

# A MOTHER'S STORY

BY JIN YANMING

Liu Jingsheng, a political and labor activist, was detained in May 1992 and was released from prison on November 27, 2004, as this issue went to press. Liu's wife here describes her efforts to make a life for herself and her son while Liu was in prison.

"What crime has Papa committed?" My child began asking this difficult question at the age of nine. As he grew older, this question became the proverbial Gordian Knot, and even now I am not able to answer it.

May 28, 1992 is a day I will never forget. On this day my family's life was changed forever, and my son Liu Xiaoguang's childhood became veiled in darkness. That evening, Liu Jingsheng did not return home as usual. As the night wore on, I began to feel that some misfortune had befallen him. The next day I went looking for him at the homes of all his friends that I knew, but his friends had similarly disappeared without a trace. I knew what had happened, but it was not until half a month later, when several policemen came to my house with a search warrant, that Liu Jingsheng's fate was confirmed for me.

At that time, my first instinct was to protect my child. I could not allow him to see our house being ransacked and our belongings picked through, so I immediately called my in-laws and told them not to let Xiaoguang return home.

When my son asked for his papa, I lied and said that he had gone away on business. But the clever child saw my distress, and I saw a dark cloud cover his innocent face. After consulting Liu Jingsheng's parents, I decided to tell the boy the truth about his father.

Upon hearing that his papa had been arrested, Xiaoguang cried bitterly. Like most boys, Xiaoguang had a lofty ambition: he wanted to become a policeman so that he could rid society of bad people. He couldn't understand how his own papa could have suddenly turned into a bad person.

I had no way to explain this to my son, because he was still too young. My heart felt like it was being pierced by a knife, but for the sake of my child, I hid my emotions as best as I could. I told him that his papa had just encountered a bit of trouble, and that he would come home very soon.

We waited until the end of the year, but Liu Jingsheng still didn't return home; and we waited until May 28, 1993 and May 28, 1994, and Liu Jingsheng still did not return home. Finally, after more than two and a half years of detention, Liu Jingsheng was tried in camera on December 14, 1994 for his role as a co-founder of the China Freedom and Democracy Party. As a family member, I was allowed to attend the proceedings, during which Liu Jingsheng was sentenced to 15 years in prison on charges of "organizing and leading a counterrevolutionary organization" and "inciting counterrevolutionary subversion."

At that time, Xiaoguang was nine years old. Upon hearing my husband's sentence, my first thought was for my child, because the experiences of our generation had shown that having a father convicted of a counterrevolutionary crime would mean that my son would be unable to live the same kind of life as other children his age. Xiaoguang was in the third grade at that time. He was clever and lively and loved to draw. I hardly dared to contemplate whether he could be the same boy from now on.

## My life with Liu Jingsheng

In 1982 I was sent to work at the Beijing Public Transportation Company, where I met Liu Jingsheng, a bus driver on the No. 27 bus line. I was 25 years old at the time. Liu Jingsheng was a generous person with a wonderful sense of humor, intelligent and hard-working. He was more than six feet tall, with a thin, strong face. He was the kind of man who gave a woman a sense of security, and I gained a very favorable impression of

him. In 1984 we married, and the following year I gave birth to our son, Liu Xiaoguang.

In fact, when I think about it now I realize that I barely knew my husband's real character when I married him. I had no idea of how committed to politics he was, and didn't even know about the role he had played in the Democracy Wall Movement. It was only later that I learned of the important role



Liu Jingsheng

Liu Jingsheng had played in founding the underground magazine *Exploration* and of his work with Wei Jingsheng, and began to reflect on “democracy” and “human rights,” concepts that were very foreign and rarely discussed in China at that time.

The ideas that Liu Jingsheng talked about were very new to me. He opened my eyes to a whole new way of looking at the world. In fact, it was not that I had no interest in politics, but rather that I avoided the subject as a means of self-protection.

I was born in Beijing in 1957 to a Manchurian family descended from Qing Dynasty nobility. Our family had been forced to Sinicize our surname as a means of self-preservation. I knew little of the hardships suffered by my forebears, but from as early as I can remember, I was aware that I was different from my schoolmates. When the Cultural Revolution broke out, I was nine years old.

In my childhood and early teenage years, the very word “politics” filled me with terror and cast a shadow over my heart. For many years after that, I not only avoided politics, but actually dreaded it to the point that I would have nothing to do with any political organization. My friends found it hard to believe, but the fact is that when it came time to join the Chinese Communist Party’s “reserve force”—the Communist Youth League—I was one of the few students in my school who would not even fill out an application. The best description of my attitude was “aversion to politics.”

But fate plays jokes on people, and I ended up marrying a man whose blood boiled with political conviction and commitment.

Unlike me, Liu Jingsheng enjoyed a happy and carefree childhood. His parents were political cadres at the China Academy of Sciences; he lived in comfort, and all of life’s opportunities were open to him. The political advantages he enjoyed from childhood made him optimistic, energetic and plain-spoken. But because he didn’t understand that the world he lived in was not actually so bright and tolerant, he didn’t realize the hardships he would face in the political life he eventually chose.

Fifteen years; the prime of life was snatched from us. To this day I don’t know what thoughts ran through Liu Jingsheng’s head when he heard his sentence in court. For me, it was undeniably a bolt out of the blue.

After the trial, many friends came to comfort me, and some who were uninvolved in politics quietly advised me to divorce my husband.

Yes, fifteen years is a long time in a human life, and for a woman with no political convictions, it’s a torment. I understood people’s good intentions and society’s conventions, and on many a long, lonely night I gazed at the dark sky, the bright moonlight, the desolate stars, and wondered what Liu Jingsheng was doing, what he was thinking and feeling . . .

### **A child’s heavy heart**

All of this was just as hard for Xiaoguang to comprehend. He often picked up a photograph of his father and stared motionlessly at it for long periods, then asked me, “What crime did Papa commit? Is Papa a bad man? Why did the police take him away?”

I had no way to explain it to him, because he had no understanding of politics, and couldn’t understand that it wasn’t a simple matter of good people versus bad people. But I firmly responded, “Your papa is not a bad man, he’s a good man. You’ll understand the rest when you grow up.”

“Why did the police take him away?” he persisted.

I could never keep my eyes from filling with tears.

Because of his father’s absence, I feared that my son would develop psychological problems, so I redoubled my efforts to protect and nurture him. I regularly took him to group activities so he wouldn’t feel that he was different from other children. In October 1992, the China Youth Cultural Palace organized a toy exchange event, and when I heard of it, I took him over so he could see what it was like to play with so many other children. On that day, many children had brought their own toys and books to exchange with others, and some people were buying and selling toys, but we didn’t have anything worth giving to anyone else, so we just watched. Suddenly Xiaoguang asked me, “Look, aren’t they hawking toys over there?”

I didn’t respond at first, because I didn’t understand where this strange observation had come from. But then he went on to say, “My papa wasn’t a hawker. Why did he get arrested while nothing is happening to these people?”

This gave me a clue as to what was going on in this little boy’s head; although he seldom said anything, his father was clearly always on his mind. I realized how heavy his heart must be, and how every small event reminded him of his suffering and loss. It turned out that he was thinking of a small business that Liu Jingsheng operated years ago, and he thought his father’s arrest was related to that.

I told him, “Your father wasn’t a hawker.”

“So why was he arrested?” the boy persisted.

I thought for a moment, then said, “You’ll understand when you grow up.”

But Xiaoguang would not let up on this question, and after we returned home, he told his grandmother, “Today I saw a lot of people hawking toys. Why don’t the police arrest them like they arrested my father?”

His grandmother was dumbstruck, but after I whispered to her where this notion had come from, she answered: “Yes, your mother is right, when you grow up you’ll understand.”

One day, a neighbor came over and told me that China’s president had died. The news had not yet been made public, so she had to be very secretive while telling me. All of a sudden, Xiaoguang sat up in his bed and shouted, “Who died? Who died?”

I impatiently replied, “It’s none of your business, be good and go back to sleep.”

Xiaoguang began to sob loudly and asked, “Is it my papa who died? My papa is dead, isn’t he!”

My heart sank as I realized what an important place his father occupied in this boy’s mind, and how troubled he was. I reassured him that it was President Li Xianlian who had died, not his father. Only then was he able to calm down.

After Liu Jingsheng was imprisoned, I had been unwilling to bring our son along to visit him in prison, because I wor-

ried about the shadow it would cast over him psychologically. But at Liu Jingsheng's repeated request, I finally brought the boy along one day during the summer holiday.

We didn't exchange a word on the entire journey to the prison. In the prison's visiting room we sat silently behind the thick Plexiglas. When Liu Jingsheng was brought in, Xiaoguang let out a gasp and snatched up the telephone. Liu Jingsheng stared blankly for a moment, then sat down behind the Plexiglas and slowly picked up the telephone. Before either could say a word, both broke down in tears.

After crying for a while, they began a stilted conversation. I noticed that Xiaoguang had a strange expression in his eyes; he was staring at his father's prison uniform and gnawing nervously at his lip. Liu Jingsheng would ask a question, and Xiaoguang would answer it. I reminded Xiaoguang, "Didn't you bring something nice to show your father, and lots of good news to tell him?" But he just stared at the prison uniform and stayed silent.

Finally, he simply asked, "Papa, are you okay?"

The expression in Xiaoguang's eyes pierced me to the core. I understood the deep connection between a father and his son, and I blamed myself for not letting him come to see his father before.

On the way home my son still said nothing. But as we got off the bus, he suddenly blurted out, "Mama, I don't want to be a policeman anymore."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because the police don't just arrest bad people. They arrest

good people, too. And I don't want to be a lawyer either, because lawyers aren't able to protect good people."

I was deeply pained as I looked at his innocent expression.

Winter vacation quickly arrived, and I decided to take him again to see his father. Again we set off on that road we'd traveled before, and entered that familiar door. And we sat down in that familiar visitor's room. And in the same way, Liu Jingsheng came out, and Xiaoguang picked up the telephone, and Liu Jingsheng smiled at his son and asked questions non-stop. But what surprised me was the dull expression on Xiaoguang's face. There were no tears; he just passively answered the questions Liu Jingsheng asked. After his father said a few sentences, Xiaoguang passed the telephone to me.

On the way home he stared silently out of the bus window. I asked, "Xiaoguang, what are you thinking about?"

He turned his head and coolly said to me, "Mama, I don't want to go next time. You go by yourself."

"Why?" I asked. I instinctively grasped his hand, and a tear sprang out of the corner of his eye.

### Boiling resentment

Before Liu Jingsheng was arrested, when he and his friends would start talking about politics I would shoo them out of the house, because I didn't want the boy to overhear political talk. After Liu Jingsheng was arrested, friends often came to our house to comfort me and give legal advice, and their conversation inevitably turned to politics. When this happened I would take them outside to talk, because I was afraid of the effect this



A boy visits his father at a Guangzhou jail. Photo: Reuters.

kind of talk would have on my son's spirit. I didn't want my son to hear about society's darkness and cruelty, or to be psychologically burdened on his father's account; I wanted my son to grow up happy and innocent like other children.

When my husband was arrested, my son was still in primary school. His teacher knew about the situation and sympathized with us. She tried her best to protect my son; she never raised the subject of Xiaoguang's father, and didn't let the other students know about it, doing her utmost to keep Xiaoguang from being hurt.

In 1995 Xiaoguang entered middle school. His teacher there somehow found out about Liu Jingsheng, and began treating Xiaoguang with prejudice.

Xiaoguang loved to draw, and in primary school he had taken part in children's art exhibitions in China and Spain. But this middle school teacher didn't allow Xiaoguang to participate in group art activities, and often said wounding and belittling things to him.

My son began to lose his self-confidence, and built up resentment against the teacher. When the teacher prohibited throwing objects out of the classroom window, Xiaoguang threw a cup out the window. When the teacher criticized him in class, after class he went up to the teacher's lectern, and pretending to stumble, kicked a hole in it. One time he became so angry with the teacher that he smashed his fist through the window in the classroom door, and his hand bled profusely.

I became extremely anxious, because hatred and enmity harms not only others, but also the one who harbors those feelings.

When my son graduated from middle school in 1998, I decided that he should attend a high school far from where we lived, where others didn't know the details of our family background. I had no control over the political path my husband had taken, but I was not going to let my child be harmed by it, or worse yet, to follow the same path. I had to protect my child.

In 1998 I sent my son to the Wenquan boarding school in the suburbs of Beijing. I wanted to cut him off from the influence of society. There was no political discrimination there, and no political influence.

Then a relative of mine who was a teacher at a high school in Li County, near the prison, suggested that I send Xiaoguang there, where he would be completely cut off from Beijing's political climate. So in November 1998 I sent my son there.

### **For the sake of my child**

In the past, it was part of a mother's duty to choose her children's companions. Now I found myself choosing my son's school. Li County High School was far from Beijing; it was a suitable place for a child to grow up.

My son was gone. Alone in our small house, I felt terribly lonely. Every day after work I would return home and sit under the fluorescent light, my heart as empty as the room.

Seeing husbands and wives chatting amicably, or happy reunions between mothers and children, my heart ached. I had only one thought to sustain me: anything for the sake of my child.

I knew that society was supposed to distribute resources fairly, and that the law was supposed to be administered with justice. But I didn't feel that the judgment against Liu Jingsheng was just, or that my family had been treated fairly. In 1994, someone with connections told me that my husband would be sentenced to four years in prison, but ultimately, someone else had their say, and it became 15 years. Such is China's judicial system!

There was nothing I could do about Liu Jingsheng's circumstances, but I could still do all in my power to take care of my child. Working as a ticket-taker for the Beijing Transportation Company, I braved frigid winds in the winter and sweltering heat in the summer for the sake of earning a little more for Liu Jingsheng in prison, and for our son. In 1997 I began working in a friend's bookstore. I rose at six o'clock every morning to go to work at the bus company, then rushed off at four o'clock to the bookstore, where I'd work until 9 p.m. After work I would return home exhausted and fall into bed, too tired even to wash my face. I continued this way for more than a year. Xiaoguang and I endured this hardship and destitution for ten years.

Xiaoguang grew by leaps and bounds and surpassed me in height. Looking at this six-foot-tall boy, I felt happy and gratified—in spite of everything, my son had grown to manhood!

At Li County High School he learned how to take care of himself and how to interact with people, and he came to understand his mother and father.

In 2001, Xiaoguang sat his college entrance exam, and was admitted into the Public Policy and Management Department of Beijing's University of Science and Engineering. When I conveyed this happy news to Liu Jingsheng during my next prison visit, he smiled so broadly that tears trickled out of his eyes.

I didn't say anything, and just allowed the hint of a smile to cross my face, but my heart was racing. Yes, our child had grown up, and had made all my effort and hardship worthwhile. I, an ordinary woman with no interest in politics, a woman with no preparation against political persecution, a woman with romantic ideals, a woman who harbored high hopes for her family's future, had managed to withstand such heavy political oppression.

I had not abandoned Liu Jingsheng's expectations, I had not failed to live up to a mother's obligations, I had not obstructed my child's future prospects, I had not surrendered to the pressures of life. For ten years I had shouldered all of life's burdens alone, almost completely suppressing my own needs and missing out on so many of life's pleasures. For ten years my life was dedicated to one thing—protecting my child.

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Translator's name withheld

The original Chinese article, posted on the 10th anniversary of Liu Jingsheng's detention, can be read on the Web site of Renminbao.com : <http://renminbao.com/rmb/articles/2002/5/21/21003.html>.