**From Virginia Suburb, a Dissident Chinese Writer Continues His Mission By EDWARD WONG**

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Edward Wong

FAIRFAX, Va. — If the place that the Chinese writer Yu Jie and his family live in nowadays, a modest house in this pleasant Northern Virginia suburb, seems ordinary, the story of what brought them here is anything but.

In January, Mr. Yu, one of the foremost critics of China’s leadership, left China after months of abuse, house arrest and round-the-clock surveillance by the state. At its worst, it was flat-out torture: in a detention cell, security officers bent back Mr. Yu’s fingers one by one, kicked him in the chest and held burning cigarettes close to his face, he said.

“If the order comes from above, we can dig a pit to bury you alive in half an hour, and no one on earth would know,” Mr. Yu said the head officer told him.

Mr. Yu fainted and was taken to a hospital, where doctors pulled him from death’s door, he said. That was on Dec. 9, 2010. Months later, after returning home, he talked to family and friends about leaving China.

“I said multiple times before that as long as my life was not threatened, I would not leave China,” he said in the two-story house where he and his family live, which belongs to a church friend. “But after Liu Xiaobo’s arrest, I was tortured by the government and almost lost my life.”

Mr. Liu, one of Mr. Yu’s closest friends, wrote Charter 08, a manifesto calling for gradual political reforms, and was sentenced in 2009 to 11 years in prison, a move that contributed to Mr. Liu’s being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize the next year. Mr. Yu, 38, was placed under house arrest in Beijing in October 2010, five days after the Nobel committee announced Mr. Liu’s award, and then, in December, was detained. He was tortured for three hours.

Mr. Yu is one of several prominent Chinese intellectuals to have chosen a path of self-exile because of the hardening of the state against voices of dissent.

Though there are dissidents like Mr. Liu who maintain they will never leave China, Mr. Yu said his friends supported his decision. “They said the situation for people like us is going to get worse, not better,” he said.

The security apparatus is on full alert this year during a once-a-decade leadership transition in China, when the Communist Party reshuffles its top officials.

The last of Mr. Yu’s 11 books was an attack on Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, whom many Chinese praise as having an empathic character. But Mr. Yu argued in “China’s Best Actor: Wen Jiabao” that that was merely a construct intended to fool ordinary Chinese. He said he did not expect much better from Xi Jinping, who is likely to be China’s next president, and those who surround him. Mr. Xi went on a carefully choreographed five-day tour of the United States this month.

“The country’s leader is simply a guy selected by a few of the most powerful families in China to work for them,” Mr. Yu said. “It’s because they’re in this power scheme together, and because they benefit from it, and because the social conflict in China is a lot sharper now. To maintain the status quo, they’ll do whatever they can.”

Mr. Yu is finishing two books scheduled to be published this year in Hong Kong. One is a critique of Hu Jintao, the current president, and the other is a biography of Mr. Liu.

“I think I truly became a political dissident after 1999, when I became friends with Liu Xiaobo and took part in the following decade or so in all the activities he did for human rights in China,” Mr. Yu said.

His political education actually began in his hometown, Chengdu. “I was 16 during the 1989 protests, and this had a big impact on me,” he said. “I didn’t take part, but every night we would listen to BBC and the Voice of America.”

Mr. Yu studied modern Chinese literature at Peking University. He began writing essays and passed around printouts and photocopies to friends.

He was labeled a literary sensation when his first book, “Fire and Ice,” appeared in 1998. It was a scathing work of social and political criticism that the China scholar Geremie R. Barmé called “undoubtedly the most provocative book of its kind to have appeared in years.”

Mr. Yu even quoted Mr. Liu in his book, which Mr. Barmé noted was apparently the first time someone on the mainland had publicly cited him in a positive light in years. Mr. Liu had been sentenced in 1996 to three years of hard labor for his writings.

Mr. Yu’s writings were packaged with those of two other intellectuals. Liu Xia, the wife of Liu Xiaobo, gave her husband the books while he was in prison “to show that a younger generation of writers was active,” Mr. Yu said. But Mr. Liu published a harsh critique of the writings.

Nevertheless, another prominent writer, Liao Yiwu, arranged a dinner in Beijing where Mr. Liu and Mr. Yu met. A working friendship was born. The two wrote together and led the Independent Chinese PEN Center. Their relationship extended through the writing of Charter 08, when Mr. Yu discussed drafts with Mr. Liu. Mr. Yu, who converted to Christianity in 2003, said he had extensive input on the part about religious freedom.

“Christianity gives me a very strong basis for my faith,” he said. “I don’t think that democracy can be a faith. Only a more ultimate goal would allow me to withstand all the difficulties I’ve gone through.”

Mr. Yu said his work with Mr. Liu had been a focus of his interrogation in December 2010. “They asked in detail about articles I had written in the past 10 years,” he said. “They asked a lot of questions about my interaction with Liu Xiaobo and the mothers of Tiananmen Square victims, and they asked about my trips abroad.”

He said the interrogators also singled out the biography of Mr. Liu that he was writing and the book about Mr. Wen.

Four days after being tortured, Mr. Yu was released but forced to stay in Chengdu for three months. Even after returning to Beijing, he was told by officers to leave the capital during certain times, like the annual anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Whenever one of his articles was published in Hong Kong, officers would show up to harass him in Beijing, he said. He began thinking about leaving last spring, and got permission last month, he said. Officials probably believed it would be better to have him outside China in this transition year, Mr. Yu said. Officers accompanied him, his wife, Liu Min, and their son, Yu Guangyi, to the Beijing airport boarding gate and took their picture.

And how will he remain relevant while outside China? Mr. Yu said he believed the Internet would help. He has a Twitter account, @yujie89, with nearly 30,000 followers. (He said he preferred not to use Chinese microblogs because of censorship.)

Mr. Yu said his immediate goals were to apply for asylum and finish the two books due this year. Then he plans to work on a book about the history of Christianity in China.

“Maybe in a couple years I’ll have a green card, and maybe I’ll become an American citizen,” he said. “But I see my career and lifelong goal as achieving democracy and freedom in China. And so my goal is to eventually return to China.”

Helen Gao contributed research.

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