

UNNATURAL EXILE: IN MEMORY OF LIU BINYAN

BY SU XIAOKANG

Exiled dissident writer Liu Binyan, best known for his book of essays *A Second Kind of Loyalty*, died in Princeton, New Jersey on December 5, 2005, after a long bout with cancer. He had always hoped to return to China.

Just as Qu Qiubai longed for Chinese bean curd even as he was dying,¹ Binyan, while on his sickbed, kept complaining that he could not get authentic *youtiao*² here in America. When I went to see him in September, I found him looking gaunt, lying on the living room couch as he chatted with Perry Link;³ his wife, Zhu Hong, said he weighed only 150 pounds. He used to be a sturdy man, and even after the disease had taken him past the point of no return, he retained a greedy appetite. I can still remember that every time we went out for dinner, only he enjoyed eating *kourou*, a dish the rest of us found too heavy.⁴

His initial rectal cancer treatment was ineffective, and I heard that Binyan and Zhu Hong repeated the process, but to no avail. The latest round of radiation, combined with a different medication, was accompanied by harsh side effects. While the two of them described the complicated treatment, my wife Fu Li limped into the room. Binyan pointed at her, and said to me, “Now I have become her, and Zhu Hong has become you.”⁵

Zhu Hong struck me as noticeably older, even though it had been only a year since I had seen her last; her fingers and lips had begun to tremble, and she said the doctor had diagnosed her with hyperthyroidism. As we were on the road heading home, I said to Fu Li, “I’m afraid that Zhu Hong will pass away before Binyan.”

Is there any sociological research on the seriously ill? Their dreams, their illusions, their mythology, even their language becomes part of a system different from that of everyday society. They surrender themselves passively to the control of therapists, religious counselors and the supernatural (gods, belief systems) until the last minute of their lives; or, what sense of self they retain is just a tattered remnant left after the various myths of our society have been imposed on the experience of illness. Pre-modern society used myth to fill gaps in knowledge, but now modern medicine has turned out to be such a massive and complicated system that laymen and society as a

whole find themselves just as ignorant and befuddled as our pre-modern counterparts, and the popular medical culture of our time has made its mythology that much more powerful. Susan Sontag divided society into “the kingdom of the well” and “the kingdom of the sick,” but the division is unnecessary, because both sides dwell in illusion.⁶ In the aftermath of our car accident, Fu Li and I experienced something similar: we depended on illusion and hope, with no power to resist.⁷

Torn from the breast of China

Binyan had no intention of spending his last days in a foreign land. My impression is that those who are forced abroad after they have passed middle age are more likely to think of returning home. He reached a point where he no longer considered what was best for his health, but only hoped to plant his feet on the soil of his homeland one last time; this was the final wish he made known to the world.

Of course, homesickness is a form of illusion, an ancient illusion that has given birth to many Yue Fu⁸ songs and many Tang poems. But Binyan’s homesickness was different from the “bright moonlight before my bed” variety.⁹ He was a political exile. What concerned him most was what was happening on the other side of the ocean: the lives of the common people, the huge gap between rich and poor, the social unrest—things that do not necessarily have to do with democracy. From his first days abroad to his last, he noted details such as the price of pork in Beijing while never knowing the price of gas in New Jersey. So many years after the launch of the Internet age, Binyan still clipped articles from Chinese newspapers and pasted them in scrapbooks. His stubborn faith in the printed world is hardly surprising; I believe it was part of his homesickness, and also part of his decision—once the option of returning to China was closed to him—to continue working as a journalist in a faraway land.

Binyan felt his banishment more bitterly than almost anyone else. In recent years, the term “exile” has taken on less negative connotations among Chinese, mainly because exile in western countries could be considered an advantage. But for Binyan, the scenery and culture of the West were a mere sideshow, and his thoughts remained fixed on his homeland. Rather than say that the Chinese people were bereft of “the conscience of China,”¹⁰ it would be more accurate to say that



Liu Binyan in 2002. Photo courtesy of *Open Magazine*.

Liu Binyan was bereft of the Chinese people. Banishing him was like tearing him from the breast of China; the hardship of his survival is not adequately expressed by a pallid term such as “exile.”

It is said that there are two types of exile: one in which the individual lives in the abyss of loneliness—the price that he pays for his exile—and the other in which the exile rejects isolation and is able to create a bridge to the culture of a foreign land. You could even say that the exile hybridizes two cultures, especially under the current fashion for globalization. However, neither of these types is evident within the Chinese exile community, because their exile is genuinely involuntary, an accident of time and fate.

How many people in this community are truly happy in exile and would scorn an opportunity to return home? Nearly 20 years after leaving China, the majority are still trapped inside a Chinese-language world, writing about the “motherland of their dreams,” perhaps their way of rejecting exile. Of course there is no harm in it, but why do we need to flaunt our exile identity with Binyan as our standard-bearer? In the 1980s, when China was still in a pre-modern phase, people needed a “conscience” and a “blue sky,”¹¹ and Binyan could not refuse those titles. But once in the West, Binyan was forced to take on the mantle of “undaunted exile.” When the overseas community held a banquet to place congratulatory laurels around his neck, I stayed home.¹² I don’t know how willingly

Binyan accepted his symbolic role, but it must have been a heavy burden to carry from East to West.

A symbol of his era

Liu Binyan became China’s leading journalist in an era of growing disillusionment with the Communist system. There was no one who could compare with him. Working under a new form of totalitarianism, he revived the classical ideal of seeking justice from a principled official, and gave people floundering in the abyss an illusory and irreplaceable sense of hope. While all of China was living under a literary inquisition,¹³ he crafted a new genre of protest writing. He tenaciously maintained and proclaimed the most bedrock ethical standards, making his writings and character an indelible symbol of his era.

He himself was also influenced by the age, which unfortunately merged with his straight and incisive character to bestow on China certain typical “Liu Binyan arguments” on subjects such as loyalty and Marxism. These arguments are treated with contempt among the more liberal and westernized members of China’s dissident community, and attract little interest from China’s younger generation. Nevertheless, I believe these “Liu Binyan arguments” will stay relevant within Chinese discourse for a long time to come, because even now I doubt the ability of Chinese people to engage in in-depth discussion of a concept such as “loyalty.” In this respect, Liu Binyan is likely to stand alone long after his passing.

My guess is that interpretation of Liu Binyan will remain a blank slate in contemporary Chinese literary history. Unless contemporary Chinese history becomes clear, the implications of Liu Binyan’s writings will not come into focus, and his fine literary legacy will be overlooked. This distinctive style was ephemeral, and its death can be attributed to both literature and politics. In my view, Binyan’s significance to modern intellectual history is the price that he paid for the Communist Party’s policy toward expression. He is a measure of freedom of speech in modern China, which in turn is a measure of all of China’s political situation generally. Although the expansion of space for free speech does not grow out of nothing, under a totalitarian political system, the chess match between freedom and authority often starts with the exposure of truth. That is why Vaclav Havel said that lying has become an essential function of power.

Liu Binyan’s accomplishments will always be associated with the heady atmosphere of the 1980s.

Liu Binyan was a person who broke through the limits on freedom of speech. His initial suspicion of details eventually led him to cast suspicion on the entire utopian concept. He was also the first to refer to actual events in a way that awakened China to the truth. He blazed a path of literary excellence while creating the trend of literary reportage and muckraking, and in the process bestowed on journalists the duty to advocate on behalf of the people. Thus, in a country such as China that

lacks rule of law, he maximized the media's involvement in society, and gave China's powerless a brief moment of glory.

True believer

Liu Binyan's accomplishments will always be associated with the heady atmosphere of the 1980s, in particular that era's interaction between the elite and the proletariat. It is this period that gave rise to the encomium of "China's conscience," which belonged to no one more than Liu Binyan. When his contemporaries speak of him, they reach for comparisons to Classical Chinese literature, particularly the poet and statesman Qu Yuan. The flip side of that dynamic, of course, is that the people do not only receive the benevolence of the principled official, but also venerate and sympathize with him.¹⁴ Deep within Liu Binyan lay a sort of Russian mentality that always inclined him toward the weak. In that way, he followed in the footsteps of Dostoyevsky.

Following Liu Binyan's exile, China fell into a post-totalitarian era in which power and capital made peace with each other to join in ruthless pillaging. Lies flew even more thick and fast than before, and "the power of the powerless"¹⁵ vanished without a trace. Where are Liu Binyan's spiritual heirs? The new generation of activists, even Li Shenzhi,¹⁶ who was of the same generation as Liu Binyan, always cite Vaclav Havel in their writings. It is similar to the way in which the language of the May 4th Movement always had to give a nod to ancient Greece, and shows the paltriness of our own culture in defying authority. Do classical concepts such as "advocating for the people" and "seeking the benevolent official" still have a place in our cynical, consumerist new world? Perhaps Liu Binyan's distinctive charm has already become outdated, pressed like a faded bouquet in the hearts of those who still recognize the term "rightist."¹⁷

Even in his last days, Binyan remained an ardent leftist. At the end of a visit, as I rose to take my leave, he stopped me: "Stay and chat some more." So we talked about a well-known dissident in China. Binyan's face tensed with anxiety, and he asked, "Do you know why he is so far right? He says that everything in America is great, and propagandizes on behalf of America's actions in Iraq . . ." I told him that when the Chinese government uses nationalism and opposes Western hegemony, it is just ideology, and they have to criticize the war in Iraq. This is different from the arguments of Western intellectuals who oppose the war in Iraq, and of activists inside China who believe that opposing the system requires them to stand with America. And how can they be criticized for opposing Saddam's dictatorship?

At that moment I saw Binyan's similarity to Solzhenitsyn, who had been holed up for the last ten years in Vermont. Both of them detest American capitalism, and have strong socialist tendencies. Perhaps Solzhenitsyn could even be considered a neo-Marxist. He certainly supports a strong Russia, just as Binyan was a great supporter of China's reunification with Taiwan. Leftist support for unification is well-known, but there's also Chen Ying-chen supporting unification in Taiwan,¹⁸ while exiled dissident Cao Changqing¹⁹ pushes American "neocon" ideas and promotes Taiwanese independence. When you shuf-

fle up the cards of left, right, unification and independence, what are the principles that separate the groups? What are the deeper principles that bind them together? This is the subject of another essay.

Translated by a friend of HRIC

NOTES

1. A reference to Qu Qiubai's essay, "Some Superfluous Words." Qu, a writer, intellectual, and early leader of the Chinese Communist Party, wrote "Superfluous Words" in May 1935, soon after he was captured by the Kuomintang. He was executed by the KMT in June, 1935. Though he was a Communist martyr, Qu's sardonic essay was not appreciated by the Communist Party leadership, in part because of various unflattering references to his work for the Communist Party. In the closing lines of the essay, Qu refers to Chinese bean curd as "the most delicious food in the whole world." See Jonathan Spence, *Gate of Heavenly Peace*, pp. 290–3.
2. *Youtiao* is a Chinese fried dough stick that is usually eaten for breakfast. It is most delicious when taken fresh from the broiler.
3. A professor of Chinese language and literature at Princeton University, Link was a close friend of Liu Binyan.
4. *Kourou* is a dish made of fatty pork belly and salted vegetable.
5. Liu Binyan refers to the car accident in which Fu Li was permanently disabled, and after which Su Xiaokang took care of her.
6. A reference to the opening lines of Sontag's 1978 work, *Illness as Metaphor*: "Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place."
7. Su Xiaokang references the car accident that is the subject of his 2001 book, *A Memoir of Misfortune*.
8. A reference to a genre of Han dynasty folk songs, many of which are about longing for home.
9. The opening line of the poem "Night Thoughts" by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai (701–762). The poem later refers to the poet's "thoughts of home" while gazing at the moon.
10. A term commonly applied to Liu Binyan.
11. A Chinese metaphor for an honest and upright official who will do what is right regardless of political concerns.
12. A formal banquet was held in honor of Liu Binyan's 80th birthday in early 2005, and included the unveiling of a bronze bust of Liu.
13. Literary inquisition (*wenzi yu*) is a term for being punished for one's speech or writing.
14. Qu Yuan (c. 340–278 BC), Chinese poet and statesman, drowned himself after his advice to the Zhou Emperor was rejected, leading to the downfall of the emperor. A symbol of honest and patriotic officialdom in China, Qu Yuan is still commemorated in the traditional Dragon Boat Festival, in which racing boats symbolize his admiring public's efforts to recover his body from the water.
15. A reference to the famous essay by Czech playwright and intellectual Vaclav Havel.
16. Prominent liberal intellectual and writer, also a former vice-president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Li Shenzhi was born in Wuxi, Jiangsu in 1923 and died on April 22, 2003.
17. A reference to those Chinese who remember the political chaos of the pre-reform era, including Liu Binyan and Su Xiaokang himself.
18. Taiwanese novelist well known for his passion for Chinese culture.
19. A former journalist for the *Shenzhen Youth Daily*, Cao was fired for criticizing Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s.