

'Profound fear': Government must help this Australian writer and his wife

By Chongyi Feng

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Early Sunday morning, I had a long phone call with Yuan Ruijuan, wife of the detained Australian writer and democracy advocate Yang Hengjun. She was in China and due to be interviewed by the ABC at 11 am. At 10.12 am Chinese local time I received a message from her that she had been taken away by seven or eight secret police officers in two cars.

I was stunned, though I should not have been surprised. Several weeks ago, Yuan received a call from the secret police asking for a meeting. She refused on the grounds she had suffered from serious depression.

With profound fear, she left her parents' home in Shanghai and went into hiding while I explored whether she could go into the Australian embassy or a consulate for protection on the grounds she was a permanent resident of Australia and wife of an Australian citizen.

That request was declined. I asked whether she could be escorted by an Australian consul back to Australia or simply to the airport. This request was rejected on the same grounds: consul protection only applies to an Australian citizen. Yuan was left to try her own luck.

On Thursday evening she went to a nearby airport and bought a ticket on the spot for a flight to Sydney. She was blocked by the border security officers from boarding.

Exhausted, she went to another place of safety and we discussed other options. Yuan feared secret police would seek to hold her as a "hostage" to extract a false confession from Yang.

Yang Hengjun was abducted by communist China's secret police and has been held in a secret place without access to a lawyer and guarded around the clock in his cell with the light on 24 hours a day.

Yet, the Australian government has maintained a soft line with the Chinese authorities. The government should have demanded Yang's immediate release from the outset. A democratic government is obligated to protect its citizens and their direct relatives from persecution for political communication by an illiberal regime.

The next fortnight is critical. Yang can only be kept without formal charge for up to six months. This period expires July 18. The Chinese authorities will either lay a charge, or release him because of insufficient evidence. To my knowledge, they have no solid evidence against him nor been able to extract a confession. Yuan was released after two hours of interrogation.

The Australian government, public and the international community must pull out all stops to help this unfortunate couple. Their basic human rights have been violated by the Chinese authorities.

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