

Walking Out on China

A writer decides

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[...]



Anthony Russo

After all, having been imprisoned for four years after I wrote a poem that condemned the Chinese government's brutal suppression of student protesters in 1989, I had been denied permission to leave China 16 times.

I felt very tempted. It doesn't matter if you have a passport or visa. All that counts is the amount of cash in your pocket. You toss your cellphone, cut off communications with the outside world and sneak into a village, where you can easily locate a peasant or a smuggler willing to help you. After settling on the right price, you are led out of China on a secret path that lies beyond the knowledge of humans and ghosts.

Until earlier this year, I had resisted the urge to escape. Instead, I chose to stay in China, continuing to document the lives of those occupying the bottom rung of society. Then, democratic protests swept across the Arab world, and posts began appearing on the Internet calling for similar street protests in China. In February and March, there were peaceful gatherings at busy commercial and tourist centers in dozens of cities every Sunday afternoon. The government panicked, staging a concerted show of force nationwide. Soldiers changed into civilian clothes and patrolled the streets with guns, arresting anyone they deemed suspicious.

Meanwhile, any reference to Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution (and even the word jasmine) was censored in text messages and on search engines. The police rounded up human rights lawyers, writers and artists. The democracy activist Liu Xianbin, who had served nine years in prison for helping to form the China Democratic Party, was given a new sentence of 10 years. The artist Ai Weiwei vanished in April and has lived under close government surveillance since his release in mid-June.

[...] When public security officers learned that my books would be published in Germany, Taiwan and the United States, they began phoning and visiting me frequently.

In March, my police handlers stationed themselves outside my apartment to monitor my daily activities. “Publishing in the West is a violation of Chinese law,” they told me. “The prison memoir tarnishes the reputation of China’s prison system and ‘God Is Red’ distorts the party’s policy on religion and promotes underground churches.” If I refused to cancel my contract with Western publishers, they said, I’d face legal consequences.

Then an invitation from Salman Rushdie arrived, asking me to attend the PEN World Voices Festival in New York. I immediately contacted the local authorities to apply for permission to leave China, and booked my plane ticket. However, the day before my scheduled departure, a police officer called me to “have tea,” informing me that my request had been denied. If I insisted on going to the airport, the officer told me, they would make me disappear, just like Ai Weiwei.

For a writer, especially one who aspires to bear witness to what is happening in China, freedom of speech and publication mean more than life itself. My good friend, the Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo, has paid a hefty price for his writings and political activism. I did not want to follow his path. I had no intention of going back to prison. I was also unwilling to be treated as a “symbol of freedom” by people outside the tall prison walls.

Only by escaping this colossal and invisible prison called China could I write and publish freely. I have the responsibility to let the world know about the real China hidden behind the illusion of an economic boom — a China indifferent to ordinary people’s simmering resentment.

I kept my plan to myself. I didn’t follow my usual routine of asking my police handlers for permission. Instead, I packed some clothes, my Chinese flute, a Tibetan singing bowl and two of my prized books, “The Records of the Grand Historian” and the “I Ching.” Then I left home while the police were not watching, and traveled to Yunnan. Even though it was sweltering there, I felt like a rat in winter, lying still to save my energy. I spent most of my time with street people. I knew that if I dug around, I could eventually find an exit. [...]

[Am 2.Juli 2011 gelang Liao Yiwu in einer kleinen Grenzstadt die Ausreise nach Vietnam, von wo er nach Berlin weiterreiste, wo er seit dem 6. Juli lebt. In deutscher Sprache sind seine Werke „Fräulein Hallo und der Bauernkaiser“ sowie „Für ein Lied und hundert Lieder“ erschienen. Auszüge aus seinen Werken sind in verschiedenen Ausgaben von Lettre International erschienen.]