

# China Rising to Environmental Challenge

## Wang Canfa forges new connections with E-LAW

BY CHUCK ADAMS

The distance between Eugene and Beijing just got a bit closer. Besides Eugene hosting next year's Olympic Trials, and the Olympic Games set for Beijing, there's another connection, and he checks in at under 5 feet tall. Chinese law professor Wang Canfa may be short, but he packs a commanding presence in the circles of environmental law. Recently featured in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* as well as a segment of *The New York Times*-produced television documentary *China Rises*, Wang is breaking waves in the global fight against environmental polluters, if only because he's doing it in one of the world's most populous, complex and ecologically ravaged nations. And now he has spent the past week networking with the Eugene-based Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide (E-LAW), a grassroots network of environmental lawyers from more than 60 countries, to help him with his crusade.

Together with associates like Zhang Jingjing (who was dubbed the "Erin Brockovich of China" by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* for her victory against the Rongping Lianying Chemical Factory in China's Fujian province), Wang formed one of the leading environmental watchdog and legal advocacy groups in China, the Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims (CLAPV). He is pragmatic about his choice to start the center: In college Wang studied law, then teaching and then environmental law. He taught for over 20 years at the China University of Political Science and Law before recognizing China had environmental laws in the books – but no lawyers willing to enforce government compliance with them.

But Wang's impetus to start CLAPV may be as personal as it is professional. Born in the countryside, Wang grew up impoverished and malnourished (he jokes on the *China Rises* documentary that he is short because he didn't have enough to eat as a child). Living next to polluted lakes and rivers most of his life, he now refuses to eat lotus roots because they grow underwater. This makes him a firsthand witness to the environmental catastrophe that has followed on the heels of China's rapid economic expansion. He sympathizes with the victims, not the cash cows.

The simple components of Wang's non-governmental organization (NGO), tucked away in a modest two-room apartment building on the campus of his university, include a telephone hotline (which has received more than 9,000 calls since the center's founding in 1998) and stacks of notes, legal documents and transcribed complaints from citizens fed up with local industries' effects on their health and food supply. CLAPV receives the complaints; a grad student logs them in and then passes the files on to the 269 lawyers working on a primarily pro bono basis for the center. Even if the odds of victory are miniscule, the simple act of getting citizens involved in a lawsuit yields its own benefits, Wang says.

"When [CLAPV sues] the polluters, the media like to report on it," Wang said at a Feb. 23 conference hosted by federal Judge Ann Aiken at the new federal courthouse. Wang is then sure to give the press the center's toll-free hotline. "A lot of people know their rights" because of this publicity, says Wang, whose center has won a third of its 80 cases. When the victories do come, they are watershed moments.

Zhang's win in the Fujian province, which compensated over 1,600 villagers for toxic chromium and chlorate spills into their water supply and agriculture, garnered media attention around the world and compelled the victims to form their own environmental watchdog groups. Jilin Petrochemical, the company responsible for the November 2005 benzene spill into the Songhua River in northeastern China – which received copious international press, including in the pages of *EW* – was fined the maximum penalty allowed under law (one million yuan, or about \$125,000 USD) in January. In addition, the state has promised over \$1.2 billion to clean up the river and prevent future accidents.

But the citizens who were exposed to toxic water and who may later fall ill were not factored into the settlement, according to a BBC news report. Moreover, critics of the settlement say that the fine was too low, considering the victims' projected health care costs over the next several years, and the state should not have to pick up the tab for private enterprises' damages. The Xinhua News Agency wrote that some "companies find it's cheaper to pay a fine than to improve their pollution controls."

E-LAW's China programs coordinator and director of

Wang Canfa founded the Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims in 1998 in Beijing

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