



Gao Zhisheng China

Gao Zhisheng is one of China's most prominent human rights lawyers as well as a husband and the father of two children. Gao was disappeared by the Chinese government on April 20, 2010 and was held *incommunicado* for more than 20 months. On December 16, 2011, the Chinese government announced that Gao had been sentenced to three years in prison for violating his parole and was imprisoned at Shaya County Prison in Xinjian on December 29, 2011.

Gao is a self-taught litigator whom the Chinese Ministry of Justice once praised as one of the country's ten best lawyers. He was the recipient of the [American Bar Association's 2010 International Human Rights Lawyer Award](#). In 2005, after being denied access to the courts for taking on politically sensitive cases, Gao wrote open letters to both the National People's Congress and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, calling for an end to the torture of members of persecuted religious groups. Gao's license to practice law was subsequently revoked, his law firm shut down, and his family placed under police surveillance.

On July 30, 2006, Gao was beaten by the police officers monitoring his home. Two weeks later, he was apprehended at his sister's home, but authorities did not notify Gao's family of his arrest until September 21, when he was charged with "inciting subversion." After giving a forced confession in the face of threats against his children, Gao was convicted in December 2006 and given a suspended three-year sentence with five years' probation, effectively placing him under house arrest.

In September 2007, Gao wrote an open letter to the U.S. Congress, detailing human rights violations in China. He was promptly apprehended and tortured, during which time authorities beat Gao with batons, held burning cigarettes to his face, and used toothpicks and electric shocks to pierce his genitals.

In January 2009, after years of government threats and constant, humiliating surveillance, Gao's wife and two children secretly fled to the United States and sought asylum.

Gao disappeared on February 4, 2009, when he was again apprehended by security personnel without any notice to his family. After months of refusing to comment on Gao's case, his brother traveled to Beijing in December 2009 to ask authorities about Gao's whereabouts, only to be told he had "gone missing." Freedom Now [filed a petition](#) with the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances on his behalf. On January

21, 2010, the Chinese Foreign Ministry acknowledged for the first time the detention of Gao, stating “this person, according to Chinese law, is where he should be.”

Gao mysteriously reappeared on March 28, 2010, after a year of intense international pressure. He was briefly allowed to return to Beijing. In April 2010, Gao was instructed by government agents to visit his father-in-law in far Western China. On April 20, 2010, security agents told Gao to return to Beijing. However, Gao never arrived in Beijing.

For more than 20 months, Gao was held incommunicado. On December 16, 2011, the Beijing People’s First Intermediate Court ordered that Mr. Gao be imprisoned for three years to serve the full sentence imposed on December 22, 2006. State media reported that the Court withdrew Gao’s probation—set to expire the following week—claiming without explanation that Gao had “seriously violated probation rules a number of times.”

Gao was imprisoned at the Shaya County Prison in a remote area of the Xinjian until August 7, 2014 when he was released. During his time at the Shaya County Prison, Gao was held in solitary confinement in a very small cell with minimal light. Guards were strictly instructed not to speak with him. He was not allowed any reading materials, television, or access to anyone or anything. Because of the strict conditions of his incarceration, Freedom Now [filed a second petition](#) with the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances. Gao was fed a single slice of bread and piece of cabbage, once a day. He lost a significant amount of weight and many teeth from malnutrition. It is believed he was repeatedly physically tortured. Gao can barely talk and it is believed he is now suffering from a broad range of physical and mental health problems. He has not been allowed to see a doctor since his release.

In March 2010, Freedom Now [submitted a petition](#) to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention on behalf of Gao. In November 2010, the Working Group [found Gao’s detention to be in violation of international law](#) and called on China to release him immediately. Freedom Now [filed a second petition](#) in January 2012.

Freedom Now mobilized international pressure for Gao’s freedom by publishing op-eds and interviews in the [New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6), [The Wall Street Journal](#) (2) (3), [The Mark](#), [The International Herald Tribune](#), [the Ottawa Citizen](#), [Voice of America](#), [BBC](#), and the [South China Morning Post](#) (2); providing [expert](#) and [family](#) testimony to the Congressional Executive Committee on China; providing expert testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives’ [Committee on Foreign Affairs](#) and [Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Investigations](#); and preparing a report to the UN Human Rights Council prior to China’s [universal periodic review](#).

Members of the U.S. Congress called for Gao's release prior to the [2010 G-20 Summit](#), in [January 2011](#), [September 2012](#). UN experts [denounced](#) Gao's secret detention in December 2012.

Gao was released to the house of his in-laws in Urumqi where he is continuing to serve his supplemental sentence of one year of "deprivation of political rights." This additional sentence was set to expire in August 2015 when he was expected to be fully released. However, Gao's whereabouts remain unknown as he taken back in custody by the Chinese government again in September 2017.