

Li Zhi-you's escape to Thailand

After a week's journey between life and death, Li Zhi-you, one of the chief members of China's domestic political party (China Democracy Party), luckily reached Bangkok to seek refuge with his wife and their 3-year-old daughter. Li Zhi-you said that human rights in the domestic political environment are regressing continuously. The process of escape was unexpectedly terrible and sinister. He advised his party friends at home that unless they wanted to face severe punishment as he had, they should not follow his example. The last resort would be running away to another country.



Li Zhi-you – taken on their arrival at Bangkok. (screenshot)

40 year old, Li Zhi-you, is a citizen of Guilin City, Guangxi Province. In 1998 as the head of the Democratic Party of Guangxi Province, he actively participated in the "98" political activities of the China Democracy Party. He was a key figure in the movement. In the same year, he was arrested when an order was given for a mass arrest of the democracy activists. He was later sentenced to three years' imprisonment. In the prison, he was brutally beaten and persecuted. A few days after his arrest, his elderly mother, in an attempt to stop the National Security Personnel from illegally raiding her home, was pushed and shoved to the ground, and died soon after.

After his release, Li Zhi-you moved to Liuzhou in Guangxi Province. He endured the never ending period of the authorities' monitoring and harassment as well as social discrimination. Nevertheless, he continued to develop secretly the activities of the Democracy Party under cover of his work as a hairdresser. He said that when President Hu Jintao came to power, the surveillance and harassment became even more rigorous. On any of the days that the Communist Party considered a "sensitive day", the Liuzhou National Security would restrict his movement. From Beijing Olympic Games to present, he could not remember how many times he had been summoned. In fact, his being tracked became part of his normal life.

In the period prior to Obama's visit, Li Zhi-you went to Central China, North China, Jiangsu, Zhejiang and some other places to push forward a series of activities. He secretly negotiated with the democrats of the other cities for the preparation of integrating a national 'One Democratic Party'. They had also discussed some other big issues. Back to Guangxi, Li Zhi-you once again organized his party colleagues to distribute the pamphlets of "Charter 08". On 28 October he went to the home of a Democracy Party member to discuss something. He was going to spend the night in the friend's home and so went out at night to buy a toothbrush. On his way back he received an urgent call from his friend who informed him that his residence had been surrounded by more than 20 police officers. He was told to run away quickly.

Li Zhi-you said that the situation was similar to his arrest in 1998. His first response was that he could not go home. Fortunately, his wife and daughter were in a friend's house. He immediately called his wife on a public phone. He told her to borrow 30,000 yuan from her brother in law, and rushed to the appointed place with their daughter. They did not dare go to any railway station or bus stop. According to his experience, the stations had certainly been dispatched, and that trains would be investigated more severely than cars. They therefore stopped a Nanning-bound bus on the road.

Thailand

The following is a record of part of the conversation between Li Zhi-you and the author (Interview Venue: Bangkok, Savary Park):

Li Zhi-you: When we reached Nanning, we quickly transferred to a bus bound for the border of Yunnan. It was already middle of the night when we arrived at a place near the border. After we had alighted, we dared not stay in hotels. I held my child in arms, and sat with my wife the whole night next to a night market stall. At dawn, we took a small van to the border. We asked for the way and found the road to a hill. We then began to climb up the hill. There were many high hills which have been made slippery by the climbing of the previous illegal immigrants. Climbing the hill was very dangerous; a little carelessness would end up in a fall. I do not know how many hills we had climbed. When I realized that we had reached the road to Burma, I felt that my limbs were all numb.

On the road we stopped a Burma-bound truck. We alighted in a banana plantation, found a Chinese speaking family and paid them for something to eat. We spent the night in the banana plantation. On the next day I went out to look for 'snakeheads'. I found two local young men. After negotiation, they agreed to lead us to Mekong River at the price of 10,000 yuan. The prepayment was 2,000 yuan.

On the third day we got up at four o'clock. We walked, crossed a river and walked again. When we came to a place unknown to me, one of the guides said, "Day light will soon come. Walking together in a group will attract attention". He told us to walk in separate groups. Holding my child in arms, I walked with one of the guys in front. My wife and the other guy walked behind us. After walking for a while I felt something wrong and so I stopped and looked back behind me. I found my wife nowhere to be seen. The guy who led me urged me to walk

quickly. At that moment I reacted unhesitatingly. I pushed away the guy, ran back with my child. I called my wife's name loudly, "Luo Liuying" Having run for 10 odd minutes, I heard my wife's voice. I rushed forward and saw her in tears. She told me that the guy had several times pushed her on ground with the intention to rape her. She resisted with all her strength and so he could not succeed I stared at that guy, he gave me back an insignificant look – as if saying "so what! What can you do with me? It is true. What can I do? We were totally strangers in that place. He held our fate in his hand. I am short in figure, and would not be able to fight against them. If I pushed them too hard, they could kill us in a few minutes and no one would know about it. I could only bear the insult, but I no longer dare to stay away from my wife (tear in Li Zhi's eyes).

It seemed probable that they could not take advantage of my wife, so they deprived us in terms of money. On the way they kept on raising the sum of payment. The initial agreed amount of 10,000 yuan was raised to 20,000 yuan by the time we reached the edge of the Mekong River. After 10 odd minutes they passed us to two other men. We paid 5,000 yuan for the ride in a speedboat of the Mekong River. (When we disembarked at a casino in Laos, we had already spent 27,000 to 28,000 yuans). The boat was sailing very fast. It jolted along the river. Several times water gushed into the boat. My daughter was so frightened that she cried loudly. I then covered her eyes with my clothes. If something had happened to my child, I would not forgive myself for life (Li Zhi-you's voice shook with emotion)

When we landed, we were near the Thai border. We found a Chinese-speaking hotel. It happened that two of the workers were away and so there was a place for us to sleep. Finally I was able to lie down to rest my eyes for a while. Later, we were taken to Bangkok by the pro-democracy activists in Thailand.

Zeng Jie-ming: the inspection on the road from Northern Thailand to Bangkok is very strict. Was everything going well on the way?

LI Zhi-you: It was even more difficult to bear the way from Northern Thailand to Bangkok! Do you know where were we hiding in the car? We hid in the place under the driver's seat in a double-decker bus. The place was not even big enough to store baggage. A human body could only bend his legs and huddle inside.

Zeng Jie-ming: how then to relieve yourself

LI Zhi-you: How can we relieve ourselves! We could only hold back desperately, or otherwise could empty it on the body. We bore the ordeal for more than a dozen hours. When I climbed out, I did not have the feeling of a living person.

Zeng Jie-ming: the child is the most pitiable.

LI Zhi-you: (silence) I have not been able to sleep well at night so far. I totally did not expect that we had to go through such a terror and peril. I am still having nightmares, dream of escape. If the guides had robbed and murdered us on the road, no one would know about it. If anything had happened to my wife and my child, how can I justify myself in front of my family? (Choked)

Escaped to Freedom, But High Price Paid

Zeng Jie-ming

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Zeng Jie-ming: If you had known of such a danger, would you still run?

LI Zhi-you: If I had known that escaping is like this, I might not be able to make the determination of running away. I would be ready for imprisonment. The root of China's democratization is in the country. I'm out of it now. What's the use of me then? Will the Thai people be interested in listening to you talking about democracy in China? My escape has left a vacancy in the Democratic Party in Guangxi

Zeng Jie-ming: If you had not escaped and had been severely punished, would your family break down?

LI Zhi-you: for sure (depth of silence)

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