



MARCO LAWRENCE

STORY

Dancing To Prison

1983's Strike Hard Against Crime Campaign led to the arrests of many innocent victims, caught up in a culture of fear. One of them was imprisoned for organizing an unofficial dance party — until he broke out in a daring escape.

LIAO YIWU — NOVEMBER 27, 2024

HISTORY

SOCIETY

Ed: Liao Yiwu is a Chinese writer best known for his collection of oral histories [The Corpse Walker](#) (Anchor, 2008). Below is an unpublished oral history, recorded by Liao in 2002 and translated by Michael Martin Day for China Books Review, in which a victim of the Strike Hard campaign of 1983 tells his story of imprisonment and escape. Also look out for our own profile of Liao next Thursday.

Liao Yiwu's introduction

I was imprisoned for four years for writing a [poem](#) [about the Tiananmen Square massacre]. My life has been as if a knife has sliced through it, leaving me with a before and an after. Before, I was a famous young poet obsessed with exploring the spiritual realm, and had not the slightest interest in politics; after, I was a political prisoner of the lowest order, with a talent for telling prison stories. Now I've been in exile from China for many years, and I'm still seen as a political dissident writer, like Alexandr Solzhenitsyn of the former Soviet Union. As I have said before: A good writer should spend some time in jail.

The 1983 "Strike Hard Against Crime Campaign" (严厉打击刑事犯罪活动) was a nightmare for many households in China. It is said to have originated from a criminal case which shocked the nation: revenge killings perpetrated by two brothers from the northeastern city of Changchun, who were fugitives for months, clashing with armed police officers. In response to this, and the steadily deteriorating public order since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the supreme leader Deng Xiaoping personally formulated a national

policy of “cracking down on crime hard, quickly and severely” which led to many unjust convictions for social offenses — a form of law enforcement by national campaign that continues to this day.

54-year-old Zuo Changzhong was a victim of the Strike Hard Campaign. He was arrested in 1983 for organizing a dorm room dance party with his friends, and imprisoned for life on false charges of being a member of a “gang-rape group.” He was released on medical parole in 1999. When I talked with him at a Court Petitioners Inn on the evening of April 1, 2002, where he was trying to overturn his conviction, he was still frightened. “During the Strike Hard Campaign, the judicial system was simplified,” he said. “The Public Security Bureau, Procuratorate and Court were all squeezed onto the same bench, or even into the crotch of a single pair of pants, handling cases.” Below is his story, told to me that night.

“ “ My life has been as if a knife has sliced through it, leaving me with a before and an after. ” ”

— *Liao Yiwu*

Zuo Changzhong’s story

In the late 1970s, hundreds of thousands of “educated youth” who had been sent “up to the mountains and down to the countryside” during the Cultural Revolution returned to their hometowns. I was one of them, violating national law to return to Chengdu [in Sichuan province] along with many others. During the day, we held sit-ins at the gates of the provincial and municipal governments to petition for relocation of our registered residence to the city. At night, we went to Chengdu’s People’s Park to gather and hang out.

I would sit deep in the shade of the oleanders, holding a guitar and a harmonica, playing old songs that had been banned for many years. Gradually, more and more onlookers gathered, and the wall of people stacked up bigger and bigger. Finally, a brave couple took the lead in dancing, then two pairs, three pairs, five pairs, until a dance party, called the “Ba Ba Dance,” started. This was the earliest underground social networking after the Cultural Revolution, where unfamiliar men and women could convene without having to undergo a political review or be investigated. I felt at home with all this and made many trendy dancer friends.

The Ba Ba Dances, like chief architect Deng Xiaoping’s “Reform and Opening Up” policies, ran out of control. It was not until 1983 that it was banned overnight by the government due to social turmoil. One time, there were dozens of illegal dancers fervently practicing their art in the center of the People’s Park, when somebody shouted: “The cow heads [on-duty militia] are here to wipe out pornography!” Everyone was terrified and scattered. But hundreds of cow heads with red sleeve bands had already sprung out of hiding and surrounded us, holding white wax poles.

The dancers were caught in groups of five, wrists tied together by a length of hemp rope, then taken in to be interrogated. They were beaten until they cried out like ghosts and howled like wolves, so loudly the tiles on the police building’s roof shook. At that time, there were no ID cards in China, and you had to carry your household registration book or work permit when you went out. I forgot to bring mine and that was a big problem. My guitar and harmonica were confiscated and I was detained for a month.

“ The dancers were caught in groups of five, wrists tied together by a length of hemp rope, then taken in to be interrogated. ”

My parents went to great lengths to bail me out. In order not to anger them again, as soon as I got out of the detention center, I went to stay with my Ba Da dancer friend, Wang Yi. He was also an educated youth who had returned to Chengdu from the countryside, and now he worked as a fitter in a valve factory. Just loafing around like this, I unwittingly became the lead sheep of the four young bachelors in his dorm room at the factory.

Having nothing to do, and with an unbearable itch, I secretly organized a dormitory dance and used my social resources to invite dance partners. Wang Yi brought a cassette player and Hong Kong and Taiwan song tapes from home, and our hardware was complete. The dance was scheduled for the weekend. After both open and secret inspections, we confirmed that the dorm building was empty, so we covered the doors and windows with quilts and turned off the overhead lights, leaving a single table lamp wrapped in a thick towel for light.

That night, five pairs of young people with budding thoughts of love had a private dance party in a space of a few square meters. There were iron-frame double-decker bunk beds on two sides, with dim lighting and faintly audible music. Everyone was moving back and forth cautiously in their private dances, like silent ghosts. In fact, this so-called dance was just an occasion for men and women to embrace in the name of dance. Once the bachelors tasted the sweetness of this forbidden fruit, we became excited and looked forward to the next time we could organize another party like it.

The third time we organized a dance party, before the couples could embrace each other, the dorm room door swung open with a crash. This was the summer of 1983, when the Strike Hard Campaign was at its peak, and the men were all arrested. After two days and three nights of rapid interrogations, we were designated as an “extra-large gang-rape group.”

“ The third time we organized a dance party, before the couples could embrace each other, the dorm room door swung open with a crash. ”

Look at my deformed knuckles, caused by chopstick pinching¹. Nobody can withstand it. There was also sitting on the tiger bench² and drinking chili pepper water. What was even more disgusting is that when the police got tired, they ordered the reform-through-labor prisoners from the detention center to make an appearance. My genitals were poked at and burned by their cigarette butts. It was impossible not to confess, even if you were accused of gang-raping the mother of Chiang Kai-shek, the enemy of the people, you'd willingly sign the confession.

Wang Yi and I were both sentenced to death. I was disinclined to give in, so I banged against the iron bars day and night and cried out against the injustice of it. In punishment, I was forced to accompany the guards to the execution site during my death penalty review period. 64 prisoners were shot in one go, but first the victims were paraded through the streets in trucks, with their arms tied behind their backs and rope looped around their necks. My mouth was injected with anesthesia and I couldn't utter a sound, so I must have seemed

like a dead fish rolling its eyes.

When we returned to the detention center, it was dark as the bottom of a pot, and there was a heavy downpour. I was frightened, but still couldn't accept my fate, so I howled in protest, demanding to see the center's inspector. Nothing could stop me. Coincidentally, all five defendants in my case were claiming they had been unjustly convicted and retracted their confessions at the same time as me, causing chaos in the detention center.

After half a year, Wang Yi and I both had our sentences altered: he was sentenced to 20 years in prison, and I was sentenced to life imprisonment. The moment I was unshackled, after having my hands cuffed behind my back for so long, my arms twisted backwards subconsciously and could not return to their original state. I slowly wriggled my joints and my bones rattled. I couldn't make large movements. The old convicts had told me if you move too much, your bones will break.

If you were convicted in the Strike Hard Campaign, it was impossible to be declared innocent. This is the logic of the Communist Party. No matter if you appeal and refuse to accept your guilt, no matter how hard you work, your sentence will not be reduced. So, given the massive momentum behind the Strike Hard campaign, and despite the ever-growing pile of unjust cases, very few people dared to risk filing a complaint. I had to go along with the prevailing custom.

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Then came the labor camp, which drained me of life. Wang Yi was assigned to do metal casting. He would rise before dawn and go to the workshop to start the furnace. A robotic arm poured molten iron into a crucible, and the prisoners would raise long-handled ladles to scoop out molten iron from the pot, irrigating each mold into a vast table, like vegetable farmers watering a field. Due to the dust in the workshop, 80% of the foundry workers contracted silicosis, coughing up black phlegm and blood, and the mortality rate was extremely high.

As a guitar player and arts activist, I was lucky enough to worm my way into an education team filled with intellectuals, avoiding heavy physical work. Wang Yi and I often passed by each other, and each time it was like seeing a piece of black coal straight from the coal pit, with white teeth that stood out. I felt I had to help this brother in need so I told an instructor of his ability in calligraphy, which is useful for writing slogans.

Just like that, Wang Yi and I were together again. He revealed to me his big secret: a plan to escape from prison. At first, I thought it was just a foolish dream. It was a big prison camp in a strategic location, densely packed with sentries, from which it would be difficult to escape even if one had wings. But Wang Yi said, “If you can't go up to heaven, go into the earth. I've drawn a map of the camp's sewers, we'll definitely be able to crawl out of there.”

“I've no money,” I replied. “Where can we escape to once we're out?” Wang Yi said he had 200 yuan in cash and would head straight to Xinjiang, where there were a multitude of fugitive convicts. If we were desperate, we could cross the border and flee to the Soviet Union. It's better to take a gamble than to suffocate in a cage.

Freedom was so tempting, and going to the Soviet Union to play guitar seemed so romantic! So, when my parents visited the prison, I secretly put aside 200 yuan in cash from them. I was very impatient, preparing for more than three months, but the opportunity to escape came unexpectedly. The political instructor's child wanted me to teach her guitar, and the instructor couldn't say no, so he brought the 12-year-old girl to the education team and ordered me to teach her. Of course, this was against prison rules — after all, I was a major felon. To avoid suspicion, the instructor placed Wang Yi and me in a construction team that worked outside the prison. He led us out through the heavily guarded inner wall, then left us behind and signaled to his police officers to take us to his home to educate the child.

I came out twice a week, and two months passed by in a trice like this. Wang Yi taught the child calligraphy and I taught guitar. The instructor and his wife were eager to cultivate their prodigy. We catered to this and praised every little bit of progress she achieved. The more they became intoxicated by this, the more they relaxed their vigilance. At 5:30 p.m. on January 3, 1986, Wang Yi and I secretly changed into the instructor's casual clothes and escaped through the small emporium downstairs while no one was watching. The gate guard post was three meters away, facing the other direction, and we got out without being spotted.

“ We saw houses, with smoke rising from their cooking stoves, but fugitives dare not act recklessly. The most dangerous thing on this earth is people. ”

Freedom came so suddenly! It was an autumn day, the ground covered by yellow leaves, and we forced ourselves to be calm, walking along the street for 20 meters. When we turned the corner, we took off running like crazy. In small county towns in the 1980s, there were no buses or taxis. We ran for a while until we were out of breath, then hailed a rickshaw tricycle to take us to the long-distance bus station.

The next bus was at 7 p.m., over an hour's wait. We didn't dare wait, so we literally ran out of the city. We were like headless flies blindly bumping around. The sky was dark, but a crescent moon jumped out of the clouds and we saw an open field in front of us and hills in the distance. We ran toward them looking for a hiding place. We saw houses, with smoke rising from their cooking stoves, but fugitives dare not act recklessly. The most dangerous thing on this earth is people. To avoid them, we would run ourselves to death if we had to. I called a halt; I was about to collapse. Wang Yi said we should keep running, crying tearfully: "It seems our lives have reached the end!"

As if to fulfill his prophecy, a car horn sounded behind us, followed by human voices and dogs barking. Our hunters had arrived! I looked back while leaning on a tree. At the foot of the hill, dozens of flashlight beams opened a fan-shaped pursuit net. "Run," Wang Yi howled, and I followed closely, running helter-skelter through the woods.

"Stop! We won't kill you if you surrender your guns!" The sound of the command echoed in the hills, followed closely by gunshots. A bullet grazed my scalp, while others brought down leaves. A wolfhound rushed at me, and its claws tore open the back of my clothes, exposing my spine. Heaven knows why I ran. I had already peed my pants. Wang Yi was in front of me, waving his arms wildly as he fought his way through the dense forest. Two wolfhounds rushed up on either side of us, then turned around to attack. Wang Yi jumped high and kicked a dog over.

Suddenly, a sheet of sparkling waves emerged in front of me. I had stumbled across a weir pond, several hundred square meters wide. Instinctively, I stopped at the edge of its steep slope. In that instant I was tackled by a wolfhound, and captured. But Wang Yi leapt into the water with a terrific splash. “Squad one, left! Squad two, Squad three, right! Surround it!” The dragnet was deployed at the instructor’s orders in the blink of an eye. The weir pond was surrounded by soldiers.



Dazzling flashlights swept across the pond before finally locking onto Wang Yi. Unexpectedly, he was strong in the water. He swam in freestyle, breaststroke, sidestroke and scissor strokes, while dozens of flashlight beams stuck to him like glue. Even when he dived, they followed his blurry underwater silhouette until, like a merman, he burst up out of the water with a whoosh.

“No shooting!” bellowed the instructor, “we’ll see how long this dog-fucker can resist arrest!”

“I surrender!” yelled Wang Yi. He’d already swum several hundred meters back and forth dozens of times in the pond. Exhausted, he stopped monkeying about and raised his arms a few meters away from the embankment.

“You’re done escaping?” the instructor laughed.

“I don’t dare, not anymore.” Wang Yi gasped.

“You don’t dare, and that’s it?” The instructor bent down at the waist for a closer look. “You bastard, you must keep running.”

“Spare me!”

“Have you become a ghost?” The instructor pulled out his gun and loaded it with bullets. “You’re dead for sure. If you don’t come up, you’re resisting arrest. If you do come up, you’re resisting arrest. In short, you’re certainly dead.”

There was the sound of a gun being cocked in the silence of the night. Wang Yi was terrified, turned back and swam toward the center of the pond. Only the light of crossed flashlights clung to him, relentlessly. The moon was high, the hills undulated into the distance, the wolfhounds were no longer barking, and the sound of swim strokes in the weir pond was the only sound. Really, it was too quiet. My hands were cuffed behind my back on the steep embankment. My heart beat wildly and my mind was a blank, but my eyes were staring at

the pond. Swish, swish, swish. Wang Yi was swimming too slowly, and getting slower, as if he were sleepwalking. I followed his movements, my eyes and those of dozens of prison guards becoming flashlights. Wang Yi was close to the pond's edge again, and yelled he wanted to surrender again, but the answer he got was: "I'll kill you if you come up."

For the twentieth or thirtieth time, Wang Yi pathetically turned back and swam toward the opposite shore. Swish, swish, swish. He gasped, choked on water, coughed, then cried out, "Instructor, I don't want to die!" About 20 minutes later, he approached another side of the pond, and the reply was still: "Get back, or I'll kill you for resisting arrest."

I don't know how many times he turned back. He could no longer swim, so he rested on his back in the water. "If you've any other tricks, let's see them!" the instructor yelled.

Only Wang Yi's face emerged from the water now. Dozens of flashlights were fastened on that face, a hundred times stronger than the moonlight. Wang Yi raised his arms twice more; they were as lax as whips. Then he gave up. His face submerged and emerged in the water repeatedly for a few minutes, then it sank.

The light of the flashlights was still fixed in place, and a string of bubbles appeared on the water's surface. The bridge of Wang Yi's nose was exposed one more time, but there was much less movement. He floated up again, sank back down, more bubbles rose — then nothing but silence.

Next, the dredging of the pond began. People were shouting and dogs were barking. Two platoons of prison guards went into the water. Sirens blared on the road at the bottom of the hill, alerting villagers for miles around, who came to see what all the excitement was about. A few minutes later, the body was brought ashore. Wang Yi's mouth was open, teeth bared, looking ugly in death under the moonlight. His belly was twice as big as usual from drinking so much water, and his belt had snapped. I passed out.

“ “ The cave cell was a coffin carved into a rock wall: two meters long by one meter wide. ... The iron bars slammed shut behind me. ” ”

When I came to I was in a prison van, with a pair of handcuffs joining me to Wang Yi's body. This was life accompanying death. I was taken to a small cell in a converted underground air raid shelter. I was denounced by the prison's General Supervisory Committee, sentenced to four years imprisonment there, then put in shackles and thrown into a small cell. After descending more than ten meters underground, we made three more turns and walked along a muddy corridor. "We're here," said a prison guard, who bent down to unlock the door, held open the iron gate, and ordered me to climb in. The cave cell was a coffin carved into a rock wall: two meters long by one meter wide. I climbed directly from the door onto the stone bed, which had a straw mat, and a toilet and plastic bowl next to it. The iron bars slammed shut behind me.

The lights were off outside. I lay on my back, motionless, and reached up to touch the wet cave roof. If I got up, I was like a pillar connecting sky and ground. I was locked up in this place for four whole years, never seeing the light of day, only eating, drinking, sleeping, never leaving this cave. I couldn't stand up or stretch out. The only place for me to be was on that stone bed. I would do tiger push-ups, sit-ups and squats, dozens or hundreds of them. Even though I only ate one small meal a day, even if I felt the world spinning, these exercises were daily necessities. I would rather have died of exhaustion than become a cripple. I later

learned that there were more than 20 prisoners in the vicinity of my cell, and they all became crippled, dying shortly after being carried out of their cells.

The only difference between day and night was that somebody delivered meals at a set time. Rats that came and went freely were a source of envy. The prison political commissar and brigade instructor conducted inspections every six months. Wearing laminated masks and rubber gloves, they asked questions while standing two meters away from my cell gate. “Do you repent? How’s life? You aren’t able to bite anybody, right?”

I kowtowed and bowed, calling the people’s government my father and mother. I promised I’d never try to escape again. And if anyone tried to escape, I’d expose them and fight against them for the rest of my life. I wanted to receive awards for meritorious service and return to the embrace of my fatherland. I said I hated Wang Yi, and felt he deserved to be cut into a thousand pieces. The instructor had been so kind, calling for the bastard to get out of the pond countless times, but he refused to be arrested, he was so damn reactionary.

If you didn’t “change your mind,” you would just rot inside. I couldn’t think of anything in there, I couldn’t concentrate, I wasn’t even conscious of the shackles. When I suddenly found myself standing outside in the fresh air one day, my eyes were almost blinded by the light. The instructor encouraged me to reform honestly and to strive to have my sentence reduced. I was so moved by him saying this that I burst into tears. I was a little excited when the shackles were finally taken off, and my movements were too violent. Due to a calcium deficiency, the tibias in both my legs fractured. I had to stay in the prison hospital for five months before I could finally get up from bed with the help of crutches.

Three years ago, the prison approved my release on medical parole. I have rheumatic muscular atrophy, heart disease, gout, diabetes, and premature aging of all my organs. I’m 54 years old now, but my physical condition is equivalent to that of a 74-year-old. Now I’ve come to the Provincial High Court to appeal, in an attempt to overturn my original verdict. Again, I’m just waiting. ■

This story (originally titled 追捕) was translated from Chinese for China Books Review by Michael Martin Day, with light alterations for clarity. The editors were unable to verify the details above, which is Liao Yiwu’s account of Zuo Changzhong’s testimony to him in 2002. Illustrations by Marco Lawrence.

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1. “Chopstick pinching” is a kind of torture that existed in ancient times. Five small wooden sticks (slightly thicker than chopsticks) threaded through a rope are used to squeeze a person’s fingers. ↩
 2. In the “tiger bench” torture method, a prisoner is tied in a sitting position with their legs stretched in front of them, their knees tied down to the bench. Bricks are placed under their feet to stretch the joint ligaments of the legs, causing great pain or muscle tears. ↩



Liao Yiwu (廖亦武) is a Chinese writer, poet and musician. He was imprisoned in 1990 in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre, and fled China in 2011. Liao is the author of *The Fall of the Holy Temple* (1998), *Interviews with the Lower Strata of Chinese Society* (2001), *God is Red* (2009) and *For a Song and a Hundred Songs* (2013), among other titles. He currently lives in Berlin.