

Prisoner Profile: Ching Cheong

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Ching Cheong. Photo: AFP/Getty Images

Ching Cheong was born on December 22, 1949 in mainland China. He was educated in Hong Kong, attending St. Paul's College and graduating from the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 1973 with a major in geography and economics. While at HKU, Ching was one of a number of students who launched groups promoting patriotism toward mainland China.

Unlike most HKU graduates of his generation who opted to join the Hong Kong civil service, Ching took the unconventional road of becoming a reporter for a pro-China newspaper, *Wen Wei Po*, the year after he graduated. He worked out of the Beijing bureau from 1981 to 1987. After the violent official crack-down on protesters at Tiananmen Square in June 1989, Ching and a group of other journalists resigned in protest from *Wen Wei Po*. Ching and a colleague subsequently launched a monthly news magazine, *Contemporary (Dangdai)*, which folded in 1995. In 1996 Ching Cheong became chief China correspondent for the Singapore newspaper *The Straits Times*. He was based in Hong Kong prior to his disappearance.

Ching Cheong is a permanent resident of both Hong Kong and Singapore. He also holds a British National (Overseas) passport, which confers a form of British nationality without right of abode in the United Kingdom.

On April 22, 2005, state security police detained Ching Cheong at a hotel in Guangzhou. According to reports, Ching had come to Guangzhou to meet a source who was supposed to deliver the transcript

of an interview with the late purged leader Zhao Ziyang, which Ching was going to have published. The following day, Ching instructed his wife, Mary Lau, to bring his personal computer to Shenzhen. The computer apparently contained notes that Ching had kept on important policy discussions.

During the first week of his detention, Ching reportedly maintained regular contact with his wife and told her not to disclose his situation. Ching's employer, *The Straits Times*, soon learned of his detention, but was similarly requested to keep the matter confidential. On May 29, Ching called his wife and urged her to visit his parents more often, as he did not expect to return to Hong Kong any time soon. During that telephone conversation, an official from the Ministry of State Security asked Ching's wife to visit her husband in Beijing, but Ching warned her to stay in Hong Kong. Since then, Ching's wife has had no direct communication with him.

News of Ching's detention was widely reported through the Hong Kong news media as another example of China's tightening grip over press freedom, raising particular attention because Ching was well known for his idealistic and fervent patriotism toward China.

Soon after the news of Ching's detention went public, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledged his detention during a press conference on June 1. Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan denied that Ching's arrest was related to the reported Zhao Ziyang interview. Instead, he declared that Ching had admitted to spying on China for an overseas entity in exchange for large sums of money. The Ministry posted the transcript of the press conference on its Web site that day, but hastily removed it the following day, and has made no further comment on Ching's detention.

On June 3, 2005, Ching's wife received a letter from the Chinese government via the Hong Kong Security Bureau, informing her that her husband had been put under residential surveillance, a form of house arrest. The letter, issued by the Ministry of State Security, was dated April 23, 2005, but there was no explanation of why delivery had been delayed for more than 40 days.

In an open letter addressed to President Hu Jintao, Mary Lau maintained her

husband's innocence and reiterated his unquestioned patriotism toward China. She noted in particular that her husband had brokered meetings between researchers from the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) and various Hong Kong political figures, including individuals branded as dissidents, to give the central government access to the uncensored views of critics of the current administration. In her letter, Lau urged Hu to recognize the wholehearted sincerity of her husband and CASS Scholar Lu Jianhua in protecting the welfare of China, and pleaded for them to be spared imprisonment.

Although Ching Cheong is a Hong Kong permanent resident, the Hong Kong government refused to take further action to assist in his release. Hong Kong's then Interim Chief Executive, Donald Tsang Yum-kuen, maintained that the Hong Kong government could not interfere with mainland legal proceedings under the "one country two systems" principle. Secretary for Security Ambrose Lee also deferred to mainland law and legal processes when pressed by legislators and confronted by protests from the Hong Kong Journalists' Association and others.

On August 5, the Chinese authorities announced that Ching had been formally charged with espionage. Officials said that Ching had used the alias Chen Yuanchun to purchase "a great deal of information about China's political, economic and especially military affairs, including some classified as 'top-secret' or 'confidential,' and passed it on to the Taiwan intelligence," for which he was paid "several million Hong Kong dollars."

News reports quoted sources as saying that CASS scholar Chen Hui was suspected of providing copies of classified materials to another CASS scholar, Lu Jianhua, who then shared the materials with Ching Cheong. Both Chen and Lu were detained around the same time as Ching and are reportedly still in custody.

On August 17 the Beijing state security bureau notified Mary Lau that it had rejected her application to engage a lawyer to defend Ching.