

Black Hands



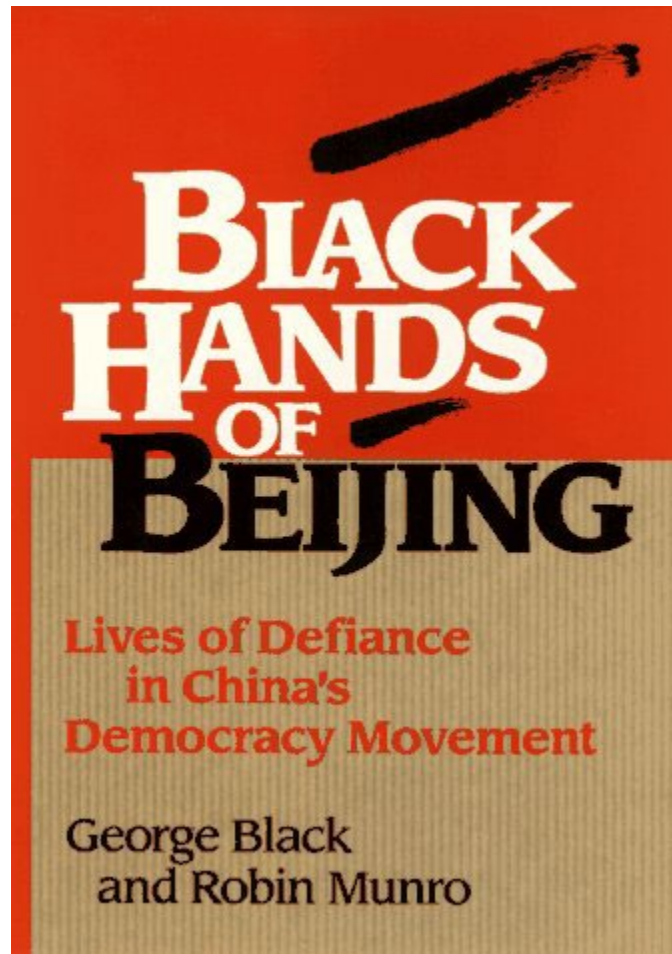
(Left to right) Chen Ziming and Wang Juntao. Image credits: [Public domain](#)

It didn't take long for the Chinese government to blame foreign and domestic forces for the May-June 1989 protests that rocked Beijing and hundreds of other cities, large and small, throughout the country. The targets of their ire included the United States and other western democracies, which maintained embassies and media offices, in China's capital. Another target was The Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China, established in May 1989, which organized huge protests and vigils in the British colony. The alliance was disbanded in late 2021 following the arrest of three of its leaders, part of the ongoing crackdown on opposition figures in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Less organized than the Alliance were groups of activists who set up Operation Yellow Bird to spirit activists out of China. Working out of Hong Kong, this loosely organized group managed to extricate as many as 300 hunted dissidents and activists out of China, sometimes with the help of disgruntled Chinese officials.

Closer to home, the Public Security Ministry identified 21 student leaders allegedly behind the protests in Tiananmen Square. The list included Wang Dan, Wu'er Kaixi, Chai Ling, and Liu Gang. "Black Hands" were singled out in the "Six Important Criminals List." Prominent on this list were Chen Ziming and Wang Juntao, founders of the Beijing Economic and Social Sciences Research Institute (SESRI), an influential think tank established in 1987 that published books, undertook public polling, and even fielded candidates in local elections. Another black hand was labor leader Han Dongfang, founder of the Beijing Autonomous Workers Federation. (A good account of Chen Ziming, Han Dongfang, and Wang Juntao's activities in the run-up to Tiananmen can be found in *Black Hands of*

Beijing by Robin Munro and George Black. My memories are also informed by communications with Wang Juntao.)



A cover of the first edition of *Black Hands in Beijing*, published in 1993. Image credit: [Biblio](#)

Chen and Wang were hunted down and arrested, Chen on October 10, 1989 in Mongolia, and Wang on October 20, 1989 at the Changsha Train Station. Liu Gang, founder of the Beijing Independent Students Federation, was detained weeks after the protests, on June 19, 1989. Han Dongfang was never tried but was kept in a detention center where he contracted tuberculosis. The prosecution chose not to charge him and eventually let him leave for Hong Kong, where he still lives.

After detention, Chen Ziming and Wang Juntao were held in local detention centers where they were interrogated. They then spent several months in the notorious Qincheng Prison where political prisoners were held.

Chen, Liu, and Wang were all tried and convicted by the Beijing Intermediate People's Court in 1991. Chen and Wang were given 13-year prison sentences.

They were sent back to Qincheng Prison, and eventually sent to Beijing Number Two Prison and Beijing's Yanching Prison to serve their sentences.

Liu served his prison sentence in Lingyuan Prison in Liaoning Province. It is common practice that individuals who are tried and sentenced in Beijing are returned to their home provinces to serve their sentences.

Reflecting intense international pressure from governments and human rights groups, including Dui Hua, both Wang and Chen were released on medical parole in April 1994 and May 1994, respectively. The releases were tied to President Bill Clinton's decision to renew China's Most Favored Relations trade status, without conditions, in May 1994. (Chinese officials repeatedly told me the releases were part of a "special arrangement.")



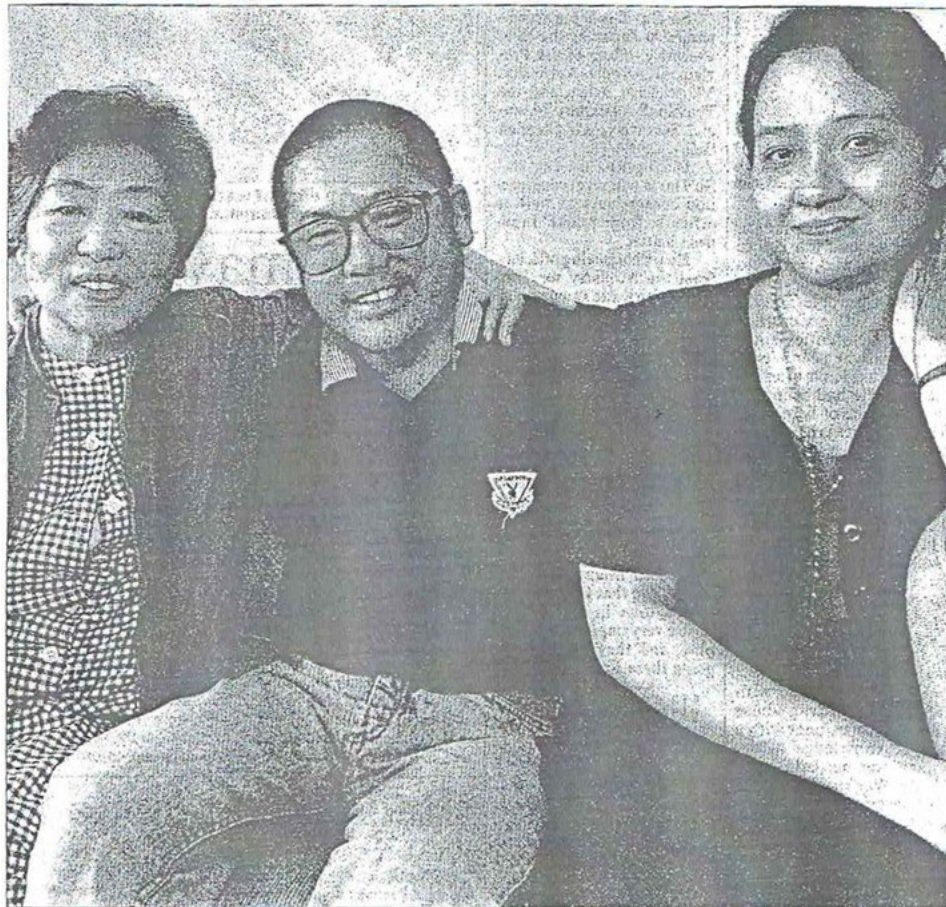
President Clinton during his announcement on May 26, 1994 to support Most Favored Nation status for China despite no significant progress on human rights. Clinton also announced extended sanctions on China and the banning of munitions sales. Image credit: [C-Span](#)

Chen Ziming had been diagnosed with cancer, heart disease and Hepatitis C while Wang had been diagnosed with Hepatitis B. Wang Juntao left China immediately after he was released, and relocated to New York, where he has lived to the present day, distinguishing himself in both academics and activism. Neither he nor his family were provided with the documentation necessary for granting medical parole.

Chen opted to stay in China. He was imprisoned again in June 1995 but once again released on medical parole in November 1996. He was placed under residential surveillance until his sentence expired in 2002. Chen Ziming passed away in 2014.

Liu served his entire sentence without a sentence reduction. He was released on June 18, 1995. He departed in May 1996 for the United States. He forged a successful business career in technology and finance, working for Bell Labs and Morgan Stanley. Like Wang Juntao, he has remained active in promoting democracy in China.

As recounted in “[Operation Yellow Bird](#)”, Hong Kong businessman Lo Haixing was sentenced to five years in prison for trying to get Chen Ziming and Wang Juntao out of China. He was granted early release from a prison in Guangdong Province in 1991, after which he returned to Hong Kong.



A scan of a photo that appeared in the *South China Morning Post* after Lo's release. Lo (*center*) with his mother and wife (*left and right, respectively*). Image credit: *South China Morning Post* via Dui Hua archives

My work on these cases established a *modus operandi* that I have relied on for prisoner interventions to the present day. I submitted prisoner lists to the Chinese government and pressed Chinese officials for responses, met with family members of the imprisoned, informed the US government of my activities and coordinated efforts with the American embassy in Beijing, obtained letters from members of Congress that were forwarded to the Chinese government, held press conferences (including in Beijing), and gave speeches, many in Hong Kong.

Although governments met with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to press for clemency for political prisoners, what set my work apart was my ability to meet with other key bodies, including the State Council Information Office, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), and the People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, as well as the MFA. I met with officials of all these bodies to discuss the Chen Ziming/Wang Juntao case.

Photographs

On my May 1992 visit to Beijing, I met with Minister Zeng Jianhui of the State Council Information Office (SCIO). We met in his rather rundown office in the Asian Games Village. Zeng handed me three photographs of Wang Juntao and two of Chen Ziming. Wang was shown watching a performance at Yanqing while Chen was photographed in his cell, books stacked high on his bunk bed. Yanqing is near a hospital operated by the MOJ. Zeng told me that Wang was being treated for Hepatitis there but had been returned to his cell. Both Wang and Chen were in four-man cells that were not, at the time of our meeting, fully occupied.

I provided the photographs to the media in Beijing. Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* ran the pictures the next day.



Prominent dissidents Chen Ziming (pictured left) and Wang Juntao (wearing a jacket) are seen here in photographs taken by prison guards last month. The pictures were given to John Kamm, a Hongkong-based human rights lobbyist. Alleged to be the "black hands" behind the 1989 pro-democracy movement, both were given 13-year jail terms in early 1991. Diplomats said it was unlikely the terms would be commuted.

The photos of Chen and Wang published in the South China Morning Post on May 7, 1992. The caption acknowledges Kamm as the source.

Not everyone was happy with my releasing the photographs of Chen Ziming and Wang Juntao. At a congressional hearing held on June 29, 1992, Human Rights Watch (HRW) Washington representative, Mike Jendrzeczyk attacked me for releasing photographs of Liu Gang playing volleyball. HRW had claimed that Liu had had his arm broken. In fact, I hadn't been given any photographs of Liu, which I pointed out to the congressman running the hearing. Jendrzeczyk's response was classic: while Kamm may not have released the photos, he could have!

Around the same time, another HRW staff person attacked me in a letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, implying I was being used by the Chinese government to spread disinformation. In a similar vein, Harry Wu told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that he had warned me against being used by the Chinese government (in fact, he hadn't). I ignored these and other attacks on me and my work. As the old saying goes, "Living well is the best revenge."

Interrogation

On my August 1992 visit to Beijing, I met with Assistant Minister of Public Security Zhu Entao at his headquarters near Tiananmen Square. ([Zhu's nickname was China's 007](#)). He gave details of the interrogation of Hou Xiaotian, Wang Juntao's wife at the time. The interrogation lasted four days. "At first she was very

uncooperative,” Zhu related, “but her attitude changed as time went on, so we released her. We promised to look into her complaints about her husband’s treatment.” After her release from public security detention, the police kept her under surveillance.

On August 25, 1992, I was hosted by Zhou Jue, Vice Minister of the SCIO and former Chinese Ambassador to France, to dinner. Zhou told me that Wang Juntao had staged a hunger strike but that he was now eating normally. A photograph of Wang Juntao eating with his relatives the night after his release was circulated by Beijing.

The following evening, August 26, 1992, I hosted a banquet for most of the senior officials I worked with on prisoners including Yang Jiechi (MFA), Zhou Jue (SCIO), Zhu Entao (PSM), and Li Yucheng (SPC). In light of the looming US presidential election, I stressed the importance of releasing Wang Juntao and Chen Ziming and other high-priority prisoners.



An article from the Washington Post published on May 6, 1992. Image credit: Washington Post archives / Fair Use

“Special Privileges”

On my March 1993 visit to Beijing, I met with Mr. Wang Mingdi, director of the MOJ’s Prison Administration Department, at the MOJ’s dilapidated office building on a dusty side road off the main highway to the old airport. (Across from the office gate, a pool table occupied the street. Players were muscular young men wearing police fatigues.) Wang told me that Chen Ziming had been granted “special privileges” so that he could study for his doctorate. Wang Mingdi listed them as “better lighting, more paper, more books.” I relayed Chen’s family’s concern that he was sharing his cell with common criminals and that he was not being treated for a skin disorder.

Clinton, Wang, Chen

In my meeting with Wang Mingdi on my June 1994 trip, shortly after Chen and Wang had been released, he spoke sarcastically about Wang Juntao's activities in the United States: "When he was in jail, you kept telling us how seriously ill he was. We spent lots of money -- more than RMB100,000 -- on medical treatment for Wang Juntao. He wouldn't have been able to travel to the United States in such good shape had we not treated him so well. But now I read that he is undertaking all kinds of strenuous activities -- travelling here and there for speeches and meetings. I'm tempted to ask you Americans: if Wang Juntao's medical situation is so serious, aren't you afraid you'll endanger his health by arranging so many programs for him?" Wang Mingdi did not characterize Wang Juntao's activities as illegal or as representing violations of the terms of his parole.

On the same trip I met with Ambassador Zhang Wenpu, Vice President of the People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, a top America watcher who played a key role in what he called the "Wang Juntao/Chen Ziming deal for MFN."

In a Surprise Gesture, China Releases a Major Dissident

By PATRICK E. TYLER

Special to The New York Times

BEIJING, Saturday, May 14 — In an important gesture to the Clinton administration, China today released on medical parole the second of two major figures still serving long prison terms for leading the Tiananmen Square uprising of 1989.

A brief dispatch this morning on the New China News Agency said that Chen Ziming, 42, "has been released on bail for medical treatment" under an order from "Chinese judicial authorities."

Mr. Chen, a social scientist and publisher, is a veteran of China's democracy movement. He was branded along with Wang Juntao as the "black hands" behind the political demonstrations that paralyzed the Chinese capital five years ago. Each man received a 15-year prison term in February 1991.

An Unexpected Move

The release came as a surprise to China's dissidents, many of whom have been predicting that with the April 23 release of Mr. Wang, the Chinese leaders would make no more concessions to Washington in order to win renewal of China's "most favored nation" trade status.

Today's decision follows a steady trickle of actions in recent days that appeared timed to influence President Clinton's decision on whether to renew the trade privileges.

On Friday, five religious activists were released from labor camps because of their "good behavior," China said. On Thursday, a 54-year-old woman imprisoned for four years for religious activities was released in southern China's Fujian Province. Earlier in the week, China issued a passport after ten refusals to a constitutional scholar, Yu Haocheng, 66, who will leave China for an academic year at Columbia University.

A longtime associate of Mr. Chen's, reached this morning, said this series of releases demonstrates the determination of the Chinese leadership to avoid a trade confrontation with the Clinton administration.

"Even if releasing Wang Juntao and Chen Ziming involves a great risk for the Chinese government, today's action shows that the Chinese Government is willing to take this

risk in order to win" renewal of its low tariff privileges in the American market, the associate said.

In fact, he added, the risk of losing these trade privileges on \$30 billion in exports to the United States, is greater than the risk of releasing two ardent democracy campaigners. "China's politics and economy cannot bear this loss," said the associate, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

When Mr. Wang was released he was put on a plane to New York, where he is receiving treatment for hepatitis.

In an interview a week ago, Mr. Chen's wife, Wang Zhihong, 38, expressed pessimism that she would see her husband released this year. She said one of her hopes has been that they could have a child. "I'm afraid that perhaps I will be too old to

Beijing weighed its risks, and trade won, a dissident says.

have one" by the time he would be released, she said.

Today, she was reported to have accompanied her husband out of Beijing for medical treatment. The Reuters news agency quoted Mr. Chen's sister, Chen Zihua, as saying Chinese authorities "originally wanted to send them abroad" for treatment but relented when Mr. Chen said he wanted to stay in China.

Mr. Chen's wife said she had made dozens of petitions to the authorities to release her husband on medical grounds. She said he was suffering from a skin ailment that was spreading all over his body, gastrointestinal problems and a diet so poor that his teeth were loosening.

"In 1993 for a whole year, he was not able to take a single shower," she said.

Mr. Chen and Mr. Wang, whose prodemocracy activism began during the 1978-79 Democracy Wall movement in Beijing, founded the Social Economic Research Institute and were publishers of a newspaper called *Economics Weekly*.

Reporting on the releases of Chen and Wang from *The New York Times* article published on May 14, 1994. Image credit: *New York Times* archive / Fair use

An agitated Zhang Wenpu had this to say: “I and many other Chinese officials find it abhorrent for China to trade prisoner releases for concessions from foreign powers.” He went on: “We released two of the five names on the State Department’s final list. Do people in the West appreciate that President Clinton raised both Wang Juntao and Chen Ziming’s names during his meeting with President Jiang Zemin in Seattle, and that subsequent to their names being raised, both were released? Is the significance of this understood? I have been in the Chinese government for my entire working career, and I think this is quite extraordinary.”

A year after my June 1994 trip to Beijing, I moved with my family to San Francisco, where I have stayed to the present day. With close friends, I established Dui Hua in 1999. The foundation continues to intervene on behalf of political and religious prisoners in China, using the modus operandi established during the work on the Wang Juntao and Chen Ziming cases in the early 1990s.