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[/et_pb_audio][et_pb_text admin_label="Text" background_layout="light" text_orientation="left" use_border_color="off" border_color="#ffffff" border_style="solid"]

I lost the time I hardly knew you,
half-assed calling:
"How you doing?"
Laughing at my hanging hay field;
I never knew the time
that tomorrow'd bring,
until it brung to me.

*Yuan lai jui shuo: "Zenmoyang ni?"
Xianzai chang shu: "Dou hai keyi";
Xiexie nimen, dou hen shang ni.
Xiwang wo men dou hen leyi
Dou hen leyi*

Dust has blown and snow has covered;
Shorter days been passed by longer,
Poplar trees have dropped their flowers
And spread them on the ground
And then the leaves unfold
Just like I told you so...

Chorus

Love you, damn you, see right through me.
Eyes are scared, a soul is healing.
Paint yourself a wall of feeling
And bring the world around
To the way you are;
It would be a better start....

Chorus

Knowing time's no great arranger
It's getting hard to 'see you later';
I'll never meet another stranger
Knowing there is something
That we all could know—
You got to let it go...

*Yuan lai jui shuo: "Zenmoyang ni?"
Xianzai chang shu: "Dou hai keyi";
Xiexie nimen, dou hen shang ni.
Xiwang wo men dou hen leyi
Dou hen leyi*

This is my somewhat rough translation:

[Early on I just said, "How are you?"

Now I always say, I'm doing awesome.

Thank you, both of you, you are in my heart

I hope we will always have happiness.]

*The folks in this song were a couple named Li Xin and Zhang Hong Nian. They were both artists in Beijing in the early 1980's where I was attending the Beijing Teachers College. During winter break I tried to visit the parents of a friend of mine. They lived on a commune outside of Shanghai, but, as so often happened back then, my bus was stopped by security forces and I was not allowed to continue, as we were traveling through a "restricted area." At that time in China, there was only a handful of Americans in the whole country. I didn't have a lot of money to start with, and most of what I did have I spent on things like cigarettes, whiskey, peanut oil, and fabric to give as gifts. Since the police would not let me go to the commune, I foisted my huge bag of gifts on an old man who had met me in Shanghai and was to be my guide. The Chinese passengers on the bus (mostly peasants and factory workers) harassed and berated the security men for being rude and petty and for not allowing me to see the all important state secrets: like how many water buffaloes they had in their district.

So, I had to go back to Beijing to a virtually empty campus. The great irony for me is that this rich American was pretty much broke with three weeks to kill (and survive) before school would start again. With no one to hang around with at school and precious little money to spend, I became something akin to a vagabond wanderer meandering the cold streets of Beijing in the winter. I remembered meeting a young couple named Zhang Hong Nian and Li Xin very briefly earlier in the fall. They had an apartment in a concrete building just north of our campus. I found them, and they took me in with huge open arms. And so I hung out with them and their artist friends for the next couple of weeks.

It was a pretty cool time in my life: I helped Li Xin's mother—a still fiery follower of Mao Zi Dong—open a hot dog stand; the first one in all of China. She railed against the communists who had lost their spirit. She told me passionate stories about her and her husband and The Long March. She took me to a secret disco she had organized in the warehouse district where a huge crowd was waiting for me (who would much rather be listening to Woody Guthrie) to show them how to dance disco style. I think it was my first experience in performance art. With my new friends, we walked the cold, dusty, and coal smoked streets of Beijing, eating yams cooked over fires in barrels and haggling for scarce chicken and cabbage. I met Chinese poets and writers and thinkers who somehow managed to survive and smile amidst a completely humorless political system. I sat with Zhang Hong Nian for a complete day as he changed a scene in one of his paintings from farmers with sun baked faces to coal miners loading coal into carts (smiling of course). The party officials who had commissioned the painting thought the sun baked faces implied that the farmer's lives were too hard.

I lived enormously because of their friendship. Li Xin had a wisdom and sincerity that remains unmatched by any other in the thirty years since I spent that time in China. She knew—she simply always knew. It was never that she had an opinion about something. She just spoke directly from her heart— softly, humbly, with a smile if it needed to be tempered, or with an icy directness if it was a truth that had to stand.

I apologize if a native speaker of Chinese hears me singing the chorus of this song. As it was, I had a hard enough time speaking a full sentence much less find a way to make them rhyme. I spent an awesome and inspiring year in China from 1981-82. I went back again in 1989 and spent a good part of the winter in Beijing, but left a couple of months before Tiananmen. Things had changed. I had

changed. Li Xin had died from cancer. Zhang Hong Nian moved to New York.

It was eerie for me as I knew that the whole scene in Tiananmen would end badly. I learned from my artist friends eight years earlier about the tenuous balance between freedom and survival. I knew that the same leaders were still in power, and that they would not flinch in the face of a challenge. But political leaders seldom listen to artists. If they did, it would have ended differently: Li Xin would have found the middle ground and pointed to the truth all around them. Zhong Hong Nian would have painted flowers bursting out of the guns. It might have ended differently.

If any of my old friends from those days find this song, just let me say: Xiexie nimen: thank you all again.

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