

CHINA USED DECEPTION TO GET ITS HANDS ON REFUGEES

Detained by Thai police, they were told to sign papers to get to Canada. It was not where they ended up **By Dane Halpin**

They came disguised as UN officers. Entering a Bangkok detention centre on Nov 4, the Chinese officials paid a collection of fines that would allow Jiang Yefei and Dong Guangping to be transferred to a different facility.

With help from Thai immigration authorities, they then met with Mr Jiang and Mr Dong and presented them with a document. The men were told the papers, written in Thai, would help them resettle in Canada.

"But they were not. They just lied," said Chu Ling, Mr Jiang's wife. "We found out later that they had signed papers agreeing to be deported back to China."

News of the visit soon made its way to the UNHCR. It triggered an urgent response.

On Nov 6, refugee status was granted to Mr Dong and his family, as well as to Mrs Chu. Mr Jiang had already obtained refugee status in April last year.

On Nov 11, Canada offered both men and their families political asylum.

But late on Nov 12, Mr Jiang and Mr Dong were taken from their cells. Within hours, they were on a plane and "forcibly repatriated" to China.

THE CONFESSION

The next time Mrs Chu saw her husband was earlier this month, as he was paraded on Chinese state television making what appeared to be a scripted confession.

Mr Jiang was arrested for "assisting others to illegally cross the national border", the CCTV news report said. Mr Dong was charged with fleeing China while awaiting trial for sedition.

Showing signs of fatigue and speaking slowly, Mr Jiang confessed to the charge. But Mrs Chu says the video shows her husband had been tortured.

"One of his eyes was hurt, and couldn't be opened entirely. You could see his pain when he was talking," she said.

"A friend of ours who had been in prison for 13 years for political reasons, he saw a lot of people who were tortured in prison. They were just like Jiang Yefei on TV. He could see that [Jiang] had internal injuries."

Fighting through tears, and with her voice hoarse from illness and weeks of emotional trauma, Mrs Chu last week provided a harrowing account of her experiences with Chinese authorities and the events that led up to the arrest and deportation of her husband from Thailand.

She was speaking publicly for the first time alongside Mr Dong's wife Gu Shuhua, and his 15-year-old daughter Dong Xuerui, in Toronto, where they arrived on Nov 18.

DRAWING ATTENTION

Thai immigration officers came for the men without warning. They knocked on the door of Mr Jiang's home in Bangkok on the afternoon of Oct 28 and took the two activists away.

"He was arrested by the Thai government because of his drawings of political cartoons," said Mrs Chu, referring to a series of drawings by Mr Jiang mocking Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Mr Jiang had been in trouble for his cartoons before. In 2008, he was jailed for drawings which were highly critical of the government. He fled to Thailand later that year, after hearing he was to be arrested again, and had been living in Bangkok since then while his refugee application was being processed.

Last year, however, he took a renewed interest in political cartoons, this time



RIDICULED: A series of manipulated images Jiang Yefei created mocking Chinese president Xi Jinping.



PHOTOS: WWW.MINGJINGNEWS.COM



MAKING THEIR VOICES HEARD: Federation for a Democratic China president Sheng Xue supports family members Dong Xuerui, second left, Gu Shuhua and Chu Ling.

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

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I am a refugee approved by the UN, China cannot take me back.

**JIANG YEFEI
CHINESE DISSIDENT**

turning his attention to the Chinese president. The images apparently caught the attention of Beijing.

"From 2014 to 2015 was the peak of drawing these pictures. For that reason, there have been dozens of articles on the internet defaming him. He has also received phone calls from people threatening him."

Mrs Chu said her husband's sister in Chengdu had recently received a call from police there, delivering a warning for her brother to "be careful in Thailand because we are working on his case".

But Mr Jiang was undaunted. "I am a refugee approved by the UN, China cannot take me back," he said, according to his wife.

SMUGGLED OUT

About 10pm on Nov 12, Mr Jiang and Mr Dong were removed from their cells and told to get dressed.

"I heard from [people in] the prison that it was tense when they were taken away.

They were told to put on their [civilian] clothes. Normally when you are switched to a different cell, you don't need to put on your clothes," Mrs Chu said.

"Jiang Yefei also felt this was not normal, so he called out [for help]. He was trying to pass a message out of the prison so people could go to the airport to rescue them."

The message did not make its way to Mrs Chu for nearly three days. Desperate, she contacted the UNHCR for more information, but the refugee agency had not heard anything.

Thai officials initially denied anything was amiss, saying only that the men had been "isolated, and were not allowed to be interviewed," according to Mrs Chu. Later that night, however, she saw a series of emails confirming that they had been taken back to China.

"I believe that they [the UN] have done a lot to try and rescue them, but the Chinese government forces are beyond our imagination," she said.

"We don't want any of this to happen. We just want our husbands back."

ON THE RUN

Gu Shuhua, Mr Dong's wife, said her family had suffered years of routine harassment, intimidation and torture at the hands of Chinese government officials, and feared what would happen now that her husband was back in custody.

Mr Dong, a former police officer in the port city of Guangzhou, began his political activism in 1999, on the 10th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, by handing out flyers in Beijing.

"He was terminated as a police officer in 1999, and then the next year, in October, the security officials came to our home for a total investigation," Mrs Gu said.

He would serve three years in prison for "trying to overthrow the government". But after his release in 2004, the police harassment continued, and so did Mr Dong's activism.

"He was always tortured by the local

police, and threatened by them," Mrs Gu said. In May last year, she said, "my daughter witnessed everything as they [the police] searched our home".

"She suffered so much mentally, and she started to fear many things, and couldn't go to school for a year."

Mr Dong was detained for eight and a half months as he awaited trial. On Feb 11, he was released on bail, and the family was forced to make a difficult decision.

"We felt that ... we could not survive, that we could not go any further and also that affects our child. So we decided to go out of China," she said.

They had been here just two months before Mr Dong was arrested.

BREAKING THE RULES

Both Mrs Gu and Mrs Chu say they are furious with the Thai government for its complicity in sending their husbands back to an uncertain fate in China.

"We don't know why the Thai government would deport them, as they already had UN refugee status."

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has denied his government knew the men were refugees. But on Nov 10, three days before their deportation, the UNHCR said it wrote to the government to say the men had been granted protected status.

"This is not the first time that the Thailand government has done this," said Majed El Shafie, president and founder of human rights group One Free World International.

He pointed to the deportation in June of 109 Uighur refugees despite fears they would face prosecution on their return to China.

"The Thailand government very clearly decided to break all their international rules, all their human rights values," he said. "It took the wrong side of history."



DECEIVED AND DETAINED: Jiang Yefei, left, and Dong Guangping after they had been forcibly repatriated to China.



PHOTOS: WWW.YOUTUBE.COM



WELL SUITED: An employee arranges a burgundy wool tweed outfit, part of the collection of former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher during an auction preview.

Thatcher's expensive passion for fashion on show

EDOUARD GUIHAIRE

>> The British public have been invited to share Margaret Thatcher's "secret passion" for fashion ahead of a sale of clothes worn by the former premier known as the Iron Lady.

Christie's auction house in London will put the clothes under the hammer on Tuesday.

It is also selling 200 personal items belonging to Britain's only female premier, in an online auction that runs until Wednesday.

The lots, owned by Thatcher's family, could fetch a combined total of around £500,000 (27.5 million baht), said Orlando Rock, president of Christie's UK.

The auction house is used to dealing with works of art that regularly sell for more than 10 times that amount.

"It is quite unusual for us that the vast majority of lots are affordable to a very, very large number of people," said Mr Rock.

Some of the most famous items, including the dresses she wore when first meeting Nelson Mandela and when dancing with Ronald Reagan, went on public display at Christie's on Friday.

The auctioneer said the collection would



IRON LADY IN RED: A red prime ministerial dispatch box used by Margaret Thatcher.

give "unique insights into the Iron Lady." "She had a secret passion for clothes," curator Meredith Etherington-Smith said of Thatcher, a dressmaker's daughter born Margaret Hilda Roberts in Grantham, central England, in 1925.

"From a very young age, she and her sister used to make clothes," she added.

"When she became the first woman prime minister she used clothes as a way of emphasising her power.

"Every time there was a photo opportunity, she was beautifully dressed, immaculately coiffured, with a nice handbag, and she looked what she was — a powerful person."

Historic lots include the blue suit she wore in a 1990 parliament debate on the expansion of the European Monetary Union, in which she uttered the now immortal line: "No. No. No."

Thatcher went to great lengths to ensure she wore colours appropriate to any country she was visiting — green, a symbol of hope, in Poland, and blue and cream in Israel to mirror the country's flag.

"It was all very carefully thought out," said Ms Etherington-Smith.

"At her party conferences, she always wore a very sharp blue suit," the colour of her Conservative Party.

"She never wore red in the UK because that's the colour of socialism but she did wear it in America because that's the colour of Ronald Reagan's Republican party," the curator said.

Her "special relationship" with US president and fellow free-market reformer

Reagan is a focal point of the collection. Items include a statue of a bald eagle, the symbol of the United States that Reagan gave her as a gift, which is expected to sell for between £5,000 and £8,000.

One of the most emblematic pieces is the iconic red leather briefcase that contained the prime minister's confidential documents, which is expected to fetch between £3,000 and £5,000.

Other items include signed copies of some of her most famous speeches, her wedding dress, her handbags — which used to strike fear into colleagues during cabinet meetings — and jewellery.

The items, proceeds of which will go to her children and grandchildren, were initially offered to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the world's largest museum of decorative arts and design, but they decided against showing them.

Thatcher was in power from 1979 to 1990. Her privatisations and deregulation helped turn around Britain's ailing economy.

But she remains a divisive figure, particularly in Britain's hard-hit working-class heartlands.

She died on April 8, 2013 and received a ceremonial funeral attended by Queen Elizabeth II. AFP

PHOTOS: REUTERS/ANDAP