



# China Environment Forum



## *Part II Snapshot of China's Waste Challenge*

### **Wasting No Time: A Chinese NGO's Campaign for Waste Management Activism**

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#### **A BEIJING NGO TANGLES WITH TRASH**

For the Chinese government, incineration has become an increasingly popular solution to China's growing solid waste problem. However, for the urban Chinese whose neighborhoods are increasingly being encroached upon by such massive waste-to-energy plants, incineration has become a rallying point for activism. For citizens troubled by a lack of information from the government about incineration plants before and during construction, NGOs and grassroots organizations serve to fill the gap as sources of information, legal services, and advice. Chinese civil society organizations are burgeoning—according to scholar Scott Wilson, “the number of organizations in China has grown rapidly since the 1990s—rising to approximately 400,000 officially registered organizations and as many as three million unregistered organizations—including the entry of a large number of international NGOs and foundations” (Wilson 2012, 551). This increase bodes well for citizens battling waste woes.

One of the most active NGOs working on the waste front is the Beijing-based Green

Beagle (达尔问自然求知社). Established in 2009 by journalist and activist Feng Yongfeng, Green Beagle's mission is to heighten public participation in environmental improvement efforts, provide services to pollution victims, and intervene when polluting activities are discovered.

Since the 1990s, most Chinese NGOs, such as the well-known group Friends of Nature, have focused on education and awareness-raising; few have intervened on behalf of communities fighting pollution. However, Green Beagle has taken a more active role, collaborating with legal services and law schools in China and fielding phone calls and Internet appeals from pollution victims and their families. Green Beagle connects victims with the Center for Legal Services to Pollution Victims (CLAPV), a legal aid NGO that is attached to the China University of Politics and Law in Beijing. This important collaboration opens doors for citizens to file lawsuits and learn about their rights as victims of poor waste management practices.

Chen Liwen, a former Green Beagle staff member, now works at Nature University, a

non-degree community center with which Feng Yongfeng is also affiliated. Nature University offers training and resources on the environment, including public classes on issues including the environment, nature, and health. Its work closely resembles that of Green Beagle's; Chen works in the "Garbage College," where she advances waste awareness projects and promotes education on sustainable and environmentally conscious waste practices.

According to Chen, the first public protest against an incineration project occurred in 2006 in response to the proposed creation of Beijing's Liulitun incineration plant. Residents in opposition to the building of the plant sought assistance from Friends of Nature and Global Village of Beijing (GVB), another NGO. Feng Yongfeng, who was working for GVB at the time, and business partner Mao Da created a report outlining the dangers of incineration, which they then submitted to the Beijing Government and the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP). After demanding a hearing and helping a contingent of mostly elderly people rally at the MEP offices on June 5, China's Environment Day, the plant's construction proposals were scrapped and the Beijing residents returned home victorious.

In subsequent years, similar efforts have been replicated across the country. Green Beagle and Nature University provide a vital conduit for the energy of the grassroots movement in addressing the mounting waste challenge. In an interview with the author, Chen noted that while her time at Green Beagle was divided between issues concerning waste, water, and heavy metal pollutants, the public has been most involved in the NGO's waste-related efforts. Trash seems to be a tipping point, a bellwether for citizen response to opaque government policies that impinge upon quality of life.

## **GREEN BEAGLE: CONNECTING POLLUTION VICTIMS TO VITAL SERVICES**

While at Green Beagle, Chen organized weekly tours of waste facilities as well as public meetings during which residents could voice their concerns and talk with government officials. According to Chen, Green Beagle is unique among Chinese NGOs in its creation of a space in which victims can tell their stories directly to the government. In pressing the MEP to expand the role of public participation in the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process, Green Beagle helps residents connect the dots between noise, smell, poor air quality, skin diseases, climate change, and other deleterious but infrequently reported effects of incineration.

Working from the EIAs, Chen and other Green Beagle staff members wrote recommendations to the MEP with a goal to educate citizens about their rights under China's Freedom of Information Act. And awareness is increasing, as evidenced by the success of the 2009 protests in Beijing, where "residents in central Beijing swarmed the offices of the [Ministry of Environmental Protection]...protesting the stench from a landfill and plans for a new incinerator there" (Zhang, 2010). As a result of this protest, plans for the plant were canceled. Dissatisfied residents are increasingly relying on embarrassing media coverage that shames local governments, petitions, and demonstrations to get their message heard.

In his survey of NGO development in China, Wilson notes that NGOs in the fields of environment, HIV/AIDS, education, and women's rights have been granted more leeway by the government than those working in other sectors, such as LGBT and human rights. He claims the MEP and the Ministry of Health, however, are "relatively weak and face opposition from rival institutions, such as the Ministries of Commerce, Civil Affairs, and Propaganda, as well as local government" (Wilson 2012, 564). Green Beagle's varying

experiences interacting with provincial governments seem to support this argument.

The Xie family lives 200 meters from an incineration plant in Nantong, Jiangsu Province. The Xies are an example of Green Beagle's target constituents. Xie Yongkang, the family's child, has suffered a host of maladies including cerebral palsy and epileptic seizures since his birth in 2008 (Balkan, 2012). Green Beagle found out about the Xie case through its affiliation with CLAPV—an environmental NGO in Beijing that offers pro bono legal assistance. Green Beagle went on to introduce Xie Yong, the father, to public health experts at Beijing University and to legal aid—the family has filed multiple lawsuits since 2010, and is now taking its complaint to China's Supreme Court. Thanks to an invitation from Green Beagle, Xie Yong was able to travel to Beijing to meet with experts and receive advice. Chen has visited the boy twice and becomes emotional when talking about the family's struggles. A vital part of Green Beagle's work is to share the stories of pollution victims, hopefully catalyzing others to action. They convene the crucial actors—legal, political, civic—providing an unprecedented avenue to redress for pollution victims.

Wilson argues that “the MEP...seeks to enhance its political position and monitoring capacity at the local level by supporting environmental NGOs and pollution victims' legal cases backed by [civil society organizations]” (Wilson, 2012, 564). In the case of Green Beagle, direct interactions with the MEP are supplemented by crucial outreach at the grassroots level—research and fieldwork are as vital as the meetings they host in Beijing. For example, visits to incineration sites with the Department of Agriculture to test air, water, and soil revealed high levels of arsenic—a toxin not previously associated with incineration. As Chen notes, the lack of environmental epidemiological research connecting incineration to health risks is “a pity”—one that the organization hopes to

remedy. Local governments and plant operators stand to learn a great deal from Green Beagle's research and involvement with local communities; collaboration could only benefit both sides.

### **OLYMPIC-ERA ACTIVISM**

China's growing prosperity is ushering in more than a waste problem; it has given rise to a wealth of citizen activism. A noteworthy example of civic activism includes protests at the Beijing Gao Antun landfill in 2008. According to Chen, the maximum capacity of the Gao Antun landfill is 2,000 tons of waste per day but, during the Olympics, it was overloaded with 4,000 tons. Residents did not know the source of the overpowering stench until one woman discovered the landfill, in addition to uncovering plans to build an incineration plant on the same site. In a 2008 article covering protests in Beijing's eastern Chaoyang district, *Guardian* journalist Jonathan Watts explains that in addition to burying municipal waste, the Gao Antun plant burns medical waste from hospitals, “raising fears among locals that the air is being polluted by odorless carcinogenic dioxins,” despite the denials from the plant's owners (Watts, 2008). Green Beagle's field research has confirmed that dioxins are released during the incineration process.

As the Games proceeded, and waste from increased tourism and infrastructure compounded, the pressure mounted. Watts characterizes demonstrators as young, urban, and professional—those who had purchased expensive real estate in up-and-coming neighborhoods: “The residents thought they were buying into one of the city's most salubrious neighborhoods, but on hot summer days, when the wind is in the wrong direction, their homes are filled with the stench from the dump” (Watts, 2008). The 2008 demonstrations indicated growing resistance to China's waste management practices—many of those who participated had never taken part in a protest before.

The woman who had revealed the source of the pollution sought assistance from Feng Yongfeng, Green Beagle's future founder. He encouraged her to write the story of her experience, which ended up winning an award from the Nature Conservancy. Green Beagle continues to encourage citizens to tell their stories and raise awareness of incineration's impact on quality of life. While the Gao Antun landfill supposedly meets global health standards (Zhang, 2010), it stills receives 2,400 tons of waste per day, which exceeds capacity and continues to contaminate its environment.

While the protests of wealthy urbanites draw attention from officials, an incident in Asuwei, the location of a landfill outside of Beijing, underscores the unequal distribution of the waste burden. In this poor village, the landfill operator is a branch of the state-owned sanitation group. Liquid from the landfill has been piped into a nearby river since 2004, creating pollution and a foul odor. The government determined that 1RMB per person per day was adequate recompense despite complaints and continued operation. It was not until wealthy residents of villas constructed nearby—millionaires with connections in Beijing—began protesting and contacting Beijing's Agricultural Culture Center, some even submitting to arrest—that construction was halted (Chen interview).

According to Chen, NGOs in China need greater community support and participation in order to educate impacted poor communities and instigate change at the local and central government levels. However, empowering marginalized or economically disadvantaged communities continues to be a particular challenge for Chinese NGOs, but it is one that groups like Green Beagle are increasingly positioned to tackle.

### **HOPES FOR THE FUTURE**

Chen and other Green Beagle staff believe that access to information and an informed

community are key ingredients to improving incineration practices. For Chen, the public participation period for the EIA ideally would be lengthened to one month—currently it is only ten days long, including the weekend—and information would be broadcast via QQ, a popular Chinese social networking site, and other new media instead of only being posted on the government's website. Furthermore, there is little accountability when false information appears on EIAs. For example, ongoing protests over the Dagongcun plant, located in a poor, less populated area outside of Beijing, reveal that the EIA overstated the number of people who approved the plant's construction and failed to address the absence of a fly ash processing plant. It was also not made clear to the public that the plant would manage more than 2,000 tons of waste per day from the Haidian district of northeastern Beijing. Green Beagle seeks to gather this kind of information and ensure that the general public has access to it.

Feng Yongfeng notes that one of the goals of founding Green Beagle was to promote holistic environmental education. In a July 11, 2012 email to the author, Feng explains: "Chinese people lack a fundamental understanding of the natural world, they also don't love nature. In order to protect nature, one must first provide knowledge." Feng and Chen both assert that Green Beagle's activities—from publicity campaigns to waste facility tours—have been met with a warm reception by the public. Public interest lawsuits and community support have heightened since the initial protests in 2006. Green Beagle has played a central role in concretizing and motivating this civic engagement.

Feng also weighs in on the most important ingredient of the environmental movement, one that will ensure continued support to pollution victims and exert pressure on those orchestrating waste management practices: "An environmental organization must



participate vigorously in ameliorating this era of environmental suffering, putting forth all of its energy. Without this basic foothold, we can forget about the environmental movement entirely.” Feng captures the

importance of each grassroots organization, GONGO (government-organized non-governmental organization); NGO; and neighborhood alliance. Together, these groups have the power to bring about change in the face of repressive government tactics.

Chen Liwen is similarly hopeful that Green Beagle’s voice can join a broader chorus. When asked what she would want readers outside of China to understand about China’s environmental movement, she responded: “I think China’s environmental movement, especially the protests of impacted communities, plays a significant role in protecting China’s environment. More and more, environmental NGOs and impacted communities are pioneers for public participation.” After visiting the United States, Chen surmised that a gap in understanding is inhibiting meaningful collaboration between U.S. and Chinese activists: “We assume only our own vantage, not the perspective of the other side. We should organize more field visits between China and the United States and have more face-to-face talks to deepen

our mutual understanding and collaboration.” Hopefully dialogue will lead to exchange of community organizing tactics and knowledge sharing, strengthening access to environmental justice in both countries.

Waste management practices will play an integral role in degrading or improving China’s environment in the years to come and, as such, they will impact the rest of the world. As Ethan Goffman observes in a June 19 *Sustainability: Science, Practice & Policy* blog post, Green Beagle and other NGOs working on waste are irreplaceable contributors to the environmental movement, acting as the “eyes and ears of the people.” They channel the energy of the grassroots, advocating policies that protect the health and wellbeing of the people. And for playing such an integral role, China’s environmental NGOs are an enriching force in Chinese civil society.

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