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## China's Human Rights Abuses Demand a Tougher U.S. Approach

By Editorial Board

They kept him in a cell so small he could walk barely two steps in any direction. There was no sunlight, no ventilation; just one five-watt bulb, burning dimly 24 hours a day. He was allowed nothing to read and no one to speak with, not even the guards. They fed him one piece of bread and one bowl of watery cabbage a day.

When they let [Gao Zhisheng](#) out of prison last month after nearly five years, he had dropped from 175 pounds to 137. Half of his teeth were gone or rotten. At age 50, his hair had turned white; his relatives thought they saw a ghost or some alien creature. Mr. Gao himself could not believe his reflection in the mirror. Since his release, he has barely been able to carry on a telephone conversation with his wife, Geng He, who lives in the United States with their two children.

Is this the product of a rising, confident China — the “China Dream” that President Xi Jinping likes to present to the world? Mr. Gao committed no crime and never questioned Communist Party rule. He was something more dangerous: a lawyer who sought to uphold the law and the constitution that the Communist Party claims to live by. At one time a successful establishment attorney, he began to work pro bono for people he thought were getting a raw deal: practitioners in the Falun Gong spiritual community; peasants pushed off their land by developers with connections.

Likely it was his very moderation that Mr. Xi and his cronies found so threatening. Mr. Gao was part of a movement that sought to reform China gradually, peacefully, through the rule of law. Its existence challenged the party's claim to be the only alternative to chaos. Given the party's diminishing legitimacy, due to corruption, pollution and other ills, Mr. Gao posed too much of a risk.

Even now that they may have broken him, they do not let up. He is confined in a relative's house in a remote village, tormented morning and afternoon by security agents who visit uninvited, monitor his reading material, hound his relatives. He is in agonizing pain but they will not let him visit a dentist, according to Ms. Geng, nor receive any other medical treatment.

Mr. Gao is not alone, of course. There is [Wang Bingzhang](#), a democracy activist who has been held in solitary confinement for more than 12 years and also is in frail health; [Liu Xiaobo](#), the Nobel Peace Prize winner, serving an 11-year sentence; his wife, Liu Xia, [under de facto house arrest](#) though charged with no crime. In 2013 alone, more than 220 human rights defenders were criminally detained, according to the group [Chinese Human Rights Defenders](#) — the “harshesht suppression of civil society in over a decade.”

The Obama administration says it raises individual human rights abuses in meetings with Chinese officials but keeps the conversations private. Over the past five years, this deference has proved fruitless. It is time for a new approach. Mr. Gao should be allowed to receive medical treatment and join his family in the United States. President Obama should find his voice and make clear that Mr. Gao’s fate is important to the United States.