



U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing

China's Political Prisoners: Where's Gao Zhisheng?

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Dear Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for convening this hearing to shine a spotlight on China's political prisoners, those individuals who have been detained or imprisoned for courageously and defiantly exercising their fundamental human rights. Human Rights Watch has documented and advocated on their behalf for over three decades. It is getting increasingly difficult to gather information about political prisoners, particularly Uyghurs, Tibetans and other minorities who face the most severe repression. My testimony today will focus on mainland activists.

It has been almost 34 years since the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Since then, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) brutality has shocked the world but failed to subdue veteran human rights activists like Gao Zhisheng and Ding Jiaxi. The CCP has also failed to suppress the rise of a new generation of human rights activists. Despite severe censorship and social control, young women's rights activists have been able to jumpstart the #MeToo movement in China, and young labor activists have brought the suffering of factory workers to global attention. Many others are working under the radar, trying to build tolerance in society by advocating for the rights of LGBT people and people with disabilities, and by spreading awareness about repression of ethnic minorities. And for that, many have been harassed, forcibly disappeared, and unjustly prosecuted and imprisoned.

Late last year, in an astounding display of courage, people across China—many of them young people—took to the streets to demand an end to the government's draconian Covid restrictions and to call for freedom and democracy. Some even shouted, "Down with the CCP!" A number of protest participants have been arrested and their whereabouts remain unknown.

We are living in a grim period for human rights in China, but there are reasons for hope.

For one, many young people in the country are waking up to the CCP's brutal repression and are following the steps of towering figures like Xu Zhiyong and the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo. Given how important China's development means for the rest of the world, and for the US-China relationship, it is critical for US political leaders and the American public to learn about and support the younger generation of activists in China and in the diaspora.

To that end, Human Rights Watch respectfully urges members of Congress, senior administration officials and relevant US authorities to:

- Comprehensively collect information on and regularly publish reports on political activism in China;
- Continue to hold hearings like this and speak out against the Chinese government's civil, political and other human rights violations in China;
- Expediate political asylum claims to activists from China at risk of being forcibly returned to China;
- Increase scholarships and resources for students and other young human rights activists from China to study at American universities and participate in exchange programs with their counterparts in the US;
- Continue and expand the investigation and appropriate prosecution of individuals responsible for transnational repression of critics of the CCP in violation of US laws. This type of repression has included harassment, intimidation, surveillance, cyberattacks and coercion by proxy; and
- Publicly denounce disinformation and harassment campaigns targeting female activists.

Additional information on female political prisoners

Political prisoners in China are too numerous to list. The following are several female political prisoners who require urgent attention:

Detained "white paper" protest participants in Beijing:

Cao Zhixin (曹芷馨), 26, editor

Li Yuanjing (李元婧), 27, accountant

Zhai Dengrui (翟登蕊), 28, teacher

Li Siqi (李思琪), 27, journalist

Authorities in Beijing detained the four women in December 2022 after they participated in a vigil a month earlier to commemorate the victims of a fire in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. At least 10 people were killed in the fire, reportedly because they

were prevented from escaping the blaze due to pandemic control barriers. The women were all later formally arrested on the charge of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.”¹

In November 2022, thousands of people across China, including in cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, and Wuhan, took to the streets to protest the government’s strict Covid-19 measures and to denounce the Chinese Communist Party’s authoritarian rule. Demonstrators held blank papers – hence “white paper” protests – and chanted slogans such as “End zero-Covid,” “We want human rights,” and “Down with the Communist Party!”

There are other detained female participants whose identity Human Rights Watch has not been able to verify, including the lone woman who held a blank piece of paper standing on the steps of the Communication University of China in Nanjing. A video showed she was taken away by an unidentified man in plainclothes.

Other notable female activists in custody

Li Yuhan (李昱涵), 65, human rights lawyer, detained since October 2017. Li had taken on numerous human rights cases, representing persecuted Falun Gong practitioners and underground Christian churches. Li suffers from arrhythmia, coronary heart disease and other serious health conditions, and has been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment in detention, according to her lawyer. Li was tried by a Shenyang court and is awaiting a verdict.²

Chen Jianfang (陈建芳), 53, land rights activist, imprisoned since April 2019. Chen, a farmer, worked to defend land and housing rights of vulnerable groups, and pushed for the participation of civil society in international human rights mechanisms. She was sentenced to four years and six months in prison for “inciting subversion” by a Shanghai court in 2022.³

Zhang Zhan (张展), 38, citizen journalist, imprisoned since May 2020. In February 2020, Zhang went to Wuhan, where Covid-19 was first identified, to document the coronavirus outbreak, for which she was sentenced to four years in prison after being convicted of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.” Zhang has been on multiple hunger strikes and at one point was “at risk of dying,” according to her family.⁴

¹ “China: Free ‘White Paper’ Protesters,” Human Rights Watch, January 26, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/26/china-free-white-paper-protesters>.

² “Li Yuhan (李昱涵),” Chinese Human Rights Defenders, December 6, 2017, <https://www.nchr.org/2017/12/li-yuhan/>.

³ “Chen Jianfang Sentenced to 4.6 Years,” Front Line Defenders, December 27, 2022, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/chen-jianfang-sentenced>.

⁴ “China: Release Gravely Ill Activist,” Human Rights Watch, February 10, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/04/china-release-gravely-ill-activist>.

He Fangmei (何方美), 37, vaccine safety advocate, detained since October 2020. He Fangmei became an outspoken critic of Chinese vaccine companies when her daughter was diagnosed with a neurological disease after being vaccinated in 2018. Authorities forcibly disappeared her after she protested in front of a local government building. She has been tried for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” and is awaiting a verdict.⁵

Li Qiaochu (李翘楚), 32, women’s rights and labor activist, detained since February 2021. Li worked to find affordable housing for migrant workers who were evicted by the Beijing government, and helped victims of domestic violence during the pandemic. Li was detained after calling for the release of Xu Zhiyong, her partner and a prominent activist. Li suffers from hyperthyroidism, heart disease, and depression. Several requests for release on medical parole by her family were denied. Li has been indicted of “inciting subversion” and is awaiting trial.⁶

Huang Xueqin (黄雪琴), 35, journalist and leading figure in China’s #MeToo movement, detained since September 2021. Huang reported on sexual harassment cases and assisted victims to file complaints. According to her friends, Huang has lost a lot of weight in detention and is suffering from untreated long-term conditions. Huang is awaiting trial on charges of “inciting subversion.”⁷

Xu Qin (徐秦), 61, human rights activist, detained since November 2021. Xu was a leader of the human rights group Rose China, and had campaigned for the release of many high-profile human rights activists. She has been charged with “inciting subversion” and is awaiting trial.⁸

Wuyi (乌衣), women’s rights activist, forcibly disappeared since March 2022. In January 2022, Wuyi went to a village in Jiangsu province to investigate a human trafficking and forced marriage case and visit the woman who was found trafficked and in chains. She was later detained by local authorities. Her social media accounts were deleted and the online Free Wuyi campaign was also censored.⁹

⁵ “He Fangmei Finally Meets Lawyer, Still Separated from Children While Awaiting Verdict,” Front Line Defenders, February 3, 2023, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/he-fangmei-finally-meets-lawyer-still-separated-children-while-awaiting-verdict>.

⁶ Yaqiu Wang, “Chinese Social Justice Activist ‘Disappeared,’” Human Rights Watch, March 11, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/11/chinese-social-justice-activist-disappeared>.

⁷ Helen Davidson, “Journalist Held without Trial in China Said to Need Urgent Medical Attention,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, February 16, 2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/16/journalist-held-without-trial-china-urgent-medical-attention-huang-xueqin>.

⁸ “Xu Qin (徐秦),” Chinese Human Rights Defenders, May 23, 2018, <https://www.nchrd.org/2018/05/xuqin/>.

⁹ “Lest We Forget: The Disappeared Women of 2023,” Made in China Journal, April 17, 2023, <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2023/04/17/lest-we-forget-the-disappeared-women-of-2023/>.