

## **Testimony of “Karin”**

### **White Paper Protest activist and student at Columbia University**

### **CECC Hearing “Tiananmen at 35—the Ongoing Struggle for Human Rights and Democracy in China”**

**June 4th 2024**

I would like to begin by expressing gratitude for the opportunity to testify disguised, even though it will only delay the inevitable police visit to my parents. Director Scott Flipse told me that only I could evaluate whether the cost of testifying is worth it. But however much this cost weighs on me, the cost for my fellow student activists who have already experienced intimidation, harassment, and even physical assault from CCP agents is ten times greater. For the record, all the names in my testimony will be aliases.

I was born and raised in China. Like many Chinese students my age, I wondered about the conspicuous lack of events depicted between 1970 and 1990 in our history textbook. I only learned about June 4th by reading it on Wikipedia in high school.

In 2022, I began an internship in Shanghai with one of China’s largest technology conglomerates. Like many young people who grew up in the economic prosperity of the 2010s, sheltered by censorship, I was ready to bask in and contribute to the economic achievements of my nation. In March, an unexpected city-wide lockdown began. This would subsequently be remembered as one of the largest humanitarian crises in China’s COVID response.

When the residents of Shanghai cried for help, the government “addressed not the problem, but the person who voiced the problem.” The lockdown made me realize that despite economic development, The Chinese Communist Party had not changed, even in 35 years, from its totalitarian self.

In November of 2022, after I returned to University, the fire in Urumqi sparked a global wave of vigils and protests to commemorate the victims. My friends and I organized a vigil at Columbia in front of the Low Library. We spread the word through social media only one day before the event. *To our surprise, not just 10, or 100, but 300 people showed up that night. The scene reminded me of how Chinese students at Columbia 35 years ago gathered at the very same place to demonstrate solidarity to students on the square.*

We wanted it to be a peaceful event. But my friend Ava, shortly after delivering a speech, was violently assaulted – struck on her face– by an unidentified individual who claimed to be a Columbia student. Later, she turned to the Columbia administration, But no action was taken aside from a suggestion to seek "mental health support." Not even a campus safety alert.

I was in a class on China's foreign policy. There were a few Chinese students whose comments were blatant CCP propaganda, like how the concentration camp in Xinjiang does not exist. After the vigil, I was always afraid that those Chinese students would recognize me. I was afraid what happened to Ava at the protest was going to happen to me, too. And that Columbia's administration would do nothing.

As China reopened, the momentum of the white paper protest died down gradually. My friends and I at Columbia have tried to persevere the spark by continuing to organize events like movie screenings of COVID documentaries and panel discussions on campus. However, we were always plagued by far-reaching, transnational repression. My friend and co-organizer Chris was interrogated by the Chinese police when he returned to China last year. He reached out to me on Instagram to inquire about the names of participants of the New York protests. I was informed that he sent those inquiries under police pressure.

The CECC has done an extraordinary job in its 2023 report in documenting the CCP's transnational repression, especially those faced by the Uyghurs and Hong Kongers. But I want to bring to your attention that even though the white paper movement has subsided, the intensity of transnational repression against outspoken Chinese overseas students has only escalated. In most cases, through personal harassment, transnational surveillance, and the coercion of proxies-in this case meaning the interrogation and intimidation of family members in China. My fellow student activists experienced this retribution in ever increasing quantities and severity this year. Yet unlike Hong Kong and Uyghur activists, few can step forward and tell the story.

According to Columbia's own website, it had 6880 currently enrolled Chinese students in 2023. Many of them, after completion of their study, will return to China and work in occupations of political or economic importance. As a social science major, I have always believed that a change in society starts with the change in its citizens' minds. In fact, many vocal individuals of the white paper movement in China were educated overseas. Exposure to freedom made us free. But if these brilliant minds cannot even think and speak freely on American campuses, on American soil, then it would be much more difficult for a movement like White Paper to be sparked again.

I believe there are two things that the policymakers could do. The first is to compel the Chinese Student and Scholar Associations (CSSAs) on American campuses to be transparent about their funding sources. CSSA provides a community for Chinese students who have only recently arrived in America, but at the same time, many of its members receive funding from the Chinese consulate and serve as eyes for the consulate to identify and silence pro-democracy students. By compelling CSSAs to disclose their funding, we can ensure that this community, important to many, does not become a vehicle of CCP's long arms of repression.

Second, urge universities to establish a comprehensive response mechanism and support network for students facing transnational repression. This could include setting up campus task forces against transnational repression, creating guidelines of resources available for students to seek help when they feel unsafe, and offering security support for on-campus events in which students participating potentially face the risk of being identified and harassed. If we are able to put such a response mechanism in place, then more pro-democracy students will feel comfortable expressing their political thoughts in campus spaces, without needing to go through the fear and trauma that me or my friend Ava were forced through.

Congress members, 160 years ago, President Lincoln showed us America was a nation that would "hold the power, and bear the responsibility [to] assure freedom to the free." He said as Americans, "We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth," that is our union, that is our beacon of liberty for those oppressed around the world.

Congress members, 35 years ago, you showed those students from Beijing fleeing a brutal massacre, that the United States kept its promise as the last best hope of earth, a safe haven for people who pursue and fight for democracy and freedom. Now I ask you to show the compassion and support for us, that those first pioneers who light the spark for all should not be allowed to freeze in the wind and snow