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Chinese woman sentenced to a year in labour camp over tweet

Amnesty International today urged the Chinese authorities to release a woman sentenced to a year in a labour camp for retweeting a supposedly anti-Japanese message.

Chinese online activist Cheng Jianping was sentenced to one year of ‘Re-education Through Labour’ on Monday for “disturbing social order”, having retweeted a satirical suggestion on October 17 that the Japanese Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo be attacked.

Cheng disappeared ten days later, on what was to be her wedding day, her whereabouts unknown until it emerged this week that she had been detained and sentenced by local police.

“Sentencing someone to a year in a labour camp, without trial, for simply repeating another person’s clearly satirical observation on Twitter demonstrates the level of China’s repression of online expression” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Director for the Asia-Pacific.

The offending tweet was originally posted by Cheng’s fiancé Hua Chunhui, mocking China’s young nationalist demonstrators who had smashed Japanese products in protest over a maritime incident between China and Japan involving the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands.

Hua’s original tweet said “Anti-Japanese demonstrations, smashing Japanese products, that was all done years ago by Guo Quan [an activist and expert on the Nanjing Massacre]. It’s no new trick. If you really wanted to kick it up a notch, you’d immediately fly to Shanghai to smash the Japanese Expo pavilion.”

Retweeting the comment as ‘wangyi09’, Cheng Jianping added the phrase “Angry youth, charge!”

The tweet has only been retweeted by three people.

Cheng may be the first Chinese citizen to become a prisoner of conscience on the basis of a single tweet.

Her fiancé Hua Chunhui, who tweets as ‘wxhch’, is not known to have been detained.

“It is possible that Cheng Jianping may have been targeted for her online activism over the last few years and her expressions of support for other Chinese dissidents and activists,” said Sam Zarifi.

According to other Chinese activists on Twitter, Cheng had participated in low-level online activism, including support for imprisoned Nobel Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo and imprisoned consumer rights advocate

Zhao Lianhai, as well as fundraising in support of other activists.

Twitter is blocked in China but is widely accessed and used, particularly by human rights defenders and their supporters who often use the social-networking platform to quickly organise in support of human rights activists who are detained or tried in court.

Re-education Through Labour is an administrative punishment that can deprive an individual of their liberty for up to 4 years through a decision by the police without a trial by an independent court.