

WORDS - THE LIBERATING PRISON

BY CHARLES LEFTWICH

Dissident poet-in-exile Liu Hongbin talks about his turbulent life, his creative struggle and his complex relationship with his homeland.

Liu Hongbin, a dissident Chinese poet who has been in exile in London for 14 desolate but dedicated years, sits by the window in the palpable gloom of an English winter afternoon, talking about a poem he wrote with uncanny prescience as a youth of not even 20. It has become, in a way, his anthem. "Sparrow," though to Western eyes hardly "subversive," was regarded by editors in China as too dangerous to touch. It was one of four poems he posted around Tiananmen Square just before the massacre of hundreds of student demonstrators by government troops in 1989. Liu's life under a crushing dictatorship had driven an intensely private and solitary person into a glaringly public role, disseminating his verse and making speeches to mobilise anti-government demonstrators.

"Sparrow" is a poem by a youth whose one desire was to be a poet, expressing his yearning to use freely a voice choked by the regime since childhood. In a land where poetry had for millennia been held in special reverence, in previous eras even candidates for posts in the civil service had to prove themselves in verse. Now poetry had been virtually extinguished, and any unguarded utterance could mean death. "Sparrow" is a poem about the defiant poetic spirit, and about sacrifice.

"What sort of sacrifice does a poet make?" says the man who fled here as a 27-year-old filled with anguish and the fire of rebellion. "I have sacrificed my youth for poetry, I have sacrificed my health to know the world. I have made the sacrifice of living in exile. I don't know how much I have left to sacrifice."

After his arrival in the West in 1989, Liu Hongbin gained almost immediate recognition by prominent members of the literary establishment for the poetry he still determinedly writes in Chinese. They discovered in him a poet of unusual freshness and candor, whose haunting images express the restless energy of the creative spirit, the torture of living gagged under tyranny and the dilemma of his own relationship with China.

He has met and been praised publicly by poets of the stature of Sir Stephen Spender, Peter Porter (whom Liu holds in particularly high esteem, and is "honored" to have as his

main translator), Elaine Feinstein and John Ashbery. Playwright Arthur Miller calls him "a fine poet of deep democratic convictions and powerful talent."

His public readings have stirred audiences at venues such as the Purcell Room and St Martin in the Fields, and he has read on the BBC and taken part in a CBS television documentary along with major writers in exile such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Joseph Brodsky, Wole Soyinka and Salman Rushdie. His poems have appeared in international reviews, and in 1992 he published a collection of poems, *An Iron Circle*, which included English translations. He has just completed translating for publication his piercing long poem 'A Day within Days', which begins chillingly: "China, you are my sodden nightmare." The poem was hailed by one of his country's preeminent journalists, Liu Binyan, as "hold[ing] a significant place in Chinese literature".

Only seven of his poems were ever published in his motherland, and his work is now completely banned. However, a collection of his youthful poems, *The Dove of the East*, was secretly circulated in handwritten form in 1983. "All typewriter owners were registered with the police - so it was easy for them to trace who had typewritten anti-Party material," he explains. There was an advantage to such clandestine distribution, though: "People would immediately know a handwritten edition was stuff worth reading!" he chuckles impishly.

Liu Hongbin is a protean individual who can be by quick turns highly personable (his prevailing state), witty, implacably gloomy, idealistic, ruthless ("Life is my tool, I use it for my work."), somewhat arrogant, frustratingly reticent and eloquently forthcoming. He is not a man easily pinned down, as his self-styled address indicates. "I live within words, and I have a passionate love for the shelter they provide," he declares. "But there is a landlord you have to pay - perhaps with your life."

The shelter is ambivalent, and comes with immense danger and instability: "If we analyze the Chinese ideogram for 'prison,' *yu*, we find two dogs guarding the mouth. In Chinese history countless writers and scholars have been imprisoned because of what they wrote." And though it affords "the joy of momentary detachment and transcendence," this chosen domicile is itself a prison: "You can't escape from the house of words - a poet can't."

Liu's life has given him abundant familiarity with the concept of prison. He was born in 1962 in Qingdao, Shandong Province, during the Cultural Revolution. Almost immediately (partly because of the threat of a Sino-Soviet war, and partly because he was the fifth child of two working parents), he was sent on a six-hour train journey to the countryside, where he spent his first five years in grinding poverty on a commune with his grandparents. He knew his parents only from short occasional visits to them - already home was a problematic concept for him.

The felicity of childhood innocence, however, protected him from harsh reality, and the natural world with the raw smell of the earth, birdsong and soft morning mists awakened the creativity of the solitary boy: "My earliest memory is realizing how I responded to the rhythm of nature - my breath, the pattern of the seasons. I could be easily moved by the rhythm of time. The countryside was my first book. I read the sound, I read the colors, I read the human landscape. I was unaware of the poverty and hardship. I was a lonely but very happy child."

Significantly, one of his first recollections is an attempt at self-discovery: "I had never known what I looked like and the only chance to discover myself was to look at my reflection in a deep well, which was very dangerous," he recalls. Dangerous indeed, in view of his tenet: "Self-discovery and enlightenment are a process of disillusionment and suffering. I don't believe happiness exists - not after you discover your separateness from the intractable things outside you. But suffering and pain can be a blessing to a poet, as they accelerate the maturing of your intellect. Poets are more vulnerable emotionally but not intellectually."

At the age of five Liu returned to his family in Qingdao, where his father was a railway administrator. "My relationship with him is very simple," he says with considerable understatement. "Soon after I came back he took me to his office and left me to nap. When I woke up I couldn't find him. I looked for him everywhere." His father had been taken away by the Red Guards, arrested on "counter-revolutionary" charges that Liu insists were fabricated by the state machine.

"That's the end of my relationship with my father. He stayed in prison for two years and in 1970 he was executed. But," he continues, "my search for my father has never ended. The fact is I never believed he had been killed. I have dreams - to this day - that he has come back. The recurrent theme of my poetry is a search for him."

Without her husband, Liu's mother, "a very intelligent, very tough, very loving woman," became the sole breadwinner for the family of six. They had to endure great poverty and official discrimination. Liu found solace in the novelties of Qingdao's modern seaport, and bookshops became his principal joy.

"I realized the power of words, and fell in love with them. Poetry found me. I began to write poetry at a very early age because I was lonely. Right from the moment I was born I was an outsider in a climate of distrust brought about by the regime. You could not talk to people - you could be betrayed by anyone. Instead I could confide in poetry, and I became its servant."

Voraciously he read all the verse he could lay hands on, which during the Cultural Revolution was precious little that was authentically Chinese. At school, which he detested for its reek of the regime, and from which he played truant for months on end, the teachers at least helped him borrow books from the library, but only in return for his marking the work of his fellow pupils. What was available was mainly revolutionary literature, mostly foreign, translated into Chinese.

In 1978 came a spell of relative freedom, and Liu could finally delve into classical Chinese poetry - which he devoured while developing his own craft. While enrolled at the Shandong Foreign Trade School, he displeased the authorities by blatantly neglecting economics coursework for his poetry, which began to win fans among the students and also attracted the attention of Communist Party spies among their number.

But this period brought no end to his chronic loneliness. "I was still really in another world. I always feel I'm not part of it." A pause. "I was a natural leader if you like. If anyone was abused by the school authorities they would come to me and I would stage a protest or make some trouble or whatever." Again the cheeky laugh.

At 21, he was expelled from the school, and charged with bringing China into disgrace after a tapped telephone call to a visiting American literary professor with whom he had become friendly. His response to a stern official warning was to circulate *The Dove of the East* in Beijing, Qingdao and Jinan. Of the collection, as of all his work, he says: "You can often perceive an underlying political gusto, but that just comes naturally. I never seek after that on purpose. There has to be a difference between a poet and someone with a political agenda. A poet is to serve poetry, not the other way around."

Between 1986 and 1989, Liu's courageous championing of self-expression brought him into ever-increasing confrontation with the regime. In 1987 he was officially labeled a dangerous person and came under permanent surveillance. The unofficial magazine he co-edited, and in which he wrote a column, was banned.

Then in 1989 came Tiananmen Square. Just before the flashpoint, Liu heeded an urgent warning from a friend, a government insider, to leave the capital immediately. Liu confesses, "For a very, very long time I felt very guilty as a survivor. What I did to mobilize the people was an individual act, and I am responsible as an individual. This caused me enormous difficulties."

He was detained and questioned for 10 days, but eventually released. "I had to go into hiding," he relates, "as the full extent of my participation was soon known, and I was a wanted man. It was terrible. In the morning there would be slogans on the walls of where I was taking refuge saying: 'If you want to cut the grass, terminate it from the roots.'"

Liu eventually managed to flee China and was granted political asylum in England. Arriving in London in a state of great dejection and disorientation, he took refuge with his one acquaintance, a former classmate and her English husband. Finally through the Poetry Society he met Elaine Feinstein, some of whose poetry he had translated.

"He came to me out of the blue," recalls Elaine Feinstein. "He was very, very young, and I was struck by his courage and resolution - a very sweet boy with clearly some terrible psychological distress. He had a great need and passion for poetry." She introduced him to Peter Porter, and he began to form his invaluable network of literary contacts in the West.

On his first meeting with the late Sir Stephen Spender, soon after his arrival, Liu recounts how, dressed "dramatically in black," he read a number of his poems, including one of the poems he had put up in Tiananmen Square, "The Spirit of the Sea," for which an English translation was provided:

That song has been drowned
Within the rushing waves, the surging, glancing light
I have found my voice

That life has been destroyed
On half-submerged rock, torn by the waves of the sea
I have rediscovered my origins

I want to build a new life . . .

Spender immediately contacted his nephew, Philip, who ran the review *Index on Censorship*, and asked him, as the young exile was later to learn, why he hadn't published Liu Hongbin's poetry. The omission was put right.

"The Spirit of the Sea' expresses the power of movement, like the poet's voice," reflects Liu. "The sea is violent, soothing, comforting, melancholy." The poem also evinces Liu's life-long readiness to start anew, to rebuild his existence after disaster - internal or external: "Intellectually a poet is like a fugitive, escaping from one conceptual world or Utopia he has created and become disillusioned with to a new one, and then another. Intrinsic to writing poetry is the risk of self-destruction, and then the chance of resurrection."

The final stanza of the poem reads: "Through the colors of the night sea / I flee towards the edge of darkness / Climbing a ladder of blue . . ." Liu explains that the allusion is to the demi-goddess of Chinese myth, Nu Wa, who, when the dome of the sky collapsed, ascended a ladder to repair it with colorful gems. He sees writing poetry as an essential service to humanity: "It calls for and restores the native sensibility we have worn out in the course of time. It is every poet's task to convert this world into a poetic one." The inevitable conclusion is that Liu Hongbin's life has been devoted to repeating again and again the task performed by Nu Wa, using what he would claim are the most colorful and precious of gems - words.

Liu confesses his poetry has become much bleaker since he arrived in London. It reflects his exile, during which he has suffered intense alienation, loneliness and depression, despite the recognition he has received. However, he adds: "London has provided me with the best library of my life, and I owe a lot to my friendships with Western writers."

While studying at the Polytechnic of Central London during his early days in exile, Liu was given a book inscribed with the lines by W.H. Auden: "In the prison of his days / Teach the

free man how to praise." They struck a strong chord - they epitomize what he sees as his own role as a poet, to free that "native sensibility" in all of us that becomes buried by the debris of disillusion and pain. "Auden has changed my life," he declares. "In Communist China what had been produced was hatred among human beings. He helped me liberate myself from the imprisonment of hatred - for instance my hatred of the people who smeared my father. I wouldn't hesitate to say Auden is a great poet whose work I truly love."

In 1997 Liu did something Elaine Feinstein describes as an act of "enormous impudence and courage." He returned to China to see his mother. He was immediately arrested, detained and then expelled for good. The real blow for him in his banishment is that he is unlikely to see his mother again, for she is too frail to travel. As for China itself, he now realizes that even though it is gradually opening up and may improve to the extent that he could one day return to live there, he would not find happiness there.

"Maybe I will never find a country of my own - I wouldn't feel at home wherever I went. I have been an outsider for too long. But China travels everywhere with me. I left when I was 27 - I was old enough to take the best things of Chinese culture to arm myself with. So really I don't think I am a writer in exile. But I understand I live only in poetry."

It is his poetry, he now believes, which could finally go home. "Time worships language, poetry outlives all dictators, and in due course poetic justice is always done," he declares with a ring of finality.