

Network of Concerned Historians				NCH
Campaigns				
Year original	Year follow-up	Circular	Country	Name
2025		112	China	Gao Zhen

Dear colleagues,

The 2018 Heroes and Martyrs’ Protection Law in China is a so-called punitive memory law: a vaguely worded law prohibiting and punishing views of the past that question the official historical narrative.

Amnesty International is organizing an Urgent Action for U.S.-based artist Gao Zhen, who was detained for “slandering China’s heroes and martyrs” for employing satirical humor to shed light on the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and criticizing former Chinese leader Mao Zedong (in office 1949–1976).

Please urgently write to the Chinese authorities in your own words or using the model letter below. Please remember to do so in your professional capacity.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/8821/2024/en/>

CHINA: PROMINENT ARTIST ARRESTED FOR HIS WORK: GAO ZHEN

First Urgent Action (UA) — 106/24 Index: ASA 17/8821/2024 — China — Date: 5 December 2024

Prominent Artist Arrested For His Work

On 26 August 2024, Gao Zhen, a prominent Chinese artist, was detained by authorities while traveling in China with his wife and son. Gao is charged with "slandering China’s heroes and martyrs," a crime punishable by up to three years in prison. His formal arrest has been approved, and his wife and child

have been prevented from leaving China. Chinese authorities must release Gao Zhen immediately and unconditionally, and cease using this and other laws to stifle creative expression.

Take Action: Write an Appeal in Your Own Words or Use This Model Letter

Director Pan Jiqiang,

Sanhe Public Security Bureau in Langfang City, Hebei Province
No.3, Dingsheng West Street, Sanhe City, Langfang, Hebei Province,
065200, People's Republic of China

Copy to: Embassy of the People's Republic of China in [your country]

Dear **Director Pan,**

I am writing to express my grave concern for artist Gao Zhen (高斌), who is currently detained at Sanhe City Detention Center on charges of 'slandering China's heroes and martyrs' (侵害英雄烈士名誉荣誉罪) — a crime punishable by up to three years in prison. His formal arrest has been approved, but these charges are baseless; he has merely exercised his right to freedom of expression, especially artistic expression and creation.

My distress is heightened by concerns that Gao's wife and their 6-year-old son, a United States citizen, were barred from leaving China when they attempted to return to New York following Gao's detention in August 2024. Gao's wife was subsequently warned by police not to speak to the media about her husband's detention.

I fear that Gao Zhen's case may signal a more robust use by authorities of the vague crime of "slandering China's heroes and martyrs" to target freedom of artistic expression and creation. Gao and his brother's works, most of which were made over a decade ago and presented bold critiques of the Cultural Revolution and former Chinese leader Mao Zedong, are reported to be the sole basis for his arrest. It is furthermore concerning that this crime seems to run contrary to protections for freedom of speech set out in China's Constitution.

Given the critical role that artists play in facilitating discussion in society, in shaping historical memory and in inspiring new ideas and work, legal efforts to suppress artists and artistic expression

are deeply concerning. No one should be punished solely for their creative work or for expressing their personal views.

I urge you to:

- **Immediately and unconditionally release Gao Zhen;**
- **Pending his release, ensure that Gao Zhen has regular, unrestricted access to his family and lawyers, and is not subject to torture or other ill-treatment;**
- **Stop harassing and threatening his family and ensure that they can enter and leave China freely**
- **Ensure that Chinese artists can express their views without fear of persecution or arbitrary detention.**

Yours sincerely,

[Name, profession, address]

Additional Information

Gao Zhen, 68 years old, is a prominent artist in contemporary Chinese art and a member of the renowned Gao Brothers duo. Since the 1980s, the Gao Brothers have employed satirical humor to shed light on the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution, consistently challenging the limits of social commentary. Their work offers a sharp critique of the Cultural Revolution and former Chinese leader Mao Zedong, exposing the extent of the authoritarian practices employed during Mao's regime. These subjects remain deeply sensitive and taboo in contemporary China.

On 26 August 2024, Gao was detained while traveling in China with his wife and son. Around 30 police officers raided his studio in Yanjiao, a town in Sanhe City, Hebei province. The authorities photographed his artworks, confiscated and sealed several sculptures—most of which were created over a decade ago—before sealing the studio.

The following day, Gao's wife was informed by the Sanhe City Public Security Bureau of his detention. He has since been held at the Sanhe City Detention Center on charges of "slandering China's heroes and martyrs," a crime punishable by up to three years in prison. This crime stems from a 2018 Law on the Protection of Heroes and Martyrs, which, in an article marking its adoption, state media claimed aims to "promote patriotism and socialist core values" and was necessary in light of a "string of cases" purported to slander or denigrate heroes in the name of, for example, academic

freedom. As with many laws in China, the vague nature of the law, lack of definitions, and latitude provided to security and judicial officials in interpreting its application make it easy to abuse this law to restrict legitimate forms of opinion and expression.

Gao and his wife are Chinese citizens; since 2011, Gao has been a U.S. permanent resident. Their 6-year-old son is a U.S. citizen and attended school in New York, where the family moved in 2022.

Preferred Language to Address Director Pan: English or Chinese

You can also write in your own language.

Please Take Action As Soon As Possible Until: 30 March 2025

Please check with the Network of Concerned Historians if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

Name and Pronoun: Gao Zhen (he/him/his)

Other sources about Gao Zhen:

- Yan Zhuang & Zixu Wang, "[Gao Zhen, Artist Who Critiqued the Cultural Revolution, Is Detained in China](#)," *New York Times* (2 September 2024).
- Human Rights Watch, [World Report 2025: Events of 2024](#) (Washington: HRW, 2025), 106.