Three Chinese Characters
Liu Hongbin, Word Conjurer, Smuggler of Nightmares

Such news as I have, which is to say within the time of this prose, is that the poet Liu Hongbin has gone into seclusion. Whether for spiritual exercises or in order to write or to further immerse himself in 2,000 years of Chinese literature he won’t say, but it is perfectly conceivable that it’s a combination of all three.

Soon after he arrived here, in 1989, swinging wildly between despair and hope, he declared that what the contemporary Chinese poet must seek to do is build ‘a historical bridge between the glory of Chinese classical poetry and the ruins of modern Chinese language.’ An older, humbler, Hongbin finds such words, when mirrored back at him, pompous in the extreme and yet they do not come out of nowhere. As a child during the Cultural Revolution he witnessed the most extreme self-desecration of any single culture, when the great classics were thrown to the flames, temples destroyed, antiquities smashed, teachers beaten to death, often by their own students, and censorship so extreme as to be barely censorship at all but rather a monitoring of the flickering of one’s neighbour’s eyelashes. All this was at a time when elsewhere in the world university students clutching their translations of Mao’s Little Red Book spoke blithely of its author as having done what needed to be done.

The day before we spoke, Hongbin walked to a nearby internet café in order to check his messages when a well-dressed woman, clearly troubled, sat down opposite him, asked him who he was, and when he smiled back at her she said, ‘Do you think I’m rubbish?’ Hongbin pointed to a vase of flowers on his table and told her how beautiful they were. She moved to another table where there sat another man before a similar arrangement of flowers, took the vase and smashed it down hard on his table and walked out.

A few hours later, Hongbin got on the underground where a man clutching a bottle of whiskey moved aside for him.

‘I am impressed by your holy water.’
‘Do you want some?’ the man said, and then, ‘Are you a monk from Tibet?’
These days Hongbin shaves his head.
‘Closer,’ he replied.
‘Are you holy?’

‘Everyone is holy.’

There is something in Hongbin’s observations of everyday life that have about them the quality of Buddhist fable. It’s there even in his name, the first syllable of which means ‘spacious water’ and second ‘scholarly’ or, in the Confucian understanding of the word, ‘form’. As he seemed to be in full monkish throttle, I asked him whether he had managed yet to conquer vanity, which is when I got a first dose of his delicious humour.

‘I try to preserve some for occasional use.’

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The story which follows is that of a perennial struggle between the conjuror of words and those who fear the power those words release. The conflict goes back to ancient times. An image, if sturdy enough, rattles thrones. A poet whose chief love is words, who is mostly hidden from the world’s gaze, yet admired by those whom he most admires, who include writers as diverse as John Ashbery, Peter Porter, Stephen Spender, Doris Lessing and Arthur Miller, Hongbin via his testimony bespeaks the continuance of that struggle. It is most vividly expressed in his incantatory poem “Who Are You?” which he wrote on his birthday in 1987. When, in the summer of 1990, Peter Porter introduced him to Stephen Spender it was the poem Hongbin chose to recite, in Chinese, while the latter followed it, word by word, in the English version. (When the poem was republished in Agenda the acting editor, Anita Money, asked Hongbin whether he might dedicate it, belatedly, to Stephen Spender and this he agreed to do.) Apart from its obvious images of ‘a devoted son now abandoned’ the poem may be read as the statement of a still greater dispossessing.

I am a frayed rope, cursed by people who used it to tow their boat.
I am a piece of wreckage on the beach to which the drowning clung.
I am a mast broken by the sail’s need.
I am the conversation between the sailors and tidal wave.
I am the conch shell, innards scooped out, now blowing a fisherman’s song.
Although a thing that stands proudly on its own, the poem appreciates in value when placed in the context of Hongbin’s early life. There is a date in his passport that serves to approximate when his birth might have taken place — 19 June 1962 by the solar calendar or 18 May 1962 by the lunar one. When he was thirteen he asked his mother the date of his birth and she could not remember. She asked her colleagues who gave birth to their children at approximately the same time, thinking someone among them might know, but nobody could tell her. All she could say for sure is that he was born at daybreak, in the early summer of 1962. What might at first seem callous to our ears will be, when one learns more of the circumstances of her life, more a cause for our compassion. This most devoted of mothers had quite the most difficult time. It could be the events of that period of her life rendered it a horrible blur. Or did she simply forget? After half a century, Hongbin’s response is that it would be more honest to leave these questions unanswered. ‘I accept my birth as a blessing,’ he says and that what he must do now is to prepare for his own death. Such words coming from a man not yet fifty may seem alarming but he does not mean for them to be taken so. Actually there might well be a correlation between what he says and what I hazard to guess are his spiritual exercises of late.

‘When I was a few months old,’ Hongbin began, ‘I was sent to live with my grandparents, many miles from home, in a small village in the countryside called Shi bà lǐ tūn. I spent, on and off, five years there. That poem suggests I was an abandoned child but really I do not have any resentment towards my parents both of whom had to work all day. Actually I was lucky. If I hadn’t stayed with my grandparents who would have looked after me? How would I have survived? When I started school back in Qingdao everyone, even my mother, was a stranger to me. When I saw her again and she tried to cuddle me I slapped her, saying I wanted to go home. I did not recognise her. This was while my grandfather still held me in his arms. My mother told me this. The village was home to me. I can still remember the landscape, the small hamlet, the lake behind the house, a stone for grinding beans, the smell of cucumbers and tomatoes, and the sound of donkeys braying. Many of the images you find in my poetry were formed then.’

“The Hunting Song in the Forest” in particular sets the primordial world against the city and its problems. It is also a statement of poetic intention.

My immortal soul contemplates:
The hunt for prey,
Aren’t sharp eyes all that are needed?
For the chase,
Isn’t reckless courage all that is needed?
For the capture,
Isn’t a momentary impulse all that is needed?

‘I wrote that poem when I was nineteen or twenty, when my social consciousness was awakened. There is no political allegory as such, but it was a young man’s wish for a world of social justice and also to prepare himself for the possible sacrifice he would have to make. It does, of course, owe much to a very important period of my life, which represents a kind of innocence, and what I seek to achieve in my writing is the mental state of childhood.’

‘To what degree,’ I asked, ‘does your ancestry influence that mental state?’

‘Years later, I went back to see my great-grandparents’ house, which was a magnificent place. When I visited my great-uncle in Taiwan he told me something of my family’s historical background, of how, for example, when they counted money it was done with a length of bamboo. You would break through the separations inside, put the money in the bamboo and count it that way. The coins had a square hole, which symbolised the ancient Chinese view of the world: the sky is round, the earth square. My maternal grandmother who was from quite a wealthy family divorced my bookish grandfather because of the Japanese war. He worked in Qingdao and was not able to keep contact with his wife and two daughters and could not even send money home. In old China, girls, especially after they got married, were not important. Whatever the case, her family would not support her. My grandmother had to survive so she divorced my blood grandfather and later remarried. The main impact my grandparents had on me was, quite simply, their love.’

‘Was your family bookish? Where did your love of books come from?’

‘My maternal grandfather was college educated, which was quite rare in those days. I can still remember books in sewn bindings, which we inherited from my paternal grandfather. Our family used to have a siheyuan, which, in its most direct translation from the Chinese, is a courtyard surrounded by buildings on all four sides. As they were a symbol of social status many of these siheyuans have long since been demolished. This earlier part of our family history became a terrible taboo during the
Cultural Revolution. When the Communists took over the educated people became underdogs whereas those of the new ruling class were mostly peasants or farmers. When it came to my parents’ generation they couldn’t write and I was a potential illiterate.’

‘Do you have memories of your father from that early age?’

‘One of the reasons I love him so much is because I never got to enjoy him for any length of time. A love such as this lasts all one’s life. I do have some memories of him. One is of when I was ill and with his very strong hands he fed me medicine. I remember a long scar on his chest where he had an operation. Also, when I was four, I went out on my own to the school which my brothers and sister went to and came back home at midnight. It was at the height of the Cultural Revolution and students were fighting one another for mimeograph machines and loudspeakers that they’d use for propaganda purposes. I picked up a packet of the red colour with which they wrote their slogans and tucked it into my pocket. My father who was clean and industrious would often wash our clothes, soaking them first in a wooden basin. On that occasion the whole lot, including his white shirts, turned bright red. In the middle of the night he summoned the five of us, my brothers and sisters. “Who did this?” he asked. “Did you do this?” “No,” I said. I had really forgotten about picking up the red colour. “Go back to sleep!” he told me. My brothers and sister who’d been made for stand for a long time were later invited to do the same.’

‘It is ironic that the clothes should have been stained revolutionary red!’
‘Yes, absurd, disastrous too. I also remember the annual traditional Chinese Spring Festival when my father led the whole family to bow before Mao’s portrait. This was utterly against Chinese tradition as it was the time when normally one would pay respect to one’s ancestors. He did *that* and still he didn’t survive the Cultural Revolution!’

In 1968, the year Mao initiated the policy of sending urban youth to the countryside to be re-educated, Hongbin, aged five, returned home from his grandparent’s village.

‘As nobody in Qingdao had time to look after me, my father took me to his place of work — he was a railway administrator — and there he found me a spot where I might have a siesta. When I woke up he was gone. I looked for him everywhere, his office, even the European-style toilet. Many years later, in 2004, when I made a trip back to Qingdao, I went to see the place and everything, even the toilet, was exactly the same. What it confirmed for me was that my memory of that day is accurate. I was taken home by one of my father’s colleagues. Mother had prepared dinner and because my father liked wine she had a bottle ready for him. The man who took me home said my father had been arrested by the Red Guards.’

Was there ever a time in history when an entire populace fell prey to teenagers on a rampage? The Cultural Revolution was initiated by Chairman Mao in 1966 when he called upon China’s youth to root out those liberal bourgeois elements which he claimed had begun to permeate the Party and society at large. They were free to do so by whatever means they chose and without the impediment of judicial rule. The Red Guards were the result and soon they acted without even the say-so of the Party, freely entering schools, temples, museums, factories and people’s homes. Mao, no stranger to ignorance, praised them, saying, ‘The more knowledge you have, the more reactionary you are.’

‘My father remained in prison for two years. It didn’t end there, though. The police would come to our home, ask my mother and the children to write things against him. This was the regime’s masterpiece, calling upon people to denounce their own families. They completely destroyed family life. This is very hard to forgive. After his death, because of the stigma my father’s name would have on the family, we had to change our surname to that of my mother’s maiden name, Liu.’

‘Did they ever give a reason for his arrest? Was he accused of being a “counter-revolutionary”?’
‘When my schoolmates bullied me that was the term they would use. You know how boys fight sometimes. They would stop me, crying, “Down with Wang Huaiyi”, which was my father’s name, and then they’d hit me on the face and run away. In order to talk about this properly I’d have to provide a detailed historical background otherwise a story told in isolation will be difficult for people here to understand. What happened between my parents was a personal thing that became political. Also there was a lot of fighting between different factions. My father was a party loyalist and on the other side were the so-called revolutionaries. Actually they did not know what they were loyal to. When one looks back and analyses this, their loyalty meant nothing at all. The “Great Leader” stirred up conflict between people. I wrote about this in my long poem “A Day Within Days”:

China, you could not cleanse these wounds
With the river of your tears.

Alive, you force man to fight man, man to trample man.
Dead, you command one to press down on another, one to pile up upon another.
Why have you produced so much hatred?

‘My father who was very direct offended members of the opposite faction and so they seized the opportunity for revenge. One thing I want to say is that I am now older than my father was when he died in his early forties. A father to five children, at the same time he supported the parents from both sides of the marriage. Something else I want to emphasise is that he was half Manchurian. While I don’t want to dwell on parentage, as I grow older and as within me the gulf between China and the West increases I realise how different I am from my fellow countrymen. This includes my behaviour. I realise there is something different about me, which has been passed down through my Manchurian genes. My mother is Han Chinese. When the Communists came to power two of my paternal great-uncles slit their wrists because they knew life would be intolerable. During the Cultural Revolution many people perished simply because they spoke a “wrong” word or because a neighbour reported that so-and-so said he’d prefer to buy a snack than use the money to purchase Mao’s Little Red Book. When they victimised you they also made you feel ashamed to talk about it later. This was the genius of their evil. I will talk about the trumped-up charge
against my father when the time comes. And then there were the humiliation parades when people were stood on trucks and made to wear big placards stating their crimes. One day there was such a parade and I rushed from the house to see if my father was among them. At primary school there were denunciation meetings from time to time, when people had to stand on the stage, wearing placards, their heads lowered. Whenever this happened my teacher would say to me, “Liu Hongbin, you can go home” She knew what I was feeling. I am so grateful to her.’

At that time the judicial system was a complete shambles. There was no law to speak of.

This is the only photograph of Hongbin as a child, aged six, taken before he started school and when his father was still in prison, incommunicado. Pinned onto his jacket is the obligatory Mao badge. At the lower right-hand corner is printed the name of the photography studio and the legend “The East is Red” (Dongfang Hong), which was the opening phrase of a song eulogising Mao and which during the Cultural Revolution became a popular anthem. The child averts his eyes. He looks as though he has been forced into the frame. Already he seems serious beyond his years. The photograph, a little spotted and creased, is commemorated in Hongbin’s prose poem “The Unfamiliar Customs House” in which he writes, ‘In another place, Mother, through her glasses, fixes her eyes on the only photo of myself as a child, expecting my mischievous footsteps.’

In April 1970, came the event that would shape the whole of Hongbin’s life.

‘When I left school I saw in the distance a gathering of people. On the wall in front of them there were posters including one with a photograph showing my father
in the execution ground with a gun at his head. There were copies posted everywhere. According to my brother, there was also one opposite the entrance to our house. After my father was executed, we were kept under surveillance. I remember lying in bed, in the moonlight, and seeing human shadows on the white curtain. They would try to listen in on the family conversations. I couldn’t really believe my father died. One summer evening, when people sat outside in circles, cooling off, I saw among them someone who looked exactly like him. I went and put my arm around his neck. And then I realised it wasn’t him. He comes back in dreams still. On September 11th, 2001, when nobody dared fly, I flew to Venice, taking with me a copy of Joseph Brodsky’s Watermark as a guide. I stayed in a youth hostel on a small island beside a beautiful lagoon. Maybe it was the Venice air that reminded me of Qingdao which also is a lovely city beside the sea, with all styles of architecture — memories are easy to evoke with our senses. There I had this wonderful dream in which my father was still alive. He had just been released from prison and was now without money or credit card in the south of France where I often go and there we were beside this blue lagoon, whether in Venice or Qingdao I couldn’t tell. Forty years prior to this, my father was killed and now, all those years later, I had this absolutely beautiful dream. I don’t know whether poets have an ability to deceive themselves or whether in their poetry they create another reality or what you might call poetic justice, but I have never stopped searching for him.’

Most gruellingly, that search is not only a mental or spiritual one.

‘When I was nineteen or twenty I met a girl, a student of medicine at Qingdao Medical College, who invited me to visit her at the college. On the way there I imagined I would see my father’s skeleton in the anatomical lab. The reason for this was because we were not allowed to retrieve his remains and even now we don’t know where they are. The bodies of those who were executed were usually taken away by medical institutions and without the permission of the relatives. A few years ago, on the internet, I read an article in one of the local Qingdao papers about a crematorium where there were unclaimed ashes. Thinking my father’s might be among them, I immediately phoned the crematorium. I was informed the ashes dated from after the Cultural Revolution and that nothing at all survives from before that date. But to tell you the truth, recently, over the past few years, these things have to begun to recede. I do not want to live with any kind of bitterness.’
Hongbin’s father is the ghost at the centre of his most famous poem “A Day Within Days”, written in 1990, a six-page work of dream images and satirical bites, in which he calls up cultural figures from the past, even Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping upon whom he exacts if not revenge exactly, then justice; Sartre and de Beauvoir — supremos of the existential, apologists for so many of the horrors of their time — get married in Tiananmen Square; invitations to the wedding party are extended to Chinese students but the Ministry of Security, fearful that the newlyweds might be kidnapped, advise them to take their honeymoon in Hong Kong; meanwhile, Confucius enrolls at the Open University, Li Po drinks Mao-tai, the famous, and some say undrinkable, Chinese liquor which President Nixon was offered when he came to China in 1972, and Tu Fu dies of exposure to the cold, the papers for his rehousing still in his pocket. This is exactly what is happening now with the forceful demolition of people’s homes and their former occupants not yet being given places to move into.

The breathing of the wind blows out the lamps.
Dreams settle,
The island of white bones looms.
I would go to the execution ground where my father was killed twenty years ago.
He was sending his ideals wrapped in those transparent gunshots —
Three bullets pelted through his head —
And I inherited his suffering.

On this day, I lean against the head of the wind.
White bones beneath my feet are turned to pebbles.
Crows are flocking in my thinning hair.

Peter Porter writes of the poem as being ‘a kind of last look back, a version of Lot’s grief at the destruction of the Cities of the Plain’ and continues, ‘It’s as if the prophetic utterance of Allen Ginsberg’s Howl was being shaped by a real and not merely a symbolic terror.’ There’s nothing of the luxury of intellectual despair in the poem.

‘The only politically explicit poem of mine, it is based entirely on my personal experiences. True, my father is a leitmotif. It was not a poem of revenge, however. There is anger, naturally, but I think there is more satire.’
The year Hongbin’s father was executed, China’s first satellite was sent into orbit and it broadcast the song “The East is Red” back to earth. There could be no escaping it, not even in outer space. One day Hongbin’s mother for whom life had come close to intolerable came home and said to him, ‘My son, you are so little. Were it not for you I would have thrown myself under a train.’

There is something almost unbearably expressive in her face and yet for all that is revealed much else remains hidden, not least the terrible paradoxes with which she permitted herself to live. As a teenager, a fervent believer in the Communist cause, she tried several times to run away from home in order to join the People’s Liberation Army. Her mother kept her locked up. She later appeared fleetingly in a popular film of the time, *Nan Zheng Bei Zhan*, which translates variously as “Conquer South, Victory North”, “From Victory to Victory” or, somewhat more cumbersomely, “Conquest in the South and Battles in the North”. Set in 1947, it depicts the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists and in it she is a member of Mao’s paramilitary. Hongbin still remembers being taken to the film by his father who pointed her out to him, saying, ‘Look, that’s your mother!’ Absurdly, given the context, Hongbin’s father had served as a conscript in the Nationalist army, which later would be one of the accusations brought against him.
‘She was starry-eyed about the Communists,’ Hongbin continued. ‘There is also a story that my grandmother, finding it difficult to feed her children, wanted to give her away to a foster family, either that or to give her away as a child bride. My mother escaped both fates. The circumstances behind my parent’s marriage are that my grandmother met my paternal grandparents on a train and they started to chat, one of them saying, “I have a son of a certain age” and she saying, “I have a daughter.” My mother although she was impressed by my father’s family, believed in freedom of choice. And with my grandmother being of an aristocratic Manchurian family, she never got over the fact of it being an arranged marriage. This has remained a problem for her all her life.’

‘And yet for all her desire to be free,’ I said, ‘she put her faith in something as absolute, as confining, as Communism.’

‘If you live in that kind of society very soon everyone speaks in the same voice and wears the same clothes. There is no independent thinking, no choice whatsoever. Either you go with the flow or you become extinct. My parents’ relationship didn’t go well, her explanation being that my father suffered from a tumour of the liver and had to go for an operation. At that time medical treatment in China was not as advanced as it is now, even with respect to anaesthetics, and so he went through all the pain of an operation and afterwards, according to my mother, he became another person. At the same time she was not a good-tempered lady, so the conflict between them escalated. After speaking to people who were close to my father, one thing I’m sure of is that she played a very important role in his death.’

‘You mean she denounced him after his arrest?’

‘I think even before.’
'Would you say she was a victim of history?'

‘If we want to explain or defend such behaviour in a time of inhumanity I’m not sure what the answer is, and it remains a problem for all the children, but this was not just an isolated case. It was widespread throughout China. The regime broke up families. When I was sixteen I went on my own to the law courts, seeking to renounce my relationship with my mother. I told her what I’d done and this, I’m sure, deeply hurt her.’

‘Was this because you came to believe she’d been responsible for his death?’

‘It is not that simple. The fact of my father’s execution was a stigma, one that has remained with me all my life. She was the mother of five children, all of whom would suffer from persecution, and for whom she felt huge responsibility and obligation. She went to the municipal government offices to petition them on the matter of my brother’s job applications being continually turned down. In that respect she was extraordinary. Sometimes, after her day’s work, climbing the long staircase of the German-style municipal government building, she fainted and would be taken to hospital by ambulance. She made less than fifty yuan a month. A whole family had to depend on this. We would keep a ledger, recording the amounts spent on rice or salt. She could be marvellous. Sometimes she would even manage to buy us chocolates or roasted chestnuts.’

‘So how does she look back on those times now?’

‘The Chinese are not like western people. If they regret, they do so in private. She claims she has become a Christian, reads the bible every day and goes to church. I asked her once, “Have you ever prayed for my father?”’

‘So how does she square all this?’

‘She did once admit to me that my father treated her well in the early years of their marriage. She was indoctrinated however. She rejected many of the Chinese traditions such as observing the memory of one’s ancestors but then family life more or less disappeared under the regime. When I was a child of seven or eight, at the dinner table she would talk only political philosophy, Marx and Lenin. At least I started my study in philosophy early in life. It was a good starting point from which to get to another side of that philosophy. The only time she ever spoke of these things critically was after I was expelled from China in 1997, after my first visit back there. Most of the Hong Kong newspapers, both English and Chinese, and Reuters, BBC TV and World Service, reported my expulsion. I faxed the press cuttings to my sister who
showed them to our mother whose response was that I had done the right thing in giving a press conference. It was the only time I had ever heard her say anything like this. Even now, with China supposedly opening up, when I phone her and get angry at how the government continues to harass her or how it will not allow me home she simply hangs up on me. The telephone is bugged twenty-four hours a day, of course, and for her merely to listen to me would imply she is taking my side. The fear is still there, deeply rooted in her consciousness. This said, she is a very talented woman, a good fashion designer and tailor. We were the most nicely dressed children in the school and even the neighbours would ask her to make clothes for their children, for the Spring Festival. She could make something simple from very little and even my first pair of leather shoes was made by her. One morning I woke up, snow on the ground, and there was a pair of newly-knit gloves on the pillow beside me. I’m sure she worked the whole night on them. She was, despite her judgement of the political and personal situation, a great mother.’

The year 1970 continued to be for Hongbin, aged seven, one of terrors.

‘I had just started school and our first lesson in Chinese was “Long live Chairman Mao” and the second “Down with Liu Shaoqi”. Liu was the disgraced state chairman. I went to the public toilet and, reversing the wording of the slogans, wrote on the wall “Down with Chairman Mao”.’

‘So you are a born dissident!’

‘Absolutely not! The psychology was simply that of a boy seeking adventure, doing something untoward just to see what would happen next. At that age you didn’t know or estimate the risk. The police came, photographed the graffiti, and started an investigation. I was terrified. I had a cousin at least ten years older than me, who was visiting us at the time. She would cuddle me or take me out for a while. All I could do was sleep. I didn’t dare wake up for fear of what would happen when I did. When I went back to school … to my shame … even now I feel very sorry about it … “Who wrote this?” the teacher asked everyone. We each had to say something. I stood up and said it might be an older student in the upper class. I gave them a name. The only reason my denunciation did not do him much damage was that his family was very Red. Nevertheless he was labelled “a little reactionary”. Soon, though, everyone forgot about it. If I were found out my whole family could have been sent to the countryside — “education through labour”. And, besides, our background was already bad. I still feel guilty about this. At that time, I started visiting bookshops. Whatever
pocket money my mother gave me, which she wanted me to spend on food, I set aside for books. The first friends I made were booksellers, many of them old ladies whose daughters would take over after they retired. Sometimes, when I got home, my mother would search me. I would hide the book on my back beneath my T-shirt with a belt tied around it. So this, perhaps, is the beginning of my relationship with books.’

‘As something forbidden …’

‘Not just forbidden! Good books were a luxury. This was during the Cultural Revolution when there were virtually no serious books at all, only Communist propaganda.’

The ferociousness of the Red Guards with respect to books and works of art was such that frequently their owners would destroy them rather than risk death or imprisonment. Mao himself stated that the “Four Olds” — old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas — were to be swept away.

‘What about when Mao called for all young people to be re-educated in the countryside?’

‘I escaped that. I started to prepare for it when I was eight. My mother said to me, “You are so frail. If you are sent to the countryside you will not be able to survive.” She introduced me to a doctor and from him I began to learn about Chinese herbal medicine and acupuncture. I started to memorise some of the classical texts, most of which were originally written in verse or song. Whereas, before, I couldn’t tell yin from yang suddenly it all began to make sense.’

It is most telling that in recent years Hongbin has become an accredited practitioner of Chinese medicine and that, in keeping with Taoist tradition, wherever he goes he treats patients and friends alike. The whole of Chinese civilisation has its roots in Taoism and so, too, does its medicine. So close is the relationship between Chinese medicine and humanities, and such is its beauty, it is hardly surprising that many doctors are also men of letters. Actually that relationship is universal: Apollo, it should be remembered, was the god of poetry and medicine. ‘Medicine is my lawful, wedded wife,’ writes Anton Chekhov, ‘and literature is my mistress.’ And, as another medical practitioner puts it, ‘The clinical gaze has much in common with the artist’s eye.’ A poet inserts a needle; the flesh surrenders its ills. Among Hongbin’s patients the film producer Richard D. Zanuck speaks of his ‘masterly acupuncture treatment which is of the highest order.’ It would seem the man who cures is himself cured, and,
as Hongbin observes, the process of making a diagnosis is itself akin to philosophical speculation and as such it provides one with the ultimate intellectual gratification.

‘With my family,’ he continued, ‘things turned out to be different than for most people. My eldest brother had to quit school, aged sixteen, in order to help my mother raise the family. Although he had been one of the best students nobody would take him on and so he ended up working in a kiln for many years, breaking down and burning building materials. My second brother, when it came time for him to go to the countryside, was rejected. He was not eligible even for that! He wrote a letter to the army representatives, asking to be sent to Inner Mongolia, but because they were worried he would defect to Russia his application was refused. For almost ten years, he worked as a carpenter, making furniture for people he knew because nobody else would take him on. All this was because of our family history. The reason I did not go for re-education was because by the time I finished high school the political situation had changed. One no longer had to go, and yet I was made to suffer for that all the same. Aged eighteen, I wanted independence. I didn’t want to go to university because I was the youngest and also because in a family of five children relationships could be rather tense. My brother said I wasted too much money on books. So I decided I would get a job. In 1980, I sat for the civil service examinations. Most of the candidates were over thirty and with university degrees, while I was the youngest one there. I passed the examination, came sixth, and then I was interviewed. The two interviewers asked me whether I would like to be a teacher. I said, “Yes, sure, whatever”. But then they rejected me on the grounds I hadn’t been for re-education in the countryside even though it had already been stopped. The real reason was my family background.’

In 1981, Hongbin became a student in the Shandong Foreign Trade School in Qingdao. This is the school where he should have been given a job as a teacher but ended up as a student instead. Subsequently his relationship with the teachers was tense especially as some of them had sat the same examination as Hongbin and had become teachers although their marks were lower than his. He sat alone at the back of the class, often slept there, and for this was punished. If business was not his forte, poetry was already very much so.

I asked Hongbin whether his family respected the fact he was a poet at which point he laughed incredulously.
'I’m sorry but to be a poet was a pathetic thing to be. You could not win the approval of your family with poetry. I was sixteen when I began to write in earnest. My second brother said, “If you continue to write these counter-revolutionary poems I will send you to the police.”'

‘Was he serious?’

‘Of course! He didn’t want me to get into trouble or to create problems for the family. I had already been a difficult high school student, even playing truant for two or three months once. I got away with it. When I sat for the examinations I still passed with a first. One day the teachers came to my home without notice, pushed the door of my room open. They saw books and papers lying about the floor. I had been seriously reading the works of Karl Marx and other communist literature. They could not imagine I’d be doing this! So yes, my brother was worried by my poetic activities. On the other hand, when one of my early poems was broadcast by local Qingdao radio we all sat and listened to the radio. I looked at him and there was relief on his face that I ended up on radio rather than in prison. Years later, I wrote a poem to my mother, which was broadcast from Paris over Radio France Internationale. She was pleased to hear it.’

‘There is a poem of yours “You Predicted My Destiny” which draws on those years and which seems to be one of poetic intent. In it you appear to be setting your stamp upon the world.’

You predicted my destiny,
That I would become a poet.
Since then your name has echoed in my blood.

I chose the black and cold volcano.
The crowded city bequeathed my space to others,
A man came who would reclaim
The mountainous wild manuscripts.

‘When I was in high school I knew this girl whose calligraphy was better than mine. Sometimes after I finished a poem I would give it to her to write out in her beautiful hand. One day she returned a poem to me with a note, which simply read, “You will become a good poet.” Many years later, I met her in the street. We
hurriedly exchanged a few words and then, as I mention in the poem, I saw her off at a tram station in Qingdao.‘

You turn around and wave to me.
The doors close like a camera shutter,
The tram moves on.

You image surges in my mind,
A statue.

‘Afterwards I went back and wrote the poem. That line “I chose the black and cold volcano” is symbolic of the knowledge that I’d have to choose a solitary life and that I would not be interested in the rivalry of the crowd or in participating in any kind of jungle activities. That kind of life was not what I aspired to, but I knew I would lead a very lonely existence.’

‘Did she ever find out about the poem?’

‘No, and it is best she doesn’t. I have been through many different stages in my life and at each one I’m different. All I have is the same name. Sometimes it is impossible for Liu Hongbin at one stage to talk objectively or accurately about Liu Hongbin at another stage.’

1983 was the year of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, which, according to the Communist Party Propaganda Chief, Deng Liqun, would root out ‘obscene, barbarous or reactionary materials, vulgar taste in artistic performances [and] indulgence in individualism’. This doubtless added to Hongbin’s misfortunes. At this point he was in his final year at Shandong Foreign Trade School in Qingdao.

‘A visiting American professor from Berkeley, Professor Oakes who was one of the editors of The Norton Anthology of Poetry, came to China to run a class for university teachers. She gave me a precious typewritten course book she had edited on American poetry. She had a minder, an agent posing as a teacher, and one day I phoned to tell her I’d be at her lecture. The minder picked up the phone, asked who it was, and informed me that I would have to apply at the Foreign Affairs office for permission. I said I didn’t think they would be of assistance. Soon after, I received notification of my expulsion. The accusation was that I had spoken words that disgraced China. This effectively put an end to my future prospects. So I went with
something like five yuan to Jinan, the provincial capital of Shandong province, in order to petition the authorities. I said to them, “Look, in all the newspapers Party Secretary Deng Xiaoping says, ‘We should select talent without any prejudice, regardless of family or political background.’” I thought I would surely be accepted. I even wrote a letter to Deng Xiaoping to ask him to intervene. Of course I did not receive a reply. Years later, I conceived the plot of a short fiction about this episode. In the story the letter is returned with a stamp on it saying, “No such person. Your letter is hereby returned.”

At Shandong University Hongbin met two people who would help him to keep in touch with the academic world, both at home and abroad. Professor Wu Fuheng, at that point president of the Society of American Literature, was a student of I.A. Richards when he was in China and then later again in Harvard and also when he went back to China he was a colleague of the poet William Empson. Professor Wu and his wife, Professor Lu Fan, took Hongbin on as their protégé, giving him books on American literature and encouraging him to write. They would watch over Hongbin even in later years when, prior to leaving China, he worked for the China National Arts and Crafts Import and Export Company.

‘My experience there put me off business for life. I was assigned to that company where I experienced great resentment. First of all, given that the main way of promoting their business was to have exhibitions abroad — in Frankfurt, Las Vegas, Hong Kong — they never sent me anywhere. They knew I would defect. After all, I was a poet and trouble-maker. On the other hand they did not want to irritate me too much because when one is that bad one is like a mad dog. You leave him alone and he will leave you alone. They didn’t mind giving me a bit of money just to keep me quiet. Still I did get into trouble while there. Yet again Professor Wu in his capacity as President of Shandong University and his wife came to my rescue. It just happened my director was a graduate of the same university. “Look at this miserable and silly guy,” they said to him, “He is a good man but he doesn’t know how to deal with life.”’

The inability to ‘deal with life’ was not a little helped by the fact Hongbin was already an object of suspicion with the authorities and was kept under constant surveillance. It was a period of student unrest which probably led to the downfall of the sympathetic General Secretary of the Party, Hu Yaobang, whose death a couple of years later would be one of the factors leading to the Tiananmen Massacre. In 1987,
Hongbin was caught up in the student activism. One symptom of the period was that the literary magazine *Literary Messenger*, to which Hongbin contributed a column devoted to translations of western poetry, was closed down by the authorities.

The fact he was watched was cause for yet another literary struggle.

‘One day I met an English sailor. Qingdao is a large seaport, ships of all nationalities calling there. Because I spoke English he wanted to talk to me, to someone friendly in this strange place. I asked him whether he had a library on his ship. When he said yes I asked, “Do you have any Shakespeare?” “Yes.” “Can you give me a copy?” Without any hesitation he said he would bring me the volume of Shakespeare at three o’clock the next day if I would meet him at a certain place. After that conversation I had a struggle within myself and in the end I didn’t go. I was sure I’d be followed by the secret police. I was already a problem for the authorities. And if I went for that book I might have been in trouble again.’

‘You must feel that book is still waiting for you.’

§

In 1989 the asteroid Asclepius, named after the Greek god of medicine, came perilously close to earth, missing it by a mere 700,000 kilometres. What cure might it have carried for ossified regimes? A man sympathetic to the Tibetan cause, the aforementioned Hu Yaobang, died of heart failure. What began as a public expression of grief over the death of the man who might have reformed China had he not been forced to resign escalated into protest and after a few weeks, during which time a million lovely faces beamed with hope, the event known to the world as the Tiananmen Massacre took place.

‘I was travelling between Qingdao and Beijing during the pro-Democracy movement, more or less in order to observe and incite. I made speeches in both places. I told a friend that I might post my poems at Qingdao Ocean University, which was a main centre of protest. My friend, a kind of official, told me I had to be very cautious. So I went with my poems to a typesetter, the wife of a professor at the university, and said to her, “Would you set these for me?” “What for?” she replied. I laughed. She knew immediately what I was going to do with them. These typesetting machines are an ancient system with separate printing blocks for every word. To own one you had to have a licence from the police, the reason for this being that if anti-
establishment slogans appeared the police would be able to trace whoever printed them. The professor’s wife set the four poems — “Sparrow”, “The Spirit of the Sea”, “On the Way” and “Rhapsody” — mimeographed them, and armed with copies I went to Beijing and posted them in Tiananmen Square.’

“The Spirit of the Sea” contained now for the first time the line, ‘The blind man tears the sun apart’, which in the poem’s original magazine appearance had been removed by the censors. We need hardly be told who the blind man is. Certainly the authorities did not require recourse to literary exegetes. Why, though, did they ignore, after lines bidding farewell to an earlier romantic voice, the line, ‘I want to build a new life’? Was this not also at odds with the *vita nuova* offered by the regime? It was written at a time when, Hongbin says, his body was bursting with hormones and he could produce several poems a day. One of Hongbin’s loveliest poems, it is a powerful evocation of the sea beside which he spent half his life. So closely does he identify himself with it he writes, ‘I am a demented wave thrown down on a reef/instantly torn apart to reveal the explosion of light.’ Only rarely does that light come on demand. Youth makes it shine all the more. Maybe it’s this very poem before which the man in Tiananmen Square holds up his hand as if in a gesture of surprise.

‘Were you an actual member of the pro-democracy movement?’

‘No. I made trouble as an individual — I appeared, I disappeared — but I am not comfortable with, nor did I ever join, any political organisation. I am glad to have participated in the movement and posting my poems was a natural response. When you look back at Chinese history in order to pass their examinations everyone had to be able to write a poem. I was merely Honouring the Chinese tradition, making a poetic response to a social event. That is all I have ever done. I never wished to be a
professional activist. I’d prefer a quiet life because, after all, I have suffered enough. There are times when I want to burn myself in Tiananmen Square. Although I couldn’t help but get involved in social and political activities poetry was always my first love. The point I want to make is that people choose to see me as a political dissident. A year later, I was asked to go on the BBC TV People Today programme in Manchester. I stayed in a hotel there, feeling absolutely desolate. It was Chinese New Year which overlapped with Valentine’s Day. I started to make phone calls to Qingdao. The next day the people at the BBC asked me if there were certain areas where they ought not to intrude, and yet when the programme started, which was live, the questions were along the lines of “How did you manage to get out of the country?” The presenter asked another man, the head of some Chinese exile organisation, who was being interviewed alongside me, “How would you help refugees like Hongbin?” I was happy enough to go on the show, but what I am trying to say is that for the past twenty years or so I have been introduced as a dissident rather than as a poet. I’m not sure this is good for me or for my hosts or for my adopted country.’

‘So do you feel some ambivalence about your role in Tiananmen Square?’

‘No, I have no regrets whatsoever. It was a defining moment in my life. I am very happy to have risked myself in order to participate, to incite, to mobilise. When I stood in Tiananmen Square for the first time ever I felt I had dignity, that at last I was a human being. There was no crime whatsoever. Even the thieves were on strike. In the early morning, students would play flutes and sing. I was young and had a sense of justice. You can’t expect me to have been obedient.’
The elation of victory is clearly written in Hongbin’s pose. The ghostly obelisk behind him is that of the Monument to the People’s Heroes. On the back of it are inscribed words drafted by Mao and polished by Zhou Enlai: ‘Eternal glory to the heroes of the people who laid down their lives in the people’s war of liberation and the people’s revolution in the past three years! Eternal glory to the heroes of the people who laid down their lives in the people’s war of liberation and the people’s revolution in the past thirty years! Eternal glory to the heroes of the people who from 1840 laid down their lives in the many struggles against domestic and foreign enemies and for national independence and the freedom and well-being of the people!’ Soon the tents in the picture would be flattened, the figures camped out beside them either dead or dispersed. Will the day come when there is added to the obelisk another line in memory of them?

‘You must have been afraid.’

‘The fear came after the massacre, not before. I left the night before the tanks rolled in. It was not because I knew a bloodbath would happen. It’s just that I got tired. It seemed nothing was happening and I couldn’t stay there indefinitely. So I went back to Qingdao and from there I phoned Zhang Hanzhi. She was a writer whose second husband Qiao Guanhua was a literary critic and was also the foreign minister who headed the delegation to the UN when China was admitted as a member in 1971. A very beautiful lady, she taught Mao English. She implied in her book that she had been raped by him and that afterwards he sent her a basket of apples which had been given to him by Kim Il-sung the North Korean dictator. I called her “Auntie Zhang”.'
When I visited her earlier, during my ten days in Tiananmen Square, and showed her the poems she said I should be prepared to leave the country as soon as possible. And now, on the phone, which was bugged, of course, I asked her how she was. She replied, “I’m fine. My young colleagues are with me. Can you hear the gunshots in the lane? Look at those counter-revolutionary gangsters out there! I behave so well. The mayor should give me an award for being a law-abiding citizen.” This was her way of letting me know what was happening. And then I saw the images in the newspapers that had been faxed to our company by clients in Hong Kong, which I then photocopied and distributed. China has since become much cleverer at controlling communications and websites, but at that time even the telephones were still working. After the massacre, I acted as if nothing happened. I continued to give public lectures and open forums in English at the city’s most well-known place, the German-built pier. Sooner or later, though, I knew they would find me. “The Spirit of the Sea” had already been published with that one missing line in a magazine and because the Writer’s Association had asked poets to send lists of all their published poems they would be able to trace me. At first I wanted to go south and try to get into Macau or Hong Kong. Some people swam. Although I was born by the sea I can’t swim at all.’

‘How you did you get out of China?’

‘Zhang Hanzhi told me that as far as she knew the American embassies were giving out visas. First, though, I needed an exit visa. You had to get permission from your company. At the time I was working for a newspaper affiliated with the provincial writers’ association and also at the China National Arts and Crafts Import Export Company which does not exist anymore. I told them I wanted to visit England. The boss summoned me for a meeting. I have to admit he was quite nice. He asked me, “Are you leaving for good?” I said I’d return. And then he said, “If you do, I advise you to be careful with what you say.” I told my mother I’d have to go otherwise I would end up in prison or in a labour camp. The problem with Chinese mothers is that they regard their children as part of themselves. They sacrifice their lives for them and they love them. She resisted. Finally I said to her, “Mother, if you do not allow me to leave, I will commit suicide.” This was the deal I struck with her. It was hard, very hard. My girlfriend went with me to the airport. I knew her for only three months. This was after the massacre. She was very intelligent, finished university, aged nineteen, with a degree in mathematics! The police harassed her over
me. She suffered much although her parents were very Red, both of them party secretaries. They didn’t like me. She learned from them there would be arrests and searches and so she warned me to stay outside the city. I was very grateful to her. After I arrived in England I asked a friend to invite her to come, but the Chinese authorities would not give her a passport, saying she was too young. I didn’t want the police to continue to harass her and if she couldn’t leave China what was the point? After two years, I told her we had better finish things. I still feel sorry about this. I understand she is now an American citizen living in Washington, DC. I could not be a better boyfriend to her and because of my infatuation with poetry I was not responsible either. I simply don’t live like other people.’

‘So then you got onto the plane …’

‘A group of uniformed officers boarded the plane. They said, “All Chinese citizens show your passports.” There were quite a few Japanese tourists around me. One of the officers said, “Are you from Tokyo as well?” I nodded but said nothing. And he walked past. Sometimes you can’t tell Chinese from Japanese. This is exactly what happened. And then the plane was half an hour late. What else would happen? When it took off at 5.45 in the afternoon, the 9th of September, I wrote in my diary “Goodbye, China”.’

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When Hongbin first came through UK customs he had to have an X-Ray. The plane he was on had stopped in Islamabad and Istanbul and presumably they were looking for drugs. When, later, he was summoned before an immigration officer with a stern face he asked, in all innocence, whether he had to go through another screening. Amusingly, or perhaps not so amusingly, the man’s gruff reply was, ‘Don’t spill blood on the carpet.’ That experience, transmogrified, would work its way into Hongbin’s prose poem, “The Unfamiliar Customs House”:

Nightmares waylaid me. I could hardly make a declaration to the customs officer. I had become a smuggler, dealing in nightmares. I was once again in exile.
When I took up my pen for the first time to write poetry I felt exiled from the ordinary world; then I was only a teenager. My exile was a voluntary one.

The night in London became damper. Sound flutters its wings hovering in the air. The lighted cigarette in my hand is like a sleepless eye.

The sky of the square in my mind seems to me still like a bloody, messy wound.

My frozen tongue has come alive. I want to speak.

‘After I arrived here, a local support group protesting the massacre already knew about me and had prepared everything — a free immigration lawyer, etcetera. Many of the Chinese who came here were not involved in the demonstrations but it was a chance for them to stay whereas although I was actually there, in Tiananmen Square, and had given speeches and so forth, I didn’t want to claim asylum at all. I wanted to go home. A poet is destined to have a feeling of exile. At the beginning this may be a horrifying experience but at least it helps one, as an onlooker, to gain a perspective. Of course one pays a price. When I was in China I read a lot of western literature, American and English poetry in particular, and I longed for the world outside. In fact the first of my poems in English translation had been published in China Now in 1988. Without hesitation I’d have defected to just about any other country. And yet after I arrived here I had a very different attitude. I had no choice. I clung to my Chinese passport until maybe two days before my visa expired in September 1990, at which point I gave it to a lawyer who put in my application. That was a painful moment. Within a week I got notice that I had been granted indefinite leave to remain.’

A near loss of balance in the physical world, a coin dropped into the slot of a payphone, would bring Hongbin some kind of redress in the literary one.

‘Soon after arriving here, I got a job helping a Chinese Malaysian decorate a flat in Norwood. I took buckets of mixed cement up a high ladder. One day my legs were trembling so badly I might have fallen from that high roof. I can still remember when later that day, on the platform of Kennington Station, I got on the payphone to the Poetry Society and asked them to put me in touch with Elaine Feinstein whose poems I had translated in China. She and her husband took me to a party, the first I attended
in London. Many people there questioned me about Tiananmen Square. I must say I was still full of fear. I asked Elaine whether there were any other poets I could talk to. She introduced me to Peter Porter who in turn said I should meet Stephen Spender. I remember the first time I went to see Peter Porter at his flat and he took out an atlas, located Brisbane, which is where he comes from, and then looked to see where Qingdao stood in relation to it.

The *Independent on Sunday* marked the first anniversary of the Tiananmen Massacre by publishing Hongbin’s poem “Consultation” together with a photograph of him in the Square. The poem, one of his darkest, is based on his visit to an English psychiatrist at St Mary’s Hospital who spoke some Mandarin Chinese. What the doctor says in the poem, which may not be quite the same as what he said across the table, is that there is no cure for the darkness in his patient’s eyes.

Terror had broken into my eyes,
My memory is ransacked by thieves
and howls through my teeth with pain.
Those crooks are swinging from my every nerve.
It seems to me that eyes are envelopes
and make good cells — I seal mine tightly shut
and tell the doctor, “Please let me sleep.”
I ask him to write out a prescription for death.

‘There is something bad in this poem because psychologically it represents a kind of revenge. Although now I can disavow the negative mentality in that poem when I first arrived here my thoughts, my consciousness, my spirit were more pervasive than my physical presence. It is a young man’s poem. We can forgive him. I mean he really had become a smuggler of nightmares. It was a difficult time however. When the poem appeared in the paper the caption beside the photograph of me sitting in a tent in Tiananmen Square said I was washing dishes in a Chinese restaurant. Blake Morrison was then literary editor at the *Independent on Sunday* and prior to publication I went to see him in his editorial office where he asked me to look over the proofs. When I saw the line about washing dishes, I was upset. “Well, isn’t it true?” Blake replied. I like Blake. Talk about vanity! I was a bit vain. I mean how *could* I have ended up as a dishwasher? It was the lowest kind of job you could have because everyone else could bully you although, in truth, I was happy in a way
because I could feed myself and also because my imagination was free. Soon after, I went to Bristol to give a poetry reading and talk arranged by Amnesty International. A number of students came, some of whom asked which Chinese restaurant I worked in and whether they could come to visit me there. “I work in the basement,” I replied. “You will not be able to see me.” When I met Joseph Brodsky for the first time, he asked me, “What are you doing?” I told him I was washing dishes. “Do you need money?” I said no. Later, I learned he did in fact give money to fellow writers. Hard times, indeed. In my second year in London, on Christmas Eve, I was evicted from my home. It was raining. The old landlady asked me, “Why don’t you spend more time in the park rather than stay at home.” All I had with me was a suitcase. I became homeless.’

‘Were you disappointed with your earlier idea of freedom after you came here?’

‘It’s not like you cross a border and then you are free. It takes a long time, even years, for the idea of freedom to settle into the consciousness, and that’s because freedom is a subjective feeling. I’m not sure many people living here feel they are free.’

‘Did coming here enlarge your life as a poet? Surely it must have done.’

‘Quite the contrary! When I first stood in Leicester Square, in the sunshine, it seemed to me that my shadow thrown on the ground was shorter than my own life. I was naïve and young and I had ambition and yet when I walked about the British Museum I felt terribly depressed. And when I passed the blue plaques displayed all around London I knew I could not compete with all those dead souls as the dead are more powerful — they are giants of thought, not just in literature, but thought in general. I didn’t write poetry in English. I didn’t have any audience here. So I did not feel my life was enlarged at all and yet this kind of adversity became an advantage. I started to write for myself. I wasn’t an established figure in China nor was I chosen by the authorities there for “direct export” to sinologists overseas. I was just an obscure boy with a passion for poetry. What else did I have? The driving force in me was so immense and yet I was not quite sure about what I had. According to many people’s standards my life is a total failure. I am almost fifty and still I am unrealistic. All I had in China was one disaster after another, and here, one accident after another. Who else would want my life? On the other hand, when looking back on one’s existence, one should not complain about suffering or humiliation. It is exactly those things that make what you are. You should not have any resentment, despite the humiliation you
undergo in life. Also this has nothing to do with how you write … the greater the humiliation, the more you grow mentally and spiritually as a writer. It gives you the strength to continue and also it will enlarge your presence in the world of your art. I’m lucky to have met people here otherwise I don’t know where my dark thoughts would have led me.’

As to the matter of what it is to be an exile Hongbin writes in his autobiographical essay *Out of Exile: Language, Memory and Imagination*:

I took with me only my mother tongue, perhaps also my unscathed imagination. If I survived, it would be on account of them. I would claim my life back one day. If my memory serves me well in return, I will serve my own imagination. Memory and imagination are one. Language is imagination’s playground, but at the same time, it is also the battleground of one’s own ideas. Every word forms the fabric of the world we inhabit. For most of the time, a poet lives within language – and by it. I smuggled my language, imagination and memory out of China … In exile, I still felt drawn towards a form of celestial reality that is the reality of imagination. This seemed a higher form of reality. Every day, through living and writing, we are convinced of the existence of different levels of reality, visible and invisible. I feel the constant desire to be raised to that higher level, to see the invisible and to hear the inaudible in the doom and gloom of exile – although isolation, homelessness, loneliness and despair have almost driven me to self-destruction. If I died, I have died many times.

In 1993, Jiang Zemin became President of the People’s Republic of China. Soon after, China conducted a nuclear test which in effect brought an end to a worldwide moratorium on such activities. That same year Hongbin was diagnosed with cancer.

‘I stayed in my flat for a week and then I phoned Elaine Feinstein and told her. “Hongbin,” she said, “open the window.” I opened it. “See,” she said, “how lovely the sunshine is.” Then I went to the Chinese Embassy and told them I wanted to go back to China, either for treatment or to die. They refused me four times. I was in despair. That is when I wrote “Valediction” which I dedicated to my nieces and nephew in the hope they would grow to love poetry.

At daybreak my bloodstream becomes a fire burning, I am rainbow-hued and drained to nothing.
Words are a gleaming river in the night, 
an elegy.

All children who read poetry are my own dear children. 
Their voices are like dawn breaking over darkness.

Children I am back with you.

‘When a Buddhist or Taoist monk dies he does not want to leave anything behind on earth. All those monks who achieve Buddhahood or immortality burn themselves like a rainbow hue. You start an inner fire and then you are gone. There is an element of this in the poem but I think what I created above all is an atmosphere of solitude. It is important sometimes for a poet to achieve a sense of detachment, sufficiently so that reading his poem is like reading someone else’s. I cannot help but be moved by this poet, this pathetic guy who genuinely loves poetry. A friend who practiced Tibetan meditation kindly sent me books and tapes, which helped me to relax and get into a tranquil mood. Later, the doctor told me I didn’t have cancer at all. They had made a mistake!’

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Hongbin, carrying a British passport, made his first return visit to China in 1997. When he arrived at his mother’s house six police broke in and after telling him he was not welcome in the country put him under house arrest. Although he was later free to go, which is to say they henceforth followed his every move, by the time he got to Shanghai he was re-arrested, this time in broad daylight, and at the police station was offered the choice of keeping either his Chinese ID card or his British passport. When he chose the latter the chief of police informed him that he had been performing activities incompatible with his tourist status.

‘They tried immediately to deport me to Hong Kong. On the way to the airport I told them it was a disgrace for China to expel a poet. They replied, “You are not worth deportation!”’ Hong Kong Dragon Airlines refused to take me. So the police put me in a hotel for the night. I slept on one bed, two policemen in another bed, another
on the floor. They ordered a meal but in order to protest my expulsion I refused to eat. A senior official came and said to me, “Do you know how much my family suffered during the Cultural Revolution?” The next day they escorted me — one of them was an attractive woman in plain clothes — to the airport. They changed my surname on the boarding pass, which I still have, to “Wu”. They did not want me to be known to my fellow passengers. When I boarded the plane two of them followed me. I said, “Can I give you something?” They exchanged looks. I gave them my book. I said to one of them “What is your name?” And he replied, “Zhong”, which, as well as being a surname, is also the first character of the Chinese for China, Zhōngguó, the implication being that he was Chin or that he was loyal to China. It was so pathetic, this individual so engulfed by the state he did not have even an identity of his own. I said to them, “I will return through my poetry.” After I sat down, another person arrived who I assumed was with the secret police. He accompanied me to Hong Kong.

*Man is born unto trouble,* says Eliphaz the Temanite, *as the sparks fly upward.* The second half of the sentence from The Book of Job has baffled commentators for centuries, and yet, as do certain lines of poetry that resist paraphrase, when taken neat it makes perfect sense. As sparks fly upward, just as surely affliction comes. Our mistake is to attribute it to fortune. The Taoist perspective on this is that misfortune comes from having a body and as such it should be accepted as the human condition. Trouble seems to follow Hongbin wherever he goes. After his expulsion from China, he returned to England only to discover he’d been evicted from his home. He moved into a place for homeless people where the manager, an old man, attacked him with an axe. What’s the full story here? Well, let’s just say Hongbin is still alive.

In 2004, in Taiwan, a decomposing sperm whale was transported through Tainan City to the university where a necropsy was to be performed when suddenly it exploded, splattering hundreds of onlookers with blood, entrails and stuff even more unmentionable. There is in this image, surely, an analogy for the fate of all regimes. Also, that year, thousands of people in Hong Kong took to the streets to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the Tiananmen Massacre. In October of that same year, Hongbin, together with his young daughter, went to China to visit his ailing mother. A piece he wrote for *Index on Censorship* describes one episode from that journey, which took place on his mother’s birthday:
All I hoped was that the police would not harass me this time. When we arrived, we were driven to a detention centre, and I was interrogated by the police. My daughter was three years old at the time and asthmatic, and started crying. But she put her hands across my mouth in an attempt to prevent me from answering the police’s questions. A woman police officer was called in. I knew she wanted to take my daughter away from me. I took out the puffer to help relieve her wheezing. My daughter was crying and said in English: ‘I don’t like them,’ and again put her little hands across my mouth to stop me from talking to the police. In the end, they didn’t take her away. We were locked up in cell 308 — a small bare room, with a bed, a few dirty white quilts and a bloody handprint on the wall. The window had triple iron bars.

They were finally released, Hongbin’s daughter covered with insect bites, and they made it to Qingdao where his mother still lives. One sad consequence of this journey is that the ban on his returning to China, issued on his first return visit in 1997, was renewed, this time indefinitely. Hongbin has not been back since.

On November 9th, 2005 Chinese President Hu Jintao visited London at the invitation of Queen Elizabeth who wore red for the occasion. Was this, on her part, an ironic gesture? When President Hu was approached by the BBC’s Newsnight for an interview he declined. Hongbin went on the programme instead to speak about the human rights situation in China with the consequence that within hours a UK-based Chinese website posted over ninety pages of complaints, mostly from Chinese students and scholars residing here, accusing him of being a traitor to his country. Some of the messages screamed, ‘Let him die in England!’ and others, more worryingly, ‘Let’s get rid of this scum!’ China is not opening up in the way its apologists assume. As of late, with, for example, the arrest of the artist, Ai Wei Wei, the repression in China has been on the increase again. These are matters Hongbin would like to put behind him.
I began by saying I found him in monkish mode. In 2000, Hongbin had been invited to visit the Dalai Lama in Dharamshala to see the refugee camps and the S.O.S. Children’s Village, and when he spoke to him of his own plight His Holiness, sensing Hongbin was on a fruitless course, which is to say he was seeking justice for his father where there could be none, replied, ‘Let it go.’ When Hongbin went on to tell him he wanted to learn more about Tibetan Buddhism, which he had already practised for eight years, the reply was, ‘If I were you, I would be more interested in the Chinese root and its form.’ It was a response that was to have serious repercussions for Hongbin, which put him back on a course that he had begun to explore many years earlier and of which he spoke with something like spiritual yearning in his voice.

‘When I was twenty, I went to a mountain above Qingdao called Laoshan, which was famed for its Taoist practice. It is the second heavenly court of the Quanzhen Longmen sect. The Chinese poet Li Po visited there. There, at Shangqing Palace, one of the very few temples to have survived the Cultural Revolution, I met a Taoist monk and told him I wanted to join the order. He said I would need to get permission first of all from my mother because I wouldn’t be able to marry. I told him she had four sons, three of whom were marriageable. Then he told me I’d require permission from the Qingdao Municipal Administration of Religious Affairs. I applied and was refused. One consequence of this rejection is that I was motivated to know more about what it was I had not been allowed to learn.’

‘Are you about to retreat into a monastic space of your own?’

‘It is not that concrete. As the twenty-second generation heir of the Quanzhen Longmen sect ideally I should have retreated to the deep forest mountains but then the
state of my mind is more important than my whereabouts … clear tranquillity of mind. That monastic space contains perhaps five thousand years of Chinese civilisation and whether it’s on the mainland or in Taiwan or in any other part of the world the Chinese people have never really abandoned their cultural heritage. So it is not as if I am erecting a barricade between my poetry and the space of my thought but rather it’s that they might marvellously combine there.

‘I have been studying the I Ching for more than twenty-five years and by doing so I have come to a better understanding of human fate and the soul’s landscape. All natural phenomena are contained within its hexagrams, which begin as eight, then become sixty-four, and, eventually, millions. It is a poet’s mission to interpret symbols and images. If you are born in an inauspicious time you are going to have a troubled life and yet the suffering enables you to experience that life to the full. You may count on one hand the writers who have had a happy existence. Their experiences are what made them great. So it is difficult to say whether someone has a better or worse fate than other people or if he is lucky or unlucky. There is, ultimately, no such interpretation and as soon as one realises this the easier it is to live and to die. You will have no complaints. It’s not that I seek to evade real questions. It is up to you how you perceive your life, whether you are happy or sad, rich or poor, creative or uncreative, loved or unloved. You are blessed with all those tribulations, disappointments, sufferings, human tragedies. It is what helps me to survive and also it enables me to understand other people.

‘When I began to learn about Tibetan Buddhism I recognised a relationship between it and Taoism. Taoism is the earliest native Chinese religion. Without Taoism the introduction and translation in China of the Buddhist scriptures would have been impossible because so much of their terminology was borrowed from Taoism. The whole of Chinese culture is based upon Taoism — its philosophy, medicine, astronomy, mathematics … even the invention of the compass and gunpowder. It is difficult to say whether I foresee a monastic existence for myself. I went to a temple in Taiwan and stayed there for quite a long time. I got up at 5.30 and went to bed at 10.30. It was a hard life. Also I went to a Tibetan monastery here in London. I was terribly depressed and the teacher-in-residence or geshi was very kind to me. He knew I was an exile and said to me, “I, too, have lost my country.” There are people who have suffered so much, who have lost everything, yet this man could maintain his peace of mind. When the Dalai Lama said I should consider my Chinese
roots I went back to Lao Tse whose *Tao Te Ching* is the classic of all classics, written in only five thousand Chinese characters. My life might finish tomorrow but Taoist philosophy values and respects life. There is a Taoist saying: “The span of my life depends on me and not on the heavens.” One of the Taoist practices is to achieve long life. Managing one’s physical health is like governing a country. Tao finds its law in nature.

‘I’m sure Taoism could be a think-tank for contemporary ecologists and also for those yearning for a better politics. On the other hand I could say the life process is a journey from ego to no ego. Have I conquered vanity? If you decide to give it up it is not so difficult. Sometimes you will have difficulties without it or because vanity has been made to equal dignity. Many people mistake dignity for vanity. The most important thing is the life *within*. What other people say or think will not have an impact on you if you are liberated from yourself.

‘Poetry has helped me. I owe so much to poetry. If there is an aim or purpose in life I want to give it all the more credit for that. As a poet you can certainly believe in a life of the soul. But who could measure that kind of life? I know I am just a passerby and that I will perish here with gratitude. That is my fate. And yet when I first arrived here I was angry, full of indignation for a life lost. The thing about totalitarian regimes is that they stir up hatred between people and then they try to keep that hatred alive. With that kind of hatred, however, I don’t think I would have been able to make a fresh start to my life here. I have many friends in this country and I love them, which is why I like to start my story in the middle, with my past at one end and with my unknown future at the other. All this seems so simple now that my life is drawing to a close, when I might be reduced to three Chinese characters.’

‘Which ones?’

‘I don’t know,’ Hongbin concluded. ‘Maybe the ones that make up my name.’

刘洪彬

_or might it be, when it was still a name one could use with impunity, Wang Hongbin?_
Maybe, though, they’re three characters, as yet unknown, for a monk bearing that name.