

WRITING WRONGS

Petitioning for justice is an age-old tradition on the mainland. But, as the tales told in the book *The Petitioner* illustrate, it is also a fruitless one for the most part. Report and translation by **Violet Law**.

Feature

Beijing has been the graveyard of hope for countless petitioners; who come in their hundreds of thousands every year to seek justice. Many end up in what have become known as petitioner villages, one of the most prominent of which lies alongside the optimistically named Good Fortune Road, near Yongdingmen, on Beijing's west side.

They come from the four corners of the nation, descending upon the petition offices of the central government's many ministries, hoping to air their grievances and see justice served. Few find satisfaction, though; it is estimated only about one in 500 petitions brought to Beijing results in a resolution of any kind. Many petitioners are forced to return home by "interceptors" sent by regional governments, to face punishment.

Petitioning is a Chinese custom that dates back centuries; as early as the Zhou dynasty (1045BC to 256BC) people were banging drums and kneeling before visiting mandarins' carriages to draw attention to their plight. The tradition lives on because it's the only recourse for ordinary people

unable to vote and in a corrupt system full of legal loopholes. By appealing to a higher level of bureaucracy, petitioners hope for resolutions denied them in their home provinces. The practice is also rooted in the belief that absolute power does not corrupt and only a powerful wise man or benevolent leader can hand down justice.

Every year, more than 500,000 petitioners travel to the capital – the vast majority from the impoverished countryside – in search of a "saviour". Also, untold thousands head to provincial seats of government but those who converge on the mainland's cities and towns are only the most visible of the country's aggrieved; the State Bureau for Letters and Calls, the government body handling petitions nationwide, receives more than 10 million annually. Nearly 80 per cent of the petitions allege mismanagement within local government.

The stories behind the petitions – a selection of which have been documented by *The New York Times* photographer Du Bin and published in the Chinese-language book *The Petitioner – Living Fossil Under Chinese Rule by Law* – are varied and often tragic. They encompass family and land disputes, official corruption, legacies of the Cultural Revolution,

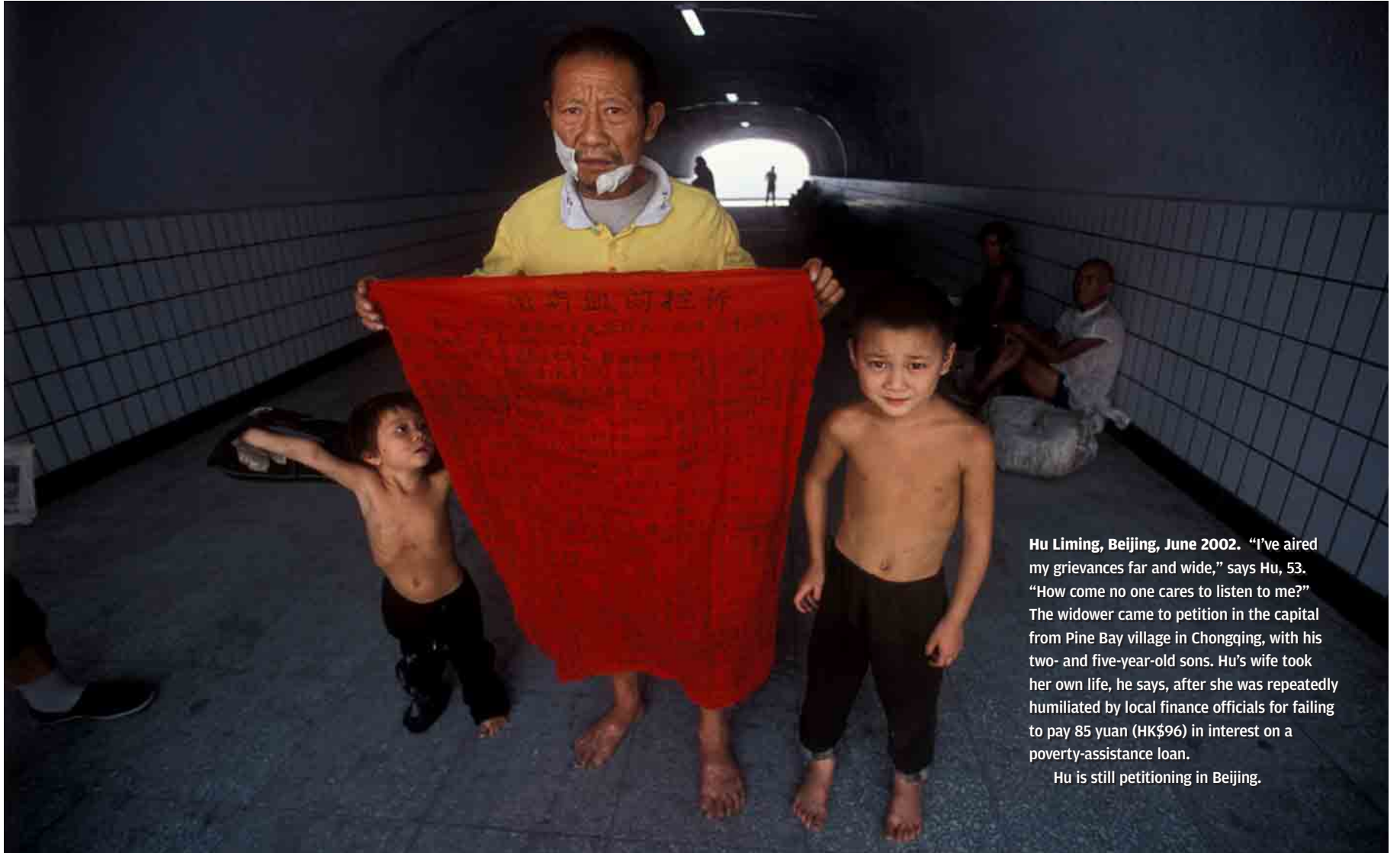
forced relocation, cruel punishment and murder. However, more often than not, petitioners are treated as enemies of the state. Many have been locked up for weeks in unofficial prisons; some of the most recalcitrant have been committed for life to a mental institution. Nearly all think the officials designated to meet with them pass the buck when they can get away with it.

In recent weeks, Beijing has been trying to pass that buck back to the local level. Partly to put an end to a system so obviously flawed and partly to maintain peace and order during the celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, the central government last month issued an edict demanding provincial officials resolve petitions locally and swiftly. Communist Party legal officials will visit areas with a high number of petitioners who come to Beijing and will accept cases on the spot, according to Xinhua news agency. The edict may also lead to petitioning in the capital being made illegal.

Edict or no edict, the majority of petitioners hold out little hope of ever being heard by Beijing officials. And yet many have lingered for years in the capital, in de facto exile. Petitioning has become their *raison d'être*. ■

Zhang Yunyin, Harbin, December 2002. "I'm a walking zombie stricken with grievances," says Zhang, 44, a teacher from Yichun city, Heilongjiang province, who claims a police officer raped his wife. Dressed in a white robe resembling a traditional mourning costume, on which he has inked his grievances, Zhang has brought his petition to the provincial capital, Harbin, 350 kilometres from his home. He has gone to such lengths, he says, because "I can't see how justice is being served under the legal system in China."





Hu Liming, Beijing, June 2002. “I’ve aired my grievances far and wide,” says Hu, 53. “How come no one cares to listen to me?” The widower came to petition in the capital from Pine Bay village in Chongqing, with his two- and five-year-old sons. Hu’s wife took her own life, he says, after she was repeatedly humiliated by local finance officials for failing to pay 85 yuan (HK\$96) in interest on a poverty-assistance loan. Hu is still petitioning in Beijing.

Liu Changchi, Martyr’s Tower village, Liling, Hunan province, September 2003. Ever since his petition to the authorities fell on deaf ears, Liu has been determined to kill himself – along with the party officials who he says destroyed his liveli-

hood. The 56-year-old farmer and six family members had lived off a plot of land until the local government took it away. Liu has prepared himself for an attack by wrapping himself in a string of homemade grenades – his hometown

is a fireworks manufacturing centre so obtaining the materials was not difficult. “I don’t wish to die but I’m left with little to go on [living for],” says Liu. “It’s better to die fighting than to starve.”

It is not known whether Liu carried out his threat.





Li Guirong, Beijing, November 2005. For nine years, Li, 49, has lived in self-imposed exile in Beijing, all the while petitioning the central government. Even though she is on crutches, the former Liaoyuan Mining Bureau worker from Jilin province has never wavered, believing in the principle etched into a monument in Beijing's Pufa Park: "To rule by law and to found a socialist society on the rule of law."

In 1994, Li's husband, also employed at the Liaoyuan Mining Bureau, was seriously injured at work. In order to win a production safety award, the director is alleged to have covered up the accident. Also under his watch, the enterprise filed for bankruptcy and defrauded the government. "I tried and tried to expose these wrongdoings," says Li. "After a year-long

investigation, provincial officials came up empty. Instead, they charged me with 'disrupting the peace of an enterprise' and locked me up several times."

Li wasn't about to give up. She has taken her case to Zhongnanhai, the central government headquarters, some 30 times. Nearly every time, government officials issue directives to the province to take her case serious-

ly. When provincial officials couldn't locate her to mete out punishment, they took her youngest daughter out of school and put her into a facility for mentally handicapped children. There, she had her front teeth knocked out.

"I want to be back in school and learn to read and write," says the daughter. "When will mum win her case so I can go?"



Lei Yuanpu, Blue Hill county, Hubei province, November 2002. Seventy-one-year old Lei is too old to climb the hill to where his son's body lies, so he sends up his grandsons to keep vigil over their father. The three boys (from right to left) - Lei Yangang, 17; Lei Yuanyi, 12; and Lei Yuanxun, five - know the drill well. They run up the hill to their father's coffin and unfurl the white-cloth banner their grandfather carried on his travels to the capital and back. For five years, their father has lain on the weed-strewn hilltop while his family's grievances remain unresolved. Lei Yong was killed in a dispute. Local police arrested four suspects but promptly let three of them out on "bail": 500 yuan (HK\$568) in bribes. The old man shuttled between Hubei and Beijing seeking justice for his son and Blue Hill officials are trying to bribe him so he'll stop making trouble. They have offered to get his eldest grandson a job and waive school fees for the two younger ones until they turn 18. He and his wife will each get a monthly living allowance of 120 yuan.

After this picture was taken, Lei Yuanpu agreed to the terms and put his son to rest. Shortly after the interment, though, the officials allegedly reneged on their reported promises.

Xing Shujing, Nieqiao village, Shandong province, February 2002. Xing says he was castrated by village officials in 1972, during the Cultural Revolution, in an attempt to humiliate him. In the decades since, he's persisted in appealing to local authorities for justice, partly because, even though he cannot have children, he is still required to pay family planning levies. Squatting in front of the locked gate of the village's Communist Party committee office, Xing says he is beside himself with anger.

