Housing Activists Sentenced for “Picking Quarrels”

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Housing rights activists Jia Lingmin and Liu Diwei were both given prison sentences today in Zhengzhou, Henan. Jia will serve four years in prison, and Liu one and a half. Both Jia and Liu lost their homes to [forced demolition](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/forced-demolitions/) and have since become advocates for themselves and others in their situation. Both were detained in May 2014, and both are now convicted of “[picking quarrels and provoking troubles](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/07/picking-quarrels-charge-used-to-cast-wider-net-online/),” a blanket charge increasingly used against activists and lawyers. RFA reports that [they will appeal](http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/renquanfazhi/yf2-11052015100536.html) their sentences.

Jia and Liu are among the “[Zhengzhou Twelve](http://chinachange.org/2014/06/26/the-zhengzhou-twelve/),” activists and lawyers detained in the provincial capital of Henan between May and June 2014. Yaxue Cao of China Change wrote about the spate of detentions last year:

At first, the arrests in Zhengzhou looked like part of the June 4th spasm, but now it looks increasingly ominous. Beijing and Guangzhou notwithstanding, Zhengzhou has been one of the few second-tier cities in China where citizens’ activities have thrived, and the twelve who have been detained are some of the core members of the citizen circle in Zhengzhou.

Jia Lingmin who was arrested along with Liu Diwei on May 8 was a school teacher-turned-activist. Over the last few years since 2009, she has undergone a transformation from a victim of forced demolition to a petitioner to a rights activist in Zhengzhou. She has devoted herself to help other victims of forced demolitions to defend their rights. She gave lectures and made videos to teach people how to use the law to defend themselves and how to fight abusive police power. For her activism, she has suffered the familiar spectrum of abuses from kidnapping to physical abuse, and from illegal detention to criminal detention this time around. She was helping a demolition victim to call 110  (China’s 911) when she was seized by police on May 7th.

[Chen Baocheng](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/08/guangdong-activist-held-on-subversion-charges/#ChenBaocheng), a reporter for Caixin who was himself detained at a house demolition protest two years ago, posted on Weibo that Jia is asking for an even harsher sentence:

Jia Lingmin on her four-year sentence: The Law Is Already Dead! You should sentence me to death!} When Teacher Jia Lingmin’s four-year prison sentence was announced today, she jeered, “You’re going too easy on me. You should sentence me to death!” Later, when the judge asked if she would appeal, she shouted, “Yes! I demand the death penalty! The law is already dead, so there’s no need for me to live!” (November 5, 2015)

Chen’s Weibo followers are equally enraged by the verdict as is Jia herself. “Whoever put this accusation on Jia Lingmin’s head is the real criminal!” writes *Gudeqiubai-Nankaixiangyu* *WangFuLüshi* muses, “In the end, an advocate for the law is sentenced by manipulators of the law.” CDT Chinese has collected more comments [here](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2015/11/%E7%BD%91%E6%9B%9D%E8%B4%BE%E7%81%B5%E6%95%8F%E4%B8%80%E5%AE%A1%E8%A2%AB%E5%88%A4%E5%9B%9B%E5%B9%B4-%E5%88%98%E5%9C%B0%E4%BC%9F%E4%B8%80%E5%B9%B4%E5%8D%8A/).

When Jia and Liu first went on trial on April 27, 2015, traffic was blocked around the courthouse. Their lawyers had slept outside in tents the night before, as outsiders were barred from checking in to Gongyi’s hotel. The court date was set just two weeks before, and Jia’s original lawyers were unable to attend, forcing her to find new representation in court. The judge objected to one of her new lawyers, Xue Rongmin, on the grounds that his application to represent Jia required 15 days for approval. Jia then dismissed both of her lawyers, ending the trial thirty minutes after it began. Jia did this “[not because she didn’t trust her lawyers, but to demonstrate her dissatisfaction](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2015/05/%E5%A4%A7%E6%A1%88%EF%BD%9C%E6%8B%86%E8%BF%81%E6%99%AE%E6%B3%95%E8%80%85%E8%B4%BE%E7%81%B5%E6%95%8F%EF%BC%8C%E4%BA%89%E8%AE%AE%E5%9B%9B%E5%AE%97%E7%BD%AA/)” with the proceedings, explained Zhu Xiaoding, her other lawyer. Dismissing defense lawyers has become [a common tactic to derail trials seen as unfair](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/06/subversion-incitement-trial-derailed-by-lawyers-dismissal/).

The space for rights advocacy in China has markedly constricted this year. [Five feminist activists were detained right before International Women’s Day](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/04/activists-describe-detention-interrogation-techniques/), while scores of lawyers and activists were questioned or detained in a [“Black Friday” crackdown](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/08/new-accounts-detail-detentions-in-rights-lawyer-crackdown/) in June.