

The Last Emperor of China

The Life of Aisin-Gioro Puyi

Wang Qingxiang

Translated by Ni Na



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1

Special Amnesty

I have finally obtained a new life with a new soul. I am now experiencing the happiness of being a new man of modern China – different from the happiness of any other kind of man. I now have those new joys of life that only this country at this time holds; those joys that cannot be had at any other time and place.

– Aisin-Gioro Puyi



1. Date to Start a New Life

To Aisin-Gioro Puyi, the last emperor of China, December 4, 1959 was a magnificent date – the starting point of the second half of his life. From that day on, Puyi was no longer an emperor, nor a criminal, but a citizen of the People's Republic of China.

On that morning, the club hall inside the Fushun War Criminal Prison, which had already been decorated into a meeting hall, was filled with the atmosphere of celebration. Above the rostrum was a banner made of crimson silk, with characters saying: "Fushun War Criminal Prison Special Amnesty Meeting". (Note: "Special" because the amnesty was approved not by the courts, but by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the CPC). A vertical banner on the right read: "Reform through labor to begin

a new life” and the other on the left, “Change bad acts to good to receive a bright future.”

By a few minutes to 9 o'clock, leaders – from the Liaoning Provincial Government, from Fushun Municipal Government, from the Provincial Public Security Bureau, and from the Provincial Higher People's Court – were already seated on the podium.

All the war criminals of the prison, about three hundred of them, now were led, walking in single file, to sit on the wooden benches facing the front. The solemn expressions on their faces indicated how nervous they were. Puyi, with a white chest card numbered 981, stood out. As the former puppet emperor of the “Manchukuo Kingdom”, he had collaborated with Japanese imperialists, becoming the most notorious traitor in China. He had come to terms with life in the prison anyway. Therefore he looked composed.

At 9 o'clock, Governor Jin Yuan, of the Fushun War Criminal Prison, announced the commencement of the meeting. Mr. Hou Xibin, as Deputy-Secretary General, made a speech on behalf of the Liaoning Peoples' Provincial Government and the Liaoning Provincial Committee of the CPC. Mr. Liu Shengchun, the deputy-president of Liaoning Provincial Higher People's Court, walked to the microphone to announce the names of those who were to be released. Everyone present held their breath to listen; silence reigned in the meeting hall.

The name “Aisin-Gioro Puyi” was declaimed. It was the first one on the list. Immediately, Puyi was struck dumb. That which he had never expected was occurring. He remained in his seat, staring blankly ahead, seemingly unable to accept what was happening. Mr. Pujie, his younger brother sitting beside him, hastily nudged him, and whispered urgently “Go to the front!”

At last, and slowly, Puyi rose to his feet. Under the watchful gaze of all the prisoners, he walked slowly to the podium. He could feel his heart pounding.

With Puyi now standing in front of the rostrum, Mr. Liu read out:

“Notice of Special Amnesty from the Supreme People's Court of the People's Republic of China in accordance with the Special Amnesty order issued by the Chairman of the People's Republic of China on September 17, 1959, this court has investigated the case of the “Manchukuo Kingdom” criminal of war Aisin-Gioro Puyi.

The war criminal Aisin-Gioro Puyi, male, aged 54, of the Manchu nationality, a native of Beijing, has served ten years' detention. During his ten years' of detention,

Puyi has shown that he has genuinely reformed, through manual labor and ideological education. In accordance with the stipulations of Clause One of the Special Amnesty he is to be released, by order of the Supreme People's Court of the People's Republic of China, dated December 4, 1959."

Even before Mr. Liu had finished speaking, Puyi lost control and uttered a loud cry. He stretched out trembling hands to receive the "Notice of Special Amnesty" from Mr. Liu Shengchun. Then Puyi bowed to him, to show gratitude to the Communist Party of China and the People's Government.

The next day, front pages of principal newspapers in cities such as Tokyo, Washington, London, Paris, Taipei, and Hong Kong carried photographs and news of Puyi's release. The world would know that, for the first time, a former feudal emperor of China had become an ordinary citizen. Throughout the history of imperial China, in every previous instance where the former regime had been replaced, its Emperor had been killed or exiled. It was the Communist Party of China that broke the historical pattern.

At that time Puyi was still unaware that Chairman Mao and his colleagues had always been concerned with his political reformation, and had been pleased to learn of the progress he had been making towards rehabilitation. It had only been after careful and considered deliberation by the highest levels within the Communist Party of China that he was finally granted the special amnesty.

That day, the Chinese government released its first group of reformed war criminals, thirty-three in total. Some of these had been detained for as long as ten years in various Chinese prisons. Ten were from Fushun War Criminal Prison. Of these, Puyi was one; the remainder had been high or middle-ranking officers either of the Manchukuo Kingdom or of the Kuomintang regimes.

The ten new citizens were all invited to the front of the meeting. They stood there with tears running down their cheeks.

Later, Governor Jin was to tell many people how deeply affected he had been by the speech that Puyi had made in the group discussion concerning their Special Amnesty. Puyi sobbed vehemently, condemning the crimes he had committed against the Chinese people. Looking to the heavens, he had cried "Who made me commit those crimes? It was the feudal dynasty; it was my vain hope to restore the feudal dynasty using foreign imperial power. I

am so grateful to the staff of the prison; they educated me in what kind of life I should live. From now on, I will follow the Communist Party of China, taking the socialist road and learning, for as long as I live.”

Puyi's gratitude was also fully expressed in a letter he wrote on August 18, 1960 to Mr. Zhao Yutang. It reads: “I never expected our government and people would be as magnanimous as to release me and to grant me citizenship. They have made me a member of the working class and I will have the opportunity to help build our socialist society. Only the Communist Party of China, which adopted the reformation of society and mankind as its mission, had the vision to do this.”

“The Communist Party's policy is ‘Curing the sickness to save the patients’. This, however, does not include those who would rather die with their sickness than work to recover. The Communist Party of China has successfully reformed many criminals, changing them from animals to men. For this reason it is said that the Communist Party of China is not only the savior of the 650 million Chinese people, but also the second parent of criminals.”

Mr. Yutang, one of Puyi's distant nephews, was mentioned many times in Puyi's autobiography “From Emperor to Citizen”. He served as part of Puyi's retinue for a total of 26 years. Because he was not a criminal of war, he was released in 1957 and had been living in Jilin ever since. Puyi had written him two letters, telling him of his happiness and contentment with life after release. When the Cultural Revolution started, for fear that his home would be raided by the Red Guards; Mr. Zhao burned one one letter, but was unable to find the other. The remaining letter survived.

On that evening at the club hall, the prison authority arranged a farewell party for the ten released war criminals. All of the prisoners were invited. There is a photograph with Puyi and the other nine released war criminals heartily singing, with the slogan “Change bad acts to good to receive a bright future” hung behind them.

On the next morning, still at that club hall, there was a send-off rally comprising all the prisoners and the working staff of the prison. Laughter and applause filled the room. The ten new citizens were lifted up again and again by their “classmates” who seemed to share their excitement. They said their farewells and exchanged mutual best wishes.

These events in the Chinese prison were regarded as “the unimaginable miracle”. What was also characterized as “the biggest news in human history”

was quickly spread all over the world through wire and radio waves. A news article of the same date by Agency France-Press from Taipei reads, "Today Beijing released thirty-three war criminals including Puyi, the former emperor of the bogus Manchukuo Kingdom. The Taipei authorities take it to be a symbol of the stability of the Communist Party's regime on mainland China, where it has been holding power for ten years."

On the afternoon of December 5th, Governor Jin called the ten new citizens to a forum in the meeting room. There he made a speech entitled, "How to Behave Correctly after Obtaining a New Life". In his oration he said:

"Chinese society has changed greatly in the ten years during which you have been undergoing rehabilitation here. I believe it would be good for you all to stay here for a few more days, to learn more about this new society. Of course, you may leave here sooner, if you wish to. Those who prefer first to visit some places within Fushun (Note: Fushun is a major industrial city with a large open coal mine) may remain. We will pay your travelling expenses, and all of you will be given sufficient spending money for your needs. The local governments have been instructed to arrange jobs for you upon your return to your home localities. Those who prefer to settle in Fushun will also be allocated jobs here. After returning to your hometowns, you may still come back to Fushun and get your job here if you are unsatisfactory with the jobs and life there.

"I suggest that you first apologize to the people in your home towns for wrongs that you did to them. I am sure that they will forgive you, knowing that you have changed into new men. If their suspicions remain, the way to deal with this is through your own, appropriate, actions.

"You will experience a new type of 'family' when you return home. There are no longer feudal patriarchs; every family member is equal, and each must care for the other.

"In closing, I express the hope that you value your new life, which you have won through your ten years of hard reformation. I hope that you continue reforming yourself in your future work and life. We welcome your opinions and suggestions on how we may improve our methods of reforming your former fellow-criminals who remain here."

How thoughtful and affectionate Governor Jin was! His words touched everyone present.

In fact, at that time Puyi and the other nine new citizens all had



Puyi receiving his Notification of Special Amnesty on Dec 4, 1959

a confusing mix of feelings and expectations. Ten years had passed, and Chinese society had changed considerably, but did their families still nurse old grudges against them? Would they be accepted by these people when they returned? One of the ten had learned how to manufacture machinery in the electrical plant of the prison, where he had acquired considerable skill. He asked to remain in the prison to continue to work there. Governor Jin answered him, "You have your family. You should at least go home to see your relatives first. You can come back if you are dissatisfied with the situation there, and we shall arrange a job for you in an electrical machinery plant in Fushun. I want to emphasize once more how much I hope that you value your new life and new character. Reformation is a life-long task. Everyone will meet diverse tests in his life and must choose 'advance' or 'retreat'. Please remember that complacency is always the enemy of progress!"

The prison authority had already established from the ten new citizens where they wished to settle, and what kind of jobs they preferred. Puyi was unwilling to return to Changchun, where he had acted as puppet emperor for fourteen years, and where his divorced wife Madam Li Yuqin was living.

He preferred to be allowed to return to Beijing, his birth place, and to live at the home of his sister, Madam Yunxin, for a while. Governor Jin immediately consented to his request.

That evening, after seeing a film in the prison club, as part of the celebrations, Puyi and Pujie were summoned by Governor Jin to a meeting room on the second floor, where he left the blood relatives alone for a heart-to-heart talk.

Puyi said to Pujie, "I shall be alone after I leave the prison. My four wives have all died or divorced me. I may have a bright future only when I follow the Communist Party of China and take the socialist road. As a feudal emperor, I led a life of only opening my mouth to be fed and holding out my arms to be dressed. I was a sheer parasite then. My health has improved through manual labor in prison. Now that I am a citizen, I shall support myself with my own hands. I am glad now to be considered worthy of serving the people."

Pujie said to Puyi, "Like you, I will be alone if I am released in the future. I am unsure whether Saga Hiro would come to China, to be with me. I must rely on the Communist Party of China, taking the socialist road, supporting myself with my own work. Our former life of exploiting others is disgraceful; I would hate to live it again."

The two brothers encouraged each other: Puyi counseled Pujie to redouble his ideological reformation in order to win people's forgiveness, so that they would be able to meet once more in Beijing, as soon as possible. Pujie likewise reminded Puyi to never relent on his own rehabilitation, and to maintain a calm and firm resolve when faced with adversity or unexpected events. In particular, he urged Puyi never to lose appreciation of his, hard-earned, new life.

Finally, with a serious demeanor, Puyi changed the topic of their talk. He warned his brother; "I am about to leave, but you remain. I worry about your wife: why did the Japanese let you marry a Japanese woman? Apparently, their purpose is to make you follow Japanese imperialists forever. I am convinced that Saga Hiro is a Japanese spy. She was doing her best to lure you to work for the Japanese imperialists. You have to separate yourself from her – to divorce her!"

Puyi urged Pujie to be cautious when writing letters to Saga Hiro. He had heard that Saga had said some unhelpful things in Japan, trying to promote the release of her husband, but interfering with his reformation.

Puyi said, "In any event, you have been separated for fifteen years. We know little about her current situation in Japan. You must be careful; do not make a mistake on this matter. When it is necessary, you must be decisive and sever your connections with her completely. Do not risk to jeopardize your rehabilitation. Even if you are released sometime soon, I believe that you still need to divorce her, in order to demonstrate your political credentials. That you have not already divorced your Japanese wife is probably why you are not released. Please think about what I have said and resolve this issue, so that you may achieve amnesty with the next group."

Pujie was embarrassed to say that he could not agree with his brother's views on Saga Hiro. He told Puyi clearly, "Although our marriage was originally arranged by Japanese warlords, our love is sincere. Saga opposed Japan's invasion of China and she was always obedient to me. If I can be released and reunite with Saga, together we shall oppose Japanese imperialists and do our best to promote Sino-Japanese friendship." He added: "Do not worry; I have sound judgment on this matter. I can correctly handle my relationship with my wife." Their talk that night lasted over an hour, and Pujie later recalled that they had seldom been so honest with each other. Governor Jin worried that Pujie would be troubled by Puyi's words. He invited Pujie to his office a few days later, saying to him: "How did Puyi win his Special Amnesty? It is because he came to utterly detest the Japanese imperialists and he did an excellent job to expose and denounce their atrocities. Therefore, the government decided to release him in the first group." But Governor Jin did not press Pujie to separate from Saga Hiro. He did not share Puyi's suspicions about her.



2. Leaving for Beijing

On December 6th, the ten new citizens packed up their belongings, happily put on their new cotton-padded clothes, shoes and caps, and waited for instructions to go their respective ways.

On December 7th, Mr. Ren Bufang and Mr. Li Jianyu, correspondents from the Xinhua News Agency, came to interview Puyi in the reception-

room of the prison. Puyi appeared a little apprehensive when he saw the two correspondents. With hesitation, he said to them, "Am I allowed to shake hands with the correspondents of New China?" "Yes, you are no longer a war criminal, but a new citizen. We should congratulate you on your new life." They rose to their feet, to shake hands with Puyi and their hands remained locked for some time. With excitement, Puyi said to them, "Everyone has a pair of hands, which should be used to labor productively for the world. But my hands had not been used since I was born; I asked others to do everything for me. The function of my hands had degenerated. It was the Communist Party and our socialist motherland that restored the use of my hands. I am glad that they are now functional and may be put to productive use. They are fortunate to shake the hands of correspondents of New China."

"Mr. Puyi, I am glad that you have your new life. Do you know, however, that I used to live in Changchun and I always saluted to you whenever I passed by your palace, as I had been instructed?" Mr. Li Jianyu said bluntly.

"I am very sorry about that!" Puyi replied, and spoke with remorse about the crimes he had committed when he was the emperor of Manchukuo Kingdom. He promised that he would never relax his ideological reformation, and that he would highly value his new life all his life.

Also on December 7th, the ten new citizens were surprised to be given back their personal effects which had been kept by the authorities of the prison. They were asked to check their belongings, to make sure that nothing was missing, and to keep them safely.

The authorities of the Fushun War Criminal Prison had preserved many of the very finest treasures, which used to be Puyi's private property. They were originally a part of the treasure collection in the Forbidden City. Before being expelled from the Forbidden City in November 1924, Puyi personally selected a great quantity of the most valuable treasures from the royal collection. He had them taken out of the palace by the method of "awarding" them to Pujie and other associates and then storing them in his house in Tianjin. Later, Puyi took most of them with him to Changchun and to Russia. He would often need to reward some of his staff, as well as to sell a portion to fund his sumptuous daily life. In August 1945, after the Japanese emperor announced surrender and Manchukuo Kingdom collapsed, Puyi fled to Tonghua, only taking the most portable of these items. In his imperial palace were stored ancient books printed and bound in the Song and Yuan

Dynasties (960-1368 AD), and paintings and calligraphic scrolls by great masters from the Jin Dynasty (265-420 AD) and the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD). After being put under house arrest in Russia, Puyi attempted to secure safe haven there for the remainder of his days, as he knew he would be punished if he returned to China. He gave some of his treasured items to the Russian government in the hope that they would be pleased with and support him. The valuables were donated in the name of "supporting Russia's economic construction". Thus, Puyi had already lost most of his valued items when he was extradited back to China in 1950. Even so, what remained on his return still filled three large leather trunks.

Puyi's treasures were grouped under jewelry, clocks and watches, and rare artifacts. The dazzling jewelry comprised some ten strands of pearls (some of them as big as egg yolks), other precious stones including agate, diamonds, sapphires, rubies, cat's-eye, beryl, emeralds, and gold. A diamond as big as a person's thumb and several hairpins inlaid with diverse gems were said to have been used by Empress Dowager Cixi. There were more than thirty clocks and watches in all, most of them political gifts sent by a range of foreign royal courts. Among these were: a musical clock decorated with a pair of phoenix, a watch with jade inlay, and a pocket watch which could speak the time. One pocket watch was made in the shape of a cicada, its wings inlaid with one hundred and thirty diamonds. The two wings opened, when the tail of the cicada was touched gently, to expose the hour and minute hands. Among the artifacts were three topaz seals from Emperor Qianlong (1736-1796 AD), each connected by topaz chains, all carved from a huge piece of precious topaz.

Four hundred and sixty eight pieces of Puyi's treasures were appraised as national treasures. In addition to those, Puyi had several lounge suits, some high-quality shirts, and a few dozen ties.

While Puyi was interned there, the prison attracted visitors of many senior officials and celebrities during the 1950s. All of them wanted to see the former Emperor Xuantong with their own eyes, and to have a chance to speak with him. Before leaving they would ask to see Puyi's treasures, and the prison authorities would arrange to display them.

Now that Puyi was going to leave the prison, the ownership of these treasures had to be decided. Puyi gave his opinion that these treasures belonged to the people and should be turned over to the state. Sanctioned by the government, the authorities of the prison formally declared that because

all of these treasures were secretly taken out from the Forbidden City, they should be returned to the people. They allowed Puyi, however, to select a watch for his own personal future use.

Puyi ignored the most valuable item – one with numerous diamonds for decoration. Instead, he chose a well-worn but still shining gold French pocket watch. He remembered that he had bought it from the noted Wuliwen Overseas Firm on November 28, 1924. It was an unforgettable day for him, as it had been the first time that he cast off his royal entourage, freely standing on the street before going into the Japanese Legation at Dongjiaominxiang Lane in Beijing. He had had it with him every day ever since, in Tianjin, in Changchun and Russia. Now he expressed the desire to take repossession of it .

When Puyi was asked to write a receipt for this item, he wrote down, "Today I received a golden pocket watch issued to me by the government." Then, in an attitude of humility, he gave the working staff of the prison present a 90-degree bow and said to them, with some emotion, "I am grateful to the People's Government and its officials for the ten years' education and reformation given to me. It was your sincere and helpful teaching which



On Dec 8, 1959, Puyi in the train waving hands to those seeing him off

changed me, the No.1 idiot in the world, into an independent man.”

Puyi took the pocket watch, looking at it from left to right repeatedly. He tried to wind it but didn't know how to turn its two hands. Only after being shown several times, was he finally able to do it – with some difficulty. Puyi was clearly embarrassed for making a fool of himself in public. With a forced smile he said, “Look how useless my hands are!”

After Puyi left Fushun, these treasures were still exhibited in the prison until, some four years later, they were sent to Beijing under escort, on the instructions of Premier Zhou Enlai. Inside the Forbidden City, these treasures were turned over to the Central Checking and Accepting Group (comprising the most authoritative antiquarians in China). After evaluation, some of these items were placed on display in the Forbidden City, with the remainder being stored there.

On the afternoon of December 8, 1959, Puyi and four other “new citizens” boarded a train bound for Shenyang. Governor Jin, besides personally accompanying them to Shenyang, had appointed a Guanjiao (a Warder, responsible for teaching and rehabilitating prisoners) named Li Fusheng to take care of them for the whole trip. They would change to the Beijing train at Shenyang. A photograph from that time shows Puyi sitting by the window waving his hand to those standing on the platform to see them off. The train chugged and whistled its way to Shengyang after passing through the outskirts of Fushun.



3. Arrival in Beijing

On the train, Puyi seldom spoke – as he had been advised repeatedly – in order that others should not learn his identity. The passengers on his train never expected that the man in the blue cotton-padded Mao-jacket, sitting by a window, was the celebrated last Chinese emperor. However, when a woman attendant came to serve tea to the passengers, Puyi involuntarily stood up and bowed to her to show his thanks. This unusual action almost “let the cat out of bag”. The passengers around whispered, “This man is a little crazy”, and “He’s so strange!”