



## Accidental Activists

### The Resistance of the '709' Wives

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*The crackdown of 9 July 2015 saw hundreds of lawyers and legal activists called in by the police or official lawyers' associations for questioning. While many were released in a matter of hours or days, a number disappeared into China's system of 'residential surveillance in a designated location'. In this essay, Nicola Macbean details how the wives of these lawyers have coped with the detention of their husbands and how they have been experimenting with new forms of campaigning that draw strength from Chinese tradition.*

Three women brandishing red buckets made for a striking image. The picture spoke of determination, confidence, and solidarity. In other photographs they wore red dresses or were depicted with the names of their detained husbands painted in red on their summer clothes. There was no intended message in the choice of colour or decision to carry buckets. Red was a 'happy colour' and the buckets would 'come in useful afterwards'. Probably it was just a coincidence, but the photographs of the women carried echoes of the white headscarves worn by Argentina's mothers of the disappeared.

The women in red are wives of lawyers detained in the '709' crackdown of 2015. Named after the date of the first detentions (9

Wives and advocates of detained rights lawyers mount a peaceful protest in support of the detainees on Monday. The buckets are covered in messages of support. PC: SCMP Pictures

July), this attack saw hundreds of lawyers and legal activists called in by the police or official lawyers' associations for questioning. Many were briefly detained and released in a matter of hours or days, while a number disappeared into China's system of 'residential surveillance in a designated location' (RSDL) to be later charged or released on bail.

The year 2015 was pivotal for human rights activism in China, as a series of targeted detentions signalled a new harsher climate under Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. The day before International Women's Day, 8 March, five women activists were detained (see Ristivojević's essay in this issue). They were held for 37 days to prevent them from staging a modest campaign against sexual harassment on public transport. The 'Feminist Five', as they became known, were mostly young women in their twenties who had been mounting a range of small-scale protests against the unequal treatment of women in all areas of life, from access to public toilets to higher education. In June, two staff of the NGO Yirenping were detained for a month for alleged 'illegal business operations' and their organisation was shuttered (Front Line Defenders 2015; Yang 2016). On 9 July, Chinese rights defence (维权) lawyers woke to the news that lawyer Wang Yu and her husband, Bao Longjun, had been detained. In the days that followed, their colleagues were rounded up or lived in fear they would be next.

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Although their husbands had been at the forefront of legal activism in China, the wives of these detained lawyers were not activists. Indeed, they were often critical of their husbands for the way their outspokenness was disrupting family life. Husbands, too, tried to protect their families by sharing as little as possible about their work. In the immediate aftermath of lawyer Li Heping's detention

on 10 July 2015, his wife, Wang Qiaoling, was reluctant to speak out publicly. Protective of their children and her work for a house church, she believed, like many observers, that he would be home in a matter of days. It was, after all, not the first time he had disappeared (Barboza 2007).

It was soon clear that the detention of Li Heping would be no ordinary case. The first challenge was to find out where he was being held, as the police provided no official notification. His wife appointed lawyers, but with the use of RSDL, the police could use Chinese law to deny access to counsel. Criticised by the United Nations Committee Against Torture as a form of incommunicado detention, RSDL allows the police to hold persons suspected of national security offences in unknown and unregistered detention facilities and without access to lawyers, family members, or any independent monitors. Despite being warned to keep silent, Wang Qiaoling decided first to mount a legal case against the *Xinhua News Agency* and the *People's Daily*, among other official media, for the way they slandered her husband in their reports about the crackdown.

In early 2016, six months after being first detained, Li Heping and other lawyers were formally charged and transferred to a pre-trial detention centre in Tianjin. From this point on, the law should have allowed the detainees access to their lawyers. Nevertheless, after several fruitless applications by lawyers to meet with their clients, families started to lose hope. A committed Christian, Wang Qiaoling asked herself what God wanted her to do. The answer was clear and she started to reach out to the other 'suffering' wives (China Change 2017). As the lawyers' efforts to represent their clients were endlessly obstructed by the authorities, the '709' wives took on a new role. Advised by their lawyers, the women used every legal avenue they could identify to seek information or to put pressure on the authorities by filing complaints and open government information requests. Overcoming feelings of powerlessness and their own lack of

knowledge and experience, the wives started to share information online of each attempt they made to meet the police, procuratorate, and court officials.

## Novel Acts of Resistance

The wives chose to interpret the authorities' failure to abide by provisions in the law as evidence that officials knew there was no legal basis for the detentions. The red bucket protest outside the Tianjin Procuratorate in June 2016 resulted in the women being detained overnight. Rather than deter them, such actions only seemed to spur them on. Often wearing brightly coloured dresses and red sashes with their husbands' names, the women wanted to convey a mood of confidence and energy. Reminiscent of actions by the Feminist Five, clothes had become small acts of resistance.

As months passed, some of the legal activists and lawyers were released, and others were convicted in show trials and sentenced. In May 2017, Li Heping was released following a secret trial but there was still no information about fellow lawyer Wang Quanzhang. His wife, Li Wenzu, often accompanied by her sister-in-law and the wives of some of the released lawyers, began to make visits, each Friday, to the Supreme People's Court. Wearing pictures of Wang Quanzhang on their t-shirts, the women repeatedly sought information and court oversight of his case.

Frustration and newfound confidence brought novel acts of protest. Marking 1,000 days since her husband had disappeared, Li Wenzu attempted to walk the 100 kilometres from Beijing to the No. 2 Detention Centre in Tianjin, where officials had last informed her that Wang was being detained (AFP 2018). On the fifth day of the march, she was intercepted by plainclothes police and taken into temporary custody.

In December 2018, in one of the most recent and symbolic protests, four wives took turns, in a Beijing park, to shave each other's heads

and place their hair in buckets labelled with the names of their husbands. This theatrical gesture to protest the persecution of their husbands was photographed and widely disseminated online. Playing on the Chinese homonym for baldness (无发), the image of the women's shaved heads was presented as a powerful visual metaphor of a country 'without law' (无法).

## Drawing Strength from Tradition

The '709' wives' actions were carefully calibrated to take place within the law and to highlight the failings of the legal system. Using their status as wives, the women emphasised in interviews that they had no choice but to speak up for their husbands (Sudworth 2015). Their efforts were acknowledged by the international community with stories in the international media, and access to Western diplomats and politicians (Buckley and Tatlow 2017). In 2018, Li Wenzu was the laureate of the Swedish Edelstam Prize for her 'outstanding contributions and exceptional courage' in defence of human rights (Edelstam Foundation 2018).

Yet, the '709' wives were largely wary of accepting the label of human rights defender. China, they knew, rejected the entire concept and would not feel constrained by well-meaning global commitments to protect the rights of human rights defenders. The women, instead, drew on the limited protection provided by their role as wives. Despite the political sensitivity of their husbands' detention, the '709' wives knew they had a degree of freedom to act within the traditional norms of a patriarchal society that places a strong value on the assigned roles in the family. The women also knew to keep their activism within bounds, to avoid feeding police anxieties about mobilisation and strategic organising.



A protest in Hong Kong on the 709 anniversary. PC: PH Yang

While traditional norms of wives defending their husbands may have helped the '709' women largely avoid punishment, they, their families, and their children have endured relentless pressure. The collective punishment of families has deep roots in China, and the authorities show few scruples in preventing the children of human rights defenders from attending public schools while, also under police pressure, landlords force families to move home. Life has been lived under the continuous surveillance of the domestic security police (国保). The support of each other, and wider family and friends, has been essential in helping to resist the isolation and fear, as well as cope with the practical demands of being single mothers. Most relatives of detainees are told early on by the police that speaking out will only harm their case. Time after time, relatives learn that remaining silent in political cases is not rewarded. Speaking out may provide some protection from the worst abuse and, at least, it brings a degree of self-respect.

## Post-release Challenges

Even when '709' husbands are released, new sets of challenges emerge. In detention, the lawyers were tortured and it takes time to heal.

Yet families are rarely allowed the peace and space to come to terms with their traumatic experiences (Macbean 2018). Licenses to practice law have been taken away from the convicted '709' lawyers, adding to the challenge of securing their livelihoods while they remain under surveillance. Family life may never be normal again.

The world of rights defence lawyers has largely been a man's world, with lawyer Wang Yu, featured in the documentary *Hooligan Sparrow*, being one of the few exceptions (see Zeng Jinyan's conversation with director Wang Nanfu in this issue). The pioneering work of these lawyers demands frequent travel and often bruising encounters with the police. As most saw it, this was not a life for women and encouraging the participation of women was not a priority. Rights defence lawyers sought to protect their wives and children by trying to keep their two worlds apart.

Feminist activism and China's #MeToo movement suggest a growing awareness among Chinese women of the impact of the authoritarian state on their lives as women (see also Lam's interview with Zhang Leilei in this issue). The activism of the '709' wives has brought new respect for the role of women in the rights defence movement. The actions of these women will likely inspire other family members of detainees and help ensure other families are better prepared for withstanding the onslaught of police repression.

In his February 2019 Report on Women Human Rights Defenders, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst, describes how rising authoritarianism and misogyny have contributed to increased pressures on women defenders (OHCHR 2019). He expresses concern at the hostility towards them and the persistence of gender stereotypes, even within their communities. Yet, in the highly authoritarian environment in which Chinese human rights defenders operate, exploiting public and police acceptance of traditional gender roles provides women with a small space for resistance. ■