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BLOG | CANADA, CHINA, USA

China's overseas critics under pressure from smear campaigns, cyber attacks

By Yaqiu Wang/Northeast Asia Correspondent

"I think my actions ... have harmed the national interest. What I have done was very wrong. I seriously and earnestly accept to learn a lesson and plead guilty," said Chinese journalist Gao Yu during a televised confession on the state-run channel CCTV in May 2014.

The televised confession by Gao, who was released on medical parole in November last year, is one of more than 15 that have been aired by the state broadcaster since 2013. They feature journalists, activists, and human rights lawyers in scenes reminiscent of the public self-criticism sessions of the Mao era. Critical journalists living abroad however, say physical distance is no protection from attempts to publicly shame and intimidate them.

CPJ spoke with two overseas Chinese journalists who say they have been subjected to smear campaigns and cyber attacks. Both said that they could not prove who is behind the attacks but they suspect the Chinese government or its affiliates are responsible.

Award-winning journalist Zang Xihong, better known as Sheng Xue, moved to Canada after the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. She was a Canada correspondent for Radio Free Asia for 17 years until 2014 and is now a freelance writer and democracy activist. Sheng's reporting on human rights issues won her Canada's National Magazine Award and the Canadian Association of Journalists award for investigative journalism.



Award-winning journalist Sheng Xue, pictured, says she has been subjected to an extensive character assassination campaign. (Sheng Xue)

However, a Web search of her name in Chinese is more likely to return results accusing her of immoral behavior. "Since 2006 and intensifying since after 2012, I've been the subject of an extensive character assassination campaign," Sheng told CPJ.

When CPJ ran a Google search of Sheng's name in Chinese, it found pages of articles accusing her of numerous sexual liaisons, prostitution, spying for the Chinese government, embezzling political dissidents' funds, and intimidating a writer who has cancer. "There are over 150 smear articles written about me just under one byline. Those articles are posted on all kinds of websites. My husband and I have been subscribed to email groups that we can't even unsubscribe from. We are forced to see them," said Sheng. She told CPJ she met the man she believes is the author at a conference in 2006, when he shouted about someone

being a spy.

Doctored photos have also been posted online and phony advertisements for escort services, using her face and personal details, have been widely distributed, she said. A Chinese man has also been photographed outside Parliament Hill in Ottawa holding a placard that claims Sheng is a Communist spy, *the Globe and Mail* reported this month. Sheng told CPJ that her Internet has also been under frequent distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks. "I have given up at this point. Let them just do it," said Sheng.

"This kind of harassment put enormous pressure on me and my family. My sister, who had been very supportive of my work, recently pressed me to stop my criticism of the Chinese government," Sheng said.

Michael Craig, chairman of China Rights Network, told CPJ that the Toronto-based human rights group has sent letters to the police and intelligence service asking them to investigate the harassment. He added: "We, who work most closely with Sheng, completely trust her and consider the allegations absurd."

The New York-based blogger Wen Yunchao, who helped CPJ research its annual prison census two years ago, has also been the victim of online harassment. Before leaving China in 2012, where he says he was harassed repeatedly by police over his online writing, Wen was a reporter and editor for local and national websites.

On February 28, a Twitter account was set up under the name of Wen's 14-year-old son and posts in Chinese were sent from it accusing Wen of espionage and he and his wife of being in a broken relationship, he told CPJ. Among the tweets viewed by CPJ is one that read, "A classmate told me, I heard your dad is a spy sent by the Chinese government. Every time when I heard these words, my heart is filled with a sense of unspeakable satisfaction...My dad is a great person."

On March 5, over 200 anonymous phone calls were made to Wen's cell phone, and a DDoS attack targeted Wen's IP address and paralyzed his network. The attack has continued all week, Wen told CPJ today. Wen posted screen grabs on his social media accounts showing the anonymous calls he receives. "Here we go. Another round of attacks on me and my family. It's hard to take," Wen said to CPJ.

In June 2013 the blogger testified at a congressional hearing in the U.S. about the cyber abuse he had received since 2011, including DDoS attacks, phishing, hacking, and exposing private information about his family. "[For a time in 2012], unidentified persons also posted viciously defaming information about me online at the rate of over 10,000 times per day [on Twitter]," Wen said at the hearing.

The attacks have continued. In mid-2014, a series of articles accusing him of spying, corruption, prostitution, and being "a dog," along with photos of him that had been doctored to be obscene, were widely distributed on the Internet. A couple of months later, several articles falsely attributed to Wen's wife, claiming that she abused her son, appeared online. Wen has not told his wife about the articles, which were emailed to him anonymously. "After all this, I can take it but I'm not sure about my wife. Better spare her the pain. My son was only 10 when this started," he said.

Similar smear campaigns have been used against the political cartoonists Badiuca, who lives in Australia, and Jiang Yefei, who fled to Thailand before being repatriated and arrested in China. Badiuca, a contributing cartoonist for *China Digital Times* who uses a pen name to protect his identity, was attacked in a Twitter smear campaign after drawing cartoons in support of imprisoned human rights activists in China, *China Digital Times* reported. "From the smear essays, I could see that they had very carefully examined words and pictures I've posted on my social media. My biggest worry is the exposure of the private information of my family," Badiuca told CPJ.

The wife of Jiang, an independent cartoonist who published work mainly on social media accounts, told CPJ last year that she thinks he was targeted over his cartoons ridiculing Chinese President Xi Jinping.

In Jiang's case, he ended up on Chinese state television. The cartoonist was repatriated from Thailand and arrested by Chinese police in November 2015 for "assisting others to illegally cross the national border," according to CPJ research. In a televised confession aired on CCTV later that month, Jiang was seen in a prison vest, looking tired and speaking slowly as he said: "I feel my behavior is wrong. Now I feel very remorseful. I must plead for leniency."

Yaqiu Wang has a Master of Arts in International Affairs from George Washington University. Her articles on civil society and human rights in China have appeared in Foreign Policy, The Atlantic, China Change, and elsewhere.

Comments

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