

Prisoner Profile: Shi Tao

COMPILED BY STACY MOSHER



Photo: Independent Chinese PEN Center

Shi Tao was born on July 25, 1968, in the city of Yanchi in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. From 1986 to 1991, he studied political education at East China Normal University.

While a student at the university, Shi Tao took part in protests in the spring of 1989, and considered joining the student hunger strike in Beijing. Years later he saw photos of the June 4th crackdown on a Web site and was deeply shocked by the images. He became determined to do his utmost to prevent such a tragedy from happening again. By then Shi Tao had also converted to Catholicism, taking on the Christian name Paul after his baptism in 1998.

After graduating from the university in 1991, Shi Tao worked as a reporter and editor at several newspapers in Shaanxi Province, first at the *Shaanxi Hua Bao*, then at *Xi'an Shang Bao* (*Xi'an Commercial Daily*), the *Lao Xin Bao* and *Fazhi Ribao* (*Legal Daily*). He moved on to the position of editor at *Dangdai Shangbao* (*Contemporary Trade News*) in Changsha, Hunan Province, on February 11, 2004. During this time Shi also published several volumes of poetry.

In April 2004, Shi sent the overseas Web site *Minzhu Tongxun* (*Democracy Newsletter*) an abstract of a state-issued document described by the newspaper's deputy director during the newspaper's daily editorial meeting.

The abstract alerted news staff to social instability in seven areas: 1) the possibility of overseas democracy activists illegally breaching China's borders around the fifteenth anniversary of June 4th; 2) liberal activists' rejection of the leadership of the Communist Party and the socialist system, formation of "civil study groups" and politicization of criminal cases; 3) harmful activities planned by Falun Gong cultists; 4) damaging messages being spread through the Internet; 5) an increase in collective actions, mainly relating to resettlement issues and petitions to authorities; 6) hostile overseas forces making use of religious media to draw in young people, or using academic activities as a cover for illegal activities; 7) activities in Hong Kong, especially regarding June 4th, Falun Gong and mass protests.

Shi Tao was unaware that although he had used a pseudonym, 198964, to post the abstract, he was identified by state security agents using filters installed on the Chinese Internet.

Shi Tao resigned from *Dangdai Shangbao* in May 2004 and returned to his home city of Taiyuan, Shaanxi Province, working as a freelance journalist and writer. On November 24, 2004, police from the Changsha State Security Bureau arrested Shi Tao. According to Shi Tao's account in his application for appeal, security police accosted Shi in the street near his home and placed a hood over his head, then carried out a search on his home and seized his computer, notebooks and other belongings. Shi says police presented no warrant for either the detention or the search. They then transported Shi to Changsha, where criminal detention papers were processed the next day.

On December 2, Taiyuan City State Security police showed Shi's wife, Wang Huan, a copy of the Criminal Detention Certificate sent by e-mail from Changsha, which

charged Shi Tao with "suspicion of leaking national secrets." Police warned Wang to remain silent about the matter so that Shi would not be mistreated in detention.

Shi Tao admitted to sending the abstract to *Minzhu Tongxun*, but said his motivation in revealing the document was to prevent people from engaging in activities that might result in their arrest or worse. Shi maintained that the document did not reveal "state secrets," since the contents focused on public sentiment. In addition, he argued that in presenting the contents at a routine editorial meeting, the newspaper's deputy director, who also served as liaison with the Propaganda Department, had effectively "declassified" the document.

However, the State Secrets Bureau certified that "the leaked contents of Document No. 11 should be considered a state secret of the 'top secret' classification." The actual document was never produced as evidence in court or seen by Shi Tao or his defense counsel, Thomas Guo Guoting.

Shi was formally charged on January 28, 2005, and on April 27, 2005, the Changsha Intermediate People's Court found him guilty of "illegally divulging state secrets abroad" following a closed two-hour hearing. On April 30, 2005, Shi was sentenced to 10 years in prison in a hearing attended by his mother and two brothers. The judge reportedly told Shi Tao, "Your actions have seriously injured the interests of our country. This sentence is the lightest possible."

Shi's conviction and heavy sentence came as a shock to China's dissident intellectual community. The Independent Chinese Pen Center immediately issued a letter of protest signed by prominent dissidents such as Yu Jie, Liu Xiaobo and Wang Yi, stating, "A judgment of this kind can only be described as absurd." Members of the international human rights community have also taken up Shi Tao's case.

On May 4, Shi Tao submitted an application for appeal to the Hunan Provincial Supreme People's Court. He is currently being held at the Changsha Municipal Detention Center.