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Shattering the China Dream

Unlawful Detentions Undermine Respect for Beijing

By Rebecca MacKinnon

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On Feb. 16, Hu Jia, a Chinese AIDS activist, was asked to get in a car with men he didn't recognize. They put a black hood over his head and pushed him down so he couldn't see where he was being taken. Then they locked him in the inner room of a hotel suite and interrogated him for 41 days. He was given no access to a lawyer, and his family was given no information about his whereabouts. Then, on day 41, his captors once more put a black hood on him, drove him to a shopping center and dropped him off roughly an hour's walk from his home.

Hu's ordeal involved no courts, arrest warrants, official paperwork, police stations or jails. While his captors work for China's State Security Bureau, what happened can only be described as a kidnapping. He plans to sue the police for unlawful behavior, but he admits he's not optimistic about winning.

Hu's abduction was one of a growing number of such "cases." Their extralegality and the lack of official records make it impossible to count them. Human rights organizations try to keep count, but the outside world generally hears about only those victims whose friends and family manage to overcome police pressure to stay quiet and who are also well-connected or savvy enough to get the story out somehow.

Another victim of Chinese state kidnapping -- with whom I am personally connected -- is Wu Hao, an independent filmmaker, blogger and U.S. permanent resident. It is unclear why state agents abducted him on Feb. 22, but his friends think it may be related to his work on a documentary about China's underground Christians. He continues to be held -- this is the 58th day of his detention -- despite the fact that Chinese law limits the maximum detention without charge to 37 days.

About a month before his abduction, Hao (his first name) also took up the part-time role of Northeast Asia editor for an international bloggers' network that I co-founded, Global Voices Online (<http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/>). He was excited about introducing the perspectives of Chinese bloggers to an English-speaking audience. He also kept an English-language blog at <http://beijingorbust.blogspot.com/>. While his writings were considerably more honest and edgy than those in the China Daily, he was by no means a dissident and often defended his government against Western criticism.

Hao turned 34 this week. He personifies a generation of urban Chinese who have flourished thanks to the Communist Party's embrace of market-style capitalism and greater cultural openness. He got his MBA from the University of Michigan and worked for EarthLink before returning to China to pursue his dream of becoming a documentary filmmaker. He and his sister, Nina Wu, who works in finance and lives a comfortable middle-class life in Shanghai, have enjoyed freedoms of expression, travel, lifestyle and career choice that their parents could never have dreamed of. They are proof of how U.S. economic engagement with China has been overwhelmingly good for many Chinese.

Problem is, the Chinese Dream can be shattered quickly if you step over a line that is not clearly drawn -- a line that is kept deliberately vague and that shifts frequently with the political tides. Those who were told by the Chinese media that they have constitutional and legal rights are painfully disabused of such

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fantasies when they seek to shed light on social and religious issues the state prefers to keep in the dark.

Since Hao's detention, Nina has spent countless hours pleading with police officers for information about his case, location and condition. After a month of getting nowhere, she started to chronicle her ordeal on a Chinese-language blog at <http://spaces.msn.com/wuhaofamily> . (You can read it in English at: <http://ethanzuckerman.com/haowu> .) It is a heartbreaking account of how China's regime eats its young. In her first entry she describes her disillusionment: "the people I dealt with never showed police credentials (despite repeated requests), and never called each other by name. . . . I was angry at myself for my political naiveté, and angry at this place that displayed the police insignia but did not actually 'Serve the People.' "

With Chinese President Hu Jintao in the United States this week, Americans have an opportunity to assess his regime. What is this country to think? On the one hand his government has raised the living standards of millions of its citizens with economic reform and international trade. On the other hand his underlings trample shamelessly on his people's basic human rights.

The careers of some politicians in both countries -- not to mention military budgets -- would no doubt benefit if our two nations became enemies. As an American who lived and worked in China for more than a decade, however, I continue to believe that peaceful engagement between the United States and China is in the best interest of both nations' people.

But we have a serious problem that won't go away: How can Americans respect or trust a regime that kidnaps our friends?

The writer was CNN's Beijing bureau chief from 1998 to 2001. She is now a research fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society and is co-founder of Global Voices Online, an international bloggers' network.

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