

February 5, 2008: Two Releases, One Conviction, One Indefinite Detention



Another Mixed Week in China

PEN now tracking 39 imprisoned Chinese writers and journalists

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New York, Toronto, February 5, 2008—PEN today welcomed the release on parole of Hong Kong-based journalist Ching Cheong from prison in Gangzhou, southern China, where he was serving a five-year sentence for espionage. The Singapore Straits Times reporter's release, two years before his sentence was due to expire, was the second within the past week. Journalist Li Changqing, who had served three years in prison for "spreading false and alarmist information," was released on February 2 on the expiration of his sentence.

PEN noted, however, that the pre-Olympic crackdown on writers and journalists continues. Writer and human rights activist Lu Gengsong, who was arrested on August 24, 2007 after his articles critical of the authorities were published online, stood trial before the Hangzhou Intermediate People's Court on January 22, and today was sentenced to four years in prison and one year's deprivation of political rights for "inciting subversion of state power."

On January 30, more than one month after his arrest, activist and blogger Hu Jia was formally charged with "inciting subversion of state power" by the Beijing Municipal People's Procuratorate. Under Chinese law, Hu can now be held without trial until after the Beijing Olympics. PEN has received reports that he is being denied access to his lawyers because the case involves "state secrets." His wife, fellow blogger Zeng Jinyan, remains under house arrest, virtually incommunicado, with all communication lines to and from her home cut by Chinese authorities.

"Obviously, we are pleased that Chinese authorities have released Ching Cheong from prison two years early and that the total number of writers in prison has declined for the first time since PEN launched our 'We Are Ready' campaign," said Larry Siems, Director of Freedom to Write and International Programs at PEN American Center. "Unfortunately, the sentencing of Lu Gengsong and the formal charging of Hu Jia serve as reminders that the

Chinese government remains determined to suppress dissent in advance of the Olympics.”

In December, Chinese authorities prevented a gathering of Chinese writers from the Independent Chinese PEN Center from taking place by harassing, intimidating, and even temporarily detaining some of its members. Li Jianhong, who had been among those held in advance of the gathering, was again placed under house arrest at the end of December to prevent her from acting on Hu Jia’s behalf, and she has reportedly been warned not to write anything politically sensitive. Cyber-dissident Wang Dejie was released from a one-month detention on January 12 only after he agreed to refrain from writing anything “attacking the leadership of the Party and State,” “inciting subversion of state power,” or any “political commentary.”

“It is quite clear that the Chinese government believes that it can leverage writers after they have been detained and possibly ill-treated,” said Isobel Harry, Executive Director of PEN Canada. “This is a troubling development as we move within 184 days of the Olympic Games. China is now facing a crucial choice: continue down the road of silencing dissent, or turn around and live up to its promises to the world that it will abide by its citizens’ fundamental right to freedom of expression.”

Zheng Yi, President of the Independent Chinese PEN Center, compared the release of Ching Cheong on the eve of the Lunar New Year to the detention of Hu Jia in the last days of December, calling Ching’s release “definitely much more human.” “We now look to the Chinese government to release all writers and journalists imprisoned in China, and bring that number down to zero.”

For more information on PEN’s China campaign, “We Are Ready for Freedom of Expression: Countdown to the Beijing Olympics,” including biographies of the 39 imprisoned writers, visit www.pen.org/china2008 and www.pencanada.ca