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China Covers Up Detention of AIDS Doctor

By [JIM YARDLEY](#)

BEIJING, Feb. 15 — The photograph and article in Tuesday’s Henan Daily could have been headlined “Happy Holidays.” Three highranking Henan Province officials, beaming and clapping as if presenting a lottery check, were making an early Lunar New Year visit to the apartment of a renowned [AIDS](#) doctor, Gao Yaojie.

They gave her flowers. Dr. Gao, 80, squinted toward the camera, surely understanding that pictures can lie. She was under house arrest to prevent her from getting a visa to accept an honor in Washington. Her detention attracted international attention, and the photo op was a sham, apparently intended to say, “Look, she’s fine and free as a bird.”

On Thursday, Dr. Gao said in a telephone interview, a handful of police officers remained stationed outside her apartment building in the central Chinese city of Zhengzhou.

“I just can’t simply swallow it all,” she said. “I want to know two things. First, who has made the decision? I am an 80-year-old lady, and what crimes have I committed to deserve this? Second, they must find out who has been slandering my name on the Internet.”

Perhaps no issue is more emblematic of a changing China than AIDS. In less than a decade, China has gone from trying to hide its AIDS epidemic to confronting it openly. International groups like the Clinton Foundation and the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#) have been welcomed. The Chinese government has initiated medical research, a free drug program and a nationwide public awareness campaign.

But for a Communist Party intolerant of public dissent, embracing grass-roots AIDS activists is a different matter. They often complain loudest about inadequate care and official corruption. And few people have complained louder, or with more influence, than Dr. Gao, who gained fame for helping expose the tainted blood-selling operations that spread H.I.V., the virus that causes AIDS, in central China in the 1990s.

Dr. Gao was detained on Feb. 1 as she was leaving for Beijing to pick up a United States travel visa so she could attend a banquet to be held in her honor in March by Vital Voices Global Partnership, a nonprofit group whose honorary chairwomen are Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), Democrat of New York, and Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, Republican of Texas.

International organizations and the United States Embassy in Beijing soon inquired about her status. Nicholas Bequelin of [Human Rights Watch](#) saw the Henan Daily article online and assumed that it meant the pressure had worked.

“I almost fell for the ploy,” said Mr. Bequelin, who later learned that Dr. Gao was still under house arrest. “Now it appears it was a very cynical move to try to assuage international concern. They had no intention to release control

of Gao Yaojie.”

Officials in Henan are famously hostile to AIDS workers. But Mr. Bequelin said Dr. Gao’s case was particularly alarming because it suggested that officials in Beijing were complicit.

He said the Henan Daily article had been posted on a Web site administered by People’s Daily, the Chinese Communist Party’s most authoritative outlet. He noted that Dr. Gao’s detention had come only three months after another high-profile AIDS activist, Wan Yanhai, was detained and blocked from holding a conference in Beijing for AIDS advocates and people infected with H.I.V.

“It calls into doubt their commitment to let the grass-roots groups and H.I.V. activists carry out their work unhindered,” said Mr. Bequelin, who is the Hong Kong-based China researcher for Human Rights Watch. “It really, clearly shows that Beijing has endorsed this restriction on Gao. They are probably worried about her going there and talking to Hillary Clinton and other people.”

International pressure seemed to have weighed on the Henan officials who had visited Dr. Gao since her detention. She said one official visited three times a day, urging her to write a letter blaming poor health as a reason for not attending the Washington ceremony. Dr. Gao said she finally relented Wednesday.

“After negotiation, we agreed that I will just say I am preoccupied and won’t be able to leave for the award,” she said. “The letter I wrote only had two lines.”

Dr. Gao said she had written it to relieve political pressure on the local health department and her family.

She was also upset with entries on a blog she recently started in which she posts AIDS cases to give them public attention. “Various posts accused me of lying and making these cases up,” she said. “Personal insults were posted. These posts were then rebutted by victims. My blog then became a battlefield.”

During the Maoist era, dissidents who spoke out against the government were brutalized or even killed. That era is long past, though rough treatment can still occur. Dissidents are now sometimes jailed on dubious charges. The authorities often tap phones and otherwise monitor people deemed troublemakers.

Fear of international embarrassment appears to be the motivation for stopping Dr. Gao from going to Washington. Indeed, the doctor has received past recognition in China. She was given a “Ten People Who Touched China in 2003” award from the government’s television network. But she was prevented from traveling outside China to receive awards in 2001 and 2003.

Wenchi Yu Perkins, human rights program director with Vital Voices Global Partnership, said the group had protested Dr. Gao’s detention to an official at the Chinese Embassy in Washington. The embassy official praised Dr. Gao’s work on AIDS. “He also stated that Dr. Gao was in poor health and unable to travel to Washington,” Ms. Perkins said by e-mail. “We know from sources close to Dr. Gao that she has repeatedly expressed her desire to travel to the U.S. to receive Vital Voices’ award.”

Mr. Bequelin and others say they think that officials were alarmed at the potential of Dr. Gao meeting Senator Clinton. Dr. Gao said she believed that the Washington ceremony, as well as her blog, were to blame for her detention. She said Zhengzhou’s former police chief, Yao Daixian, had gone to her apartment and personally

warned her not to “communicate with foreign journalists.”

She recalled his saying, “These people are liars, and you must consider the negative influence it will bring on our country.” Mr. Yao, now director of the Zhengzhou Communist Party’s organization department, also addressed the young woman cooking and doing other tasks for Dr. Gao.

“He told her to love the country, the party, the government,” the doctor said. The woman quit.

Citizens in China understand where boundaries exist in society, and most do not cross them. But Dr. Gao has always trampled across.

In her youth, she was a rare woman admitted to medical school. She survived Japanese bombing raids during the 1940s and worked delivering babies as an obstetrician in the 1950s. When the famines of the Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1960 unleashed mass starvation, Dr. Gao sometimes gave her food ration tickets to emaciated women.

During the violent class struggles of the Cultural Revolution from 1965 to 1975 she was labeled a “black element,” a term for members of the former ruling class or rightist intelligentsia. In a 2003 interview, she recalled surviving one night during that era by hiding among the bodies in a hospital morgue to avoid Red Guards.

Her involvement in AIDS began when she learned that H.I.V. was silently spreading through Henan in the 1990s. A government-endorsed blood-selling campaign had led to the infection of thousands of farmers. She traveled to villages to provide medical care and free informational brochures to people who had no idea why they were dying.

She also spoke out against local officials trying to cover up the crisis.

Her status came up on Thursday at the regular news briefing by the Foreign Ministry. “Please ask the local government about this,” the spokeswoman responded.

A spokesman with the propaganda office of the Zhengzhou Communist Party refused to give out a number for Mr. Yao, the former police chief. He referred the call to the city government’s press office. A spokesman there seemed startled when asked if Dr. Gao was under house arrest.

“What?” he answered. “That sounds very unlikely. We have not been informed of such a thing. But please be assured if we have any information we will inform you in time.”

A final call went to the press office of Henan Province. It had more information. “Did you read the newspaper?” a provincial spokesman said. “Our provincial officials have paid her a visit to see how she’s doing and wish her a happy New Year. I will look into it and get back to you.”

His response came quickly: a faxed copy of the Henan Daily story.

Dr. Gao said her restrictions had been loosened a bit. Her telephone was reconnected this week. Her family can visit her. She can step outside her apartment building for some air. But she can go no farther. Police officers remain posted. A group of AIDS advocates tried to visit her Wednesday but were turned away.

“Luckily I am still clear in the mind, or I could have been fooled by the government into speaking for them, telling untrue tales,” she said. “It does not matter to me at all whether I can go pick up the award.

“I think my absence at the ceremony will be more influential than me being there.”

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