



## Under the Dome: The smog film taking China by storm

By Celia Hatton - 2 March 2015

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**Only in China would a documentary on air pollution garner more than 100 million views in less than 48 hours.**

Renowned investigative journalist Chai Jing has been widely praised for using her own money - more than 1 million RMB (\$159,000: £103,422) - to fund the film, called *Under the Dome*. She first started the documentary when her infant daughter developed a benign tumor in the womb, which Ms Chai blames on air pollution.

Standing in front of an audience in a simple white shirt and jeans, Ms Chai speaks plainly throughout the 103-minute video, which features a year-long investigation of China's noxious pollution problem.

Alone on a stage, like Al Gore in "An Inconvenient Truth," she detailed how the coal and oil industries are complicit; how environmental officials are impotent. A giant screen behind her flashed data and video clips.

At times, the documentary is deeply personal. Near the start of the documentary, Ms Chai interviews a six-year-old living in the coal-mining province of Shanxi, one of the most polluted places on earth.

"Have you ever seen stars?" Ms Chai asks. "No," replies the girl.

"Have you ever seen a blue sky?" "I have seen a sky that's a little bit blue," the girl tells her.

"But have you ever seen white clouds?" "No," the girl sighs.

### 'Work before the environment'

At other points, the documentary is deeply critical of the state's lax environmental laws. In one instance, Ms Chai follows a government inspector to measure the illegal pollutants coming from a coal-burning steel producer in central Hebei province.

Months later, she discovers the steel maker had yet to pay any fines.

When she asks a provincial official why the coal-burning factories cannot be shut down, the answer is astonishingly blunt.

"It just doesn't work to sacrifice employment for the environment," Ms Chai is told.

"This is how history is made," Ms. Chai says. "Tens of millions of ordinary people. One day they say no."

Sources at Chinese state television CCTV, Ms Chai's former employer, confirmed the documentary was shot independently, but she had support from producers inside CCTV.

The original documentary was four hours long but another collaborator, tech entrepreneur Luo Yonghao, told her to cut it down to its current 103-minute length, the CCTV sources said.

However, it is clear that she also worked to gain government approval for the documentary before its release. In an interview with the People's Daily, a major state media outlet, Ms Chai notes that she sent the documentary script and interviews to the National People's Congress - China's parliament - and the government office working on China's new oil and gas laws. Both teams offered comments and feedback, she says.

One of Ms Chai's collaborators, an investigative journalist named Yuan Ling, told a Chinese news site that he viewed an earlier version of the documentary that questioned China's "development model".

"I think this is very hard to discuss and there is no need to worry about things that should be considered by a prime minister," Mr Yuan said. He told her to eliminate that section, which was absent from the final version of the documentary.

### **Igniting debate**

China's government leaders will appear to be very responsive to the concerns raised by *Under the Dome*.

Chai Jing's documentary was released on 28 February, less than a week before China's annual parliamentary session begins. China's central government is expected to pass an ambitious new law that hopes to impose tough new regulations on China's coal-burning polluters.

But in China, passing a law is one thing. Enforcing it is another.

Beijing could certainly use public pressure in its bid to carry out the new rules. Laws from the central government are commonly ignored by lower level officials, particularly when they might affect economic growth.

The new Environment Minister, Chen Jining, had said in a news conference as the film was launched: "I think this work has an important role in promoting public awareness of environmental health issues, so I'm particularly pleased about this event." He compared it to Silent Spring, the film that kickstarted a backlash against pesticide use in the US. Chen even told reporters the film should "encourage efforts by individuals to improve air quality".

He noted he had already watched the documentary and had phoned Chai Jing to thank her for contribution.

Ms Chai had input from Chen's ministry, with officials explaining how little leverage they have with public and private industry to enforce anti-pollution laws.

Ms Chai and her collaborators declined interview requests from the BBC. Sources at CCTV explained the team were wary of the foreign media. After all, their Chinese-language documentary had already reached its intended target, the vast audience inside China.

Perhaps it does not matter who supported Ms Chai's documentary before it was made. Certainly, it has ignited a national debate across China, with millions stopping to pay attention to an issue that has been lingering in the air for years.

"My home is less than 5km [three miles] away from my office," reads a typical comment, one of millions of responses. "Starting today, I will not drive to work except on special occasions. I salute Chai Jing and I will do my small part to help."

Ms Chai now occupies a rare place inside China - someone with the moral authority to speak publicly against government policy, even if she must first gain their tacit approval.

Perhaps we should have suspected Ms Chai was bound for a rare perch in China all along.

"A country is built upon individuals; she is constructed and determined by them," she said in a speech to the Beijing Journalists' Association in 2009.

"It is only if a country has people who seek truth, who are capable of independent thinking, who can record the truth, who build but do not take advantage of the land, who protect their constitutional rights, who know the world is imperfect but who do not slacken or give up - it is only if a country has this kind of mind and spirit that we can say we are proud of our country.

"It is only if a country can respect this kind of mind and spirit that we can say that we believe tomorrow will be a better day."

## Banned

By March 9<sup>th</sup>, though, the film was pulled from Chinese video sites by the country's government.

Perhaps alarmed by the massive popularity of the film, the government has stepped in to muffle it, with the film removed from video sites like Youku and Tencent (it is still available on YouTube, which is blocked in China). An interview with Chai on the website of central news organization People's Daily has also been removed along with a posting of the film itself, and earlier last week there had been directives to media prohibiting reporting on it.

It's not the first time China has tried to play down the extent of its pollution problem. During an APEC summit last year, officials removed the US embassy's reading from its air quality data for

Beijing, which showed pollution at six times the level deemed safe by the World Health Organization.

China operates one of the world's most sophisticated online censorship mechanisms, known as the Great Firewall. Censors keep a grip on what can be published online, particularly content seen as potentially undermining the Communist Party.

Some social media users in China voiced frustration at the removal of the film.

"When will this country be able to face the attitudes of its own people?" wrote one Weibo user, quoted by AFP news agency.

Another Weibo user quoted by Reuters wrote: "Some people have the power to completely smother Chai Jing's Under the Dome on the internet but don't have the power to smother haze in this country."

Alvin Lin, the Beijing-based China climate and energy policy director of the US-based environmental group the Natural Resources Defense Council, said: "They've made a big deal about air pollution in the last couple of [legislative meetings]. Under the Dome made it so they really really have to talk about it."

Film: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/mar/09/chinese-pollution-documentary-under-the-dome-taken-offline-government>