



OUT OF EXILE

Since 1989, the poet **Liu Hongbin** has been trying to make his way back to China – memory and imagination are part of the journey home

I finally boarded the plane, but just before it took off, a group of fully armed soldiers suddenly entered: 'All Chinese citizens, please show your passports.' I sat among a group of Japanese tourists. They produced their red passports. Then an army officer came over to me, 'Are you from Tokyo as well?' I nodded. He went past me. That was 9 September 1989, in Beijing.

My girlfriend had come to see me off at the airport. She had been my companion after the terror of the massacre – and she was crying. I would never be reunited with her.

I was about to leave my 27-year life behind: my homeland, where my father's body would never be retrieved after his execution during the Cultural Revolution, and where my mother would count each day until my return.

I took with me only my mother tongue, perhaps also my unscathed imagination. If I survived, it would be on account of them. I would claim my life back one day. If my memory serves me well in return, I will serve my own imagination. Memory and imagination are one. Language is imagination's playground, but at the same time, it is also the battleground of one's own ideas. Every word forms the fabric of the world we inhabit. For most of the

DISPATCHES

time, a poet lives within language – and by it. I smuggled my language, imagination and memory out of China.

I paused to recollect the past five months. I had posted four poems around Tiananmen Square shortly before the massacre, honouring the Chinese tradition of poetic response to social events. I was warned to leave China by Zhang Hanzhi, who was once Mao's English teacher, after I told her about posting my poems.

In exile, I still felt drawn towards a form of celestial reality that is the reality of imagination. This seemed a higher form of reality. Every day, through living and writing, we are convinced of the existence of different levels of reality, visible and invisible. I feel the constant desire to be raised to that higher level, to see the invisible and to hear the inaudible in the doom and gloom of exile – although isolation, homelessness, loneliness and despair have almost driven me to self-destruction. If I died, I have died many times.

In my first year in London, I washed dishes in several Chinese restaurants and I restored dilapidated houses. Exile did not deter me from reconnecting with poetry. I started writing again, and I even tried to contact poets living in London. I still remember making a call to the Poetry Society from Kennington underground station one afternoon, asking to be put in touch with Elaine Feinstein. I said: 'I am a Chinese poet now living in London, I translated some of Feinstein's poems into Chinese back in China.' Later on, Elaine Feinstein took me to a party where I was introduced to Peter Porter, and Porter suggested that I should meet Stephen Spender. A year later, I started teaching Chinese poetry at the University of Westminster.

At a reading in London in 1996, paying tribute to Stephen Spender, I shared the stage with Harold Pinter, Doris Lessing and Salman Rushdie. I was also asked to make a speech on behalf of the participating international writers. I struck up a conversation with Rushdie, who encouraged me to visit China to see my mother, if I had a British passport. He was planning a visit to India, where his mother would join him from Pakistan.

In the dead of winter 1997, I landed back in Beijing. As I was passing through immigration control, an officer asked: 'Do you have a Chinese name?' I wrote down a name with the same pronunciation but using different characters. He waved me through.

According to police regulations, anyone with a foreign passport has to report his place of abode within 24 hours. As soon as I arrived at my mother's home, I called to register with the police. Early the next morning, six policemen broke into my mother's home and greeted me with the

words: 'You are not welcome in this country. Your counter-revolutionary words overseas have made you persona non grata. You are forbidden to meet politically sensitive people, to move or speak freely.' Then they took away my passport.

I was put under house arrest, but I managed to leave the house. I met the sister of a dissident writer in prison, Sun Weibang. He had been adopted by International PEN as an honorary member, at my suggestion. I said I was willing to take any of his writings out of the country.

One day, the police came banging at the door at my sister's house. Hearing this, I telephoned the British consul in Beijing and told him what was going on. The consul told me to open the door. The police showed me a warrant and asked me to sign it. I made a fingerprint and put down the same name I used when entering the country, but the police ordered me: 'Put down your right name.' The telephone rang: it was the consul again. I told him they were going to take me to police headquarters.

As I was walking down the staircase of my sister's home, flanked by police, my sister returned from work. As I was shown into the car, my sister told me: 'I will be with you very soon,' and she hailed a taxi. The police car drove away at full speed with its siren on, pushing aside pedestrians and vehicles. The police sitting in front were abusive, shouting at the crowds. I was calm and unafraid. My eyes were moist.

I wanted to ask one of the police, 'Do you believe in God?' The words didn't come out. I thought it might be too provocative.

At police headquarters, they interrogated me. They asked me what organisation I belonged to. I said International PEN. They drew up a statement and asked me to sign it. I refused. Then my sister arrived, and the police questioned her separately. Two plain-clothes policemen passed by and I recognised them. I even remembered their names; I said hello, as if speaking to old acquaintances. They were the policemen who had harassed me before I left China in 1989.

After we were released, I asked my sister: 'Were you afraid?' She replied: 'No. I'm proud of having a brother like you.'

A few days later, my passport was returned to me. I had told them to give it back or I would apply for a new one at the British Embassy in Beijing. I made my way to Jinan and spent a night of freedom there. A friend's wife had used her name to book a room in a hostel. The next day, I left for Nanjing. As soon as I called my sister to tell her I was safe, they tracked my whereabouts, and the hotel where I was staying was swarming with police.



Liu Hongbin in Tiananmen Square, 1989
Credit: Liu Hongbin

From Nanjing, I headed for Shanghai to meet a friend who had helped me out when I was ill. She booked me into a hotel and said she would return the next morning. I took a walk alone in the night rain and tasted the excitement of freedom.

The next morning when we went out, we were all followed in the subway and to the restaurant. As we came out of a bookstore, I sensed them just a few feet away. I asked the man and woman to show their ID or I would report them to the police. They fobbed me off by saying they had none and the girl said she was waiting for a job. I went into a Baptist church for a while. The people shied away from us. I felt calm but realised we were not welcome there. When I came out, the two police agents continued to follow us, I turned around and started taking photographs of them. Then I caught sight of a dozen police with walkie-talkies. They surrounded me, coming out of taxis and leaping off motorbikes. I dialled

the British Embassy number on my cell phone, but I was arrested in broad daylight and taken to a local station.

After several hours, the head of the police came to me with my Chinese ID card in one hand and my passport in the other. He told me: 'You have to choose between the two.' And I now knew what that meant: the final hour had come. I said, 'I want my British passport,' but I felt like saying, 'I want freedom.'

The chief declared: 'You have been performing activities incompatible with your tourist status. You must leave the country immediately.'

The next day, I was taken to the airport and two policemen escorted me onto the plane. Before I boarded, I asked one of them: 'Can I give you something?' They exchanged glances and agreed. Presenting him with my collection of poems, I said: 'I will return through my poetry.' I was deported to Hong Kong.

As soon as I got back to London, there was a death threat waiting for me on my answer machine. The perpetrator, of Chinese origin, was arrested and I didn't press charges.

In 2002, my mother fell seriously ill and was hospitalised again. I went to the Chinese Embassy and spoke to the consul. He suggested I write to the ambassador. I did just that: 'China has just won the bid for the Olympic Games, and entered the World Trade Organization. We are all sons and daughters of a mother, and it will be a chance for the Chinese government to show they still have human spirit by allowing me to visit,' I wrote. The Chinese accepted my proposal, but laid down their conditions: firstly, the port of entry must be Beijing; secondly, I had to inform them of my travel arrangements.

We stopped over in Zurich. There was a large nursery at the airport and it was in there that my daughter, Shini, started to walk. As I was doing some shopping, I realised there was a woman following me around the airport. On the plane, we met a BBC journalist, Fuchsia Dunlopp, whom we both knew; she was on her way to do some research for a cookbook. We told her we might have trouble getting through Chinese immigration. 'If we don't come through within two hours, please call the British Embassy.'

We walked up to the immigration desk and my partner held out three passports to the officer. He said: 'There is a problem with your child's visa.' He made a telephone call. Two officers arrived and escorted us to a room, where people were smoking and watching TV. I objected that such a room was not suitable for my baby and they let my partner wait outside while they dealt with me. They took an hour. Friends who had come to



Liu Hongbin in Tiananmen Square, 1989
Credit: Liu Hongbin

meet us were worried. Fuchsia was waiting at the gate for us, looking rather tense.

Our car was immediately tailed by two vehicles as we drove out of the airport car park. I joked with our friend, who is quite a well-known actor in China, and ironically played a lead role in a TV series about policemen: 'If you go out alone, do you have any trouble?'

Later on, the police abducted me for an 'interrogation dinner'. They asked me what kind of poetry I was writing. Perhaps only in totalitarian societies do poets and police find themselves so intricately entangled. The policeman not only watches what you do, but he wants to find out what is going on inside your head.

In 2004, I left for China to see my mother again, taking my baby daughter with me. Before I left London, I told the Chinese consul my flight number. He even encouraged me to stay for a visiting professorship

or to present a television show. All I hoped was that the police would not harass me this time. When we arrived, we were driven to a detention centre, and I was interrogated by the police. My daughter was three years old at the time and asthmatic, and started crying. But she put her hands across my mouth in an attempt to prevent me from answering the police's questions. A woman police officer was called in. I knew she wanted to take my daughter away from me. I took out the puffer to help relieve her wheezing. My daughter was crying and said in English: 'I don't like them,' and again put her little hands across my mouth to stop me from talking to the police. In the end, they didn't take her away. We were locked up in cell 308 – a small bare room, with a bed, a few dirty white quilts and a bloody handprint on the wall. The window had triple iron bars.

In London, my partner thought we had disappeared. She rang the British Embassy in Beijing, who could not locate us. She was instructed to call the Chinese consul in London. He told her: 'Their location is a state secret.'

I spent the next four weeks dashing around different hospitals. During our stay in the cell, my daughter had suffered many insect bites on her face, arms and legs that had developed into nasty blisters, with fever and vomiting.

It was my mother's birthday and she came out of hospital to greet us. My mother complained that I had spent most of my time with her in hospital on my previous visit. She hadn't spent any time with me at home. The Chinese police had told her that her son and granddaughter had been detained for illegally entering the country without a visa. This was obviously not true. At this point, all my efforts to maintain hope in the humanity of the Chinese government evaporated.

As I was leaving the country for the last time, I was detained – even though I was being escorted by the British deputy consul, who took my daughter in her pushchair through the diplomatic channel.

I was returning to London to resume my work as a visiting research fellow at the School of Advanced Studies at the University of London. The ban on my return to China, originally issued after my expulsion in 1997, was renewed on 15 March 2005 – this time indefinitely. I found this out only when I called the Chinese consul to determine the result of my application to return to see my mother. I overheard him speaking to his boss. 'Liu Hongbin is on the line. What I should say to him?'

The reply was: 'Tell him the truth.'

DISPATCHES

In 2005, when the Chinese president visited London, the BBC's current affairs programme *Newsnight* asked him for an interview. He declined. I went on the programme and said I simply wanted the truth to come out and for the whole world to know about the human rights situation in China. Immediately afterwards, there were over 90 pages of hate-filled postings on a Chinese website run by Chinese students and scholars in England, accusing me of being a 'traitor' or declaring, 'Let him die in England.'

Did that threat help to shut me up? No, my philosophy is to speak and die, unless my outspokenness intrudes on the domain of the purity of my poetry. I try as far as I am able to separate my politics from my poetry.

Time is not linear. Memory and imagination mix together. The poet has two tasks. First, he has to obey the call of his imagination; secondly, he has to maintain the integrity of memory. Massacres are as common as commas and periods in the language of history. However, despots force us to read history according to their version, which is why they treat poets as enemies of the state and bury them by exiling them.

Words come from our imagination; green plants come from the soil. Freedom of expression is no longer a political question. For me, defending free expression means protecting human creative ecology. This can be an apolitical act. At the same time, we have to recognise that we are still far from living in an apolitical age. When Confucius comments on *Three Hundred Poems*, he declares: 'Poetry has no evil thought.' A new etymological analysis of this statement has led to a new interpretation: 'poetry has no boundaries' in terms of the domain of poetry and restrictions imposed on a poet's imagination.

The plight of the poet in exile has not improved. First of all, few publishers are interested in his work any longer. Universities are reluctant to offer him a teaching job as they want to maintain good relations with the authorities, even though he could be an inspiring teacher.

If a poet is to play a useful role in overthrowing a government of tyranny, he must do it not just through politics, but through defending the human imagination – first and foremost, his own imagination. And his success is measured in how well he can write. If writing is an act of preserving the human spirit through words – in an internal revolution which may lead to an external realisation – then in finishing a paragraph of good writing, a poet feels that he might have overthrown a regime of repression, even if from within.

If a poet's faith in poetry as a lonely path to the truth continues to shine, free expression is an essential part of fulfilling this process.

Writing illuminates those dark areas of our lives and reality, as each of us can grasp only part of reality.

All I have ever written has been in praise of imagination. I hope, when I lie dying one day, that that one word will linger on my lips.

In China, my mother has waited for my return for almost 20 years. In 2008, she spent eight months out of 12 in hospital. She is still waiting for me.

Although I have been living outside China for two decades, the Chinese language has become more and more my homeland. I still compose my poems in that tongue.

Wole Soyinka has told me that he would be prepared to lead a battle to get me back to China. This has not happened yet.

Memory may be a way to return home. □

Fishing at Corsica

In a flash,
The weight of life was pulled out from the surface
A fish comes into the field of my vision
Its nationality is already unreadable.
Fish,
I have a different concept of the shore from yours
But I feel as tragic as you.
We both once possessed a blue home.

Liu Hongbin is a poet, journalist and translator. His books include *A Day Within Days* (Ambit)