



Former China's Interpol
Chief Meng Hongwei.
PC: Crimerussia.com

Where Is China's Interpol Chief?

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In March 2018, the Chinese government ostensibly strengthened its fight against corruption by consolidating anti-graft efforts in a new 'super agency', the National Supervisory Commission (国家监察委员会, NSC). The NSC is part of President Xi Jinping's signature campaign against corruption, which he describes as a matter of 'life and death for the Party' (The Economist 2012).

One of its highest-profile detainees—as far as we know—is Meng Hongwei, the former chief of Interpol, the international police organisation, and China's former Vice-minister of Public Security. Meng vanished after returning to China from Interpol's headquarters in France on 25 September 2018. That the world's top cop had been forcibly disappeared made headlines across the world. But Meng is only one of many who have been ensnared and secretly detained in Xi's anti-corruption campaign.

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The NSC runs a detention system called *liuzhi* (留置), which can forcibly disappear anyone exercising public authority into undisclosed locations for up to six months without access to lawyers or family. Little is known about *liuzhi*—including how many people have been detained or the treatment of those held.

On the day he disappeared, Meng sent his wife a WhatsApp message with a knife emoji, indicating that he was in danger. In an unusual move for family members of high-ranking Chinese government officials, Grace Meng went public with a news conference and appealed for assistance. Ms Meng and her family remain under protection and have requested asylum in France (AFP 2019). She fears that Chinese agents may have tried to kidnap her.

Following Meng's disappearance, Chinese authorities were silent for two weeks. The NSC finally issued a one-line statement on its website acknowledging that it had detained Meng for an investigation into his having 'violated the law'

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(NSC 2018). Since then, no details have emerged as to whether he has been charged with a crime, if he has a lawyer, or anything about his whereabouts or well-being.

In December 2016, Human Rights Watch published a report detailing the abuses in *shuanggui* (双规)—a predecessor of *liuzhi*—including prolonged sleep deprivation, forced stress positions for extended periods, deprivation of water and food, severe beatings, and denial of access to family and lawyers. After ‘confessing’ to corruption, suspects were typically brought into the criminal justice system, convicted, and often sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

Shuanggui was run by the Chinese Communist Party's disciplinary agency, the Central Commission for Disciplinary Inspection (中国共产党中央纪律检查委员会, CCDI), and inflicted upon Party members. There was no specific legal framework for the system, and the practice contravened China's Law on Legislation, which requires that any ‘mandatory measures and penalties involving deprivation of citizens of their political rights or restriction of the freedom of their person’ must be governed by law.

Bo Xilai, a former member of the Party's powerful Politburo, was, according to media reports, held under *shuanggui*. Bo said later he had confessed under ‘improper pressure’; he was sentenced to life in prison. The fact that Xi's campaign depends on such an abusive system has attracted growing criticism that the campaign is, in part, a convenient way for Xi to purge political rivals and to consolidate his personal control over the government bureaucracy.

In 2017, the Chinese government abolished *shuanggui*, and replaced it with *liuzhi* (HRW 2017). *Liuzhi* is now codified in law and run by the NSC. However, the NSC shares space and personnel with the CCDI and is, in practice, under its control. While the authorities claim that *liuzhi* offers improvements over *shuanggui*, these limited measures are unlikely to deter abuses. For example, while *liuzhi* interrogators are required to videotape the interrogations, they are not obligated to disclose them to the detainees, making it difficult for them to seek redress. But these optical distinctions are apparently designed to convince an international audience, as well as the domestic audience, that the anti-corruption campaign has been improved.

The Chinese government says some of the corruption fugitives it wants are hiding in foreign countries, and it has actively lobbied foreign governments for their return in a campaign called ‘Operation Fox Hunt’. Some governments—such as France, Cyprus, and Greece—have complied (Eder and Lang 2017). Others, including Australia, Canada, and the United States, do not have extradition treaties with China, partly due to concerns about the treatment of those sent back, given China’s abuses in detention, unfair trials, and the death penalty.

In these countries, the Chinese government has resorted to other means to ‘persuade’ suspects to return, including sending undercover agents to these countries without notification or permission (Garnaut and Wen 2015; Phillips 2015), publishing the suspects’ home addresses (Shepherd 2017), and harassing and detaining their family members back in China (HRW 2018). The Chinese government’s repackaging of its anti-corruption campaign in more legal terms may have been seen as necessary to secure the cooperation of these foreign governments.

The official online magazine of the NSC celebrated its first anniversary by listing among its ‘milestones’ the return of fugitives living abroad in the United States and Bulgaria—the former ‘persuaded’ to return and the latter through extradition—and its signing of a memorandum of understanding with the Danish Parliamentary Ombudsman (NSC 2019).

Left out of this list was the death of a 45-year-old local government driver after 26 days in secret detention in May 2018—the first reported death in *liuzhi* (Cui 2018). His family, who said his body was ‘black and blue’, demanded to see videotapes of his interrogation. The authorities declined. The family has since been silenced, according to an activist following the case. The media report has also been scrubbed from the Internet. This kind of ill treatment of detainees and lack of accountability for that treatment is disturbingly common across China. The family will face a far more difficult fight for justice because of *liuzhi*’s opacity.

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Some of the people who have been subjected to torture and wrongful conviction under Xi’s anti-corruption campaign—and their families—are standing up for their rights. On 15 February 2019, more than 100 of them issued a public letter to the authorities ahead of the National People’s Congress’s annual meeting, seeking a reexamination of their cases. So far, there is little indication that the authorities are going to respond and the police have continued to harass members of the group over the years.

Meng Hongwei's six-month detention without charge was up on 25 March 2019. Two days later, the CCDI issued a statement expelling Meng from the Party 'for confronting the Party' and having 'pilfered government money to support his family's luxurious lifestyle'. But the Chinese government has not charged him with a recognisable crime, nor mentioned if he remains under incommunicado detention. Either way, we can be sure that whatever Meng is accused of, he will not be held accountable for the crimes the police force under his leadership committed against activists, lawyers, and ethnic and religious minorities.

The Chinese authorities' reliance on disappearances and arbitrary detention as a tool of punishment stands in stark contrast to their incessant rhetoric that the government supports the rule of law. The Chinese government has long maintained tight control over the country, but prior to Xi's ascent to power, it had occasionally tolerated modest reforms, such as measures to curb torture in the formal criminal justice system (HRW 2015). But Xi has turned that idea on its head, and has instead sought to adopt laws and policies that give a veneer of legitimacy to what are manifestly serious human rights violations. That *liuzhi* has been in some way codified under Chinese law does not make it any less of an abuse. That the leadership resorts to it is a powerful indictment of the naked politicisation of the legal system.

In 2015 President Xi described the law in China as being like 'knife' with a 'handle ... firmly in the hands of the Party' (Lubman 2015). As long as the Party envisions the law primarily as means to exert control rather than to deliver genuine justice, and as long as China's anti-corruption campaign relies on arbitrary detention and torture, no government should endorse it by cooperating with the NSC. ■