

How Mob and Church Rescued China's Most Wanted After Tiananmen

By Simon Lee
Henry Sanderson
Bloomberg News

May 28, 2014 – Wu'er Kaixi was losing faith.

China's second-most wanted man stood on the shore for a third night, waiting for the speedboat that was his only chance to escape certain imprisonment.

Just three weeks before, troops and tanks had crushed the student protesters he had led in Tiananmen Square. He and his girlfriend fled, evading police as they traveled more than 1,200 miles south.

"I didn't hold any hope that I would be able to escape," Wu'er, 46, recalled. "I just thought: let me get arrested somewhere else by the police, rather than by soldiers."

Suddenly, lights flashed out of the gloom. The boat that would smuggle them to Hong Kong, the British colony where they planned to seek refuge, was waiting. The two waded through an oyster farm into open water. Reaching the boat, they were hauled aboard by a man draped in jewelry. Wu'er's journey to exile had begun.

As many as 400 protesters were spirited to freedom by the covert operation codenamed Yellowbird, assisted by an unlikely alliance of Hong Kong gangsters, police officers and



Students from Beijing University stage a demonstration at Tiananmen Square as they start a hunger strike as part of a mass pro-democracy protest in Beijing on May 18, 1989. Photographer: Catherine Henriette/AFP via Getty Images

businessmen, the British and French governments, and even a Baptist minister. They are eyewitnesses to events that China's leaders still don't allow to be mentioned at home. Ahead of the 25th anniversary, censors continually scrub the Internet of references to June 4, and journalists and activists have been arrested in the past few weeks as part of a security clampdown.

'Truth of History'

"They were able to play the role of preserving the truth, preserving the truth of history," said Albert Ho, one of the city's leading pro-democracy politicians who helped the operation. "One day many of them will have to go back to



Injured students are carried out by cart near Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.
Photographer: Manuel Ceneta/AFP/Getty Images

China and they can tell the truth to the people as they promised those who lay on the ground bleeding.”

While the existence of Yellowbird has long been known, many details have been kept secret to protect those involved. To piece together the operation and the lives it transformed, Bloomberg News interviewed escapees, organizers and former officials.

Among those who got out were Xiong Yan, who was released from a Beijing prison in 1991 and is now a U.S. Army chaplain; Li Lu, a fund manager who helped Warren Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway Inc. invest in China; and Su Xiaokang, who wrote books about his struggle to adapt to a new life in the U.S.

China has transformed dramatically since too, at least in economic terms. Its economy has grown more than 20 times to become the world’s second biggest. In so doing, hundreds of millions of people were pulled out of poverty and an urban middle-class emerged.

Generation of Entrepreneurs

All that happened, some observers say, after

Deng Xiaoping, the country’s paramount leader in 1989, brutally rejected political reform in favor of pursuing economic growth at all costs, including the restriction of personal freedoms and preservation of one-party rule.

“Because of the tragedy of Tiananmen Square, my generation became entrepreneurs instead of working for the government,” Li, who got a start on Wall Street after graduating from Columbia University, said in a speech at his alma mater in 2012. The former president of the Student Congress on Tiananmen Square didn’t respond to e-mails sent to Himalaya Capital, a California-based fund he founded in 1997.

Troops opened fire late on June 3, 1989, killing hundreds, maybe thousands, as the army entered Beijing to take the square from students. The demonstrators had been demanding political reforms, free speech and an end to corruption by officials.

Wedding Banquet

News of the bloodshed quickly reached Reverend Chu Yiu-ming, a slim, feisty, Baptist minister in Hong Kong. Chu, who had just returned from meeting the students in Beijing, was at a wedding banquet.

“The tears came down,” said the gray-haired Chu, 70, in an interview at his church in April. “I made a prayer: God, what can we do?”

His answer came within days. He was called by two men – a businessman and a local gangster. They wanted him to coordinate an ambitious escape plan. Chu, never one to shirk a challenge, accepted. He became a linchpin of the operation, liaising between activists, smugglers and officials. Even now, he refuses to talk fully

about his role, for fear of jeopardizing others and a movement he is leading for full democracy in Hong Kong.

The escape plan relied on a smuggling network run by people including Chan Tat-ching, known as Brother Six. Local filmmakers recruited him for Operation Yellowbird because he knew people with high-powered speedboats who were experts in evading police as they smuggled foreign cars into China.

Nightclub Owner

“They took me to a hotel room, saying that China is now trying to catch people and asked if I was willing to help rescue them,” said Chan, who owned nightclubs, saunas and hotels, but said he wasn’t a member of the city’s Triad gangs. “I didn’t think too much and agreed to it. If I pondered too much, I might have had second thoughts.”

Citizens in Hong Kong, the territory which the U.K. had agreed to hand back to China, were so shocked by the images of the Tiananmen bloodshed that 1 million people poured onto the streets to protest. No one cared who enabled the rescue, or how.

“The Triads are sometimes very effective because they don’t have to go through all this due process and procedure,” Hong Kong politician Ho said.

While many dissidents, such as the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, were rounded up and jailed in the days after the crackdown, others slipped into hiding. Beijing-born Wu’er, a member of the country’s ethnic Uighur minority, had sprung to prominence among the students for confronting then-Premier Li Peng during a hunger strike in May, 1989.



Su Xiaokang speaks at a news conference in Washington, D.C., on June 4, 2009. Su, the son of a Communist Party official and a journalist during the Cultural Revolution, went on the run after martial law was declared in Beijing in May 1989. A television documentary he produced was later blamed by China’s leadership for inspiring the pro-democracy movement. Photographer: Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images

21 Most-Wanted

Wu’er said he was smuggled out of the capital on June 7 by seven supporters, heading south by train, bus and taxi. He arrived in the coastal city of Zhuhai 13 days later.

Even though he was recognized by people en route after his photo was shown on state television, no one turned him in to authorities, he said. He was ranked second on the government’s list of 21 most-wanted protesters, which also included Xiong and Li.

Wu’er knew nothing about Operation Yellowbird, but they knew about him. The more high-profile students were prioritized for bringing out, organizers said. The cost of each rescue ranged from HK\$50,000 (\$6,450) to HK\$600,000. Szeto Wah, a Hong Kong politician who was personally involved in Wu’er’s escape, wrote in a memoir before he died in 2011.



Xiong Ya, second right, stands with local pro-democracy leaders Szeto Wah, second left, and Albert Ho, right, at a demonstration in Hong Kong on May 31, 2009.

Photographer: Samantha Sin/AFP/Getty Images

City Lights

A sympathizer connected Wu'er to a businessman in Zhuhai. He arranged for a policeman from the neighboring Portuguese enclave of Macau to come and take Wu'er's photograph. The cop took the photo to Hong Kong for Szeto to confirm the student leader's identity before rescuers sent the boat.

Wu'er and his then girlfriend Liu Yan had no idea what fate awaited them as city lights illuminated the sky after almost an hour at sea.

"When we could see the glamorous Hong Kong nighttime view, I said 'wow, is this real or am I dreaming?'" Wu'er recalled. They were taken to the home of a Chinese-speaking French diplomat, Jean-Pierre Montagne. A week later, at a police briefing, he was given a takeaway of Chinese dim sum that he was told was a present from the colonial governor at the time, David Wilson.

"That was his way of saying that I am the guest of the British colonial government," Wu'er says. "It was a nice touch." Montagne and Wilson didn't reply to e-mails sent to their offices seeking comment.

Foreign Governments

Colonial officials in Hong Kong met with the staff of foreign consulates and asked them to consider taking the dissidents, said Alistair Asprey, Hong Kong's former secretary for security from 1990 to 1995.

"We were simply honoring our international obligations," said Asprey.

The French government was the most accommodating, Yellowbird organizers say. It took fugitives including Su Xiaokang and political scientist Yan Jiaqi, who had been a political adviser to Zhao Ziyang, the former Deng ally who was purged for his sympathies with student protesters.

Boarding a flight to Paris a week later, Wu'er wore a police badge and held a walkie-talkie to cover his face. He was given fake French travel documents.

He was too well-known not to be recognized. On arrival, two officials boarded the plane and welcomed him to France, prompting spontaneous applause from fellow passengers. Wu'er waved at them and stepped off the plane into a two-door Renault.

Documentary Maker

Stories told by other escapees reveal how Chinese police and soldiers also helped students flee, motivated either by sympathy or corruption.

Su Xiaokang, the son of a Communist Party official and a journalist during the Cultural Revolution, spent 100 days on the run in 1989. A television documentary he produced a year earlier, *River Elegy*, was later blamed by China's leadership for inspiring the pro-democracy movement.

After martial law was imposed in May 1989, Su hopped from safe-house to safe-house, seeking refuge with his mother-in-law in central Henan province, as he fled south.

“In those days the police system wasn’t so great,” said Su, a writer now based in Delaware. “If you left home they didn’t know where you had gone.”

While the cops couldn’t find him, Yellowbird operatives did. He still doesn’t know how.

‘Save Zhao’

A Chinese military officer took him to an abandoned fishing village in the port of Humen, he said. After a speedboat whisked them both to Hong Kong, they were ordered to jump into the sea and swim ashore under a pitch-black sky.

Two gun-wielding men met them and Su was escorted to a hideout where he met Brother Six. After letting slip in a media interview that he was in Hong Kong, Su said he was given a makeover by the Special Branch of Hong Kong’s police force before flying out of Hong Kong. He was given more fashionable, branded clothes and a mobile phone to look like a businessman.

Before leaving for France, Su said he was invited to breakfast at an expensive restaurant with a gangland kingpin, Brother Six’s boss, who gave him \$2,000 in cash.

“He said ‘we rescued you,’” Su recalled.

“After you get out you must call for or think of a way to save someone.

“‘Who?’ I asked.

“‘Zhao Ziyang, he replied.’”

Zhao, a symbolic figure for reformers, never left China, remaining under house arrest until his death in 2005.

Sting Operation

Operation Yellowbird ran until 1997, when Hong Kong reverted to Chinese rule. Many escapees languished in the city for years until frantic diplomatic efforts in the final months before the handover of sovereignty, according to officials and organizers.

Brother Six lost two of his men in a boat crash, and withdrew from Operation Yellowbird after two others were arrested in a sting operation.

Twenty-five years on, those who escaped have watched China’s growth from afar, pondering what their protest, escape and subsequent lives have achieved.

In the summer of 1990, a few days before he turned 41, Su left for Princeton, New Jersey, from Europe. A year later, his wife and son joined him, having been allowed to leave China, but their struggles began anew. After a visit to Niagara Falls in 1993, Su’s wife was left paralyzed following a car crash.

He said he feels he’s let down the people who helped him. After getting to Europe or America, many escapees became “busy with life,” he said.

‘I’m Sorry’

“I’m sorry to the Hong Kong people, the French and the British,” Su said. “They did so much to rescue us, but after we got overseas we didn’t do anything.”

Xiong Yan, who stood alongside Wu’er when students faced off with Li Peng and who escaped to Hong Kong hidden under the floorboards of a trawler, has helped burnish the memory of those who died. He attended an

annual candlelight vigil in Hong Kong on June 4, 2009.

Xiong, 49, used his new-found freedom to follow his religion. After U.S. officials helped him get refugee status, he flew to Los Angeles in 1992 and later enlisted in the U.S. Army. He went on to become a chaplain and did a tour of duty in Iraq.

“In the past 25 years, we have stood outside China and gained more knowledge and a better understanding,” Xiong said from his base in Fort Gordon, Georgia. “Some people feel indifferent, believing that managing the economy well and doing good business are the end of it, but in fact, China under one-party rule is bringing damage not just to the Chinese people, but also to the world.”

‘Juncture of History’

Brother Six visited the U.S. a few years ago at the invitation of Chen Yizi, an adviser to Zhao Ziyang who eventually escaped through Operation Yellowbird. Chen, like other escapees, was so indebted to Chan he later wrote to thank him. Fund manager Li also penned words of gratitude to Chan, saying the smuggler had been

chosen by history.

“No one has performed more spectacularly than you have at the juncture of history,” Li Lu wrote in a letter to Brother Six in May 2007. “The world will remember your story.”

Brother Six said he doesn’t see himself as a hero.

“I hoped for reform and opening up, preserving the history one step at a time,” he said. “These were the academics, the bright minds. In the world there are the police and there are outlaws. Whenever someone tries to catch people, there will be people who try save them.”

While some of those who fled China have since returned to visit, invest or even stay for good, Wu’er remains persona non grata.

Desperate to see his parents again, he’s tried several times to turn himself into Chinese authorities in Macau, Tokyo and Washington. In November, he tried to fly into Hong Kong, only to be turned away by authorities, rejected by the city that once rescued him.

– *Editors: Rosalind Mathieson, Neil Western*