As darkness fell on a March evening in 2005, I found a place to sleep in Beijing’s “Petitioner Village.” For the next couple of months, I would spend most of my time here working on the Open Constitution Initiative’s (Gongmeng) research project on China’s petitioning system.

My landlord, Mr. Liu, had come to Beijing with others from his hometown in Henan to work as a laborer. He used to run a small restaurant, but business wasn’t good. In 2002, he rented a room and began renting out beds to petitioners. In those days, he often took his tenants’ petitioning documents to China Reform magazine to ask for our help. Nearly three years later, his small hostel had expanded to four rooms. The largest could accommodate more than 30 people, and the smallest 10. Each bed cost 3 yuan per night.

There were only two beds in the small room, with sheets of plywood placed between them to make two communal bunks. On the crumbling wall, someone had used blue chalk to number each of the bed spaces.

At 9:30 p.m., everyone got into bed with their clothes on. The quilt gave off an unpleasant odor. The door was open, and a light was left on. The sound of snoring gradually grew louder. As a train passed nearby, the building shook gently.

At 6:00 a.m. the next day, everyone woke up and joined the queue to brush their teeth and wash their faces. Then, they picked up their petitioning documents and went out.

Countless footsteps had worn a path cutting across the railroad tracks and through Dongzhuan Park to the Supreme People’s Court (SPC) Office for Receiving Letters and Visits, located about 400 meters from the Petitioner Village. At dawn, the sunlight shining down on the railroad tracks would cast shadows of people walking in twos and threes. Along the wall next to the path, people had set up a row of small huts, and someone was cooking.

The street next to the SPC Office of Letters and Visits was called “Happiness Street.”
The bustling foot traffic brought booming business to the little restaurants, copy shops, and bookstalls that sprang up here. There were three kinds of books for sale: legal books, pornography, and fortune-telling books. Someone was hawking pamphlets with the addresses of all the central government offices and media outlets, as well as the names and telephone numbers of some sympathetic academics and journalists. My name was included.

There was still 40 minutes before opening time, but nearly 100 people had already gathered outside the entrance to the Office of Letters and Visits. This was an information hub in the mornings. From here, people would spread out to various locations in Beijing, such as the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the State Bureau of Letters and Visits, China Central Television (CCTV), Tiananmen Square, and the old Legation Quarter.

Some went to the television station hoping to get some exposure. But the chances were slim. For a time, CCTV’s “Focus Report” program would pay attention to some appeals, but later it lost interest and became an extension of the nightly news broadcast. As for Tiananmen Square, it was one of the most sensitive places during imperial times. Many people had been imprisoned for kneeling there, but if you were lucky you might get some attention. And all veteran petitioners knew that Premier Wen Jiabao lived in the old Legation Quarter.

A group of people surrounded a middle-aged woman who was singing a plaintive song, urging someone to “eliminate the corrupt officials and keep the country safe and secure.” It was an old strategy in China to direct public ire at corrupt officials but maintain respect for the emperor’s authority.

Someone suggested that there was no point just waiting around and that everyone should march in demonstration. People nodded as they listened to his impassioned speech. It was a characteristic conundrum of China’s unique situation that moderate petitioners were often sent home while more radical action had the potential to attract attention — together with the risk of imprisonment.

At 7:45 a.m., the main entrance opened and people began streaming into the alleyway inside, lining up to fill out forms. Then they would go into the reception hall to wait for their name to appear in red on the screen.

No one knew how long it would take from the time you submitted your form to the time your name was called — half a day, a week, even more than a month. You’ve come from far away to this strange capital city where it’s difficult just to find food and shelter. This system doesn’t care about that, about the pleas and hardships of the lowly ordinary people.

**Petitioning: China’s Social Disease**

Before 2006, the area around the new Beijing South Railway Station was filled with one-story buildings built in the 1950s. Further south is what remains of the old village of Dongzhuang. Throughout the year, regardless of the season, you can find people camped out in the open all around the village. They have come to Beijing to petition.

This is an old tradition, dating back at least to the end of the Qing Dynasty. Petitioners
would gather in the area around Qianmen, which served as the entrance to the former imperial city. Cases of injustice and the righteous men who solved them were enduring tropes of literature and art during China’s long autocratic era.

“To the victor go the spoils,” which meant that rulers handed out appointments at all levels of government. Since power flowed from the top down, officials naturally felt responsibility to the emperor, not to the people. Whenever there was an injustice, you would naturally petition the higher authorities for redress. In this way, the petitioning tradition of an autocratic state became a major social problem.

Petitioning exists in every country, but there are differences between democracies and dictatorships in terms of how it works.

There’s no such thing as absolute equality and justice, just as there’s no such thing as a perfect political system. Human nature is distributed normally throughout society from stubbornness to submissiveness. In a country with elected officials, an independent judiciary, and a free press, officials at all levels care about the voice of the voters and will make a serious effort to address each person’s complaints. The majority may feel that something is fair, but only a tiny minority — perhaps less than 1 percent of the population — feel that sense of injustice and have the character to pursue petitioning. In the United States, there have been people who camped out in front of the White House to protest that the country is a failure of democracy.

Democracies have relatively few petitioners, so there’s no need to panic. There’s no need to set up defensive perimeters or maintain a high state of national alert every time the legislature is in session. Sirens don’t go off every time a petitioner shows his or her ID at a checkpoint to prevent access to the capital.

Things are different in China. Government officials aren’t elected, and power comes by appointment from above. The people’s congresses are just for show, and the judiciary isn’t independent. There is a long tradition of officials covering up for each other, regardless of the cries of the people below. They only care about the orders from above. They only really pay attention to the orders that come from their superiors’ superiors, or even from the very, very top. That’s why so many people feel they have to come to Beijing.

Chinese society is based on connections and realpolitik. Unfairness and injustice result from the personal use of public power, privilege, and corruption. The majority of those without power are forced to suffer in silence, but a minority of stubborn individuals take the slow petitioner’s road. In a society as unfair and unjust as China’s, if even 1 percent of the population refuses to put up with it, then the result is more than 10 million petitioners nationwide and there are enough in Beijing to form a village. It has become a social disease with Chinese characteristics.

In the Gongmeng report, we used Minquan County, Henan Province, as a case study. In our conclusion, we put forward a hypothetical situation. We said that if government officials and delegates to the people’s congresses were popularly elected simply at the county level, and if the judiciary were independent, it would make power truly accountable to the people and the number of petitioners in China would fall by more than 80 percent.
If the State Office of Letters and Visits received 100 petitioners a year, they could send out special investigation teams to look into each case and come to a just resolution. Increase that to 1,000 petitioners a year and they could probably still manage. But 10 million? No government agency has the capacity for that.

This is not a question of how offices to handle letters and petitions are set up; this is a question of democracy versus autocracy. Until autocracy is brought to an end, there will be no solution to China’s petitioning problem.

The government has described three peak periods of petitioning. The first was in 1954, during a brief respite in the state’s use of terror and repression. The second was from 1976 to 1980, when people were looking for some hope again after the Cultural Revolution. The third began with the new government of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao in 2003, the so-called “year of citizen rights defense”. People didn’t petition because it was a time of extreme injustice. Rather, it was because, having lived through a dark period of injustice, people began to see a ray of light and feel a sense of hope.

For more than half a century, the State Bureau of Letters and Visits, the National People’s Congress Office for Receiving Letters and Visits, and the SPC Office for Receiving Letters and Visits were all located in the area around Yongdingmen, so it was natural for petitioners to gather there. Dongzhuang was the nearest place where they could find cheap accommodation. Thus, from the 1960s onward, Dongzhuang and the surrounding area became the place where people gathered to stay while they were petitioning in Beijing.

In 2002, Dongzhuang was demolished and its residents relocated. But a few small buildings remained on a patch of land south of the Liangshui River, east of Kaiyang Road, and west of the railroad tracks. In 2003, more than 2,000 people crammed into these small houses, creating a village almost entirely inhabited by petitioners, well known as the Petitioner Village.

Only 20 kilometers separates Petitioner Village, a reminder of history, from Beijing’s bustling international trade buildings.

The Ones Who Bear the Suffering

The first time I saw petitioners was in the winter of 1997 in the waiting area at the east entrance to China Central Television (CCTV). There was a long line of people waiting to submit documents to the receptionist. People called this the “Second” State Bureau of Letters and Visits. They were eager to get some exposure for their cases and desperate for a senior leader to issue instructions regarding their personal injustices. They had a better chance of winning the lottery, but they had no alternatives.

That year, I’d come to Beijing to look for a job after finishing my master’s degree. I made a point of going to CCTV to see the petitioners. Only there could I see, beneath the veneer of all being well with the world, the profound suffering that totalitarianism had brought to millions of powerless people.

One of the middle-aged women in line asked someone for a cup of water but was refused. She began to whimper and then started making a scene, shouting that she
wanted to go inside the CCTV office and find someone in charge. A police car came to take her away.

So many people give up along the long, slow petitioning road. I had just seen one person suffer a breakdown right in front of my eyes. Now, many years later, I can still see that scene very clearly.

In September 2002, I took a part-time job as editor of the monthly rural edition of *China Reform* magazine. There were a number of other idealists there, including Li Changping, Qiu Jiasheng, Liu Xiangbo, and Tu Ming. Every weekend, the editorial staff would arrange for someone to be available to meet with petitioners. Sometimes so many people would come that the police would send a car to sit outside the building.

Later, at Gongmeng’s office in Shuangjing, we would open up for visitors every Thursday and the office would often be packed with people.

People can become numb to all the suffering in the world. We would choose the individual cases with the most social value — the most extreme injustices, the people wrongly convicted and sentenced to death, or cases involving large numbers of people. Our idea was to use our limited resources to help as many people as possible. So, when we were faced with individual cases that weren’t so extreme, we often could do little more than apologize again and again.

Whether you feel misery or happiness all depends on a person’s state of mind and what they are seeking.

The martyr faces the executioner’s blade feeling a sense of peace as he prepares to face eternity. But most people will never be able to understand this. Even if they do, they have no way to rid themselves of the desire to make things right. Suffering is a human reality. This is why we need institutions to distinguish the boundaries between rights in the present world and defend equality and justice.

You must have faith. The road to happiness is long and arduous. Sometimes you have to climb a hill, sometimes you have to rest. Some keep going, others give up.

Li Xiongbing, Li Fangping, and other volunteer lawyers worked with me to help them analyze their cases, determine whether decisions had been made fairly, and suggest ways that they defend their rights. We also told them what the possible outcomes would be. In many cases, there was little reason for hope. I would tell them when there was little hope and try to comfort them and urge them to accept and move on.

I pray that they will love their enemies. In Petitioner Village I would hand out a flier saying “Love on the Way to Justice.” But our roles in the world are predetermined. Without stubborn people, how would society progress? In an unfair, unjust society, they are the ones who bear the suffering.

**My Encounter With the ‘Interceptors’**

Not far to the north of Petitioner Village is the State Office of Letters and Visits, also known as the State Petitions Office.
I first came here in the winter of 1999. On both sides of a long, cold alley were high walls smudged with soot and covered with slogans. Around two corners and through a small room, there was a sign announcing the “Reception Office for People’s Letters and Visits of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and State Council.” In Japan, they make it easy to submit petitions by setting up reception desks in supermarkets. But in an authoritarian state, they always want to hide such places away.

I came here again on April 1, 2005, because I had been hearing that petitioners were often being beaten.

“Receiving” petitioners was also known as “intercepting” or “seizing” them — the words sound similar in Chinese. A large number of petitioners was considered a measure of poor government performance. Local governments from across the country would bribe officials at the State Petitions Office to destroy records of petitions. Another tactic was to intercept petitioners and send them back home before they had a chance to submit their petitions. Later on, during the era of digital totalitarianism, the methods to locate and detain people became much more precise.

The former Ministry of Internal Affairs first set up petitioning offices in the 1950s. These included the “Material Assistance Desk” at Yongdingmen Railway Station, where petitioners would be sent to the Yongding Gravel Factory in Lugouqiao (aka the Marco Polo Bridge) and forced to work to earn the train fare to send them back home. These “irrational troublemakers” were turned over to local government authorities to be forcibly “escorted” back home.

This system was “legalized” in 1982, with the appearance of the “Measures for Custody and Repatriation of Urban Migrants and Beggars,” which came to link petitioning to the “custody and repatriation” system.

There were vagrants, beggars, and rural migrant laborers being held in the custody and repatriation centers, which had a separate section for petitioners.

After the custody and repatriation system was abolished in 2003, the number of petitioners exploded. Hundreds, and even thousands, of petitioners repeatedly marched around Tiananmen. The Central Committee of the CCP instructed local governments to take petitioners back home, and “interception” teams expanded rapidly.

It was just after 10 a.m. when I reached the alley in front of the State Petitions. Police vehicles lined both sides of the street at the entrance to the alley, which was filled with several hundred people whose job it was to intercept the petitioners before they reached the State Petitions Office. They came from all over, from every county, city, and town. There were officials from local petition offices, plainclothes police, and people picked for this task from every possible government department.

Maybe it was because I wasn’t dressed like a petitioner, because several people looked me over as I entered the alley but no one tried to stop me. In addition to the State Petitions Office, this alley also led to the Xuanwu District Education Bureau and a few other government offices, so there were always a few people other than petitioners going in and out. The interceptors had to observe carefully or they might
accidentally stop the wrong person by mistake. It was rumored that once an official from the State Petitions Office had once been stopped here and roughed up.

A few dozen meters inside, another group of even more densely packed people blocked the alley. Suddenly, one of them reached out and grabbed my shoulder, asking me where I was from.

I said I was from Henan. The gathered crowd erupted in shouts: “He’s from Henan! He’s from Henan!”

Three people suddenly emerged from the crowd and grabbed me by the arm. They asked me, “Where in Henan?” When I said I was from Kaifeng, the men grabbing my arm again began to shout: “Kaifeng! Kaifeng! Hey, Liu! Director Liu!”

A man who appeared to be a local cadre came up to me and looked me up and down. He asked me: “Have you been to the Kaifeng Party Committee yet?” When I said I hadn’t, he shouted: “No? Well, that’s skipping over jurisdictions! It’s illegal! Let’s have a word outside!” His voice rose in pitch as he loudly berated me.

The three who first grabbed me began pushing me outside. I fought to break free, but I couldn’t escape the mass of people.

Surrounded, I was deliberately pushed around. People took turns punching and kicking me from behind, but I couldn’t see who was doing it. Finally, I was able to grab one of them. I shouted, “Who are you? How dare you hit me?” “I didn’t hit you!” he replied. He had the look of a scoundrel. “Did anyone see me hit you?”

Then Director Liu reappeared. In a more friendly tone, he showed me his identification, which read “Liu Fengxiang, Deputy Director of the Kaifeng Bureau of Letters and Petitions.” He said there were people there from 10 different provinces and asked whether I knew who had beaten me. “I’m showing you my identification because I want to protect you,” he said.

I shouted back: “Are all you local officials this badly behaved, grabbing people and beating them up every day?”

“Let me tell you,” he said, “whoever beat you was not from Kaifeng.” Later, I realized that Director Liu was mostly telling the truth. The interceptors and the veteran petitioners generally recognized each other, so a beating might lead to retaliation back home. Eventually, there came to be a tacit agreement that interceptors from other provinces would help each other with the beatings. I saw interceptors from Heilongjiang beating petitioners from Inner Mongolia, interceptors from Henan beating a petitioner from Hunan, and an interceptor from Liaoning beating a petitioner from Henan.

The angry crowd continued to push and shove, and I kept getting punched and kicked from behind. Eventually, I took advantage of a passing vehicle to break free of the crowd. It was nearly 11 a.m. by the time I reached the compound of the Petitions Office.

Once again, Director Liu appeared. He seemed worried that I had some kind of background and made a show of helping me to dust myself off. It was then that I
discovered that my pants were covered in footprints.

The Petitions Office was about to close for lunch and security guards were shooing people away. The crowd slowly dispersed. At the entrance to the alley, four or five men were pushing around a young petitioner. I could see the fear on his face as he began shouting himself hoarse: “They’re beating me! Let me go!”

A Beijing police car was parked nearby. Through the window, a police officer watched the scene impassively.

**I Take a Swing**

I went back two weeks later in a different capacity.

I took a taxi and got out a few hundred meters away, then I walked to the entrance of the alley. There, I sat down for a moment to rest. Gradually, I approached the crowd. This is a tactic of investigative research. Soon, before I knew it, I was among them.

I struck up a conversation with them. I asked a young woman if she was here to intercept petitioners. She suddenly looked embarrassed. Here, as a collective they weren’t ashamed to act like a vicious mob. But pick out an individual and have a conversation with her, she regains her individual human nature. People are inherently good; they just get caught up in systems of evil.

I was standing against the wall. A middle-aged man sitting on a small stool near my feet looked up at me curiously. Then Director Liu appeared. He must have seen me, too, but he didn’t acknowledge me. Probably someone else recognized me as a “special guest.”

Every now and then a petitioner would try to break through the dense crowd of people. Almost everyone there would give them a shove or a kick. A tricycle tried to get through. They pushed it to keep it out and then started laughing.

Yes, they laughed. When they were playing that role, all of their ideals, natural instincts, and conscience meant nothing. They were just a bunch of hooligans. At that very moment, the ugliness of human nature was revealed in full.

The laughter also marked a kind of strange removal of restraint among them. In the middle of all that misery, laughter lifted their own heavy sense of burden.

Around 2:30 p.m., an elderly couple was surrounded by the crowd. I was standing only a few meters away. The old woman said they were from Lianyungang, in Jiangsu Province. An interceptor tried to grab them and take them away. The couple stood firm at the base of the wall. The crowd began pushing and shoving the old couple.

Suddenly, a stocky man with deep tan knocked the old woman down with a single blow and started stomping on her.

In a flash, my blood boiling, I punched the man in the head! He stumbled and froze for a moment. Then he came charging at me, as if crazed. Behind me, others began to punch and kick at me.
I fell to the ground, and documents spilled out of my satchel. By the time I had collected my things, they were gone.

This was the first time I had hit someone since graduating from high school. My only regret was that I didn’t hit him harder.

I stood up and pointed at the hundred or so interceptors, shouting: “You are a bunch of dogs living off the sweat and tears of the people! This woman is as old as your mothers, yet you dare to beat her like this! Are you even human? Look into your conscience and ask yourselves! Are you human? Which of you have beaten someone here? Who? You’re fucking scum, animals!”

None of the interceptors said a word. The old woman picked herself up from the ground and cried: “Are you human? If you want to beat me, come here and beat me! You are all utterly heartless and don’t deserve to die well! Don’t any of you have parents or children of your own? If you do things that offend heaven and reason, your relatives will be run over by a car when they go out!”

In the face of the tyranny of power, the weak often have no weapon but their curses.

But between heaven and earth, and in the light of the sun, the universe is filled with righteousness. For the next half an hour, things quieted down at the scene. No more violence and no more laughter.

The old woman thanked me, tears in her eyes. The couple spread out their petitioning documents on the ground. In the center was a photo of their son, dressed in military uniform. I didn’t get the full story but understood that their son had been beaten to death while serving in the army and that the person responsible hadn’t been punished.

At 3:30 p.m., I had to leave for another appointment. Sitting in the taxi, I suddenly felt myself tearing up. Thank you, whoever gave me the strength to keep the peace at that moment.

I wrote about my experience and posted it online. In June 2005, a deputy director from the State Petitions Office and a director of the reception department there arranged to meet with me. They told me that their superiors had instructed them to apologize to me for the beating and promised that there would be no more beatings outside the entrance. From that point on, the interceptors were expelled to a location about a hundred meters outside the entrance to the alleyway. Superficially, at least, the beatings diminished.

Many years later, I wondered whether I, as an advocate of nonviolence, should have punched that man. I thought I should have acted to stop the violence and to defend justice, but I shouldn’t have let my anger take over. In the face of the most shameless thuggery, even if I had to use violence to stop it I should still have compassion. Love is the spirit of nonviolence. I respect those who exercise reasonable self-defense in the face of extreme power. They don’t care about spilling blood or losing their lives, because it will shock the numbness and indifference that exists in the world. But we must not feel hate. Faith in the power of love is the only thing that can redeem this ancient nation.
In 2018, I reread what I had written about that day and felt a twinge of guilt about my cursing. I always behaved humbly in front of those who were weaker than me, but in front of those who represented power I felt a kind of arrogant pride deep in my bones. One shouldn’t act arrogantly in front of anyone. You should love all beings, even those who think they’re superior to you.

**Some of Their Stories**

In the fall of 1968, during the Cultural Revolution, Hao Wenzhong’s husband was seized and subjected to a violent struggle session. He died the next day. The relevant authorities concluded: “Before Liberation, he was a local bandit. . . . Death attributed to illness.”

In order to “politically” clear her husband’s name and prevent future generations from having to “endure persecution in political campaigns,” Hao Wenzhong began petitioning in 1976 at the end of the Cultural Revolution. In 2005, someone helped her calculate that over the past 30 years she had been locked up, detained, or sent to a psychiatric hospital a total of 199 times.

With her daughter’s help, Hao Wenzhong rented a house in Petitioner Village and began subletting space to other petitioners. On the eve of the Lunar New Year in 2006, I stayed in Hao’s place and helped her make dumplings. With us was Ma Li, a former television producer who was there to make a documentary.

By 2006, much of Petitioner Village had been demolished.

China had cancer and Petitioner Village was a symptom of it. Removing the village only caused the cancer to metastasize and spread.

As midnight approached, the sound of fireworks grew louder all around. There was a faint light at the edge of what remained of Petitioner Village. An old couple were huddled around a small black and white television, stirring embers in an old tin paint bucket.

I crouched down and started a conversation with them. The old man was 82 years old. For seven years, he had been petitioning over a plot of contracted land that had been seized by village cadres.

From the television, we could hear singing from the CCTV’s New Year Gala program. I turned my head and saw a camera in the shadows. Later, I learned that it was Zhao Liang capturing footage for a scene in his documentary, *Petitioning*.

Early the next morning, there were scattered blasts of fireworks. The old woman went to “deliver New Year’s greetings to Premier Wen”. She was in a hurry because she didn’t know how much longer she would be alive.

I saw the old couple again on November 30, 2010. That night, Yuqiao and I were staying in an underground passageway. The cold wind chill had arrived, and for two days in a row urban management officers were sweeping through the passageways and taking people’s quilts away. We wanted to see exactly what kind of people would do such a thing.
We were passing by Petitioner Village, so we stopped to take a look around. We found more than 30 elderly people living together in a makeshift hut. Plastic sheeting had been hung over the ruins of a wall and old pieces of furniture to form a kind of tent structure. Then, I happened to see a familiar old wrinkled face. She recognized me immediately and grabbed my hand and patted my shoulder, asking me how I’d been. She’d heard I’d had some trouble the year before. I said I was doing fine and thanked her. It’d been almost five years since we last saw each other.

She still yearned after the faintest of hopes. But deep down she still carried the scars of that era of terror and is unable to shake off the burden of China’s autocratic history.

She is far from alone among the people of this ancient nation in finding it difficult to shake off this burden.

Wang Jinying is from Chang’ge, Henan Province. She came to Beijing seeking to appeal her younger brother’s death sentence. The first time I saw her was on May 12, 2005, at the end of a corridor in the emergency ward of Xuanwu Hospital in Beijing.

Her brother, Wang Mingxuan, was convicted of murder and sentenced to death in November 2000. According to the verdict: “Because the deceased, Zhao Yanli, telephoned him at home, it led to marital discord and Wang’s hatred of Zhao. At about 10 a.m. on June 25, Wang Mingxuan went to Zhao’s house and hit Zhao on the head with a stainless steel teacup and then strangled her to death.”

There were doubts surrounding almost every aspect of the case. Several witnesses said that Wang Mingxuan was at work in the office when the incident allegedly took place. I called his defense attorney Hao Guanghui, who said that it was a “politically motivated” case of injustice.

After the verdict was announced in the trial of first instance, Wang Mingxuan wrote a seven-page defense statement on the back of the court’s decision, describing how he had been subjected to extremely brutal torture to make him confess to the crime.

In another letter he got someone to bring out of prison, Wang wrote: “Please contact the Supreme People’s Procuratorate and Supreme People’s Court right away. We need to prevent the possibility that they kill me just to shut me up, because when I was being questioned by prosecutors before trial, I told how the police and an electric utility company had conspired in a 1 million yuan blackmail scheme. There must be just people in this country who can undo the injustice that has been done to me! Please believe that I never killed anyone. Someone is out to get me! Your brother, Mingxuan.”

I’ve seen many appeals over the years, but I’ve never seen such a desperate cry for help.

Without holding a hearing, the Henan High Court issued a written decision confirming Wang’s death sentence. On December 25, while Wang Jinying was in the process of petitioning, Wang Mingxuan was executed with a bullet to the head.

Wang Jinying was brutally beaten seven times while petitioning. Five times she was injured so badly that she had to be hospitalized. On May 10, 2005, when I first met
her, an interceptor had broken her ankle and three ribs before throwing her into a dried-up well in Dongzhuang Park. Fortunately, other petitioners witnessed the incident.

They were able to get her out and called the police emergency line. Officers and interceptors both arrived on the scene. They conferred quietly and then went their separate ways. Other petitioners repeatedly tried to call the police or emergency services. It was 9:30 p.m. before an ambulance finally arrived and took Wang Jinying to Xuanwu Hospital.

No one paid for her treatment, so the hospital stuck her at the end of the corridor in the emergency ward and hid her behind a whiteboard.

I got a doctor to look at her X-rays. The doctor pointed out her three broken ribs to me.

A few days later, Wang Jinying’s relatives took her back to a hospital in Chang’ge City. She called me from there on May 26 to tell me that her family couldn’t pay her hospital bills. That morning, her younger brother Wang Changming had been brought to the same hospital in a coma after attempting suicide by slitting his wrists.

I thought she would give up.

But on Human Rights Day 2011, I received a text message: “Kind sir: This is Wang Jinying from Chang’ge, Henan. I’ve come to Beijing and am dying of terminal cancer. Please, you must help to clear my brother's name!” Outside Gongmeng’s office, I helped her lift her heavy wheelchair and once again saw her break down in tears.

Liu Hua was a straightforward, outspoken woman from the rural outskirts of Shenyang, in the northeastern province of Liaoning. She and her husband ran a shoe factory and a trucking business and were considered relatively capable around their village.

In late 2001, village cadres secretly sold more than 30 acres of communal village land to a developer. The villagers weren’t happy, and they turned to the “experienced and knowledgeable” Liu Hua for help.

Under Liu’s leadership, villagers petitioned the city and provincial governments to no avail. On March 20, 2002, angry villagers bulldozed the multi-story houses built by the developer and replanted the land with crops.

With the support of other villagers, Liu Hua’s husband was elected village chief. The villagers hired someone from the Shenyang Municipal Audit Bureau to audit the village finances and discovered a deficit of more than 10 million yuan. *China Reform* magazine ran a long interview with Liu Hua and her husband under the headline “Who Will Save China’s 900 Million Farmers?”

With the audit report in hand, the villagers made several trips to the provincial capital and two trips to Beijing. The popularly elected village chief was powerless even to protect his own family from harm. Twice, Liu Hua was beaten at the hands of the village party secretary.
There was no hope in sight, and the villagers gradually returned to their ordinary lives. But Liu Hua and her husband began to take things further. In January 2006, Liu Hua and her husband were sentenced to 21 months of “re-education through labor” for “gathering a crowd to disturb social order.”

Sheng Qifang was a retired civil servant from Jilin province. For 16 years, he represented Ma Jiyun in his protest against the unlawful confiscation and destruction of Ma’s motorized tricycle by police. They filed more than 10 lawsuits and called administrative law experts to testify three times. They got media coverage. They didn’t just do this for themselves. They made it their lifelong goal to stop the police from abusing their power.

Somewhere along the petitioning road, Sheng Qifang became a professional rights defender who helped other petitioners write their appeals. He wrote many analyses based on various petitioning cases, including a letter signed by over 3,000 petitioners voicing objection to a new regulation that restricted petitioning.

There was a woman who came up from Fujian to petition. On March 14, 2005, she was on a public bus when she began to have abdominal pain. Later, she gave birth to a baby girl in an ambulance on the side of Qianmen Road. People took them to the hospital, but they were forced to return to Petitioner Village 24 hours later because she couldn’t pay the hospital fees. They named the baby Tianyi, or “Heaven’s Will.”

Then there was the old Muslim man who wore a white skullcap and used a megaphone to call on everyone to march in front of the National People’s Congress.

And there was Old Wang, who petitioned for many years about nuclear waste and suddenly disappeared on April 28, 2005.

I wonder how all these once familiar folks are doing now. They suffer in the shadows of China’s seemingly spectacular prosperity. They have become part of my life.

**The Lucky Ones**

Winter 2009. That day, Beijing recorded the city’s lowest temperature in forty years, dropping to minus 16 degrees Celsius. The underground passage near the South Second Ring Road was packed with people.

Among the petitioners, the poorest couldn't afford the three yuan needed to rent a bunk bed. During the day, they scavenged the market for scraps of vegetables and steamed buns, and at night, they lived in shanties or under bridges. One night, someone quietly perished in the cold. The next morning, a police car arrived; the area was cordoned off and the body disposed of within minutes.

A group of Christians from South Korea distributed food every weekend. People waited hours in line for their charity. I saw an old woman burst into tears after receiving a bag of steamed buns.

Later, our team also joined in. We were a devout group. Zhenglin was studying law at a university and was a Buddhist. She had once considered becoming a nun but found her path of spiritual cultivation lay in the secular world. Wang Kezhi was a retired
teacher who cycled from Lankao, Henan province, to Beijing, enthusiastically promoting a message of love throughout the journey. Old Huang drove his own car and served as the driver and shipper for our charity team. There were also Christians like Yuqiao; netizens who had found us via Sina Weibo such as one under the handle "Ice Pick"; experienced charitable citizens from Beijing like Lan Jingyuan, Zhanjiang, and others. There were many silent supporters as well, often sending money to our charity account or parcels to the Gongmeng office.

We rented a small room of about ten square meters (around 100 sq ft) near the South Station, filled it with cotton-padded overcoats and quilts. Zhenglin and others went to places like the South Station and Lü Village every day to register names and distribute clothing to the homeless petitioners. Our goal was for no one to freeze to death in Beijing that winter.

This afternoon, Mr. Huang, the volunteer, had run out of cotton coats and quilts in his car, leaving only some steamed buns. In those few days, we distributed hundreds of coats and quilts and over two hundred pounds of steamed buns every day.

We ran into a child in a frigid alleyway. He was probably six or seven, with a flushed face, holding instant noodles in his hands, his eyes filled with a simple helplessness.

“Whose kid is this?” I asked loudly. A short middle-aged man appeared before me, and began recounting his family’s tragic ordeal.

I wasn’t in the mood to listen, feeling somewhat angry. Why bring a child here? Why isn’t he in school?

The man held back tears as he told their story. He said the child had been picked up from beside a garbage heap, had undergone two surgeries at the hospital, and that his own wife had been beaten to death by someone, leaving him with no choice but to bring the child with him. That’s when I noticed the child’s cleft lip that had been stitched up.

I gently stroked his head. He was too young to understand why a stranger was feeling such sadness.

People are born unequal in this world. Some are born ugly, into poor families, abandoned by their parents near garbage dumps. Others come to the world with stubborn personalities, unable to tolerate the privilege and corruption of those in power, and how tyranny tramples the powerless underfoot.

“He should go to school,” I told the father. “We'll figure out how to make it work.”

A few days later, I received a call from Mr. Liu, asking me to meet him in Tongzhou District. Including the child we saw that day, a total of five children had been arranged to attend a boarding school in Tongzhou.

That winter was too cold. I heard news of deaths twice at the South Station in Beijing. One of the dead, a man from Heze, Shandong province, had posted photos online just a few days before. When we went to the South Station, his messy bedding was still in
the corner beside a bus stop. His companion next to him that fateful night slept right through his final moments.

Those who insist on redressing their grievances come to these corners of the nation's capital, cold, hungry, and sick. Some quietly pass away, too soon to see the day a just society arrives. Each person has their ordained role; on the path to justice, they are martyrs, even if they themselves don't realize it.

We are the lucky ones.

He gave us food, vegetables, and warm housing. He brought us sincere compassion and opportunities to serve. The dawn people long for is still far away, but we can offer a little starlight.

When we rescue others, we rescue ourselves too. With gratitude. For the feelings swelling in our hearts. For faith. For living out his image in this earthly life.

**Black Jails**

I coined the term "black jail". Hopefully it doesn't infringe on anyone's intellectual property rights.

These are illegal detention centers — underground prisons — for petitioners, including hotels, basements, and study parlors. They form one stage in the interception of petitioning citizens.

To avoid embarrassment, police in Beijing’s various districts detain petitioners from around China at Majialou, located in the southeast corner of Beijing; they can't stay overnight because that would count as illegal detention. Local governments have to pick them up on the same day. If they can't be promptly sent back to their hometowns, they are temporarily detained. The criminal act of unlawful detention is thus handed over to the local governments in the areas from which the petitioners came. The regime has its henchmen do the dirty work.

I learned of the black jails as early as 2005. During the Two Sessions in 2007, I received a text message from the same location where three people from different provinces were seeking help, which gave me some idea of the systematic and professional nature of these black jails.

A typical example of such professionalized detention facilities is the Anyuanding Company (安元鼎公司), exposed by the media in September 2010, which earned 20 million yuan annually by intercepting petitioners.

On the morning of September 21, 2008, I received a text message from a petitioner saying they were being detained in an alley behind the Youth Hotel near Taoranting Park. Since I had some free time, I called up a friend and we went there together.

In the alley behind the Youth Hotel, there was an inconspicuous white iron gate, firmly shut. I knocked on the door. A flustered-looking man appeared, asking where
we were from as he fumbled for the lock. I said Henan. Suddenly, he became suspicious and asked us to contact the province's liaison office in Beijing.

I asked for Wang Jinlan. He said there was no such person — a lie, but that was their usual practice. I called Ms. Wang. A moment later, she came to the window and demanded to be let out. I took photos through the window, and the man closed it.

Soon, six or seven men surged around me. One reached for my camera. A shirtless man punched me in the chest. The thugs wielded iron chains and padlocks. These criminal gangs, large and small, lurked in the underbelly of society.

I remained calm, allowing them to insult, curse, and occasionally punch me. When they grew tired of their bravado, I took some photos and asked, "Can I go now?" They briefly considered dragging me into the black jail but were stopped by their leader. As I left, I turned back and said, "You will regret your actions today."

The next day, we were better prepared. Before reaching the entrance of the black jail, four or five guards were already waiting.

One of the guards in a red shirt looked familiar; he turned out to be Liu Fengxiang, the former deputy director of the Petitions Bureau in Kaifeng. I had met him three years ago. Communist Party officials are like chameleons, changing faces at will. I called for Wang Jinlan. Liu grabbed my phone and punched me in the face. The tall man beside him shoved and punched me violently, pushing me all the way to the entrance of No. 62 Middle School, dozens of meters away.

In the twilight, students poured out of the campus, their faces young and innocent. I shouted, "Students, please remember, right beside you, there is a black jail where innocent petitioners are detained." Their puzzled looks indicated they probably didn't understand what I was talking about.

Wang Jinlan sent a text from inside: "They won't let us out. There are 31 people here. Just now, a woman from the Luoyang Steel Plant in Henan province named Liu Cuihua had her ribs broken and was brought here with an IV drip. She's in the corridor now."

At the entrance of No. 62 Middle School, the guards spotted my media friend. One of the taller guards rushed forward, snatched her phone, and smashed it on the ground. Several guards anxiously made phone calls, demanding that Wang Jinlan be taken away quickly.

The situation momentarily calmed down. I gently asked the tall guard who had just hit me what his occupation was. He suddenly roared, "What business is it of yours! If you have the guts, go take the civil service exam! Become a high-ranking official! Change this situation!"

The beaters have driven themselves crazy. That's how society is!

Can. You. Change. It?
Yes, we can change it. In this society that defies conscience, many people are mentally splintered. We come here to heal wounds.

A local judge came to take Wang Jinlan away. The guards, eager to save face, handed Wang Jinlan over and couldn't wait for us to leave.

Wang Jinlan said she was taken here immediately after completing the forms for a normal petition at the Supreme Court and hadn't violated any laws. Relatives of officials from the petition bureau hired thugs to set up the black jail. Six or seven petitioners were held in a single room, and the local government had to pay the hotel 150 yuan per person per day. Like the "Changping Sand Dredging" business, there was also a twisted industrial chain at work in this case.

In 2012, Song Ze drew up a map of black jails. In Beijing, there were 42 sites that we’d visited and confirmed.

**A Moment of Sunshine**

On October 13, we received a distress message and once again went to the black jail behind the Youth Hotel.

We arranged to meet with three friends who worked in the media, with one staying at the entrance of No. 62 Middle School for coordination.

The prisoner, Ma Xirong, went to the window and demanded to be let out. She loudly questioned the guards, "I am a law-abiding citizen, what is your identity, and why do you have the right to detain me here?"

The thug, who the last time I saw him was shirtless, rode his bike back and forth in front of us, then squatted in the distance to keep us under watch. Several more thugs guarded the entrance of the middle school, watching our moves. I called Teng Biao, informing him that we were back at the black jail and asked him to pay close attention to the situation.

By my side was the journalist Guo Jianguang. He knocked on the door and asked when they would release the prisoners. The jailers replied that they were in the process of contacting someone. The standoff lasted almost an hour.

Suddenly, a van pulled up from outside and stopped at the entrance of the black jail. Three people jumped out and started attacking Guo Jianguang. The surrounding guards also rushed over. There were slaps, punches, and kicks, but Jianguang remained calm as he was pushed into a corner against the wall. One guard came over, grabbed his hair, and knocked him to the ground.

I stood beside Jianguang. At that moment, I wished so much to rush forward and hit the thug in the head with all my strength. But I had to restrain myself.

At moments like these, we are on a nonviolent offensive. We must keep ourselves completely calm inside. We are here to suffer. This is different from myself being a hero in front of the Petition Bureau; the old man who was beaten there is a victim, but
we are not. We are the attackers. Being beaten is a powerful attack.

Immediately, I was punched in the neck, chest, and face. The shirtless thug kicked hard at the back of my knee, trying to force me to kneel. I stood calmly, looking at him sympathetically.

As one guard hit me, he shouted, "We are acting on behalf of the government, we are not afraid of anything! Call 110 if you dare! Do it now!" The first time I was beaten here, I called 110 and the police came. They had a cursory look at the scene, said nothing, and left.

What can we rely on? Our only reliance is the conscience of hundreds of millions of Chinese people.

Even after the beating we received, none of us three left. There was no fear, just calm patience.

A grassroots cadre hurried over to escort Ma Xirong out. We left together.

The guards cursed and yelled behind us. As we passed the entrance of No. 62 Middle School, I turned around and said to the thugs, "We'll be back."

Immediately, they rushed up, the tall one shouting frantically, "I dare you to come back, believe it or not, I'll run you over now!" He opened the car door and got in, all while shouting his threats.

I stayed calm. The shirtless thug rushed over again, grabbed me by my clothes, choked me, and ripped off a button from my shirt.

This is weakness hiding behind a fierce appearance. Each time we come, we threaten the existence of this black jail. Especially this era, with brutal violence being live-streamed and spread online, sunlight has already reached this place.

They are acting on behalf of the government. But this behavior is too ugly. The Party needs to save face, so once it's exposed, they'll distance themselves from the thugs. That's where we find room to act.

They are hysterically mad. So what are we afraid of?

Ma Xirong took out her petition documents. Her son, a student at Xi'an Jiaotong University, had been killed in a traffic accident, and she disagreed with the court's ruling, so she kept protesting the results of the case. She was searched on Wangfujing Street, one of Beijing's oldest commercial streets, and brought here after the petition materials were found on her.

Suddenly, she knelt in front of us, crying bitterly for us after the beating we had suffered.

I helped her up, my own eyes tearing up. Actually, I wanted to say that we weren’t so miserable; being able to share some pain is our honor.
Twenty days later, we didn't receive any more distress calls. Zhang Yadong and other volunteers went to the Youth Hotel to check, and it had vanished.

**Account of an Anti-Black Jail Action**

We formed a citizen observation team specifically to combat black jails.

The afternoon of December 28, 2008. The location: a black jail at Jing Wan Guesthouse, an establishment operated in Beijing by the municipal government of Nanyang city, Henan Province.

This time we were well-prepared. Nearly forty citizens, including Guo Yushan, Teng Biao, Xu Chunliu, Tan Yifei, Yao Yao, Shan Yajuan, Wang Zhongxia, Yin Yusheng, and others. In addition to phones and cameras, a Mr. Song from CCTV brought a big video camera.

Shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon, everyone began to gather in the small woods on the east side of the Jing Wan Guesthouse. There were victims of black jails from Zhejiang, Jilin, and other provinces, as well as friends from media outlets such as *Southern Metropolis Daily* and the *Beijing News*. We reaffirmed our commitment to absolute nonviolence no matter what circumstances we might encounter.

The observation team was divided into three groups. One group of five negotiated with the guards at the black jail, while the second group of six filmed and documented the scene from a distance not far from the first group. The third group, consisting of over twenty people, waited outside the main gate.

Around three o'clock, by the side of the Beijing-Shijiazhuang Expressway, Teng Biao, Xu Chunliu, and I walked down a passage, going tens of meters before arriving at the front gate of the Jing Wan Guesthouse. Going around to the back from the east side of the guesthouse, there was a two-story courtyard. The gate to the courtyard was tightly closed, with the Olympic logo and the words "Maintaining Harmony in the Capital" plastered on it. The dark forces of tyranny always try to disguise themselves behind bright facades.

We had just contacted the petitioners being held inside. When we arrived at the gate, they came downstairs and demanded to be released. Tan Yifei and others took out cameras to film and demanded the guards free the detainees.

The guards inside said they needed us to go to Room 114 to get paperwork. We went to Room 114. There, a middle-aged man said he needed to consult with the leadership. We returned to the backyard once again.

Soon, seven or eight guards, male and female guards converged on us and tried to seize Tan Yifei’s camera. The petitioners being held inside also pounded on the door desperately, trying to rush out. At this moment, the third group of the citizen observation team hurriedly approached from outside the main gate. Whenever the guards attempted to take our cameras, we swarmed them, using our bodies to block their movements. They were acting like hooligans, assaulting people and damaging...
our belongings, but we wouldn't do the same to them, out of safety concerns and, more importantly, because of our principles.

A man in his 70s climbed up onto the gate from inside, repeatedly shouting “help me!” We documented the scene with photographs.

I called 110 and reported the illegal detention at Jing Wan Guesthouse. We had obtained evidence, but we were concerned that the guards might call the police first and collude with the local police station to cause trouble. Many of our friends also called the police.

After about fifteen minutes, the police arrived. The elderly man hanging on the gate was still calling for help. We pointed out to the police that this was the scene of an illegal detention crime in progress, and we asked them to handle it according to the law.

In this post-totalitarian society, the words “rule of law” is part of the politically correct discourse. The “socialist core values,” one of which is “rule of law,” are plastered all over the streets and alleys. This is our most frequently used weapon.

The cries for help and the sound of banging on the door continued. A young guard jumped in and pulled the elderly man off the gate from inside, but the situation was still out of control. The police had no choice but to order the door be opened and the old man released.

During the opening of the door, many petitioners rushed out. We also squeezed through, trying to help them escape from the black jail. However, there were many guards concentrated at the entrance, and in the end, only the old man was able to leave. Even so, he couldn't simply walk free out of the gate; the police intercepted him and put him in a police car to wait.

The police stood on the side of the black jail. They didn't care that a crime was in progress; instead, they demanded that we go outside the gate, leaving only a few of us, including myself and Teng Biao. Deputy Director Kong of the Lugouqiao Police Station promised us that they were in contact with the liaison office in Beijing and that when the liaison office representatives arrived, the detained petitioners would be given the choice of leaving with us or with the liaison office. We provided the names of six illegally detained individuals.

Seeing the police taking their side, the guards were emboldened again. The Jing Wan Guesthouse general manager threatened us, saying that he only needed to make one phone call and none of us would be able to leave.

It was getting dark. The police asked us to go to the police station to give statements and tried to hand over the old man to personnel from the petition office. But he insisted on leaving with us. Deputy director Kong blocked his path. I sternly pointed out, "On what grounds do you restrict his personal freedom?" In the end, the police had no choice but to agree to let the old man and Xu Chunliu ride in one police car, while Teng Biao and I rode in another police car, and we all arrived at the Lugouqiao Police Station together. The rest of our friends waited at the entrance of the
guesthouse.

We waited in the lobby of the police station for a long time while they reported the details to their superiors. A car belonging to the guards at the black jail was waiting outside. After discussing it, Xu Chunliu and Teng Biao covered for us while I took the elderly person away.

We walked a few hundred meters to a desolate area, where I had the elderly man hide. After observing for a while and seeing no one following us, I handed him 100 yuan, then watched as he disappeared into the night. Suddenly, my eyes felt a bit sore.

Returning to the police station, I called Guo Yushan and told him that everyone could leave, at least this time we rescued one elderly person.

At this point, the situation reversed. Kong, the deputy director, warmly served me and Chen Liang tea. I got a phone call from Zhang Xiaoyu: all six of the detainees we listed had obtained their freedom.

Our efforts of exposing the black jails had begun to bear fruit. Black jails are a source of shame. Many friends who came that day wrote blog posts about the situation, and many others worked in the media. As the authorities above felt pressure, things began to change below. The guards who were tracking us at the black jail, fierce and menacing before, now suddenly became very docile. Deputy Director Kong practically begged us to grant the Nanyang government’s Beijing Office an audience.

The head of the Nanyang Office in Beijing apologized profusely and asked us for our demands. Teng Biao said, "Remember, according to the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China, whether you are from the petition office or the Beijing Office, your actions undoubtedly constitute the crime of illegal detention. Any citizen has the right and responsibility to report criminal behavior if they witness it. You must immediately stop this activity." Chen Liang added, "The entire process today has been recorded, and we will continue to monitor the situation."

Around 11 o'clock in the evening, we received news that the remaining thirty-plus detainees had been transferred to stay at the Jing Wan Guesthouse, with their living conditions significantly improved. They expressed their gratitude to all of us!

Epilogue: In the following months, our anti-black jail team's momentum grew ever stronger. When we went to the Juyuan Guesthouse where a petitioner girl had been raped, the thugs basically fled at the first sign of us. Our efforts continued until 2012. I knew that we couldn’t rescue everyone so long as the dictatorship remained in place. But as long as we're together, sharing a little suffering, shedding a little light on the evil, we can bring a little hope to this sin-ravaged land.