

Liu

Liu Bao Ren owned a successful brick factory in Fujian province in Southern China when he was arrested in 1997, at the age of 33, for his membership of a banned Buddhist cult, the Quan Yin method. Liu was tortured: his face was held millimetres away from a bucket of urine and excrement and sometimes a towel soaked in that bucket was used to wipe his face; he was beaten and shaken in a way that left no marks. He got word out to his brother to bribe the governor and prison warders to allow him to escape.

It was not safe for him to stay in Fujian province. He shut his factory down and said goodbye to his wife and his three children. He took a train to Beijing, a **journey** that took 2 days and 3 nights. He knew that he would never get an identity card to work in another part of China now that he was blacklisted. A friend mentioned that there were many opportunities to go abroad to work and put him in touch with a snakehead, a people smuggler, who could take him to Europe on a fake passport at a cost 100,000 RMB (approximately £7000). Some of this money went towards bribing officials so that Liu could get false papers for his health check, police check, proof of employment and family check. Liu and a friend of his, Ming, wanted to go to Italy but they were advised to get a visa to Hungary first. They waited for a month in a Beijing hotel before they were put on a flight to Moscow. From there they took a flight to Budapest. They were picked up and taken to a rundown, four-bedroomed apartment where 6-8 people slept in each bedroom.

During their two weeks, there was much tension which sometimes erupted into open violence among the travellers because the food supplies were limited and the queues to use the kitchen long. Finally, a group of 18 migrants, packed into three cars were driven to some woods and dropped off. They walked up a steep mountain path to the border between Hungary and Slovakia. It took a gruelling five hours to get into Slovakia.

They were taken by truck to a house in the suburbs where they had to sleep in a room that was 12x12 ft. Liu slept on an uncarpeted wooden floor without bedding on a freezing cold night in his wet clothes with only a small piece of bread and an egg to eat. The following day they were driven to a garage in Austria. In the basement, there was a warren of rooms with about 200 people in transit from all over the world – Afghanistan, Iraq, India, Africa – all headed to different destinations in Europe. The Chinese group got into a fight with a Middle-eastern group who tried to steal their food. After two days, they were put in a container and driven to Prague where they stayed for a month in an overcrowded flat waiting for the right moment to cross the German border. It was well-policed, many trips had failed and new routes were being devised in order to avoid detection.

This was the worst part of the journey. There was knee deep snow, Liu was not feeling well and they had to walk for nearly 24 hours, without food, to cross the border. He ended up crawling into Germany because he was just too tired to walk. He had worn many layers of clothing, including several items of underwear, because they had been told that they would not be able to carry any luggage. They were picked up by a truck and taken to a place where 16 people slept in one room, again with no bedding and freezing cold temperatures. The following day they were taken to Holland, to a very large holding centre just outside Amsterdam. Liu suffers from carsickness. He thought he was going to die. It was the first time that he began to regret leaving China. They stayed there for 3-4 weeks before crossing into the UK. It was here that Liu discovered that they were not going to Italy and became very upset. He realised that they had been tricked. As Italy is not a very popular destination, it is not profitable for snakeheads to transport only two people there. It was also here that Liu saw people being beaten for not having kept up with their payments. The mazhai or escorts would beat them while they were on the phone to their family in the hope that their screams would make the family pay up. The mazhai were a law unto themselves, often cruel for the sake of it. They would steal from the travellers. Liu carried his money rolled up inside his tube of toothpaste to hide it from them.

In a dark and mouldy container, stinking of urine, without any toilet stops during a 20 hour journey, they were brought to Dover and dropped off in London. Liu had been on the road for four months. Two days after their **arrival**, they went to Chinatown to look for work. They were approached by several Chinese people working in pairs asking if they needed a place to stay. They discovered later that they were all part of Chinese Triad gangs. Liu and Ming went with one pair who charged them exorbitant rents to stay in a council flat and offered to help them apply for asylum which consisted of accompanying them to the passport office in Croydon. They were expected to go out and fight the Boss's battles; they had basically become one of his thugs. The Triad would find odd jobs for them, such as portering, but it was not enough to meet their basic needs and the money they had brought with them was fast running out.

Liu and Ming escaped this **entrapment** by paying £200 each to a lorry driver to find them another job. The escape was illusory and the entrapment continued in the shape of one low-paid job after another. This job lasted three weeks. Liu was paid £2 per hour for 11 hour days, seven days per week leaving little for day to day expenses. They worked without masks inhaling dust all day. Liu worked in the construction industry in such poor health and safety conditions that he suffers from health problems to this day. He fell through two floors before getting stuck with his legs dangling through the floor underneath. Some places they did not get paid and were threatened with violence if they asked for payment. They went through such starvation that they ate conkers

thinking it was some kind of fruit, living in worse and worse conditions, paying rents of only £7 per week in some places. This life of utter destitution continued for two years.

Just as things started to improve, his brother died, crossing the Channel in the container where 50 Chinese people were suffocated to death – the infamous Dover 58 tragedy of 2000. Liu could not contain his anger and he spoke out publicly on TV and in the papers against the snakeheads and the corruption of the Chinese provincial governments. This act of **resistance** brought death threats. His mother was visited by police in China and members of his family were thrown into prison. Liu had also offended the Big Boss here and had to go into hiding for a year, living in garden sheds and working for a pittance in small towns and villages the length and breadth of England. When he was granted asylum in 2003, he made his **escape** from these desperate conditions. He was then able to take on better paid jobs in better health and safety conditions. His wife and family joined him a year later. Liu believes that he has not been successful in life because he keeps changing his **dream**. Today he wants to set up a painting and decorating business and buy his own house although he still does not get regular work

His family and children are slowly settling down. They face racism at school and feel isolated. Liu still lives in **fear** of the Triads and took care to hide many vital details of his story.

