



Born in 1943 in Yan'an, Zhang Langlang is the son of Zhang Ding, a well-known art designer in China and one of those who designed the national emblem of the PRC. In 1968 he graduated from the Department of Art History and Aesthetic Theories, the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, he was jailed as one of the “counter-revolutionaries” for slandering Madam Mao and for being a Chinese traitor. He was one of the organizers of an underground literary salon named *The Sun Brigade*. After ten years he was released. He was a teacher of art history at the academy, columnist for the journal of the academy titled *The 1990s*. His works include *The 1970s: The Quiet Horizon*. In the 1990s, he was a visiting scholar at Princeton University, East Asian Studies Department, writer in residence and Chinese language instructor at Cornell University, East Asian Studies Department, as well as writer in residence at Heidelberg University, Chinese Department. Currently he is a researcher and China specialist at Princeton, and a language instructor for the State Department in Washington D.C.

*Excerpts from The Quiet Horizon by Zhang Langlang*  
Translated by Rujie Wang

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I may very well be executed tomorrow morning. Sleep eluded me as I was lying on the “hotbed” (for the condemned), staring at the light-bulb on the ceiling cased in wires. From time to time I could hear the sound of shackles when someone new was taken in through the corridor. We might belong to the next group to be executed next.

Since that time, many have asked me if I was scared at that time. Scared is hardly the word to describe how I felt then. I was frightened stiff like a mouse seeing a snake. My mind was a total blank as how I was on the chopping board. I couldn't begin to figure this out. At most, my crime could be characterized as “speaking nonsense”. Was it a capital offense punishable by death? But this was something whose truth and authenticity was not to be questioned. As a death row inmate I had already gone beyond the point where mass dictatorship was exercised to make you feel scared and stay in line. An iron frying pan was always made of iron.

It was a fact that you were among a group of death row inmates. Yu Luohe never had thought that he would be thrown in jail and paid with life for merely writing an article. Your crime was far worse; there was no way you could be off the hook for less.

That night my brain was in a spin; my entire life flashed through in front of my eyes over and over like in a movie. I was questioning myself what wrongs I might have committed. For so long, my education turned me into an idealist, believing that there was truth in the world. If there was truth, then there must be criteria and benchmarks necessary to telling right from wrong. I subjected myself to the most rigorous self-incrimination I knew but concluded that it was they,

not I, who were wrong. The truth set me free from panicking.

It then occurred to me I could play with writing poetry, putting down the following:

We were just youth trying to make merry  
Now jailed for wanting to be free.  
As the choices were made by ourselves  
We have no regret and not turning back.

When I was writing these lines I was certain that I didn't do anything "to jeopardize the country". In the course of human history, when a turning point is reached, there are always people scapegoated in a sacrificial crisis. My biggest fault was nothing other than wanting freedom to speak up my mind, to think and write whatever I want, and to live however I choose.



I was well aware that I chose to live in this way in spite of the knowledge that society would not grant anyone the right to think freely. Now the time has come for a reality check. Now that they mean what they say and want you dead for what you did, it is clear that your conviction is faulty. Would you still stand by what you wrote in the poem? I realized whatever I'd say was pointless now that everything was a matter of going through the process to exercise the mass "dictatorship". But come what may, the lines of my poem still echoed in my mind, as if a self-affirmation or absolution during my last moments.

There is no use crying over spilt milk. As a literary youth that enjoyed the company of girls, I had been subconsciously trying to impress them with poetry and art. My regret was having no significant romance with any of them. The feeling was probably similar to that of the young officer, one of the characters in Emile Zola's *Germinal*, who was killed in battle right after he had said goodbye to his fiancée, without consummating their love, and therefore an everlasting regret. In my case, I was engaged to a girl named Ding Yue of the town of Long Jing in the city of Hangzhou on May 1<sup>st</sup> of 1968, but arrested by Public Security Bureau of Beijing on June 14<sup>th</sup> of the same year. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of February, 1970, I was transferred to the jail for death row inmates, repeating that everlasting regret.

Fortunately, I had told her before we split: "Don't wait up and take good care of yourself. I'm content if you have a bright future." With that being said, I have nothing I cannot let go now. I worry for no one, except that it is a shame that my life is going to be cut short like this.

That night the death row inmates had a pre-departure party. This was because all of us were in a state of shock, suddenly confronted with imminent death. In the tight grips of this magnetic field, every one of us was anxious about how to make our fine exit. It was a good thing that all of us were Chinese well familiar with the dramas we had been brought up to play in this culture. It was in our bone marrow, intensified by centuries of Kun Opera becoming popular and wide spread, to view ourselves as opera singers, and our lives as dramatic stories. There was no way we were going to screw up this last scene.

As I recalled there was a prisoner in a Japanese novel titled *Noodles for Making a Move* who was about to be transferred to a single cell. His cell mates all asked him to entertain them with a song before his departure since, in prison, it would be out of the question to treat everyone noodles, as customs would have it, before one moves away to a different location. The privileged prisoner thus reached his hand out from behind the bars and plucked a leaf from a tree outside. With the leaf in his mouth he whistled a song for his fellow inmates before he left.

That night we followed the example of the prisoner, having a meeting while everybody lying on the hotbeds. In the course of our meeting, the warden and prison guard would come out to check in on every cell if and when they heard noises but would return to their office after making sure the inmates were all sound asleep. We would then resume singing the songs we were singing. The song I sang was “Glorious Martyrdom”, which I once taught Yu Luoke how to sing. It was believed that Lenin liked it the best. “You suffer no more from the loss of freedom, sacrificing your life like a martyr. You joined our hard struggle for freedom, sacrificing your life like a martyr . . .” Then I could sing no more, my blood came up to a boil in my chest; I felt that the song had been composed solely and exclusively for people like us. Immediately I resumed singing, no longer humming it. I sang *O sole mio* on top of my lungs:

“O sole mio, sta’nfronte a te!” I sang in Italian in the holding cell for death row inmates. It was something I learned at Old Seven’s. In my estimate, this was unprecedented in history. At least I know not of Wang Jingwei or Jin Bihui ever having studied Italian. Like the sky being broken by a rock, the warden and guards all came running along the corridor looking into every cell, the place filled with the sound of footsteps and commotion. But the other inmates were as quiet as before, as if in their slumbers. I heard them whisper: “Must be having a nightmare.” “Delirious or deranged.” “That’s only natural in a place like this.” Then the sound of footsteps died out and everything became quiet again. I burst out laughing. Yes, I managed to laugh out loud in a time like that. Throughout the remainder of the night, we continued singing, no longer lowering our voices nor roaring like enraged animals. We sang songs with which we were most familiar and they were no longer making a fuzz by coming out to check on us.

I then started singing the Italian song *On the Seas*, that was popular at the time in China, others listened without a word. Few knew how to sing it then. When I was finished, they said in low voices “Well done”. I could tell from their remarks that they had already got up from bed, crowded in front of the inspection window. How come I had not even been aware of their getting up! Then I realized what to do next. To get up, I first raised my legs up, then stretched them out so that the foot shackle and the chain were no longer loose. As I sat up I turned my body 180 degrees and the entire movement caused not a sound from the iron chain. Now I was sitting up on the hotbed facing the cell gate. Still with my legs straightened out, I dropped myself to a standing position. Then I leaned forward like in a bow, pressed myself against the inspection window. Only then did I hear others who had been carrying on a conversation for quite some time. No one was interested in getting more sleep. Soon we would be having the longest sleep from which we’d never wake up. Therefore, every waking moment was precious and priceless.