

Raising their Names: Chinese Political and Religious Prisoners at the January 2024
PRC Universal Periodic Review and Beyond

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Cochairman, and distinguished Members of the Commission, thank you so much for holding this hearing. Today’s hearing is so important to me, as the wife of an imprisoned Chinese human rights defender. We must continue to speak about the horrific human rights violations committed by the PRC government and the Chinese Communist Party. This is all the more important in the wake of the Chinese official delegation denials about its human rights abuses and its allies’ empty praise of poverty alleviation and so-called rights safeguards at the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) last Tuesday, January 23, 2024.

As I begin my testimony, I want to thank the Commission for tweeting about cases of political prisoners on social media in advance of the PRC UPR. More broadly, I would like to publicly thank the U.S. Government for its robust statement during the PRC UPR and its advance questions, including the focus on political prisoners and human rights defenders arbitrarily detained by the PRC government.

Since my testimony two years ago in February 2022 at the time of the Beijing Winter Olympics, I spoke at length about the cases of my husband Ding Jiayi and his colleague and co-defendant, legal scholar Xu Zhiyong whom Chinese authorities detained after they held a private gathering of friends to discuss civil society and rule of law in China. Chinese authorities held Ding and Xu in pre-trial detention for nearly two years and six months before trying them secretly in June 2022 and sentencing them in April 2023 to 12 and 14 years in prison. To date, no verdict has been issued to the families. After the Shandong High People’s Court refused their appeal, authorities sent Jiayi to Jianbei Prison in Hubei province, and Xu Zhiyong to Lunan Prison in Shandong province in November 2023.

In April 2023, following the announcement of Jiayi’s verdict, I had the honor to speak to Chairman Smith at a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing together with Ms. Geng He, the wife of disappeared lawyer Gao Zhisheng. Geng He and I discussed how Chinese authorities persecute human rights defenders through forced disappearance, secret detention, torture, coerced confession, fabricating criminal evidence, closed-door trials and sentences, and the use of ongoing surveillance even after human rights defenders are released. These constitute violations of the Chinese constitution and laws as well as the international laws and conventions that the Chinese government is obligated to adhere to and respect.

I want to commend the countries that specifically discussed the Chinese government's use of arbitrary detention and forced disappearance, and its abusive treatment of human rights defenders during the UPR.

Behind me is a group picture of the political prisoners in China as of today. My heart aches terribly every time I see this picture. But I put it beside my desk, as a reminder of my mission: To let the world know the true human rights situation in China, and fight for the rights for all of them.

There are many more prisoners beyond this picture. Some of their cases are documented in the Commission's for its Political Prisoner Database (PPD)—the research staff informed me that there are now **11,116** records in the CECC PPD, among which **2,714** are cases of currently detained individuals. Human rights NGOs such as CHRD, Hong Kong Watch, the Dui Hua Foundation, Uyghur and Tibet groups, Falun Gong, China Aid Association, and others have also documented detentions.

For the remainder of my testimony, I will highlight the main violations used against human rights defenders by Chinese authorities with specific case examples.

No. 1: Forced disappearance. Gao Zhisheng was “disappeared” in August 2017, his family in the U.S. have had no news of him since then. Peng Lifa disappeared in October 2022 after he held an individual protest on a bridge in Beijing, calling on Xi Jinping to step down due to the Chinese government's harsh zero-COVID policy. The whereabouts of Peng's wife and child are unknown, and they are believed to be held under some form of detention.

No. 2: Heavy prison sentences for rights defenders. Uyghur scholar and ethnic rights advocate Ilham Tohti and China democracy advocate Wang Bingzhang were sentenced to life imprisonment in 2014 and in 2003 respectively.

No. 3: Lengthy pre-trial detention. Lawyer Li Yuhan was first tried after 6 years of detention for no clear reason at all.

No. 4: Torture, especially while held under residential surveillance at a designated location (RSDL). RSDL is a form of incommunicado detention that allows authorities to hold individuals up to six months. Political prisoners are extremely vulnerable to torture and other forms of maltreatment during RSDL. My husband Ding Jiayi and Xu Zhiyong both were held for months in RSDL and reported torture.

No. 5: Lack of access to medical treatment in detention and denial of medical parole. Li Qiaochu had mental health issues before being detained. After detention, she experienced auditory hallucination, needed medical treatment, her mother submitted over 10 times requests of medical parole, but all were denied.

No. 6: Forced labor in prison. Cheng Yuan and Ou Biaofeng were reported to have done forced labor in Chishan Prison in Hunan province. Cheng Yuan recently was moved to a different unit in Chishan Prison where he no longer has to do forced labor, according to his wife, Shi Minglei. Taiwanese rights defender Lee Ming-che, who also was held in Chishan Prison, reported on working from 7 am to 7 pm every day while he served a five-year prison sentence.

No. 7: “Non-release release.” Shanghai authorities released rights defender Cheng Jianfang in October 2024, but a group of plainclothes police have been outside her home surveilling her since that time, preventing her from enjoying her right to freedom of movement, including for medical appointments or meet with friends. Authorities have pressured landlords to revoke rental agreements, as we saw in the case of rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang and Li Heping. Additionally, Chinese authorities have prevented rights defenders from leaving China under exit bans, such as Lawyer Lu Siwei, who was sent back to China while trying to cross the border in Laos.

No. 8: Deprive the children of rights defenders from attending school. Authorities have prevented their children of human rights lawyers Li Heping and Wang Quanzhang from going to school. Children of rights defenders have also been severely harassed and prevented from leaving China to receive an education abroad. This reflects a wider problem of the harassment of family members.

No. 9: Randomly deprive political prisoners of the right to be visited by family members (a right written in the Chinese prison law). The Sichuan-based rights defender Huang Qi has not been able to see his mother since 2019. His mother is now 90 years old and is suffering from cancer. Another notorious form of persecution directed at human rights defenders’ family and loved ones is also the possibility of detention, such as the cases of Xu Yan, Wang Liqin, and Li Qiaochu.

No. 10: Pressuring or forcing legal counsel representing human rights defenders to sign confidentiality agreements, thus preventing legal counsel from speaking publicly about the case. This has a further negative impact in that Chinese authorities thus have space to malign the human rights defenders or publicize false information. Defense lawyers face multiple obstacles in representing human rights defenders, such as not allowing lawyers from meeting detainees, withholding case documents and evidence, all of which are in violation of Chinese lawyers’ practice rights.

I could go on, but due to the time limitation, I am not able to describe all the forms of persecution that Chinese human rights defenders are facing.

Again, thank you for your continuous efforts to support the families of human rights defenders to fight for basic rights and seek the unconditional release of these arbitrary detained political prisoners!

I look forward to your questions and comments.