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## Jailers Who Thrive on Silence

By LI SHAOMIN

**H**ONG KONG -- When I visited China in February this year, I was arrested and detained for five months by the Chinese secret police. My "crimes" were my critical views of China's political system, my visits to Taiwan, my use of Taiwanese funds to conduct research on politically sensitive issues, and my data collection for research in China. All of these are basic academic freedoms that are expected in democratic countries. But such freedoms are regarded as highly subversive in authoritarian societies.

Friends from all over the world and even strangers protested my detention and tried to help me. Thousands of people throughout the world, mostly academics, signed petitions to the Chinese government voicing their concern. Harold T. Shapiro, the president of Princeton — my alma mater — and Francis L. Lawrence, president of Rutgers University, wrote to Jiang Zemin of China asking for my release.

My arrest had a profoundly chilling effect in Hong Kong, where I teach, because most academics here conduct research and collect data in China. Yet the voices of protest from Hong Kong were relatively weak. About a hundred scholars and professors signed a letter to express their concern about my arrest, and I am very grateful to them. But no high-level academic officials from Hong Kong were willing to voice their concern.

University leaders here may have felt uncomfortable addressing my case because I have been more critical of the Chinese political system than most and my family has a long tradition of being critical and outspoken. Others may have felt they were far away from me on the political spectrum and that my arrest was irrelevant to them. But silence like theirs is precisely what allows dictatorships to continue to exist.

Not long after my release, Xiaokai Yang, a Chinese economist in Australia who was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, told me this parable that offers a little insight into this kind of group silence.

In the old days, people in some parts of China ate monkeys. Monkeys are smart and know how to protect themselves. So when a cook would arrive at the monkeys' cage to choose one to prepare, all the monkeys would try desperately to hide behind one another. Once the hapless monkey was chosen, all the others eagerly pushed it out of the cage. In contrast, oxen are not very smart. But when an ox is attacked by a lion, all the others form a circle, with horns pointing outward, to defend the unlucky one under attack. And

collectively, they did much better than the monkeys.

A totalitarian government suppresses its people by singling out the most outspoken for persecution and thus causes the entire population to live in fear. Once a target is chosen, everyone is relieved — everyone except the victim, of course. Most people in these societies prefer to remain silent to avoid attention or persecution. But of course, it never stops with just the outspoken ones. Eventually, those accused of lesser crimes are taken away, too. No one can escape.

And yet, protests can work even against totalitarian regimes. The current Chinese leaders desperately want China to be a full member of the international community. They are concerned about outside pressures. Criticisms from other countries, especially from the United States Congress, play a major role in counteracting China's one-party rule. I was treated much better physically during my detention than the Chinese detainees for a simple reason: Monthly visits by the American consulate allowed the outside world to know about my condition. And the release of the American-based scholars who were charged as spies in China shows that outside pressure can be effective.

Unfortunately, the government in Hong Kong — which is an autonomous region of China that maintains its independent judicial power and basic freedoms — has not sufficiently raised its voice to ensure fairness for Hong Kong residents detained in China. For example, Xu Zerong, another Hong Kong-based academic arrested more than a year ago in China on vague charges of endangering state security, has received little help from the Hong Kong government.

At a minimum, the Hong Kong government should insist that detainees be able to acquire legal documents, have visits from Hong Kong government representatives, and review the evidence against them when they face legal charges in China.

Hong Kong is still a free society according to our laws. But our freedoms may wane if we fail to protect them. I am fortunate to be out of prison. But I fear that others will suffer what I did if few in Hong Kong or in our government are willing to protest to protect basic rights.