
THE LIFE OF A POLITICAL PRISONER'S WIFE

By Ouyang Xiaorong

An Internet essayist discusses the particular suffering of political prisoners' wives.

LOVE SONG (1)

If I go now,
I won't think of returning.
Fix the autumn fence for me,
Shut the wicket gate again.
Forgive me,
I am unable to pluck the world's loveliest bloom
for you.
If homebound craft no longer ply the Yangtze,
I can only stroke
your dew-soaked sleeve.
Next year the green bristle grass will flourish
on the prairie
I'll be in an alien land
Learning sorrow.

There is a time I've dreamed of more than once, a time in which a train belches thick coils of smoke as it rolls along on a frozen track, heading slowly for a distant wilderness. People carrying bread and boiled water and padded jackets arrive early to wait for the train on either side of the tracks. The winter wind blows snowflakes all around. The bread has hardened, the water turned to ice. A child asks: "Isn't the train here yet?" but most people are silent, waiting, watching; or they draw crosses, and pray.

That is the heaven of my dreams, for these people, immortal, fought for the freedom of that land sealed in ice, where they might die without regret.

If you have never seen a Decembrist wife,¹ take a look at this photo of Jia Jianying: thin and quiet; behind her

pale gaze and her smile, melancholy mingles with hope. She's lovely. She reminds one of Pushkin's Tatiana or Turgenev's Elena. But our society seems incapable of bearing the weight of such beauty. Souls alienated by thousands of years of totalitarian systems cannot bear beauty like this.

Ouyang Yi is a political prisoner. He is my second eldest brother. Luo Bizhen is his wife. When Ouyang Yi was made a political prisoner, people did not bring him water and bread; instead they wanted to gather around and get a look at these "red-haired, green-eyed" counterrevolutionaries, male and female. Chinese treat decapitations as passing entertainment, no matter whether the head that falls is of the flesh or of the spirit.

In 2006, toward the end of winter, I met Luo Bizhen. She was wearing simple winter clothes that made no attempt at stylishness. When we were introduced, she just smiled. Compared to her, I was just a kid, but she was shyer than I was. You could not tell that she was the wife of a political prisoner, that because she had fallen in love with this man, she now suffered all life's grief with him. You could not see her distress; she faced everything with composure: struggling on the edge of poverty, drifting from place to place with no improvement in sight. But if she harbored complaints against life, it did not show. Wittgenstein said we shouldn't ask what kind of world this is. We live in this world and that is enough; it is beautiful.

Luo Bizhen teaches in a rural school, returning on weekends to her home in the city of Suining in Anhui Province. She and Ouyang Yi used to teach together, but he lost his position long ago. Now he just stays home and writes, earning a little money from his manuscripts. When Ouyang Yi was driven out of the school

where he taught, Luo Bizhen was driven out too. The reason given was very simple: Who made you marry a counterrevolutionary? That makes you one too. We don't want you here anymore. Untold hardships followed until finally she found another teaching job in the countryside. Through all the changes of the years that followed, she kept to her little town of Suining, kept to her child, who was hurt and humiliated, and kept to her storm-battered husband. I think she's fortunate, because she loves and is loved.

The wives of political prisoners are a special group: not political prisoners themselves, they choose to suffer alongside political prisoners. Geng He is a handsome woman, but when a person has been immersed in terror, the most pleasant-looking among us takes on a frightening look. I have seen a picture of her, eyes wide and staring, her expression that of someone who has only just stopped weeping. She does not even note down the license plate of the car of the secret policemen who beat her. She said: "My husband Gao Zhisheng said, 'No use looking, it just flatters them.' So I never even look at their car."

Geng He did not flatter those state security people, though it would only have been to 'flatter' them with a look. When the state security came to take away her husband, they came with all kinds of men and vehicles, in an attempt to isolate her whole family, young and old, from society. After that, state security officials came to beat her. Two tall strapping men beating one woman, shouting accusations at her: "Geng He, you injured two policemen . . ." Where is the justice in that? If Geng He had been able to injure two big strapping men, then she would not be Geng He, she would be an Olympic judo champion like Sun Fuming. Later, state security beat her thirteen-year-old daughter, shouting as they struck her that she was a "little whore."

Geng He was filled with sorrow, but she bore it as before. This was her choice and when you make a choice, you stick with it.

When you decide to become a political prisoner, you have to be ready to bear the crushing instruments of tyranny along with the humiliations on every side. This is the tactic of the most terrifying tyrant in Chinese his-

Human rights activist Hu Jia (R), at home with his wife Zeng Jinyan in Beijing during an interview. Photo credits: FREDERIC J. BROWN/AFP/Getty Images.



tory, Mao Zedong: “Bring them down and dishonor them.” When this happens to political prisoners, it is because they have convictions, a vision of transforming society. But it is different for wives of political prisoners who accompany their husbands into hardship solely out of love. I believe that there really is something called love in this world, even though so many people are always telling me there is no such thing. The moment I met Fang Cao, I was that much closer to knowing this thing I believed in, and my belief—that it not only existed but could be sought and obtained—was that much stronger. What is more, I believe that by relying on love, one can fight back at this absurd world. Examples are right in front of you.

Wives of political prisoners are a special group. Not political prisoners themselves, they choose to suffer along with political prisoners.

Fang Cao is a typical northerner, married to a man much older than herself, a political prisoner with a daughter. This political prisoner has no money, no house. The reason she married him is simple, let her speak in her own words: “People in the democracy movement are noble and upstanding.” The reason she fell in love with and married an impoverished, down-and-out democracy activist was because of her own strong belief in these qualities. For that, she willingly bore it all.

She and her daughters live in a roughly-finished house in a slum on the outskirts of Bengbu, Anhui Province. To get there, you have to traverse a filthy muddy road whose ditches are filled with rotting fruit parings, vegetables and other garbage. When we met, she said: “My daughter is taking the high school entrance exam this year. My older daughter; I have two. But you won’t meet her today, she’s gone to her grandmother’s.”

I grew up reading foreign literature and I know that in the old days in the West, when winter came, vagrants would commit crimes so they could spend the cold weather in prison, where it was warm and there was food and drink. But this would not work in China. When somebody does time in China, the family has to pay. They even have to buy the bullets for the firing

squad. With her husband in jail, Fang Cao had to spend 400 *yuan* a month, a sum she and her daughter did not even spend on the outside. She was allowed to visit her husband once per month for about an hour each time. She says: “At first I went happily, but every time, as soon as I got there I started to cry. I couldn’t help it. He’d say, ‘Be strong.’ And I’d say: ‘I’m not crying because I’m not strong; it’s because when I see you I can’t help it.’”

Every time she goes to the prison, Fang Cao buys a lot of fruit, because her husband is fond of it. She buys fruit she and her daughters cannot afford to eat. She buys dozens of pounds of it at once, though she has to change buses, carrying her daughter, and all that fruit as she travels to faraway Tongling Prison. Her husband says to her: “What do you bring all this for? I’m fine here. You need the money at home.” She says: “I can make more money, but I can only come to see you once a month.”

I saw her again after that and she asked me: “How is the long-distance learning on the Internet? I want to study.” I said: “It’s a scam.” She asked: “So you still have to go to school?” I said: “Schools cheat you out of your money too, even worse.” She was silent. “Then what can I do?” I sighed: “Nothing. If you want to learn something, you don’t really have a choice . . .”

When Lomonosov,² a nearly illiterate fisherman’s son, left his fishing village for Moscow, he entered a school and asked for the headmaster, saying: “I want to study in your school.” The headmaster took him in and later, with a recommendation letter from that headmaster he went to university in St. Petersburg. After university his tutor gave him a letter and he went to Germany for further study. From the day he entered school to his return from studies in Germany, Lomonosov did not spend a ruble. He lived in 17th century Imperial Russia. Today we live in 21st century Communist China. Lomonosov became famous as a chemist and a scholar of rhetoric, a linguist, a poet and an artist in glass mosaics. China has so far not produced a Lomonosov.

Fang Cao did not own any presentable clothes, but she paid several thousand *yuan* to study away at her Internet courses everyday until late at night. Now it is midnight. While I fret over another day gone by in a

muddle, she has put the day's weariness out of her mind and is studying.

In August, her older daughter, the child of her husband and his former wife, was at last entering high school. She is an excellent student, very much like her father, and tested into a key high school. To make it easier for her to get to school, Fang Cao moved out of her roughly-finished house and rented a place near the school, increasing her financial burden.

"Fang Cao is like a woman in a beautiful poem," someone said. Yes, she's like her name.³

Without great women, there would be no great men. At Tiananmen Square in 1989, the poet Bing Xin, tears running down her cheeks, addressed the hunger strikers: "Children, please stop . . ." Bing Xin was a great woman. In her great maternal love she could not bear to see these young people, like flower buds yet to open, struggling in the grip of cruel reality, awaiting their troubled fate.

A teacher lives in an out-of-the-way corner of Suining, a typical woman of southern China: calm and unassuming, a woman of few words. She looks serene and composed. If you knew nothing about her, you might think she enjoys an untroubled, peaceful life; that you might happen on her holding fresh flowers, surrounded by happy children. You would be wrong. She is a political prisoner's wife. Her husband Liu Xianwu is spending thirteen years in a dark cell. She has to face interrogation by the police, has to face chats with the school "leaders". Her home is plain and sparsely furnished, a witness to her hard luck and eight years of work. Both her parents are living and she has an eight-year-old daughter, a daughter who was born after her father's arrest. This woman is Chen Mingxian, a language teacher at Suining Middle School.

Liu Xianwu had not been married long when he was arrested. The bride in Tu Fu's poem, "The Newlywed's Departure," is distressed because her husband has been drafted to fight the rebels, but perhaps the fighting will not go on long and her husband will soon return. Chen Mingxian's husband, however, has been taken to prison to be tortured. There is nothing of the glory of "defend-

ing home and country" about his departure. Both of them, husband and wife, must suffer the humiliation that comes with this "honor" of his being a convict sentenced to Reeducation-Through-Labor. His leaving will last thirteen years, thirteen years that are the best time of a woman's life. During these best years of her life, she and her husband will be separated.

The woman married to the merchant of Qutang complained that her husband "has failed each day to keep his word."⁴ Chen Mingxian does not complain. She just works hard, waiting for her husband to be released. When that happens, their home will be ready for him. She bought a house and although it is very small, it will be home enough after those thirteen years. Their daughter is growing up and she is very gifted, delicate, and lovely. She likes to play the piano, paint, and act. She does outstandingly in all her classes.

I know why this is.

Chen Mingxian treats her students like close friends, though those children do not yet know how hard life is. When I met her, it was right around dinner time. She had a telephone call from one of her girl students, who asked if she'd eaten yet, because she and several of her classmates were going out. She invited her teacher to come along. Chen Mingxian smiled, talking to that child, and politely declined the invitation. The girl seemed rather disappointed and Chen Mingxian comforted her in a soft voice.

She is a good teacher. Yes, even though you did not know her story, you got it right. Sometimes she does have fresh flowers and a crowd of happy children around her.

In the czarist prisons, political prisoners had the respect of the other prisoners. The convicts would not let them work, but shared the heavy tasks out among themselves. You could not imagine this happening in Chinese prisons.

I cherish a tiny wish, or maybe I should call it an extravagant hope: whenever the sun sets in the west, I pray that political prisoners in China might receive the same treatment. I pray this because my friend Hu Jia faces the danger of being imprisoned at any time. Could he, with his frail, sickly physique, stand up to that inhuman place?

Hu Jia's wife Jinyan⁵ is happy. She might be the wife of a political prisoner, but she seldom worries. When she discovered she was being followed, she turned with relish and began following the agent who was following her. All he could do was run. The people following her turned this way and that, while she carried on, concentrating on memorizing English vocabulary. Jinyan has a famous line: "Who has less freedom? The follower or the followed?"

Of course the follower has less. But the follower doesn't need freedom. The followers can betray everything, so naturally they can betray freedom. What do they need it for? What good is it to them? While for the followed, freedom is breath itself. So if we measure from a special angle, it's still the followed who are less free.

Jinyan is only twenty-three. Maybe she does not know the taste of sorrow yet. May she never know. May she stay twenty-three forever.

LOVE SONG (2)

If your weeping footsteps
Had not brought you to my heart's window
Where would I go
For hope of a future?
You are the dove who brings me olive branches
I am the firefly who sends you crabapple blossoms.

The Himalayas cut off the sky,
The hawk scatters your news
Into the snow-blown night.
Every morning as I think of you, still dreaming,
The news of freedom
Begins to spread deep in the wilderness.

Translated by J. Latourelle

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Notes

1. Decembrist Revolt, December, 1825, Russia. Those revolutionaries who did not die on the spot under gunfire from the czarist troops were sent into exile in Siberia. Many of their wives followed them into exile.
2. Mikhail Lomonosov, Russian polymath (1711–1765).
3. Fang is a homophone for "fragrant" or "virtuous". Cao means grass.
4. Li Yi, "A Song of the Southern River": Since I married the merchant of Qutang, He has failed each day to keep his word. Had I thought how regular the tide is, I might rather have chosen a river-boy. "English Translation of 300 Select Poems From Tang Dynasty," *China the Beautiful*, [no date], <http://www.chinapage.com/poem/300poem/t300d.html>.
5. Her full name is Zeng Jinyan.