

# HARRY WU

Brought up as one of eight children of a Shanghai banker, Harry Wu attended a Jesuit school before enrolling in Beijing College of Geology in the late 1950s. In the throes of a Communist purge, his university was given a quota of counterrevolutionary elements, and relegated Wu to nineteen years in the Chinese gulag, known as the *laogai*. There, he survived physical and psychological torture, living for a time on only ground-up corn husks. In his autobiography *Bitter Winds*, he describes chasing rats through the fields in order to “steal” the grains in their nests, and eating snakes. After his release, Wu accepted a position as an unpaid visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, arriving in the United States in 1985 with forty dollars. After ten days of pursuing research by day and sleeping on a park bench by night, he landed a job on the graveyard shift at a doughnut shop where he ate three meals a day and had a place to stay at night. (To date, he cannot touch a doughnut.) Wu returned, or tried to return, to China a total of five times. While there, twice in 1991 and once in 1994, Wu documented conditions in prisons and labor camps for *Sixty Minutes* and other news programs, and was placed on China’s most wanted list for his exposés. In 1995, on his fifth trip, he was caught. While Wu spent sixty-six days in detention awaiting news of his fate, a worldwide campaign for his release was launched, including demands that Hillary Clinton boycott the Beijing women’s summit. China released him, and his return to U.S. soil was celebrated across the country. Wu frequently testified on Capitol Hill about the latest abuses he had uncovered—the for-profit selling of executed prisoners’ organs by Chinese officials, the illegal export of prison labor products (such as diesel engines and Chicago Bulls apparel), the frequency of public executions, the unfair restrictions on reproductive rights and their appalling enforcement procedures. The Laogai Research Foundation, which Wu founded and directs, estimates there have been fifty million people incarcerated in the *laogai* since 1950, and that there are eight million people in forced labor today. In 2004 Harry Wu took part in *Speak Truth to Power* activities in Rome, Italy. In November 2008, Wu opened the Laogai Museum in Washington D.C., the first museum in the world to exclusively deal with human rights in China. Harry Wu’s self-proclaimed goal was to put the word *laogai* in every dictionary in the world, and to that end, worked eighteen-hour days crisscrossing the country and the globe speaking with student groups and heads of state to make such a present-day horror become a past memory. Wu passed away in April 2016.



Harry Wu, ©2000 Eddle Adams

**“IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO FREE ONE DISSIDENT WHEN THE STAKES ARE SO HIGH. IN THE GREATER BALANCE, WE ARE ALL EQUAL, AND EACH VICTIM OF THE LAOGAI DESERVES THE SAME RIGHTS.”**

INTERVIEW TAKEN FROM KERRY KENNEDY’S BOOK *SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER*, 2000

Human beings want to live as human beings, not as beasts of burden, not as tools for another’s use. People must respect each other enough to live with one another but retain the right to free choice: to choose their religion, their culture. Under totalitarian regimes, people are never treated as human beings. There is no free choice. If you talk about individual rights, you are automatically opposing the government.

Many American politicians and American scholars echo the Chinese lie that a different concept of human rights applies in China. The Chinese leadership argues that the most important category of human rights is economic rights. Jiang Zemin, president of China, said, “My first responsibility to human rights is feeding the people.” In response, I would say that I can feed myself if I am free—I don’t need you to do that. Unfortunately, some Westerners say, “The Chinese never talk about

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individual values, they talk about collective rights, so don't impose Western human rights standards on the Chinese. Democracy is a Western idea." This is pure hypocrisy, because there is only one version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which China is a signatory. We don't have a Chinese version and an American version. It's universal.

The West mostly focuses on freedom of speech and freedom of religion, while trying to release religious dissidents, political dissidents, and student dissidents. So most of the West's focus is on the individual, this Catholic father, that Tibetan monk. On the one hand, it is very important to call for their freedom because life belongs to a person only once, never twice. We must save them. But we Chinese say "Never focus on only one individual tree; focus on a forest."

Let me tell you a story of the three W's: Wu, Wei, Wang Dan. I am the first "W." In 1957, while attending university in Beijing, I spoke out against the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary. For this I was labeled a "counterrevolutionary" and sentenced to life in the *laogai*, the Chinese term for gulag. Ultimately, I gave nineteen years of my life to that system. In 1979, the year I was released, the West was applauding China for opening up. Mao was dead, the Cultural Revolution was over, and it seemed that Deng Xiaoping would herald a new era for China. But that same year, the second "W," Wei Jingsheng, was imprisoned for expressing himself, for calling for the fifth modernization of democracy for China. In 1989, when I was in the United States and Wei was serving the tenth year of his sentence, another young man, Wang Dan, was imprisoned for his role in the student democracy movement. The Chinese government imprisoned each of us in three different decades for peacefully expressing our opinions; we all received second sentences in the 1990s. With respect to individual rights, not much has changed since 1957.

The first year of my first time in prison, I cried almost every day. I missed my family, especially my mother, who had committed suicide because I was arrested. I thought of my girlfriend. I was Catholic, so I prayed. But after two years, there were no more tears. I never cried, because I had become a beast. Not because I was a hero, not because I had an iron will, but because I had to submit. I don't think anyone under those circumstances could resist. From the first night in the camps, we were forced to confess. The confession destroys your dignity. If you don't come up with a confession, you are subjected to physical torture. And you have to keep your confession straight, all the time, from the beginning to the end. You never can claim you are innocent. You can only cry out, over and over, "I am wrong. I am stupid. I am crazy. I am shit. I am a criminal. I am nothing." At the same time, there is forced labor. Labor is one of the ways to help you become a new socialist. Labor is an opportunity offered by the party for your reform. The final goal is for you to turn into a new citizen in the Communist system.

They said my crime was light, not serious, light. But my political attitude was the problem. "I did nothing wrong," I said. "You trapped me. I am not going to admit to any crime." I wouldn't confess. They separated me from all the people in my life, my

classmates, my friends, my teachers, my parents. I was totally isolated. I thought, "I am a mistake. They don't like me. I am something wrong. Let me think about it, okay." And then, "Yeah, I am wrong." Step by step, I lost my dignity, lost my confidence, lost my rank. I started to believe I was a criminal. It was as if we Chinese were living in a box all our lives where we never saw the sky. If you never escape from the box, you come to believe that it is the truth. That is reprogramming, which in the end reduces you to a robot. One drop of water can reflect the whole world, but many, many drops become a river, an ocean.

Nineteen years. How many days, how many nights? I punched someone in the nose and stole from people. I never cried. I stopped thinking about my mother, my girlfriend, my future. Some people died. So what? They broke my back. I had human blood on my lips. I had forgotten so much.

In 1986, I first came to the United States as a visiting scholar. I remember the day in October of that year when I gave a talk on the *laogai*. I told myself, "You are not Harry Wu. You are a storyteller." Suddenly I could not stop. For twenty minutes, the students were very quiet. I finished my talk and I realized I had come back as a human being. The end of that talk was the first time I said, "I am so lucky I survived."

When I first came to America, nobody knew me. Just like in the camps, I was anonymous. The Chinese government put me on the wanted list because I touched the heart of the issue. If you want to talk about dissidents, the Chinese are willing to speak with you, but not if you talk about the *laogai*. Can you talk to Hitler about concentration camps? Can you talk to Stalin about the gulags?

I don't know why I survived. You think of yourself as a human being, fighting for your dignity, fighting for your future, fighting for your life, fighting for your dream. Life will only belong to you once. Sooner or later you and I are going to go to the grave. Some people take thirty years, eighty years. Once I was in exile, why shouldn't I have enjoyed the rest of my life? Why did I need to go back to China? I tried to enjoy it. I felt guilty. Especially when people were calling Harry Wu a hero. The West is pushing me because it is always in search of a hero. But a real hero would be dead, dead. If I were a real hero like those people I met in the camps, I would have committed suicide. I am finished—there is no Harry Wu. That is why I ultimately decided to go back to China.

In 1991, I visited the *laogai* camp where Wei Jingsheng was held in China. He was in the Gobi Desert and I wanted to get some video footage to show people the situation. In the past, I posed as a prisoner, a tourist, or a family member. This time I posed as a policeman. They didn't recognize me. In a guesthouse, many policemen waved to me, and I waved back to them. But when I tried again to collect evidence in 1995, they caught me trying to enter China from the Russian border. They arrested me and showed me these pictures I had taken. This time, I was sentenced to fifteen years.

Now I am working on birth control issues, because this is another systemic human rights problem in China. Without government permission, you can't have a child in China. I have a copy of the

“birth-allowed” permit and the “birth-not-allowed” permit from the Fujian province. After one baby, you are supposed to be sterilized. If you are found to be pregnant a second time, the government forces you to abort. You cannot have a second child, unless you live in the countryside. In this case, you can wait four years and then have a second baby. Then, after that baby’s delivery, you are forcibly sterilized.

An American sinologist told me the population growth in China is terrible, causing problems not only for the Chinese, but the whole world. And I said, “Do you agree to forced abortion in the United States?” He replied no. “But why are you applying that standard to the Chinese?” I responded. “It’s a murder policy. It’s a policy against every individual woman, against every individual.” Government statistics tell us that in one area of China alone, 75 percent of the women between the ages of sixteen and forty-nine have been sterilized—1.2 million people. Every month there are about one hundred abortions.

Today, the Chinese people do have the right to choose different brands of shampoo but they still cannot say what they really want to say. Will the right to choose one’s shampoo lead to the right to choose one’s religion, as some would argue? It’s quite a leap.

My choice was simple—imprisonment or exile. But what people don’t understand is that exile itself is torture. Exile, too, is a violation of human rights. We never applauded the Soviets when they exiled dissidents. Yet, when the Chinese exiled Wang Dan, the State Department and the White House claimed it as a victory for United States engagement policy.

Of course, I do think it’s worthwhile to try to free someone from the machine, but I would rather see the machine destroyed. I come from the laogai. Wei Jingsheng came from the laogai. Now Wang Xiaopo is in the laogai. Catholic priests are in the laogai. Labor activists are in the laogai. Most of the people in the laogai don’t have a name, they don’t have a face. It is not enough to free one dissident when the stakes are so high. In the greater balance, we are all equal, and each one of the victims of the laogai deserves the same rights, not only the political dissidents, but even the criminal prisoners. This is not to say that we should excuse the crime, but each prisoner must be offered the same protection. You tend to forget that when you only talk about famous prisoners of conscience. It’s hard to say what percentage of prisoners are political compared to those that are criminal. You can present the question to Chinese authorities and they answer that in China there are no political prisoners. They will say, for instance, that it is legal to practice your own religion, but if you practice Catholicism they arrest you and charge you with disturbing society and participating in an illegal gathering instead.

Every totalitarian regime needs a suppression system. The funny thing is that nobody talks about that system in Communist China. They say that it doesn’t exist, or that they only use it in the case of particular individuals. I’ve given talks about the laogai at all the top universities in the United States. When I was at Yale, I spoke to Jonathan Spence, who wrote the most widely used college text on China. I said to him, “Jonathan, you speak Chinese very well, you have a Chinese wife, you include so many Chinese terms in your work. But what about laogai? The victims of the laogai number

more than those of the Soviet gulag plus the concentration camps. Of course, you’ve heard of it, but it never appears in your reports, your articles, your books. You don’t want to talk about it—why?” Why doesn’t Steven Spielberg film the laogai the way he did the concentration camps?

I want to see laogai become a word in every dictionary, in every language. Lao means “labor,” gai means “reform.” They reform you. Hitler, from the beginning, had an evil idea: destroy the Jews, destroy the people. The Communists in the beginning had a wonderful idea to create a paradise, a heaven, to relieve poverty and misery. In the beginning they were like angels, but at the end they were like devils. The Chinese perpetrate a lot of physical torture, but also spiritual torture and mental torture. They say, “Let us help you to become a new socialist person. We won’t kill you, because of our humanity. You were going wrong. Confess. Accept Communism and you will, through reform, reestablish the community spiritually, mentally, totally.”

Before 1974, gulag was not a word. Today it is. So now we have to expose the word laogai: how many victims are there, what are the conditions the prisoners endure, what is the motivation for such systematized degradation? I want people to be aware. Aware of how many men and women are in prison. Aware of the products made in China by prison labor: the toys, the footballs, the surgical gloves. Aware of what life is like under forced labor. Aware of the so-called crimes that send people there. This is a human rights issue, not one of imports and exports.

I totally understand this is difficult talking about laogai today. I said to President Clinton, “I wish you would be the first world leader to condemn Chinese laogai. I beg you. Just one sentence. It won’t cost you anything.” And I criticize U.S. policy as a typical appeasement policy. U.S. leaders ask me, “Are you suggesting isolation or containment?” That kind of polarization is too cheap. I never suggest isolation and I never suggest sanctions. But you should not tell me a one-sided story. When you try to tell me that trade is improving the lives of the Chinese common people, this is only one side of the story. I don’t argue that economic levels are improving, that a middle class will appear, property rights will come to the fore, and that the society will reorganize. But you have to tell me the other side of the story. The profits from the industry will only benefit the Communist regime. You don’t talk about it. The Chinese Communist regime is stable. Why? Because you support it financially.

China will become more important in the near future. When we witness a Communist hegemony in the East, then we will debate why. Why did we ignore the growing strength of this authoritarian regime? Let me quote another Chinese idiom: “If you want to stop the boiled water, you only need to stir it. The better way is to withdraw the fire from the bottom.” The West needs a long-term China policy, one that supports all of the desires for freedom and democracy in China.

# STANDING UP FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHINA

## HARRY WU

LESSON GRADE LEVEL: 9–12  
HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE:  
FORCED LABOR

### UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS:

- **Article 5:** Freedom from Torture and Degrading Treatment
- **Article 9:** Freedom from Arbitrary Arrest and Exile
- **Article 19:** Freedom of Opinion and Information

### TIME REQUIREMENT FOR THE LESSON: 80 minutes

### OBJECTIVES:

After this lesson, students will be able to:

- Define and provide examples of dehumanization.
- Explain how labor camps in China deny human rights.
- Become a defender of human rights by helping Harry Wu and his fight against forced labor camps in China.

### GUIDED QUESTIONS:

- What is dehumanization?
- How are labor camps a violation of human rights?

### COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.9
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.9

### CONCEPTS:

- **Human rights**
- **Forced labor**
- **Labor reform**
- **Censorship**

### VOCABULARY:

- **Laogai**
- **Dissent**
- **Exile**
- **Communist Party**
- **Dehumanization**
- **Counterrevolutionary**

**TEACHER TIP:** The vocabulary terms and concepts pertinent to this lesson should have been taught throughout the core curriculum in order to provide students with the knowledge necessary to comprehend the material. As a refresher, teachers may review these terms/concepts with students prior to distributing the materials. Teachers can also prepare a vocabulary list to give to students as a reference.

### TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED:

- Computers with Internet access
- Microsoft programs

**TEACHER TIP:** Your students must have an understanding of Communist ideology and the rise of the Communist Party in China before conducting this unit. For global history and geography II students, this lesson can be delivered after studying the Cultural Revolution and the rise of Mao Zedong in China. For U.S. history and government students, this lesson can be implemented after students study the Cold War and begin to learn about foreign policy and U.S. economic involvement with China during the 1960s–present day.

### MATERIALS:

- Video clip of Harry Wu  
<http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=PmckCrZhrOw&feature=related>
- Speak Truth to Power Interview - [www.rfkhumanrights.org](http://www.rfkhumanrights.org) / click on Speak Truth to Power / click on “Defenders” tab
- PBS background interview with Harry Wu  
[http://www.pbs.org/speaktruthtopower/b\\_wu.htm](http://www.pbs.org/speaktruthtopower/b_wu.htm)
- The Independent—News Interview with Harry Wu  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/i-was-sentenced-to-life-in-a-chinese-labour-camp-this-is-my-story-1790465.html>

## STUDENT ACTIVITIES

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### ANTICIPATORY SET:

- Instruct students to take about three minutes to write a response to the following prompts:
  - Have you ever been blamed for something you didn't do?
  - Has someone else ever been blamed for something you did?
  - Have you ever spoken up to stop someone else from being unfairly blamed?
  - Think of a time when you stood up for something, even when doing so would make you unpopular or get you in trouble.  
Write a brief description of the event and list the qualities you needed at that moment to take a stand.
- After students complete these responses, facilitate a discussion, using student responses to generate a list of common qualities individuals must have in order to stand up for something they believe in.
- Write responses on the board or interactive whiteboard
- Conclude this activity by asking students:
  - Why is it important to stand up for what you believe?
  - What are your human rights?
  - What does it mean to be dehumanized?
  - How might you help others stand up for their human rights?

### ACTIVITY 1:

- Introduce the group activity and distribute materials as follows:
- Briefly introduce Harry Wu's fight for human rights to students by showing the video clip of Harry Wu from "Speak Truth To Power: Public Service Announcements":  
<http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=PmckCrZhrOw&feature=related>
- Divide the class into four groups.
- Assign each group one of the following aspects of Harry's experiences:
  - Early Life and Imprisonment
  - Freedom in the USA?
  - The Others in Laogai
  - The Goals of Harry Wu
- Students will read together the *Speak Truth To Power* excerpt on Harry Wu. Students will take turns reading paragraphs of the article to learn more about Harry Wu, taking notes and circling unknown vocabulary as they read. (See "materials" for a selection of documents. Teachers should use their discretion in selecting documents that are the appropriate length and level of difficulty for students.)
- Instruct the groups to research important information on their topic and create a short presentation for the class. In order to serve the different learning styles and needs of the class, the presentation may be in the form of a poster/collage, role-play, poem, PowerPoint slide presentation, or a song/rap.
  - Monitor student progress by walking around the room to discuss new vocabulary and answer questions each group may have.
  - Each group will present to the class by the end of the second class session.

## BECOME A DEFENDER

- Students will work in groups to write letters to U.S. senators and the United States International Trade Commission, urging our leaders and federal agencies to increase private investigations of suspected laogai factories in China that are interested in trading with the United States. In addition to increased investigations, students can also urge the United States to expand its definition of “prisoner” and “forced labor” to include those detained in administrative detention who are not considered convicts by either the Chinese or the U.S. and thus are allowed to produce goods that are traded between these two nations.
- Students can present their research and suggestions on how to help Harry Wu to the school board or a local member of Congress. For example, students can encourage community members to join Amnesty International and add their names to the group’s “Actions” to increase the pressure on governments and human rights violators to eliminate human rights abuses. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/join>

### EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES:

- Students can debate whether the United States should contribute to China’s economic wealth even when there is evidence of ongoing human rights violations. How should the rest of the world respond to China’s actions? For example, should China have been allowed to host the Olympic Games in 2008?
- Students can present their research at a PTA/Board of Education meeting to rally community support for human rights defenders such as Harry Wu. As a community, they can take action to help Harry Wu.
- Students can advocate with the school to be certified “sweatshop-free.” [http://www.sweatfree.org/join\\_us](http://www.sweatfree.org/join_us)
- Students can use the Prisoner Database on the Laogai Research Foundation’s website to research more about the lives of the detained. In response to their research, students can develop a website/Facebook page to raise awareness/support for some of the current prisoners in the laogai.
  - Organize an art competition, asking students to illustrate articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or organize a writing competition on a theme such as “What ‘human rights’ mean to me” or “What human right do I value most?” Winning entries from writing or art competitions could be featured in an exhibit, offered for publication in local newspapers or featured on your website. See <http://www.un.org/en/events/humanrightsday/2008/plan.shtml> for more ideas.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag* (1991):

Harry Wu’s first full account of the Chinese labor camp system.

### *Bitter Winds* (1994):

Harry Wu’s memoir of his time in the camps.

### *Troublemaker* (1996):

Wu’s account of trips to China and his detention in 1995.

### *New Ghosts, Old Ghosts, Prisons and Labor Reform Camps in China* (1999):

Book by James Seymour and Richard Anderson

### Timeline of Human Rights:

[www.rfkhumanrights.org](http://www.rfkhumanrights.org) / click on Speak Truth to Power

### Laogai Research Foundation:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20111031003206/http://www.laogai.org/aboutus>

The Laogai Research Foundation works to publicize and document systemic human rights abuses in China, including executions, organ harvesting, coercive population control and Internet censorship and surveillance.

### Youth for Human Rights video documentary (10 minutes) on the Birth of Human Rights:

<http://www.youthforhumanrights.org/what-are-human-rights.html>

A documentary made by Youth for Human Rights that explains the history of human rights

### "Simplified" Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

[https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/udhr\\_simplified\\_0.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/udhr_simplified_0.pdf)

A student-friendly version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights