

Gao Yaojie's Difficulty in Getting to the U.S. to Claim Her Award is a Cause for Concern

By Zhang Tiankan (□ 田勘)

According to news reports, Gao Yaojie, the retired doctor who will turn 80 this year, has won the Vital Voices Global Women's Leadership Award for her great efforts in defending those infected with AIDS in China. But Gao Yaojie's has constantly faced resistance in going to America to claim her award. Over the last more than a month, a number of local officials have visited her home [in Henan province] to dissuade her from going the America to receive her award, and have even accused her of "manufacturing malicious rumors, telling lies and making up stories".

The actions of these officials cause us to doubt whether Gao Yaojie is living in a free country, and this can't help but make us uneasy about the actual situation of the AIDS epidemic in various regions of China. Concerning the AIDS epidemic, who exactly is telling the truth, and who is telling lies? Gao Yaojie has been on the front lines investigating and taking action to fight AIDS all along ... It should be said that she has more authority than anyone concerning the current state of AIDS in China, or at the very least the most authority to speak to the AIDS situation in Henan and other areas. For this reason, I deeply believe that anything Gao Yaojie says concerning AIDS is earnest and true. Just as she has said herself, "At any time, in any place, under whatever pressure, I will never tell lies. I cannot cheat the people of the world".

Correct policies arise from accurate information about a problem. They arise from a comprehensive and detailed recognition of a problem. If information is inaccurate, fabricated or incomplete, this potentially leads to policy miscalculations that are not only strategically wrong but set people on the road to ruin. This is true of AIDS prevention and other areas as well. As SARS spread in 2003, it was the honest Jiang Yanyong who stood up and was the first to say, "The Emperor has no clothes", and point out that SARS was spreading in China. This urged decision-makers to set into motion a nationwide fight to effectively fight SARS, and resulted in eventual victory.

Do we not even today have the kind of environment and tolerance that allowed Jiang Yanyong to speak the truth during SARS? Even if Gao Yaojie says something wrong we should let her have her say, nor can we limit her freedom, violating the rights she enjoys as a citizen. And how much more so if Gao Yaojie speaks the truth.

One of America's founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, once said: "If a nation expect to be ignorant and free ... it expect what never was and never will be." Through her revelations about the AIDS situation in China, Gao Yaojie wants to make everyone understand the real situation of the AIDS epidemic, making way for practical and realistic approaches to AIDS prevention. This is the way toward defeating epidemic disease and moving toward freedom and reason. In contrast, when a number of local leaders do not wish to let Gao Yaojie speak the truth about AIDS, this not only blocks our way to freedom and prosperity, but leads us to disaster through our ignorance of AIDS.

Under constant public concern, and owing to reasonable involvement by central officials, Gao Yaojie has already arrived in Beijing and obtained her entry visa for America. On the 25th she will

fly to the United States, and receive her award in Washington on March 14. What is even more encouraging, both deputy health minister Wang Longde (王德) and Hao Yang (郝阳), deputy director of epidemic disease control at the Ministry of Health, visited Gao Yaojie on behalf of Vice Premier Wu Yi (吴) at the hotel where she was staying in Beijing. Wang Longde did not stand in the way of her trip to the U.S. to claim her award and in fact admitted the tragedy of blood supply infection, the fact of underground blood-selling, and that not enough had been done to publicize [AIDS]. This made Gao Yaojie feel that Wang Longde's "attitude was good and he was reasonable".

If our local and regional leaders could, like Deputy Minister Wang, benefit from the true words of Gao Yaojie and others, making relevant policies on the basis of real information through investigation and research, we will be able not only to prevent disasters arising from AIDS and other forms of epidemic disease, but will have greater hope of building an ideal and harmonious society.

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