

# THANK YOU, EXILE

**By Wang Ai**

*In early May 2007, Wang Ai received permission from the Chinese government to return to China after 13 years in exile in New York.<sup>1</sup> Wang Ai was allowed to visit China for three weeks.*

In early May, I received permission from the Chinese government to set foot on Chinese soil after 13 years in exile. I was allowed to remain for three weeks, but could not meet with any politically-sensitive persons outside my relatives and friends.

The weather was sweltering; and before my travels had even really begun, I was already darkened by the sun and exhausted. But I wanted my American-born daughter to understand China, and so in spite of my weariness, I shuttled her around every day: the Forbidden City, the Great Wall, the Summer Palace, etc. Later, seeing that she now had a basic grasp of what she should have learned in primary school-level history, I took her to visit Peking University. With a friend's help, we entered the now firmly-locked portals of the University Party Committee Hall. Twenty-seven years ago, my husband held a series of campaign activities here. It was here that his impassioned, profoundly powerful words moved over the land like a fierce wind, caught fire, and illuminated each youthful heart. I was in my first year at Beijing Normal University then, one of those who braved the heavy snow, squeezing into the aisles of the already-packed hall, to listen to his speech. Since then, I have heard him speak many times overseas, but it has never made as deep an impression on me as that time 27 years ago. Now, I gently push open the snugly-shut double doors to peek warily into the pitch darkness, and suddenly discover that the grand hall of my memory, with its hubbub of voices, is actually old-fashioned, dark, and narrow.

“Why did that hall seem so small?” I asked my husband after I returned to the U.S.

“Of course it did. It wasn't that big,” he replied, his attention on his writing.

Even before I left New York, I understood that there had been big changes in China during these years—the cities, the shops, and people's thinking and feelings were nothing like they had been then.

The streets had become very attractive, one tall building after another, medians planted with roses. There were classic and elegant restaurants and hotels, and the food was even more amazingly authentic, exquisite, and refined.

People were very cordial as well. Joyful, shrill voices made time pass in a twinkling, dispelling all my misgivings and unfamiliarity. Only in striking up conversations did I become aware of the vast distance between them and me.

One day, I'd just returned to the hotel when an old friend came to see me. She's quite successful now. In addition to teaching, she's also an official. Without her realizing it, her satisfaction and confidence showed in her face. I invited her to have a meal with me. In the brightly lit, elegantly decorated and shining restaurant, we shared stories of our youth. Of course, our conversation finally turned to our different current situations. She laughed bluntly: “We're getting old, our minds have changed too. All we want now is to improve our health, provide a good life for our families, and live happily. That's enough. We give no thought to the goals and ideals of the past.” In the end, she gave me some well-intentioned advice:

“Don't be so concerned about everything. Life is short, so drink and be merry—whatever it takes to get by. This is the only life we have, why concern ourselves with other people's business and make ourselves miserable? My family is so happy; we have such a good life!”

I gazed at her, too shocked for words.

It took me a few moments of silence to steady myself and then, eyes forward, lips trembling, I spoke slowly, emphasizing each word: “Precisely because it’s short, life should be taken seriously. . . . Furthermore, what keeps us from getting by that way is . . . conscience!”

I spoke brokenly and with difficulty, my voice was hoarse, and when I was finished, I couldn’t look at her. I knew I was too worked up. Here I was just off the plane and I was saying something so wounding. Yet for some reason, I was unwilling to take it back. Secretly, I didn’t want her to get the feeling that she was right.

My friend was naturally very embarrassed. But we were adults, so she smiled and silently nodded at me without saying anything more.

My older brother made a special trip to see me. In 1964, when he was still a high school student, he was attacked for writing an article criticizing the current political situation. The family hurriedly sent him off to a remote village. He settled there, married, and had children. We seldom saw each other. So when I passed the fish pond with its artificial rocks and came down the stairs, and saw an old man, thin, small, and bent, wearing a cheap, second-rate Western suit and sitting at a bright shiny table, I was taken aback.

“Brother,” I greeted him, hesitantly.

He, too, was obviously taken aback. He hesitated, and looked at me in confusion for some time before he broke into a smile.

“You . . . you’ve changed!” he said.

Our meeting was not a happy one. During those few days, he fell silent again and again. He was very troubled, full of sighs, and would frequently glance at me with a kind of sadness and pain.

And one day, he could hold back no longer.

“Ai, I tell you!” It was just after lunch and we were resting, my brother leaning his head back on the chair,

when he suddenly remarked to me in a loud indignant voice: “Look at yourself. What has life overseas done to you to make you look so old and haggard!? You don’t look at all like yourself!”

I did a quick mental inventory of my time overseas: it really had been a time of ups and downs, passed in busyness and loneliness.

Looking at him, I smiled reluctantly as I responded:

“The last time you saw me, I was about 20 years old. How can you expect me to look the same as I did then?”

“But you really have aged too much.”

“Really? Well, there’s nothing I can do about that.”

“What do you mean? I’ve seen other people who’ve come back from overseas and they’re all in excellent spirits!”

Then I lost my temper and shouted at him: “As you know, brother, I’m not overseas enjoying myself. I’m in exile with my husband!”

“Right! This exile is what I’m talking about. Is it really worth it?!”

There was nothing more to say at that point. We fell into a mutual silence, glaring at each other, both aware we couldn’t continue on this subject.

I also saw an “admirer” of mine from the old days. He had been a young and impetuous guy who liked my writing very much. Now he was slightly fatter and he had shiny temples. He was pretty calm and collected: a man of middle age. We asked each other about our families, about what our children were doing, and then he changed the subject to ask about my writing. I said it had been years since I’d taken up my pen. I had a busy life, responsibilities at home.

“Life overseas is quite difficult. But maybe someday I’ll start writing again,” I said, attempting to mollify him.

His reaction was unexpectedly offhand. A light toss of his hair and a grin and he said: “It doesn’t matter! Every-

thing's different now. Those years are gone. You might not get it yet, but people don't read that much anymore. Hardly anybody reads what's published these days."

"What do people do all day then?"

"Hey, we manage to pass the time."

I discovered that at nearly every dinner table discussion, people of all ages carried on with great animation and boundless anticipation, focused on doing business and making money. Their speech revealed indomitable courage in the face of possible setbacks and perseverance to weather repeated failures. I was surprised, bewildered, puzzled, and finally, terrified. They would also speak frankly of seizing the opportunity to go off to strange and unusual places one had never heard of, traveling through Xinjiang, Yunnan, Tibet, through mountains, forests, and deserts. Some of the more reserved and naïve people, those of former days, wax familiarly on dining etiquette, seating protocols, toast-making, and the meting out of rewards and punishments. Others, enormously self-satisfied and with great thought for the future, were calculating their own future as officials, haggling over every penny. They were slick and sly, all of it coming together in a way that left me dumbfounded. It was a real eye-opener for me. Even still, I only needed to mention books, ideals, the meaning of life—these subjects of the 80s—or my husband, his involvements, the truth about certain incidents, etc., and these fine fellows would fall suddenly silent. Not a peep would issue from their pressed lips and they would sit at attention as if they had received the finest military training.

"What is it, don't want to listen, or don't dare to?" I asked once in a deliberately loud voice.

The younger ones looked up cautiously and gave me apologetic and fearful looks, then hurriedly looked back down. The older ones remained upright and looked straight ahead, their faces cold, as if they had not heard what I'd just said. It was only when accidentally meeting my puzzled, expectant gaze, that they would give a grudging, embarrassed smile and an equivocal shrug of the shoulders by way of response.

One day, we braved the scorching sun to visit the Terra-

cotta Warriors in Xi'an. Next to the beautiful environs of the exhibition hall, we saw a small plaza where there was a majestic and imposing statue. I remembered that there had been no statue there in the past.

"Who is that a statue of?" I asked.

People responded happily, practically with one voice: "Qin Shihuang!"<sup>2</sup> Their smiles were tolerant, as if they forgave my long absence from my home and my subsequent lack of familiarity.

"Why?"

They all smiled again: "Isn't this Qin Shihuang's tomb then?"

"Well, of course I know that, but . . .!"

I was filled with a weird amazement. Standing there in the burning sunlight, I focused silent attention on this huge, rough-hewn statue with its intentional magnificence. A powerful and inexorable sense of shock and indignation surged through me. Qin Shihuang—who had the gall to raise this towering statue to that notorious and brutal tyrant? What fears and nightmares must this image of Qin Shihuang, standing majestically in the sunshine, produce in the hearts of ordinary people? The sound of Meng Jiangnu's<sup>3</sup> bitter tears ignored, loud praise for a tyrant drunk with his power and exploits—what sort of twisted, weak, despicable people is this?!

But a glance revealed that each and every friend and relative around me were oblivious, smiling and chatting happily. I couldn't keep back my anger. I felt as if my blood were surging straight through me, yet my heart was cold and I was trembling.

When we went to Mount Emei in Sichuan, we oohed and aahed over the mountainsides full of blooming azaleas. But after making our way with difficulty to the top, we found that what we had thought was a green craggy peak had been leveled. On this vast flat expanse of bald gray-green concrete, an A-shaped Buddha, huge and ugly, but shiny bright, towered toward the clouds. I had a moment of dizziness and turned to go down off that mountain when I ran into several dark-skinned,

grimy-faced youths in tattered clothing carrying baskets on their backs. Something made me ask them what they had in their baskets. “Rocks,” answered one.

Then they told me that a full basket weighed 100 catties.<sup>4</sup> By carrying it from the foot of the mountain to the top, they earned two *yuan*.

I couldn’t believe my ears and asked again. The answer was the same.

“Sis!” In confusion, I called over my older sister who’d come up the mountain with me and asked her quietly whether I could give these young people some money.

“They’re so pitiful,” I said.

“No!” My sister was suddenly angry. She dragged me away.

“Don’t be foolish!” We stood far off behind the Buddha as my sister spoke her warning in a low voice. “These are all very poor people. If they know we have money, they might rush up and kill us all.”

As I watched the gradually setting sun, my face went pale and I didn’t say another word.

The next day, sitting at a richly-laden banquet table with a heavy heart, I mentioned the young people with their loads of stone that I had met on the mountain, and I couldn’t keep a trace of the injustice I felt from my voice: “Two *yuan*! How do they survive?”

As my words fell, embarrassment showed on every face. As if I stood in a circle of crops struck by frost, they sat mute in a collective silence.

I was extremely embarrassed as well. Intentionally or not, I had ruined everyone’s happy mood.

Right then, a friend stood up, a brimming glass of red wine in hand, looked around the table and said loudly:

“Hey, none of that. Let’s concentrate on eating, drinking, and being merry! Let us eat as much as we want and drink as long as we want. When the time comes and our eyes close and we’re laid out with legs outstretched,

who will care whether the East wind blows harder than the West wind or vice-versa? Who will care whether the man killed the horse or the horse killed the cow? Am I right, everyone? Drink up!”

This order given, those who had moments ago resembled crestfallen, mute crops, were in an instant transformed, like withered trees in spring, or after a long drought. One after another, they were transformed into a flourishing and joyful bunch, their eyes flashing, as they laughed and shouted: “Cheers! Cheers!”

When the scene became more than I could stomach, I would turn my eyes to the trendy new buildings beyond the window. The median plantings were filmed with dust. Cars sped past while a dark, thin old lady in shabby clothes stood at the roadside looking left and right.

China, my beloved land, has truly become a vast, flickering cave where, in the darkness, thousands of glasses of liquor shimmer. It is a country oblivious to the blood covering the floor underfoot, whose people turn a blind eye as they pursue pleasure without a thought for tomorrow. To them, tomorrow is an amusement park of smiling faces and loud songs, a place where suffering, sadness, frustration, and tears are smothered relentlessly. The calls for freedom and democracy of the 1980s before I went abroad, the reverence for knowledge, justice, conscience, and reason have all been swallowed in the depths of these glasses, and are no more.

Yet there are exceptions.

One busy, hot evening I went to the home of my second older sister. An artist, she is a short woman, full of energy, hair all out of place, with big, bright eyes that flash with stubbornness and aggression. She got out a big batch of her recent work to show me. We sipped tea as we unrolled the paintings on the floor one by one. They were large ink and wash paintings of headless torsos, the brushwork bold and unrestrained, full of passion. I looked at them in pleasant surprise and told her I liked them.

“Really?” She swept a glance over me, eyes glinting with an odd light.

“I was trying to express a kind of grief and indignation,”

she said. And suddenly her eyes were red and her expression changed to one of grim solemnity: “I wanted my painting to show that I am not resigned to oppression, to being trampled or tread upon! . . . You know, our lives here are hardly human!”

This was almost the only dissenting voice I heard while I was in China.

We set the paintings aside and sat down to chat. I told her about my life overseas. She listened with envy and from time to time let out a startled exclamation. When I finished, she fell silent and after a while began talking to herself in a soft, bitter voice: “And us? We are forced to become pigs . . . The government wants us to live like pigs! There’s no way to avoid it. What can we . . . This life of mine!” She suddenly began to weep soundlessly.

And I suddenly realized how lucky I am.

Years of life in exile have made me like one sealed in ice, perfectly preserving my youthful vitality and ideals. I did not experience the torture, the agonizing despair of the ordeals following June Fourth, nor did I know the terror of police vehicles speeding through the streets below in the dead of night. I did not witness hope being crushed under government tanks. At the same time, I didn’t follow the government’s lead and suddenly develop an unparalleled interest in money, putting all my family’s savings into business, and sacrificing my soul and ideology along with it. I did not grow shrewd in the ways of looting, with which the whole people tried to cheat each other, nor did my flame gradually flicker and die in the wake of all sorts of failed attacks. In other words, I did not experience that whole process: the abrading, bleaching, and cutting, till all rough edges were worn away. I am not as one who stands beside a rushing stream, and can only hear the rush of the water as it twists my silhouette beyond recognition. No, in my heart, good overcame evil, light vanquished the darkness. Life ought to be beautiful and serious, and should forever stand fast as a golden standard, indisputable, and secure.

A very close friend of mine perceived this. On one occasion, she suddenly let out a long sigh, and said, “You have it good, you still retain the enthusiasm and ideals of our school days.”

I asked why she did not.

“Such a waste!” my friend shot back. “We’re in China here. You’re an idiot if you don’t try to get rich, or get yourself some kind of semi-official position. If you don’t, you have no social standing, you can’t get anything, and people will cheat you and trample you under!”

My friend spoke with such disdain for the world and its ways, watching me at the same time, as her eyes glittered with a look that was in a way crafty. She leaned in close to me and whispered in my ear, “Look, take yourself as an example: without money or privileges, would this trip have been comfortable for you? Hmm? Am I right?”

And then she threw back her head and laughed.

I was mortified. Apart from her laughter, tinged with something of the lack of scruples that I found distasteful in middle-aged women, I felt as if her words drew us into some kind of conspiracy. I suddenly felt stifled, somehow insulted, but I could hardly say this to her. I took a breath and looked away.

Three weeks later, I was back in the noise and bustle of my New York home. I immediately got out my cleaning supplies and set to work scrubbing the toilet and floor.

The original essay was published in the Chinese-language journal: Wang Ai [王艾], “Thank You, Exile” [谢谢你, 流亡], *Kaifang* [开放], November 2007.

## Notes

1. Wang Ai is married to activist Hu Ping, who is on Human Rights in China’s board of directors, and is the editor-in-chief of HRIC’s Chinese-language monthly online journal *Ren Yu Ren Quan* and the magazine *Beijing Spring*.
2. Editor’s note: King of state of Qin 247 BCE–221 BCE, first emperor to unify China, but a very controversial figure due to the tyranny of his autocratic rule. He began construction on the precursor to the Great Wall.
3. Editor’s note: Female character from a popular legend in which a young man had to leave his bride on their wedding day to answer the call of Qin Shihuang to build the Great Wall. She wept bitter tears when she found out he was dead.
4. Approximately 130 pounds.