in its volunteers. At the same time, he is concerned about the lack of civic engagement among Chinese generally. In a country where labor unions, media and NGOs are strictly controlled or regulated by the government, there are numerous obstacles to grassroots involvement. The Internet has been an effective tool in reaching the masses, but access in the countryside is still quite limited.

That hasn’t stopped a group of farmers near Chongqing City from banding together with the support of Green Volunteers League. The Dazu County Eco-agriculture Development Association grew out of efforts to fight pollution from factories that produce strontium carbonate, which is used in the production of optical glass, color TVs and magnetic materials. China is the world’s second largest source of strontium, and Chongqing contains China’s largest reserve of that mineral.

Tang Xuhan, the Association’s chair, says that his group one is of the first grassroots organizations of its kind in the country. It has more than 100 members from villages in Dazu and Tongliang counties who are active on a number of fronts: monitoring pollution sources, petitioning local authorities on environmental enforcement, and developing renewable energy sources like biogas.

The fight against industry has been ongoing. In 1993, Hongdie Strontium Industrial Company relocated the first of several plants from Qingdao, in Shandong Province, to the town of Anju. By 2002, a large-scale production base for strontium salt was developed in the area, and the company built additional plants in Nongshui and Yongqi. Industrial waste from the plants was discharged into nearby lakes and rivers.

Several newspapers have reported on the severity of the pollution affecting these rural communities. A cover photograph of the Chongqing Times in September 2004 depicts a child whose body is covered with rashes. Such images only scratch the surface of health problems accompanying the influx of strontium. Official statistics are lacking, but Tang



The Hongdie strontium plant looms beyond the paddy fields of Dazu. Photo: Li Miao Lovett

says cases of cancer began cropping up only three months after the factory moved into Yongqi, and since then there have been many deaths from cancer in the affected counties.

Lu Fuliang, a 71-year old farmer from Tongliang County, owned a grove of fruit trees destroyed by pollution from Hongdie's strontium factories. He says that 400 mu (about 60 acres) of land in his area has been affected. A methodical man, Lu showed me a stack of papers detailing his efforts to petition the government about his case, poring over each of the documents with great zeal. A few of the letters were drafted on Green Volunteers League letterhead. There are records calculating the yield from his fruit trees, and estimated losses. In 2005, a high court in Chongqing Municipality actually ruled in Lu's favor, but that only brought him trouble from the local government. He was strong-armed and beaten, then jailed for 15 days.

The incident only strengthened Lu's resolve. "They violated my rights, and I don't accept it," he said. His first trip to petition Beijing produced no results, as his case was simply referred back to the local government, but he is planning another trip to Beijing this year. Lu says he has spent 80,000 yuan on his case over the past 12 years. He has



hired three lawyers, but says that those on the industry's side are much more powerful.

Tang doesn't think Lu will win his case, because the orchard farmer is asking for compensation above the 20,000 yuan the government offered him to relocate. According to Tang, Lu has already received the funds, but his family hasn't moved yet.

David and Goliath battles such as these have not diverted Tang from optimism in his broader view. "The central government is concerned about its citizens in a way that it hasn't been before," said Tang, referring to the leadership of Wen Jiabao and Hu Jintao. "Before, it was all about rapid economic development. Now there's concern for the welfare of the people."

However, Beijing's awareness of environmental impacts does not necessarily filter down to the local level. Hongdie was required to build a treatment plant so its industrial waste would no longer pour directly into the Huai Yun Lake, which residents use for drinking water and irrigation, and which flows into the Jialing River and from there to the Yangtze. But treating the discharge costs 80,000 yuan per day, and the company



Dazu farmer activists (L to R) Lan Huadong, Lu Fulliang and Tang Xuhan.

Photo: Li Miao Lovett

has balked at complying. Tang says it would cost several hundred million yuan to remediate the problems stemming from this one pollution source.

Concerned citizens such as Lan Huadong have advocated for action on behalf of the Dazu farmers' association. In 2003, Lan wrote a letter to the Chongqing municipal government blaming the illegal discharge from Hongdie for poisoned fish stocks, ruined crops and deleterious effects on residents' health. On the first day of my trip to Dazu, a few of the association members gathered around Lan as he read the letter aloud. Nearby, an elderly man with late-stage cancer, evident in a purple tumor mushrooming from his neck, lay bedridden.

"We citizens feel that economic development is beneficial, but we believe that the government cannot allow harm to the environment in order to protect industry." Lan delivered his plea in an oratorical style amidst the occasional blare of horns on Yongqi's main street. "If economic gain means the sacrifice of the environment and citizens' health, this is not the Communist way."

The letter had been distributed widely to various local and municipal bureaus, and government officials subsequently held a meeting in Dazu County to discuss the situation. Lan said the officials gave notice to Hongdie, but considered their task done after that. What they really did, Lan claims, was simply put the company on the alert that citizens had made a complaint.

Program coordinator Xiang Chun says Green Volunteers League helped put pressure on the local government, going through the courts and garnering media attention. The Chongqing government ordered smaller strontium factories to close down, but Hongdie is still in operation, and the belching smokestacks of the company's Yongqi plant are visible from the balcony of the temple in Tang Xuhan's village.

It's an idyllic setting where Tang lives, amidst forested hills and a verdant patchwork of farmland. He and his neighbors grow sorghum, corn, rice, potatoes and yams. Having previously lived in Guangdong Province, where his son and daughter are working, he is grateful to return to the slower pace of the countryside. And yet, he is all too aware of the environmental challenges that belie such tranquility. Tang's granddaughter has recently given birth; Tang and his wife will care for her child when she goes back to work. He's thinking about the next generation, and hopes to leave a better legacy through his work with the Eco-agricultural Development Association. "If you don't deal with things now, and wait until the pollution is severe, it's too late," he said. "You have to nip the problem in its infancy."