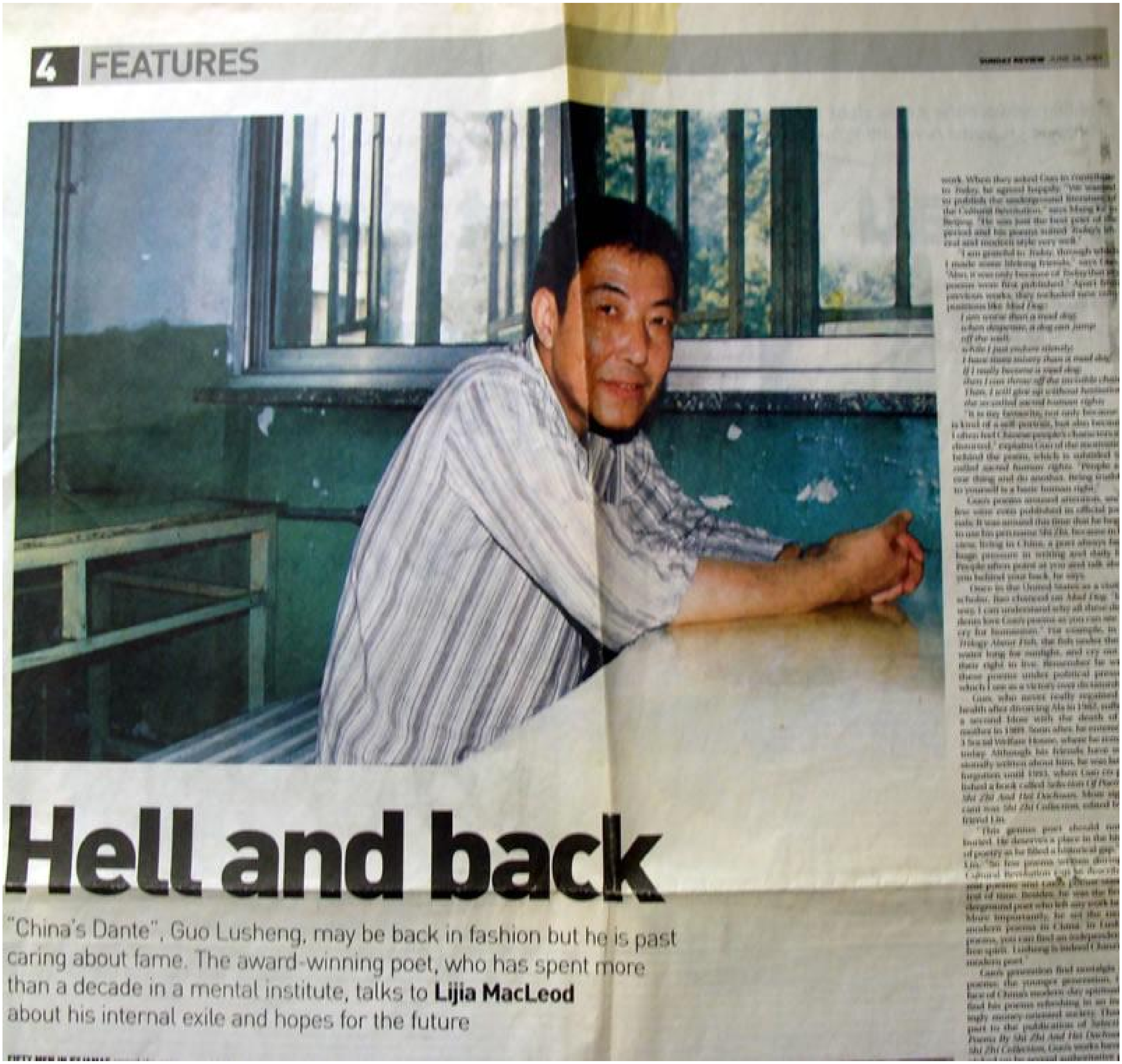

4 FEATURES

Hell and back

"China's Dante", Guo Lusheng, may be back in fashion but he is past caring about fame. The award-winning poet, who has spent more than a decade in a mental institute, talks to **Lijia MacLeod** about his internal exile and hopes for the future

Hell and back: a story of a Chinese poet who went bad under political pressure

Fifty men in pajamas crowd the common room of a mental institute in Beijing. Some sit on the concrete floor, forming striped lines against the wall. Others watch television or talk to themselves, lost in a world of their own. Even amid this singular crowd, one man stands apart, smoking and staring beyond the barred windows to the garden below. He shares the regulation crew-cut and pajamas of every inmate, but his inner world is surely the most extraordinary.

His name is Guo Lusheng, a writer known and loved by young Chinese in the 1960s [and 1970s?]. Some critics call him 'China's Dante'. Inspired then reviled by the brutal Cultural Revolution, this scarred survivor has seen the depths of Chairman Mao's hell. The forerunner of China's underground literature movement, Guo captured the pain and hope of a generation, yet internal exile has been his fate for the past decade.

Today, the name of the PRC's first modern poet is barely known outside poetry circles, though obscurity seems no barrier to sudden international fame. Playwright and novelist Gao Xingjian surprised himself and the book world by securing the Nobel Prize for Literature in November last year. His triumph excited many Chinese who have longed for their written culture to be rewarded by the West. It excited the Chinese government too, which attacked the 'political' choice of an exile living in France who doubts he will ever return to China's 'oppressive regime'.

Within China, debate rages over other worthy candidates. "If Guo Lusheng's works had been translated into English, he could have won the Nobel Prize, not Gao Xingjian", claims Li Hengjiu, a writer and an old friend. "I heard strong rumors that Bei Dao was a favorite candidate. Yet he came to the modern poetry world much later than Lusheng and in fact benefited from him." Bei Dao rose to prominence in the late '70s with the liberal publication 'Today'. Now living in America, he once said to Guo, "You are forever my teacher."

Guo himself betrays no hint of jealousy and says he is happy for Gao, the first ethnic Chinese winner of the coveted Nobel prize. Although Guo keeps writing, he appears past caring whether his works are published. Despite this indifference, he threatens to return to fashion. This month, the People's Literature Publishing House issued a new collection of Guo's poems, a modest step back towards the popularity his many supporters believe he deserves.

The 52-year-old poet has experienced enough to take a calm view of the transient nature of fame. Tall and well-built, with a very expressive face, he chain-smokes as he reviews his life over the greasy dining tables at Beijing's No.3 Social Welfare House. On a bitter winter's day in 1948, as civil war raged across China, Guo was born on a roadside in Shandong Province, southeast of Beijing. His mother was marching with the army in which his father served. The couple called their boy Lusheng, meaning 'born on the road'. The inauspicious start to life suggested the rest of the journey could be a bumpy ride.

"He loved reading since he was little," recalls his father Guo Yunxuan, a small-time Party worker who still lives in the same Beijing apartment the family occupied when Guo was just five years old. "At three, he could already recite many classic poems taught by his mother. And he was stubborn, always got his views on things."

While an independent mind and love of books are admired in democratic cultures, these intellectual leanings spelt nothing but trouble in the politicized society of Mao's China. "When the Cultural Revolution came, I was very excited at first," says Guo. Mao's call to "bombard the headquarters" in August 1966 fired the enthusiasm of young people nationwide. They formed ranks of Red Guards, turning the tables on all authority figures.

"But I was soon attacked at school." Guo's undoing was caused by an admiring teacher, who wrote a 'self-criticism' admitting he loved Guo's writing for its 'bourgeois' taste. The teacher had taken to reading aloud Guo's compositions in class.

He was spurned by every Red Guard faction, who soon turned to fighting each other. All schools and universities were shut, so Guo stayed at home, reading and meeting soul mates like Zhang Langlang and Mu Dunbai, members of an underground literature salon called 'Sun Fleet'. "They were mostly children of the social elite," remembers Guo. "They had access to classic foreign books and even 'Beatles' albums, which were unheard of for ordinary people." His new friends opened new horizons, from drinking and partying to earnest discussions of literature and their future.

Yet Guo was lucky to fall short of formal membership. In [month?] 1966, 'Sun Fleet' was labeled a 'counter-revolutionary' organization, and its leader Zhang Langlang received a suspended death sentence. Red Guards attacked several of his friends, driving some to commit suicide. Even the son of Communist China's poet laureate, the official Guo Moruo, was tied to a chair and thrown from a building to his death. He was targeted for leading another underground literature group.

Guo's involvement with 'Sun Fleet' still meant arrest and interrogation. "They slapped me hard in the face and forced me to confess," he recalls. "It was the first time I realized the danger of literary activity." After his release, he was branded a 'rightist student' at school, leaving a lasting black mark in his all-important personal file.

By early 1968, the 'Prague Spring' was inspiring the youth of Eastern Europe. Cocooned in a very closed China, thousands of miles away, Guo was unaware of …. it when he wrote what became his best-known poem, 'Believe in the future'. Fellow poet Li Hengjiu remembers a similar spirit. "It was in the early spring. When we met up at Beihai Park, Lusheng recited the poem passionately for me, in his deep, slightly husky voice."

‘When a spider’s web seals off my stove ruthlessly,
When the last stream of smoke from a dying fire sighs the sadness of poverty,
I still persistently level down the ashes of disappointment
With beautiful snow flakes, I wrote down: believe in the future.
…..My friend, firmly believe in the future.
Believe in your relentless efforts,
Believe that youth overcomes death,
Believe in the future and love life.’

Li was deeply moved by the poem. “I knew instantly that it was a masterpiece to be spread wide.” The poem did spread wide at a remarkable speed, given the primitive mode of transmission. A work of this kind could not possibly be published. Cultural tsar Madame Mao exerted a fierce grip on the arts, permitting only paeans of praise to her husband. Instead, the poem was copied out by hand and passed among friends who could be trusted.

“After Chairman Mao dumped us Red Guards, the movement went downhill,” says Lin Meng, a well-known poet and literary critic. To curb Red Guard excesses, Mao began packing the young radicals off to the countryside to learn from the peasants. “Many young people felt greatly disappointed, frustrated and uncertain about the future. The tone of the poem is gray and heavy which matched our mood, but there is something beautiful and uplifting in it that offered some spiritual sustenance.”

It surely provided spiritual sustenance to Li when he was held in solitary confinement for ten years as a ‘counter-revolutionary’. “I could have gone mad in that three meter square room with no books or anything. It was Lusheng’s poems that kept me going. I am deeply grateful.” Li had memorized all of Guo’s poems he knew, for he was allowed no written copies. Several of Guo’s poems published in recent years came entirely from his memory. Guo himself had long forgotten the words.

Though terrified by the ‘Sun Fleet’ drama, Guo continued to write, including the important works like ‘A Trilogy about fish’, ‘A Trilogy about the ocean’, ‘Smoke’, ‘Liquor’ as well as some love poems. The young poet had grown infatuated with a beautiful Uygur girl, a Muslim Xinjiang named Lili and a daughter of a central government leader. “I knew there was no hope, so I wrote several sad and beautiful poems to express my desperation.” says Guo. At that time, love poems could not be found anywhere in printed form.

Since Guo was associated with a few well known ‘society ladies’, he gained the nickname ‘Lao Se’, Old Flirt. “I would not call him a flirt,” says Li in his defense, “Witty and nice looking, he was attractive to the ladies. And he is a total poet, hopelessly romantic. His romantic and sensitive nature later contributed to his madness.”

In December 1968, Guo was also sent down from the city to the country. His destination was Apricot Village, in a poor rural area in central Shanxi province. At the train station, the poet was struck by the emotions on display as families said goodbye.

‘It’s Beijing at 4.08;
The sea of hands waving: A sharp whistle;
The tall buildings at Beijing railway station;
Suddenly began to rattle.
All of a sudden, my heart was attacked by pain, that must be;
Mom’s needle shot through my chest;
At this moment, my heart becomes a kite;
The string ties at mom’s hand.’

“My two years at Apricot Village were a very happy time,” Guo recalls with his ready smile, “for the first time, I felt equal, without any political burden.” After a hard day’s tilling the land, the ‘sent-down youth’ would sing and read the precious books they had brought from home. “But the most enjoyable thing was listening to Lusheng read poems and tell stories,” recalls Jiao Yuanchao, one of twenty-two young students banished from Beijing.

The gathering took place after supper in the dormitory kitchen. In his faded Mao jacket, Guo would sit beside the stove, facing an audience sitting on water buckets or pumpkins. As he spoke, his bright eyes shone and his hands moved excitedly in the air. His fans included the head of the village production team, [an illiterate peasant?] who revered Guo as a 'cultural man'.

Guo's fame grew among the sent-down youth. Besides Madame Mao's propaganda art, there was hardly any literature available, let alone any relating to their own experience. People came to Apricot Village from all over China to ask for poems, old or new. Many more wrote letters, including ardent proposals from love-struck women.

Such fame was dangerous at a time when conformity was the safest bet. One woman from Inner Mongolia saw her chance to ingratiate herself with the central government. "We were supposed to be re-educated by the peasants," she complained in a letter. "But some people dare to write poems with such bourgeois content." The letter, and copies of Guo's creations went right up to the hands of Madame Mao. Luckily for Guo, she brushed away the complaint. "He's only a little grey poet!" [GREY MEANS?]

In 1971, the 23 year-old Guo joined the People's Liberation Army. "I had always wanted to be a soldier," he says today. Enlisting could also boost his writing career. "I thought if I could become a Party member, I would be able to get my poems published." Better educated and more experienced than the other recruits, Guo quickly rose to a clerical position. But in just over a year [?], his lively, positive and ambitious character transformed into that of a silent depressive.

"I doubt a free spirited man like Lusheng would suit a strictly controlled, oppressive place like the army," explains Li Hengjiu. Guo's father also suspects that the dark mark in his personal file led to his son's loss of favor in the army. "The political instructor of his company told me he was a 'pink poet', not red enough to be a Party member." To make matters worse, Guo was laid off early from the army.

Returning to Beijing, Guo experienced the lowest point in his life. Most of his friends were either stuck in the countryside or the army. He shut himself in his room, eating little, chain smoking day and night. "I just felt totally lost and miserable," Guo remembers. Then, one day, his father noticed Guo had drawn a man holding a long knife to his neck.

"We began to worry he was going to commit suicide, so we finally sent him to a mental hospital." Old Guo sometimes blames himself for not noticing the symptoms earlier, but more often he blames China's repressive society that victimized his son. "He always tried hard, at school, down in the countryside and in the army. But he simply did not get anywhere!"

After a few months' treatment, Guo recovered and was assigned a janitor's job at the Beijing Photo-electricity Research Institute. His condition [what was it?] had stabilized when he met Ala Li in 1975. Ala was the second daughter of a Russian lady and Li Lisan, China's former Minister of Labor. A one-time rival of Mao as Communist Party leader, Li had died in mysterious circumstances early in the Cultural Revolution.

Guo soon fell in love with Ala, a pretty and lively woman whose Eurasian looks and character made her stand out from Chinese ladies. The pair married after a few months' courting. "It was Chairman Mao who drove me mad," insists Guo. "I wanted to marry Li Lisan's daughter because Li dared to fight against Mao and he did humiliate Mao."

Li Mang, a close friend, believes that while Guo can appears sane and lucid discussing his poetry, if you touch on sensitive topics such as his personal life and politics, he may not be able to follow. His given reason for marrying Ala could be one of his "nutty talks". The marriage did not last. "I find Lusheng a very paradoxical character," says Inna Li, Ala's sister. "When you read his poems, you see a man who breaks the shackles of ideology. But in daily life, I find him very traditional in some ways. In fact, bossy and possessive."

Throughout these trials, Guo never stopped writing. His 'renaissance' came after the downfall of the 'Gang of Four', including Madame Mao, in the late '70s. The first liberal tide ushered in a golden age for unofficial publications, while literary works published in official media such as 'People's Literature' retained the Cultural Revolution style even as their content explored new critical themes.

The real breakthroughs featured in underground magazines such as ‘Exploration’ by Wei Jingsheng, ‘Beijing Spring’ and ‘Today’, which emerged in December 1978 amid the ragtag posters of the Democracy Wall movement. For a few brief months, the outpouring of Cultural Revolution suffering, and the expression of real opinions, coincided with the political maneuvering of a resurgent Deng Xiaoping. “The people want to speak,” Deng told an American journalist at the time. “Let them.”

‘Today’ featuring modern poems, was established and run by poets Bei Dao and Mang Ke, both keen admirers of Guo’s work. Through the introduction of film director Chen Kaige, they found Guo and asked him to contribute to ‘Today’. Guo agreed happily. “We wanted to publish the underground literature during the Cultural Revolution,” says Mang Ke in Beijing. “He was [just?] the best poet of the period and his poems suited Today’s liberal and modern style very well”.

Mang became a poet when he was sent down to Baiyangdian, a wetland area south of Beijing. He lost his job because of his role in ‘Today’. But he was prepared to lose more. Before setting out to paste up the first issue of Today in late 1978, Mang Ke and his two friends embraced in tears, fully expecting arrest. Caught in the center of the political whirlpool, ‘Today’ was drawn deeper into the expanding pro-democracy movement. Several editors withdrew, until only Bei Dao and Mang Ke remained. “We just had to fight for freedom as we artists need it for our creation,” remembers Mang.

Even today, China’s heavily circumscribed freedom of speech silences Mang’s efforts. Publications are instructed not to run his works. After an unsuccessful attempt of writing a novel about his experience as a sent-down youth, he is gradually falling into obscurity, picking up occasional jobs in TV industry. Over in America, his former comrade-in-arms Bei Dao has won international fame.

“I am grateful to Today, through which I made some lifelong friends,” says Guo. “Also, it was only because of Today that my poems were first published in printed form.” Besides previous works, they included new compositions like ‘Mad Dog’.

‘I am worse than a mad dog; when desperate, a dog can jump out of the wall; while I just endure silently; I have more misery than a mad dog. If I really become a mad dog; then I can throw off the invisible chain; Then, I will give up without hesitation; the so called sacred human rights.’

“It is my favorite, not only because it is kind of a self-portrait, but also because I often feel Chinese people’s characters are distorted,” says Guo of the motivation behind ‘Mad Dog’. “People say one thing and do another thing. Be truthful to yourself is the basic human right.” His poems aroused some attention and some were even published in official journals. It was around this time that Guo began to use his pen name ‘Shi Zhi’ (index finger), because in his view, living in China, a poet always faces huge pressure in writing and daily life. People often point at you and talk about you behind your back.

Once in the States as a visiting scholar, Jiao Yuanchao, an Apricot village friend and still a close friend of Guo, chanced upon ‘Mad Dog’ in the dissident publication ‘Beijing Spring’. “In a way, I can understand why all these dissidents love Guo’s poems as you can see the cry for humanism. For example, in his ‘A Trilogy about Fish’, the fish under the icy water long for sunlight, and cry out for their right to live. Remember he wrote these poems under high political pressure, which I see as a victory over dictatorship.”

But Jiao disapproves of the dissidents’ courting of Guo’s friendship. Each time, Wei Jingsheng, an old school friend, was released from jail, he would visit Guo; and each time, Guo and his family would be troubled by the police.

After divorcing Ala in 1982, Guo’s health deteoriated. There have been ups and downs ever since, but he never fully recovered. The death of his beloved mother in 1989 was another major strain on his mental stability, after which his retired father felt obliged to send him to the No. 3 Social Welfare House in Changping county, where he remains today.

Guo’s friends occasionally wrote articles about him. On several occasions he was invited to attend poetry conferences abroad, once by SOAS in London, another time by Stichting Poetry International in Rotterdam, but he was unable to go. The poet was more or less forgotten until 1993 when Guo and poet friend Hei Dachuan jointly published a book of their poems. More significant was the impact of Guo’s collection issued in 1998 by the prestigious writers’ publishing company, pushed and edited by his friend Lin Mang who works as a senior editor with China's Writer's Association and Poem magazine.

"This genius poet should not be buried. He deserves a place in the history of poetry as he filled a historical gap," explains Lin. "During the Cultural Revolution, so few poems can be described as real poems; and Guo's poems can stand the test of time. Besides, he was the first underground poet who left any work behind."

One man made a brave attempt to collect these sensitive texts. Disabled intellectual Zhao Yifang spent years collecting underground literature and philosophy by Guo Lusheng, Bei Dao, Mang Ke and others. In 1975, after Zhao was accused as a 'counter-revolutionary', the police removed three truckloads of material from his home. Though they were returned to him after his rehabilitation, the majority of this invaluable collection was lost when his maid threw them away as rubbish after his death.

Lin Mang, another contributor to 'Today' magazine, began his poetry career as a 'sent down' youth in Baiyangdian. "When I first read a hand written copy of Lusheng's 'Believe in the future', I went 'wow! One can write poems like this'." At that time, all the poems were of the impersonal, revolutionary type - 'the Sun is the reddest and Chairman Mao the dearest.' In Lusheng's poems, you can find an independent and free spirit. In later years, though 'menglong' (obscure, hazy) poems are more modern in style, but they carry out the same sprit. Lusheng is indeed China's no 1 modern poet." Many of the poets published in 'Today' became known as Menglong poets, after some critics complained their works were incomprehensible.

The first edition of 6,000 copies of the 'Index Finger collection' sold well. Guo's fellow generation found nostalgia in his poems; the younger generation, in the face of modern day China's spiritual void, found his poems refreshing in an increasingly money oriented society. Partly thanks to the publication of the two books, Guo's works have been picked up by many authoritative poetry titles, such as 'Selection of poems in the past 50 years'. "Lusheng deserves it. believes Li Hengjiu. As time goes by, people will appreciate his poems more and more. He is China's Dante."

Some admirers visit Guo at the institute in the Beijing suburbs, often bringing their own works for his appraisal. There are female fans too, who express their love to him. Behind his back, literary debate questions if this legend of the 'mad poet' was real or man-made by his friends. Some have argued that he was a spokesman for the Red Guards, and undeserving of such 'glory'.

Guo's life has been barely affected by his returning fame. He still lives at the institute, sharing a small room with four other inmates. He eats basic food and smokes the cheapest brand of cigarettes. His 'work unit' covers his medical costs, and his family pays for his food. Trying to be helpful at the institute, he mechanically sweeps the floor and washes dishes.

"Of course, I hate the institute. Every day, I sit at the big common room with a bunch of nutters [Chinese?], watched over by doctors and nurses. I'm not allowed to read books," he reveals. "But this terrible environment leaves me longing for beautiful things. I believe when your bitterness reaches its peak, your soul becomes perfect." The 1998 poem 'At a mental hospital' reveals the tortuous process of artistic creation.

'In the hot summer, sweat drops to the floor that has just been mopped;
In the cold winter, I wash dishes in icy cold water;
Only in the long night when I cudgel my brain, fighting against fatigue,
Does some balmy feeling of spring creep into my pen.'

'Selfish, lazy, barbarian and unhygienic;
Which reflect the weakness of Chinese;
All of these are like iron drill and heavy hammer;
Stimulate sparks in my soul.'

"Sometimes, I think he is better off to be mad," says Guo's old friend Li Hengjiu. "Otherwise, being so naive and honest, he may well get in trouble." Compared to the persecution many intellectuals suffered in China's recent past, there is now greater leeway for expression. But the authorities remain easily angered, and retain many levers of control.

Writers who fall foul of the censors can lose their jobs, see their works banned and their personal freedom restricted, including travel to academic conference. “It is safe now to publish Lusheng’s old poems, but [NOT?] all of his new ones.” Despite Li Meng’s efforts, ‘Mad Dog’ was removed from the final version of the ‘Index Finger Collection’, and does not appear in the new “Poems of Guo Lusheng”.

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The regime’s continued intolerance of free thinkers was highlighted by the July 2000 arrest in Beijing of Huang Beiling. The Boston based poet was held in Beijing for distributing his liberal-oriented literature magazine ‘Tendency’. “It’s a big step backward that Tendency can not even be distributed in China. It is literature, not political publication!” Bei speaks from his Boston flat after being deported from China without charge. The poet vows to continue his magazine in the US. Bei credits Guo Lusheng as his inspiration to take up poetry, after they met through ‘Today’ magazine. “I was struck by his religious dedication to poetry,” says Bei.

Other reminders of the Chinese government’s fear of the power of the pen are less known in the west. Last May, authorities discovered the monthly journal ‘Beijing Literature’ had run an article named ‘The death of May Four’ in which writer Lin Xianzhi argued the spirit of the May 4 1919 Movement, namely, the spirit of freedom and democracy, had died in China. All 12,000 copies were taken back and burnt.

Some Chinese writers have enjoyed heady success abroad. Apart from Gao Xingjian, Jung Chang’s ‘Wild Swans’ was a world-wide best-seller, and Ha Jin’s ‘Waiting’ won America’s National Book Award last year. Yet the literary scene on the mainland remains far from vibrant. “I have a habit of visiting book fairs. Often I feel disappointed that there are so few great literature works,” says Li Hengjiu, “I know it is not totally the writers’ fault. Chairman Mao once said ‘Let Hundred flowers blossom’. But the truth is that flowers have never been allowed to blossom. Only when flowers are all allowed to blossom freely, can literature flourish in the mainland.”

[?Without the government intervene, change to ‘Under the government’s strict censorship?] , and the distraction of more material concerns, poetry is being edged out of people’s lives. Over the last fifteen years, the circulation of ‘Poem’ shrunk from 530,000 copies per month [?] to just 30,000 today. But Guo still writes, persistently. “What I find moving is Guo’s unchanged love and devotion to poetry, as well as his faith in life, in the face of broken dreams and changing times,” observes critic Li Meng. “It is such unbending spirit that allows China’s fine literature tradition to survive and thrive one day.”

‘Finally, I have stepped over the spiritual death valley.’ Guo wrote not long ago. [Next sentence – to explain what he meant? “Now I …[?] “Now, I do not have much to demand from life. If I can read, write and think, I am happy.” Guo states. From time to time, one or two of his fellow inmates burst into the dining room, either staring silently at Guo, or asking with obvious envy “You have visitors?”

“I am very lucky,” he says with a broad smile, “I have by far the largest number of visitors.” Several times a year, his family takes him back for a brief home stay. And his loyal friends always throw a big birthday party for him, attended by poets, writers and artists.

Guo admits he no longer suits the so-called ‘normal’ life back in the city. His dream is to have his own apartment attached to the institute where he will have more freedom as well as easy access to medical care. The ‘Old Flirt’ also believes it will revive his flagging chances of remarriage. “When I wrote the poem ‘Believe in the future’, it was more like a self-encouragement. Today, even in my poorly state, I still see the beauty of life and I believe in the future more than ever! Otherwise, what’s the meaning of life?”

In the stark canteen that doubles as a reception room for inmates, Guo rises to begin a recital. He stands tall with great dignity, hands moving excitedly in the air, as if facing a large audience. The noises and screams from the nearby common room are drowned out by his powerful, slightly husky voice.

‘When a spider’s web seals off my stove ruthlessly,
When the last stream of smoke from a dying fire sighs the sadness of poverty,
I still persistently level down the ashes of disappointment
With beautiful snowflakes, I wrote down: believe in the future.

[ENDS]