

## The Peril of Creating State Enemies

Our appeal to the Chinese government to free Li Bifeng

On the heels of the Chinese Communist Party's 18 congress, a Chinese court sentenced underground poet Li Bifeng to 12 years in prison on November 19, 2012 on a fictitious charge, sending the world, what we believe is, a dangerous signal of political regression.

Liao Yiwu, an exiled Chinese writer now living in Germany, and Li Bifeng met each other in the Third Prison of Sichuan Province after the June 4 Tian'anmen Square crackdown in 1989. Of the two dozen or so political prisoners there, the two became friends because of their shared interest in literature, and their friendship has continued beyond the prison walls. Over the years they have exchanged manuscripts and shared their views about life with each other. Li Bifeng was an optimist who, writing aside, also participated in pro-democracy activism, while Liao Yiwu, a pessimist, burrowed deep in writing and performed music in bars to earn his bread.

In 1998, Li Bifeng wrote a non-fiction piece about a sit-in protest by textile workers in his hometown Mianyang and their blockade of highways. He sent his reportage to human rights organizations overseas. His action alarmed the police, and he was again arrested after six months on the run. This time the government changed its strategy, charging him with "financial fraud," and sentenced him to seven years in prison.

Last September, two months after Liao Yiwu had slipped across the Chinese border into Vietnam, local security police called Li Bifeng to "have tea." Li Bifeng went because he was routinely summoned by the police for their inquiries. Then, in front of everyone, he was seized by five policemen, handcuffed and taken away in a police car.

Liao Yiwu didn't learn of Li Bifeng's arrest until May, 2012. Authorities suspected Li Bifeng of assisting Liao's escape financially or physically. But in fact, he had nothing to do with Liao's flight.

The trial of Li Bifeng lasted several months with repeated adjournments. Mere days after China had completed its decennial power transition and the new leaders presented their faces on stage, several thousand kilometres away from Beijing in the small town Shehong,

Sichuan, Li Bifeng was sentenced to 12 years in prison amid defence lawyer's protests that "the evidence is dubious, and there is no victim in the so-called fraud!"

Li Bifeng is 48 years old this year, and his three prison terms total 24 years.

Just like Liu Xiaobo, the winner of 2009 Nobel Peace Prize, Li Bifeng embodies the political reality in China since the 1989 Tian'anmen Square crackdown. But while Liu Xiaobo belongs to the intellectual elite, Li Bifeng is nobody. Liu Xiaobo, in his letters to Liao Yiwu, tirelessly called for China's own Václav Havel or Martin Luther King, Jr., and aspired to be like them. Li Bifeng, on the other hand, is one of the anonymous, silent majority. They share the same conscience and sense of responsibility with the elite, but they are buried in the filthy sewage of the society and live like mice. These "mice," ravaged in turn by poverty and tyranny, who once marched in the streets of Chinese cities, protested, helped each other, and faced the bullets of troops enforcing martial law with their bodies.

The two friends, Liao Yiwu and Li Bifeng, have given each other warmth over the years, the warmth of one mouse huddling against the other. However, Liao did not trust Li Bifeng—for good reason. Among China's political prisoners from the era of June 4 crackdown, Li Bifeng must have been the record holder of failed escapes. Shortly after the movement in 1989 was crushed, he and a few others managed to get several kilometers into Myanmar before they were captured by Burmese communists who dutifully handed them back to the Chinese communists. He was

subsequently almost beaten to death and has sustained permanent disabilities since. Five years later he again was on the run for having once more gotten into trouble, this time he tried the China-Russia borders in the Northeast. He bribed a local smuggler, but as he was waiting to get into a cargo container to be shipped out of the country, he overheard that the smuggler was going to sell him in Chifeng, a Chinese city on the other side of the Heilong River, as a slave worker. He ran for his life, traversing China to the southernmost city Shenzhen where he attempted to make it to Hong Kong by crossing Chung Ying Street (China-Britain Street). He loitered around for two hours, and was seized

by suspecting border guards. After that, he braved three or four more border-crossing adventures, and failed each time. When he recounted them to Liao Yiwu, he managed to strike sadness into Liao and cause him to laugh his head off at the same the time.

Two months before Liao Yiwu's own planned escape, also around the time when the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei was disappeared in Beijing Capital International Airport, Li Bifeng invited Liao Yiwu for dinner. As usual, the two friends talked about their writings, and, quite abruptly, Li asked Liao if he needed money. Liao said he did not. Li Bifeng then asked if he needed "help to go," and Liao said he was not going anywhere.

Liao Yiwu was scared by Li's inquiries and relieved that Li Bifeng, who was a junkie for fortunetelling using the Book of Changes, didn't get anything out of him. How could Liao Yiwu, plotting a slip-away himself, possibly seek help from someone who himself tried it so often and failed each time?

Should Li Bifeng complete the 12-year term, he would be 60 years old. He can then finally give up the idea of running away. Even if he eventually arrives in the free world, what good would that do him?

Over the years, the Chinese authorities have impounded a large trove of Li Bifeng's writings. Isn't it enough to take away a writer's work? Why send him to prison? China's new leaders should understand that the imprisonment of an innocent man will draw wide compassion and indignation, just like the death of innocent citizens in 1989 massacre. Of all people, China's new leader Xi Jinping should understand it better, because his own father, an innocent man, was once an inmate in Mao Zedong's prisons.

Now that Li Bifeng's story is being told by Liao Yiwu, it is going to reverberate for a long time to come. Since last May, more than 300 intellectuals around the world have signed the appeal to free Li Bifeng. And as the persecution of Li Bifeng continues, more and more people will join to make their voices heard.

We call on the Chinese government to release Li Bifeng. It's wrong to create fake charges against an innocent man, treat his life so wantonly, and destroy his family along the way. For those who have to carry out their "judiciary" function for an authoritarian state, as long as they still have any humanity left, they cannot possibly be proud of their role. For the Chinese communist regime, nothing is more self-destructive than continuously manufacturing enemies for itself.

November, 25, 2012

Initiated by:

Ai Weiwei, artist, Beijing.

Liao Yiwu, exiled author and musician, 2012 winner of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, Berlin.

Ha Jin, author, winner of American Book Award, Boston.

Herta Müller, author, winner of Nobel Prize for Literature, Berlin.

Salman Rushdie, winner of Booker Prize 1981, 1993 and 2008, USA.

(Translated by Yaxue Cao)