

UP FRONT WITH WANG YU

Liu Nianchun, 54, is a veteran democracy and labor activist. In 1998 he was forced into exile and currently lives in New York with his wife and daughter.

Wang Yu I know you have been involved in various movements, starting with the Democracy Wall Movement of 1978 and on until 1998, when you were forced to leave China. Let's look back on the period of the Democracy Wall Movement from 1978 to 1979. At that time you were a college student. How did you get involved in the movement?

Liu Nianchun In the beginning, like most people, I went to Democracy Wall just to read big character posters or listen to people speaking. The speeches and the big character posters attracted huge audiences because their content was very different from the stance of the official media. For example, one big character poster opposed construction of the Mao Memorial, saying Mao was not a god and that we shouldn't worship him as one. Outspoken criticism like this shocked me. At the same time I sincerely admired the writers' courage. It was the first time I had tasted freedom of expression.

However, I remained an onlooker for some time.

It wasn't until I reencountered two old friends that I started to get involved. During the period of the Democracy Wall Movement many underground magazines sprang up like mushrooms. One of them was the outstanding and influential literary magazine, *Today*. Its two founders, Bei Dao and Mang Ke, were both prominent avant-garde poets, who also happened to be my friends. As a literature enthusiast, I joined them and became one of *Today's* editors. Our home, which was shared by my brother and me, soon became our gathering place, and *Today* was edited and printed there.

WY Your involvement in *Today* must have caused you some trouble.

LN Many literature fans came to our home to express their appreciation, admiration and eagerness to contribute to *Today*. Some of them went on to become famous writers in their own right, such as Duo Duo, Jiang He, Yan Li, Yang Lian, Gu Cheng and others.

In addition to serving as the editorial office of *Today*, my home was used as a liaison station for the "April 4th Forum," an organization that my brother, Liu Qing, was deeply involved in.

With so many visitors coming and going almost every day, it became impossible to avoid attracting the attention of the security police. Our home came under surveillance. I was taken to the police station for inquiries; of course they focused on *Today*. The police warned me not to get mixed up with troublemakers. They advised me that as a college student I should take my studies more seriously. I ignored their warnings.

Because of my role in the movement, I was expelled from my college, the Beijing Normal College, shortly before graduation. Then in 1981 I was sent to jail.

WY Would you please tell us why you were sent to jail? What were the charges?

LN In 1981 I was sent to jail for three years after being convicted of "counterrevolutionary propaganda and incitement." Additional criminal charges brought against me included helping to get the prison writings of my brother, Liu Qing, published outside of China.

Liu Qing was sentenced to a ten-year term in 1979 for his pro-democracy activities. The writings that I helped him smuggle out of prison included a novella he wrote that was published repeatedly in literary magazines in Hong Kong and Taiwan. It was called "The White Road."

WY Would you explain the primary impetus behind the Democracy Wall Movement?

LN Because of the suffering our whole nation had experienced during the Cultural Revolution, some people began to question all aspects of politics, economy and social welfare. These views began to gradually form into a movement calling for institutional and legal protection for freedom of speech, human rights and civil liberties in order to build a better China in the future.

The demonstration organized by the Xing Xing (Stars) group of young avant-garde artists remains vivid in my memory. It was held on China's national day, October 1, 1979, and was the first unofficial demonstration since the Chinese Communists had gained power. Although there were only about 200 participants,

up to thirty thousand more people watched and followed from the sidelines. The slogan of the demonstration was, "Democracy and Freedom."

I would say then, that the essence of the Democracy Wall Movement was the search for democracy and freedom.

Ironically it was the Cultural Revolution that awakened us. We wanted to break away from the conditions of slavery and become our own masters, so we practiced freedom of expression and established our own organizations without asking permission from the authorities. As Chinese citizens we're entitled to these rights. For that brief period of time, I lived as an independent person with dignity.

WY What role did you play in the June 4th Movement in 1989 that took place at Beijing's Tiananmen Square?

LN I was like thousands of other people in Beijing at that time, supporting the students and participating in the protests. As I did so, an old feeling began to stir within me.

The crackdown against the students made me very angry. More than ever I felt an urgent need to call for institutional and legal procedures to protect freedom of speech, human rights and civil liberties. The only thing these students had done was to exercise their individual rights as guaranteed in the Chinese constitution.

WY You and many other Democracy Wall activists became active in the nineties again. What did you do?

LN My personal experiences have given me an intimate understanding of the predicament of political prisoners and their families. For that reason I joined with some other activists in 1993 to try to build a financial assistance network for persecuted dissidents. In November of the same year I helped draft the "Peace Charter." Because of these activities I was detained and interrogated by the police.

The rapid economic growth proudly declaimed by the government has not only widened the gap between rich and poor but has also contributed to widespread corruption. Because of this, in 1994 I co-established a labor rights group called the League for the Protection of the Rights of Working People. We demanded legalization of the right to strike and of the right to form independent unions for peasants and workers. In 1994 when we tried to formally register the group, I was sent to prison once again for more than seven months.

After my release I continued my involvement in the labor movement and helped initiate pro-democracy petitions such as "Draw Lessons from Blood" and "Calling for a Spirit of Tolerance in China's Political Life." These earned me a sentence of three years of Reeducation Through Labor on July 4, 1996.

My experience in the nineties only strengthened my determination to fight for democracy, freedom and human rights, the same beliefs that we had embraced in the Democracy Wall Movement.

WY While you were in prison what was your family situation? Could your wife support the family? How did it affect your daughter?

LN First of all let me mention my mother, who is a very gentle woman. All her life she has meekly submitted herself to maltreatment. My wife, although an idealist and very supportive of my pro-democracy activities, has never involved herself in any political movement.

These two gentle women launched a brave campaign for my release from prison. As a result they were subjected to repeated interrogation, detention and intense police surveillance, but they never gave in.

My daughter, living in such an environment, became an introverted child, very quiet. When I think about the suffering I caused my family I feel a deep grief.

WY In the nineties you worried about the growing gap between the rich and poor spurred on by rapid economic growth. Has the situation changed?

LN For anyone traveling through China, on the surface the economic situation looks good; with building projects in progress, new highways being constructed and cars replacing bicycles, there is a general feeling of hustle and bustle all around the country. But below the surface is another story. Thousands of workers are jobless. Farmers are leaving their land to look for work in the cities. The farmers provide cheap labor, but there is little in the way of housing, health benefits or education for these people and their families. The gap between rich and poor is getting wider. It is a time bomb waiting to explode.

WY How have your wife and daughter adapted to living in exile?

LN Both of them have adapted better than I have. My daughter, who is now fifteen years old, has been admitted to the Bronx High School of Science. She excels academically, not only in mathematics and science but in English as well. She's even won a poetry prize. She seems to fit in very well. I'm very proud of her. She tells me she is no longer afraid. When we were in China, she was afraid all the time. She was afraid of going to school, making friends or coming home and not seeing me there. Although she misses her grandmother very much she does not want to return to China.

My wife works very hard. Any job that's available, she will take it. At the same time she has also made a tremendous effort to learn English and other skills for a professional career. She just graduated from a community college in June this year.

My wife feels a burden has been lifted from her shoulders. In China she lived under a constant feeling of apprehension.

Both my wife and my daughter have taken to the American way of life like ducks to water.

WY That is good to hear. What about you? Are you as confident as they are?

LN No, I can't really say I am. I feel displaced. Dislocated. In China I was in the thick of things, working for the movements, communicating with other activists, always busy and involved. Although it was sometime dangerous, it was also stimulating; it gave meaning and significance to my life. But here, I feel removed from all that.