

Exiled to English

HA JIN

In February 2005, ten months before he died of cancer, I again met Mr. Binyan Liu, one of the top Chinese dissidents in North America. I went to Princeton to give a talk, and we had dinner at Perry Link and Tong Yi's home in the evening. Over tea Mr. Liu complained about how empty of soul current Chinese literature was. He sighed and said to me, "Nobody is interested in exploring the Chinese soul anymore." He paused, then added, "If I were fifteen years younger, I would return to literature." His tone of voice was so sincere that I didn't know how to respond, as I remembered how certain he had once been about his political role.

The first time I'd met him was in the spring of 1989, when I was finishing my dissertation at Brandeis University so that I could return to my teaching position at Shandong University that fall. I was anxious, unsure if China would continue keeping its door open. I had known of several scholars who had earned graduate degrees in the West forty years before, but whose knowledge of our field, English and American literature, had grown obsolete over the decades because they'd never had opportunities to communicate with scholars outside China. One evening in mid-April, together with a friend I called on Mr. Binyan Liu, who was at Harvard that spring. During our conversation I told him my concern, and he assured me that things were improving in China. "Look," he said, "Su Xiaokang is about to become a vice president of a drama school. Your fear is groundless." At the time Su Xiaokang was a controversial figure, attacked by the hard-liners, because he had made the TV series *River Elegy*, so his promotion was heartening news to most reform-minded people.

I respected Mr. Liu but couldn't share his optimism. He was a well-known political figure and an eminent reportage writer, whereas I was just a graduate student, so my concern might not have made much sense to him. Indeed, I myself felt it was rather trivial at the time.

Six weeks later, when the tanks rolled into Beijing and gun shots rang out in Tiananmen Square, Mr. Liu was still optimistic. Even three days after the June 4 massacre, at our demonstration in front of Boston City Hall, Mr. Liu gave a short speech and announced that the Li Peng regime would step down in a matter of days. Some of the demonstrators, mostly Chinese students, scholars, and people from Chinatown, seemed to be similarly hopeful.

Few of us could see what such a tragedy meant to many of us personally—it would change our lives for good. For weeks I was in a daze and in pain as though something had shattered deep inside. I had served in the People's Liberation Army for more than five years in the early 1970s, and we soldiers had always been instructed that our principle was to serve and protect the people. That was why we were called the people's army. Now the gunfire, the carnage, and the bald-faced lies afterward had blown that principle to pieces.

As a result, a part of my reference frame had collapsed. For the first time I was tormented by the monstrous apparition of my native country.

By then I'd had my first volume of poems accepted for publication, but I took this English book only as an excursion because I believed I would write in Chinese eventually. I'd kept in touch with a few friends, poets, in China, and we thought that the Chinese language, polluted by revolutionary movements and political jargon, had reached the stage where changes must be made, and that we could work to improve the poetic language. As a possibility, we might attempt to create a new kind of language for poetry. The immediate effect of the Tiananmen massacre on me was that I would have to revise my personal plan if I couldn't go back to China soon. I began looking for a job, ideally something related to Chinese, such as teaching it or writing and translating for a Chinese-language newspaper. It turned out that for every opening there were hundreds of applicants, who mostly had degrees in Chinese, which I didn't have. The only diplomas in my hands were in English, on which I would have to depend when seeking employment. How I envied some of my friends who could make a living by using our mother tongue.

To make matters worse, my dissertation was in comparative poetics, aimed at China's academia, and had no use for most English departments in the United States. As a result, I couldn't find an academic job. On paper my application looked strong and could get me some interviews, yet when people saw me in person and heard my accent, they would change their minds. I dreamed of going to California, but no school on the West Coast gave me an interview.

Despite displacement and adversity, one had to survive and figure out how to make the best use of one's life. I felt I must not just wait for a historical change, the course of which doesn't take the individual's fate into account. Like many Chinese students, I considered changing my field, and even my parents urged me to go to law or business school, or into computer science, but I knew I wouldn't be good at any of those. So I started thinking about shifting my field a bit—to write in English. I believed that after publishing three or four books, I might be able to land a job teaching creative writing as some of my American friends were doing, usually with one book under their belts. There were several reasons for taking this step. First, we—my wife and I—decided to immigrate so that our child could get out of the vicious cycle in Chinese history where violence had been gratuitous, serving no purpose. Second, I was unpublished in my mother tongue, and if I wrote in Chinese, I might have to publish in mainland China eventually and be at the mercy of its censorship. Third, I wouldn't let the Chinese state power shape my existence anymore—in other words, I wanted to get out of its field of force. To preserve the integrity of my work and to separate my existence from the powers that be, I could not but write in English.

However, it was easy to lay out those rationalities but hard to actually take the leap. For months I felt as though running a fever, overwhelmed by the odds. I was uncertain if I could write in English and how far I could go. But gradually I realized that certainty was not human condition. I had to ask myself whether I could accept failure as the final outcome. After a long soul searching, I concluded that I could face failure, which meant having wasted my life without getting anywhere. I was sure that even if I failed, my family would still love me and stay with me.

At the time I'd been reading Chekhov, both his stories and his correspondence. In his early years Chekhov didn't take his talent seriously, writing stories under pseudonyms only for bread. In his own confession, prior to 1886, when he was twenty-six, he had never worked on a story for longer than a day. In February 1886, D. V. Grigorovich, a reputable novelist, wrote Chekhov a letter, which "caused an emotional explosion" in the young writer. The older man said: "I am convinced that you are destined to create some admirable and truly artistic works. And you will be guilty of a great moral sin if you do not live up to these hopes.... I do not know what your financial situation is. If it is poor, it would be better for you

to go hungry, as we did in our day ...”¹ From that point on, Chekhov began writing longer stories with a clear artistic vision and eventually left us his best works, those small classics of his last decade. As I was reading his letters, it dawned on me that in America, as long as you were healthy and did some work, you wouldn’t go hungry. Artists here could be poor, wretched, and paranoid, but they didn’t starve. Compared to Chekhov’s time and the czarist Russia, we were in a much better situation. Speaking about hunger, I was also deeply affected by Kafka’s story “The Hunger Artist.” The protagonist cannot find normal food that can satisfy his hunger, so he has to fast and take fasting as his art, an art that makes no sense to others. Eventually he breaks the fasting record and dies from enacting the art, yet even his best performance and highest achievement turn out to be meaningless to others and to himself. This character is a quintessential figure of artistic failure and success. In other words, neither success nor failure means anything to him. I realized that I wanted to write also because I couldn’t find another way to appease the hunger within. Success or failure would be less relevant as long as I could write.

In English there were two models I could follow. One was exemplified by Yutang Lin, who served as a “cultural ambassador” and who spoke to the West about China and to the Chinese about the West. He functioned as a bridge—a link between two countries, two languages, and two cultures. In essence he viewed himself as a cultural spokesman of China. For some time such a grand role was very attractive to me, but I soon began to be aware of my inadequacy and to feel uneasy about Lin’s dependency on China for his literary existence. The other model was embodied by Conrad and Nabokov, who didn’t represent their native countries and instead found their places in English. In fact, Conrad and Nabokov have established a great tradition in English prose, in which some nonnative speakers have become essential writers. This is a unique phenomenon, one of the glories English has.

It took me more than a year to decide on the convention of Conrad and Nabokov. They both depended on nothing but their individual talent and found their destinies in their adopted language. What I attempted to do was just follow the path they had opened. There was no originality in my choice—all would depend on whether I had the courage, the ability, and the luck.

At the time, China was my only subject matter, and I assumed I would spend the rest of my life translating Chinese historical experiences into literature. I didn’t pay much attention to a fissure in my conception—the contradiction between my subject matter and the language I used, a language by nature alien to my subject matter. As I continued writing in English, I began to feel this alienation widening and taking place inside myself as well, and gradually I grew less and less interested in China. I realized that I wanted to write about something else, especially the American immigrant experience, which was closer to my heart.

This desire to enter a new territory—to arrive somewhere—is in part related to my choice of writing in English. Writers of my situation exist in a margin between two languages and two cultures, so we have to become our own monuments—if we do not produce a body of significant works, we cannot claim our existence in either language. We can easily be diminished and even crushed by the forces projected from the centers. Just the isolation alone is potent enough to erase most of us. Therefore, the pressure of survival is a constant presence to us. This high-strung condition makes us restless to produce new works and treat every book as a beginning and departure. We have no permanent turf under our feet and have to move on. In some cases, our desperation and even our anger can fuel our ambitions, spur creativity, and clarify our visions. With few references around us and without any reliance on the collective, we have to seek, imagine, and set up landmarks for ourselves, and ultimately, have to figure out how to go further than our predecessors and thus enrich the tradition we work in.

Even within this English tradition, writers each have an individual way of existence. It is commonly known that Nabokov disliked Conrad. When people compared him to Conrad, Nabokov would insist that he was different because he had written poetry and fiction in Russian whereas Conrad had never published in Polish. What Nabokov implied was that he had a place in both languages while Conrad existed only in English. Nabokov is a paragon of dual linguistic identity, which few writers can claim. However, we should keep in mind that similar to Nabokov's dual literary citizenship, Conrad is also part of Polish literature, embraced by the Poles as their own—even school pupils in Poland read him. In other words, the literary citizenship is not always determined by language alone. It is also decided by the subject matter, the quality of the author's works, the experiences they present, and the writer's origin. In the end, everything will depend on the quality of the works and on whether they can enrich and bring honor to a literature. If they are valuable enough, they might be embraced by more than one language and culture. In this sense, a writer's first responsibility is to write well and produce significant works. That is all we can aspire to do.

Yet there is a good deal of pride in the way Nabokov differentiated himself from Conrad. I greatly admire his kind of contribution to both his mother tongue and his adopted tongue. He demonstrated how a writer can contribute to his native language and literature while working in another language and living away from his motherland. But we should bear in mind that Nabokov's unique linguistic identity was shaped by the circumstances of exile. In fact, he wrote all his fiction in English after he had immigrated to America in 1940, and in his later years he lost the excitement in composing in Russian.² Even he himself divided his writing career into the Russian period and the English period. Every nonnative writer has his or her own unique problems and situation and has to figure out a personal way of survival. As beginners, it might be insane for us to seek a place in multiple languages, because the task of surviving in one language is already Herculean. Sometimes we have to make great sacrifice in order to proceed, including giving up a country or a language.

The novelist Dai Sijie, who writes in French, once said in an interview that I was too high-minded about the possibility of creating genuine literature in an adopted tongue and of bringing something new to "the mainstream literature in the West." He claims that the Western readers accept our works merely as some kind of novelty. "Like Chinese food," in his words.³ I was appalled by such self-denigration. If we don't try to write literature, why should we endure all the painful struggles in another tongue? If we don't attempt to produce serious art, we will reduce ourselves to cultural peddlers and will not deserve all the anxiety, despair, and loneliness that we have to suffer in our pursuit. In brief, if we don't take our adoption of another language as an earnest artistic choice, how can we expect readers to take us seriously? Mr. Dai must have been unaware that many of those in power in China couldn't wait to see us fail or become mediocre, because that would bring us closer to them and vindicate their mediocrity. Worse, that would set a frightening example for those artists who dare escape from the dominance of the Chinese state power.

Up to now, the bulk of my fiction is set in China. I have been accused of betraying my native country and uglifying the Chinese to please the Western audience. All those accusations will be proved groundless eventually, as I have always held translatability and similarity as my literary principle. I can say with certainty that most of my fiction means much more to the Chinese than to the readers in the West. That is why all my books except for *Waiting* have been banned in mainland China. In fact, audience shouldn't be a literary writer's concern. In American poetry, we all know that a poet should start by speaking to "vacuum," as Joseph Brodsky stressed, or "to emptiness," as Robert Creeley asserted as the needed courage. For whom do we write? "For the dead you love," as John Berryman declared. We write to please the dead masters, who are also our rivals, and we all know it is the isolation and loneliness that refines one's work and hones one's art. All the talk about

the book market and selling points is sheer nonsense, which I have felt too ashamed to heed.

Accusations against me are largely based on the conviction that one must be loyal to one's native country. But loyalty is a two-way street, especially when the individual doesn't rely on China for his or her existence. Why don't we speak about how a country betrays an individual? Has a country ever been loyal to an individual? Why should a country always demand service and sacrifice from the individual? Indeed for a country, the individual is only to be used and consumed. This is okay if the individual is a willing party. Yet if a country has abused and oppressed its people, isn't it tyrannical to demand their loyalty? And what is loyalty? It's easy to talk and point the finger, but it is difficult to do something meaningful and valuable for your country. If a Chinese writer moves into a foreign language and produces significant works in it, the ultimate upshot, from the country's viewpoint, will be that the effort might expand China's cultural map. Is that not a higher order of service? At least, it will mean much more to China than patriotic platitudes and empty talk of loyalty.

I am often revolted by the litany that one must love one's country unconditionally. Even some intellectuals and artists have joined the fanatic chorus.⁴ They believe that the country's holiness must never be questioned. But creeds not backed by reason are likely to be deceiving and self-serving. What if your country has become a fascist state? What if your country invades another country or commits genocide? What if your country bullies its own people and robs them of their voices? What if your country makes your life miserable and insufferable? Let us face it—in human history most atrocities have been committed in the name of the country. It is simpleminded, if not hypocritical, to propagate that kind of blind patriotism. An intellectual's basic task is to speak truth to power, and if necessary, speak against power.

When I began writing in English, I didn't expect to draw so much flak. Let me be candid about the controversy over me. To my mind, it mainly has two origins. The first is that publicly I have always been vocal about the Tiananmen massacre, which still rankles, and thus I have become a persona non grata to the Chinese government. Because of my feud with the Communist Party, its propaganda officials have orchestrated most of the personal attacks, including character assassination. The second cause is that my existence as a writer exemplifies that an individual doesn't have to depend on a country to survive. In other words, my existence outside China's political and literary apparatuses has become an eyesore to the authorities and to some writers and critics who are also state officials, who have to justify their inadequacy to their superiors and inferiors.

After my last meeting with Mr. Binyan Liu in February 2005, I have often thought about his words, his claim that he would have returned to literature if he had been fifteen years younger. He might have been disappointed by continuing to play his political role, passively and hopelessly waiting for the historical change in China that might bring him back to our motherland.

Fifteen years before our last meeting would be the beginning of 1990, just months after the Tiananmen massacre and when many of us had been scrambling to figure out how to exist in America. Since then he had never returned to China and must eventually have been disillusioned by the long wait. His last claim seemed to have revealed some self-doubts and many other implications. Did he mean he might have endeavored to write significant literature? Did he aspire to cure the disease in the Chinese soul as Lu Xun had attempted to eight decades before? Like Lu Xun's, his conception of literature must have been quite utilitarian. Did he regret having spent his later years gleaning information on China from newspapers and magazines and writing political articles? He might have preferred to live differently in America by having a literary life, although I couldn't see how

he would have been able to define his existence without the political context of China. A celebrated exile like him could not conceive his independence from our native country. In that resided his tragedy and honor.

I am sure that Mr. Binyan Liu was aware of the difference between a literary life and a political life—the latter is predicated on power and the collective, without which no political figure can achieve anything significant. By contrast, a literary life doesn't need those, and it mainly relies on the individual's talent and effort—through the private endeavor some writers might also achieve greatness if they have created works of lasting value. Of course, in Mr. Liu's situation, even though he had returned to literature, he wouldn't have needed to make any drastic change. For him, to continue writing in Chinese would make more sense because he was also an established semi-literary figure in China and his voice would be more resonant in our mother tongue. But for a beginner and an immigrant like me, the only choice was English, in which I would have to make my solitary journey and turn my back to our menacing native land whenever it becomes too exacting and too overpowering. This alienating stance is essential for artistic survival, because one cannot afford to let politics overwhelm one's art. As a writer, I must not be responsible for a country or a group, and I can be responsible only for my characters and for the words I use.

Notes

1. Ernest J. Simmons, *Chekhov: A Biography* (Boston: Little Brown, 1962), 96.
2. Nabokov confessed in an interview: "Of the two instruments in my possession, one—my native tongue—I can no longer use, and this not only because I lack a Russian Audience, but also because the excitement of verbal adventure in the Russian medium has faded away gradually after I turned to English in 1940." See Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 106.
3. Dai Sijie, *Xin Jing Bao*, July 22, 2007.
4. Even Ji Xianlin, the late Beijing University professor and "a master of Chinese national culture," was known for saying, "You must love your country unconditionally" (*ai guo mei shangliang*).