



Wang Yong

wangyong@shanghaidaily.com

Cities need disaster drills, better buildings

Some officials rely on secrecy and clubs

TWO unrelated news events over the weekend reveal one of China's thorniest political problems: bureaucratic indifference to public interest.

On Sunday, Li Yan, a graduate student at Qinghua University, withdrew her lawsuit against three central government ministries — the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Science and Technology, and the Ministry of Land and Resources.

About a month ago, she had filed suit in Beijing against the three ministries for refusing to be transparent and publicize the job descriptions for their vice ministers' posts.

Li said she dropped her lawsuit because the three ministries — under public pressure and with court mediation — had finally satisfied her request. She made her initial request in May as she was researching an academic paper about China's deputy officials.

This case serves only to show how silly many of our "public servants" are. The Ministry of Education looks especially foolish and ignorant in this case — how can

you educate China to become an enlightened democracy if you yourself are so often blind to the law?

In another betrayal of public trust, a group of *chengguan* ("big hats" in charge of maintaining urban "image") in Kunming, Yunnan Province, beat a 17-year-old boy to death last Friday — and later admitted that they had beaten the wrong target.

In a five-minute press conference afterward, a local government spokesman refused to answer questions about why the thuggish *chengguan* had clubbed the wrong person and why they wanted a man to die on the street under the blows of iron rods.

The "spokesman" even refused to give his own name. Thanks to a bold reporter from CCTV, now everyone can see the video of that pseudo press conference.

So silly and thuggish are many of our government officials that even good laws cannot prevent them from being silly or thuggish. The good news, though, is that people can now speak up — and hope to be heard.

Too many 'servants' idle at public trough

ATOWNSHIP Party secretary in Chongqing was reported in June to have organized gambling at mahjong in a resort villa while attending a training program on the family planning law.

Four months have passed, and the local Party discipline department has failed to make any progress in its investigation. A spokesman for the department said on Sunday: "We're still investigating it."

This hardly qualifies as "news" in China today, where too many officials prefer to serve *renminbi* (Chinese currency, literally "people's money"), not *renmin* (the people).

Playing cards or mahjong at work has come to typify the bureaucratic life in many parts of China, from Chongqing in the west to Nanjing in the east.

Corruption? Of course. But there's another problem: China simply has too many officials.

A 2005 news report by People's Daily said there

was one official for every 26 ordinary taxpayers, 306 times that of the level in Western Han Dynasty (202 BC - 9 AD), one of China's strongest empires.

While the 2005 figure might have been a bit of exaggeration, one is still aghast at the official figure of official numbers — announced this March — of about 10 million officials across China. That's one official for about every 120 ordinary taxpayers.

The number of those feeding at the public trough has skyrocketed lately as the government tries to create jobs for the myriad laid-off workers. In 2003, 87,000 people sat in national public servant admission tests. The figure peaked at 1.46 million last year. This year, slightly fewer people attended the tests: 1.42 million.

When a nation is willing to feed so many official mouths, you bet many of them will bet their time away at mahjong tables, whether they are corrupt or not. They simply have nothing to do at work.

Max Wang

MY trip to Fukuoka, Japan during the National Day holiday last week was not for leisure, quite the contrary: it was all about disaster.

First, I got "trapped" in a smoke-filled, all-lights-out building and had to grope my way out. For the first time in my life I used an extinguisher to put out a fire. Then I went through a simulated magnitude-7 earthquake with the floor shaking violently under my chair.

These scary experiences were a prelude to an international symposium on creating disaster-resilient cities held by the UN Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific to observe the World Habitat Day.

The theme was appropriate since a spate of natural disasters has hit Asia this year, such as the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan on March 11, the rain-triggered mud slides in Seoul on July 27 and the huge floods in downtown Manila on September 27.

The forum discussed challenges in disaster prevention and mitigation as well as the experiences of different countries.

All participants agreed that education is vital for building disaster-prevention capacities at community levels and that the success of government anti-disaster measures hinges on public participation. This was the message from the forum.

A disaster-resilient city can limit the loss of life in the event of a catastrophe and quickly recover from damages.

Cities can ward off floods with adequate drainage systems and dikes, but they can't stop an earthquake. Reinforcement of weak structures, early warning, timely evacuation and well-planned reconstruction are needed.

Unlike Japan and the western and northern parts of China, Shanghai is less vulnerable to earthquakes. The city is about 250 kilometers west of the closest tectonic fault in the Yellow Sea, which occasionally experiences tremors, usually smaller than magnitude-5. The latest one was felt this past January 12. But the city is prone to typhoons, rainstorms, tidal waves, dense fog (a cause of traffic accidents) and epidemics like SARS and bird flu.

Man-made disasters also threaten the city. The high-rise inferno that killed 57 people last November still haunts many locals and the subway collision that injured 270 people two weeks ago all remind us there is no room for complacency.

After China designated May 12 National Disaster Prevention and Reduction Day, a reminder of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Shanghai became the first city in the country to issue a local law on earthquake crisis management. It requires all new buildings to be built to withstand a magnitude-7 earthquake. Schools, hospitals, stadiums and theaters must endure shocks stronger than magnitude 7, and buildings more than 160 meters high must be evaluated for seismic hazards before construction.

Two weeks after the tsunami hit Japan, the Shanghai government announced a plan to build 20 emergency shelters in urban parks by 2015. A budget of 500 million yuan (US\$78 million) has been earmarked to store food, medicine, drinking water and tents in the shelters where waste can be recycled, rainwater collected for use, and electricity is generated by solar panels.

According to the plan, A-type shelters are at least 20,000 square meters and can accommodate residents within a radius of 5,000 meters from the park for as long as 30 days. B-type shelters cover at least 4,000 square meters and can serve residents within a radius of 1,000 meters for 10 to 15 days. Residents near Zhongshan Park say they are glad to know there will be an emergency shelter nearby.



Illustration by Zhou Tao/Shanghai Daily



Max Wang

It has been proven that emergency drills can significantly reduce the loss of life in a real crisis, but these are hard to carry out in a fast-paced society like Shanghai where people are busy and businesses are reluctant to let the drills interrupt their operation.

It has been proven that emergency drills can significantly reduce the loss of life in a real crisis, but these are hard to carry out in a fast-paced society like Shanghai where people are busy and businesses are reluctant to let the drills interrupt their operation.

As a result, emergency drills often take place in schools and a select few residential complexes.

In our 46-story office building, three floors are designated as emergency shelters with water, food and medicine stored there, but few of us know where these floors are, and no fire drill has been held since we moved into the building in 1999.

During this year's National Disaster Prevention Day, Shanghai's Baoshan District organized an evacuation drill. Within eight minutes, more than 90,000 students and teachers filed out of their school buildings in an orderly exercise. Without proper training, I am afraid there would be total chaos even if a calamity befalls just a fraction of the city's 20 million people.

To address the problem, Shanghai should make it compulsory for every citizen to take part in a disaster drill every year on May 12 and devise a way to make the system work. The Japanese city of Fukuoka is a role model in this regard.

The Fukuoka Citizens' Disaster Prevention Center, where I and other foreign journalists experienced a building fire, an earthquake and a typhoon, receives more than 100,000 visitors a year and teaches them survival techniques through simulations.

Quick recovery is another indicator of disaster-resilient cities. At the Fukuoka symposium, both UN officials and experts spoke highly of the Chinese government's ability to respond quickly to the Sichuan earthquake.

They were also impressed by China's unique one-to-one support program, under which each well-off province or municipality is paired with a city or a county in the disaster area to assist in reconstruction with financial aid no less than 1 percent of the better-off area's local GDP.

Professor Peng Zhenwei of Shanghai Tongji University presented a case study of Shanghai's aid for Dujiangyan. His school was involved in the planning and reconstruction of the city damaged in the earthquake.

Sitting through two days of discussion on disaster prevention and reduction, I left Fukuoka with a heightened awareness that dangers are lurking under our feet but cities are facing more hazards caused by climate change.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in his World Habitat Day message: Rising sea levels are a major impact of climate change and an urgent concern. Major coastal cities such as Cairo, New York, Karachi, Calcutta, New Orleans, Shanghai, Tokyo, Miami and Amsterdam could face serious threats from storm surges. "The nexus between urbanization and climate change is real and potentially deadly," he warned.