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Tian Lan, 56, watches for police from her rented room. The windows have been covered by newspaper to hide her and other petitioners from authorities. Gilles Sabrié/For TWP

ONCE A COP, NOW A VICTIM

A Chinese tale of abuse and a craving for justice

BY WILLIAM WAN

BEIJING — For 12 years, the dark blue police uniform has stayed in Tian Lan’s closet.

She held onto it after she was arrested for accusing two fellow officers of corruption, through beatings in interrogation and during a prison sentence that followed. She kept the uniform even as she lost her family and savings and began sleeping under a bridge.

The uniform reminds her, she said, of who she used to be — an enforcer of Chinese law — and what she has become — one of its many victims.

“I used to believe in the system, in its fairness,” said Tian, 56, who lives in a squalid village alongside hordes of others trying to appeal their cases in Beijing. “I was naive.”

China’s legal system is so broken that a separate government agency — called the petition system — has been set up just to handle the mil-

lions like Tian who flock to its cities each year, alleging abuse and begging for intervention.

An appeal of last resort, the petition system draws China's most desperate and bitter. The clearest-eyed among them include those who share Tian's fall from official position – former judges, court officials and police officers, now reduced to hopeless rounds of petitioning. They know how China's secretive legal system works but have experienced the painful ways in which it doesn't. They describe a system in which arrests are arbitrary, prosecutions are motivated by special interests and court rulings are dictated by political leaders.

Distrust in the law has grown so widespread that China's Communist Party leaders this fall announced sweeping judicial reforms after decades of dithering.

But accounts such as Tian's, of abuses and legal disregard on multiple levels, suggest how difficult – perhaps impossible – it will be to change China's deeply entrenched system.

A craving for justice

Tian used to believe that justice and the party went hand in hand. And in those hands, the law was like a sharp cleaver, starkly dividing the world into right and wrong.

Now she sees law and justice in China as elements of a vicious circle.

The more abuse you suffer, she said, the stronger your craving for justice becomes. The more you try to satisfy that craving, the more abuse you bring upon yourself.

She has joined a group of fellow officers-turned-petitioners. A dozen of them live with Tian in a village slum, about an hour's drive

from Beijing. They eat and sleep together in cramped, unheated rooms rented with money borrowed from relatives.

By day, they try in vain, like other petitioners, to plead their cases outside central government offices. By night, they hide from police sent by hometown authorities to hunt them down and haul them back.



Sang Dianpeng, a 42-year-old former police officer from Bengbu, holds a picture of himself with bruises. He says he was accused of using excessive force against a man who turned out to be politically connected. Gilles Sabrié/For TWP

There is Sang Dianpeng, 42, who carries pictures of the bruises he suffered after being accused of using excessive force against a man who was politically connected. Former constable Li Dawei, 52, recently rejoined the group after 11 years in prison for expressing sympathy for democracy activists. Another fixture is Liu Ming, a towering former station chief who was purged after offending superiors.

Among them, Tian has become a mother figure of sorts.

A compact woman with a round, sympathetic face, she often spearheads the group's protests

and contacts others when one is detained.

“Perhaps if I gave up my case years ago, I could have gotten another job, salvaged my life and family,” she said during a recent interview in the village. “But you cannot help who you are.”

The ‘dark underbelly’

Her parents were military officers who raised Tian with the belief that life’s highest calling was serving the motherland.

At age 20, Tian enlisted in the army, and nine years later she joined the police force of Handan, a city 300 miles south of Beijing.

For the next two decades, she taught procedural law and other courses to rookies. She rose to the rank of superintendent, in charge of department propaganda and planting glowing articles in local newspapers.

“But I was never involved in casework,” she said, “so I never saw the dark underbelly of the system.”

She blames that naivete for her decision in 2002 to help a man she knew who had been arrested in a neighboring jurisdiction by two police officers demanding ransom from his family.

She helped publish a short article that focused on the failure of the officers to give a receipt to the man’s relatives for the large sum they paid.

In the years since, dozens more accusations have emerged against the same two officers – Yang Junhai and Zheng Chengyue – with lengthy descriptions online of an arrest-for-ransom scheme for amounts ranging from \$800 to

\$8,000.

But back in 2002, shortly after Tian’s article appeared, officers from Yang and Zheng’s jurisdiction – a place called Guangping County – stormed into Tian’s office and arrested her.

A copy of the indictment accuses her of five crimes, including making false accusations. Tian and her relatives said she was verbally charged with a sixth: leaking state secrets – a charge often tacked on to prevent detainees from seeing a lawyer.

During three months of detention, Tian said, the two officers personally took charge of her interrogation, beating her in the face, chest and stomach. She recalls Zheng screaming at her, “You work for police in Handan? That means nothing here. I am the boss here.”

Upon her release, Tian immediately reported her case to provincial authorities, who oversee both her department in Handan and her accusers’ in Guangping. Soon after, Guangping police responded by detaining her again.

Tian’s bosses tried to intervene, sparking a turf war of sorts between the two jurisdictions, Tian’s relatives said.

Court documents, however, suggest that what sealed Tian’s fate was not any damning evidence or arguments at trial, but the critical relationship between her accusers and those running local courts.

What Tian was struggling against, in others words, was China’s pervasive system of guanxi.

“Perhaps if I gave up my case years ago, I could have gotten another job, salvaged my life and family.”



Tian Lan, a police officer-turned-petitioner, sits in the cramped room she is renting outside Beijing. She was arrested after accusing two fellow officers of corruption and was beaten and sentenced to prison. Gilles Sabrié/For TWP

Powerful patrons

Guanxi is what Chinese call mutually beneficial relationships. Almost every branch of the Communist Party and government is a fiefdom built on guanxi. And perched atop each network is a powerful patron.

In Tian's case, she and relatives say, the patron was a man named Feng Wenhai. Feng had for years overseen the province's police and courts as head of the party's politics and law committee.

The place where Feng began his career and built his network, records show, was Guangping County, the same jurisdiction of the two police officers Tian had accused.

Feng and the two officers declined calls for

comment. Guangping police, courts, prosecutors and four other agencies also refused to comment on Tian's case and her allegations of torture and legal interference.

But court records show Guangping County's own prosecutors expressed concerns about Tian's case, rejecting it twice over the absence of evidence and lack of jurisdiction.

Tian's family tried to fight back through their own considerable connections in the military and party. It wasn't until her sister, Tian Yan, reached a friend in China's parliament that she realized how outmatched they were.

"My friend told me, 'You need to distance yourself from Tian Lan. She has become an evil element in the eyes of many,' " her sister said.

Charged in Guangping, finally, with forging documents, Tian was tried, convicted and sentenced in quick succession.

Cutting family ties

After being released from prison a year later, Tian began the first of many appeals.

She also collected written statements from more than 30 residents who said they had been held for ransom by the same two officers and distributed them in government buildings as a self-published newspaper.

But the more she fought, the more she lost.

Her husband – a military officer – divorced her. Her father spent a small fortune paying for her legal appeals and died a few years ago bitterly angry.

Her son graduated from high school and began pursuing his lifelong dream of becoming an officer like his mother. He told Tian he planned to become a good cop to root out bad ones like those who imprisoned her.

But four years later, in his first job as an officer, his bosses made clear that Tian's unending appeals and constant bad-mouthing of the legal system threatened to end his career, relatives said.

"They told him, 'If you can't get your mother to stop, you should quit your job now,'" Tian's sister said.

Tian and her son met for the last time in 2006, both in tears. Tian agreed to cut all ties and communication to protect him. She wrote a notarized

statement disowning him and sent it local authorities.

"From now on, I am not your mother and you are not my son," Tian told him. "I've already suffered so much. I cannot drag you into it."

On her own, Tian's health quickly deteriorated. In the unheated room where she sleeps with eight other petitioners, Tian keeps stacks of red receipts by her bed – medical bills from doctors who have diagnosed her with breast cancer.

Despite three decades in the army and police, she has no health insurance because of her conviction. She pays for hospital visits by borrowing from relatives and relies on boiled medicinal herbs to treat symptoms.

For her, 2005 was a turning point, after higher courts refused to hear her case and her appeal reached an official dead end.

That's when Tian – with no remaining recourse – began her harrowing journey into China's legal dumping ground: its petition system.

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Petitioners vs. police

To understand the unlikely nature of her transformation – from law officer to petitioner – one must understand the antagonism that separates the two.

Petitioners are ubiquitous in Beijing, cluttering the entryways of ministries and embassies. Those who are illiterate wear signs around their necks, on which they have paid others to write their grievances. Many lug sacks filled with legal



Petitioners find shelter in a Beijing underpass. The petition system was established to handle the millions who flock to China's cities each year alleging abuse at the hands of the justice system. Their home towns often send police officers to bring them back by force so they don't embarrass local leaders. Gilles Sabrié/For TWP

records everywhere they go, foisting copies on anyone willing to take them.

Their natural enemies are the police officers sent from back home to prevent them from embarrassing local leaders in front of Beijing's central government with stories of abuse and corruption.

That used to be the job of Liu, the former station chief who lives in Tian's village. He and those under his command wielded words at first, then force if necessary, to drag petitioners back to Anhui province.

The stubbornness of petitioners always perplexed him, he said. After living as one of them, however, he said he finally understands their actions even in the face of arrests and beatings.

Liu has been captured and sent home by authorities seven times this year while petitioning.

On several occasions, those detaining him were former colleagues. Other times, they have been thugs hired by Anhui leaders.

During one of those detentions, he said, the hired thugs beat him so hard that at the end of a 12-hour car ride back to Anhui, an old colleague at the police station wept at his appearance.

Many begged him to give up his petitioning.

Liu said he responded with anger: "If you know it's illegal to arrest me like this, why do you keep doing it?"

"We have no choice," he was told. "If we don't, they will just get others to do it."

Wronged officers' club

Tian and other former officials say they have found unexpected camaraderie among fellow petitioners.

When she first arrived in Beijing on a winter day nine years ago, Tian said, she had no clue how to live a petitioner's life. Lacking money, she begged on the street for food.

Other petitioners taught her how to write a proper complaint and navigate the arcane petition system – comprising hundreds of offices in China, across various ministries as well as the party's disciplinary arm.

Many told her that the best way to get paperwork submitted wasn't waiting in line at those offices, but to get detained at one of Beijing's politically sensitive sites. Plead your case, they suggested, at Tiananmen Square or Zhongnanhai – China's equivalent of the White House.

Finding the group of former police officers, Tian said, has rekindled something she has missed for years: a sense of family. Members of the group pooled their money to help with her medical bills and often find lawyers for those seized by the police.

Many treat their group as a kind of police fraternity. They have printed up badges that identify them as "China's Wronged Officers."

They are also unusually strategic in the cat-and-mouse games all petitioners play in evading police.

When authorities detained hundreds of petitioners recently in Tian's village ahead of the landmark announcement on legal reforms, a dozen from the Wronged Officers club avoided arrest by hiding in two rooms.

They made it look as if no one was inside by



Petitioners display their grievance forms outside a government office. Gilles Sabrié/For TWP

gluing newsprint to the windows and attaching a padlock outside the door from the inside, retracting the key through a concealed window.

During a foreign reporter's visit, the group set up alternating shifts so each could be interviewed while others watched for authorities at nearby intersections.

Days later, however, in apparent retaliation for the secret interviews, Liu and another member, Zhuo Cong, were arrested on charges of "stirring up trouble."

Lost causes

After years of such experiences, most in the group have come to realize their petitions are futile.

Statistics back up that conclusion. A study by a government-run think tank several years ago found that 0.2 percent of petitions get resolved.

For some petitioners, this realization pushes them to become full-fledged dissidents. For others, it leads to suicide.

Several in recent years have set themselves on fire in protest. Among farmers, a more common method is drinking pesticide.

Those who persist in petitioning sometimes become unhinged, muttering their grievances while roaming the streets of Beijing. Insanity is only natural, Tian said, after years of banging your head against the system.

In the 12 years since her arrest, the two police officers Tian accused of blackmail have been promoted again and again. Zheng has retired. Yang has become a high-ranking police chief.

Meanwhile, Tian has given up on trying to get justice. Instead, she said, she keeps fighting in hopes that her case combined with millions of others may one day nudge China's legal system

toward deeper change.

Her son, she points out, remains an officer in that system.

She has not talked to him since their last meeting eight years ago, keeping their agreement. But through her sister, she occasionally sneaks messages to him.

She said she tells him to avoid casework and to stick to technical jobs that keep his hands clean of corruption. And she asks him not to bully those he arrests.

Look at your mother, she says. In a legal system like China's, how can you tell the guilty from the innocent?

Gu Jinglu and Xu Jing contributed to this report.

Blog: Days after we interviewed these former cops, Chinese authorities arrested two of them

By William Wan



Members of the “Wronged Officers” group pose together after meeting with a foreign reporter. Just days later, two were arrested in retaliation for the secret interviews. Gilles Sabrié/For TWP

BEIJING — We met on the empty floor above a restaurant on the outskirts of Beijing — far away from the prying eyes of authorities. Or so we thought.

Gathered were more than a dozen former police officers who had become targets of authorities after accusing local leaders of corruption and abuse. During previous reporting on China’s police and courts, we had heard of this strange, tragic phenomenon — former officers being hunted by the very system they once upheld — and hoped to write a story about them.

Before meeting, however, members of the “Wronged Officers” group insisted on extensive precautions. As ex-cops, they were well-aware of the smothering capabilities of China’s surveillance state. Many lived under constant government surveillance and were detained whenever they try to leave their home towns to bring their complaints to Beijing.

Most had been beaten at some point and told to stop spreading their allegations.

So that day in the restaurant, before anyone could say too much, the ex-cops, one-by-one, turned off their cellphones and took out the batteries – to stop authorities from tracking or listening to them – and we did the same.



Former police turned petitioner, Liu Ming holds up a sign that says “wronged” during an interview. A few days later he was arrested by police on charges of “stirring up trouble.” Gilles Sabrié/For TWP

Over the next few days, as two of us from The Post, along with a veteran freelance photographer, interviewed individual members in the rundown village where they now lived, the others manned lookout points for authorities on nearby street corners. Every so often, we’d move to a new home – wary of lingering too long in one place – and the perimeter of lookouts would move with us.

“We know all their tricks,” said Liu Ming, one of the group’s chief strategists for evading authorities.

It was a role Liu fell into naturally from experience in his former police job before he was fired in leading squads of officers to hunt down petitioners.

And yet – despite such painstaking, seemingly paranoid precautions on their part and ours – just days after our interviews, Liu and another former officer we met, named Zhuo Cong, were arrested in retaliation for our secret interviews.

Both now face possible prosecution and prison time.

As a journalist, you experience incredible pangs of guilt whenever a source suffers as a result of your reporting. You think about what went wrong, what you could have done differently.

In this case, it wasn’t for lack of precautions, nor because of any particular secret we touched on. (Everything that Liu and Zhuo told us were things both had complained about for years loudly and publicly in their petitioning.) Instead, what got them in trouble was the fact that we had met at all.

It has now been weeks since authorities took Liu and Zhuo away. Other members of the “Wronged Officers” group have scrambled to find lawyers for both. Many lawyers in Liu’s home town of Huainan have refused to take his case, supporters said, fearing the local authorities who arrested Liu.

On the night after Liu returned from Beijing to Huainan, five officers from the Huainan Police burst into his home and pressed him to the floor, according to Liu’s supporters. Days later, Liu was formally arrested under criminal suspicion of “stirring up trouble.”

According to one friend who helped find Liu’s current lawyer, police also accused Liu of “leaking state secrets” because of his interview with us – a charge that human rights experts say is frequently and flagrantly used in China to silence dissenting voices.

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Zhuo – a former court officer from Dangshan County in Anhui province who says he began petitioning because he didn’t get a fair salary and was later fired for that petitioning – was also arrested on suspicion of “stirring up trouble,” according to other members of the Wronged Officers group.

Dangshan police, who searched Zhuo’s room in the petition village outside Beijing, told others present that Zhuo had done two things wrong: Agreeing to an interview with foreign media and traveling to Tianjin City recently to support a friend whose home had been demolished by local authorities.

Neither police department responded to calls for comment.

Both Liu and Zhuo were painfully aware of the dangers of speaking out.

This year alone, Liu had already been detained seven times by police while petitioning in Beijing and dragged back to his home town. He recounted being beaten during one instance until he bled from his head and repeatedly lost consciousness as hired thugs drove him back to his home province of Anhui.

This, however, is the first time that such detention has led to formal arrest and criminal charges for Liu.

In our interviews before his arrest, Liu had explained why he felt a need to speak out.

“The petition system is a lie,” he said, referring to the pseudo-legal

structure set up by China's leaders to receive complaints against the government. "It leaves us nowhere to make our voice heard. ... Chinese media do not want to listen to our stories. Even when Chinese reporters are interested, they dare not write about it."



Former police officer Zhuo Cong outside his home in a petition village. A few days after this picture was taken, police arrested him. Gilles Sabrié/For TWP

Liu said he became a petitioner in 2008 after he was fired for making overly frank remarks that offended his superiors.

He recalled how years of frustration eventually led him to publicly air his complaints against the government in Tiananmen Square, a move he knew would result in detention.

"I knew it was a trap, but I went anyway," he said. "I wanted to show others that petitioning doesn't work."

He said all his fruitless petitioning has led him to realize that no one in government cares about cases like his. "I realize now that the problem doesn't lie with any individual; the problem is the petition and legal system itself."

Gu Jinglu contributed to this report.

Ex-police officers in China protest by attempting suicide



Six former officers protested alleged injustices done to them by trying to kill themselves with poison in front of a government office for top Chinese leaders. Obtained by The Washington Post

Six allege wrongdoing by authorities, drink poison in desperation

BY WILLIAM WAN

BEIJING — Six former police officers attempted to kill themselves by drinking poison outside the main compound of China's top leaders, activists said Friday, in an act of desperation over alleged corruption and wrongdoing by local leaders.

The former officers were quickly detained by authorities Thursday morning and taken to local hospitals, according to others in their group.

News of their arrest and pictures circulating

Friday were quickly deleted by censors — a frequent occurrence because of China's sensitivity to all protests.

The six are part of a group that calls itself "China's Wronged Officers," a loose affiliation of about 300 members who claim they were fired or prosecuted unfairly as a result of corruption or abuse in their local departments.

More than a dozen in the group who live on the outskirts of Beijing talked to The Washington Post in recent weeks about their experiences,

and two were arrested in retaliation for those interviews.

The six – who belonged to another contingent from China’s northernmost province, Heilongjiang – timed their attempted suicides to coincide with China’s first Constitution Day, recently created by leaders to promote the idea that rule of law exists in China.

Reports conflicted about whether the six swallowed a liquid pesticide or rat poison.

A former officer who founded the group, He Zuhua, said he was shocked by the suicide attempts. The former officers from Heilongjiang had not warned him or others of their plans, perhaps for fear authorities might catch wind and stop them.

The six had long complained of being fired unfairly and now have no income or health insurance.

“They’re desperate, with no way to sustain themselves,” said another former officer, Tian Lan. “They lost their family and are living a life without dignity. Their cases have been ignored for years. They feel they have no way out, except death.”

While many in the group have discussed protest via suicide before – often out of frustration – Thursday was the first time anyone attempted it. Drinking pesticide has become a common form of protest among Chinese farmers, especially after local leaders have forced them off their land.

According to other former officers who have talked to those who drank the poison or have seen pictures of the incident, the Heilongjiang contingent arrived Thursday morning in front of Zhongnanhai – a secretive, sensitive compound where President Xi Jinping’s office is located. They tried to unfurl a protest banner and were quickly intercepted by police.

In view of the police, before they could be

stopped, the six downed the poison. A seventh person was responsible for taking photographs and sending news of their protest, said He, who founded the Wronged Officers group in 2004 after being imprisoned, he says, for uncovering corrupt prosecutors.



Authorities arrested the protesters and rushed them to a hospital, where they were treated for imbibing poison. Their condition is unknown. Obtained by The Washington Post

Calls to four cellphones Friday went unanswered. Automatic messages said the service was cut or phones were turned off. Two of the former officers, who were reached by Washington-based Radio Free Asia, said they were sent to Peking University’s People’s Hospital.

One of the group said in the report that with their actions they had hoped to grab the public’s attention and force the government to face its injustice.

“I have chronic leukemia. There is no way out except to die fighting,” he said.

A woman answering the phone at People’s Hospital on Friday said she heard a group suffering from poison had been admitted but

didn't know their condition. Police in Beijing and Heilongjiang declined to comment.

Thursday's Constitution Day – which had schoolchildren across China reading aloud from the constitution – was also marked by authorities arresting activists and preventing them from entering Tiananmen Square.

Some people online, noting the irony, pointed to Article 35, in which the constitution guarantees “freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration.”

In recent months, increasing numbers in the Wronged Officers group have argued for more extreme measures, said Tian, one of the former

officers.

But Tian said she has tried to talk some out of suicide.

“You can't make your case and clear your name if you are dead,” she said.

She said she last spoke with one of the people who attempted suicide, Wang Binsheng, just three days earlier. At the time, Wang told her he was planning a trip to Beijing and wanted to bring delicacies from his hometown for Tian. She told him to save his money.

“If you don't want anything this time,” Tian said she recalls Wang saying, “you will not be able to have it again.”