

History reclassified as state secret: the case of Xu Zerong

In 2002, historian Xu Zerong was sentenced to 13 years in jail for leaking state secrets. The classification of the leaked materials as "top secret" came only after he had been sentenced, writes Timothy Garton Ash.



Xu Zerong (AKA David Tsui), an Oxford-educated historian based in Hong Kong, was detained and later arrested by the Chinese authorities in 2000. He was accused of leaking state secrets by sending copies of materials about the Korean War to a South Korean scholar and in January 2002, [sentenced](#) to 13 years in jail. The classification of those materials, from the 1950s, as "top secret" came only after the court in Shenzhen had jailed him. The court also accused him of selling unauthorised Hong Kong publications in mainland China.

According to Xu, the real reason for his arrest and imprisonment is related to a [magazine article](#) he had written in 2000 on a radio transmission station set up in Hunan Province, China, to broadcast propaganda for the Communist Party of Malaya in the 1970s and early 1980s. He thought that article had infuriated Beijing, although he [believed](#) that his work was "purely scholarly, without any link to any organisation or social movement". During his time in prison he could only read limited materials due to restrictions, but had completed a book to point out the failings of Marxist theory. He was allowed to bring the manuscript out when he was [released](#) in June 2011.

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