

Ho Chi Minh

Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom

Fifth Estate Collective

1969

The series of brief poems which make up the *Prison Diary*—his one and only, his precious book of poetry—were written by Ho Chi Minh between August 29, 1942, and September 10, 1943, during a journey which he describes in one of his poems in these words: “I have travelled the thirteen districts of Kwangsi Province, and tasted the pleasures of eighteen different prisons.”

Endowed with sharp foresight, Ho Chi Minh reached the correct conclusion that if he wrote poems in Vietnamese, his native language, Chiang Kai-shek’s prison guards and jailers would take away from him these papers which they were unable to read. Therefore, he wrote his poems in classical Chinese, following the rules of Chinese poetry of the Tang Dynasty—which, according to experts, is one of the most difficult and complicated forms of poetry.

The *Prison Diary* is made up of a little over 100 brief poems. Man, what is most noble and dignified in man, is present in these poems. They consist of remarks, notes and brief sketches of people and places, which at times—as Bourdarel, one of the translators who translated these poems into French, said—resemble “landscapes painted on silk.”

When Ho Chi Minh was released and returned to Vietnam to continue the struggle for freedom, the green notebook containing the poems was left behind, forgotten. Many years later, when the great leader did not even remember having written the poems, a peasant delivered to the Party in Hanoi the green notebook in which the *Prison Diary* was written. —GRAMMA

AFTER PRISON A WALK IN THE MOUNTAINS

The clouds embrace the peaks, the peaks embrace the clouds,
The river below shines like a mirror, spotless and clean.
On the crest of the Western Mountains, my heart stirs as I wander
Looking towards the Southern sky and dreaming of old friends

THE FLUTE OF THE FELLOW-PRISONER

Suddenly a flute sounds a
nostalgic note:
Sadly the music rises, its tune is
close to sobbing:
Over a thousand miles, across

mountains and rivers,
Journey's an aching grief. We
seem to see a woman
Climbing a far off tower to
watch for someone's return.

VISITING HER HUSBAND IN PRISON

The husband is inside the iron bars.
The wife is outside the iron bars, looking in.
So near they are, only separated by inches,
And yet too distant, like sky and depths of the sea.
What no words utter, their desperate eyes relate
Before each word, their eyes brim over with tears.
Who could stand here and watch their meeting, unmoved?

AT THE POLITICAL BUREAU OF THE FOURTH ZONE OF RESISTANCE

I have travelled the thirteen districts of Kwangsi Province.
And tasted the pleasures of eighteen different prisons.
What crime have I committed, I keep on asking?
The crime of being devoted to my people.

LISTENING TO THE COCK'S CROW

You are only a very ordinary cock,
But every morning you crow to announce the dawn.
Cock-a-doodle-do! You rouse the people from sleep.
Truly your daily job is not unimportant.

A SLEEPLESS NIGHT

The first watch passes... the second watch... the third watch...
I toss about, and fidget, and no sleep comes.
The fourth...fifth watch! No sooner my eyes have closed Than the five-pointed star twinkles in my dreams.

ON READING "ANTHOLOGY OF A THOUSAND POETS"

The ancients used to like to sing about natural beauty:
Snow and flowers, moon and wind, mists, mountains and rivers.
Today we should make poems including iron and steel,
And the poet also should know to lead an attack.

ADVICE TO ONESELF

Without the cold and desolation of winter
There could not be the warmth and splendour of spring.
Calamity has tempered and hardened me,
And turned my mind into steel.

MIDNIGHT

Faces all have an honest look in sleep.
Only when they wake does good or evil show in them.
Good and evil are not qualities born in man:
More often than not, they arise from our education.

FINE WEATHER

Everything evolves, it is the cycle of nature:
After the rainy days, the fine weather comes.
In an instant, the whole world shakes off its damp clothes.
Thousands of li of mountains unfurl their brocade carpet.
Under the warm sun and the clean wind, the flowers smile.
In the big trees with branches washed clean, the birds make chorus.
Warmth fills the heart of man, and life reawakens.
Bitterness now makes way for happiness,
This is how nature wills it.

fifth estate

Fifth Estate Collective
Ho Chi Minh
Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom
1969

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/89-october-2-15-1969/ho-chi-minh>
Fifth Estate #89, October 2-15, 1969

[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/89-october-2-15-1969/ho-chi-minh)