

Reluctant China battles the green revolution

By ANGUS McDONALD
in Canberra

She's known in the West as an environmentalist, yet she started out as an engineer on China's nuclear missile program. She calls herself a journalist, yet she cannot be published in her own country.

Dai Qing, the woman who came to prominence for organising the resistance to the controversial Yangtze Gorges Dam project in China, resists classification. Perhaps she is best described simply as an iconoclast.

Dai Qing is on a three-month visit to the Australian National University in Canberra, where she was invited to give a paper on Ideas of Freedom in Asia.

"The word 'freedom' really perplexes people in China today . . ." she says in her paper. "To this very day, China's authoritarians regard 'freedom' as the greatest threat to their 'revolution'."

In 1989, she edited a book of essays and articles criticising the Yangtze Gorges Dam project, which was then at the planning stage. The dam, which is now under construction, is intended to improve navigation on the Yangtze River, generate a large amount of hydro-electricity and control the disastrous floods that periodically sweep through the area.

Dai Qing says the enormous project will create more environmental problems than it solves, and has been pushed through because China's leadership wants a monument to itself.

Her main criticisms of the dam are that it will force the relocation of more than a million people who live in the area and that the accumulation of silt may make it useless within a few decades.

When the crackdown came at Tiananmen Square later in 1989, her book *Yangtze! Yangtze!* was banned and Dai Qing was jailed.

Although she had been urging the students to go back to their universities and allow reform to proceed at its own pace, Dai Qing said she was accused of helping to foster the protests. She was also told she was on a list of six people to be executed and was held for 10 months before being released.

Rather than trying to solve China's environmental problems through large-scale projects such as the Yangtze dam, Dai Qing says smaller-scale hydro-electric projects and alternative energy such as wind power would be more appropriate.



Environmentalist Dai Qing . . . "The word 'freedom' really perplexes people in China today."

Surprisingly, she favours nuclear power for the east and south-east of the country, although she admits that the recently opened nuclear power plant at Daya Bay, near Hong Kong, has been plagued by poor construction.

As to nuclear waste, she claims, perhaps optimistically, that it may be possible to dispose of it in the future by blasting it into space.

One of China's most serious problems is air pollution — about 70

per cent of China's energy is supplied by coal and, as a consequence, many cities are so polluted that the incidence of respiratory disorders is alarmingly high.

Much of China's serious energy shortage is caused by grossly inefficient, aging smokestack industries, and could be reduced by improvements to end-use efficiency.

Dai Qing says China should not attempt to attain the living standards

of the West, which she characterises as wasteful.

Rather, it should use its existing socialist base to encourage, for example, the use of public transport and bicycles instead of cars.

China faces unimaginable environmental problems at almost every level. But the most serious problem, in Dai Qing's view, is the lack of environmental awareness in the general populace. She sees her role as helping to raise this awareness.

She says it is virtually impossible to get permission to start an environmental organisation in China because the authorities fear such bodies may be politically motivated.

As a consequence, there is no environmental movement as such — only government agencies, which are mostly content to hand out slap-on-the-wrist fines to polluters.

However, using \$US70,000 in prize money from two environmental awards she won last year in the United States, Dai Qing has started what she calls an environmental translation centre in Beijing, where she collects information from non-government organisations around the world which is then translated for dissemination in China.

The centre also sends information out from China. The authorities would never have granted her permission to start such a centre, she said, so she did it regardless, and it has been operating for about six months.

Is she afraid that she may be imprisoned again? "Maybe I face some danger to be arrested again, but if the nation needs you to do this kind of thing, I want to do it." She adds that the fact she is now well known in the West gives her some protection.

When she returns to Beijing in October, she hopes to work on making literature and films available to help raise environmental awareness, particularly among children. One of the films she wants to promote is *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, which she says will "let people love nature, love the rocks, love the rivers . . ."

Among the books she wants to have published are the works of Vaclav Havel and George Orwell, which she says are not available in China. "Orwell loved socialism but he criticised socialism, so from his works . . . we can see our society clearly," Dai Qing said.

Killer gas continues to baffle