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My Life in Prison: Memoirs of a Chinese Political Dissident

Jiang Qisheng
James Dew, translator
Rowman and Littlefield (February 2012)
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Chronological, detailed, and methodical, *My Life in Prison: Memoirs of a Chinese Political Dissident* fulfills its author's purpose as historical record. His plea for human rights, particularly free speech, also includes observations on the dehumanizing effects of incarceration for prisoners and guards alike.

For his involvement in the 1989 Tiananmen Square student movement, doctoral student Jiang Qisheng had his studies interrupted by an eighteen-month jail sentence, after which he was no longer employable as a teacher. Earlier, during the Cultural Revolution, he had been "sent down" to work among peasants for ten years. Later, in 1999, for an essay he wrote called "Light a Million Candles to Commemorate the Souls of the Heroes of June 4th," he was arrested and eventually sentenced to four years in prison.

The official charge was "incitement of subversion of state power," but from the beginning Jiang maintained that his arrest and sentence were illegal and amounted to, in his terms, a "literary inquisition."

Following his arrest on May 18, 1999, Jiang was held in the Beijing Detention Center for nearly two years, awaiting sentencing. Subsequent to his conviction in December of 2000, he spent two months in the Beijing Transfer Center and finally passed the remaining two years of his four-year sentence in Beijing Number Two Prison. *My Life in Prison* has little to say about the third facility, but the first two are described in detail, the writer making very clear that his fifty-three days in the Transfer Center (along with the first week in Beijing Number Two Prison) were the worst of the entire four years.

Born in 1948, Jiang remembers The Cultural Revolution, and his reflections are deepened by that historical perspective. He contrasts his own persecution with the torture and deaths of martyrs who gave their lives for the cause of freedom. "Teacher Jiang" received respect from guards and inmates that would have been unthinkable decades earlier, steadfastly refusing to put his hands on top of his head and cast his eyes to the ground, and never joining group chants of guilt and repentance.

When claiming that those who have been legally deprived of freedom should not be treated to further humiliation and abuse, his concern goes beyond political prisoners to general prison reform. Whenever human dignity is set aside, he observes, violence results. One wonders what he would make of American prison life.
PAMELA GRATH (Spring 2012)

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