

# The Harvard Crimson ONLINE EDITION

## **Wife of Jailed Activist Keeps Hope**

HMS researcher-lobbyist fights for husband's return

By Romina Garber, Crimson Staff Writer

March 31, 2003

Christina X. Fu takes out two Ziploc bags full of pictures of a man and two young children mugging for the camera.

One of the pictures shows a younger Fu with her daughter, her son, his friend and the life-size Disney dog, Pluto, at Walt Disney World. Fu, smiling broadly, looks straight at the camera—and at her husband, Yang Jianli, who is behind it.

Another captures Yang and Fu in Harvard Yard, with their son Aaron wrapping his arms tightly around Fu's leg.

As Fu shuffles through her coveted stack of photographs, suddenly the home photographs end and instead there are pictures of a man—the same father and husband—standing still in the midst of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest, speaking to a crowd from a podium. Then there is a picture of Yang standing still in the midst of a crowd hoisting posters. Then a blurry one of bloody bodies lying in the street.

Last April, Fu's two worlds—her husband's political activism and her tranquil family life—crashed into each other. Yang, a graduate of the Kennedy School of Government (KSG), was arrested after illegally returning to China using fake documents in pursuit of his mission of fighting for democracy in his home country. Caught with another person's passport after entering the country despite being on a Chinese blacklist forbidding him from visiting, Yang has not been seen or heard from since last April.

Without her husband, Fu, a healthcare policy researcher at Harvard Medical School (HMS), has not only become a single mother, but the leader of a team of lawyers, politicians, friends and colleagues fighting to find Yang and bring him home.

While she continues to work at HMS and care for Aaron, 7, and Anita, 10, Fu makes monthly pilgrimages to Washington, D.C., to lobby for the attention of the government, refusing to let members of Congress forget about her missing husband.

Advocating for her husband's return has forced Fu—a demure, supportive wife—to boldly delve into the intense, political side of Yang's life she was mostly oblivious to before his arrest.

Now, she has experienced the frustration with the Chinese government that Yang had been dealing with for the past decade—and become a vocal, political activist in the legacy of her husband.

“She so quickly was able to mobilize inner strength that took her from not knowing very much about the American political process to becoming in a very short space of time an advocate,” says Julie Seavy, Fu’s friend from church.

After almost a year of lobbying, though, nothing has been uncovered about Yang’s whereabouts—or if he will ever return. But Fu is not giving up. “My friends tell me, ‘You’re so brave!’” Fu says. “I don’t feel that way, though. I don’t see it as a bravery thing—it’s just when you have a problem, you deal with it. Like when you have a leaky pipe, you fix it.”

### **The Last Call**

At 11 p.m. on April 26, 2002, Fu received an anonymous phone call from a man who told her that the Chinese police had arrested her husband and taken him to a hotel. Fu says he had been in China for a week, travelling through five cities, running and hiding from the authorities, when he went to the airport to buy an airline ticket to go back home.

Yang had been placed on China’s blacklist after he participated in the Tiananmen protest in 1989, and the Chinese government has repeatedly barred him from entering the country. At midnight on April 27, Yang called Fu from his hotel room. Fu remembers Yang as sounding very tired and she urged him to get sleep during the night. Fu learned from the anonymous phone call that Chinese authorities had discovered Yang had fake identification and five police officers took him to a hotel room. The officers searched his baggage and then he was kept in the room with two officers guarding him, according to Fu. The two spoke again at 11 a.m. that morning. “What should I do?” Fu remembers asking him. “Call the people on the list I gave you,” she says he told her. “Whatever happens, you take care of the children.” That was the last time Fu spoke with her husband. She does not know where he is, how the government is treating him or if he will ever come home.

More than 11 months later, Yang has still not been formally charged with any crime. Fu says she has learned that the Chinese government is investigating Yang for using a false passport—and other undisclosed charges.

### **Mobilizing Support**

After speaking with Yang the first night, Fu jumped into action. Fu called everyone on the list of 12 names Yang had left behind in case of an emergency. The list contained the names of a few professors, a thesis adviser and another Chinese dissident, all of whom started to make calls themselves. In case he did not return within two months, Yang had also left two letters for Fu to send out: one to a colleague where he worked—the Foundation for China in the 21st Century—and another to a friend.

Yang and Fu's church began to run an urgent notice about Yang's disappearance in its weekly newsletter and distributed pins and magnets displaying Yang's picture, encouraging parishioners to help in the quest.

Fu said her and Yang's connection to Harvard has also helped generate publicity and support for his return.

34 Harvard Faculty members have sent out letters of support, including University President Lawrence H. Summers.

But Fu herself has taken on the brunt of the work in trying to bring Yang back to the U.S. A few weeks after his arrest, Fu tried to enter China to find her husband. Chinese immigration officers said she posed a threat to the country and forced her to return to America. Soon after she lost touch with him, Fu began to make trips to Washington, balancing care of her children and work at HMS with visits to Capitol Hill. "She can teach a course on how to lobby the Hill because she does it with such persistence and intelligence and humility and gratitude that it's impossible to ignore her," says Daniel McGlinchey, a spokesperson for Rep. Barney Frank '61, D-Mass. "She worked with both the House and the Senate, both democrats and republicans, both the legislative branch and the executive branch, with such grace that they adore her."

Frank has been one of Yang's most ardent supporters and he and McGlinchey have been working very closely with Fu. "What's most impressive is she had no background whatsoever about the American political system and has become a master of the legislative process," says Jared Genser, Yang's classmate at KSG and his pro bono lawyer. "She is a much more effective advocate on behalf of her husband because...she's articulate and...people will feel much more guilty about not returning her calls than mine."

Genser says he could not ask for a better client than Fu. "I personally have been inspired by her strength," Genser says. "She's going through such a tough time but she's still always asking what's the next thing she can do."

## **A Transformation**

For Fu, a shy, softspoken woman, becoming a political activist has meant both coming out of her shell and entering a realm of Yang's life she had never seen before. "Like a lot of marriages, he did his work and she did her work," her friend Seavy says. "She's such an accomplished academic in her own right and she takes care of the children, so she didn't get involved in his work...This has been an incredible awakening for her as to what his work was."

While Fu always had to balance her job with taking care of the children, her friends and colleagues say the battle for Yang has brought out a new, bolder side in her. "She has had to go from being someone who is quiet and somewhat shy, to having to be so persistent in order to be in the face of all these congressmen and not be disappointed by

the amount of persistence it takes,” Seavy says. “She’s so strong and it’s amazing the hours she’s putting into this in addition to being a full-time working woman.” Even before Yang left for China, Fu was the core of the family, caring for the children and financially supporting the family when Yang was studying at KSG. “She was always the breadwinner in the household because as a student, he was always into his causes,” says Nancy Smith, Fu’s colleague at HMS. “So she was the breadwinner before and she is it now.”

And Fu avoided interfering in her husband’s work life, preferring to remain his most ardent supporter—even when he told her about his risky plan to return to China. Fu hid her husband’s arrest from their family for 10 days—and ended up defending Yang’s trip to her sister-in-law when she asked how Fu could have let Yang go. “As a wife, I could only make it easy for him,” Fu says. “I don’t fight him—he’s a man, he knows what he must do and I support him. I know how important his family is for him but he also has something higher than this.”

Now, Fu has become as politically active as Yang once was—on top of mothering two children with no father. Fu says her son Aaron constantly asks about Yang. “He always says, ‘He told me he was coming home, why isn’t he here? Does Dad have enemies? Is an enemy keeping him?’” Fu says. “One night he cried that he really misses daddy and said he didn’t think he could wait any longer.”

The day after this conversation, Aaron’s school called Fu to say he was sick. When she got to the school to pick him up, she found Aaron completely healthy. He had pretended to be ill so that Fu, not one of her friends who had been picking him up lately, would come get him.

A Superwoman?

Even though Fu has tried to appear outwardly strong, Yang’s disappearance has shaken her. She became depressed after Yang’s arrest and was given a two month disability leave from Harvard. She says she has trouble concentrating at work and relies on the flexibility HMS has given her to travel to Washington frequently. And while Fu has been battling for the safe return of Yang, she has also been occupied with lobbying the Chinese government to allow her father to come to the U.S. They have refused to allow him to leave China because of Yang’s blacklist status, Fu says. Fu’s mother, who was already in the U.S. before Yang’s fateful trip, died without seeing Fu’s father again because China would not allow him to travel to the U.S.

“My only regret is that my father couldn’t come here because he couldn’t get a passport to travel because my husband is blacklisted so they are afraid he will brainwash him,” Fu says. “So my parents were separated for three years and never saw each other again.” Fu and Yang both converted to Christianity in 1991—rejecting the atheism they had grown up with in Communist China—and Fu says she has found herself relying on her church more than ever in the last year.

After her first couple of experiences in church, she started rethinking the atheism of her youth. “In church, I felt this God is really eternal—the same God through the generations—and someone we could always go to,” Fu says. In getting through her battle with the Chinese government, she has turned for strength to the religion shunned in her childhood. But even with her spiritual faith, Fu says she still finds herself overwhelmed. “We had a conversation right before Christmas and we talked a little about what we would say to her husband when he comes off the plane in the U.S. and I told her I’d say to him that he’d better not do this again and we both laughed,” Genser says. “It helps to release the stress that she and her children live through every day.”

“No matter how much she works there’s always the sense that she hasn’t done enough,” Seavy says. At the bottom of her stack of pictures is a close-up of Yang’s face with his name displayed across the bottom on the television screen in a news segment. Fu looks at the picture and seems unsure of how much longer she will have to wait. “He’ll get out soon,” she says.