# Wang Quanzhang: The lawyer who simply vanished

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http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-china-blog-39974953

In August 2015 Wang Quanzhang was detained by the Chinese authorities.

In that he was not alone. The nationwide series of raids that summer saw more than 200 lawyers, legal assistants and human rights activists brought in for questioning.

But almost two years on, Mr Wang is the only lawyer from whom nothing has been heard at all.

"I don't know whether he's alive or dead," his wife Li Wenzu told me. "I have had no information at all. He has simply disappeared from the face of the earth. It is so scary, so brutal."

China's "709" crackdown as it's now known - a reference to 9 July, the date it began - is widely seen as a sign of a growing intolerance of dissent under President Xi Jinping.

Of the large number of people initially detained, around two dozen have been pursued as formal investigations. Over the past year or so those cases have gradually been reaching some kind of a conclusion.

Some of [the accused have been given long jail terms](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-36972206), of up to seven and a half years, for the crime of subversion.

Others have been [given suspended prison sentences](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-39741893) or released on bail, but still remain under constant surveillance.

But of the lawyers arrested in that initial 2015 sweep, Mr Wang is unique. Apart from one brief written notification of his arrest, the family say he has disappeared into a black hole.

"For these two years, he hasn't been allowed to meet the lawyer that we have employed for him, and he has no right to communicate with the outside world," his wife Ms Li said. "He has been deprived of all rights."

There have been allegations that [some of the lawyers have been tortured](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-china-blog-39893359) during their detention, force-fed drugs, shackled, beaten and kept in stress positions for long periods of time.

Their [admissions of guilt](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-39843680), either in court or in the televised confessions that have been broadcast by state-run TV, should not be taken at face value, their supporters argue, but rather as the inevitable consequence of the pressure they've been under.

They now fear that Mr Wang's continued incarceration might be because he is holding out.

"I think it might be because my husband hasn't compromised at all," Ms Li said. "That's why his case remains unsolved."

Wang Quanzhang is certainly no stranger to pressure. His work representing the persecuted followers of China's banned spiritual movement, Falun Gong, as well as human rights activists, has attracted the ire of the authorities before.

In [this interview](https://chinachange.org/2015/06/30/black-ten-minutes-chinese-lawyer-recounts-being-beating-in-a-courthouse-in-shangdong/), he recounts being beaten in the basement of a court building for challenging the order of a judge.

Jerome Cohen is a professor at New York University School of Law and a long-term expert on the Chinese legal system. He knows some of the detained lawyers personally.

"They are in the lead, they are the ones who have really gone public. There are many other lawyers who are quietly working, they hope, within the limits allowed by the party," he said.

"But they too are feeling the pressure and are watching very carefully how these lawyers, who were up front as it were, are being abused."

"Of course this deters a lot of people, which is the whole aim of the party... to try to keep the lawyers in line."

President Xi Jinping has spoken of the dangers that liberal ideals, like constitutional rights enforceable in the courts, pose for Communist Party rule.

China, it seems, wants lawyers to help it "rule by law", not keep its rulers in check through the "rule of law".

The lawyers whose cases have gone to trial appear to be those who have consistently taken on the most politically sensitive cases, as well as those who have advocated for the need for a justice system beyond party control.

"The party knows it needs lawyers, it wants them for economic development," Mr Cohen said. "But essentially, the party would like lawyers to behave like dentists, like technicians."

"I admire dentists very much but I don't expect them to annunciate the values of my society," he added.

"So this is what the party is trying to do, and it is doing so with extreme cruelty."

But if that is the plan then, on one level, it isn't working. The "war on law" has prompted the wives of the detained lawyers to work together and advocate very publically for their husbands' release.

Despite facing continuing intimidation and harassment by plain-clothes policemen, they have refused to be silenced.

Some of them even [addressed a US Congressional hearing on the issue this week](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/19/chinas-war-on-law-victims-wives-tell-us-congress-of-torture-and-trauma), including - via recorded video evidence - Li Wenzu.

Other Chinese lawyers have come to the defence of those caught up in the crackdown, visiting detention centres to demand information or mounting legal challenges, only then, subsequently, [to be detained themselves](http://www.hrichina.org/en/citizens-square/zhao-weis-husband-zhaos-defense-lawyer-arrested-false-rumors).

And the wider community of Chinese defence lawyers [has made public](https://chinachange.org/2017/05/04/urgent-statement-by-chinese-lawyers-concerning-lawyer-chen-jiangang-who-was-detained-by-yunnan-police-along-with-family-and-friends/) its opposition to the alleged mistreatment of members of the profession.

Meanwhile there is mounting concern about the fate of Wang Quanzhang. If he really is still holding out against the odds, his loved ones fear the consequences.

Lawyer and friend Ge Wenxiu recorded this video message that was [posted on Twitter](https://twitter.com/YaxueCao/status/865025136679940096) this week.

"Lawyer Quanzhang, are you still alive?" he asks. "We don't mind if you make a damn confession on Chinese TV and come home. Come home."