

# Prisoner Profile: Zhao Yan

COMPILED BY STACY MOSHER



Journalist Zhao Yan, 42, was having dinner with a friend at the Yaohan Shopping Center in Shanghai's Pudong District around 9:00 on the evening of

September 16 when he was approached by two men who identified themselves as Shanghai State Security Bureau officers.

The men presented Zhao with a written notice, and soon afterwards, about a dozen plain-clothes officers arrived and led Zhao away, while his friend was taken to a safe house and subjected to a lengthy interrogation. Police told the friend that Zhao had lied and was not really a researcher for *The New York Times*. The next day, police led the friend to a detention center near Shanghai's Hongqiao Airport, where an exhausted-looking Zhao was accompanied by a senior official from the Beijing State Security Bureau. That is the last sight any of Zhao's friends or family have had of him.

On September 21, Zhao's family received a notice from the Beijing State Security Bureau accusing Zhao of "providing state secrets to foreigners."

Zhao was detained 10 days after *The New York Times* published an article reporting that Jiang Zemin had informed Party officials of his intention to resign as chairman of the Central Military Commission. The official announcement of Zhao's resignation didn't come until September 19. A well-informed source in Beijing told HRIC that President Hu Jintao had personally ordered an investigation into the *Times* story.

A friend says Zhao had become increasingly convinced that state security authorities suspected him of having leaked the information to the *Times*, even though he was a specialist in rural affairs rather than central government intrigue. Zhao told friends that the authorities had contacted him twice within three or four days, saying they wanted to meet with him to discuss the article. *New York Times* foreign editor Susan Chira has stated publicly that Zhao was not in fact the source of the information in the story, and another *Times* insider

confirmed that Zhao was not even an active participant in the reporting process. However, Zhao was aware of the substance of the piece before it went to press and may have spoken with others about it, and he had expressed concern to a friend that state security authorities might associate him with the article in some way.

A professional colleague said that Zhao felt a need to escape from the pressure and decided to take a vacation from his research position in order to "disappear" for a while. He had spent several days away from work with his cell phone switched off, but within an hour of turning his phone back on, he was tracked down by state security and detained.

Since Zhao's detention, a number of his friends have been interviewed by state security regarding Zhao's connection to *The New York Times* and his relationship with Chinese government and military officials. Zhao's lawyer, Mo Shaoping, has said that the allegations against Zhao could lead to a charge of treason, a crime punishable by death.

It is quite possible that the controversial *Times* story provided Chinese authorities with an excuse they'd been waiting for to take action against a reporter who had become a thorn in their side. Zhao began working at the *Times* in May 2004 after he was forced out of his job with *China Reform* magazine. Zhao had been harassed and monitored for some time because of his aggressive reporting on peasant issues, in particular allegations of official embezzlement of funds set aside for peasants relocated in development projects in Hebei and Fujian. Zhao told Radio Free Asia that Fuzhou police had followed him to Beijing to arrest him in April, but he had already left his job by then and was no longer in the city. Later that month, police raided Zhao's home, badly frightening his ailing father and possibly precipitating the old man's death a few days later.

Zhao had written extensively on the plight of some 20,000 peasants who had been relocated in the 1990s to make way for the Taolinkou reservoir near the city of Qinghuangdao in Hebei Province, as well as that of villagers displaced by the construction of an automotive complex in Qingkou Town near Fuzhou. His articles were often considered too controversial for publication, and were restricted to internal circula-

tion among government officials.

Sources say that following the publication of the February issue of *China Reform*, nine members of the Party Secretariat of Qingkou Town traveled to Beijing to find a way to have Zhao Yan removed from the magazine. Zhao's name no longer appeared on the magazine's March masthead, and he formally resigned in April.

However, Zhao remained deeply concerned with the plight of China's peasants. A source said that shortly before his arrest, Zhao approached social activist Yu Meisun to join him in launching a hunger strike to pressure the authorities into releasing Zhang Youren, who had been confined to his home under residential surveillance since July 6 after leading a group of peasants in Tangshan, Hebei Province in protesting the terms of a massive relocation scheme. Earlier in the year, Zhao had joined with Yu and others to distribute a petition signed by more than 17,000 Tangshan villagers calling for the removal of a local official suspected of having misappropriated funds earmarked as compensation for the loss of their farmland.

On July 8, a well-known peasant advocate, Wu Zhongkai, telephoned Beijing-based sociologist Zhang Yaojie from a village near Fuzhou and said that Fuzhou PSB police had ordered him to expose the activities of Zhao Yan and legal scholar Li Boguang, director of Beijing's Qimin Research Institute. Police described the two men as criminals and demanded that Wu Zhongkai have no more to do with them. Wu said he finally refused further cooperation with the police, and with the assistance of fellow-villagers fled to a hillside cemetery.

Subsequent to Zhao Yan's arrest, legal scholar Li Boguang was detained on December 14. He remains in custody. The chief editor of *China Reform*, Chen Min, was also detained briefly in December, and the rural edition of the magazine was closed down in January.

Neither any of Zhao's friends or family members nor his lawyer has been allowed to see him since he was detained. Zhao is believed to be held in the Beijing State Security Bureau Detention Center in Beijing's Dahongmen neighborhood.