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### American woman becomes petitioner in China

BY CARA ANNA, ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER  
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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**BEIJING** — She joins the crush of Chinese petitioners outside the high, well-guarded gates on cold Beijing mornings. Like the others, she has a grievance against the government, in her case, a fiance jailed on a charge she says is untrue.

But unlike the others, Julie Harms is American and a Harvard graduate. And as she haunts government offices in a long search for justice, even the officials stare.

"Yes, I saw her, of course," said Yu Guiying, a petitioner from western Gansu province who stood with dozens of people outside the Supreme People's Court reception office on a recent afternoon. "Tall, thin. She didn't say much, but she spoke good Chinese."

"She got in!" others called out, cheering a rare success at getting past the gate.

Harms said later she didn't make it past security. Despite what the crowd might expect of a foreigner, she has made little progress. Her boyfriend faces his second trial on trespassing charges on Wednesday.

"They see this white face and think I have some magic powers, when I can't even resolve my boyfriend's case successfully," said Harms. She made a sour face. "I haven't really heard of the whole happy ending."

Chinese have brought grievances about corruption and injustice to Beijing for centuries, first to the emperor and now to the ruling communist party. Some stay in



/ AP

In this photo taken Thursday, Nov. 19, 2009, U.S. petitioner Julie Harms, center is questioned by a plain clothes security personnel outside the west gate to the Zhongnanhai compound after she attempts to deliver a letter to China's top leadership who resides in the compound in Beijing, China. She joins the crush of Chinese petitioners outside the high, well-guarded gates on cold Beijing mornings. Like the others, she has a grievance against the government, in her case, a fiancé jailed on a charge she says is untrue. But unlike the others, Julie Harms is American and a Harvard graduate. And as she haunts government offices in a long search for justice. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)



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the capital for months or years, camping out under highways. Some are grabbed off the streets and sent home, often being held in unofficial detention centers petitioners call "black jails."

Harms is believed to be one of the few, and perhaps the first, foreign petitioner. Largely spared the rough treatment Chinese petitioners often receive, the results are no different. She finds official suspicion, indifference and the desire that complainers would simply go away.

When Harms stood outside the U.S. Embassy during President Barack Obama's visit, hoping to hand him a letter about China's need for legal reform, police detained her for a couple hours at a local police station.

The 30-year-old Harms met Liu Shiliang a decade ago at a post office while she was traveling in China and majoring in East Asian studies at Harvard. They were engaged in 2007.

Their wedding has been delayed after a neighbor beat Liu up in their village later that year in Anhui province when Liu was home to visit family. The neighbor already was accused of attacking some of Liu's relatives, and his family wonders whether Liu's arrival was mistaken as an attempt at revenge. Liu went to the hospital with serious injuries, Harms said. The neighbor went to jail.

But Liu ended up facing a trespassing charge in the incident. He was arrested in June in the southern city of Shenzhen, where he runs a shipping company, and has been jailed without bail ever since, Harms said.

She has seen him once, in handcuffs, at a trial that ended two months ago with the case being sent back to prosecutors, a move which usually means the judges think the evidence is shoddy.

The head of Licai village said Liu is being mistreated because the neighbor has a cousin with the local police. "He did not trespass," Liu Jiali said by phone from Anhui. The two Lius are not related.

The chief prosecutor of Wuhe County hung up without saying a word. The head of the local police said he had no information.

The circumstances could be found anywhere in China. The government says it receives 3 million to 4 million letters and visits from petitioners each year, but rights groups say its tens of millions and only a small fraction are solved.

"Local authorities are essentially counting on the fact that the local people don't have that much knowledge of the law," Harms said. "I think it's a shame."

At the office of China's top prosecutor, the entrance for petitioners is behind a black metal door. Dusty footprints were beside the handle, as though someone kicked it.

When Harms knocked, a guard opened, shouted "We're closed!" and slammed the door.

Harms knocked again. Nothing. There were no office hours posted, just a metal slot with a note telling petitioners to submit their papers.

Chinese officials tend to deflect complaints, not accept them, Harms said. "If they don't want someone to be there, they'll find a way so that the person is no longer there."

Harms started petitioning about a year ago, when she learned her fiance was on a local "most wanted" list for the trespassing charge. She found it absurd.

Beijing-based lawyer Li Heping has worked with many Chinese petitioners and is no more optimistic about Harms' chances.

"Anyone entering the system will be dominated by the system," he said. "No one can predict what eventually will happen. Her petitioning may help get the thing resolved with her boyfriend freed or compensated, or in



AP

In this photo taken Thursday, Nov. 19, 2009, U.S. petitioner Julie Harms holds a letter she hopes to deliver to China's top leadership as she is stopped and questioned by Chinese police officers outside the walls of Zhongnanhai in Beijing, China. She joins the crush of Chinese petitioners outside the high, well-guarded gates on cold Beijing mornings. Like the others, she has a grievance against the government, in her case, a fiancé jailed on a charge she says is untrue. But unlike the others, Julie Harms is American and a Harvard graduate. And as she haunts government offices in a long search for justice. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)



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In this photo taken Thursday, Nov. 19, 2009, U.S. petitioner Julie Harms poses for photos before visiting a petition office in Beijing, China. She joins the crush of Chinese petitioners outside the high, well-guarded gates on cold Beijing mornings. Like the others, she has a grievance against the government, in her case, a fiancé jailed on a charge she says is untrue. But unlike the others, Julie Harms is American and a Harvard graduate. And as she haunts government offices in a long search for justice. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

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the end she may herself be detained."

Human Rights in China, a New York-based group founded 20 years ago and which reported Harms' detention during the Obama visit, has never heard of a foreign petitioner.

"Yes, there is a risk of being labeled a troublemaker by going high-profile and public," executive director Sharon Hom said in an e-mail.

Harms finally delivered a letter about her fiance's case to Zhongnanhai, the high-walled compound that is the headquarters for the Communist Party leadership.

She was stopped by a guard's outstretched, white-gloved hand and waved toward nearby police. A man with a crewcut and an Adidas jacket inspected the letter.

"Listen, you should go to the petitions office and report to them," he said.

"I've been there," Harms said patiently.

"You can go to the Supreme Court ..."

"I've been there."

A police van dropped off an officer curious to see Harms. The back of the van was full of Chinese, petitioners or protesters, with tattered clothing and distressed faces.

They peered through the barred windows at Harms as the van drove away.

The Associated Press

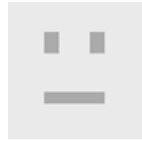
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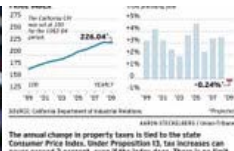
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