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Peter Humphrey on PRC Human Rights Violations

1. Forced TV Confessions & Ofcom Cases

2. Forced Prison Labour

Introduction

My personal story of wrongful captivity in Shanghai (July 2013 to June 2015) as a victim of China's coercive legal system has been extensively publicised and my background and credentials as a China specialist are well-known.

== See [summary CV](#).

I do not intend to recycle too much of that story here. For the present purpose I wish to concentrate on two key areas of human rights abuse - compulsory prison labour and forced televised confessions – where I have obtained rare first-hand special insights.

== Please refer to my article in FT Weekend 18 Feb 2018 for background on my case, appended here in PDF form. The following links may also be accessed, subject to FT paywall restrictions.

Article:

<https://www.ft.com/content/db8b9e36-1119-11e8-940e-08320fc2a277>

Video:

<https://www.ft.com/video/4fb22a91-8bca-4704-9cca-93f2eeec4a7>

1. Forced TV Confessions & Ofcom cases

After Xi Jinping took power in China in late 2012, among the rapidly escalating human rights abuses there was a dramatic rise in the abusive practice of staging forced and falsified televised confessions (FCs) extracted from unconvicted prisoners under conditions of duress and torture. Such FCs are extracted by police (PSB) or security (MSS) officers with the collusion of Chinese state TV organisations. For national and international broadcast purposes, CCTV and its foreign-language subsidiary CGTN (formerly CNTV) are in the forefront of this abuse (while lower-level provincial TV outlets are involved in domestic cases of FC). The FCs are all extracted from prisoners who have not yet been tried in court, and in many cases not been indicted or formally charged. They are intended to incriminate ahead of trial and to prejudice the outcome. That these abuses happen at all is a confirmation that Chinese courts do not and cannot judge any case impartially and independently from Communist Party control. These TV entities CCTV and CGTN are arms of the Chinese Communist Party's Propaganda Department and the one-party PRC state, their beneficial owners.

In August 2013, I became the first foreigner to be subjected to this abusive practice when I was paraded in prison garb and handcuffs on CCTV and CGTN inside a steel cage and was made to appear to be confessing to the crime of illegal acquisition of private information, which I had not

committed. My wife, a China-born American citizen was separately subjected to this abuse on the same day. The incident was staged to look like an interview by journalists. However, no journalist asked questions. Only our chief PSB interrogator inspector Ding Zhidong asked questions. I did not confess to any crime. But he tried to dictate our responses, repeating the questions after telling us how he wanted us to answer. I was in a state of shock and had been drugged beforehand with a sedative that made me drowsy. My words are patently slurred. I struggled to navigate between saying something that would get me out of that cage and something that would not falsely self-incriminate me for crimes I had not committed. I punctuated everything I said with ifs and buts. I was never shown the footage nor was I asked for my consent that this footage be aired. It was more than a year later, after my release from China, that I saw what was broadcast. I was shocked to see how it had been edited and packaged by its creators (PSB, CCTV, CGTN) to incriminate me and my wife. My remarks had been heavily edited, cut and pasted, miss-dubbed between languages or narrated over to twist and distort, and untrue “facts” had been added and inserted without my approval.

Before the incident, I had agreed to meet two or three print media journalists and explicitly refused to be photographed or filmed. But one morning the detention centre gave me a sedative in my cell, then brought along a brand new prison vest, and then told me I was going to “meet the media”. As I was being escorted down a corridor towards a large interrogation cell, a dozen camera-wielding people ambushed me on the corridor and began filming without my consent. Inside the interrogation cell, it was set up like a tribunal, with a cage in the centre. I was placed into a metal chair with a locking bar over my lap, wearing handcuffs and the orange prison vest, inside the steel-barred cage. The vertical cage bars are visible behind me in some of the footage and photographs that was aired. The large number of PSB in the room is kept out of the footage. The repackaged footage was broadcast across China by CCTV, and within the UK and across the world by CGTN, without my consent.

One day after the broadcast, UK consular officers met senior PSB officers in Shanghai and protested against this abuse. The embassy in Beijing also lodged a complaint with the Chinese Foreign Ministry. A senior consular officer told the head of the Shanghai PSB that if something like this happened in the UK, the case would have to be thrown out. The consular officers also demanded an urgent visit to see me and I briefed them clearly on the train of events. I possess a copy of an FCO memo acquired under an FCI request which recorded these facts and events. **(Date of broadcast: 27 August 2013, filmed on 26 August)**

Over the following year, a number of other prisoners in China were subjected to this practice, as the Xi Jinping regime ratcheted up its human rights violations.

In July 2014, I and my wife were subjected to this abuse yet again, albeit it not in a cage this time. On this occasion, the FC was staged in a meeting room within the detention centre and a woman claiming to be a reporter from CCTV asked most of the questions, while the PSB stood back. It was clear to me she was reading a question list that could only have come from the PSB because it contained personal information about me and my business which I had not seen or approved, and was deliberately erroneous and misleading. It contained elements from my PSB interrogation sessions. This second incident occurred soon after we were indicted but before we had been tried or convicted for any crime. **(Date of broadcast: 14 July 2014, filmed on 12 July)**

In both involuntary incidents, I was pressured into “co-operating” under threat of not being released and of facing a lengthy sentence. On both occasions the PSB officers said they were acting on orders from their superiors.

Both incidents were timed to counter a wave of international media coverage favourable to me and my wife. The FCs were being used by the authorities for propaganda purposes to influence the Chinese public and to indicate what would happen to us: we would be convicted, even though we had not yet been tried.

After our release in June 2015 I was in a damaged state of physical and mental health as a result of my conditions of wrongful incarceration and the withholding of necessary medical treatment. I was heavily traumatised, and I was diagnosed with cancer, and underwent two years of treatment. I also underwent treatment for damaged joints and both shoulders were partially disabled for a year. I began PTSD treatment which remains ongoing to this day. For these reasons I was unable to fight much of a campaign for redress and exoneration for quite a long time after my release

However, in 2018 I became aware of UK broadcasting law and the role of Ofcom as regulator and enforcer. I concluded this was one legal mechanism where I had solid grounds to complain of legal violations against me by an organ of the Chinese Communist Party within the UK. Because my FCs had been broadcast in the UK by CCTV and CGTN, I filed a complaint with Ofcom citing detailed violations of UK broadcasting law mostly pertaining to violations of fairness and privacy as well as the deliberate twisting and distortion of facts, along with outright lies.

Although it announced an investigation, to this day Ofcom has failed to rule on this complaint. According to two former Ofcom directors I have heard from, this delay is highly irregular. My complaint has triggered a number of similar complaints from other victims of FC, as well as complaints against the Chinese broadcasters on other matters such as untruthful coverage of Hong Kong and Xinjiang. I believe there are now approximately 20 complaints in Ofcom’s hands against Chinese state television. In addition, an NGO has submitted an open letter to Ofcom complaining that Chinese state TV should never have been granted licences to broadcast in the UK in the first place, because they are owned and controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, and ownership by a political party is proscribed under the UK broadcasting law. Ofcom has thus far failed to rule on any of these China complaints at all.

Over the past year, US authorities, recognising similar violations by Chinese broadcasters there, have forced them to register as foreign government agents under the FARA act, and have in addition classified their offices as foreign government missions, under a law originally conceived to combat Nazi influence in the 1930s. In addition, Magnitsky-style complaints have been filed against CCTV/CGTN officials in the US and Canada for their role in overseeing TV’s collusion with the police in extracting FCs.

In January 2020, I filed a new complaint myself, after CGTN broadcast a vicious and libelous half-hour-long attack (on 29 Dec 2019) on me personally over my journalism for the Sunday Times on Chinese prison labour, containing many lies, distortions and insults. That complaint also remains pending with scant response thus far from Ofcom, merely an acknowledgment of receipt.

To be clear, Ofcom has failed to adhere to its own procedures, timelines and deadlines in its handling of my complaints, and has failed to protect the British public against such illegal broadcasts. There is now much speculation in public circles that Ofcom is being leaned upon by pro-Beijing elements within the UK government, compromising Ofcom's independence and impartiality and its role as a protector of ethical and legal broadcasting. We need to see a clear demonstration that Ofcom is faithful to its creed and compliant with its duties and UK law without bending to political interference and influence.

== Please refer to copies of my complaints to Ofcom, appended here as PDF files.

== Please refer to two reports by the NGO Safeguard Defenders which documenting my case: *Scripted and Staged*, 2018; *Trial by Media*, 2018

Suggestions

- Committee should condemn CCTV/CGTN for its involvement in these human rights abuses and for broadcasting such illegal content in the UK, and should recommend these outlets be stripped of their UK licences.
- Committee should urge Ofcom to comply with its own regulations and UK law.
- Committee should interview Ofcom about its delay in processing China complaints.
- Committee should gather any evidence of pressure or manipulation exerted on Ofcom.
- Committee should bring Ofcom's deficient handling of China complaints to parliament and to the public's attention.
- We need to see parliamentary committee scrutiny and questions placed to government on the floor of parliament.

2. Forced Prison Labour

During my wrongful captivity in Shanghai (July 2013 to June 2015), I was able to witness some aspects of the prison labour system in practice in that period, chiefly among foreign prisoners.

== Please refer to my article in FT Weekend 18 Feb 2018 for background on my case, appended here in PDF form and to the online version at <https://www.ft.com/content/db8b9e36-1119-11e8-940e-08320fc2a277>

During the four years or so after my 9 June 2015 release, I have tracked some of the changes in the evolving prison regime as it hardened up under the rule of President Xi Jinping. I did this by developing a small 'alumni circle' of former and current Qingpu Prison inmates to gather intelligence from them. This included:

- contacting former prisoners who were already released before me (some who I got to know in Qingpu, and some who I got to know afterwards);
- writing under alias via consulates to several prisoners who remained in the prison after my own release and receiving letters back from them;

- gathering info about new releases who I could contact, even prisoners who I had not known.

I have thus obtained a rare insider's perspective on some aspects of prison life there.

I was held in two institutions. From 10 July 2013 to 4 Sept 2014 I was held in the Shanghai Municipal (Number 1) Detention Centre (上海市第一看守所) which was predominantly for pre-trial detainees. During that period I witnessed no compulsory manufacturing labour taking place there. Officers told me it had been abolished just a few years earlier. The only prison labour I saw there was food-serving and corridor-cleaning performed by convicted prisoners on short sentences.

From 4 Sept 2014 to 4 June 2015 I was held in Qingpu Prison (青浦监狱) in the Shanghai suburbs, which currently holds more than 5,000 prisoners. Within Qingpu Prison, there is a dedicated cell block for foreign male prisoners. Among the many prisons in Shanghai, Qingpu was the only convict prison holding male foreign prisoners in the Shanghai area. The prison is divided into "brigades", namely cell blocks, and the foreign prisoners form Brigade 8 (8 队). That brigade contained about 120 or so foreign citizens when I was there. A further 30 or so foreign citizens were held in 8 Brigade's sub-brigade (份部 or 分队), mostly prisoners on short sentences or nearing the end of a long sentence. About 150 foreigners were held in Qingpu at that time. (The total now is ca. 250 plus, according to more recently released prisoners.) I was one of three British prisoners there during my time in captivity.

Prisoners from Chinese brigades/cell blocks had labour arrangements different from the foreign prisoners in 8 Brigade. Chinese prisoners worked in a full-fledged classic blue-roofed factory which was a separate building on the prison's campus. It was not within sight of Brigade 8's building but every morning at 7am I saw thousands of prisoners from Chinese cell blocks march in military formation through the campus to the factory. I saw them return and head for their cell blocks around 7pm. This means they were out of their cells for 12 hours of the day to work in the factory, including marching time. I was never able to visit the factory where they worked. But in my occasional interactions with some Chinese prisoners, I was told they made apparel for Adidas and Reebok and electronic components for companies whose names I did not learn.

The prison authorities did not want foreign prisoners to see the prison factory, so they, made them work inside their cell block in a work room that doubled up as a dining room and assembly room and euphemistically called the "activity room" (活动室). Every prisoner was expected to work in some shape or form, but the manufacturing work was not compulsory at that time. The work earned some remission points in theory, as well as a very small wage. It was possible to opt out and pursue other approved activity such as joining the work teams cleaning communal areas (corridors, staircases, windows, shower room, offices, etc), food serving at meal times, teaching prescribed classes to officers and other prisoners, etc. Perhaps a half or more of the foreign prisoners in main Brigade 8 joined in the manufacturing labour for circa 8 hours per day. They needed the pocket money. They could earn up to about 100-120 yuan per month if they worked full-time. They used the money on the prison shopping system to buy items such as toiletries, underwear, stationery, stamps, small snacks and telephone call credit. Some prisoners had money in their prison accounts remitted from their families and did not need to earn money, so some did not work and were not forced to at this time.

In Brigade 8's work room, I saw the prisoners work on products for a mixture of domestic and foreign brands. I do not remember the names of the Chinese brands, but the foreign brands that I remember seeing were 3M, C&A and H&M, and I have confirmed this with other released inmates. My fellow prisoners at that time told me they had also worked on products for Adidas. The work was mostly the assemblage of packaging components for the brands, such as plastic tag holders or tags for shop displays. Sometimes, display rack components were also assembled. The work was simple, monotonous and entirely manual. No machinery was used. Materials would be brought in from a store room, worked on, packed into boxes and shipped out again. Sometimes the shipping boxes had brand names on them, and addresses printed on the boxes.

A number of prison officers had duties related to this commercial enterprise. Some officers were responsible for bringing in orders from companies outside the factory; others oversaw production work. They received bonuses for this work. There were clearly some commercial deadlines evidenced by time pressure to complete certain orders. The prisoners were given piecework targets, 100 of this, 1,000 of that, etc, and their work was measured not only in time spent on the job but in the number of items made undamaged.

I did not participate in this manufacturing labour. I boycotted it and insisted on studying instead. My "studying" was in fact reading. I got away with that on grounds of ill health and short sentence. I was a rebellious prisoner, always refusing to write the demanded thought reports and confessions to crime. And anyway, they were not keen on me knowing too much about the manufacturing operation, because of my 20-year background in journalism in my first career.

From my discreet correspondence with prisoners and former prisoners over the past few years, I gleaned some information about the brands of products that Brigade 8 was handling after my own release. And in December 2019, I obtained a windfall of unexpected information which confirmed some of the brand names, resulting in a series of exclusive reports by me for the Sunday Times around last Christmas. Most of the product handled was packaging (such as bags) of some sort or another, or the insertion of goods (such as sticky notes) into packages.

In brief, they included gift bags for Disney, Zara, Voila, Bobeau and Greenbrier, insulation cards for 3M, coloured sticky notes for Paperzone, Christmas gift tags and Christmas cards for Tesco, and oatmeal for Quaker.

The Tesco work was confirmed when a six-year-old London girl (Florence Widdicombe) found a message written in a Christmas card in a Tesco box set and showed it to her father. A prisoner in Qingpu had secretly written a plea for help inside the card, alleging the prisoners were being forced into manufacturing labour against their will and asking the finder to bring the message to the media via me personally. I was named in the message, which suggested the author/prisoner must have known me when I was a prisoner in Qingpu. The London girl's father, a civil servant (Ben Widdicombe) working in the criminal justice field, researched my name, found me and contacted me. He showed me the note and I recognised the handwriting as that of a former cellmate. I then tracked down a number of recently released prisoners on five continents, interviewed them remotely and not only confirmed that the prisoners were packaging Tesco

greeting cards into box sets but also learned they had been packing oat sachets for Quaker, and packaging products for a number of other well-known international brands.

I learned from ex prisoners that two Nigerian prisoners in Qingpu had colluded to write similar messages into a total of ten Tesco Christmas cards packed in ten different box sets. One of the authors had left Qingpu in October 2019. I traced him in Nigeria and spoke to him and he admitted to writing six of the cards, while four were written by a prisoner who is still in Qingpu, whose handwriting I had recognised. Other released prisoners who I spoke to confirmed this story. As far as I know, only one of the ten messages has surfaced publicly in this way to date.

After the Sunday Times ran the stories, I learned from sources in the prison that Qingpu halted all prison labour for two weeks and issued video clips to media showing prisoners enjoying Christmas along with on-camera denials by one or two prisoners that they were forced to work.

Tesco investigated independently and fired the Chinese company Yunguang who was its greeting card printer. Publicly, through the Chinese media, Yunguang denied using prison labor to package the cards but there were too many witnesses cited in my reports, four of whom have signed contingency witness statements for me. Disney also investigated and fired the same manufacturer after conducting its own investigation.

Given my second career background of 15 years as a due diligence and anti-fraud consultant for multinationals in China, I believe that Yunguang, or a packaging company working for it, had a commercial relationship with the prison that evaded identification during audit. All prisons in China conduct forced prison labour operations engaged in for-profit commercial manufacturing and have their own registered commercial entities – i.e. companies for these transactions. Due to Chinese secrecy laws, it is high impossible for brand owners and due diligence specialists to drill to the bottom of the supply chain to identify prison labour involvement in manufacturing processes. This applies not only to the production of genuine product but also to counterfeit product.

== Please refer to my Sunday Times reports on prison labour, dated 22 Dec 2019, 29 Dec 2019, and 19 Jan 2020, attached here in PDF form and .available at the following links subject to paywall restrictions:

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tesco-charity-cards-packed-by-chinas-prison-slaves-v9psp9fqx>

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sawdust-burgers-and-borscht-peter-humphreys-christmas-in-a-chinese-prison-7q0rnsrnk>

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-best-way-to-help-is-to-buy-your-cards-direct-from-charities-sw3ts8p3z>

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tesco-christmas-card-prisoners-a-note-from-hell-that-exposed-slave-labour-85js2fkgc>

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/revealed-prisoners-who-sent-tesco-cards-from-chinese-jail-mr8g98nzv>

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/letters-to-the-editor-firms-exploiting-slaves-will-be-found-out-9bdbnr8xk>

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/chinas-prison-slaves-forced-to-pack-quaker-oats-mrbc8sgm#>

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tesco-cuts-ties-with-chinese-card-factory-r25s2hkjr>

This message in a bottle technique used by the Qingpu prisoners to blow the whistle in a plea for help was not unprecedented. In a similar case in 2012, an American woman found an SOS letter inside a box of Halloween decorations she had bought from Wal-Mart in Seattle. It was later confirmed to be a genuine cry for help from a prisoner in the notorious Masanjia labour camp.

One very important thing that I learned from my recent investigation was the extent of change in the life of foreign prisoners in Qingpu since my own June 2015 release from there. In my time, manufacturing labour was optional, although it was clear that the officers involved in it wanted to expand it and efforts were already beginning to harden up prison life, before I left. Over the past four years they gradually pressured more and more foreign prisoners to join in. Then, just over a year ago, it was made mandatory for every foreign prisoner to participate. The prison has accomplished this through various methods of leverage and coercion, including:

- Imposing the same 5-grade system as applied to Chinese prisoners
- Placing foreign prisoners on the lowest grade (E) if they are non-compliant
- This means rescinding “privileges” that they previously enjoyed if they won’t work
- Prisoners are now forced to work their way up the grade ladder to regain privileges
- Blocking prisoner access to money remitted to them by their families.
- Seizing incoming remittances to go towards unpaid fines that were part of sentence
- Stripping prisoners of phone call rights supposedly guaranteed by international law
- Blocking prisoners’ inbound and outbound correspondence (ditto)
- Withholding reading material brought in at consular visits
- Capping prisoners’ spending on the prison shopping system
- Disallowing purchases of extra food or snacks on the prison shopping system
- No merit points for prisoners who did not comply (meaning no sentence reduction)
- Canceling previously earned sentence reductions if a prisoner turns non-compliant
- Sending defiant prisoners who refuse to work to solitary confinement

The aim has been to put prisoners in a position where they could only obtain money if they worked on the manufacturing projects, and only obtain merit points for sentence reductions if they worked. My sources suggest the prison has been mostly successful except with prisoners serving very short sentences who are not eligible for sentence reductions anyway.

Not all prison labour in the world amounts to a human rights abuse. Prison labour is implemented in many countries. In some countries, paid work in prison is actually viewed as a privilege. It may be communal chores such as cleaning, cooking, or it may be therapeutic such as craft work, or it may be unpaid hard labour for serious offenders such as the classic breaking of rocks.

But what is wrong here is that the Chinese prison is operating as a commercial enterprise and forcing prisoners to work on commercial manufacturing for a pittance without the option of non-participation. The prison makes a good profit. The prisoner makes very little that he can save for his eventual “new life”. The result is resentment, not personal reform.

Every Chinese prison operates this system to fund its operations. I call it prisonomics. For the prison administrations it has become an economic imperative to make prisoners work in this profitable enterprise. Chinese prisons are thus disincentivised to facilitate a prisoner’s reform and sentence reduction. Quite the opposite, Chinese prisons are incentivised to make the prisoners serve as long as possible in order to hang on to their labour.

Suggestions

- Committee should condemn China’s practice of coerced manufacturing labour which has turned the Chinese prison system into a commercial enterprise.
- Committee should question the UK government about its knowledge of these coercive prison labour practices in China.
- Committee should urge the UK government to keep this issue on its list of PRC human rights concerns in relation to China.
- Committee should question FCO and relevant NGOs about their knowledge of forced labour in Chinese prisons, including but not limited to any known cases of UK citizens.
- Committee should urge UK consulates throughout China to gather and release information on these issues.
- Committee should urge UK consular officials to question prisoners about these issues during consular visits, and to question prison officers about these issues.
- UK government should raise its concern to PRC government and prison authorities over coercive labour practices in Chinese prisons and express disapproval.
- Committee should enquire with Tesco about the recent Christmas card scandal.

- Peter Humphrey