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# USING OUR CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS TO ADVOCATE FOR OUR FAMILY MEMBERS

## An interview with Fu Xiang, wife of Yang Jianli

By Yi Ping

*When a loved one becomes a political prisoner, family members often find themselves taking up the role of advocate to reunite their families. Fu Xiang speaks with Ren Yu Ren Quan editor Yi Ping about how her husband Yang Jianli's involvement in the democracy movement and his imprisonment has affected and transformed their family.*

**Yi Ping (Yi):** *Thank you for accepting our interview! Now that Yang Jianli has been released and is back in the United States, I imagine you and your children must be tremendously happy. I would like you to talk about how you felt when you saw your husband upon his arrival.*

**Fu Xiang (Fu):** Of course I was happy, very very happy. Every single day for a long time, I've been looking forward to this moment. On the day of his return, I received a phone call from Senator Barney Frank's office out of the blue, and was told that Jianli would be arriving at the Los Angeles airport in an hour. It was 10 a.m. then. I was so pleasantly surprised that I jumped up and down. My daughter was in China at the time, so I went to pick him up with my son and a couple of friends at the Boston airport at 8 p.m. The moment I saw him, I breathed a sigh of relief.

**Yi:** *You haven't seen each other in five years, is that right?*

**Fu:** We did see each other in between. I went to China three times and saw him twice. Jianli was arrested in April 2002. I returned to China in May to visit him, but wasn't allowed into the country.

**Yi:** *Why didn't they let you through customs? For what reason?*

**Fu:** At the time, the status of Jianli's case was still unclear. They claimed that they stopped me because "state secrets" were involved. The next two times, I brought my son with me. The first time I saw Jianli, then, must have been in January 2005; I can't really remember. It was so difficult arranging to see him in person. It took a long time to apply, and the visa was only good for seven days. In short, it was a lot of trouble and came with all kinds of restrictions.

**Yi:** *Now you must feel relieved. Your voice is filled with happiness.*

**Fu:** Yes! Yes! I am truly filled with great joy indeed!

**Yi:** *Yang Jianli has PhD degrees from two famous schools, Berkeley and Harvard. Had he not participated in the democracy movement, he would have had a great future in either America or back in China. Involvement in the democracy movement is dangerous in China and brings trouble, even if you are overseas. For example, you wouldn't be able to go back to China, and you can jeopardize your family in China, not to mention that it is harder to make a living when you get involved in the movement. When Yang Jianli chose to devote himself to the movement, he sacrificed a lot. Did you support his choice at first? Did you ever have disagreements with each other over the issue?*

**Fu:** I am quite traditional. When it comes to my husband's career and choices, I respect his decisions in general.

**Yi:** *You are a typical virtuous wife and caring mother.*

**Fu:** I can't say that I'm a virtuous wife and caring mother, but I do admire Jianli greatly. I respect and believe in his thoughts, his judgment and his ability. The only thing that concerns me about his participation in the democracy movement is the effect on his health and safety. In terms of financial difficulties, I don't really care that much. Jianli has a good eye on things and is a very able person. For that reason, I normally don't question his decisions. The democracy movement he endorses is a good thing. It is so exceptional that he can have the heart for it. Jianli comes from a rural county; he has a special passion for poor people and the peasants. He understands what kind of life they are living. He strives for a better China, where its people can have a better life. If I tried to stop him from doing that, wouldn't I be too selfish? I support Jianli's career.

**Yi:** *I remember back in 1989, Yang Jianli rushed back to China from America to participate in that democracy movement and witnessed the June 4th incident. Did you agree with his decision to go back? What were your thoughts?*

**Fu:** In 1989, Yang Jianli was getting a PhD in mathematics at Berkley. He was elected by the Chinese students there to go back and support the democracy movement, mainly by delivering donations to students and workers on the Square. I had butterflies in my stomach when he left. It was, after all, a political movement and the military had been marshaled. But we didn't expect them to open fire. Jianli went back on around May 20. At the time, the most serious incident we knew of was the police hitting people with police sticks. We saw a woman bleeding on television. Even that was enough to outrage us, so how could we possibly have imagined that they would shoot people? On the night of June 4th, we saw on television that some students were shot dead in the Square; Jianli was in the Square with students from Beijing Normal University. I was so worried that I kept calling our mentor at Beijing Normal University, where Jianli lived in the dorm. But Jianli didn't return for the whole night, not until 10 a.m. the next morning. I was worried to death.

**Yi:** *It must have been horrible to think what might have happened.*

**Fu Xiang, along with daughter Anita Yang, look over family photos in their Rockville, Md. home on April 21, 2003. Photo credits: AP Photo/Matthew Cavanaugh.**



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**Fu:** Jianli returned after 10 a.m. in the morning.

**Yi:** *So you were relieved.*

**Fu:** I was only somewhat relieved. There were many rumors at the time; some said that a military truck was going to drive into Beijing Normal University and carry out a massacre on campus. As long as Jianli was still there, there was no way I could stop worrying. Fortunately, Jianli came back two or three days later. He was on standby at the airport, since it was impossible to get a ticket. He was lucky. He had secured his return visa to America before he went to China. Because of it, he was able to return quickly and later testify before Congress regarding June 4th.

He analyzed the situation and his plans with examples, thinking through the possibilities. He thought that he would not be arrested, but even if he were, it wouldn't be for long. He had been making preparations for so many years with such careful and detailed plans, not to mention that what he did was the right thing—what else could I say? Even if I was reluctant, I could do nothing but let him go.

**Yi:** *June 4th changed Yang Jianli's life path.*

**Fu:** It's all because of June 4th.

**Yi:** *Since then, he gave up on pursuing his math career and devoted himself to the democracy movement.*

**Fu:** Yes, it all changed after June 4th. Before that, he had always wanted to become a math professor.

**Yi:** *Yang Jianli went back to China in 2002. He was already a well-known dissident by then. It was dangerous for him to go back. There was a high risk of being arrested. As his wife and the mother of his children, you must have been reluctant to see him act in the face of that risk. But*

*Mr. Yang told me that it was you who helped him pack before he left. In other words, in the end, you were still supportive. How did you feel at the time? What convinced you to let him go back despite the risks?*

**Fu:** Jianli had wanted to go back for many years. But back then, all our kids were very young, so it was hard to leave home like that. This time before he left, he made a huge effort trying to convince me. He analyzed the situation and his plans with examples, thinking through the possibilities. He thought that he would not be arrested, but even if he were, it wouldn't be for long. He had been making preparations for so many years with such careful and detailed plans, not to mention that what he did was the right thing—what else could I say? Even if I was reluctant, I could do nothing but let him go. I remember when we were packing before he left, I said, "It's cold, bring a sweater!"

**Yi:** *Before he left, you never thought he would be sent to prison?*

**Fu:** To be honest, I was of course concerned, but I wasn't exactly mentally prepared. He had a concrete plan: how to enter, how to exit, what to do in the case of an accident. He even gave me a list of names that I should contact in case something happened to him. In the first ten days he was in China, he called me every day. That was the most torturous ten days. My sister took care of our children for me, and I anxiously waited for Jianli's phone calls every single day. I couldn't wait to learn if he was still safe or if he had been arrested.

**Yi:** *When did you learn that Jianli was arrested?*

**Fu:** A couple of hours after he was taken away. At 11 p.m. that night, I got a phone call from his friend—the friend didn't reveal his name. He told me that Jianli wanted him to send a message that he was in trouble. He was taken away at Kunming Airport and asked me to find ways to rescue him. I freaked out, not knowing what to do. An hour later, Jianli called me and said he was locked up in a room of a hotel close to Kunming Airport. They took all his forms of identification. They knew who he was and would probably transfer him somewhere else soon. There would be a period of time that he wouldn't be able to get in touch with me. At 10

a.m. the next morning, we talked to each other over the phone again. He was taken away an hour later. After that, I lost total contact with Jianli for a year and a half.

**Yi:** *Not a single clue of information in a year and a half?*

**Fu:** At the time, there were all kinds of rumors. Some said he was locked up in Kunming, some said he was in Beijing, and some pointed to Shandong, in the northeast. But there was one official report on Jianli's arrest on April 26. On May 10, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China made a statement: "There is a person who claims to be Yang Jianli who entered the country illegally. The Public Security Bureau is looking into the case." When I heard this, I was a little relieved. At least we knew he was in the hands of the government. He didn't go missing.

**Yi:** *The worst fear would be of his secret disappearance. If he went missing, you would have no idea what they could do to him.*

**Fu:** As soon as I learned the information, I went straight to the U.S. State Department, who immediately tried to communicate with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the case through the U.S. embassy in China.

**Yi:** *After Jianli was arrested, you tried your best to get him released. But did you have any expectations as to how long he would be in prison?*

**Fu:** I thought he would come out fairly soon. It was around the time when President Hu Jintao was about to visit the U.S.—good timing to get Jianli out of prison. For two weeks, I lived in Washington, D.C., running around between Congress and the State Department. I met with the assistant Secretary of State in charge of human rights related issues. He told me to give him two days, that there might be some hope. I thought it was resolved. Days later, I was notified that the effort wasn't going smoothly: China refused to release Yang Jianli in the name of anti-terrorism. The U.S. is fighting terrorism; China is fighting terrorism, too. All those who carried falsified identification were to be punished strictly. I burst into tears when I heard this.

I didn't expect Jianli to be locked up for five years. I sought out every possible way to secure his release, hop-

ing that he would be freed soon. I tried so hard every single day, and now it's been five years already. Had I known that he would serve for five full years, I may not have had that much motivation.

**Yi:** *In China, there are a good number of political prisoners. What do you think is the biggest challenge for the family of those prisoners who are in prison? When Jianli was in prison, what was the most difficult thing for you?*

**Fu:** I think every political prisoner's family situation is different, and they face different challenges. It is also not the same between domestic China and overseas. For example, it must be much more difficult for a family in China. If the husband is in prison and the wife is laid off, making ends meet becomes a struggle. Illness of family members—parents of either side or children—is another example of these additional challenges. Also, discrimination from Chinese society against families of political prisoners itself is an invisible burden and torture. Based on these considerations, we are a lot better off being here in America.

Ever since Jianli was arrested, I have been under financial pressure, losing his income while having to cover the sizeable expense of running around trying to get him out of prison. Nevertheless, I had a job and we had friends who helped. Therefore, our finances were not a huge problem. The biggest challenge was our children's education. This broke Jianli's and my heart. When Jianli was arrested, our daughter was nine and our son was six. They lost a father's care and instruction at this stage of their development. And this is different from the situation of a divorced or separated family. For children from such families, their parents are simply separated: they are still able to see their father and spend time with him once in a while. No matter how great a mother is, she will never be able to replace a father figure. Without education from a father, a child's growth is flawed. This can have lifelong effects, that can never be erased.

**Yi:** *What specific impact did Jianli's arrest have on your children?*

**Fu:** Jianli's absence had a larger impact on our son. Sons crave fathers more. Without his father's protection, he lost his sense of security. He became sensitive, intimi-

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dated, and overly attached to me. Compared to his peers, our son is more naïve and matures more slowly. The first time I went to China to visit Jianli, I put our son at my sister's and didn't dare tell him. When I wasn't there, he became very anxious and couldn't sleep at night. Most children are not like this. That was the time when the Chinese government wouldn't let me in the country, so I came back two days later.

**When Jianli was arrested, our daughter was nine and our son was six. They lost a father's care and instruction at this stage of their development.**

**Yi:** *When Yang Jianli was in prison, you did a lot of advocacy and rescue work for him. I read a lot about it. For prisoners of conscience, outside advocacy is very important, including the family's efforts. What kind of advocacy work did you do for him? What kind of results did your efforts produce? From your experience through these years, how do you think the wife of a political prisoner should advocate for his release?*

**Fu:** There are many things you can do. Endless letters, faxes and emails to draft, a great amount of information to get out; you will find it impossible to finish them even if you work hard everyday. For these past few years, rescuing Jianli has become a major part of my life. I went to the U.S. Congress and the State Department frequently to meet with senators and report on developments in the case and on how he was doing in prison. I also brought my kids, Jianli's parents and sisters with me, holding press conferences with our legal consultants, Jerome Cohen, Jared Genser, and Senator Barney Frank, Representatives Christopher Cox, and Michael Capuano. I also wrote letters to President Bush, Secretary Powell, and Secretary Rice to get their help in putting pressure on the Chinese government. Twice when I visited Jianli in Beijing, I also paid visits to the American ambassador to China, Mr. Clark Randt. On the other hand, I also tried to get help from American civil society—churches, schools and companies—asking them to write petition letters to the American and Chinese governments. When Premier Wen Jiabao was visiting Harvard, I turned to

Jianli's mentor, who quickly organized a signed letter with many other Harvard professors, pleading for China to release Yang Jianli. The president of Harvard brought up this request when meeting with Wen Jiabao. I contacted various international human rights organizations, hoping that they could advocate within the international community. For example, I delivered two speeches at Amnesty International, both with an attendance of thousands of people. I met with head individuals from Human Rights Watch, Human Rights in China, Dui Hua Foundation, Laogai Research Foundation, Wei Jingsheng Foundation, and Chinese Democracy Education Foundation. I kept in touch with them so that we could get prompt help when in need. I also communicated frequently with Jianping's defense lawyer, Mr. Mo Shaoping. Our whole family is grateful for what he did. He was the only person who was able to see Jianli in person before the family was allowed to visit Jianli. Mr. Mo made a huge effort as the messenger between Jianli and our family before the judgment came out, which brought us tremendous comfort. Thanks to constant contact with the media, major American newspapers all reported on Yang Jianli's case, even more so among overseas Chinese media. In addition, I protested against the Chinese government. During the spring festival that year, our whole family, including Jianli's parents, went to the Chinese embassy and sat at the door on a hunger strike.

I am not a social person to begin with. I had never gotten involved with Jianli's work. But for these years, I've seen a lot and met a large number of people.

**Yi:** *All families of political prisoners hope that their beloved family member will be released soon. But many of them lack experience and are reluctant to seek help from the media or to advocate to the outside world. They especially resist contacting overseas organizations or people, fearing that they will be deemed hostile to the government and experience retaliation, resulting in greater pain and a longer term in prison for their beloved family members.*

**Fu:** It's very natural that they have such concerns. This is not only the case for families in China; we had similar fears initially, even when in America. Jianli was tortured while in detention. We did not utter a word to the outside world, fearing that Jianli would be retaliated against. However, Jianli insisted that we continue

protesting and petitioning, urging us to reveal the truth to the world. And so we did. The prison felt pressured by law and the media. The prison consequently apologized to Jianli and promised not to let anything like this happen again. Jianli wasn't ill-treated ever since.

We have to learn to fight, speak up and protect ourselves with the law. If our family members are persecuted or unfairly tried, we must fight through petitions, protests, and by finding legal representatives, getting the media's help, writing open letters or seeking help from the international community. All these methods are useful. We should have nothing to fear. Once they make a criminal of a member of our family, do you really think they will reduce the penalty simply because the family is obedient? If we advocate in a nonviolent way with the rights provided by the Constitution, what should we be scared of?

**Yi:** *Indeed. Many families of political prisoners think that keeping silent and doing whatever the government instructs will win some sympathy from the government and their loved ones will be better treated in prison. The truth is completely the opposite. The more intimidated and obedient the family acts, the more harassment and torture their family members will receive in prison. They will think they can do anything to you if you are quiet.*

**Fu:** All our methods of advocacy are legitimate rights that the law renders to the families of political prisoners. Aren't we all talking about safeguarding rights? As families of political prisoners, we should protect and exercise these rights, too.

**Yi:** *What you just said was great! I hope all families of political prisoners can hear it. I heard that Jianli is thinking of starting a project overseas for rescuing Chinese political prisoners. It is an important and practical matter. I wish him success and hope that people from all walks of life can support him. One component of the project should be assisting families of political prisoners.*



Representative Christopher Cox looks on as Fu Xiang, wife of Chinese dissident Yang Jianli, relates details of her husband's condition during a news conference in Washington, D.C., on January 19, 2005. Photo credits: AP Photo/Kevin Wolf.

**Fu:** Jianli's personal experience was his inspiration for this project.

**Yi:** *It is a necessary thing to do and we should all be supportive. So many sacrifices go unseen by people throughout this process of the democratic advancement of China. There is a family behind every political prisoner in China. Their wives, children, parents, brothers and sisters undertake tremendous work and pains every single day with their tears and blood. This is the most substantial sacrifice and contribution pushing China's development forward. I think the Chinese should not forget those people, either now or in future.*

**Fu:** Your words touch me deeply. It was worth it, going through all the pain.

**Yi:** Thank you! Thank all the wives and families of political prisoners!

Translated by Isle Arthur

This interview was conducted over the telephone in the U.S. in mid-October, 2007. To read about the perspectives and experiences of Yang Jianli, see page 57.