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HRW – Human Rights Watch

“I’m Actually Freer Than They Are”

February 5, 2019 is Lunar New Year, the biggest holiday in China. It is a time when people travel to see their families, enjoying fundamental rights to liberty and freedom of movement. But these basic rights are often unjustly denied to those Chinese whose lives are dedicated to protecting the rights of others – the activists, lawyers, and writers who are China’s embattled human rights defenders. Human Rights Watch spoke to more than two dozen Chinese human rights defenders, asking them to share their stories.

In recent years, Chinese authorities have intensified their efforts against human rights defenders, subjecting them to various kinds of harassment and continuous surveillance, or detaining and prosecuting them on fabricated criminal charges. Human Rights Watch has extensively documented (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/china-and-tibet>) cases from across China.

Human Rights Watch spoke to more than two dozen Chinese human rights defenders, asking them to share stories of the police harassment they had recently experienced. Some said the harassment felt so routine they could not even think of a story that stood out. Others declined to share detailed information, worrying that publicizing their story would further restrict their freedom. Some even asked us to leave their story out altogether because they did not want to “make life harder” for their government minders. After many years of daily interactions, they empathize with their guards’ unpleasant job.

The stories rights defenders shared reveal their remarkable resilience, strength and humor in the face of severe and unrelenting oppression. The following are among those they agreed to share publicly.

Their quotes have been edited for clarity and brevity.

Li Xuewen

Li Xuewen, dissident writer.

“In December, two police officers, pretending to be apartment buyers, came by our apartment with our landlord to evict me and my wife. The landlord said to us in a stern voice, ‘I have sold the apartment to them. You must move out!’ I pulled the landlord aside and said, ‘I know they are the police, and you are forced by them to do this.’ Our

landlord felt a little embarrassed and said quietly, ‘You know I’m just an ordinary person. I can’t fight back. They have summoned me to the police station twice and made me do this.’”

Hu Jia

Hu Jia, activist and recipient of Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

“I have police officers standing outside my apartment 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. They take notes of everything I do, even the time I turn off my lights at night. During politically ‘sensitive’ events, they even come into my hotel room where [the government temporarily] detains me. When they are being ‘hard,’ they would say, ‘This is state policy! You can’t do this!’ When they are being ‘soft,’ they would say, ‘Can you please pity us?’ I feel these people aren’t free at all. They can’t even make decisions about their own words and thoughts. In a way, I’m actually freer than they are.”

Ai Xiaoming

Ai Xiaoming, documentary filmmaker, activist, former professor at Sun Yat-sen University.

“In April, when [President] Xi Jinping came to visit the city where I live, Wuhan, the personnel from the local neighborhood office were ordered to keep watch over me. Every day, they were outside my apartment. I yelled at them, ‘You ladies, why do you want to be spies? Wait there, let me grab a camera and take pictures of you!’ I went inside and came out again, but they had left. They were embarrassed.”

Wang Qiaoling

Wang Qiaoling, activist and campaigner for the release of human rights lawyers.

“In December, we three women went to the gate of the Supreme Court. A security guard spoke into his walkie-talkie, ‘Disperse them!’ They rushed to separate us. A guard grabbed Li Wenzu [activist and wife of imprisoned lawyer Wang Quanzhang] and said to

her, ‘We have 600 guards today!’ After a period of chaotic tussling, the guards actually pushed the three of us back together. I thought, ‘Well, it seems you hired too many people. It’s not working well.’ It was funny.”

Ye Du

Wu Yangwei (known as Ye Du), writer and activist.

“After dealing with each other for so many years, the police officers who guard my apartment and follow me around no longer hurl harsh words at me. They usually just say things like ‘We can’t help. We are just executing the orders from our superiors.’ All bland, nothing interesting.”

Zhang Lifan

Zhang Lifan, historian.

“In January, I attended a talk. During the break, a friend and I went to the restroom. As we were chatting, the friend mentioned Mao Zedong. Suddenly, a ‘cleaning worker’ in the restroom took out his phone and snapped three or four pictures of us. The people in the restroom were all shocked. I stared at the ‘worker’ and he just went into a stall as if nothing happened.”

Wang Yi

Cheng Jianping (known as Wang Yi), activist.

“Last year around New Year, two police officers met me and my husband. One said, ‘Spring Festival is coming, and the Henan public security bureau wants to send our holiday wishes to some “key personnel” (that is, “important persons to be controlled (<https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2017/06/20/tibet-glossary-repression>))’). You are very lucky. You are one of them. The bureau said every person will be awarded 500 yuan (US\$75). We personally feel this is too little, so we added 500 yuan out of our own pocket. So, 1000 (\$150) in total.’ They want to use the money to appease us so we don’t ‘make a fuss’ during the holiday. This is just so sick and absurd.”

Gao Yu

Gao Yu, journalist.

“The police officers try to block me from seeing my friends all the time. They call my meeting friends – or even just one friend – a ‘mass incident.’ One time, I was able to sneak out of my apartment, but they spotted me at a subway entrance. A big guy grabbed me and held me tight. I said, ‘How about I scream “robbery, help!” now?’ He said, ‘Then I will lie face down, grab your leg and say, “Mother, let’s go home.”’”

ecoi.net summary:

Article on the situation of human rights defenders



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