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A world away from China, Geng He seeks justice for her dissident husband

By Dan Zak
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Somewhere between the desert basins and craggy mountains of far west China, in the lonely expanse to which criminals and subversives have been exiled for generations, a human rights lawyer named Gao Zhisheng presumably sits in prison.

Meanwhile, 6,600 miles away, his wife peels a tangerine in the underground cafeteria of the Cannon House Office Building on Capitol Hill. She's been wearing the same beige blouse for three days. The bunkerlike eatery echoes with lunchtime chatter. She understands little of it.

Across town, at the State Department about 12:30 Tuesday afternoon, the vice president of her home country is seated at lunch with the vice president of her adoptive country. Invitees sip a sparkling cuvee and dine on soy-marinated Alaskan butterfish.

[Xi Jinping](#), the vice president of China and heir apparent to the Communist Party leadership, refers to "human rights" six times in his speech after lunch.

"Of course, there is always room for improvement when it comes to human rights," Xi says. "We will, in the light of China's national conditions, continue to take concrete and effective policies and measures to promote social fairness, justice and harmony, and push forward China's course of human rights."

Geng He, 45, will also push forward, she says, as forcefully as the Chinese government has pushed back on her husband. She, too, believes there is room for improvement on human rights in China, but her plans are different from the vice president's.

That afternoon, Xi would engage in a business roundtable with the chief executives of Coca-Cola and the Walt Disney Co., and Geng would cap her two-day sprint around the Hill by leaning into a microphone in front of the [Congressional-Executive Commission on China](#), her printed testimony shuddering in her nervous hands, getting ready to say what China doesn't want to hear.

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They met in the military in 1986. In Kashgar, in northwestern China, she was one of 30 female soldiers, who weren't allowed to leave the base. A fellow soldier named Gao Zhisheng routinely sneaked out to buy sundry items for the women.

This is a kind man, she remembers thinking.

They married in 1990, after 3¹/₂ years of military service. Geng was an operator at a state-owned telephone company. Gao sold vegetables, wrapping some of them in newspaper, which is how he saw an article on the shortage of lawyers in China. He decided to teach himself law. Gao passed the national bar exam in 1995, two years after their daughter was born, and started representing businessmen and landowners who were victimized by government overreach. His client list grew more controversial over the years as he began to represent persecuted Christians and Falun Gong practitioners. In legal circles, Gao was viewed as both fearless and foolhardy.

“I said, ‘You’re going to get locked up and be no good to anybody,’” says Jerome Cohen, co-director of the U.S.-Asia Law Institute at New York University, who met Gao in Beijing several years ago. “He said, ‘Then that’s the way it’s going to be.’ . . . Other Chinese lawyers would say to me, ‘We’ve got to get him to work on our case because he’s not afraid.’ . . . [Gao] combined ability with a huge personality and being quite aggressive.”

Their son was born in 2003. Geng didn’t know trouble was brewing until 2005, when the government shut down Gao’s law firm and police moved into adjoining apartments to monitor the family. Police officers followed their daughter to school, according to Geng, where she was made to feel like an outcast because of her father’s work.

The next four years were Kafkaesque to an extreme, according to Geng’s account and [Gao’s published writing](#), and involved [prolonged periods of detainment and torture](#). Gao was arrested in August 2006, convicted of inciting subversion of state power, sentenced that December to a three-year prison term, but was instead given five years of probation and released. He was taken into custody again in 2007 for 50 days, during which Gao says he was beaten with electrified batons until his skin was black and swollen. (In response to petitions from the United Nations, the Chinese government denied ordering enforced disappearances or taking coercive measures against Gao; the Chinese Embassy did not respond to requests for comment on this article.)

That October, Geng related the family’s hopeless situation to a sympathetic fruit vendor near their home. The next day, the vendor passed along a note while giving Geng change. It included detailed instructions for initiating a two-week-long escape for Geng and her children, who would be guided by a succession of anonymous agents. She and her husband agreed that it would be impossible for Gao to go. He was watched too closely.

In January 2009, she and her children were escorted to a train station, where they received tickets, fake IDs, a cellphone and several SIM cards from an unidentified man. They boarded a train for two days and nights. Upon arriving in a southern province of China, they received a phone call and further instructions, which set in motion a series of rides across the porous, mountainous border.

Throughout the journey, Geng trusted her helpers to lead her in the right direction.

Gao was arrested again in February 2009, reappeared in March 2010 and spoke to his wife on the phone for the last time that April. He was relieved that his family members had sought asylum in

the United States and settled in northern California, where they relied on savings, food stamps and loans from friends while Geng began learning English.

Gao disappeared again that month and has not been heard from since. In December, China announced that Gao had violated his parole — even though he had disappeared and was presumed to be in custody — and would spend the next three years in prison.

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Geng He (pronounced “Gung Huh”) tells this story Sunday, through an interpreter, over a dinner of steamed rice and stir-fried green beans at a Chinese restaurant in Rockville. Her eyes are wet, and her face is twisted into a frown. She landed at Dulles International Airport hours earlier. On Monday, both she and Vice President Xi were to start their tours of Washington.

Her pro-bono attorney, Jared Genser, reviews their schedule as they drink tea. Yang Jianli, a democracy activist who was imprisoned in China from 2002 to 2007, translates.

“All you need to do is express how difficult it has been for your family,” advises Genser, who lives in Bethesda and founded the nonprofit group [Freedom Now](#), which provides legal and public relations services to prisoners of conscience and their family members. “These two days are about you making personal connections, so that they feel like they *must* act. . . . You should be very comfortable being yourself.”

Being herself, in Geng’s mind, means being a housewife, caring for her husband, cooking for her children — not knocking on doors on Capitol Hill. Gao “would have done so much for the people” if he hadn’t been kept in prison, Geng says. “Sometimes I want to be able to take his place.”

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For the activist wife of a dissident, Washington is a city of rehearsed sympathy and generic promises, of hurried lunches and petulant metal detectors. It’s a city of meetings with mid-level staffers, of last-minute cab rides, of stiff armchairs in custard-colored waiting rooms. Of conjuring pain, over and over, on both the Senate and House sides of the Hill. Of constantly moving yourself to tears.

Washington, to Geng He, is exhausting. It is also her best hope.

Genser has arranged a packed schedule for his client’s two-day stay. One goal is a spike in publicity, to pull some focus from Xi. Another goal is to make an impression on congressional advisers, who might relay Geng’s story to their elected bosses, who might then raise Gao’s case during official meetings with Xi. The ultimate goal is to indirectly persuade President Obama or Vice President Biden — Biden’s office had not replied to their request for a meeting — to mention Gao Zhisheng by name, publicly or privately.

That's a trump card, according to Genser. It took two private mentions of Yang Jianli's case by George W. Bush to Chinese President Hu Jintao, he says, to secure freedom for the man who is translating for Geng He.

Genser and Yang met as students at Harvard University in 1997, when they planned protests of visiting Chinese president Jiang Zemin, and Genser worked to free Yang after he was imprisoned in China for entering the country using a false identity (Yang had been on the government's blacklist since helping to organize the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square). Yang pointed Genser to Gao's case in 2009.

And for these two days, the trio is united: Genser, excitable and gregarious, dresses in light-colored suits, wears his Ivy League class ring and projects the buddy-buddy confidence of a hotshot lobbyist; Geng, with penetrating eyes and high cheekbones framed by shiny black hair, is slight and unassuming and tries to keep up with Genser's pace; Yang, a stout, cheerful man with doctorates from two U.S. universities and five years of prison time in China, not only translates Geng's words, but also transmits her emotions.

"I know what she wants to say each time she opens her mouth," says Yang, whose son was fatherless for years, just as Gao's is now.

The lobbying begins early Monday.

At 8, they meet with Michael Posner, the State Department's assistant secretary for democracy, labor and human rights, who has been supportive of Gao's case and has [Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton](#)'s ear.

Before meeting with [House Majority Leader John A. Boehner](#)'s chief of staff in the Capitol, Genser pitches Geng's story to the congressman's director of administrative operations, who presses her hand to her heart in sympathy.

"That's no accident that I talked to her," Genser says afterward. "The people in these reception areas are some of the most powerful people in Washington" because of their constant proximity to elected officials.

They meet with staffers from the House subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, then hustle back to the Senate side to talk to [Sen. Barbara Boxer](#)'s foreign policy adviser, who is especially interested when she learns that Geng is a constituent of the California Democrat.

Geng is "very persuasive," Genser says later. "She speaks in sound bites that are easily digestible."

"I was just a housewife helping my family," Geng says. "I never put myself in a political position. . . . But now, my only calculation is my husband's freedom."

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Gao Zhisheng is one of many prisoners of conscience in China, and human rights is not the only pressing issue in Sino-American diplomacy. The presence of Geng He and Xi Jinping in Washington reveals an American conundrum: the moral obligation to care about one 47-year-old man vs. careful bilateral cooperation — the “key to global economic stability,” as Biden has called it — with a country that holds \$1.1 trillion worth of U.S. treasuries and buys more than \$100 billion worth of American exports a year.

Human rights activists want high-ranking U.S. officials to be more vocal about specific cases of abuse. The administration, in turn, emphasizes that human rights is a central part of its diplomatic missions and that such discussions were a prominent part of public speeches and private conversations during Xi’s visit.

Sometimes the White House appears outwardly placid and noncommittal to achieve results privately. In his remarks at the State Department luncheon, Biden said leaders had discussed “the plight of several very prominent individuals,” which Genser and Geng hope includes Gao.

“Putting public pressure on China can be embarrassing for them, and then you’re less likely to get a result,” says a former senior official who was involved in East Asian diplomacy in several presidential administrations. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity to freely discuss the sensitive issue. “I’ve been involved in a number of cases that we did not want to highlight publicly, because then you are undercutting your ability to have any impact on [China’s] thinking.”

When your husband’s life may be at stake, though, embarrassing his captors is the least of your concerns.

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On Tuesday morning, Geng does on-camera interviews at Radio Free Asia, then the team stops by Genser’s office at 19th and M streets NW so he can answer e-mails. In a nearby conference room, Geng takes a small book from her purse, opens it and quietly repeats English vocabulary words.

“Of course. Of course. Of course.

“Ice cream. Ice cream. Ice cream.

“Enough. Enough. Enough.”

The team then cabs to the Hill for a meeting with [Rep. Jim McGovern](#) (D-Mass.), co-chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. Geng repeats her story and asks McGovern to help them move the case forward.

“I’m trying to think of the action items we can take immediately,” McGovern says to Geng and her partners, who are perched on the edge of a navy leather couch.

“Is [Pelosi](#) seeing Xi?” Genser asks.

“I don’t know, but I can find out right now,” McGovern says, picking up his phone and asking to be patched through to House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi’s foreign policy adviser. “Is Nancy meeting with the Chinese vice president today? . . . She’s not? . . . Okay, all right. We have a human rights case we wanted to raise with him. . . . Just Boehner? . . . I’ll call [Sen. John F.] [Kerry’s](#) people as well.”

McGovern suggests that they collaborate on a hearing in front of the human rights commission, and he promises to fax a letter to Biden that day to urge him to meet with Geng.

The team eats a quick lunch beneath the Cannon building, where Geng quietly peels her tangerine as Genser reminisces about how he toured Capitol Hill with Yang’s wife in the same manner. Shoe leather, face time and persistence is how people get freed from Chinese prisons, he says.

“It took 2,000 hours of work to free Jianli,” Genser says as the team departs Lafayette Square about 1:45, after Geng tells her husband’s story at a rally of China protesters. “I could’ve gotten 20 people out of Pakistan for all the time it took to get you out of China.”

“Sorry!” Yang says, laughing.

For the third time in 36 hours, they cab back to the Hill. At 2:30, just before Xi meets with CEOs two miles away, Geng takes her place behind a nameplate in a Rayburn House Office Building hearing room as the Congressional-Executive Commission on China assembles on the dais. Fearing he will get too emotional during her testimony, Yang allows another interpreter to sit with Geng. Nearby, on an easel, is a large black-and-white photograph of Geng and Gao, arms around each other, in 2005.

After introductory remarks by commissioners, the housewife from Xinjiang reads her four-page testimony, her voice growing louder and more confident with each page, her eyes welling as C-SPAN’s cameras roll.

“This morning, Vice President Xi Jinping was meeting with President Obama and Vice President Biden,” Geng says through the interpreter. “I requested to meet with them, but I didn’t get any reply. I was very disappointed. . . . I’m so grateful that the United States has provided protection to my family from the Chinese government and also need to ask all of you . . . to continue to call on the government of China to respect human rights for all citizens.”

Her voice quivers as she reads the carefully crafted statement, which was designed to express her genuine emotion and desperation — as well as needle the White House, stoke the ire of the Republican co-chairmen and plead for this case to move forward at higher levels.

After the hearing adjourns, the team has one more stop. As they wait outside the office of [Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen](#) (R-Fla.), Geng exhales. It’s the end of a long two days.

Gao would be surprised if he knew what his wife was doing, she says. “I’m afraid I’m causing too much trouble here,” she says, smiling, looking up and down the long, airy corridor of marble.

In this way, she has taken her husband’s place. Somewhere in far western China, he presumably sits in a prison. Meanwhile, 6,600 miles away, his wife embraces the chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

“You have friends here,” says Ros-Lehtinen, grasping Geng’s hand. “We’re going to help you.”

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On Wednesday, as Geng He flies across the country to her children, her team’s persistence begins to pay off.

Boehner’s staff gives Xi a letter calling for Gao’s release.

Boxer agrees to sponsor a resolution calling for his release.

Ros-Lehtinen issues a news release demanding the “immediate release of Gao Zhisheng, ‘the conscience of China,’ and all political prisoners.”

And on Thursday evening, an Obama staffer e-mailed Genser to invite Geng to a meeting with White House advisers on human rights and Asia.

Geng won’t know whether these symbolic actions will yield results, but she does believe that she’s doing all she can, that she’s moving forward, again trusting others to help her reach her destination. And she will continue to work on her English so that she can eventually make her husband’s case in the language of her new country.

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“Enough. Enough. Enough.”

Staff writer William Wan contributed to this report.