

Appeal

Peter Liu worked as a journalist for International News Service (INS), a forerunner of UPI. One of the things he regrets most is that he handed over all the clippings of his articles to party officials. He could not make copies. It would be very nice to dig up articles with his byline from American archives. I would like to ask anybody who has an idea how to unearth Liu's articles to contact: Peter Liu at pam89@163.com or Yvonne van der Heijden at info@vanderheijdencommunications.com

Laogai-veteran Peter Liu (78) in Peking:

"Better to have misfortune first in life and fortune later"



"My story is the unhappy experience of my country." Chinese scholar and one-time journalist Peter Liu is 78 years old. During an interview on a hot autumn day, however, his fierce eyes and firm voice hardly betrayed his ordeal. Liu Naiyuan, by his Chinese name, spent 21 years in Chinese labor camps, the *laogai*. Only in 1979 when Deng Xiaoping consolidated power in his hands after ousting all the leaders of the chaotic Cultural Revolutions, was he released and fully rehabilitated. He wrote a book in English about his tempestuous life and got it published in the United States in 2001: *Mirror, A Loss of Innocence in Mao's China**. "Like a mirror my tragic life reflects the life of the nation", Liu observed.

Peter Liu, good-humoured and brimming with optimism, spoke at length in his apartment in Peking explaining the circumstances that went on to make his life a hell for so many years. "The misfortune that befell my country in the fifties lasted three decades. I was a victim of the crackdown on so called *bourgeois rightists*. Mao Zedong planted a booby trap, which he called a good plot."

Liu was referring to the political campaign, *Let a hundred flowers bloom*, which got into full swing in April 1957. Mao and other Communist leaders, including late premier Zhou Enlai, felt the party's work since the start of the People's Republic in 1949 had been so successful that it could take a little criticism. A general appeal for critical comments went out. And intellectuals around the country responded with unprecedented enthusiasm. Complaints poured in on everything from corruption within the party to control of artistic expression, from the unavailability of foreign literature to low standards of living. But most of all, criticism focused on the monopoly on power of the communist party and the abuses that went with it. Very soon the party had second thoughts on the 'Hundred flowers' campaign and instead unleashed an anti-rightist campaign.

"I was one of the flowers. I spoke up: A lot of things regarding the government I did not like eight years after the communists took power. I touched a raw nerve in suggesting that the political leaders, most of them peasants before they enlisted in the People's Liberation Army, should get a proper education. A good guerrilla commander was not going to make a good leader of a university or a government institution. If they refused to be educated, they should step down. China had to be rebuilt and was in need of capable leaders. Well, after I had reported a lot of shortcomings -- mind you I was invited to do so -- I was called a criminal, a *bourgeois*. In French this word means citizen, but in Mao's China it meant enemy of the people. Of course I was not the only one. Because Mao very frequently gave instructions that five percent of the people were bad, by the end of 1958 some 550.000 Chinese were picked out to be labeled rightists."

I got to know Peter Liu, who speaks English fluently, in the early 1990s when I was a correspondent in Peking for Dutch language newspapers. Compared to the atmosphere in 2002-2003, the situation a decade ago in China was harsher. Chinese people, especially intellectuals, still had to be careful in their contacts with foreigners. Foreign journalists had to keep in mind that the Chinese they talked to might get into trouble. Nevertheless Peter and I got along well. During my eight years' stay Peter helped me frequently to put developments in China into a broader perspective. His 'lectures' gave me a unique insight into several aspects of the country's long history.

Peter Liu is an erudite man, a scion of a family of scholars. Peter and his three brothers got their education at a missionary school from the American Presbyterian Church. Peter went on to study English literature at St. John's University in Shanghai.

In 1945 China was at the brink of civil war. The United States sided with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) and sent General George Marshall to take part in a tripartite Mediation Committee. The American army employed Peter Liu as a translator in the mediation Executive Headquarters. A year later the civil war broke out and the Executive Headquarters was disbanded.

But Peter was lucky. Seymour Topping, a reporter at the Peking bureau of International News Service (INS, one of the forerunners of UPI), needed a translator and hired Peter. "Later I became his assistant. He trained me to become a journalist. On the eve of the Communist takeover, I quit the job. The communists were very hostile to the Americans because the military aid for the Nationalist Government contributed to the loss of communist lives."

Peter Liu was actually in favour of the communist takeover. He could have chosen to go to the United States. Or he could have cast his lot with the Nationalist government that fled to Taiwan. His life would have been quite different. "Since childhood, I was very patriotic. I loved my country, not the Nationalist Party, though, which was corrupt to the bone. I was convinced the communists would change politics, eradicate corruption and poverty, govern in the interest of the Chinese people. So, I did stay on and welcomed the communists with open arms. My country would have a bright future under communist rule, I thought."

He was enrolled as a student at a so-called *Revolutionary University*. "In six months I finished with bad grades. They did not like me. I asked too many questions. Western journalists described these classes organized by the communists as brainwashing institutions. It was the initial stage of the reeducation of Chinese intellectuals." After he got his 'revolutionary degree' he had to study Russian. He became a translator for Soviet experts in the army. In 1954 he asked to be demobilized. He was stationed as an education official in a poor district near Peking. In the momentous year 1957 when the "Hundred flowers" campaign began, he was transferred to Xinhua, the New China News Agency.

Peter Liu did not fit in the stereotype of the control of ideology and was criticized over and over again. His independent mind, his 'American' history and his family background all worked against him. In the summer of 1957 -- like all intellectuals and Government functionaries -- Liu was encouraged to tell what he thought were shortfalls of the Communist Party. He complied, but a fortnight later the wind changed and those that were outspoken about the Communist Party's shortcomings were denounced and labeled Bourgeois Rightists.

"I did everything to try to prove that I did not want to harm the party. But I ended up as a rightist of the worst category, which meant expulsion from work unit and loss of all rights of a citizen." For sixteen years Peter Liu had to do manual labor. Farm work: tilling the earth, planting rice and other crops, digging canals and lakes. "In the end I was a grape care expert." In 1974, he became a teacher at a labor camp middle school for the children of camp officers and his life improved.

Liu recalls times of great despair. At some point he even seriously considered to take his own life. In the end he did not because since he would die as a political prisoner his relatives, first of all his mother and his only daughter Jane, would suffer the rest of their lives. He decided not to die as a coward and to bear the hardship. Now he is happy he did live on.

Peter Liu's autobiography with its very detailed account of harsh life in China under Mao's rule ends with his release in 1979. In the early 1980s his life took another dramatic turn, but in a welcome direction. He met his current wife Yu Qin, a middle school teacher of English who herself suffered untold harassment at the hands of the Communist Party. They started a new life together. Listening to Peter Liu is not like listening to a bitter man. His humour and optimism were probably the keys to his survival. He credits Yu Qin for the renewed zest for life he has acquired. "Some of my friends tell me my turbulent life is unfortunate. I agree that my life has had its bitter days. And I suffered a lot. I did. But nothing can be done about it. And, it is better to experience misfortune in the beginning of your life and fortune later, then the other way around."

**Mirror, A Loss of Innocence in Mao's China by Peter Liu. Published by Xlibris Corporation. ISBN 1-888-795-4274. 436 Pages. Price: US\$ 21.24 To order a copy of the book: www.Xlibris.com*

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