



SILENCED VOICES: GAO YU

by Cathal Sheerin

Despite its ever-growing economic power and prosperity, the People's Republic of China still functions with the terrible, blunt efficiency of an Orwellian dystopia. Ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China does not look kindly on dissenters. Those who advocate for democratic reforms, such as the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, often end up in jail; in 2011, a Chinese human rights group listed 3,833 cases of arbitrary detention of human rights defenders during that year. Political corruption is endemic, with thousands of officials investigated and punished each year in prosecutions that are Kafkaesque in their opacity and arbitrariness. Criminal trials, which are usually closed to the public, have a conviction rate of ninety-eight percent.



Illustration by Maxine Young

Gao Yu

It should be no surprise that the CCP keeps the media locked in a tight stranglehold. All media outlets are owned, though not always directly operated, by the CCP or the state. News providers take their orders directly from the CCP in terms of which subjects they must avoid covering, such as calls for greater autonomy in Tibet and

Xinjiang, independence for Taiwan, and the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown; disobeying these orders lands journalists in jail and results in the closure of newspapers and broadcasters. When it comes to the internet, the government maintains an elaborate censorship apparatus: the authorities block websites or force the deletion of content they deem politically threatening, and sometimes detain those who post such information.

For those journalists or activists that are arrested, torture is common and impunity the norm for police brutality. Fifty-five crimes—including nonviolent offenses—carry the death penalty; an estimated 4,000 prisoners were killed in 2011 alone.

It takes a brave person to transgress any of the CCP-prescribed boundaries; to do so repeatedly makes you a very unusual person. Journalist Gao Yu is such a person. She is currently serving a prison sentence on the trumped up charge of leaking state secrets. This is not her first time in jail.

A political and economic reporter, Gao Yu, seventy-one, has been a journalist since the 1960s. She knew very early in life that she wanted to work in news. In 1962, she enrolled in the Chinese Language and Literature department of Renmin University of China, with the intention of majoring in news media. However, history—as it has done so frequently in Gao's life—intervened: the Great Chinese Famine, which killed millions of people, led to the cancellation of her journalism course; the Cultural Revolution, which crippled the Chinese education system, meant that her graduation was severely delayed; Gao eventually received a degree in literary theory.

Despite these early setbacks, Gao entered journalism after college and rose through the ranks quickly: from 1980 to 1988 she was a reporter for *China News*, from 1988 to 1989 she was deputy editor-in-chief of the weekly *Economics*, and from 1990 to 1993 she was a correspondent for the Hong Kong newspaper *Mirror*. Gao's talent as an investigative reporter was noted early on. By the early 1980s she was admired for her in-depth interviews with high-ranking public figures and for her investigative reports on economic issues. But she had also begun to make enemies. In November 1988, she published an article which was

described by the mayor of Beijing as a “political program for turmoil and rebellion.” He described her as an “enemy of the people.”

In 1989, history came calling again. This time, it was in the form of the Chinese pro-democracy movement and the Tiananmen Square student protests. Gao sympathized with the students’ goals of freedom, democracy, and human rights, and wrote articles supporting them. She was one of the first people to be detained when the inevitable crackdown began, and was imprisoned for over a year. While she was in prison, the Chinese authorities mobilized an estimated 300,000 troops to maintain order and disperse the student activists. Exact figures are impossible to come by, but Amnesty International estimated that up to 1,000 protesters were killed by government forces.

Following her release, Gao returned to writing about Chinese politics and economics for the Hong Kong-based *Mirror*. Then, in October 1993, just as she was about to head to the United States to take up a one-year fellowship at Columbia University, Gao was arrested again. She was accused of leaking state secrets. The charges were based on some articles that she had written in which she commented on a speech by the then-President Jiang Zemin and discussed details of government policy. In 1994 she was convicted and sentenced to six years in prison.

During her imprisonment, Gao became internationally well known: in 1995, the World Association of Newspapers awarded her the Golden Pen of Freedom; in the same year, the International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF) gave her the Courage in Journalism Award; in 1999, she became the first journalist to receive the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize. She was unable to collect these awards in person, but years later, in 2006, she was able to personally attend the IWMF’s Courage in Journalism Award ceremony. There, she delivered a belated acceptance speech:

In 1995, when I received the Courage Award, I was being held in one of Beijing’s most remote prisons after having been arrested for the second time. . . . I wrote to China’s then minister of justice, asking him to forward my letter of appreciation to the International Women’s Media Foundation. The letter was torn to pieces by the prison police. The

IWMF then invited my husband to receive the award in my place. This panicked the authorities. The Beijing Security Bureau told my husband that if he would turn down the invitation, they would take me to the hospital and release me from prison early. My husband took their offer, but it turned out to be a scam.

My first arrest took place on the morning of June 3, 1989, when I was abducted by the Beijing Security Bureau on my way to work...I was arrested again in 1993. My arrest warrant showed only my name and the date of my arrest. There was no notation about which laws I had broken—because my arrest was based on no law. Thirteen months later, I was sentenced by the Beijing Intermediate People’s Court to a six-year jail term and “deprivation of political rights for one year for the crime of leaking state secrets.”

Chinese journalists have shared outstanding traditions ever since the modern media was first set up in China in the nineteenth century. However, when the Communists came to power, they destroyed all privately run newspapers and used political violence to deprive the Chinese press of its independent spirit. Chinese authorities require that the past be forgotten and the present be whitewashed. Reporters who dare to tell the truth are fired—or worse. Today, I would like to recall the words of Shi Liangcai, a Chinese newspaper reporter and pioneer of the independent media who was murdered by secret agents from the Guomindang government in 1934. “You have a gun. I have a pen,” he said. History has given me the choice of a pen.

Due to her ill health, Gao was released on medical parole in March 1999. The terms of her release were strict—she was not allowed to speak to other journalists—and she completed the remainder of her sentence at home, after which she returned to news reporting.

The years that followed passed relatively tranquilly. Then, on April 23, 2014, Gao Yu disappeared. Her whereabouts were unknown for two weeks until the Chinese authorities announced, via a televised “confession” that she was being held once again on suspicion of leaking state secrets. At the time of her disappearance, Gao had been writing a column entitled “Party Nature vs. Human Nature,” which is said

to have been an analysis of the CCP's new leadership and internal conflicts. The article was never submitted. Gao had also been due to attend an April 26 event commemorating the 25th anniversary of the 1989 democracy movement.

The televised "confession" was broadcast by Chinese national media in the early hours of May 8. Gao's face had been blurred out, but she was identified by name. In the broadcast, Gao said, "I admit that what I've done touched on legal issues and threatened national interests." She also said she was "deeply remorseful" of her actions and "willing to accept legal punishment." She would later say that she had made these comments under extreme duress.

Gao was accused of supplying a U.S.-based Chinese news outlet with a copy of "Document Number 9," a CCP paper on ideological correctness that outlines plans to neuter civil society, the movements for democracy, and freedom of the press. Despite the news outlet's denial that it had ever received this document, and despite the fact that the contents of the document had already been widely summarized on government websites and distributed among party members, Gao Yu was found guilty of leaking state secrets on April 17, 2015. She was sentenced to seven years in prison.

Appeals calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Gao Yu may be sent to:

His Excellency Xi Jinping
 President of the People's Republic of China
 State Council
 Beijing 100032, China

You may want to use this [sample letter](#). Please also send a copy of your letter to your nearest Chinese diplomatic representative. In Washington, D.C., it is:

The Honorable Mr. Cui Tiankai
 Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to the U.S.
 Email: chinaembassy_us@fmprc.gov.cn

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