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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Beijing's Chilling Imprisonment of a Taiwanese Critic

Communist authorities say Li Ming-che violated domestic law but deny him a citizen's legal rights.

By Benedict Rogers

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Li Ching-yu, the wife of imprisoned activist Li Ming-che, in Taiwan, March 28, 2018. PHOTO: RITCHIE B. TONGO/EPA-EFE/REX/SHU/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Taipei

Li Ching-yu fixes me with a look of steely determination. “Even in prison,” she says, “my husband is a human-rights activist, and he wants the world to speak out, not only for his freedom but for all prisoners of conscience in China. The last time I saw him, he told me: ‘Go everywhere and tell everyone.’ ”

Her husband, Li Ming-che, is a Taiwanese democracy activist. He has languished in Chinese custody for two years because of his writings. Communist authorities arrested him in March 2017 as he tried to enter the mainland from Macau. Ten days later, China revealed he was detained on suspicion of “endangering national security.” For 177 days Mrs. Li received no news, until his trial on Sept. 11, 2017. In a televised confession—almost certainly obtained under duress—he said he had “disseminated articles and essays that maliciously attacked and defamed the Chinese government.” In November 2017, Mr. Li was sentenced to five years for “subverting state power.”

In Mr. Li’s case, Beijing has applied its “One China policy” in a heads-I-win-tails-you-lose fashion. Because China claims sovereignty over Taiwan, it accuses Mr. Li of writing illegally within its jurisdiction. Yet Mr. Li, who supported civil society in China, is believed to be the first activist imprisoned under Beijing’s new law restricting foreign nongovernmental organizations. So even though his activities from Taiwan are regarded as within China’s jurisdiction, China classified him as a foreigner and stripped him of rights to which Chinese nationals are entitled under the law.

Held in Chishan Prison in Hunan province, Mr. Li is subjected to forced labor, denied warm clothes, and forced to subsist on prison rations. According to his wife, he has lost “an incredible amount of weight.” In breach of prison regulations, which mandate no more than eight hours of labor a day for five days a week, plus a day of education and a day of rest, Mr. Li is forced to work more than 10 hours a day without a day of rest. “There is not a hairsbreadth of difference between re-education through labor in prison and working at a sweatshop,” Mrs. Li says.

She has tried to send him books that are published legally in China. They include Jeremy Black’s “The Holocaust: History and Memory,” Camus’s “Reflections on the Guillotine” and Primo Levi’s works. Her husband was forced to sign papers ordering the books returned. Chinese authorities have refused eight times to allow her to visit her husband. Her letters take six months to reach him, and she hasn’t received any from him. He is not permitted to make telephone calls.

The last time she saw her husband was on Dec. 18. In January she was informed that because she had made a public statement that “disrupted the prison’s standard operations for upholding the law and impeded the reformation of the criminal Li,” her visits are suspended for

three months. All she had said was that her husband remains “incarcerated, alone and desolate in a foreign country,” and she appealed to people to send him postcards.

Mrs. Li describes her husband as “a prisoner of conscience who is suffering in prison only because he showed concern for the families of victims of political oppression, and only because he upheld the universal value of freedom.” He is far from the only one. Increasingly China is locking up not only its own dissidents, but also those from outside. The abduction of Hong Kong booksellers in 2015 should have been a wake-up call. The continued detention of Gui Minhai, a Swedish citizen who disappeared from his apartment in Thailand in 2015, deserves attention. Yet it is only through the valiant efforts of his daughter Angela Gui, who like Mrs. Li has testified and campaigned, that his cause is kept alive.

It should not be left to abductees’ daughters and wives to struggle alone. “When they start persecuting Taiwanese citizens like my husband,” Mrs. Li says, “the persecution of human rights by the Chinese Communist Party has already extended beyond China’s borders. So the whole world should be concerned about China.” If China’s definition of a “crime” includes writing articles and social-media posts from elsewhere in the world, then I am as guilty as Mr. Li.

Mr. Rogers works for the international human-rights organization CSW, serves as deputy chairman of the U.K. Conservative Party Human Rights Commission and is co-founder and chairman of Hong Kong Watch.

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