#FreeXiyueWang

SAR Advocacy Seminar

Mansfield University
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Introduction: Who is Xiyue Wang?

Xiyue Wang was born in Beijing in 1980 and has held American citizenship since 2009 [1]. He is a husband, father, and passionate student of history enrolled in a graduate program at Princeton University, where he has won the respect and affection of his peers [2]. From January 25th to March 10th, 2016, Wang attended a Farsi program in Iran to prepare for further research on that country’s Qajar dynasty, which ruled from 1785 to 1925 [3]. His thesis focuses on governance in Eurasia in the 19th and early 20th centuries, especially the relationship between local polities and larger empires [4]. To that end, Wang returned to Iran on May 1st, 2016 [5].

Prior to this trip, Wang corresponded with the different libraries he wished to visit in Iran, including the National Archives, as well as the Iranian Interest Section of the Pakistani Embassy in Washington, which granted him a travel visa [6]. In these letters, Wang expressed the nature of his research and the documents he planned to examine, which were purely historical in nature and available to the public [7]. Despite obtaining the proper permissions, Wang encountered problems shortly after his arrival in May. Iranian authorities blocked his access to certain documents and harassed him about his research, but there was little indication of the terrible turn Xiyue Wang’s life was about to take [8].

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
4 Arrest and Prison Life

Hua Qu’s Advocacy

Upon his arrest, Wang spent eighteen days in solitary confinement [14]. During the second year of his detention, Wang was moved to the public ward of the prison, which made it possible for him to enjoy more freedoms, including regular phone calls with Hua Qu – first weekly, now almost daily [15]. Early on, he confessed thoughts of suicide to her, and more recently he has developed arthritis, rashes, and scratches; depression, too, is a reality of life behind the walls of Evin Prison [16]. It’s uncertain whether Wang has been abused at the hands of authorities since all conversations are heavily monitored, and he would certainly be punished for disclosing this. Fortunately, Hua Qu is able to send him books – these must be approved by prison officials – and she relayed to the class that Xiyue’s appetite for learning will not be satisfied until he can return to his research [17].

[9] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
Perhaps the most significant development in the case this semester came in early April, when the South China Morning Post reported that Beijing has been in communication with the Swiss embassy in Tehran, privately urging the Iranians to release Xiyue Wang. Apart from the geopolitical implications, this shift in Chinese policy could bode well for Wang. “Unlike the U.S.,” the article observes, “China enjoys a stable relationship with Iran” [1]. The Chinese are better positioned to negotiate with Iran for Xiyue Wang’s release, and their newfound interest in the case is a source of hope for Wang, Hua Qu, and everyone who wishes for his safe return home.

Diplomacy

Beijing willing to step in to aid Wang Xiyue, Chinese-American scholar imprisoned in Iran, his wife says

- Move by the Chinese government could be a goodwill gesture to Washington in the midst of efforts to end the trade war
- Wang, who was in Iran for research on his PhD thesis, was found guilty in 2017 of attempting to ‘infiltrate’ the country at the behest of Princeton University

“His only crime is...

...he’s American.”

– Hua Qu

Iran’s human rights record is among the worst in the world. In addition to serious concerns about systemic discrimination and violence against women, juveniles, religious minorities, and protesters, the Islamic Republic is notorious for “harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; [and the] systematic use of arbitrary detention and imprisonment, including hundreds of political prisoners” [1]. Torture is rampant and conducted with impunity, often at the direction of government officials [2]. Under the direction of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who holds absolute power in Iran, the authorities ruthlessly and violently suppress their critics [3]. Unfortunately, Xiyue Wang is being detained in one of the most oppressive dictatorships on Earth.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution and hostage crisis, relations between the United States and Iran have been tense at best, and often overtly hostile [1]. More recently, in 2015, the Obama Administration helped complete the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iran nuclear deal, which was designed to set back Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief [2]. Then, in May 2018, the Trump Administration withdrew the United States from the JCPOA, a move which is widely held to have inflamed tensions between the two nations and emboldened hardliners in Iran [3].

In April 2019, the Trump Administration labelled Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (or IRGC) as a terrorist organization, “the first time the U.S. has declared an element of a foreign government to be a terrorist organization” [4]. A couple weeks later, the administration announced that it would no longer grant sanctions waivers to countries, such as China, that import Iranian oil [5]. Iran responded with a threat to close the Strait of Hormuz, through which passes 20% of all sea-born crude oil shipments [6].

In recent months, tensions have steadily ratcheted up between the United States and Iran. Sadly, this geopolitical climate does not bode well for productive negotiations between the two nations that might result in Xiyue Wang’s release.

In order to have an icon that represents the group on social media, a logo for the class was designed. It is a combination of Mansfield University’s logo and Scholars At Risk’s acronym.

Social Media Committee

The class started a social media campaign to raise awareness of Xiyue Wang’s case and publish information about advocacy at Mansfield. Twitter (@MansfieldSAR) and Instagram (@SARMansfield) were selected as the primary platforms for this program, in part to capitalize on Hua Qu’s #FreeXiyueWang campaign. The class’s Twitter page was updated three to four times a week, with posts providing updates about Wang’s case and other related topics, for example the Persian New Year, Nowruz, when some Iranian prisoners are granted clemency. The class also retweeted posts by others, related to the cause. Mansfield University, SAR, Hua Qu, and Sevgi Akarcesme shared and retweeted @MansfieldSAR.

Instagram was updated two to three times a week, with posts providing information about Sevgi Akarcesme’s talk, the class’s interview with Hua Qu, the Week of Action, and various press releases. The Instagram account also showcased the class’s photo campaign. Students and faculty posed for mock mugshots, holding up a chalkboard indicating their “academic crimes.” This exercise gave the campus community some idea of what it’s like to be punished for scholarship—albeit in a fairly lighthearted way—and the photos, finished in black and white, then posted online, served as a powerful reminder of threats to academic freedom in Iran and around the world.

Throughout the campaign, the class earned over 100 followers on Twitter and Instagram.
Planning Committees

Public Relations Committee

Sending letters to politicians

Madison Curtis mailed letters to Senator Benjamin Cardin, Senator Chris Van Hollen, Jr., and Representative Andy Harris during Princeton University’s Day of Action and received the following reply from Senator Cardin:

Pennsylvania State Representative Tina Pickett was also contacted. The class informed her of Wang’s case and Mansfield University’s advocacy efforts. She replied with support of the cause and pledged to give her best effort to spread the word.

Honors Students Plan Week of Action (March 25-29) for Imprisoned American in Iran

By CJ Moran

“The Mansfield honors class (HON 4455) of this semester is focusing on human rights advocacy and is working with Scholars at Risk (SAR), an organization that promotes academic freedom. The class chose to advocate for Xiyue Wang. Xiyue Wang is an American graduate student from Princeton University detained in Iran since August of 2016. He went to Iran to study the Farsi (Persian) language and the government of the Qajar dynasty, which was the ruling government in Iran from the 18th century to the 20th century. He is a vivacious scholar, who knows multiple languages. In other words, learning is not just a job for Wang. It is a lifetime commitment.

Wang had finished the majority of his research in Iran and was just trying to get home to his wife and his now six-year old son when Iranian officials jailed him on charges of espionage. He had followed Iran’s rules while he was in Iran and had gotten all of the approvals he needed to do the research prior to entering the country. The most likely motivation of his detention is political, not wrongdoing by Wang. With this in mind, it is important to get the attention of American lawmakers, because they have the power to press the Iranian government to release Wang.

Last month, the class had a video conference with Wang’s wife, Hua Qu, to discuss his situation. Wang is currently in the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran. He has developed arthritis in his knees and his overall health, both mental and physical, is deteriorating. Although he is able to speak with his wife regularly over the phone, his wife is gravely concerned for his well being. He is serving a ten-year sentence.

The class is organizing a week of action (March 25-29) to draw attention to his unjust imprisonment. The only way he will be released is if pressure is applied to the Iranian government, which means his case must remain in the spotlight. During the week of action, honors students will be stationed throughout various locations and at various times on campus for students to sign a petition calling for his immediate release. Wristbands of solidarity will be distributed to those who sign the petition. Stay updated on the case by following their Twitter account @MansfieldSAR.”
Met with Mansfield University President and Provost

Sara Miller and Brayden Gabel met with the interim president and provost of Mansfield University on March 22, 2019. During these meetings, it was discussed that the class’s efforts do not go unnoticed and represent a great start to Mansfield University’s partnership with Scholars at Risk. Dr. Ulrich, the provost, is pleased with the efforts being made as a class and as a campus community. He is also extremely proud of Mansfield University for being the only PASSHE school involved with Scholars at Risk, and he wants to continue to offer classes of a similar nature not only to continue taking strides forward, but also to allow students to broaden their horizons. This class offers students an opportunity to learn about real-world situations and how academic freedom is sometimes taken for granted. As a result of this conversation, the provost sent the following email to MU faculty and staff:

“Hello everyone,

As you may be aware from social media postings and other outreach, students from Jon Rothermel's Human Rights Advocacy course are conducting a week of action on behalf of Xiyue Wang, an American citizen and graduate student at Princeton who has been wrongfully detained in Iran since 2016. You can learn more about Xiyue Wang's case, sign a petition calling for his release, and get a #FreeXiyueWang bracelet at the information table the students will be staffing this week at various locations on campus. You may follow the class on Twitter @MansfieldSAR as well as they work on their advocacy campaign.

The advocacy efforts of this class are taking place in conjunction with our university’s membership in the Scholars at Risk (SAR) Network. I want to take this opportunity to remind everyone about that affiliation. We are currently the only institution in the state system participating in this network, an international organization that raises awareness about, advocates for, and protects scholars worldwide whose safety and freedom are threatened, often by oppressive, authoritarian regimes. Since we joined the network in Fall 2017, we have hosted two speakers, a professor and a journalist, both of whom were displaced from Turkey due to their human rights advocacy and their steadfast commitment to academic freedom and freedom of the press. The students in the Human Rights Advocacy class are the first at Mansfield to participate in a course connected to the Scholars at Risk Network. Please ask them about their experience in the course when you see them staffing their advocacy table.

For more information about the network, see the SAR website: https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/. You may sign up for SAR email notifications and newsletters on the website, if you are interested.

Our membership in the Scholars at Risk Network is just one of many ways that our institution expresses its profound commitment to academic freedom and free speech.

Thank you!

John"
The Wellsboro Homepage, a local online media source, filmed the class and produced a seven-minute feature about Xiyue Wang's case and Mansfield University's advocacy on his behalf. The video made quite a splash and raised the class's profile to neighboring communities.

Link to article and video

FALSE ARREST AND FAKE CHARGES!
Mansfield University Students are advocating for his release.

Hua Qu - April 19, 2019

Xiyue Wang is on the border with Iran, but his imprisonment is shocking the academic world. A small number of alumni are reaching out to his family and advocating for his release. The Wellsboro Homepage Network is covering this issue and raising the class's profile to neighboring communities.

Note: The article and video are linked in the text above.

The Wellsboro Homepage is a local online media source that covers a range of topics, including local news, community events, and educational initiatives. The Wellsboro Homepage Network interviewed Hua Qu, a Mansfield University student who is advocating for Wang's release.

Hua Qu - April 19, 2019

"a scholar cannot be judged... because it’s a passion and a lifetime commitment."

– Hua Qu
On Tuesday February 19th, Mansfield University hosted Sevgi Akarcesme, who spoke to the advocacy seminar and delivered a campus-wide talk, “How Turkey Has Become the Largest Jail for Journalists: A Personal Account.” In March 2016, Akarcesme was dismissed from her post as editor-in-chief of Today’s Zaman, Turkey’s largest English-language daily publication, as part of President Erdogan’s broader crackdown on critics and free expression. Today’s Zaman had printed articles criticizing the Erdogan regime. Akarcesme’s presence on campus started a conversation about human rights and freedom of expression with a compelling personal narrative. Akarcesme has consistently supported Mansfield’s advocacy on behalf of Xiyue Wang.
The centerpiece of this semester’s advocacy was the Week of Action, held from March 25th through the 29th. A large poster was professionally printed, emblazoned with #FreeXiyueWang and a selection of faux mugshots from the photo campaign. The class also had several hundred bracelets made, printed with the hashtag and molded in blue – the favorite color of Wang’s son. Small fact sheets about the case were also produced. Finally, signature sheets were printed for a petition calling upon the Iranian government to release Xiyue Wang.

Throughout the Week of Action, members of the class set up a table – with the poster, bracelets, fact sheets, and petition – at various times and locations around campus. Faculty, staff, and students who passed by were very receptive to the cause, and many signed the petition and picked up a bracelet. Today, walking around campus, one is bound to see a significant number of students who proudly wear this symbol of solidarity with Xiyue Wang.

In all, the Week of Action yielded about 350 signatures for the petition out of a campus population of around 2,000, a result with which the class was pleasantly surprised. The names and emails of signatories were inputted into SAR’s advocacy page for Xiyue Wang, which generated messages to the Ayatollah Khamenei and other Iranian officials, copied to President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, calling for Wang’s immediate release. Maybe this surge in activity will sway these leaders on both sides to redouble their efforts to reach a compromise that brings Xiyue Wang home to his family.

The poster was also set up at MU’s Showcase of Student Scholarship on April 17th, along with the signature sheets from the petition.

On March 7th, 2019, Sam Finch joined SAR’s Student Advocacy Days in Washington, D.C. Various speakers – including former congressman Henry Waxman and Scott Busby, the current Deputy Assistant Secretary in the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor – shared their experiences and offered advice to the student advocates in attendance. Then, SAR staff assisted students in preparing for advocacy on Capitol Hill, performing mock meetings and offering helpful feedback. Sam also had the opportunity to share Xiyue Wang’s story with representatives from other colleges and learn more about their cases.

The next day, March 8th, the student advocates travelled to Capitol Hill to conduct meetings with members of Congress and their staffers, spreading the word about their respective cases and enlisting the help of elected representatives. Sam was able to arrange a meeting with a staffer from Senator Pat Toomey’s (R-PA) office. Senator Bob Casey’s (D-PA) office never responded to a request for a meeting.

Senator Toomey’s staffer was sympathetic to Xiyue Wang’s story and expressed disgust with Iran’s conduct, but he resisted the suggestion of a public message of support, through social media or otherwise. He did, however, express a willingness to speak with the relevant persons in the State Department and remind them of the unjust detention of an American citizen in the Islamic Republic. Since negotiations of this nature are often held in secret, it will be difficult to judge the outcome of these conversations, if they indeed take place.

In all likelihood, the meeting in Senator Toomey’s office will not produce a specific, tangible result related to advocacy on behalf of Xiyue Wang. Nevertheless, another member of Congress has been made aware of the case and MU’s work in collaboration with SAR.
Xiyue Wang

Background
- Born Beijing, 1980
- Moved to United States in 2001, naturalized 2009
- Husband and father
- Ph.D. student in history at Princeton
- Travelled to Iran to study Farsi and Persian history for dissertation
  - Received a visa through the Pakistani embassy and shared a detailed plan for his research with the relevant authorities
  - Examined publicly available, historical documents in various Iranian archives and libraries

Imprisonment
- Arrested August 7th, 2016 and sent to Tehran’s Evin Prison
- Charged with two counts of espionage, convicted in a closed-door trial. April 2017
- Sentenced to ten years in prison
  - Bouts of serious illness, inadequate medical treatment
  - Regular contact with wife
- Imprisonment condemned by the UN and various human rights groups
- Geopolitically-motivated detention

Advocacy
- Honors advocacy seminar at Mansfield University in connection with Scholars at Risk
  - On-campus awareness and advocacy efforts
  - Social media campaign (Twitter)

“Everything is so...
...difficult to understand.”

– Hua Qu
Future Plans and Goals

The success of the bracelet campaign demonstrates that physical reminders of Xiyue Wang’s detention go a long way towards raising awareness. Plastering stickers printed with #FreeXiyueWang all over campus and the community could start conversations about the case, even when advocates aren’t there in person.

Jason Rezaian is an Iranian-American journalist with the Washington Post who was detained in Evin Prison from July 22nd, 2014 to January 16th, 2016. To better understand the conditions under which political prisoners are detained in Iran and get a sense of the country itself from one who lived there for many years, the class read and discussed Rezaian’s book, Prisoner. Although it’s a longshot for a small school like Mansfield, bringing a speaker like Rezaian to campus would dramatically raise the profile of advocacy efforts and offer a powerful, personal testament to the environment in which Xiyue Wang presently languishes.

As the meeting with Senator Toomey’s office revealed, individual members of Congress are limited in their influence over negotiations held between the United States and Iran about political prisoners like Xiyue Wang. Certainly, efforts to reach out to elected officials and gain their support should continue, but the negotiations that will ultimately secure Xiyue Wang’s release are conducted by the State Department, not lawmakers. Future advocacy should therefore include direct appeals to the State Department.

Purchase stickers to hand out and put everywhere

Have Jason Rezaian come speak about his experience

Meet with more senators and representatives
“...[He is] driven by an innate passion for scholarship.”

– Hua Qu
Advocates should familiarize themselves with their case as much as possible and become comfortable with all the facts. This not only includes a command of the scholar’s particular situation, but also the broader context of the case. Advocates should brush up on the human rights record of the country which imprisoned the scholar and learn about that country’s relationship with the United States and any relevant third parties. It is also important to follow the news. One headline can change everything, just as the surprise development that China has called for Xiyue Wang’s release brought new hope and energy to the cause. If nothing else, current events will almost certainly enter conversations throughout the course of advocacy. Whether speaking with elected officials, faculty, staff, or fellow students, it is critical to appear credible and knowledgeable of the case and its context.

Some of the most common questions encountered this semester were, Who else is working on this? and, How do you know this person isn’t a spy? Be prepared to answer these legitimate questions completely and convincingly. If ever you don’t know the answer to a question or are unsure, offer to follow up when you have the information requested. Never, ever make up the answer. Spreading misinformation discredits the advocate, the university, SAR, and the scholar.

Ideally, advocacy should begin early in the semester. Of course, it’s difficult to get an advocacy seminar up and running in so little time, but every additional day of concrete, meaningful work helps. Perhaps the first two weeks should be used for planning; after that, advocates should begin organizing events to spread the word and get the campus community interested and involved in the project. Splitting up into committees can make this process more efficient.

Something to keep in mind when planning events and simply speaking with others about the case is this – know your audience. College students are usually pressed for time, so advocates shouldn’t expect them to stand around forever, listening to every minute detail of the case. Learn to convey the basics quickly and efficiently. Faculty and the public might expect more detail – be prepared to offer this as well. Elected officials or their staffers will look for some connection to their work, like a committee assignment or upcoming legislation, for example. Everyone wants to know how a case applies to them, and why they should care. One of the difficulties encountered at Mansfield was explaining that Xiyue Wang has no affiliation with MU. More general concerns about academic freedom engaged the campus community, but the general public will likely expect some other connection. The mention of Xiyue Wang’s American citizenship was usually enough to spark interest and sympathy.

Social media accounts are effective in spreading awareness of the case and any events planned by student advocates. Those who are interested can follow along at their leisure, so be sure to distribute social media handles at all events. Regular posting on Twitter, Instagram, and other platforms – at least several times a week – keeps the audience engaged with the case. Unfortunately, social media can also bring out online trolls. It is best to ignore the trolls. Engaging with them accomplishes nothing except to tarnish the advocacy seminar’s reputation.
The Week of Action is another good option for raising awareness. Many passersby are willing to listen, at least for a moment, to a summary of the case. A big, visually interesting poster helps draw people in. Always have a petition ready for people to sign, and bring along something to hand out, like a bracelet or stickers. In retrospect, Mansfield’s Week of Action was a great success, garnering around 350 signatures for the petition and creating a buzz across campus, but even more events and locations would have been desirable. Future seminars might consider organizing interviews with campus and local media, creating and showing a brief documentary film, petitioning the Student Government Association, and collaborating with other universities during the Week of Action. For Xiyue Wang’s case, cooperation with Princeton University might be especially fruitful.

Advocacy seminars should not feel limited to the university and its immediate surroundings; in fact, branching out to neighboring towns, cities, and schools is a positive step. After the Wellsboro Homepage Network feature on Xiyue Wang and advocacy at Mansfield was posted online, the class was approached by concerned citizens from the surrounding area, curious about the case and eager to express support for the cause (Wellsboro is about twelve miles from Mansfield).

Finally, advocates should remember that their efforts are not in vain. Many times throughout the semester, the class was discouraged by the apparent lack of progress in the case. But speaking with Hua Qu, Xiyue’s wife, and knowing they are both aware and appreciative of our efforts made the whole enterprise worthwhile and rewarding. Advocacy isn’t only a matter of raising awareness and applying pressure to government officials, although that’s a big part of the equation. It’s also about supporting those whose lives have been turned upside-down by egregious violations of human rights and academic freedom, letting them know that they have not been forgotten.

“My life has been... ...totally put on hold.”

– Hua Qu
Contacts and Special Thanks

Dr. Jonathan Rothermel, Associate Professor of Political Science, Mansfield University
“The SAR Student Advocacy Seminar at Mansfield University was incorporated into an honors course created and taught by Dr. Rothermel: HON 4455 Human Rights Advocacy: Theory & Praxis.”

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Scholars at Risk – especially Adam Braver, for providing the class with invaluable guidance; Alex Bell, for her tremendous support throughout the semester; and the entire network for all the wonderful work they do on behalf of academic freedom and imprisoned scholars around the world.

Hua Qu – for graciously speaking to us about her family’s situation, and for her inspiring, relentless advocacy on her husband’s behalf.

The Wellsboro Homepage Network – for filming the class and putting together a superb feature on Xiyue Wang’s case and advocacy at Mansfield.
Testimonials

Sara Miller - “Working with Scholars At Risk to advocate for Xiyue Wang was worth more than just a grade to me. This experience taught me so much about human rights and situations that I personally take for granted. I did not realize how difficult it is for some people to do what they love the most in countries that they have the utmost respect for. When helping, whether it be physically advocating or just gathering information, it is not what we cannot do, it is what we can do that makes the biggest difference.”

Anna Nelson - “Being a part of this campaign for Xiyue Wang has made me feel part of something bigger this semester. I never had the experience of advocacy and to see that it had an impact on campus makes all the hard work worthwhile.”

Maranna Nitcznski - “As a student with ambition to continue my education beyond my undergraduate degree, I felt a greater responsibility to really push for Xiyue’s Wang’s case and taking part in this journey was a great privilege. I am so pleased to be part of a university that allows us the opportunity to think outside the box and teach us how to be a part of something greater than ourselves. I remain hopeful that one day soon Xiyue Wang will be back home safe with his wife and son.”
Photos

Photo Campaign
Library Photoshoot: Missing Scholar

Photos during the Semester

University students rally for release of American prisoner in Iran