
MAY NO OTHER MOTHER FEEL THIS PAIN

An Interview with Gao Qinsheng, Mother of Shi Tao

By Shi Ping

Shi Tao, a journalist and member of the Independent Chinese PEN Center, is currently serving a 10-year sentence for “leaking state secrets.” The World Association of Newspapers recently honored Shi with its 2007 Pen of Freedom Award in recognition of his contributions to the struggle for press freedom in China. Shi Tao’s mother, Gao Qinsheng, traveled to Cape Town, South Africa, to accept the award on behalf of her son. She then traveled to the United States to hold discussions with legal professionals about filing a lawsuit against Yahoo!, the Internet company that divulged Shi Tao’s personal information to the Chinese authorities. A writer for HRIC’s Chinese-language e-weekly, Huaxia Dianzi Bao, had an opportunity to speak with Gao Qinsheng in New York.

Huaxia Dianzi Bao (HXB): *You recently traveled across the globe to accept the 2007 Pen of Freedom Award on behalf of Shi Tao. What experience during your travels has left the deepest impression on you?*

Gao Qinsheng (Gao): I have been most impressed with the innate moral sense within people’s hearts. All I have seen over the past few weeks has convinced me that our world is one of justice and righteousness. Back in China, I had no idea that so many people around the world had been following my son’s plight so closely. Such global empathy and support proves that Shi Tao is completely innocent, and was simply performing his duty as a journalist. Despite the difficulties of the past few years, I now know that we are not alone. I remember that when I went onstage to accept the Pen of Freedom Award on Shi Tao’s behalf, a picture of my son at a younger age was on display. Seeing that picture really struck me, and I couldn’t hold back my tears any longer. I shared a brief poem with the audience, written by my son in commemoration of the Tiananmen massacre, but I became overwhelmed by emotion and could sense that everyone else in the room did also. I

was later told that many had been moved to tears by my presentation and that it stood out as a highlight of the conference.

Shi Tao is my eldest son, and we have always had a special bond. He has always been such a wonderful child, but since his arrest, he has been worried that he has somehow let me down. It hurts him that he is unable to look after me, and he feels that his case has burdened me with constant anxiety and unnecessary trouble. These concerns have left him plagued with guilt over the past few years, but I disagree and wish he would stop worrying. In fact, I believe that my son has richly rewarded me for the care I took in raising him, and has given me the best gift that a son can give a mother: I have seen with my own eyes that people all around the world consider him an outstanding person. This is the greatest gift and reassurance that a mother can receive. My son, Shi Tao, is my life, and even if everyone else gave up and left him behind, I would never forget him—I will always be by his side.

I am retired and just try to make it through each day on my pension. I have had to sell off our family’s property and spend all of our savings in order to help my son with his legal dilemma. I am also in poor health and suffer from coronary heart disease, which has only added to our troubles. Yet despite all of these strains, I would never dream of missing the chance to visit my son at Chishan Jail each month. I have rented a basement room not far from the jail in Changsha, the capital of Hunan Province. It’s a dingy little room, and to make things even worse, it was completely submerged in the floods last year, washing away everything I had. But even in the face of these mounting difficulties, I remain determined to continue doing all that I can to support my son. I eagerly await the day that he is released from jail, safe and healthy.

HXB: *Human Rights in China* recently published a report on China's state secrets system. A spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when questioned by an international journalist about this report, responded, "The Chinese government guarantees its citizens freedom of speech in accordance with the law. Only citizens who have violated the law will face legal penalties. No one will be punished simply for exercising their freedom of speech." What do you think of this claim?

Gao: It's simply a barefaced lie. The authorities accused my son of "divulging state secrets abroad," and handed him a merciless 10-year prison sentence. But how is the Tiananmen massacre a "state secret"? Everyone knows that the government engaged in unconscionable acts that spring, and that it remains unwilling to acknowledge its wrongdoing. It is no secret that they are obsessed with covering up and stifling any discussion of those events, obviously fearing the consequences of their actions. As June 4th approaches each year, the authorities hold meetings and issue documents listing innumerable restrictions and "taboo topics." Such restrictions apply year after year, and are far from "state secrets." In sharing the truth of this matter, Shi Tao simply did what any good journalist is supposed to do.

My son has always been an honest and idealistic young man. He organized a poetry group in college, and has always followed developments in our society closely. Whenever and wherever he saw injustice, he was always passionate about helping those in need. After graduating from college, he incorporated this passion into his media work: when he saw injustice, he made his opinions known and pleaded for those left behind by our society. But such passion for justice and truth can be problematic in our country; his commentaries on the Internet had caught the authorities' attention long before his arrest. His harsh 10-year sentence is simply an example of the government leaping at the chance to put him behind bars and set an example for everyone else.

Shi Tao is 100 percent innocent—he was jailed for exercising the freedom of speech granted to him, as a citizen, by our constitution. The irony is that in exercising this right, he became a victim of the Chinese authorities' drive to suppress freedom of speech and freedom of the press in active violation of their own constitu-

tion. No matter what the Ministry of Foreign Affairs might claim, my son's ordeal is a clear-cut example of the lack of freedom in today's China.

HXB: *Countless international organizations and institutions have joined hands to show their support and to demand, in one voice, "Release Shi Tao immediately." As the old adage says, "He who stands on the side of justice will always find support." Having witnessed such passion for this cause all around the world, do you feel optimistic about the prospects for saving Shi Tao?*

Gao: First, I would like to express my most sincere thanks to everyone for supporting my son and for keeping this cause in the public spotlight. I believe that the more people who get involved in this fight, the better our prospects will become. And there are already so many people involved: The World Association of Newspapers, Human Rights in China and many other groups have made such great efforts to apply continuous pressure to the Chinese authorities. All of these efforts make me, as a mother, feel greatly relieved and thankful. I hope that everyone will continue working together to force the Chinese government to release my son before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Obviously, we still have quite a long road ahead of us, but I will never stop fighting to save Shi Tao. At the same time, we should also remember to look beyond this individual case toward the future. I came here to the United States not only to help my son, but also to push the US government to proceed with legislation to end American Internet companies' cooperation with the Chinese government, so that no one else will ever face the tragedy that has beset my family.

HXB: *Thank you for joining me for this interview. Please take good care, and have a safe journey home!*

Translated by Kevin Carrico

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