

The Silencing of Gao Zhisheng

If this leading lawyer can be repeatedly "disappeared," no one in China is safe from illegal detention.

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China is spending about \$45 billion on the World Expo in Shanghai, more than it spent on the Beijing Olympics. These extravagant displays are intended to confirm the country's arrival on the world stage. But there is a far darker side to China's rapid development and to the Expo itself: the silencing of a growing number of protesters.

As it did with the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government recently threatened and rounded up protesters before the Expo, fearful that foreigners might see that all is not well. Police brazenly warned Shanghai's most famous dissident, the economist and activist Feng Zhenghu, to keep quiet or be "disappeared" like Gao Zhisheng.

Mr. Gao is one of China's leading human-rights lawyers. Or at least he was—before the government revoked his law license, shut down his law firm, arrested and tortured him, and convicted him of "inciting subversion of state power" in 2006. Mr. Gao's crime was to defend those whom the government persecutes, especially religious minorities including the fiercely oppressed Falun Gong, and to tell the outside world about the government's shocking abuse of these groups. The suspended prison sentence meted out to Mr. Gao appeared surprisingly mild, but he and his family were subjected to such stringent home detention, harassment and humiliation by security police that the conditions of his confinement proved intolerable for all of them.

After sending an open letter to the U.S. Congress in 2007, Mr. Gao was again detained and suffered more than 50 days of unspeakable torture before being returned home under threat of death if he revealed the experience. Shortly after his wife and children secretly fled abroad in early 2009, Mr. Gao was "disappeared," taken hooded from his relatives' home in northern China by government security agents. This triggered a friend's publication of the record Mr. Gao had made of his most recent torture ordeal, which in turn stimulated fears of his death.

Mr. Gao's unexplained "disappearance" for over one year was one of China's most bizarre developments since the days of the Cultural Revolution and presented its Foreign Ministry with an insurmountable public relations challenge. Incessant foreign media questions about Mr. Gao's location and welfare evoked a series of ever more ludicrous and inconsistent comments from nonplussed spokesmen—even the foreign minister—who were hard-pressed to even admit that he was detained.

But then in late March, Mr. Gao suddenly reappeared at a remote Buddhist monastery. He was allowed and, no doubt, encouraged to contact Western reporters. A few days later, he was allowed to return home

to Beijing. After months of believing he was dead, his children were allowed to speak to him from their new home in New York.

But it was clear that Mr. Gao was far from free. Although permitted to meet certain visitors, he was kept under close surveillance—again, de facto house arrest. His wife cried after seeing pictures of him, saying he looked like a different, broken man. Mr. Gao's conversations indicated that he was forced to abandon his human rights efforts to survive.

His family hoped that Mr. Gao would be allowed to reunite with them in New York, or at least be left in peace by the authorities. But Mr. Gao has again been "disappeared." On April 20, having been taken out of Beijing ostensibly to visit his father-in-law in western China, he was put on a plane to return home by police and hasn't been seen since.

We have little doubt that the Chinese government intended Mr. Gao's brief reappearance this spring to relieve the increasing international pressure surrounding his mysterious detention. Now, however, it appears that the government fears Mr. Gao, even under house arrest, more than it fears the international community's condemnation of his renewed "disappearance." It is willing to blatantly violate its own domestic law, not to mention international law, to silence the man known to many as "the conscience of China."

Mr. Gao's case is about far more than the tragedy of one man and his family. It is about the rule of law in China. If the government can act with impunity toward a lawyer as prominent as Gao Zhisheng, then just as the police threatened Feng Zhenghu, other dissidents will continue to be "disappeared," as have many protesters unknown to the outside world. As the lavish World Expo continues in Shanghai, we hope that the international community will look beyond the Communist Party's carefully constructed image of China and see the reality of the oppression that sustains it.

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