

Xu Zhiyong

A Beautiful China

Nine

The Citizens' Alliance, or Gongmeng

Part Three

From a Citizens' Alliance to Citizens Movement

At the time of the “two sessions” in 2009, Gongmeng submitted 10 proposals, including proposals to reform county-level political institutions, abolish the administrative monopoly on education, end coercive birth control measures, abolish “black jails” and protect human rights, and establish a system of punitive compensation for damage and harm done to the public. We posted these proposals on the “Citizen Participation” section of our website.

Practically speaking, our work gradually evolved to cover three main areas.

The first area was **legal aid**. Many people sought our help, but because of our limited capacity we hoped to use our limited resources to maximize our social impact. Lawyers Li Fangping and Li Xiongbing set up an individual case committee and met weekly to discuss the latest progress of their work and decide on what individual cases to provide legal aid. We chose cases involving the most extreme injustices, such as the case of the Chengde Four or the case of Cheng Fagen and three others (程发根) in Leping, Jiangxi province (江西乐平) — cases of wrongful conviction that sentenced innocent people to death. Or we chose representative cases that would have greater social significance, such as the *Southern Metropolis Daily* case, the Chen Guangcheng case, or the contaminated milk powder cases.

The second area of our work was **citizen participation**. We set up a small working group on major social issues and used investigative reports or legislative proposals to promote institutional improvements. Examples include our legislative proposal for a law to govern the requisition of property; the reports “Investigation into the Causes of the March 14 Incidents in the Tibetan Regions,” “Investigation into Petitioning in China,” and “Proposal to Stop Compulsory Birth Control Measures”; and our proposed compensation plan for the Wenzhou high-speed train crash in 2011.

The last area of our work was **citizen action**. This included actions to promote elections for people's congress, direct elections at the Beijing Lawyers Association, monitoring "black jails," and providing help to petitioners during winter.

There were no hard and fast boundaries between these three areas. For example, our work on educational equality involved citizen participation through the submission of recommendation reports, legal aid in the form of individual litigation, and citizen action in the form of monthly petitioning rallies outside the Ministry of Education.

In April 2009, we compiled a "Citizens' Rights Defense Handbook" and conducted our first legal literacy training session. We provided legal aid to Deng Yujiao (邓玉娇) and set up a legal assistance fund when Yao Jing (姚晶) was attacked for petitioning. In May, we submitted formal applications to 73 government agencies in Beijing requesting that they release information regarding their "three public expenses" (the amount of public funds spent on official overseas travel, official vehicles, and official receptions), as well as detailed accounts of each agency's income and expenses. In June, we convened a seminar of experts opposing the "Green Dam" online filtering software.

Deng Yujiao was a guesthouse waitress in Badong County, Hubei province. After she refused to provide "special services," three local government officials attempted to rape her. While defending herself, Deng Yujiao killed one of her attackers with a fruit knife. She was arrested and charged with the crime of intentional injury. With blogger and activist Wu Gan (吴淦) leading the way, lawyer Xia Lin (夏霖) led a legal team to intervene on Deng's behalf. As a result of the widespread public attention surrounding the case, Deng Yujiao was released on bail.

One incident at a time, we wanted to use these concrete, individual incidents to promote the idea that power should be brought under the rule of law. We were optimistic that progress in the rule of law could be achieved through this gradual process of accumulation, and we were willing to play a positive and constructive role in this historic process. But some didn't see us that way. Faced with the growth of civil society, they became extremely hostile. In their eyes, there were enemies everywhere.

The notice we received from the tax authorities on July 14 left us angry and shocked. It said that Gongmeng, which had always been a non-profit civic organization, would be fined the maximum amount of five times the tax we allegedly owed, equal to more than 1.42 million yuan. On July 17, the Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau declared Gongmeng Law Research Center an illegal organization. Then on July 20, Gongmeng office assistant Zhuang Lu (庄璐) and I were detained on suspicion of tax evasion.

At this most difficult moment, everyone in the Gongmeng office continued carrying out their work. More than 700 citizens donated money to pay the fine, preventing the use of any excuse to fabricate any crime. A number of eminent legal professionals and public intellectuals signed a joint appeal on our behalf, including Jiang Ping (江平), Mao Yushi (茅于軾), Zhang Yihe (章诒和), Xu Yinong (许医农), Qian Liqun (钱理群), and Zhang Sizhi (张思之), and countless

citizens wrote articles, sent postcards, or made T-shirts. Thank you all! We were very lucky to have their support.

After Zhuang Lu was released, I was released on August 23, so was the Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti (伊力哈木). Ilham and I weren't connected, but we were both moderate and constructive. I later heard that the order to release us came from the same office. One of the signs of China's regression after 2013 was that I was sentenced to four years in prison and Ilham Tohti was sentenced to life.

One drizzly afternoon in October, I was sitting on a pleasure boat on Beijing's Houhai Lake discussing the future of our work with Teng Biao, Wang Gongquan (王功权), Yang Ziyun (杨子云), and Li Xiongbing. Since the Gongmeng company and the Gongmeng Law Research Center were both involved in pending litigation, we registered a new company. But we would no longer publicly work in the name of the company or use the name "Gongmeng."

Instead, we would use the name "Gongmin," or "Citizens." Each of us is a citizen, and together we are "Citizens."

We used to be an NGO called the Citizens' Alliance, or Gongmeng, where we took our citizenship seriously. From that point on, we turned into principled advocates who would build a broad platform and use our status as citizens to bring together Chinese people seeking democracy and freedom.

Educational Equality

In September 1958, China established a system of urban-rural segregation based on place of household registration, or *hukou*. Because of the *hukou* system, millions of Chinese migrate like birds every year during the Lunar New Year holiday season to visit their families. No matter how flourishing the city is, it will never really be home for them.

According to statistics from the All-China Women's Federation, in 2008 China had 58 million "left-behind" children being raised apart from their parents working in the cities. In 2011, we conducted a sample survey to assess the reasons why children were left behind and found that 80 percent were left behind because of the *hukou* system and its restrictions on children's ability to attend school or take the university entrance exam if they live with their migrant worker parents.

Many people were concerned about these left-behind children, but many had never thought much about the best ways to help them. Making their parents, who were employed in the cities, return to the countryside was not a solution. Rather, the best way to help these children is to allow them to go to school in the cities where their parents work.

In December 2009, venture capitalist Wang Gongquan suggested we start a project on educational equality. In the preceding several months, a total of four parents had come to our office seeking help. Their children were about to finish primary school in Beijing and were not allowed to participate in the computerized placement system that assigned Beijing children to a

nearby middle school. Instead, it was up to the parents themselves to place their children in school through this or that connection, an extremely difficult task in Beijing.

We realized that, behind these parents who came to us for help, there were more than 200 million “new urban migrants” and many millions of left-behind children.

We set up a three-year work plan. Our reason as well as sentiment convinced us that three years would be enough time to solve this problem!

The goal of the first phase of the project was to have a unified computerized placement system for students moving from primary to middle school. This goal would be easy to achieve because the law and policy made it the responsibility of the governments in locations receiving inflows of migrants to provide compulsory education. It would be much easier to enforce the law than it would be to try to change the law.

In January 2010, Yan Ye (严野) and I went around in the bitter cold visiting Beijing’s slum neighborhoods. China was like every other developing country in that new urban migrants would congregate in slums in the villages on the outskirts of the city. They couldn’t be covered up, nor could they be completely demolished.

We called our research report “Inequality from Birth.” We listened to children recount details of their tragic youth. A child who had the best grades in her class was denied a “three-good student” award for having “good moral character, good studies, and good health” simply because she did not have a Beijing *hukou*. Every May or June you could see silent figures on the school playground, wandering about or crying in each other’s arms. Students in their last year of middle school saying goodbye to their teachers, their classmates, and their parents to return to the faraway and strange place where their *hukou* is.

Zhang Xudong’s (章旭东) parents worked in Beijing for more than 20 years. One of the top students in his class at Beijing Guozijian Middle School, after graduating he had no choice but to return to Zhangjiakou alone in order to continue his studies. Far from his parents, in a place where the dialect, environment, and customs were all unfamiliar, his grades quickly slipped to among the lowest in his class. When we saw him a year later, this once talkative, happy boy had become sullen and withdrawn. A year after that, he had dropped out of school altogether.

There are 8 million Beijing residents without a Beijing household registration. This includes more than half of the city’s lawyers, journalists, and business managers. China is rapidly urbanizing, and hundreds of millions of people come to work and live in cities. They pay taxes, but they aren’t treated equally. They face discrimination when they try to buy a house or a car. Worst of all, their children aren’t allowed to take the university entrance exam in Beijing and are forced to stay behind in their place of *hukou*.

Our demand was simple: equality in taxation and rights to education.

We weren’t asking for special privileges. Rather, we were fighting for equal treatment for Beijing’s 200 million new urban migrants. At first, Beijing parents with so-called “green cards” demanded that the Beijing government fulfill its promise regarding the rights of those with that

status. But this was a small group. We told them that there was strength in numbers and that we needed to represent the larger group if we were to get the broadest level of support.

Few people were willing to stand up and demand justice like this. We can't blame the silent majority. In a social movement, you have to be smart about the way you mobilize the public to participate without fear.

The first step is to collect signatures. Participation requires minimal effort: just sign your name and leave your contact information to show your support. People who sign petitions gradually become bolder and more willing to participate in other ways.

We had a total of eight "consultations" with the education commissions of Beijing Municipality and Haidian District. My status as a delegate to the Haidian People's Congress proved useful, as the education authorities occasionally invited us to their meeting rooms for discussions. We had concrete proposals on how to place students from schools for the children of migrant laborers and how to make schools more available where these students were most concentrated. At the same time, we were also preparing a lawsuit to demand that the Beijing government fulfill its legal responsibility to provide compulsory education.

By the eighth time we met with the Haidian education authorities, everyone was already under a great deal of pressure. From that point forward, there was continuous friction between the parent group and the authorities in charge of 'stability maintenance.'

To ensure that our action would continue, we repeatedly warned everyone to remain moderate and rational and not to discuss politics in the QQ message group. Our goal had to remain purely focused on the children's education. I never hid my political ideals, but in our pursuit of the politics of conscience the interests of the parties involved were paramount. We believed that the highest form of politics was to truly help people.

By June 2010 we had basically achieved our first phase objective. Children without a Beijing *hukou* would be allowed to take part in the computerized school placement system. Countless parents breathed a sigh of relief.

Next, we continued on to work for equality in the university entrance examination system. On the last Thursday of every month, we gathered to petition outside the Ministry of Education. It happened to be a Thursday the first time we decided to go, so that became our tradition. For two whole years, our actions revolved around these monthly demonstrations, whether it was collecting signatures, making proposals, organizing seminars, or mobilizing people's congress delegates.

Maintaining a temporal rhythm in action is an extremely important factor in ensuring its sustainability.

In August 2010, we launched a website for educational equality. By September, we had collected more than 10,000 signatures of support. *The Beijing News* and other media carried lengthy feature articles. As a result, the Ministry of Education finally recognized this as a major social problem and set up a team of experts to address it. By the time of the "two sessions" (两会) in

March 2011, this was an issue that the Ministry of Education couldn't avoid, and Minister Yuan Guiren (袁贵仁) announced that they were in the process of developing a plan.

In November 2011, we mailed materials to more than 1,000 National People's Congress delegates. Whenever we had the opportunity, we split up and met with delegates. Many actions for the protection of rights tap into the forces of conscience within the system. Our citizen movement was not a non-cooperation movement, because sometimes we could not reject cooperation.

On New Year's Day 2012, more than 100 parent volunteers went to more than 20 different locations in Beijing, such as subway stations and shopping malls, to collect signatures of support. We had organized a number of similar non-politically-motivated street actions.

By February 2012 we had collected more than 100,000 signatures of support. We were now able to report on the progress of our work to these 100,000 people in Beijing by text message. We divided up the city into seven zones and assigned active parents to serve as core organizers in each area. In a regime focused on stability maintenance, this was the most powerful force for social progress around.

During the "two sessions" in March 2012, more than 60 delegates of the National People's Congress publicly supported allowing the children of migrant laborers to take the university entrance examination in their place of residence. A vice-minister of education said a plan to make this possible would be issued in the first half of the year, to be followed by concrete local implementing regulations later in the year.

On July 5, 2012, after the deadline set by the Ministry of Education had passed, the parents again went to petition. This time, several of the activists were brutally attacked by the police. Hu Yang (胡杨) was bundled into a vehicle and beaten for an extended period. Another parent activist, Tiao Wu (跳舞) was carried away by two police officers, one grabbing her by the legs and the other grabbing her by the hair.

On August 30, 2012, the new policy was announced allowing children accompanying their parents to take the university entrance examination locally. By the end of the year, provincial governments had issued their own implementing regulations. Tens of millions of children who had previously been forced to be "left behind" would finally be able to stay with their parents while attending school and taking the university entrance examination.

But lo and behold, this hard-won policy didn't apply to Beijing. In the years that followed, the children of new migrant families in Beijing were instead treated more and more harshly. One parent said bitterly: "We've worked so hard for three years to liberate all of China but ourselves."

Ahead of the "two sessions" in 2013, Beijing was expected to release a new policy. We heard that they had prepared two plans. We made one last push. I went to hand out cards at subway stations and urged everyone to call in sick on February 28 and petition in front of the Beijing Education Commission. This would eventually become one of my "crimes."

Five years later, in 2018 [*Translator's note: Xu Zhiyong was released from prison in July 2017 after serving a four-year sentence*], we met up again. Two of our tireless activists were still at it, meeting outside the Ministry of Education on the last Thursday of each month.

Nine years had passed. We had brought changes to the *hukou* segregation system and helped countless “left behind” children. Together we had paid a price for social progress, but we had no regrets — only gratitude for the glory of this progressive era.

From beginning to end, we had taken the initiative to carry out careful planning and extensive mobilization in this social movement. If you look at the number of “left behind” children we helped, we achieved about 90 percent of our goal. Another thing I am proud of is that not one of the many parents who fought alongside us was detained during those three years. The price was paid by only a few of us.

In July, I received a WeChat message from Tiao Wu: “Teacher Xu, I have some good news to share! My son took the university entrance exam this year and got into an art college in Shanghai! After middle school, we decided to send him to high school in Hebei Province, just outside Beijing, and he took the university entrance exam using his status as an accompanying child. Even though it took him three hours each way to return home to us every two weeks, he avoided being ‘left behind’ in our hometown. There are so many other children like him who have benefitted from being able to take the university entrance exam close to where their parents live. You have done so much and sacrificed a great deal to make this possible! Every time I think about you, I feel ashamed and heartbroken!”

This gave me a great deal of comfort. With sadness I had once thought that they, the parents, helped countless children across China but their own.

The Village Head's Death

I vividly remember the first day of 2011. All afternoon we stood in front of a three-story building surrounded by barbed wire in Fengtai District and repeatedly dialed “110,” the emergency hotline number. We had just discovered a new “black jail.”

It was a bitterly cold evening when one of our more courageous volunteers took advantage of someone leaving the building to rush past and pry open the steel gate of what had the feel of a military fortress. Then, petitioners began streaming out of the building.

The police arrived a few minutes later. Around a dozen volunteers, including Wang Gongquan, Shan Yajuan (单亚娟) and I, insisted that the rest of the people inside be released.

One of those released that day was Zhao Kefeng (赵克凤), who had come to Beijing to petition over the wrongful imprisonment of her son. Her story was quite a long one. Her son had been given a suspended death sentence for homicide. The true culprit had long since surfaced and had been sentenced to death in another case under a different identity. That cold night, after being released from the black jail, she went to live under a bridge. She was penniless after nine years of tireless petitioning.

Stories like these had already become part of our lives for many years.

Meanwhile on that same day, we were being widely condemned by people online.

Qian Yunhui (钱云会), the village head of Zhaiqiao Village in Zhejiang Province (浙江寨桥村), had been killed after being run over by a truck. Given the years he had spent petitioning against abuses and the broken security cameras at every crucial moment of the incident, to many people it all looked like foul play.

People wanted to know the truth, so we went there to investigate. Yu Jianrong (于建嵘) and Wang Xiaoshan (王小山) each led independent teams to investigate as well.

Based on several factors, our many years of investigative experience quickly led me to the conclusion that this had indeed been an ordinary traffic accident, not a murder: there were the long brake marks, the evasiveness of “eyewitnesses,” the way that everyone was just allowed into the village after the incident, and some of the events of that morning. The reason that Qian’s death had become a matter of such great public concern was because of the pressure that petitioners in Zhaiqiao had come under after years of land seizures, combined with the public’s general distrust of officials.

Looking around the scene of the accident, there was one key detail. Qian Yunhui hadn’t died from being hit, or run over, by a vehicle; rather, he had been crushed to death between the tire and the mound of dirt on the side of the road. After braking suddenly, the heavy truck left long tire marks leading to the pile of dirt by the side of the road where the fallen Qian lay. The truck had been traveling at over 40 km/h. After braking, it couldn’t have been traveling at more than 20 km/h when it hit Qian. If it was murder, they wouldn’t have tried to stop the truck so suddenly. It would have taken an extraordinary coincidence for a suddenly braking truck to kill a person. No one would try to kill someone like that.

Another factor that convinced us it was a traffic accident was something that it wasn’t convenient to include in our report: the attitude of the local government.

We had been involved in many matters of public concern over the years, and we were very familiar with the response of local government officials. In many places, we would be followed or harassed. But Zhaiqiao Village remained unusually open. The village was bustling with people streaming in from all over China, and the key witnesses had not been “disappeared.”

The first version of our report published on December 31 unfortunately got some of the details wrong, and we were perhaps too blunt in our conclusion that it had been an ordinary traffic accident. I am also deeply ashamed about the self-righteous way in which I rushed to publish that report. If I could do it again, I would be more careful and delay the report a few days. But I would still publish the same conclusions.

We had made a big deal out of announcing that we were going to find out the truth about Qian Yunhui’s death. If we kept quiet after finding out the truth, wouldn’t we then be avoiding the truth?

The initial publication drew intense criticism and controversy. After New Year’s Day, I went back to Zhaiqiao Village to investigate the incident further.

One detail almost brought me to tears. I walked the road where Qian Yunhui took his last steps countless times, but I couldn't understand why he had walked on the right side of the road.

The village was on the left side of the road and the farmland was on the right side. The village store and Qian Yunhui's house were all on the left, about 320 meters from each other. If he had just stayed on the left side of the road on his way home from the store, there wouldn't have been an accident.

I studied the video footage and the accident scene over and over again. I finally realized that Qian had walked to the right side of the road to take video of the three trucks carrying security guards. Just the day before, there had been a conflict between villagers and the electric power plant, and those security guards had come to prevent the villagers from blocking the road.

Once past the store, he crossed over to the right side of the road and raised his video watch in the air to face the approaching three trucks. Then, almost at the intersection near his house, he tried to cross back to the other side of the road. At that moment, the brakes screeched. I felt a strong sense of foreboding. This was the first time I had ever doubted our conclusion. Was this really an ordinary traffic accident? As village head, Qian Yunhui had led the villagers of Zhaiqiao in protests for six years. He was still fighting until the last minute of his life.

We had heated discussions about whether to publish a revised report. Teng Biao was adamantly opposed. He was in Shenzhen that day, and we spent three hours on the phone discussing it, to the point where several people's phone batteries died. In the end, we took a vote. The majority prevailed, 6-5.

My position was clear. It had definitely been a traffic accident. We had announced publicly that we were going to investigate, and we shouldn't keep mum about our conclusions just because the truth wasn't what we expected. Tell the truth and take responsibility. We're not just critics, we're symbols of justice. We should think about how to really help the villagers and not just express our politically correct views. The way to help wasn't to deliberately hide or obfuscate the truth. Rather, it was to discover the real responsibility of the government behind the truth.

Between the egg and the wall, we are always on the side of the egg. But truth is the condition of justice. We cannot say that white is black.

The fierce criticism continued for several years. Had we suddenly switched sides and started defending the government? Had we been bought off for 2 million? Had we extinguished the torch of revolution? I'm sorry, but even in a revolution I hate to see passions built on top of lies.

After the raging controversy of Qian Yunhui's death, I learned to keep quiet about some public incidents.

To this day, people still ask me whether it was really a traffic accident. I still answer with confidence that it was.

I still have a dream that the politicians in this country will make honesty their bottom line. I will always have a heart of justice and speak the truth even when opinion is against me. That is part of our character.

The Jasmine Revolution

In late 2010, the death of a street vendor sparked a revolution in Tunisia, where the public demonstrated to demand the resignation of President Ben Ali. Less than a month later, on January 14, 2011, Ben Ali's 23-year political career came to an end.

The revolution that swept the Middle East became known as the "Jasmine Revolution," after Tunisia's national flower.

"Jasmine" spread to Egypt, where after mass protests, Hosni Mubarak stepped down from the presidency he had held for 30 years on February 11.

The ripples of the Jasmine Revolution reached Beijing in early spring.

On February 16, Teng Biao, Jiang Tianyong, Tang Jitian, and about a dozen other lawyers and citizens met over a meal to discuss how to help Chen Guangcheng. Someone might have mentioned the Jasmine Revolution. The situation in Beijing was unusually tense, and the domestic security police kept watch outside the restaurant. That evening, Tang Jitian was taken away.

On February 17, an anonymous account on Twitter posted about a Jasmine Revolution developing in China. On February 19, an appeal was posted on the Boxun website announcing rallying points in each of China's major cities.

On the afternoon of February 19, Teng Biao and Jiang Tianyong were taken away by the police and their homes searched. On the same day, a number of public intellectuals and dissidents were also detained, including Ran Yunfei (冉云飞), Li Tiantian (李天天), Liu Guohui (刘国慧), Ding Mao (丁矛), Zhu Yufu (朱虞夫), Liao Shuangyuan (廖双元), Huang Yanming (黄燕明), Lu Yongxiang (卢勇祥), Xiao Yong (肖勇), Zhang Jianping (张建平), Shi Yulin (石玉林), She Wanbao (佘万宝), and Li Yu (李宇). Several hundred were detained in Beijing alone.

I had originally planned to meet with Teng Biao that afternoon to discuss how we could help Chen Guangcheng, but I was unable to get in touch with him. That evening, I went to Teng Biao's place to assess the situation and make preparations.

I wasn't involved in the incident. I knew it was extremely sensitive. Chinese society wasn't ready for revolution. Teng Biao was different. He didn't think about these things. He considered himself an independent intellectual who would say what he had to say without worrying about crossing any lines.

Most of the time we were committed to standing together, whether we were investigating "black jails," rescuing petitioners, providing legal aid in death penalty cases based on wrongful convictions, or helping the families of children poisoned by tainted milk powder. Together we were disowned by our Ph.D advisor at Peking University.

But sometimes we had heated debates. For instance, I proposed that we devote a third of our human rights report to progress, a third on criticism, and a third on recommendations. But Teng

Biao felt that citizens should take a more purely critical stance because the country already has its state propaganda to sing praises excessively.

After the 2008 Tibetan protests, Teng Biao, Jiang Tianyong, and about a dozen other lawyers issued a joint statement announcing their willingness to defend Tibetan detainees. Their position was simple: as lawyers, it was their professional responsibility to defend human rights. But they were heavily criticized online, and Teng Biao was later “disappeared” for nearly two days.

I had learned through hard experience to avoid some of the dangerous traps along the way. Teng Biao hadn't yet learned those lessons. Given his nature, he would never be able to learn them. He's the epitome of an independent intellectual, a perpetual critic. China has not progressed to the point where independent intellectuals like him are tolerated.

One morning in April, a police officer took me to a hotel for the day. It was only when I returned home that night that I learned that the artist Ai Weiwei had been “disappeared” and realized that they had detained for the day fearing that I would go to Ai Weiwei's place to call for his release. The situation had become extremely serious.

Should we close the office for a while? Some friends gave me a friendly warning that, even though Gongmeng was not provocative, objectively speaking, we were once again found to be on the forefront of the situation. If a rational and constructive group like ours could no longer exist, was there any hope left for this society? We continued our legal aid work and campaign for educational equality.

After that summer, the situation calmed down a bit. We started to work on cases of violent forced eviction and promoting people's congress elections.

It was time again to elect delegates to people's congresses. In May, Liu Ping (刘萍) took the lead in carrying the campaign banner in Xinyu, Jiangxi province. Her campaign leaflets were confiscated and she was illegally detained. In June, the Legal Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress announced that there was no legal basis for “independent candidates.” News coverage of their candidacy was removed and forbidden. Courageous citizens like Li Chengpeng (李承鹏) made very public announcements that they were running for office and soon came under all kinds of strange pressure. Thirteen citizens who ran for election together in Beijing all had their freedom of movement restricted. I ran again just to show my attitude.

The year 2011 marked the 100th anniversary of the revolution that overthrew the Qing Dynasty. Libyan dictator Gaddafi died, and Mubarak's rule collapsed in Egypt. From the Middle East to Northeast Asia, the iceberg of authoritarian dictatorship was beginning to break apart. New technologies made it possible for the tide of revolution to once again sweep across the globe.

That year, the discourse of revolution rose up quietly and spread.

Youth

Gongmeng had an office in Wudaokou neighborhood for a long time. I liked the chaotic and youthful vibe of the people who hung around Beijing's “Center of the Universe” where a few top universities concentrated. I liked to listen to lively music in the local bars and reflect on life or

jot down distant revelations amidst ethereal music. The north winds would howl outside the window. Then I would get up and go to the freezing petitioner's village.

I'm grateful to have experienced the world's greatest sorrows and finest blessings in that place. We happened to be born into this great era of change in China.

Later, our office moved to the Huajie Building. After that, we were based in Shuangjing for a short time. Then, one evening in July 2011, we had a dinner at the office to say goodbye to Wu Rujia (吴如加). It was only later, with the help of Zhou Xiaoxiao (周晓晓), that I slowly came to remember the details of that gathering.

Wu Rujia hadn't been at Gongmeng for very long. The domestic security police came for him four times, and twice he was summoned for investigation. His mother was very worried about him. The story behind this was told by Rujia's girlfriend in her essay "The Portentous Star," in which she recounted a conversation between Rujia and his mother:

Rujia: "I am a citizen."

Mother: "You are not something to be sacrificed! My son, I don't care what you do – I just hope you will stay safe. There is an ancient saying: 'The hunter kills the bird that pokes its head out.'"

Rujia: "Ma, that's only a folk saying. I have another ancient saying for you: 'Civilian officials should die for giving good advice to the emperor as soldiers die defending the country.'"

Mother: "You've graduated and gone to work at a famous law firm – why did you quit?"

Rujia used to work at a law firm. He was fluent in foreign languages and earned 80,000 yuan a year doing non-litigation work. Now, where was he working? Some place called "Gongmeng"? If you tried to look it up on Baidu, the only result would be "Some search results cannot be displayed due to the relevant laws, regulations, and policies."

Gongmeng's main programs were legal aid, assistance to victims of forced evictions, our reporting on the petition system, educational equality, and elections. Rujia was in charge of the educational equality program. He began by researching and analyzing the need and feasibility of allowing the children of urban migrants to attend school and take the university entrance examination in the place where their parents lived. Why would the police come after him for that? Rujia's mother read my blog and saw an article about Teng Biao's disappearance. Naturally, she was worried about her son's safety!

Soon after Zhou Xiaoxiao joined Gongmeng, the police went to find her landlord and she was forced to move. For a time, she lived temporarily in the office. Zhuang Lu was detained for more than 20 days. They had summoned Lin Zheng many times. Ma Yinling (马银岭) passed the judicial examination but was blocked from obtaining his license to practice law.

Yes, we have political beliefs. We have never hidden this fact. We want to say goodbye to autocracy forever and see a China with democracy, the rule of law, freedom, justice, and love. That's why we've had so many difficulties.

Rujia's girlfriend recalled that day in her essay: "[Rujia] was drunk, his body swinging. In tears, he shouted: 'If I give the tax collector a gift card, it's considered bribery. Not even a single yuan! I won't do it! I won't do it!' He repeated this, over and over again. Then, he smashed the glass with his hand and blood splashed on my skirt."

The story behind this is that in 2010 we started asking people to make the "Citizen Pledge." Each of us should be a true citizen. Judges should not twist the law, and lawyers should not engage in bribery. Everyone must be true to their conscience and faithful to the ethical principles of their profession. We wanted all the righteous people of China to unite and become the hope of our nation.

That day, I also drank until I lost consciousness. As Xiaoxiao recalled in an essay, *The Unforgettable Moments of a Drifter in Beijing*: "Mr. Xu stood up and they embraced each other tightly, choking with emotion."

In "The Portentous Star," Rujia's beautiful girlfriend describes her lover this way: "Yesterday we suffered the panic of the doomsday. Tomorrow promises nothing uncertain. Here we are, in this familiar yet foreign city. I have exiled myself year after year and lived through good times and bad, all for a land of freedom. In this city of desires, you are the last thing I can believe in, something pure and white like the joyful ray of light that illuminates my heart."

I often think of those youthful faces from those days. My lifelong brothers, Teng Biao and Yu Jiang, now live far away. Lawyer Zhang Xingshui became a Buddhist who later converted to Christianity. Wang Gongquan is the poet-venture capitalist who refuses to give up his idealism. Guo Yushan has always been an activist under tremendous pressure for many years. Lin Zheng was always a ray of sunshine who later had a successful business and happy home. Wang Jia (王佳) is a young woman of extraordinary ability who went to Harvard to do postdoctoral work. There are so many other memorable colleagues: Li Xiongbing, Peng Jian, Yang Ziyun, Li Yujie (李玉洁), Li Fangping, Jin Huaiyu (金怀鱼), Ma Yinling, Wei Huanhuan (魏欢欢), Wu Rujia, Yan Ye (严野), Song Ze (宋泽), Zhou Xiaoxiao, Xia Tianshu (夏天姝), Ju Shuang (鞠双), Li Bing (李冰), Liu Liyun (刘丽云). They all have dreams, character, and a love of freedom. In those dark years, we worked together in days of bright sunshine.

These Ten Years

In March 2012, we were again temporarily without an office. The authorities had chats with each of our staff members and volunteers, demanding that they stop working for Gongmeng. Song Ze, a volunteer who had been in charge of monitoring "black jails," was placed under criminal detention on May 5 for "picking quarrels and creating a disturbance."

All of this forced us to make a planned transition from an NGO to a "formless" alliance of citizens.

In May 2012 we called for a “New Citizens Movement,” one in which people would be true citizens and take their status, rights, and responsibilities as citizens seriously. We created a “Citizen” logo based on a sample of Sun Yatsen’s calligraphy and the blue associated with the Republic of China. We promoted the core values of the citizen movement as freedom, justice, and love. We made T-shirts and umbrellas with the Citizen logo and urged people to make the logo part of their Weibo social media avatars. And we called on members of the movement to hold meet-up dinner gatherings in their respective cities.

We have tried to break new ground on behalf of the people of our nation and develop an independent political force outside of the system.

It’s been ten years.

The abolition of “custody and repatriation” meant that countless numbers of new urban migrants no longer had to worry about being arrested and sent back home. The educational equality movement meant that millions of “left behind” children would be able to attend school while living with their parents. Over the past decade, through these efforts, we worked hard to break down the system of segregation based on household registration and to realize a freer, more equal society.

There were the court cases involving Sun Dawu (孙大午), the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, the victims of contaminated milk powder, and Chen Guangcheng. There was the promotion of people’s congress elections or the call for direct elections at the Beijing Lawyers Association. Throughout, we had been defending freedom and justice and promoting democracy and the rule of law. We battled for ten years armed with the law as our weapon.

We had gone from the Open Constitution Initiative to the Citizens’ Alliance. We had the “Citizen Pledge” and the “New Citizen Movement.” To build a civil society and transform China into a constitutional political culture, we took our status, rights, and responsibilities as citizens seriously, broke new ground, and followed the path forward for ten years.

We have always been in opposition. We oppose authoritarianism and autocratic culture. We oppose lying, false accusations, and unscrupulous behavior by anyone, whether in power or not.

We have also always endeavored to be constructive and rationally promote social progress and build the rule of law and civil society. In our report on the March 2008 unrest in the Tibetan region, we made recommendations that would help bring both national unity and indigenous self-government. In our legal recommendations regarding the Wenzhou high-speed train accident, we criticized the proposed compensation of 0.5 million yuan as too low and proposed a compensation standard of more than 0.9 million, which public opinion soon forced the government to accept. Many provinces and municipalities accepted our educational equality proposal to end segregation on the basis of *hukou* and allow the children of migrant workers to take the university entrance examinations where their parents live. We called on officials to disclose their assets, and when ten members of the New Citizens Movement were arrested in Beijing in the spring of 2013, we were preparing draft legislation on asset disclosure by China’s high-ranking officials.

We are responsible citizens who oppose in order to build something new. We want to build the better China of our dreams.

Those who wish to build this China should go out into the world and serve society. Politics isn't just empty rhetoric. There are so many opportunities around us to serve society. You can help the poor and vulnerable or provide aid to disaster victims. Put down roots in society and offer yourself with sincerity. That is the source of our strength.

The hearts of those who are constructive should be dedicated to justice. In this land poisoned by lies and power grabs, it is important to maintain one's character and conscience and let it grow into a mighty, righteous strength. We want to reform our national character and bear witness to a beautiful politics of conscience.

We are erecting an enduring tower of democracy and constitutionalism next to the crumbling palace of dictatorship. Only when totalitarianism is reduced to ashes will our nation have new hope.

This rough and bumpy road has led us through the hopeful years before the coming dawn. This road of conscience, freedom, justice, and love leads to a better China.

The countercurrent we have encountered cannot turn the tides of history. More and more, "subjects" are awakening and becoming "citizens." We have an unshakable belief in the bright and better future of this nation and that, after two millennia of autocracy and a century of turmoil and hardship, China will be reborn and have a new life full of freedom, justice, and love.

Gongmeng is a phase in the history of both China's progress and my own life. There will come the day that it rises again.