

China's new freedom fighters

Countless thousands of people in China are blacklisted, harassed, intimidated and locked up merely for what they say or because of the job they do. Nineteen years after the Tiananmen massacre, six dissident voices explain why their battle for freedom of speech must continue. Interviews by **Lijia Zhang**

MA JIAN NOVELIST, 53

I am a writer. Being critical is a writer's responsibility. In China, however, writers are encouraged to sing the praises of the government. Since being too critical may lead to the banning of their work, many exercise self-censorship or write books to please the market.

I left Beijing in the late 1980s to live in Hong Kong because, having been blacklisted by the government, I couldn't publish my works on the mainland. My novella *Stick out Your Tongue*, which draws on my experience of travelling in Tibet, had been denounced as 'filthy and shameful' and banned. In spring 1989 I returned to witness the student-led democratic movement. As the government brutally cracked down on the protest, my brother went into a coma after an accident. I just couldn't find the words to describe the sense of shock and despair I felt then; it forced me to see the evil face of the regime.

My brother finally woke up after six months. I went back to Hong Kong until the handover in 1997. Then I moved to London. When I make trips back to China I am often struck how people seem to have forgotten about '4 June'. The whole of society, increasingly money-oriented, seems to have slipped into a coma. I spent 10 years writing *Beijing Coma*, exploring the double tragedies that took place in 1989. I want to wake people up from this vegetative state.

I divide my time between London and Beijing. I am trying to persuade my family to spend more time in China. It's no fun to be in exile. I can't even figure out the basic 26 letters, let alone operate in English. I often feel that although I've found the sky of freedom above my head, I've lost the soil I stand on. I need to be back in my motherland, where I can find inspirations.

I am concerned as to whether the government will let me back in after the publication of *Beijing Coma* in China later this year. But I have to speak the truth. My next book is a novel about the cost of the inhuman family-planning policy. But it is not just books. I openly criticise this dictatorial regime in my articles and interviews or whenever I can. If we don't, it will never change. And I want to remind people; when a country forgets its past, it will have no future. *Beijing Coma* is published by Chatto and Windus at £17.99. To order a copy for £16.99 with free UK p&p, go to observer.co.uk/bookshop or call 0870 836 0885

WAN YANHAI CHINA'S FOREMOST AIDS AND GAY RIGHTS ACTIVIST, 45

I was probably among the first Chinese researchers to look into Aids. That was

in 1990 when I was working for the Ministry of Public Health. I realised there was a huge amount of ignorance; one official openly said China had no Aids and called it a foreign disease caused by decadent lifestyles. That kind of attitude is all too common today. I set up an Aids hotline and launched Project Aizhixing to meet the challenge of Aids armed with love and knowledge. I was sacked for 'encouraging homosexuality, sympathising with prostitutes and advocating human rights'.

I was and am sympathetic to prostitutes, with whom I had a lot of dealings for my research. They have the same rights as the rest of us. It was my deep belief in human rights as well as democracy that made me participate enthusiastically in 1989's democratic movement and that was why I chose to do what I am doing now. I didn't encourage homosexuality, though I am immensely interested in it, not only because I experienced some confusion myself, but also because I was appalled that it was regarded as some sort of mental illness.

I went to America to work on my MA in mental health and sexual orientation. I returned on graduation because I decided that the best way to fight for my cause was at grassroots level. Now my NGO, Aizhixing, funded by foreign organisations such as the Open Society Institute and the National Endowment for Democracy, is dealing with a wider range of issues. It promotes the rights of those living on the fringe, such as drug-users, prostitutes and haemophiliacs infected with HIV.

'The whole of society, increasingly money oriented, seems to be in a coma. I want to wake people up'

Thanks to the sensitive nature of my work I have had many brushes with police. The first time I was arrested was on Aids Day in 1994 when I was distributing condoms and Aids leaflets. Two years later I was locked up yet again on the eve of a large conference where we planned to help those infected by HIV through blood transfusions to demand compensation from the government. In China, Aids and rights issues are deeply entwined. Because I am on the government blacklist, the Chinese media are not allowed to interview me. With the tightening up in the lead-up to the Olympics, our work is getting more difficult, but we are determined to soldier on.

LI FANGPING HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYER, 34

Since I was young I have admired martial-arts masters from the past fighting to uphold justice, which was probably why I chose to become a lawyer. I have been practising since 1995, dealing mainly with civil, criminal and economic cases. And it wasn't until recently, when I met Chen Guangcheng, a blind advocate for peasant rights, that I became interested in hu man rights.

He called me in 2005 to inform me that he was under house arrest. Two friends and I went to Shangdong to see him. Before reaching his village we were attacked, then interrogated throughout the night before being kicked out of the province. I had never expected to experience such open violation of the law by the law.

I became one of Chen's two defence lawyers. His crime? Inciting crowds to disturb social order. The truth was that he had exposed local officials' abuse of human rights, including forced abortions. You can imagine the difficulties we encountered. At one point I was beaten up and had to be hospitalised because of a severe head injury. But I wasn't going to give up.

Chen was given four years' imprisonment. I am not sure that our defence had any impact on the sentencing. I believe that the verdict was reached before the trial. Still, it was important that lawyers tried to defend him so that the rest of the world could know what was happening.

Since then I've taken many rights cases. Right now I am defending Hua Jia, an imprisoned human rights campaigner in Beijing. He was sentenced to more than three years' imprisonment for 'inciting to overthrow the government', the evidence being six articles he wrote on a website, Boxun, and two interviews

he granted to foreign reporters. It is a classic case of 'being charged for one's words'. We are planning to appeal. As in Chen's case, I don't think I have the power to set him free but if we lawyers accept that it can be a crime simply to say something, then the government will never change.

DAI QING ENVIRONMENT ALIST, 67

How did I become involved in the Three Gorges Dam project or, rather, in the campaign against the project? I was first drawn to it because of my deep belief in freedom of speech. I am a journalist, and if a journalist can't speak the truth, what kind of journalism is that?

I came across the project in the mid-1980s when I was working for the *Guangming Daily*. We were told that no media in China could report on the Three Gorges Dam in a negative way because it was a political project that needed the whole nation's support. I learnt for the first time about the potential ecological and archaeological nightmares the dam could cause when a friend and politician invited me to an internal meeting.

I mobilised my journalist friends to interview experts who had doubts about the project. However, no newspapers or magazines dared to publish our findings. In the end, through some contacts, we published the interviews in a book called *Yangtze!*. Its impact was far greater than we expected, for when the National People's Congress, China's parliament, known as 'rubber stamp', voted on the project in 1992, one-third of the delegates decided against it.

If there was a free press or free public debate, this project would never have gone ahead. It went ahead because Chinese leaders wanted to



Above, Ma Jian. Below, Li Fangping. Photographs by Richard Saker and Teh Eng Koon/AFP



make a showcase for the idea that only socialist China could conquer nature and build the largest dam in the world. Now some of our fears have proved to be true – for example, sedimentation, the interruption of river traffic due to the low water level, land erosion and spiralling costs. Cracks on the dam have emerged, though you won't read that in the newspapers.

With my friends I am compiling a collection of interviews with families who have had to move away. I'd say that more than half of them are unhappy about moving, which shows the human cost of the project. Even when the families are compensated properly



(Clockwise from above) Wan Yanhai, Dai Qing, Woesser, Dean Peng. Photographs by Lijia Zhang



– and often they are not because of corruption – they lose so much by giving up their living environment and being separated from family and friends.

I speak out whenever I can, in the form of books, interviews and articles, published outside the mainland, of course. I have not been able to publish my works in China for 19 years. Now I have a new platform – my blog. I write about the Three Gorges, as well as the Olympics.

Both are political games about which the government doesn't allow dissident views. But if China really intends to become a powerful nation, it has to grant its people the freedom of speech.



DEAN PENG ECONOMIST, 40

For a long time I had hope in the government – as long as it was willing to reform. One event in 2003 changed my mind. A girl known as Stainless Steel Rat was arrested for criticising the authorities. I thought, how can they arrest someone simply for what she has said? I organised a news conference for foreign journalists to expose this. Thanks to my action, and pressure exerted by fellow 'netizens', she was set free. It got me on to the police blacklist. In 2005, when I tried to attend the funeral of Zhao Ziyang, our reform-minded former

Communist party Secretary, some policemen tried to stop me. I wouldn't oblige. We engaged in a fight; they sprayed mace on my face and I produced a knife. Some friends asked me: 'Why aren't you afraid?' Why should I be? The government is weak, while I am strong because I have truth on my side.

I was born here and studied physics at Beijing University but later became an economist. I have translated into Mandarin lots of articles by Western economists and a satire about the need for a free market called *The Adventures of Jonathan Gullible*. I don't think China can have sustainable economic development in the long term with the current political system. I write articles to express my views, which are usually toned down before being published in the newspapers, but I post whatever I want to say on the net. And I criticise the authorities openly when I am being interviewed by the foreign media.

I work occasionally as a fixer. Last September I went with two Channel 4 journalists to film a detention centre where people who came to petition in Beijing were being kept illegally. We were roughly handled by some policemen and then detained for hours. I am now trying to sue the policemen.

I oppose the government just as I would oppose any dictatorial regime. I just want to defend my human rights. If every Chinese person did the same, then the authorities wouldn't dare do whatever it wants, as it does at present.

WOESER TIBETAN WRITER AND BLOGGER, 42

I am only one-quarter Han Chinese – the majority ethnicity in China – and three-quarters Tibetan, one of 55 registered minorities. And I've always felt Tibetan. Even now I divide my time between Lhasa and Beijing.

I grew up in a Tibetan area in Sichuan and attended Chinese schools with a standard 'red upbringing'; we were taught to become 'the successors of communism' and to 'continue the glorious struggle'. My ethnicity

didn't play a big role in my life until about 20 years ago after I read a book by John Avedon, *In Exile From the Land of the Snows*, about life before the communists and about the Dalai Lama's harrowing escape into India. I was fascinated because it was so different from what I learnt at school. I heard home calling. So I found a job in Lhasa as an editor of a literary magazine. I also found my spiritual belonging as I converted to Tibetan Buddhism.

In 2003 I published a book called *Notes on Tibet*, a collection of essays, travel writing and reportage. The book also touched on sensitive topics. One story mentioned the monks' love for the Dalai Lama, a simple fact denied by the authorities. After the book became popular, it was banned. My bosses ordered me to write a self-criticism and to promise not to write such stories. When I refused, they sacked me.

When I inherited some wonderful black-and-white pictures taken by my father during the Cultural Revolution,

SPECTATOR SPORTS

FOOTBALL
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