

China: Inciting Subversion by Association: 120 Days in Detention

Thursday 28 January 2021, by [QIAOCHU Li](#) (Date first published: 23 December 2020).

On 16 February 2020, just a few hours after her partner Xu Zhiyong, a leading Chinese human rights lawyer, was detained, women’s rights and labour activist Li Qiaochu went missing. China’s state security bodies would hold her incommunicado for four months under the system known as ‘residential surveillance at a designated location’ on suspicion of ‘inciting subversion of state power’. A few weeks earlier, Qiaochu had attempted to draw attention to the crackdown on civil rights activists, which included her partner. Before being detained, she had also participated in a volunteer team to provide free masks to sanitation workers and help women suffering from domestic violence. As a consequence, she had been put under close surveillance, with public security agents stationed outside her house and following her up until the day of her disappearance. In this account—translated and republished here with her permission—she recounts the uncertainty and terror that she experienced in the four months she spent in detention.

At about 11pm on 15 February 2020, I was busy with volunteer work related to the epidemic at Xu Zhiyong’s residence in Changping District. A friend messaged me to ask about Zhiyong, saying: ‘I heard he’s been detained.’ I was also really worried about him, as we had not been in contact for eight or nine hours. At 12:26am on 16 February, I was about to go to bed but suddenly I heard someone banging on the door. At the same moment, a man shouted in a loud voice: ‘Open up! Safety inspection!’ Alone at home after midnight, it was terrifying to hear such banging. I rushed to grab my phone and, my hands trembling, texted a friend: ‘There are people banging on the door.’ After walking back and forth in front of the door in genuine panic, finally I hesitatingly opened it.

Two men in white protective suits first rushed through the door to do an ‘epidemic safety inspection’. They pushed me into a chair, told me to sit still, and made me put on a disposable mask. I was about to ask for their identification when another man who had come in afterward, with no police uniform or ID, suddenly handcuffed me from behind and said: ‘We’re from the Public Security Bureau.’ Meanwhile, the two men who came in first took off their protective suits and murmured: ‘It’s so hot.’ Even though I had been followed by vehicles from the internal security service for a month and a half, I had still failed to anticipate such a home visit. By the time I calmed down, about ten men had entered the living room, none of whom were wearing uniforms or had shown their ID. At this moment I realised that I was still in my pajamas, so I indicated my need to get changed. One of the men said: ‘Wait a minute. A female officer will be here soon.’ I waited for another five or six minutes, seated the whole while, and then a woman in uniform came in, carrying a wearable camera. She took me into the bedroom to get changed.

After I had changed, I went back to sitting in the chair in the living room. An internal security agent from Haidian District, Beijing came in. I had met him previously when I was summoned on 31 December 2019. He showed me a summons and then read it out without expression: ‘Li Qiaochu, you are now summoned on suspicion of inciting subversion of state power.’ Hearing this, I was completely at a loss as I tried my best to recall what conduct of mine could constitute this offence

and pondered what would happen next. Waves of anxiety and fear about the future overwhelmed me. Then the internal security agent and two others began to search the two bedrooms of Xu Zhiyong's home, while I was asked to remain seated in the chair in the living room with handcuffs on. They put items that they found in the living room into resealable bags, including mobile phones, USBs, laptops, and books. Then they asked me to sign a list of confiscated items they had prepared. Staff from the Aobei Residential Compound management office were also on the scene. During a brief break in their search, the internal security agent who had read out the summons asked: 'Do you remember me?' 'Yes,' I replied. He continued: 'It appears that my previous warnings to you were useless.' Having finished searching Xu Zhiyong's home, they informed me that they would be going to Tianzuo Guoji Residential Compound in Haidian District to search my own home. Just before we left, I asked if I could bring the little turtle and goldfish kept in the fishbowl (they were Zhiyong's daughter's favourite pets) with me. The internal security agent who had read the summons said, with a sort of helpless smile: 'There's no way we can let you take a fishbowl with you.'

After about half an hour we arrived at my place. I was handcuffed all the way there and did not dare to say a single word, but I kept wondering what heinous crime I had committed to deserve this treatment. Four or five officers went into my home to carry out a search. My home was not spacious, and they rifled through bookshelves, cupboards, areas under the bed and wardrobes. They found an unused mobile phone, a scanner, a recorder, as well as a 'citizen seal' that I used when sending postcards to prisoners of conscience. Again they asked me to sign a list of confiscated items. As before, staff from the Tianzuo Guoji Residential Compound management office were on the scene during the search. I asked if I could take a painkiller, as I had got a migraine. The internal security agent responsible for the search poured me a glass of water. Before we left, I pointed to the cupboard and asked if I could take my anti-depressants with me. After some hesitation, the same agent put all the drugs in the cupboard into my handbag and said: 'Don't worry. If all this lasts a while we'll get you a prescription.' When I heard 'if all this lasts a while', my heart skipped a beat, as I realised that this summons was unlikely to be similar to the previous one. What would happen to me? How long would I be out of contact with the world? All these were unknowns.

Half an hour later, I was sitting in a blue business vehicle, still handcuffed. Wearing handcuffs the whole time made my wrists hurt badly. I tried to adjust my posture, but this only made the handcuffs tighter. Soon the car arrived at the Haidian District Investigation Centre. The first time I was summoned I was also detained there but then I was released after 24 hours. So a thought crossed my mind: Would I be released after 24 hours again?

Having gone through a series of health check procedures, including a blood test and urine test, I was asked to sit in an iron chair in the investigation room, still handcuffed. Two plain-clothes officers who had not shown their ID sat across from me. The younger officer, who was tall and looked strong, glared at me, whereas the older officer lowered his head and did not even look at me.

Suddenly, the younger officer questioned me in a fierce voice: 'Do you know why you were summoned?'

I replied: 'No.'

He raised his voice to show his growing anger. 'Did you post things online that you shouldn't have? And did you also do interviews with foreign media?'

I was truly terrified by his tone, and my heart raced. But there was nothing wrong in what I had done, so I tried to calm myself down a bit and not let my voice quiver. I replied: 'I just posted a truthful account of my experience of being summoned. Some media outlets were paying attention and called me, and I simply answered their questions about my experience of being summoned. Is

there anything wrong in doing that?’

He ignored my question and continued in a loud voice: ‘What have you been doing recently? Who have you met? You know it very well!’

Hearing this, I felt completely at a loss. Since I had returned home in handcuffs after the New Year, I had been followed by cars from the internal security service. Why were these agents, who were fully aware of all my activities, still asking who I had met and what I had done? All my activities had been undertaken right under their noses.

Seeing that I was not saying anything, the older officer said in a softer tone: ‘You must have left traces of your activities. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have summoned you. You don’t have to answer our questions right now. We’re going to have plenty of time to chat.’

Hearing this, my heart skipped another beat. It was possible that I might be disappeared! I could not help trembling as I recalled the suffering of the 709 Lawyers that I had read about online. It appeared that this interrogation was coming to an end, so I mustered the courage to ask: ‘How is Xu Zhiyong? Is he still okay?’

The kindlier officer walked over to my side, patted my shoulder, and replied: ‘I can assure you that he is healthy at the moment.’

When the interrogation was over, I was asked to sign the interrogation record. The younger officer was obviously really unsatisfied with my answers, and when he signed the interrogation record he mumbled: ‘I don’t even want to sign this.’ Then I was sent to a temporary detention room in the Investigation Centre. I was the only person in the room. I sat on the cold slate, handcuffed the whole time. Fear, anxiety, and worry kept overwhelming me. Even worse, it was extremely cold in the room. I felt very sleepy, so I lay down on the cold slate, but at once I was frozen to the bone. I did not sleep the whole night. Early in the morning of 16 February, I was given a vegetable steamed bun. I asked to take my anti-depressants, but the guard replied: ‘We can’t make that decision. You’ll have to wait unless you have symptoms like a fever or a cold or something.’

My time at the Investigation Centre was like torture. On the one hand, I kept trying to recall what on earth I had done to be suspected of ‘inciting subversion of state power’. At the same time, I was also worried about Zhiyong, with whom I had not been in contact for more than ten hours. Judging from the information I picked up from the interrogation, he had probably been detained. Had he been subjected to violence? Was he given sufficient protection against the epidemic? On the other hand, I could not put the volunteer work that was still underway in Wuhan out of my mind. Had any progress been made on the drafting of suggestions for preventing gender violence in Fangcang Hospital? Had the patient’s family whom I talked to several hours before already been admitted to hospital? Time passed as I was immersed in these complicated trains of thought.

In the afternoon of 16 February, I was taken to the main hall of the Investigation Centre. Five or six people, none of whom wore police uniforms or showed their ID, got out of a car outside the door. They took out a black hood and put it over my head. Suddenly I could not see anything. It was the first time I had experienced anything like this. I was so terrified that my legs were trembling and my mind went blank. I was carried by the arms by two people and pushed into the car.

I sat in the car, wearing handcuffs and the black hood the whole time. I completely lost track of time and had no idea how long the car had been driving or where it was going.

When the black hood was taken off, I found myself in a padded room. There was a single bed, a desk, and two chairs in the room. Standing around me were four or five young female guards in uniform.

There was also an older female guard who was standing right in front of me. In a stern voice, she demanded that I take off all my clothes, undergo an inspection, and change into the clothes and slippers they had prepared for me in advance. Next, I was asked to sit still in the chair in front of the desk, with my hands in my lap. Three guards surrounded me, all wearing walkie-talkies. They called me 'the target'. They told me: 'You're not allowed to talk or move without permission when you're here.'

My glasses were taken away and I was ordered not to look around. I did not dare to turn my head so I narrowed my eyes to try to examine the room out of the corners of my eyes. To my surprise, I saw a small window in the room, about the size of the palm of my hand. This brought me a tiny bit of joy, because I would be able to figure out whether it was day or night.

I could not help turning my head towards the window, only to immediately hear: 'Target! Sit still and look forward! Who said you could move?!' I was greatly taken by surprise. The young woman in her twenties who was standing in front of me was expressionless and her eyes narrowed while she stared at me. This was the first time I had seen a real person who behaved as if she was a robot. Only when they reported my subtle movements and changes of facial expression through their walkie-talkies could I feel that they were real living people.

After dinner, I was asked to sit still yet again. Suddenly, there was some noise outside the door, and two figures appeared. My heart raced uncontrollably. Two plain-clothes men came into the room, holding employee cards. I could not read the names on the cards, and I did not dare to ask.

The taller man informed me that they were responsible for the preliminary inquest portion of my case and instructed me to call him 'Officer Li'. He added that he had been the lead investigator in Ding Jiayi's 'New Citizenry Case' in 2013. Officer Li took out a piece of paper and started to read it out. It turned out to be the notice that I was being placed under 'residential surveillance in a designated location' on suspicion of 'inciting subversion of state power'. While I was reflecting on the words 'inciting subversion of state power', he looked at me and said in a low voice: 'The highest penalty for the charge of inciting subversion of state power is the death penalty. We're going to monitor you as if you've been sentenced to death! Have you thought about how those guards looked at you?!'

Hearing the words 'sentenced to death' utterly terrified me. I felt like I could hardly breathe and my mind went completely blank. While I had been reflecting on 'inciting subversion of state power' a moment ago, now I could not think of anything at all. I have no idea what they said after that, but I did hear them ask me if I needed anything.

I took a deep breath in an effort to calm myself down a bit and conceal my feelings of helplessness and anxiety when sitting in a tiny, airtight room. I said: 'I have quite serious depression and have been taking anti-depressants for a long time. I request that I be allowed to take these as soon as possible. I also request that my parents be made aware of my situation.'

When I signed the interrogation record, I noticed that the detention centre was called the 'Beijing Municipal Tongda Asset Management Ltd. Reception Centre'. Ah, so this completely hermetic and strictly supervised little room was actually called a 'reception centre'.

The second interrogation took place in the evening of 17 February. Officer Li told me that my father had been notified in writing of my situation, but that with respect to my request for my anti-depressants, they could not provide me with those at the moment, because the fever clinic at Xiehe Hospital where I had gone previously could not find my medical records.

However, it was only after I arrived back home on 19 June that I learned that since 16 February, when I had been incommunicado, my father had first contacted Dongxiaokou Police Station, which was the local station for the area of Xu Zhiyong's home, and then Beixiaguan Police Station, which was the local station for the area of my own home. The police at neither station gave my father any details about my situation. He then called the municipal Public Security Bureau, but after receiving two phone calls from my father they stopped answering the phone. After a day or so, my father was told, without any legal formalities, to go to Yuqiao Police Station in Tongzhou District. There, he met internal security agents from the Beijing municipal bureau and Tongzhou District. Without any preamble, these internal security agents showed my father one of Xu Zhiyong's articles and asked him what he thought about it. My dad was perplexed: 'It's my daughter you've detained. Why have you asked me to read Xu Zhiyong's article? Wasn't my daughter detained because she wrote some articles herself?'

The internal security agents then asked my father to sign a notice but then they took the document away once he had done so. My father, greatly distressed, did not even clearly see the document he had signed.

Later, my parents were questioned by an internal security agent at the Beijing municipal bureau named Sun, and it was only then that they found out that I was suspected of 'inciting subversion of state power'. My mother asked him: 'What on earth did my daughter do to be suspected of inciting subversion of state power?' Sun refused to answer on the grounds of 'state secrecy'. My mother inquired further: 'Is it like how we teachers mark subjective questions on an exam? If we think they're correct, then they are? If we think they're not, they're not?' Sun replied: 'You can understand it like that if you want. We've just been handling this case in accordance with the law.' This 'disappearance in accordance with the law' is certainly one of the strangest experiences a person can have.

In this tiny 'residential surveillance in a designated location' room, the dazzling white light above me was kept on around the clock. For the first month and a half, I had to sit still for four hours straight in the morning and again in the afternoon. I could take the opportunities presented by mealtimes and trips to the toilet to move around a little. Sometimes, I would ask for water several times just so I could get a chance to change posture. Sitting still for eight hours every day made my entire body stiff, as if the blood in my body were no longer circulating.

As for the three robotic female guards who stood beside me, would their experience of monitoring 'a prisoner sentenced to death' be enormously beneficial to their lives? When they were closely observing me sleeping, showering, or going to the toilet, what were they actually thinking about?

For the two and a half months that followed, there was one less robotic guard, and I was allowed to move around for twenty minutes after every two hours of sitting still. (During my interview with the internal security service on 9 September, Officer Li specifically emphasised: 'I was the one who made sure you got the opportunity to stand up and move around. How can you only talk about your suffering during your detention? What about the times when we treated you nicely? Isn't it important for upright people to have a clear conscience?')

Because I was required to sit motionless for long periods of time, my calf muscles began to atrophy, and after I was released I could not walk properly. Every night when I was going to sleep, I had had to face the bright light above my head directly. I had already been prone to insomnia and nervousness, so at the beginning I could not fall asleep at all. As soon as I used my hand to cover my eyes, guards would scold me and sometimes even push my arm down violently. Then I realised that there was even a specific posture for sleeping at the detention centre. I had to lie on my back, and my hands, shoulders, neck, and face all had to be uncovered and visible outside of the quilt. Even if I

changed my posture after falling asleep, I would be poked awake by the robotic guards.

I gradually learned the 'rules' that needed to be obeyed at a 'residential surveillance centre': always obey orders given by guards; raise your hand to report any issue you have, and then security guards will report to higher-ups via walkie-talkies, and you can only do anything when permission is given; talking to guards is forbidden; you are not allowed to look around when someone enters the room; when you walk around inside the room, always move slowly and maintain a certain distance from the window and walls; keep your personal belongings organised and tidy, and you will be monitored by guards even when you go to the toilet or take a shower. If you do not follow the rules, you will be scolded by the guards and the correctional officers, and they will threaten that your daily activity time, already restricted, will be restricted further.

I was deprived of everything. Everyone who appeared before me could scold, threaten, and lecture me. The correctional system has granted itself unlimited power in the name of 'national security' and exercises its absolute power to the maximum. This is a correctional system that drains vitality and attempts vainly to transform people under surveillance into 'obedient machines'. Living is just being ceaselessly interrogated.

Where was this place? What was its purpose? Sitting in my hermetic room, I had absolutely no idea. But my hearing and memory were unusually keen during this period: every day I could hear the roar of planes taking off and landing at various times, and every evening I heard the sounds of military exercises and military slogans being shouted. With the door of my room behind me, interrogators would open it and walk to the chair opposite in about five or six steps. From the chair near the door to the toilet on the right side of the room was about eight steps, and from there to the bed board was less than ten steps. I could not get close to the window beside the bed, and anyway it was blocked by thick curtains. I came to understand the human longing for sunlight and fresh air. By grasping certain patterns—the robotic female guards changed every two hours, every half an hour flex staff brought me a small paper cup of water—I figured out how to calculate the passing of time, and figuring that out was just to encourage myself to take a bit of a break when sitting in a fixed position for the entire day.

I found the daily walking exercise pretty depressing: with a robotic guard setting my pace behind me and three guards watching me, in the brief time in which I could move around I was pressed between two of the robots, one in front of me and one behind about ten small steps apart. I had to take slow, small steps with the guard behind me matching my pace exactly. She would regularly tread on my slippers because she was following me so closely.

I already suffered from moderate depression and anxiety. About five days before I was detained, access to my depression medication had been interrupted, and following this I experienced heart palpitations, anxiety, insomnia, headaches, and other pretty serious physical and mental reactions. After that, internal security went to the Xiehe Hospital where I had gone before and retrieved all my medical records. My parents went to the hospital regularly to fill my prescription, and I was able to continue taking my depression medication. Every morning, two people in white lab coats who called themselves 'doctors' came to do rounds and ask about my physical condition. Before this, I had always thought that doctors and 'the angels in white' [nurses] were the same, but in a hellish environment like this, can there really be angels?

Their daily inquiries were so cold and mechanical:

'Doctor, I've been suffering from insomnia, palpitations, and headaches.'

'There's nothing to be done. The environment in here is just like this. It can't be changed. If you

really can't sleep, we can give you some drugs for that.'

'Doctor, I've been constipated for three or four days.'

'We can give you something for that, and increase your constipation medicine to four pills a day.'

'If I take that much, I get cramps. It's really too painful.'

'There's nothing we can do about that. Otherwise, you'll just have to have a glycerine enema once every three days.'

When I had been held in detention for about two months and the environment was making my depression and anxiety worse and worse, my interrogators told me that they had requested that a clinical psychologist come to see me specifically about my depression, to take a look at me and to adjust the dosage of my medication. One afternoon, the psychologist entered my room accompanied by another doctor. He asked the robotic guard standing beside me to leave the room temporarily, indicating that this would create a slightly more relaxed environment for me to be diagnosed in. During the hour in which the guard was not in the room, the psychologist asked about my emotional state, observed the facilities in my room carefully, and acquainted himself with my previous medical history and my specific past experiences with illness. The mechanised system of management that I had been subjected to for such a long time meant that I was incredibly pleased to encounter a bit of humanity and wanted to carry on talking to the psychologist, even to the point that I mistakenly thought that I was in the treatment room at Xiehe Hospital. The hour passed quickly, and the psychologist recommended that I take mood stabilisers twice a day, instead of taking them irregularly when I urgently needed them like before (because long-term use of mood stabilisers can easily cause memory problems and addiction).

In the following two months, besides medication, I learned that vomiting after a meal also relieved my fear and pain. Every day after breakfast and dinner, I would raise my hand and ask to go to the toilet to vomit. I would squat helplessly next to the toilet, feeling overwhelming waves in my stomach, and by means of this abusive self-torture, I could release the anger and pressure that I had nowhere to vent. But then I would hear a guard speaking to someone through a walkie-talkie: 'She's vomited up the medicine she just took. Send over another dose.' 'Tell the doctor to give her an antiemetic.' A few minutes later, the doctor would stride into the room and give me one.

My frequent vomiting after meals was troubling to the guards in the detention centre. Once after I finished vomiting, I sat on my chair and a guard walked into my room in a rage and shouted: 'Have we treated you too well? We've given you fruit now and then, let you have some free time, reduced the number of guards to two. And what do you do? You're constantly giving us trouble! If you continue on like this, we'll go back to the previous arrangement. Does sitting motionless in a chair all day feel good? Do you like having three guards surrounding you?' In that moment I was utterly frail and helpless. Unexpectedly, I thought a bit about whether the self-abusive means I'd used to vent my emotions had been troublesome to others, and I lowered my head and apologised. The guard went on: 'If you consider suicide in a place like this, it can only be because life is not as good as death.'

I did not just abandon my appeal for the rights corresponding to my status. I even identified with the value system of seeing rights as special benefits or rewards that I was given like charity. If I wanted to survive a little more comfortably here, I had to cooperate and I had to obey. Sometimes I would feel physically satisfied because I could eat a little more meat, or because I got some extra time for physical activity, or if I had the chance to bathe a little longer. I dreaded hearing the guards or the interrogators say things like: 'You've been behaving well lately, we'll let you have some more

physical activity' or 'Your behaviour's been better so we can give you some meat' or 'You've been more cooperative so you can take a bath.' This distorted system crushed and tore at the principles I lived my life by and stripped away my human dignity.

Meanwhile, I got headaches, palpitations, constipation, stomach problems, urinary tract infections, and other problems continuously, one after another. When my body and my mind were in an extremely bad state, I could take up to a dozen drugs for 'parallel symptoms' in a single day. A pretrial interrogator once said to me, like he was making a joke: 'This is because you have a problem with wanting to take your medications. It's not like we forced you.'

After my release I applied for disclosure of information from the Haidian District Public Security Bureau, asking for the qualifications of the doctors who had visited me, done daily rounds, and written my prescriptions during my detention, their units, records of my use of medication, and so on. During one discussion of my release under supervision, Officer Li, who was in charge of my case, said: 'At first, we had hundreds of reasons not to give you your prescriptions. We took a huge risk letting you fight for your right to continue taking antidepressants, but then you didn't take them properly and blamed us. Do you not have a conscience? What do you say about that?'

I never had a chance to talk to the robotic female guards in my little room. One afternoon, I was sitting properly on my chair when one of the guards standing beside me fainted because she was unwell. Without even thinking, I stood up to help her and asked her if she was okay. Her companion standing opposite me roared: 'Target! Who said you could move?! Sit down with your mouth shut!' I explained: 'She fainted and I'm just trying to help her.' 'Just sit down! Don't talk to me!' Only after she had finished reprimanding me did she help her dizzy companion into a chair and use her walkie-talkie to ask one of the flex staff to come in and stand in for her for a while.

In these sealed off and closely supervised rooms in which people are kept, even elementary interpersonal concern is forbidden. They are saturated with strict behavioural controls and baseless reprimands. In such an environment, conversing and building relationships with my interrogators was my only opportunity to speak and communicate with others. This way, through saying things like 'You are only allowed to talk to us,' 'During this interview you can sit in a more relaxed manner or stand up and move your limbs,' or 'We brought you some snacks,' a convict's sense of psychological dependency on my interrogators was built up, to the extent that the rights I ought to have had were transformed into favours and rewards. I fell imperceptibly into Stockholm Syndrome. One day, in a kind of automatic state, I wrote: 'The police patiently instructed me. They didn't torture me. They gave me opportunities to try to get my prescriptions and engage in physical activity. I deeply regret the insolent things I said about them on Twitter.' That night in my dreams I saw my own lifeless body.

From 16 February to the end of April, with the exception of a trip for a preliminary hearing, I was questioned for at least two hours every evening. They told me that I was suspected of inciting subversion of state power for the crime of posting Xu Zhiyong's 'inflammatory' article on the Internet. Later, they brought me dozens of printed articles by Xu Zhiyong one after another and made me read them page by page, and after I had finished I would 'criticise' them. That feeling of humiliation followed me for a long time. It was like biting off my tongue to try to commit suicide, but failing, and then ultimately still having to use the stub of my tongue to mimic their language. I was told to write a 'statement of repentance' about my 'crime'. Again and again, they prompted me to write 'forcefully'. I didn't understand what that meant, so they said: 'You have to write about how you have rethought and criticised Xu's thinking. You realise that by helping him publish his article on the Internet you've handed a knife to foreign powers who want to attack the government of China. How do you wish to amend your conduct? Do you wish to draw a clear line between yourself and subversive thinking and foreign powers?'

To what degree did my statement of repentance determine the criminal charges brought against me? I have my suspicions. But in the process of demanding that the statement of repentance be revised again and again, the interrogators and the internal security agents achieve complete control of a person's body and spiritual will. From acts of revolt to the consciousness of revolt, from the ability to think for oneself to one's aspiration to think for oneself, this made obedience, cooperation, and submissiveness come from my own mind, so that the humiliation and trampling of my character was achieved together. Whether they were arresting me, interrogating me, guarding me, or even maintaining my stability, their existence meant that I could never escape the disaster of being labelled a 'prisoner'. 'I am too weak and yielding,' I wrote in my statement of repentance, 'I deserve to be humiliated.' Even after I was released, I continued to persecute and deny myself: 'Didn't you admit your guilt regarding unlawful acts and show repentance? Didn't you say that you wished to draw a clear line in your thinking?' Those who had restricted my freedom and placed me in a state of total isolation spoke to me of 'commitment' and 'morality'. They used the statement of repentance to humiliate me in interview after interview, so that I continued to experience shame and fear even after I had left the detention centre.

During my trial, they attempted to persuade me to convince Xu Zhiyong to confess his guilt. At the same time, they asked me whether Xu Zhiyong had any defects of personality. After not receiving an answer, they said among themselves: 'Every day now Xu Zhiyong asks about the epidemic in the United States, and he's especially worried about his daughter's safety. We can give him this as a way out: if he is willing to confess his guilt, we can make sure his daughter is safe and sound.'

In a situation of 24-hour video surveillance and real-time reporting by the guards, even my facial expressions belonged to the state apparatus. I did not dare to laugh. I did not dare to furrow my brows. There were times when I would quietly cry because I suddenly felt awful, and the robotic guard would expressionlessly pass me a tissue, and then the same evening the interrogation would be 'comforting' in tone and concerned with analysing my crying. I remember one day, an officer who had interrogated me several times before came into my room to talk to me. As soon as he walked in and saw me he said: 'Why do you have such a stupid expression on your face? Have you become an idiot? Has your brain stopped working?'

As a woman in detention, going to the toilet, bathing, and changing your clothes must be done in front of female guards and surveillance cameras. Personal privacy? A sense of shame? Evidently there is no right to talk about that there. I was not permitted to tie my hair back, and I felt so embarrassed thinking about the messy appearance of my dishevelled hair. Toward the end of my custody, I finally successfully applied for a black rubber band to tie my hair back. I was not allowed to wear underwear, and whenever I was confronted by male interrogators I would always subconsciously make sure that my clothes were not clinging to my body.

Officer Li would occasionally say things that were sexually humiliating. On one occasion, they were going to be away on other business for a few days, so they came to tell me that there would be no visits to court for a while. Officer Li said, half in jest: 'Even though it's only going to be a few days, I'll be sad to be apart from you.' When we discussed my relationship with Xu Zhiyong, he constantly belittled and humiliated me: 'Have you heard of living people being buried with the dead? Do you feel like you're important? You're nothing more than a burial object for Xu Zhiyong.' 'You don't intend to wait until Xu gets out so you can live together happily, do you? Don't you want to have your own children? Look: he's really old, but your land is still rich and fertile.' 'Do you think Xu is a hard man? Of course, I have no idea if he's hard in bed or not.' I can't remember my expression or my reaction at the time, but I remember these words extremely clearly. Through sexual humiliation they tried to make me feel like I 'only received this treatment when I mistakenly rejected a compliment.'

During my detention, my interrogators continually reinforced my solitude by saying things like

'You've already been forgotten by the outside world' and 'Besides your parents, no one cares about your situation.' During that period, I regularly thought: 'If they just dug a hole and threw me into it, maybe no one would even know.' One afternoon, Officer Li brought me a letter my mother had written and spread it out in front of me. I recognised my mother's handwriting. It said: 'You have to cooperate with the police comrades. No matter what you do, you are Mom and Dad's child.' My heart hurt like it was a needle cushion. I was utterly filled with guilt because my parents were suffering on my account. I lowered my head and said nothing. Officer Li said: 'Every day now your parents are in tears at home. Would you like to write a letter to tell them that you're safe? Your parents' worries may be based on their being deceived by foreign powers. You have to warn them in your letter not to be casually in contact with the outside world.' I was so conflicted: if I did not write the letter as demanded, my parents would not receive any information about me. They would continue to worry about my health and security and continue to work on my behalf. Would writing a letter and letting them see my handwriting relieve their worries? So, I wrote a letter to my parents as demanded. 'Dad, Mom, I'm so sorry for making you anxious about me. Everything is fine here, my rights are safeguarded, and I have not been maltreated. Don't be in contact with the outside world, and please just wait for me to come home.'

After returning home under supervised release in June, I learned that my parents had seen the letter I wrote and were relieved about my situation in detention. They were also convinced by my warning that they should not be in contact with the outside world. After that they refused to do so, and only communicated with a lawyer who wanted them to sign a power of attorney agreement and maintained contact with the prefectural and municipal internal security offices. With the approval of internal security, they prepared clothes and books for me, thanking them effusively for that.

My interrogations continued until the end of April. After that, the interrogators brought in Officer Guo from Haidian District to 'help me return to a normal life' and to stay in contact with me about life problems after the modifications in the compulsory measures I was subject to.

One day in early May, Officer Li came into my room carrying some papers, and asked me loudly in an inquisitorial tone: 'Did you sign a power of attorney letter for a lawyer before February?' I was really puzzled by this so I looked up and asked: 'Do you really mean that I don't have the right to engage a lawyer? I remember that the law states that I can engage a lawyer on my behalf, and that my lawyer can apply to visit me.' Officer Li replied: 'Does it really make sense for you to request a lawyer in your situation? It's not possible for you to meet with him.' Next, he pushed the papers in front of me, pointed to them, and said: 'Someone used their status as your lawyer to spread lies on the Internet, to say that you were missing and that they didn't know if you were alive or dead, and to take advantage of you to attack the government of China. Now you have to write something to clear your name and make clear whether you're colluding with human rights lawyers and foreign powers. You were going to be getting out in a few days. If you're going to blame anyone, blame the people on the outside who are appealing on your behalf. If we feel that people are still taking advantage of you after your release, we'll take you back into protective custody for a while.' I was astonished at this, but in the three months I had been locked up, this was the first time I had learned in this way that there were people in the outside world paying attention to me and looking for me. I realised that I had not been forgotten, and this gave me the desire to survive and get out of that place, to give myself the chance to speak.

In the environment of the detention centre, I found ways to survive. I learned to meditate on the movies, poems, and novels I had watched and read, to fill up the long periods spent sitting in my chair. Those precious memories allowed me to gradually filter out the contents of all the brainwashing, to preserve my vitality, and to keep myself from being transformed into their disciplined machine. Doing this took all the energy I had.

The great power that sustained me there was the knowledge that these few months would be the closest I would be to Xu Zhiyong in the coming years. I longed for some kind of special abilities, like telepathy, so that I could converse with him. One interrogator showed me a photo of the two of us together on my computer. I did all I could to imprint that photo in my mind. I thought constantly of the daily life we had together, and these details would also appear in my dreams.

On the morning of 19 June, when an internal security agent read out the 'Notice of Decision Concerning Supervised Release' to me, I sat in my chair numbly, unable to feel joy that I had regained my freedom. More than this, I was confused, and I did not know how to keep going along my solitary road once I was out. On the second day after my release, I tried to sort through my experiences on the inside, but I had no memory of some of the most difficult parts. The realm of public opinion constantly emphasises a person's efforts and strengths, their defiance in the face of tribulations, and showing one's weaknesses is discouraged. Even more attention and publicity is given to learned or heroic subjects, but psychological trauma is ignored or stigmatised by so many people.

In the days immediately following my release, I had panic attacks, nightmares, insomnia, an inability to focus, heightened alertness, traumatic flashbacks, trembling limbs ... At the same time, I also became a 'semi-underground worker' and when I met with friends we would speak very quietly and examine our surroundings carefully. Meanwhile, my parents worried about my safety to an almost neurotic degree. They engaged in constant self-examination. They worried every time I left the house, worried that I was talking too much, worried that there were informers all around me, and even worried that internal security would form a bad impression of me. I felt like my whole family was suffering from a kind of 'investigative mania'.

I often dream about the circumstances in which I wrote my statement of repentance. The feelings of guilt and humiliation never stop tormenting me and I never stop blaming myself: Why did I just stand there submissively, watching them rifle through my things and letting them put me in handcuffs and cover my head with a black hood? Why would I obediently wish to sit on only half of my chair? Was there any part of it I could look back on fondly? Isolation and helplessness, the fettering of my strength and determination—all of these experiences control me. We are restricted by the system. Each of us has contributed in different ways to the formation of this system, and in the end we lack even the ability to engage in passive resistance. Our submission allows those who actively work for the system to do as they please, and an evil space takes shape. How can we escape it?

Obviously, the internal security agents knew how to exacerbate my fears. The greater my fear, the easier it was to control me. If I opted not to say anything at all, they would communicate my fears to even more people. Recording the specific details of my experiences in detention is my way of resisting those fears. Rage and indignation are easily dispelled with the passing of time, but the truth is unchangeable. Even if everyone forgets about it, it is its own witness, and regardless of how it is suppressed or threatened, even if black and white are totally confused, it can no longer be concealed or silenced.

Even if the price of speaking out is losing my freedom again, I do not regret writing about my experiences, because I know that the moment I summoned the courage to tell the truth, the feelings of humiliation and fear the internal security agents tried to produce in me were easily broken. If you cannot speak courageously, you cannot act freely. We must speak directly and in a way that does not avoid problems. We must talk about the details, our traumas, and our weaknesses. Our doing so is what those who avoid such things, those who maintain secrets, are afraid of.

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