

Interview with Meng Han (director of *Smog Town*) conducted by Lee Millington as part of Take One Action's 'Take Aways' initiative.

LM: *This is a very insightful and contemporary work. Is this a topic you are passionate about? Is it because of your personal feelings that you chose to shoot this movie?*

MH: *In 2013 and 2014, I was working in Beijing, China. At that time, the smog was very serious. At that time, we did not know whether it was fog or smog. Especially in winter, the blue sky is rarely seen. Fortunately, at that time, the U.S. Embassy announced the PM2.5 value it detected on Chinese social media. This was an opportunity for the Chinese public to realize that it was not just "fog" and the public began to ask "What is PM2.5? The media began to explore the causes of air pollution. I was still a reporter at the time, and I was particularly curious, what exactly did the government do? Because under this sky, everyone breathes the same air, everyone is equal, and no one is immune.*

At the beginning of 2017, I was pregnant. I am particularly sensitive to air quality. At that time, every time I breathed air, I would consider whether the health of the fetus in my stomach would be affected. As a soon-to-be mother, I especially wanted to know "How does the government manage the smog?" Later, the producer and my husband, Vincent Du, read the news about the three novels about smog written by Deputy Director Li of the Langfang Environmental Protection Bureau. We instinctively realized that if he could be willing to accept the filming, he might be a good character. I tried to contact Deputy Director Li, and he readily accepted the request for shooting. In the next two years, we followed him and his team to complete this documentary, to see how a city manages smog and the effort and price everyone has paid.

LM: *Why did you choose Langfang as your focus instead of other places with major pollution problems?*

MH: *Actually, at that time, most of the heavy industrial cities in northern China were similar. Some cities around Beijing face similar problems. From the late 1990s to the early 20th century, during the period of rapid economic development, heavy industry played an important role, such as steel plants, coking plants, etc. The emissions from these plants were the main source of air pollution in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region. Therefore, the price of rapid economic development is environmental pollution and air pollution. In fact, the problems faced by every city are similar. The particularity of Langfang is that it is only 60 kilometers away from Beijing by car and is called Beijing's satellite city. The task of controlling smog in Langfang City was called "political task" at that time. In China, when it is regarded as a political task, it means that it is pressing and urgent, and it is done as the most important thing.*

LM: *The film covers the characters' rich, complex emotions, disputes and disagreements. Although you portray these situations empathetically, the "protagonists" (environmental workers or factory employees) portray reality in the film. What is the positive or negative reaction?*

MH: *Can they openly accept the reality shown in the film? In the Chinese environment, it is difficult to obtain permission from government officials for shooting. But I'm lucky. I have worked with the EPA staff for two years, and have developed a lot of trust between each other. They later forgot about me and the camera. I recorded some real scenes, as you can see in the film. Government officials are also human beings. When they are faced with some contradictions, they will also experience complex emotional changes, including disputes and incomprehension. These are all recorded by the camera.*

LM: *You seem to make a great effort to respect and sympathize with the different difficult situations the heroes deal with. When editing the recorded images, how objective did you hope that the film would be?*

MH: *A documentary cannot be objective, it is ultimately the subjective feelings and thoughts of the creator. What this film ultimately shows is the effort and price that a city has to pay from top to bottom to control smog. It is like a small chorus. When the concert ends, it hopes to cause thinking: whether we need to find a sustainable development path to control environmental pollution. Sometimes I feel a little powerless. When we make a film, apart from showing the dilemma, we cannot see the solution to the problem in the end. This is also a dilemma in making documentaries.*

However, recently the air quality in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region has improved significantly, the number of polluted days has decreased significantly, and the frequency of blue sky has increased. Just like in the treatment of a disease, the disease is cured, and the pain experienced in the middle has been left in people's hearts. We need to think about how we should avoid "sickness" in the future. I also want to thank my co-producer, Ms. Zhao Jia, who is a very good film producer. When we edited with the editor Barabara Hin, we adjusted the story to become the situation that a city faces when solving the problem of air pollution, rather than individual stories such as Li and Hu.

LM: *Sometimes the strong ideals of environmental protection workers conflict with the welfare of the public. Do you think this is inevitable?*

MH: *In the long run, Li's ideals are consistent with the public's expectations; however, in the short run, conflicts between these are inevitable. For example look at Han's auto repair factory. If his factory is closed, he will lose his source of life. When the government decided to shut down, it did not consider the reemployment of these people, because at the time, air pollution control was the most important task. This is what Li mentioned in the film. He will have concerns, but it is not something he can decide. Within his power, he can only solve the problem of air quality, and the problem of reemployment is solved by other departments. This raises the issue checks and balances between various departments of the government. To avoid such conflicts, scientific research and planning need to be done in advance, and the use of scientific methods takes time and is expensive. At that time, they had to sacrifice the interests of a small group of people in exchange for "blue sky."*

LM: *It seems that young people who are struggling for environmental protection are still suffering from the same external pressure as Li Chunyuan, who is unwavering. Do you feel that this layer of pressure can promote Lang Bi Lang to make the new generation of young people more successful than their predecessors?*

MH: *To some extent, the success of the new generation is based on previous experience and lessons. If you can't learn from the past, you will still go the same way. For example, the grassroots cadres of the Environmental Protection Agency of the generation like Li Chunyuan, who are full of enthusiasm and strong ideals, but he is not an environmental professional background, most of them are (IDIOM - BECOME A MONK LATE IN LIFE - SWITCH TO A JOB ONE WAS NOT TRAINED FOR). The motivation of this generation of people comes from inner aspirations, and their ideals and feelings of serving the people. In China today, the new generation of grassroots cadres are gradually getting younger, and cadres like the Environmental Protection Agency are increasingly coming from young people with professional backgrounds. In my opinion, real progress depends on science, not mainly on administrative orders and administrative means. For example, before making a decision on how much air quality can be improved by closing a car repair shop, a scientific assessment is required, not a strong administrative order. I think this generation of young people are trying step by step on the road of scientific pollution control.*

LM: *It is obvious that there is a clear disconnect between the wishes of environmentalists, society and enterprises due to economic conditions. What do you think is needed for the cooperation of these three?*

MH: *Policy support and the help of advanced science and technology. At this stage in China, technology is becoming more popular, but the use of high technology is still expensive, and not everyone can pay for it. For example, small businesses like Master Han and Zhu cannot afford the high cost to update their small businesses with the latest environmental protection facilities. Therefore, when technology is developed to a certain stage, when technology really serves ordinary people and the price is low, then they can enjoy its benefits. At the same time, policy makers need to help these small businessmen, who are still at the bottom of China, and they need more care and help.*

LM: *The end of the film leaves an impression on the viewers—that is, no matter how personally, the existence of systemic problems will constitute an obstacle to the actual solution of the pollution problem. Do you think individuals can play an important role in lasting change (environmental protection)?*

MH: *Yes, this is also the reality. Personal changes are important, such as changes in lifestyle, reducing waste, reducing the use of items and the disposal of garbage. Each individual change can make the environment better. At the same time, better social change forces are needed to urge change. For example, many large and medium-sized cities in China have begun to popularize electric vehicles to replace gasoline, while improving the quality of oil products. This change requires a process, but it is effective. Closing large polluting steel plants in a short period of time, in fact, when the employment problem is not solved, this method will have side effects. For example, a large amount of unemployment will produce social instability. Therefore, sustainable development takes time. Although it is difficult, it is effective.*

LM: *Faced with the threat of global environmental catastrophe, we seem to have no clear solution to the problem. Can you imagine an effective way for countries to exclude their own differences and unite against the threat of environmental pollution?*

MH: *Indeed, this is also the main reason why I made this film. I am trying to tell as much as possible the actual situation that China is facing as it solves the problem of environmental pollution. In the final analysis, the environment is a global problem. Pollution is caused by "people" and ultimately needs "people" to solve it. There is a Chinese saying that "you need to tie the bell to untie the bell". Smog occurred in London and Los Angeles in the last century. Recently, the situation in northern China has improved. I heard that air pollution in India has also become serious. Therefore, mankind needs to cross cultural and political barriers, unite, take the initiative to take*

the responsibility, and solve environmental problems, because this is the earth on which we humans depend. Now that the earth is sick, we need to find a way together. Returning to what the individual can do: lifestyle changes, reduction of daily necessities. I sometimes advocate a lifestyle of abandonment, reduce the use of disposable products, reduce emissions and waste.