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HO CHI MINH

PRISON DIARY

(SECOND EDITION)



PRISON DIARY

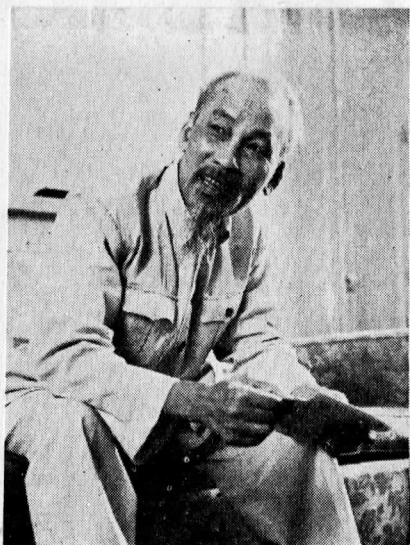
HO CHI MINH

PRISON DIARY

Translated by AILEEN PALMER

(Second edition)

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Höchhine

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PREFACE

July 1946, Paris,

In the reception-room of that palace on the right bank of the river, a hale and hearty journalist heckled for a quarter of an hour a thin man with deep marks of suffering and privations on his face, who had in front of him a small vase of pink roses.

Round about were nearly one hundred reporters and observers from all countries.

"Mr President, you are a communist, aren't you?" the journalist asked.

"Yes," the man replied sedately.

"Have you been in the Resistance?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"About forty years."

"Have you been in prison, too?" It was clear what the journalist was driving at.

"Yes."

"What prisons?"

"Many, sir."

"Long?"

The thin man looked at the hale and hearty journalist with a faint smile and said, "In prison, time is always long, you know."

The reply given in French was prompt, clear and unexpected. Was it said as a reproach, as irony or as humour? What is certain is that at that instant Frenchmen, Englishmen and Americans in the room were astonished to notice that the goatee-bearded scholar could smile in Paris or in London as well as in Hanoi; it was the inscrutable smile of a wise man whose vision stretched far beyond today.

Have you any further questions, journalist?

"In prison, time is always long."

August 1942, in Asia.

The second year of the war drew to a close. The Japanese took possession of Indo-China. But new forces emerged. In Vietnam a resistance base was firmly established in the uplands.

One day, near the Sino-Vietnamese border, Chiang Kai-shek's police arrested a man, about whom they knew nothing except that he was called Ho Chi Minh, that he wanted to go to Chungking and that he claimed to be the representative of the Vietnamese patriots.

Who was this Ho Chi Minh? Around 1926 or 1927, there existed a Vietnamese patriot by the name of Nguyen Ai Quoc — known to all the police in the Far East — who used to go to and fro in this seething region of the world. But Nguyen-the-Patriot was dead.

This man looked the same age. His clothes were very simple, but small details about him revealed that he was not an ordinary man, and, strange to say, he wanted to see the Chinese authorities at Chungking. This was enough to clap a man in prison.

First he was put in Tsing Si jail; then without any plausible reason, he was taken to Nanning; from Nanning he was sent to Kweilin and from Kweilin to Liuchow where he retraced his steps...

Before dawn when the stars faded away, he was sent on his way on a lead, with hands bound, behind a pig carried by two guards. At nightfall, when the birds returned to their nests, he was cooped up in some makeshift jail near a rubbish shoot, happy to have one leg shackled so as to avoid a night's sleep on a cesspool.

Transferred here and there by circuitous routes, he crossed the thirteen districts of Kwangsi province, was confined in thirty prefecture and district prisons for fourteen months and put under house arrest at Liuchow whence he took the road back to the frontier which he had crossed two years ago.

Arms and legs bound, who can prevent you from hearing a bird's song, from smelling fragrant flowers? Do solitude, inaction weigh on you? The autumn moon is bright in the sky. Does the languor of the evening twilight stupefy your will - power? Look at that house lit in the pitch dark night :

The police watch every detail of your deeds and gestures. Who can forbid you to jot down the loneliness of an hour, an unspeakable situation, the drama behind a smile? The poetry of every thing is in the heart of life. And if poetry can ever be of any use in life, it is in the circumstances described above.

* The main prison in Paris (Publisher's note).

Sometimes in the evening, sitting in the dark, our prisoner watched all these people asleep and awake, innocent-faced men on the ground, bugs on the walls crawling like black armoured cars in the night, and mosquitoes flying in squadrons in the sky. The world was at war, while he suffered in the corner of a prison cell, far from his country, far from his comrades. It was at just such moments that he took out a time-worn note-book and jotted down his impressions of the day. He wrote in the language of his jailers who would have suspected all material written in Vietnamese.

This was the origin of a hundred odd quatrains and Tang poems written in the scholars' classical language adorned here with a newly coined sentence, there with a popular expression. All were sketches taken from life and they made what could be called the prisoner's travel book.

We have translated that book for our friends abroad. And the prisoner, as you have guessed, was none other than Nguyen-the-Patriot, the man who received pressmen in the

Royal Monceau reception-room one afternoon of July 1946, the first year of Franco-Vietnamese reconciliation, as it could be called.*

Within the framework of this collection of translated poems, we do not wish to expatiate on the political life of the author — it seems to us unnecessary, for Ho Chi Minh's name has since long been well known to the public in the West.

Neither will we make a critical study of his poetry in this mere collection of texts. We refrain from taking the place of the reader who is clear-sighted enough to make his own assessment of their value.

Nevertheless we deem it necessary to make the following small remark.

Nowadays there are many memoirs of great statesmen. Memoirs are part of history and history, as you know, can be told as one likes.

* In July 1946, President Ho Chi Minh led a Vietnamese government delegation to France to open the negotiations provided for in the Preliminary Agreements of March 6, 1946 which gave birth to the Modus Vivendi of September 14, 1946 (Fontainebleau conference). Unfortunately, the French colonialists torpedoed these agreements; the resistance of the Vietnamese people broke out on December 19, 1946 and ended in July 1954 with the Dien Bien Phu victory (Publisher's note).

The public, especially in Europe, is rarely given the opportunity to read the poems of these men. This for many reasons of which the following is worth noting, however impertinent it may be. Great statesmen are great chiefly because of their work, their thinking and their character, not always because of their sensibility. Now, poetry is something most intimate to man. It can hardly tell lies or else the poet is not a poet.

In such men as Ho Chi Minh, the intelligence and sensibility are one. There is nothing secret in his public and private life. To him the sight of suffering is a call both to action and to poetical expression.

*The rose at evening blossoms, and then it fades
away.*

*Its opening and its withering continue all unnoticed.
But the fragrance of the rose floats into the depths
of the prison,*

*Telling the inmates there of life's injustice and
sorrow.*

*This small book enables us to understand its author much
better than lengthy memoirs.*

PHAN NHUAN

*The body is in prison,
The mind escapes outside :
To bring about great things
The mind must be large and well-tempered.*

FIRST PAGE OF THE DIARY

Reciting verses has not been one of my habits,
But now in prison what else have I to do?
These captive days I'll spend in writing poems,
And, singing these, bring nearer the day of freedom.

ARRESTED AT TUC VINH STREET

('Abundance and Glory' street)

At 'Abundance and Glory' street, shame was thrust on me
So as to delay my journey:
I am an honest man with a clear conscience,
But I was accused without ground of being a spy.

ENTERING TSING SI DISTRICT PRISON

Old inmates of the jail welcome new prisoners.
In the sky, white clouds are chasing the black ones away.
White clouds and black have drifted out of our sight.
On earth free people are huddled into the jail.

HARD IS THE ROAD OF LIFE

I

Having climbed over steep mountains and high peaks.
How should I expect on the plains to meet greater
danger?

In the mountains, I met the tiger and came out unscathed:
On the plains, I encountered men, and was thrown into
prison.

II

I was a representative of Vietnam
On my way to China to meet an important personage.
On the quiet road a sudden storm broke loose,
And I was thrust into jail as an honoured guest.

III

I am a straightforward man, with no crime on my
conscience,

But I was accused of being a spy for China.
So life, you see, is never a very smooth business,
And now the present bristles with difficulties.

MORNING

I

Every morning the sun, emerging over the wall,
Darts its rays against the gate, but the gate remains
locked.

Inside the prison, the ward is shrouded in darkness,
But we know outside, the rising sun has shone.

II

Once awake, everyone starts on the hunt for lice.
At eight o'clock the gong sounds for the morning meal.
Come on! Let's go and eat to our heart's content.
For all we have suffered, there must be good times
coming.

NOON

In the cell, how lovely it is to have a siesta!
For hours we are carried away in a sound sleep.
I dream of riding a dragon up into heaven...
Waking, I'm brought abruptly back into prison.

AFTERNOON

Two o'clock: the cell door opens to let fresh air in.
Everyone raises his head for a look at the sky.
Free spirits haunting the sky of liberty,
Do you know your own kind are languishing in prison?

EVENING

When the meal is over, the sun sinks in the west.
Now, from all corners, folk songs and music
Suddenly start up: the gloomy Tsing Si prison
Is transformed into an academy of the arts.

PRISON MEALS

At every meal, only one bowl of red rice,
Without vegetables, without salt, and even no broth to
go with it:
Those who get food brought in to them can sometimes
eat their fill.
But, without help from outside the jail, we groan with
hunger.

THE FLUTE OF THE FELLOW-PRISONER

Suddenly a flute sounds a nostalgic note:
Sadly the music rises, its tune is close to sobbing:
Over a thousand miles, across mountains and rivers,
Journeys an aching grief. We seem to see a woman
Climbing a far off tower, to watch for someone's return.

THE LEG-IRONS

I

With hungry mouth open like a wicked monster,
Each night the irons devour the legs of people:
The jaws grip the right leg of every prisoner:
Only the left is free to bend and stretch.

II

Yet there is one thing stranger in this world:
People rush in to place their legs in irons.
Once they are shackled, they can sleep in peace.
Otherwise they would have no place to lay their heads.

LEARNING TO PLAY CHESS

I

To wear away the time, we learn to play chess.
In thousands, horses and infantry chase each other.
Move quickly into action, in attack or in retreat.
Talent and swift feet gives us the upper hand.

II

Eyes must look far ahead, and thoughts be deeply
pondered.
Be bold and unremitting in attack.
Give the wrong command, and two chariots are rendered
useless.
Come the right moment, a pawn can bring you victory.

III

The forces on both sides are equally balanced,
But victory will come only to one side.
Attack, retreat, with unerring strategy:
Then you will merit the title of great commander.

MOONLIGHT

For prisoners, there is no alcohol nor flowers.
But the night is so lovely, how can we celebrate it?
I go to the air-hole and stare up at the moon,
And through the air-hole the moon smiles at the poet.

THE WATER RATION

Each of us has a ration of half a basin of water
For washing or brewing tea, according as each may
choose:
If you want to wash your face, then you must go
without brewing tea:
If you want a drink of tea, then you have to go without
washing your face.

MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL

I

The mid-autumn moon is round like a mirror
And shines on the whole earth its silvery white rays.
You who enjoy mid-autumn in the midst of your
families,
Remember those in prison, who drink the dregs of
misery.

II

In jail we also celebrate the mid-autumn festival.
For us the autumn moon and wind bear a flavour of
sadness.
Being deprived of freedom to enjoy the autumn moon,
My heart wanders after her on her course across the
sky.

GAMBLING

Outside the jail, people who gamble are arrested,
But once inside the jail, they can gamble just as they
like :
So, of course, in jail the prisoners are often heard to
complain :
'Why on earth did I never think to come to this place
before ?'

IMPRISONED FOR GAMBLING

The state supplies no food to those imprisoned for
gambling,
So they may learn all the sooner the error of their
past ways:
Each day the wealthy prisoners enjoy their copious
meals,
But the poor ones shed tears and their mouths water
with hunger.

TRANSFERRED TO TIAN PAO ON 'DOUBLE TENTH' DAY

Every house was festooned with flowers and with
lanterns.
On the national day, the whole country went wild
with joy,
But on that very day, I was placed in chains and
transferred:
The wind remains contrary to the flight of the eagle.

ON THE ROAD

Only when out on the road can we take stock of our dangers.

After we climb one mountain, another looms into view:
But, once we have struggled up to the top of the
 mountain range,
More than ten thousand li can be surveyed at a glance.

TWILIGHT

Wearily to the wood the birds fly seeking rest.
Across the empty sky a lonely cloud is drifting.
In a village in the mountains, a young girl grinds out
maize.
When the maize is all ground, the fire burns red in
the oven.

STOP FOR THE NIGHT AT LONG TSUEN

All day my 'two horses' (1) have trotted without respite.
At night, I am served with 'chicken with five spices' (2)
And offered to the combined attack of the bed-bugs
and the cold.
How welcome an oriole's cry, announcing dawn!

TIAN TUNG

For every meal, only a bowl of rice gruel.
Day and night, the hungry stomach sets up a wail.
Three yuan of white rice is not enough to feed on,
When wood is sold like cinnamon, and rice as though
it were pearls.

ARRIVAL AT TIAN PAO

Today I walked fifty-three kilometres,
My clothes are wet through, my shoes are in tatters,
And all night long, without a place to lie down,
I wait for the next day's coming, on the edge of a
cess-pool.

A VISIT BY THE WIFE OF A FELLOW - PRISONER

The husband is inside the iron bars.
The wife is outside the iron bars, looking in.
So near they are, only separated by inches,
And yet so distant, like sky and depths of the sea.
What no words utter, their desperate eyes relate.
Before each word, their eyes brim over with tears.
Who could stand here and watch their meeting, unmoved?

ON THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF WILLKIE'S RECEPTION IN THE NEWSPAPERS

Both of us are friends of China,
Both are going to Chungking,
But you are given the seat of an honoured guest,
While I am a prisoner, thrown under the steps.
Why are we both so differently treated?
Coldness to one, and warmth towards the other:
That is the way of the world, as from time immemorial
The waters flow down to the sea.

ADVICE TO ONESELF

Without the cold and desolation of winter
There could not be the warmth and splendour of
spring.
Calamity has tempered and hardened me,
And turned my mind into steel.

PASTORAL SCENE

When I came here, rice-plants were tender green.
Now autumn has come, and the harvest is half done.
Everywhere smiles are shining on peasants' faces,
And songs and laughter are heard across the rice-
fields.

THE GRUEL INN

At the side of the road, in the shade of a big tree,
A thatched hut serves as an inn for passing travellers,
But there's no wine for the guests of this institution:
The menu is just cold rice-gruel and white salt.

KUO TEU PRISON

Quaint prison where domestic cares assail us!
Wood, rice, oil, salt — all must be bought and paid for.
In front of every cell stands a little stove
On which all day rice boils and soup is cooked.

DEPARTURE BEFORE DAWN

I

The cocks crow once, the night is not yet over.
Slowly the moon climbs up the autumn hills
In company with the stars, but now the traveller
Who journeys far is already out on the road;
His face is beaten with icy gusts of wind.

II

The paleness in the East is turning rosy,
Night's shadows are swept up, and warmth extends
Over the universe: and in the traveller
The poet warms and wakes.

TUNG CHUN

(The 2nd of the 11th month)

Tung Chun jail is much the same as Ping Ma:
Each meal a bowl of rice-gruel, the stomach always empty,
But water and light at least they have here in abundance,
And each day the cells are twice opened to let in fresh air.

THE PAPER-BLANKET OF A JAIL-MATE

Pages of old books and new ones glued together!
A blanket made out of paper is better than nothing at all.
You people who sleep in jade beds with brocade curtains,
Do you know in the jails there are many who cannot sleep?

COLD NIGHT

In the cold autumn night, without mattress, without
blankets,
Lying with back curled round and legs folded up close,
I try in vain to sleep. The moonlight on the plantains
Increases the sense of cold, and through the window-bars
The Great Bear draws up alongside and looks in.

THE BONDS

A long dragon is entwined about my arms and legs:
I might be a foreign officer with tassels on my shoulders,
But the tassels officers wear are woven of golden thread:
My tassels are no more than a coil of hempen rope.

GOODBYE TO A TOOTH

You are hard and proud, my friend,
Not soft and long like the tongue:
Together we have shared all kinds of bitterness and
sweetness,
But now you must go west while I go east.

WIFE OF A CONSCRIPT DESERTER

One day you went away, not to come back again,
Leaving me alone in our room, with sadness for companion.
The authorities, having pity on my loneliness,
Invited me to live temporarily in the prison.

SOMETHING TO SMILE AT

The state feeds me on rice: I inhabit its palaces;
Its guards work in relays to serve me as escorts.
Its mountains and its rivers I gaze on as I will.
Loaded with such privileges, a man is really a man!

ON THE WAY TO NANNING

The supple rope has now been replaced with iron fetters.
At every step they jingle as though I wore jade rings.
In spite of being a prisoner, accused of being a spy,
I move with all the dignity of an ancient government
official!

GUARDS CARRYING PIGS

I

Along the way we travel, the guards are carrying pigs.
Pigs travel on guards' shoulders, while men are dragged
in irons.
Once a man is forced to surrender his natural human
freedom
The value of a man is less than that of a pig.

II

In this world the ills of man may number tens of
thousands,
But nothing that can befall him is worse than loss of
freedom.
A simple word, a gesture is no longer a man's right.
We can only submit to be driven along like horses or
cattle !

STUMBLING

Still darkness covers the earth, but we are forced to set
out:

The road is tortuous, as well as rugged and hard.

Stumbling I find I have landed into a dangerous pit.

That was quite a near thing, but with luck I can jump
out.

ON A BOAT FOR NANNING

Carried along by the current, the boat glides towards
Nanning.

Our legs are tied to the roof, as though we were on the
gallows.

Along both banks of the river are lively, prosperous
villages.

The boats of the fishermen glide swiftly in mid-stream.

NANNING JAIL

Here is a jail built in ultra-modern style.
All night the compound is brightly flooded with electricity,
But as every meal is nothing more than a bowl of rice-gruel,
The stomach is forever in a state of quivering protest.

SADNESS

The whole world is ablaze with flames of war,
And men compete as to who will be first at the front.
In jail inaction weighs heavily on the prisoner.
My noble ambitions are valued at less than a cent!

LISTENING TO THE COCK'S CROW

You are only a very ordinary cock,
But every morning you crow to announce the dawn
Cock-a-doodle-do! You rouse the people from sleep.
Truly your daily job is not unimportant.

DEATH OF A MAN IMPRISONED FOR GAMBLING

Nothing remained of him but skin and bone.
Misery, cold and hunger were the end of him.
Only last night he slept close to my side,
But this morning he is gone to the Nine Springs' Country.

YET ONE MORE...

Po Yi and Chu Tsi⁽³⁾ refused the rice of the Chou dynasty.
This man refused the rice-gruel of our government. /
Po Yi and Chu Tsi died on the Shu Yang mountain.
The imprisoned gambler starved to death in his cell.

NO SMOKING

Here, smoking is absolutely prohibited!
Your tobacco vanishes into the jailer's pocket.
He, of course, puts it into his pipe—he has every right to,
But if you try again — it's always handcuffs for you.

TWILIGHT

Now the wind's edge is sharpened on mountain rocks.
The spear of cold pierces the branches of trees.
The gong from a far-off pagoda hastens
The traveller's steps, and boys are playing flutes
As they drive the buffaloes home across the twilight.

THE CHARGES

Sixty cents to cook a pot of rice!
A basin of hot water costs you one yuan
A yuan pays for an item worth sixty cents.
Those are the charges clearly laid down in prison.

A SLEEPLESS NIGHT

The first watch passes... the second watch... the third
watch...

I toss about, and fidget, and no sleep comes.

The fourth... fifth watch! No sooner my eyes have closed
Than the five-pointed star twinkles in my dreams.

THINKING OF A FRIEND

That day, you came with me to the edge of the river.
'When will you come back?' you asked. 'When the new
crop ripens',

I told you. But now that crop has long been harvested,
And still I linger, a prisoner in a strange land.

睡不著
一更...二更...又三更...輾轉徘徊細睡不成。
四五更時才合眼。夢魂環繞五更星。
憶友
昔君送余至江濱，問我歸期指谷新。
現在新田已稔好，他鄉亦作獄中人。
替誰友們寫報告
同舟共濟義難辭，替友編修報告書。
奉此等因，今始學，多多博得感恩詞。

Facsimile of President
Ho Chi Minh's autograph

WRITING A PETITION ON BEHALF
OF A JAIL - MATE

Being all in the same boat, we can never refuse
Help to one another. For you, I write this petition,
Starting to use expressions considered correct,
Like : "So, in accordance with your sublime instructions..."
That kind of phrase I am learning now for the first time.
But how you thank me for turning out such a nice job !

SCABIES

Covered in red and blue, we seem dressed in brocade,
And all the scratching in progress is as though we played
the guitar.
Dressed up in brocade ? Well, of course, we are honoured
guests here,
And share a common language with fellow - musicians.

LISTENING TO THE RICE-POUNDING

How much the rice must suffer under the pestle !
But, after the pounding, it comes out white like cotton.
The same thing often happens to men in this world :
Misfortunes workshop turns them to polished jade.

THE ELEVENTH OF NOVEMBER

I

Formerly when the eleventh of November come round
The end of the First World War in Europe was celebrated.
Today bloody fighting rages over five continents,
And the Nazis are the chief criminals.

II

Now China's war of resistance has lasted almost six years :
Her acts of heroism are known all over the world,
Victory is within her grasp, but greater efforts are needed
To carry through the counter-offensive.

III

All over Asia flutter the anti-Japanese flags:
Big flags or little flags — they are not all the same
Of course, big flags we must have, but we need the little
flags, too.

AIR RAID WARNING OF TWELFTH NOVEMBER

The planes of the enemy come roaring over the sky.
The people have fled to shelter, and left the place
uninhabited.
Because of the air raid in progress, we are taken out
of the prison,
But once outside the prison, we are happy, despite
the air raid.

THE INN

According to the rules, new comers to the prison
Must sleep near the cess-pool,
So anyone who wants to make sure of a good night's sleep
Must pay ready cash in advance.

MORNING SUNSHINE

The morning sunshine penetrates into the prison,
Sweeping away the smoke and burning away the mist.
The breath of life fills the whole universe,
And smiles light up the faces of all the prisoners.

籠	人	患	囚
開	有	過	人
竹	憂	頭	出
門	愁	時	去
出	優	始	或
真	點	見	為
龍	大	忠	國

拆字

WORD - PLAY

I

Take away the sign 人 (*man*) from the sign 囚 for *prison*,
Add to it 或 (*probability*), that makes the word 國 (*nation*)

Take the head-particle from the sign 患 for *misfortune*:
That gives the word 忠 (*fidelity*).

Add the sign 亻 for *man* (standing) to the sign 憂 for
worry

That gives the word 優 (*quality*).

Take away the *bamboo* top 竹 from the sign 籠 for *prison*,
That gives you 龍 (*dragon*)

II

People who come out of prison can build up the
country.

Misfortune is a test of people's fidelity.

Those who protest at injustice are people of true merit.

When the prison - doors are opened, the real dragon
will fly out.

ALERT IN VIETNAM

*(News from Xich Dao Agency,
published in the Nanning press)*

Better death than slavery! Everywhere in my country
The red flags are fluttering again.

Oh, what it is to be a prisoner at such a time!

When shall I be set free, to take my part in the battle?

A BRITISH DELEGATION IN CHINA

The Americans have gone, and now the British arrive.

Their delegation is welcomed everywhere.

I am also a delegate on a friendly visit to China.

But the warm welcome given me is of another kind!

TRANSFERRED BACK TO OU MING

They transfer me to Nanning,
Then they bring me back to Ou Ming.
With transfer after transfer, the journey stretches out.
I have had enough of this!

THE DOG - MEAT AT PAO SIANG

At Kuo Teu, they eat fresh fish.
At Pao Siang, they live on dog-meat.
Even the prison-guards
Have rare delicacies at times!

ROAD MENDERS

Drenched with rain, flogged by wind, and with never
rest at all
How wretchedly you work there, repairing the road!
Among the travellers passing, on foot, on horseback, by
carriage
How many of them ever are grateful to you?

MY CANE, STOLEN BY THE WARDER

All your life with me, you have been upright and strong.
Together we have passed through seasons of snow
and mist.
Cursed be the thief who has separated us!
And will it ever be over, the sorrow he caused us
both?

A MILESTONE

Neither high, nor very far,
Neither emperor, nor king,
You are only a little milestone,
Which stands at the edge of the highway.
To people passing by
You point the right direction,
And stop them from getting lost.
You tell them of the distance
For which they still must journey.
Your service is not a small one.
And people will always remember you.

THE CHILD IN PIN YANG PRISON

Oa! oa! oa! My father's run away,
My father is afraid to be a soldier.
So I'm in prison, though I'm only six months old.
I had to come with my mother.

THE LIGHTING FEE

When you enter the jail, you are charged a lighting fee:
Six Kwangsi yuan per person:
Thus in this domain of darkness
Light is worth only six yuan.

PRISON LIFE

Everyone has his own stove, and a few earthen pots
For cooking rice and vegetables and brewing tea.
All day without interruption the place is filled up with
smoke.

MR. KUO

This meeting was a real stroke of luck,
As when two drifts of duckweed are brought together
By the current. Oh, Mr. Kuo, what your kindness meant
to me!
Like the gift of a little coal in the depths of winter,
It was to know people like you may still exist!

MR. MO, THE HEAD-WARDER

The head-warder at Pin Yang has a golden heart.
He buys rice for the prisoners with his own money.
At night he takes off the fetters to let us sleep.
He never resorts to force, but only to kindness.

ON THE TRAIN TO LAEPING

After scores of weary days travelling on foot
Today we board a train.
Although we have to sit on piles of charcoal
At least this is much better than having to walk!

A MAN ATTEMPTS TO ESCAPE

Driven by one thought — freedom — he jumps off the
moving train,
Risking his all, and runs for about half a li.
Unluckily, he is caught by the guards and brought back.

LEAPING

Here the chief warder plays cards every day,
The police-chief extorts money from any prisoners
To be transferred. The district-chief works comfortably
Under the light of a lamp. Nothing here has changed.

ARRIVAL AT LIUCHOW

All bitterness and suffering must have an end.
On the ninth, when I arrived here at Liuchow
I looked back over a hundred days of nightmare,
And when I woke, my face was still marked with sadness.

LONG DETENTION WITHOUT INTERROGATION

The drink seems all the more bitter when we come to
the last dregs.
The frontier gate is always the most difficult.
The mandarin's residence is only about one li away,
But why am I kept waiting here so long?

MIDNIGHT

Faces all have an honest look in sleep.
Only when they wake does good or evil show in them.
Good and evil are not qualities born in man:
More often than not, they arise from our education.

AT THE MANDARIN'S RESIDENCE

At last, I thought, we had come to the last passage!
I thought the day of deliverance was approaching.
Who would have dreamed they would find another obstacle?
Another transfer: now we are to go to Kweilin.

AT THE END OF FOUR MONTHS

"One day in jail is equal to a thousand years outside it..."
How right were the ancients, expressing it in those words!
Four months leading a life in which there is nothing human
Have aged me more than ten years.

Yes: in a whole four months I have never eaten my fill,
In four months I have never had a comfortable night's
sleep,
In four months I have never changed my clothes, and in
four months

I have never taken a bath.

So: I have lost a tooth, my hair has grown grey,
And, lean and black as a demon gnawed by hunger.
I am covered with scabies.

Fortunately
Being stubborn and patient, never yielding an inch,
Though physically I suffer, my spirit is unshaken.



PRESIDENT HO CHI MINH
(1945)

SERIOUSLY ILL

My body has been battered under the changing weather
of China,
My heart is sorely troubled by the misfortunes befallen
Vietnam.

Oh, what a bitter thing it is to fall ill in prison!
But, instead of weeping, I prefer to keep singing.

ARRIVAL AT KWEILIN

(The cinnamon forest)

Kweilin has neither cinnamon nor forests:

Only the mountains are high, and the rivers are deep.

In the shade of a giant fig-tree, the prison looks very
terrible

Dark in daytime, desolate at night.

ENTRANCE FEE

On arriving at the prison, you have to pay a fee —

Usually not less than fifty yuan.

Of course, if you have absolutely no money to pay it at all

You will be constantly bothered and tormented.

? !

Forty days are lost, for no result.

Forty days of indescribable suffering!

And now again I am sent back to Liuchow.

New worries and vexations go on forever.

? !

Liuchow, Kweilin, and then again Liuchow.

I have been kicked back and forth again like a ball.

Innocent, I have been dragged all over Kwangsi.

When will these comings and goings have an end?

AT THE POLITICAL BUREAU OF THE FOURTH ZONE OF RESISTANCE

I have travelled the thirteen districts of Kwangsi Province,
And tasted the pleasures of eighteen different prisons.
What crime have I committed, I keep on asking?
The crime of being devoted to my people.

MORNING SCENE

In the morning the sun climbs over the mountain peaks,
And bathes the mountainside in a rosy glow.
Only in front of the prison dark shadow remains,
And the way of the sun is barred from the prison-cell.

TSING MING FESTIVAL

On the day of the Tsing Ming Festival falls a monotonous
drizzle.
The inmates of the prison fell the pangs of acute sadness.
'Liberty, where are you?' we ask, and the warder points
To the official government residence far away.

EVENING SCENE

The rose at evening blossoms, and then it fades away.
Its opening and its withering continue all unnoticed,
But the fragrance of the rose floats into the depths of
the prison,
Telling the inmates there of life's injustice and sorrow.

RESTRICTIONS

To live without freedom is a truly wretched state.
Even the calls of nature are governed by restrictions!
When the door is opened, the belly is not ready to ease
itself.
When the call of nature is pressing, the door remains shut.

SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

Through the endless nights, when sleep refuses to come,
I write more than a hundred poems on prison life.
At the end of each quatrain, I put down my brush,
And through the prison bars look up at the free sky.

ENDLESS RAINS

Nine days of ceaseless rain for one day of fine weather!
Really the sky above must be a pitiless thing.
My shoes are in pieces, the muddy road soils my feet,
But however it is done I have to keep on moving.

REGRETS FOR TIME LOST

The blue sky purposely shines out to tease me.
Eight months now I have lost in the grip of the fetters,
And a day seems worth a thousand taels of gold.
When shall I ever again enjoy days of freedom?

AUTUMN IMPRESSIONS

I

At about ten o'clock the Great Bear tops the mountain.
The cricket's song, rising and fading, announces autumn.
What does the prisoner care for the changing seasons?
Only one change he dreams of: his liberation.

II

Last year at the beginning of autumn I was free.
This year autumn finds me in the depths of a prison.
As for services rendered my country, I surely may claim
This autumn has been just as productive as the last?

PERMITTED TO TAKE A WALK IN THE PRISON YARD

After this long inactivity, my legs are like cotton.
While trying my first steps, I totter and stagger.
Immediately the chief warder calls out after me:
"Attention — about turn! That's enough of dawdling
around!"

ON READING "ANTHOLOGY OF A THOUSAND POETS"

The ancients used to like to sing about natural beauty:
Snow and flowers, moon and wind, mists, mountains
and rivers.

Today we should make poems including iron and steel,
And the poet also should know how to lead an attack.

The branches of a tree make a portrait of Chang Fei:
The sun forever shines on the virtues of Kuan Yu (4).
This year I have received no news from my native land.
Every day I am waiting for a word from my home country.

FINE WEATHER

Everything evolves, it is the cycle of nature:

After the rainy days, the fine weather comes.

In an instant, the whole world shakes off its damp clothes,

Thousands of li of mountains unfurl their brocade carpet.

Under the warm sun and the clean wind, the flowers
smile,

In the big trees with branches washed clean, the birds
make chorus.

Warmth fills the heart of man, and life reawakens.

Bitterness now makes way for happiness.

This is how nature wills it.

AFTER PRISON, A WALK IN THE MOUNTAINS

The clouds embrace the peaks, the peaks embrace the
clouds,

The river below shines like a mirror, spotless and clean.

On the crest of the Western Mountains, my heart stirs
as I wander

Looking towards the Southern sky and dreaming of old
friends.

NOTES

1) "Two horses" means jokingly the two legs walking the whole day without rest.

2) "Chickens with five spices" describes jokingly the two legs tied up the whole night like chickens are tied up to prepare the "chicken with five spices" dish, at the restaurant.

3) Po Yi and Chu Tsi were the two sons of king Co Truc, at the end of An dynasty (China). When king Yu was fighting An dynasty, Po Yi and Chu Tsi tried to dissuade the king. When king Yu conquered the country and founded the Chou dynasty, both refused to eat "rice belonging to the Chon", went to Thu Luong mountain and ate wild herbs instead. Later on, both died of starvation there.

4) Chang Fei and Kwan Yu were two generals in the period of the Three Kingdoms in China.

