

HARRY'S WAR

by Sarah Henry
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Harry Wu, a Prisoner in Chinese Labor Camps for 19 Years, is Now Your Basic American Suburbanite and an All-Around Pain in the You-Know-What for China

Human-rights activist Harry Wu--dapper in a smartly cut gray suit, blue patterned tie and white business shirt, his black hair neatly slicked down--strolls onto the set of "The Tonight Show." A youthful 59, he exudes a practiced nonchalance that's given away by his closed-mouth smile. Wu, who spent 19 years in China's forced-labor camps, is an unlikely candidate for a Jay Leno laugh fest. On this October evening, he's here to talk about his most recent ordeal: 66 days of imprisonment in the People's Republic for allegedly spying and stealing state secrets.

Leno, Wu confides later, was "very uncertain" about inviting him. After all, what's there to wisecrack about in Wu's detention by Chinese authorities in a remote border area? Or his subsequent confession, trial and 15-year jail sentence before he was expelled in August 1995? Leno telegraphs his concern to the audience by noting--twice--that Wu is "a different kind of guest for us."

Wu, though, is clearly pleased with himself. And why not? As China's most famous expatriate dissident, he has faced far greater challenges than proving he's worthy of a spot on late-night TV. He's charming, and he's skilled at working the Western press, so it's not surprising that he scores second billing behind Bette Midler. Dubbed "a genuine American hero" by Leno, Wu acknowledges the audience, greets Midler and takes Leno by surprise when he ad-libs: "Jay, I think you made a mistake--you invited a criminal to your show." Leno flashes back: "It could have been Joey Buttafuoco, but we'd rather have you."

Still, the Leno-Wu patter unfolds awkwardly. Wu's fractured, strongly accented English can be hard to grasp; Leno winds up repeating Wu's comments for clarity. The talk-show host seems relieved when Wu offers up a few bars of "Love Me Tender," the Elvis number he sang to himself while he was jailed. He warbles good-naturedly. Leno cackles, and the crowd eats it up. Now, with captive audience in tow, Wu turns the mood sober. He explains for the umpteenth time why he continues to risk his life by returning to China. "I cannot turn my back to my homeland," Wu says in his raspy voice. "My parents' graveyard, my former inmates' graveyards {are} over there. That piece of land is full of my blood and tears."

It would be difficult to watch Harry Wu in action for even five minutes and not grasp what drives him. An undeniable symbol of a life nearly destroyed by communism, he's the most ubiquitous China basher in the United States. Wu is on a one-man crusade to serve as a voice for the millions of Chinese who have suffered since 1949 under that country's totalitarian regime.

In the decade since he arrived in this country, Wu has proven to be a man of many public faces. He's part politically connected activist on Capitol Hill, part professor guest-lecturing at college campuses, part press-savvy dissident whose China horror stories--the selling of executed prisoners' organs, the export of prison labor products, public executions--are designed to maximize outrage here and abroad. But Wu is also a haunted figure awash in survivor's guilt, a loner who has few friends outside Sinophile circles, whose single-mindedness has alienated even some of his strongest supporters.

"I'm nowhere near as noble as a Buddhist monk who sets himself on fire in the public square to protest an injustice," declares Wu in his account of his most recent run-ins with the Chinese government, written with co-author George Vecsey. "I'm a secular man . . . with no streak of the martyr." Instead, Wu likes to call himself a "troublemaker," a tag he's also chosen for the title of his latest memoir, published by Times Books earlier this month.

His detractors wouldn't disagree. Wu's troubles last year brought front-page attention to the then-little-known activist, turning him into a global cause celebre. It also wreaked havoc on America's already tense relationship with China and almost scotched Hillary Rodham Clinton's attendance at the U.N.-sponsored Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. At a time when the People's Republic has replaced the former Soviet Union as the stickiest foreign policy wicket for the United States, Wu insists on inserting himself into the thick of the China crisis du jour, mouthing off, as he does, on extremely touchy subjects such as trade, arms proliferation and, of course, human-rights abuses.

Now, more than a year after his release from China, a backlash is brewing against Wu in his adopted country. Critics--and they're not hard to find--include Sino-U.S. policy wonks, overseas Chinese university students and Chinese American businessmen. They charge that Wu is a cowboy who has fashioned a career out of headline-grabbing pronouncements, and that he chooses to ignore reforms in his homeland.

He is a zealot, says James Feinerman, a professor of Chinese law at Georgetown University, who has testified at congressional hearings with Wu. "At the same time, he's a heroic individual. But he's got that persecution complex, that victim/martyr thing, going on at so many different levels."

Wu's credibility and tactics also are questioned by fellow human-rights campaigners. "I think he exaggerates tremendously in terms of the importance and the purpose of the labor camps," says Ty Hu, executive director of the China Democracy Fund, a New Haven, Conn.-based group that helps students from the 1989 pro-democracy protests in China. Hu says he understands why. "If you don't do that, your whole idea is less valuable."

Wu shrugs off such attacks. He says he is just doing what he's done since he came to the United States 11 years ago. And neither his recent celebrity nor the increasing outspokenness of skeptics will change that. As he says to Leno during their late-night chat: "I have to expose the ugly truth about communism."

Harry Wu is running late for a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing in July. He hustles over to the Hill in a cab. Crammed in with him are his star witnesses for the hearing: two chain-smoking dissidents from China's remote northwestern Xinjiang province, home to a Turkic Muslim minority group called the Uighurs. The province, an exile for political prisoners and others out of step with Beijing, has long served as China's Siberia.

The hearing is the culmination of a 10-month campaign Wu has waged against the World Bank. In October, 1995, he released a report that accused the bank of funding an irrigation project--to the tune of \$125 million--that uses prison labor and is managed by a quasi-military operation called the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC). "I have brought today only some official Chinese documents of the XPCC," says Wu, dressed in a power suit and suspenders, as he waves a sheaf of papers in the air. "And all of these documents brag of the money coming from the World Bank since 1985, and these documents also talk about the {forced-labor} production, talk about the forced-exile prisoners . . . and the military activities of the XPCC."

His delivery is dynamic, even melodramatic; he alternately thumps the table with his fist for emphasis or whispers conspiratorially. An old hand at testifying, Wu knows the power of a first-hand account. So after setting the stage, he turns the microphone over to the Uighurs. Wearing a traditional hand-stitched cap called a doppa, Abulajiang Baret, an ex-deputy commander with the corps, leaves little room for doubt about what he believes is the corps' true nature. "The XPCC is a political, military and economic organization used by the Chinese Communist authorities to exercise their control over the millions of people making up the ethnic minorities in Xinjiang," Baret says through a Uighur interpreter, who chokes with emotion during the translation.

Wu is reticent about saying just how he found his witnesses or the secret Chinese government documents. He will only divulge that after a June trip to Turkey and Germany to meet with the Uighurs, he persuaded them to come to the States to testify. In keeping with his cloak-and-dagger manner, Wu declines to say where they are staying. Every few days, the three of them change hotels as a "security measure" and, in what seems an almost B-spy-movie display of paranoia, Wu takes to furtively checking behind doors before answering questions.

Chinese officials have found out about the hearing, according to Wu, and have grilled Baret's wife, who remains in Xinjiang. They have told her to divorce him or lose her job. Baret says he has received a fax from his wife warning him not to come back, that his children will be OK. "She is saying it's better to have a distant, alive father," an interpreter explained after the hearing, "than a dead father at home."

For much of the hearing, the only senator in attendance is Republican Chairman Jesse Helms of North Carolina. "Harry, and I am going to be informal with you because everybody in this room knows that you and I are longtime friends," Helms says, "if freedom ever comes to mainland China, as they call it, I hope they will consider a statue on Tiananmen Square to Harry Wu."

"The plain fact is that {the bank} just ignored the information," Helms says later, referring to documents on the corps' militia and prison links. "That is the impression I got. Do you agree with that, Mr. Wu?" Wu agrees.

What's going on during the hearing is more than a mutual admiration session. Wu's claim that the World Bank funded slave labor is one of his most sensational--and most contested. He's not just going after his former torturers but an organization headquartered in Washington whose single largest supporter is the United States.

Bank officials, who deny the charges, are now among Wu's most vocal detractors. They say he got his facts wrong. The bank, which offers low-interest loans to alleviate poverty in developing countries, only does business with the civilian side of the corps, according to bank staffers, who discount the XPCC's continued use of military terms as a historical throwback.

As a testament to Wu's clout, however, immediately after he publicized his allegations, the bank launched an internal investigation. "Harry Wu is a major player, and we took his words seriously," bank spokesman Graham Barrett said at the time. Last December the bank announced the results of a six-week inquiry. "There was no evidence that {the corps was} persecuting minorities, supporting prison expenses or using prison labor," says Lauren Ptito, an East Asia spokeswoman for the bank. "{Wu} seizes on allegations and then doesn't check them out carefully. His contentions are tenuous at best."

Still, the bank is backpedaling on its relationship with the corps. "To avoid even the appearance of a link to forced labor," a bank press release states, the bank won't contract with the corps on future projects until the XPCC separates "its commercial and civilian activities" from its "prison management."

For now, at least, the United States is siding with the bank. Testifying on behalf of the Treasury Department, Assistant Secretary for International Affairs David Lipton tells the committee that "the bank mounted a good-faith investigation effort, and we have accepted those findings." At the hearing, Wu barely conceals his contempt: "It is a disgrace that the World Bank not only supports this organization but also defends it to the United States government and the world public."

For Wu, the hearing is just the latest in a series of embarrassing disclosures about China that he's broadcast via Congress. Over the past six years, Wu has carefully cultivated his Washington connections. (Notably absent among his coterie of congressional friends is California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, a leading proponent for "engaging" with the Chinese.) His supporters bridge the ideological gap from Helms to Nancy Pelosi, the liberal House Democrat from San Francisco. "Harry Wu is very well respected in Congress because he knows of what he speaks," Pelosi says. "His work is critically important because it's not just generalizations about repression in China, it's well-documented evidence."

Like Pelosi, Wu supports a hard-line approach when it comes to doing business with China because of that country's human-rights record. He favors boycotts against companies that traffic in forced-labor products, which are illegal in the United States, and backs revoking China's most-favored-nation status, a trade privilege that reduces tariffs on goods exported to the States. "Economic sanctions is a peaceful measure," he argues. "{It} is very effective, used in the past, applied to South Africa, applied to Cuba. Why can't it apply to China?"

Wu answers his own question. "The problem is, people say we have to deal with China because it's an economic giant," he says. "{But} economic giant also means political and military giant.... you cannot cover your eyes with leaves and not see the mountain."

Wu's introduction to American life was hardly auspicious. In 1985, he arrived in San Francisco with \$40 to his name on the strength of an offer of an unpaid visiting-scholar slot at UC Berkeley. For a brief time he bunked with his sister, whom he hadn't seen in 30 years. She made it clear he wasn't welcome. Wu, who had left behind a teaching job and a young wife, took a job in a doughnut shop. Before coming to the States, Wu didn't know what a doughnut was. "I did this for only a few months, but the pungent, burning grease left a lasting impression on me," he writes in "Troublemaker." "To this day, I can never bring myself to touch a doughnut."

Even as Wu tried to immerse himself in an alien culture, he was consumed by a desire to tell his story. John Creger, a high school English teacher, met Wu through a mutual friend in the spring of 1986 when they took a modern Chinese history course at Berkeley. "The three of us embarked on a series of dinners," Creger recalls, "and there were a lot of jokes and lightheartedness. But then Harry began to talk about his past, and another side came out. As these dinners went on, it became clear that this guy had an incredible story. I felt like I was getting to know the Chinese Solzhenitsyn."

Wu's life began uneventfully enough, as one of eight children of a well-to-do Shanghai banker. At an early age he developed a passion for baseball and Western literature. When he was 11, his father sent him to a Catholic school run by Italian Jesuit priests.

"I think the key to understanding him is his Christian upbringing," says Orville Schell, dean of the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, a China expert and a friend. Schell points out Wu's keenly felt sense of justice and his desire to bear witness to atrocities in his birthplace. "Harry himself is not always conscious of this, but it's deeply steeped within him."

Wu attended Beijing College of Geology, where he was singled out by Communist Party members for being bourgeois and, despite his efforts to avoid politics, chastised for criticizing the word of Mao. After a failed attempt to escape from China in 1960, he was labeled a "counterrevolutionary rightist" and condemned to a labor camp, called laogai in Chinese, a penal system of rehabilitation for criminals and political dissidents. He wouldn't be released for 19 years.

Not until then did he discover that his stepmother committed suicide after learning of his fate. "When he started telling me about his mother and her suicide, he began to cry," says Creger, who began to tape record their talks a few months after meeting Wu. "His whole face was soaking wet. He was obviously releasing things he had never talked about."

Creger spent hours listening to his new friend. Wu spoke of how he worked at a dozen labor camps, including a coal mine, a steel plant, a chemical factory and various farms. At one he nearly starved to death; at another he almost died in an accident. He survived "by living like a beast," eating snakes and frogs, stealing food from fellow inmates, lying and fighting.

In 1979, he was released along with other political prisoners as part of Deng Xiaoping's post-Cultural Revolution reforms. He got a job as a geology lecturer, but he had difficulty adapting to life on the outside. "Living in this society, I felt scared, isolated, alone," Wu writes in "Troublemaker." "Everybody knew how to mislead someone, how to pretend he or she was innocent China was a country of survivors."

So he left, but even after coming to America his troubles continued. Wu's second marriage fell apart. (Wu had been married to a fellow camp prisoner.) His second wife, a student, followed Wu to the States in 1986. Before long, she confessed to being in love with someone else. Eking out a living, he struggled to find a way to do the work he wanted to do: exposing China's forced-labor camp system.

Creger remembers a phone call from Wu during this period. "I don't know if I'd quite call {his state} suicidal, but I was worried," Creger says. Wu asked him to promise him something. "He wanted me to remember that I knew Harry Wu. To tell the world who he had been and what he had been through. That moment has always struck me as saying a lot about the degree of his humanity."

In late 1987, Wu's life started to turn around. He interviewed with Ramon Myers, curator of the East Asian collection at Stanford's Hoover Institution; he wound up talking about the laogai for two hours and landing a job at the conservative think tank. "In the beginning I thought it was important to have someone like him shed light on an institution that we didn't know much about," says Myers, who has since cooled toward Wu because of concerns about "whether his work could be accurate and objective." Myers offered Wu a visiting-scholar position and a small amount of funding for research.

Wu soon found that Western audiences were eager to learn about his past and his latest forays into China. In 1991, four months after marrying his third wife, Ching-Lee Chen, he returned to his homeland. Disguising himself in a police uniform and Mao-style suits, he shot undercover footage of forced-labor camps for "60 Minutes" and wrote a cover story on the trip for Newsweek.

The following year he published "Laogai: The Chinese Gulag" (Westview Press), the results of his Hoover-financed research, in which he charges that the penal system rivals Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet gulag "in terms of scope, cruelty and the number of people imprisoned." Says physicist and pro-democracy advocate Fang Lizhi, 60, who wrote the book's foreword: "He is very typical of our generation. I have many friends who were sent to laogai camps. I understand why he hates the system so very much."

In 1994, Wu published a memoir of his prison years, "Bitter Winds" (John Wiley & Sons), and returned to China with a BBC producer--posing as an American academic in what one wag calls his Indiana Jones outfit--for a documentary on forced-labor exports and another on the harvesting of organs from executed prisoners for transplant patients.

Wu was on his fourth undercover excursion to China when he was arrested last year. During his detention, he wasn't tortured or ill-treated, but the guards who supervised him were forbidden to talk to him. That didn't faze Wu. "I told them about the Chicago Bulls, you know, Michael Jordan, and what was going on in the O.J. Simpson trial," Wu explained to a campus crowd a few months ago.

Still, he says, there were many uncertain days before it was clear that the government simply wanted "to save face." Chinese officials questioned his ongoing association with the Hoover Institution, where Wu is an unpaid research fellow. But his interrogators mistook the name. "They say: 'We know who is Hoover,' " Wu recalls. "And they say: 'Hoover is the head of the FBI. Is that correct?' And I say, 'Yes,' and I just laugh."

Four years ago, Wu founded The Laogai Research Foundation. "I want the word laogai to be in every language dictionary in the world," he says at every opportunity. "It is the cornerstone of the Chinese Communist dictatorship {and} the machinery for crushing human beings physically, psychologically and spiritually." The foundation has identified 1,155 laogai camps and estimates that, since 1949, more than 50 million Chinese (currently 8 to 10 million) have endured forced labor. (These are far higher totals than official Chinese figures.) Two years ago the Chinese government outlawed the use of the word laogai in favor of "prison" or "jail."

To help with his work, Wu relies on the support of an assistant, AFL-CIO staffer David Welker, and fellow foundation director Jeff Fiedler, secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO's Food and Allied Service Trades Department. The two amount to a makeshift Washington bureau. Wu met Fiedler five years ago when both testified at the same congressional hearing. Fiedler says the AFL-CIO, which has a long history of human rights activities, has given Wu's foundation "a little money." Wu is reluctant to say how much his foundation receives, but according to IRS documents, the organization's revenue for fiscal year 1994 was \$170,888. Most of its funding comes from Wu's speaking engagements and book royalties, he says. His salary is listed as \$20,400.

Wu runs the nonprofit out of his modest split-level tract home in suburban, strip-malled Milpitas, about 50 miles south of San Francisco. His upstairs office is cluttered with work-related paraphernalia: stacks of videotapes of his trips to China, tomes by Chairman Mao Tse-tung, a slew of humanitarian awards and photographs of Wu with Helms, Pelosi, Leno and "60 Minutes" correspondent Ed Bradley. A neighborhood child's crayon drawing adorns a filing cabinet. "See this--this is my favorite," says Wu, dressed in a white T-shirt, faded green shorts and white sport socks. It reads: "Welcome Home, Harry! We're proud of you."

Although Wu became a U.S. citizen in 1994, he says it wasn't until his arrest last year--which sparked an outpouring of protest across the country, including a demand for his release by Congress and a yellow ribbon campaign in Milpitas--that the fact hit home. "When I receive the passport and become an American citizen, my view is just, 'OK, it's easy to travel, maybe in the future a kind of protection,' but I didn't feel I had become part of the United States."

Then Wu glances down at the child's drawing. "They stood up for me because they look at me as a part of them This country has been very proud of me," he says. "I become honored to be a part of them."

After returning to the United States, Wu learned that his years of relative obscurity were over. He attended a welcome-home rally in Los Angeles. "We were rushing through the airport--we were late," remembers L.A. resident Ann Lau, who campaigned for Wu's release, "and a Chinese man stopped him and asked him, 'Are you Wu Hongda {Wu's Chinese name}?' And Harry said, 'Yes.' And the man said, 'I'm so glad you did what you did. I was in the laogai myself for 20 years.' There was a camaraderie between them, like old friends meeting for the first time in years. There was so much emotion in the man's face When Harry talks, he doesn't show much emotion himself. But when I saw him look at this man's face, it was with so much tenderness."

Wu also called on his friends in Congress. "Harry came back and was in Washington to thank people on Capitol Hill almost immediately," says Welker, Wu's 24-year-old assistant, who set up a speaking engagement at Georgetown University. "The place {was} sold out, standing room only, thousands of students and we get out {of the car} and people burst into applause." Two women approached them and asked to have their picture taken with Wu. Welker obliged. And the women, he says, "went running away screaming, squealing, and I was thinking: 'So now we're dealing with a rock star.' "

Why, then, do so many people dislike Harry Wu?

Celebrity has finally brought to his cause the attention he believes it deserves. But with his new-found fame, Wu also has aroused enormous ire--even among allies--for his high-risk escapades and his uncompromising stance. In a view held by a diverse group of detractors, his single-mindedness has crossed over into intolerance for anyone who deviates from his point of view. Echoing the sentiment of others, Georgetown University's James Feinerman says that Wu won't entertain any debate with "people of goodwill" who disagree with him. "He's convinced he's got the exact right position about what should be done when it comes to policy on China and he braces no opposition."

Other critics disparage Wu in harsher terms. "Over time I began to see that {Wu} wanted to bring as much misery and pressure as he could to the Chinese Communist government," says Hoover's Ramon Myers, explaining his change of heart over Wu. "He didn't want to just reformat; he wanted to eradicate it without any real concern for the consequences . . . I view him as a bitter person who vehemently wants revenge.

"We have a worldwide reputation of being anti-communist, but we do our work in a very fair, objective way," Myers continues. "It doesn't help us any when Harry Wu is affiliated with us and he's peddling his stuff in every parliament in the world . . . I regret, frankly, that he was ever at Hoover."

Wu's actions have also created another, more compromised, set of foes, notably some Chinese American businessmen, the most persistent among them from the Silicon Valley. Wu is a "con artist {who} not only exaggerates, he fabricates," says George Koo, director of International Strategic Alliances, a consulting company based in Mountain View. "I am not saying that everything is fine in China. It has many social and political problems. But the most important thing is that what's going on in China today is not what Harry Wu says it is."

Wu and his colleagues dismiss Koo as an apologist for the Chinese government. They point to a speech Koo gave last December at a meeting of U.S. corporate honchos and Chinese military, chemical and manufacturing company leaders. "I should listen to George Koo for two seconds?" snorts foundation director Jeff Fiedler. "George Koo is doing business with the Chinese military and he's criticizing Harry Wu at the same time? Sorry George, shut your mouth."

Koo acknowledges that his firm helps Americans do business in China, and he says he travels regularly to the People's Republic and has extensive contacts there. But he denies that he is a member of the Communist Party or that he is doing the Chinese government's bidding. "Because {Wu} works in clandestine conditions," says Koo, "he assumes dark motives for everyone else."

Lester Lee, a former University of California regent who runs Recortec, a high-tech firm in Sunnyvale, shares Koo's perspective. "It's only the American public that's being fooled by {Wu}," says Lee, who notes that neither he nor his company has financial stakes in China. "The whole Chinese American community, many of them who have suffered during those periods like {he has} are totally turning against him. I think most Chinese probably think he's a traitor."

Certainly many overseas Chinese students do. At universities across the country, Wu's assertions have been strongly contested by students. "He's an opportunist," says Qiang Li, a Columbia Law School student. Li's encounter with Wu has been well publicized on China-related Internet student news groups. Li, who speaks the same Shanghai dialect as Wu, talked with him at an awards event in his honor last year. "I told him that one of my chief concerns was that his presentations seemed to create the impression that China's human-rights situation was getting worse, contrary to my honest belief and observations," writes Li in one e-mail account. "{Wu} said that he agreed with me that the human-rights situation is undisputedly the best in the past 50 years. Then he shocked me by saying: 'The Americans know nothing. We should talk among ourselves.' " (Wu says Li misinterpreted his statement.)

Says one student who went to hear a talk given by Wu at his university: "He really tries to demonize those who criticize him. He's trying to appeal to the agenda of some American politicians who need a new Evil Empire." For many Chinese students, Wu's willingness to deceive Chinese officials—even for goals the students support—rubs them the wrong way.

The true hero, they say, is former student leader Wang Dan, an icon from the Tiananmen Square democracy movement, who was recently sentenced to prison for 11 years. "Wang Dan compared to Harry Wu? They're not in the same class," scoffs Michael O. Wang, a business student at Duke University who participated in the 1989 uprising. "Wang Dan is a real human-rights fighter, not a professional political figure."

In a measure of Wu's influence, even human-rights workers who are sympathetic to his views are reluctant to reveal what they think of him. "I prefer to have nothing to say. We don't work with him. I prefer not to comment on what he does," says Xiao Qiang, executive director of Human Rights in China, based in New York.

Others are more willing to point out what they consider Wu's shortcomings. "He fails to reach any segment of the overseas Chinese community," says Ignatius Ding, a spokesman for Silicon Valley for Democracy in China, another human-rights group. "I support him even though we approach things in a very, very different fashion. He builds political alliances. I make friends. He's got members of Congress on his side, but how come he doesn't have any people from his own ethnic group?"

Wu acknowledges that economic and social conditions have improved in China in recent years but notes that few disagree that its government still has a long way to go. While he's disappointed that many in the Chinese American community are less than empathetic, he says he understands why. They don't like one of their own revealing the country's deepest, darkest secrets--especially to foreigners, he explains. Chinese are highly protective of their motherland, and that sentiment, he adds, is mixed with a newfound nationalism, particularly among the younger generation.

And because Chinese culture doesn't recognize the concept of human rights, it's far more difficult, Wu says, to reach that community than it is to appeal to Westerners. Regarding his detractors, Wu asks: "Can they say that there is no laogai in China, that there is no prisoner organ transplants in China, that there is human rights in China?" He doesn't wait for a reply. "I don't mind {their criticism} because the truth is on my side."

Perhaps Wu's wife, Ching-Lee Chen, best sums up his tunnel vision. "Harry says, 'No matter how famous I am, or how many people attack me or applaud me, I still want to do the same job,' " says Chen, a 51-year-old former government secretary from Taiwan who works with Wu. More than anyone else in Wu's life, she bears the strain of his devotion to his cause. "I understand why he has to do this job, and I think we should have more Harrys. But it's difficult," concedes Chen, who personally lobbied Bob Dole, Newt Gingrich and Margaret Thatcher for Wu's release last year. "The work {has} enriched my life, {but} I hope he can stay at home just like other husbands." Last November, for example, he was on the road all but two days of the month.

Late at night, after another 18-hour day, Wu says he's beginning to tire of his current pace. Although he moves through the world with the energy of a man many years younger, Wu admits that he's beginning to feel the limitations of age. Approaching 60, he has two big projects he's determined to complete: For the past decade, he's been taping interviews--dozens of them--with labor-camp survivors and other victims of Communist China--that he wants to compile in an epic oral history book, and he is busy working out the logistics for a laogai museum that he envisions being on the scale of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

He continues to keep working the telephone, offering reporters cryptic tidbits to entice them into checking out his latest expose. Despite being berated by his own community, Wu is at peace with his role as the obstinate outsider. Now that he has a "Tonight Show" appearance under his belt, Wu has set his sights on another top-rated TV program, whose host--the reigning queen of interviewers--specializes in adroitly mixing international intrigue with all-American celebrities. Wu confides that he's eager to sit down with ABC's Barbara Walters.

Credit: Sarah Henry is a San Francisco-based writer whose last article for the magazine was on the white-supremacist group the Church of the Creator.