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# **Past Events Disperse like Smoke: Chinese Revolution, intellectuals, Hu Feng and Mei Zhi's prison memoirs**

Saturday 3 May 2014, by [BENTON Gregor](#), [HETHERINGTON Grace](#) (Date first published: 22 April 2014).

**PEN Atlas contributor Gregor Benton looks at revolution, resistance and the Beijing University literature class that harboured three of China's best-known intellectual and political adversaries, in light of his forthcoming translation of Mei Zhi's prison memoirs *F: Hu Feng's Prison Years*.**

Probably all revolutions in modern times have fallen out, sooner or later, with their intellectuals. Critical thinkers have been both the begetters of revolution, by articulating its ideologies, and its victims, for the same righteous indignation that fired them up enough to join it in the first place led many to denounce its abuses once the new freedoms vanished.

Hu Feng is an example. He became a revolutionary at Beijing University in the 1920s, secretly joined the Japanese Communist Party in Tokyo, worked for the resistance in wartime China, and led movements of leftwing writers in cities controlled by Chiang Kai-shek. He was one of China's best-known leftwing editors before 1949 and a pupil of Lu Xun, the giant of China's twentieth-century literature and its George Orwell. After Mao's victory in 1949, Hu Feng worked for a while on the fringes of the Beijing regime, but after a couple of years he got into trouble with the literary and political establishment. This was partly because he belonged to a wrong faction, but mainly because of his liberal view of literature. He implicitly criticized Mao's proposal that creative writing should serve the party, by extolling the masses and reflecting the 'bright side' of life rather than 'exposing the darkness'. So he was denounced for 'subjectivism', i.e., exaggerating the role played by what he called the inner energy of the active subject. He was also a belligerent man. His short fuse made enemies, and he was not a party member, unlike his opponents. He had joined its youth section in 1923, lost touch during the civil war, and tried to rejoin after returning from Japan, but failed.

Hu Feng spent twenty-five years as a political prisoner starting in 1955, a record surpassed only by the Chinese Trotskyists' thirty-odd years in gaol. After his death in 1985, his wife Mei Zhi wrote her memoir of the prison years she shared with him. Mei Zhi too was a revolutionary, but by profession she was a children's author, so her writing is clear and jargon-free. Initially gaoled as Hu Feng's accomplice, she was freed under supervision in 1961. The nuances of Hu Feng's literary theory didn't really interest her, but she stayed true to him despite the troubles he brought on her and their children and despite her milder views. She returned to prison voluntarily after her release, to care for him in his sickness and old age.

Mei Zhi was engagingly honest about her feelings. She was a stoic, capable of astonishing self-sacrifice for her family, but unlike Hu Feng she could be cynical about politics. Hers is one of China's best prison-memoirs. It is a gripping story, climaxing in Hu's madness and a redemption of sorts. It differs from similar accounts in that despite their calvary, Mei and Hu remained supporters

of the revolution. It is also a love story - of her love for him, even in the years of his madness.

The book was first published in instalments, starting with *Past Events Disperse like Smoke*. I picked this up in Beijing in 1987 for Wang Fanxi, the exiled elderly Trotskyist leader who shared my house for several years. On my trips to China, I used to buy books I thought he'd like. It turned out he and Hu Feng had been class-mates at Beijing University, along with Wang Shiwei, Chinese communism's first real dissident, murdered by the party near Yan'an in 1947 after arguing publicly that writing should be free to criticise party abuses and to talk about the soul. So one literature class harboured three of the party's best-known future trouble-makers. Wang Fanxi pressed me to translate *Past Events* and told me some interesting facts about Hu Feng, which might have got him into trouble even sooner had his inquisitors known about them.

They concerned Hu Feng's relations with Lu Xun and Lu Xun's affinity with Leon Trotsky, Stalin's exiled rival. As a literary liberal, Trotsky had attacked 'proletarian literature', a futurist Soviet style, in his book *Literature and Revolution*, arguing that the arts should be a sphere unto themselves rather than a product of official decrees. This was also more or less Lu Xun's view.

In notes written after 1979, Hu Feng recalled a postscript Lu Xun had written in 1926 for a translation of Alexander Blok's enigmatic poem *The Twelve*. According to Hu, reading the postscript freed him 'from a vulgar sociological understanding of the creative process.' In it, Lu Xun had used Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* to illuminate the literary genius of the 'bourgeois' Blok. He also sponsored a Chinese translation of Trotsky's book. He stopped referring to Trotsky after 1929, probably for diplomatic reasons. After reading Lu Xun's postscript, Hu Feng realised that not all Marxists believed that everything in the creative process had a 'material' or 'economic' base. So Trotsky's style of literary appreciation was a wellspring of Hu Feng's fateful opposition to party-decreed 'mechanicalism', though he never said so directly.

Stalin's demonizing of Trotsky was copied by the Chinese communists in their attacks on Chen Duxiu, the independent-minded founder of Chinese communism, expelled as an oppositionist in 1929. Similarly, Stalin's posthumous cult of Maxim Gorki was mirrored by the cult of Lu Xun, hailed as 'China's Gorki', also after his politically convenient death in 1936 (the same year Gorki died). Like Gorki, Lu Xun was made into a cult so the party could cloak itself in his reputation for integrity. But first they had to expurgate his embarrassing antecedents, especially the fact that he was influenced by Trotsky, for the link made his enshrinement laughable. So the affinity between Trotsky, demonized in both China and Russia, and Lu Xun was richly ironic. And so was the fact that Hu Feng's 'thought crimes' were in reality a faithful echo of Lu Xun, who had persuaded him that revolutionary writing did not have to be clichéd and uniform or to toe a party line and should be free to treat questions of the human spirit.

\* Posted February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013 by Tasja Dorkofikis & filed under Pen Atlas:  
<http://www.englishpen.org/living-with-a-prisoner/>

\* *F: Hu Feng's Prison Years* by Mei Zhi, translated by Gregor Benton received a Writers in Translation award for 2013 and will be published by Verso in April 2013.

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## **'Tragic, harrowing, redeemed-by-love' - a word from the translator with Gregor Benton**

*Lying on the bed, my lids drooped and my eyes shut, but they wouldn't close. When I put out the light, the bars on the window looked like fangs. The four walls pressed down on me and scared me. Where was my beloved? I had come all this way but still I couldn't see him. Why wouldn't they say anything? Was he alive? The more I thought, the more I worried.*

- Excerpt from *Hu Feng's Prison Years* by Mei Zhi, translated from Chinese by Gregor Benton

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### **Grace Hetherington - How did you come across this book, and what led you to translate it?**

Gregor Benton - For many years, the exiled Chinese Trotskyist leader and literary figure Wang Fanxi lived with my family, in our spare room in Leeds. He was like a father to me, and like a grandfather to my children. I was teaching Chinese Studies at Leeds University at the time. Wang would have been arrested if he'd gone to China, where he was considered a counter-revolutionary, so on my frequent visits to the country I used to buy him books and magazines I thought he'd like. The Mei Zhi book originally came out in fascicles, as was often the case in China in the 1980s, and I only managed to get him the first chapter. He'd been at university in 1925 with Hu Feng, and the two shared some views and attitudes on literature and politics. So when I saw the fascicle, I knew he'd want it. After finishing it, he returned it to me and said it was definitely worth reading. I didn't read it at the time, but several years after his death in 2002, I happened to pick it up from my bookshelf. When I opened it, a note floated to the floor, written in his shaky hand (he had Parkinson's). It said, 'Greg, this is a good book, it's well written and important. I recommend you translate it.' So I did, after getting the full text from SOAS library.

### **Mei Zhi's writing is extremely raw, powerful and honest, and the book constitutes a very intimate portrait of her and Hu Feng's relationship. Can you describe the experience of translating such an intimate, real-life story?**

Translating Mei Zhi's writing was a labour of love, and of homage to the memory of Wang Fanxi. I sometimes wept at what I read, and had to stop for a while. The communists were sickeningly cruel to her and her husband. Whenever I reached a passage of raw emotion I changed down a gear, stripping the translation to a minimum, avoiding wordiness, and fending off long, abstract, or Latinate words that might distract attention from the flow of feeling. Where possible I tried to use strong verbs instead of adverbs and adjectives which create a moment of wait that can diminish the intensity of feeling by delaying or interrupting it. I tried to keep the sentences short and to restrict each to just one small idea or event, to give readers (and myself) time to breathe. When Mei Zhi paused for a moment of reflection, I switched to a higher, wordier register, to mark the transition. I didn't just translate, I also edited and shortened the text by around a third. Where possible I removed the author's frequent stage directions ('he said', 'I said'), signposts, and explanatory asides, as well as comments I found superfluous or obscure. You might say I paid more attention to style than Mei Zhi, who was single-mindedly focused on the facts of her experience rather than on creating literature. But her writing can be very direct and sincere. By profession, she was a children's author. That shows. Her writing is plain, clear, and unpretentious.

By the way, one reviewer criticized me for not adding a scholarly introduction explaining the

circumstances of Hu Feng's arrest. But this was deliberate. I thought it better to let the story seep out by degrees, as a sort of mystery, which it does, but you have to be patient. Anyone who wants to know more about Hu Feng's case can read my article on the PEN Atlas.

**You're an expert on Chinese history. Do you think it would have been possible to translate this book if you weren't? Did you still find yourself doing a lot of research despite your knowledge of the subject?**

Yes, I'm an expert on Chinese communism, and also on Chinese dissent and Chinese Trotskyism. Over the years, I have translated three Chinese prison memoirs: the prison chapters in Wang Fanxi's *Chinese Revolutionary* and Zheng Chaolin's *Oppositionist for Life*, and now this. I'm an old lag by proxy. Since I'm deeply familiar with the facts, I didn't need to look much up. I only once wrote to Hu Feng's youngest son with a question, concerning a comment his father made about a detail of the architecture of the Great Hall of the People, which he was allowed to visit after his release from prison. Would I have been able to translate this book without my previous knowledge? Yes, but it would have been a lot harder, and I would have had to consult people, bother Hu Feng's son more, and look lots up. The main thing was my link to Wang. This book represents more than a year of my life, willingly given for my love for Wang and my support for his and the oppositionists' struggle for worldwide freedom and socialism.

**Describe F: Hu Feng and Our Prison Years in three words.**

Tragic, harrowing, redeemed-by-love.

**Interview by Grace Hetherington**

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<http://www.englishpen.org/tragic-harrowing-redeemed-by-love-a-word-from-the-translator-with-gregor-benton/>

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**P.S.**

\* Gregor Benton is professor emeritus at Cardiff University. He has published books on Chinese Communism, dissent in China, and Chinese communities outside China. His *Mountain Fires* (1992) and *New Fourth Army* (1999) won several awards, including the Association of Asian Studies' best book on modern China. He has translated scholarly books from German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, French, and Chinese. He has taught Chinese Studies in Leeds, Amsterdam, Cardiff, Kuala Lumpur, and Barcelona.