

# Blind Chinese activist fights for rights – and lands in jail

## Self-taught in law, he has made waves in Beijing

BY ALEXA OLESEN  
The Associated Press

BEIJING – Like many of China's blind, Chen Guangcheng studied acupressure to be a healer. Instead he ended up in jail.

Self-taught in law, Chen has become one of China's most prominent legal crusaders – what the Chinese call a “barefoot lawyer” – who has made waves in Beijing by helping poor farmers in the cornfields of eastern China. Since March he has been in jail awaiting trial.

“Chen is not afraid of sacrificing himself to serve ordinary people,” said Liu Changhai, a farmer from Chen's home county of Linyi who ran afoul of the local government for resisting sterilization after his first child was born. Liu, 37, was beaten at his home by family planning officials until he consented to the operation – a case Chen championed and that ultimately helped land him in jail.

Chen's passage from disabled student to civil rights campaigner underscores the contradictions under a government that has unleashed free-market reforms and claims to be moving toward a law-based system, yet often allows those very laws to be trampled, leaving the fight for rights to lawyers, scholars and, increasingly, ordinary Chinese.

These campaigners in recent years have tackled cases of corruption, confiscation of property and religious persecution, bringing them into conflict with local authorities and at times the central government in Beijing.

Chen, a square-jawed 34-year-old father of two, was due to stand trial Thursday, but prosecutors were granted a delay to gather more evidence, his lawyer, Li Jingsong, said.

He is accused of illegal assembly and intent to damage public property – charges his supporters say were trumped up in revenge for uncovering cases of forced abortions and sterilizations by family planning officials.

Blinded by a fever in infancy, Chen attended the Nanjing University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, but got interested in

law, his friends said.

After college he returned to the farmhouse where he grew up in Dongshigu Village, a region famous for its peanuts and honeysuckle flowers. He began fighting for disabled farmers, forcing the government to obey the law and waive their tax payments.

“This is one of the most impressive human beings you will find,” Jerome Cohen, an American lawyer and expert on the Chinese legal system, has said.

Cohen met Chen when the campaigner went to the United States in 2003 on a State Department visitors' program.

“He is an extraordinary person with a charismatic personality,” Cohen said. “You are moved by his emotion to try to improve the legal system and human rights.”

Chen's resolve was tested when he discovered numerous cases of forced abortions and sterilizations like Liu's, driven by China's policy of limiting most families to one child. Among the cases were several women who said they were forced to have abortions within days of their due dates.

Such practices are illegal, but local officials often resort to drastic measures for fear that violations of the one-child rule could derail their chances for promotion.

Chen's documentation and the international attention it drew caused the National Population and Family Planning Commission to launch an investigation. The government agency validated Chen's claims last September, and said some Linyi officials were removed from their posts and others were detained.

But the action landed him in trouble with officials in Linyi. Starting last August, he and his family were repeatedly beaten, threatened and confined to their house by dozens of thugs, according to relatives and supporters. Chen's wife, Yuan Weijing, says the men were hired by the government.

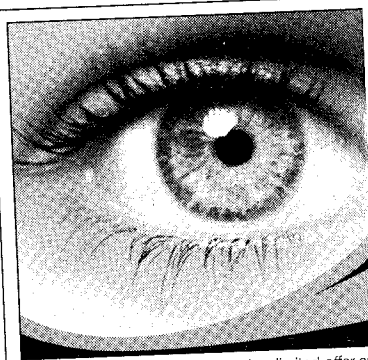
Beijing has turned away. “We have no information about Mr. Chen Guangcheng,” said Hao Hongcai, a spokesman for the family planning commission. “This issue now belongs to the local authorities.”

Li, Chen's lawyer, said that when he and a colleague tried to

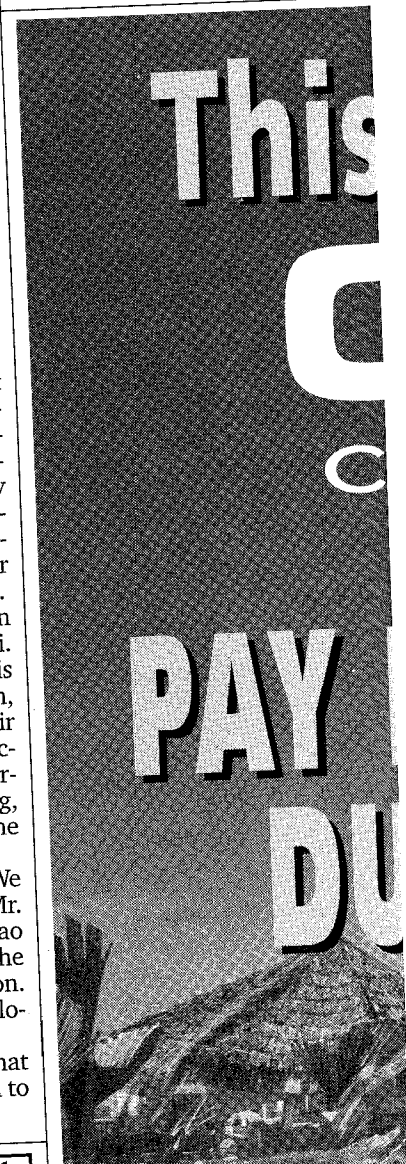
visit Chen and his wife, they were attacked by a dozen men who smashed a camera and flipped their car while local police did nothing.

The county Public Security Bureau said police followed procedure throughout the investigation and Chen's arrest.

Chen remains steadfast, Li said. “His physical health and mental condition are both good.”



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In this undated photo released by his supporters, blind activist Chen Guangcheng, center, is seen in a village in China. A court on Thursday postponed a trial in the closely watched case of Chen, whose supporters said has been harassed since he documented forced abortions.

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