Statement for the Hearing

of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China

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I am honored to be here and I salute the Commission for its wisdom in holding this hearing.

Liu Xiaobo is one of those unusual people who can look at human life from the broadest of perspectives and reason about it from first principles. His keen intellect notices things that others also look at, but do not see. It seems that hardly any topic in Chinese culture, politics, or society evades his interest, and he can write with analytic calm about upsetting things. One might expect such calm in a recluse—a hermit poet, or a cloistered scholar—but in Liu Xiaobo it comes in an activist. Time after time he has gone where he thinks he should go, and has done what he thinks he should do, as if havoc, danger, and the possibility of prison were simply not part of the picture. He seems to move through life taking mental notes on what he sees, hears, and reads, as well as on the inward responses that he feels.

Fortunately for us, his readers, he also has a habit of writing free from fear. Most Chinese writers today, including many of the best ones, write with political caution in the backs of their minds and with a shadow hovering over their fingers as they pass across a keyboard. How should I couch things? What topics should I not touch? What indirection should I use? Liu Xiaobo does none of this. What he thinks, you get.

Liu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010. For about two decades, the prize committee in Oslo, Norway, had been considering Chinese dissidents for the award, and in 2010, after Liu Xiaobo had been sentenced to eleven years in prison for "incitement of subversion"—largely because of his advocacy of the human-rights manifesto called Charter 08—he had come to emerge as the right choice. Authorities in Beijing, furious at the committee's announcement on October 8, 2010, did what they could to frustrate celebrations of it. Police broke up parties of revelers in several Chinese cities. The Chinese Foreign Ministry pressured world diplomats to stay away from the Award Ceremony in Oslo on December 10. Dozens of Liu Xiaobo's friends in China were barred from leaving the country lest they head for Oslo. Liu Xiaobo's wife, Liu Xia, although charged with nothing, was held under tight house arrest. Liu himself remained in prison, and none of his family members could travel to Oslo to collect the prize. At the Award Ceremony, the prize medal, resting inside a small box, and the prize certificate, in a folder that bore the initials "LXB," were placed on stage on an empty chair. Within hours authorities in Beijing banned the phrase "empty chair" from the Chinese Internet.

Liu was the fifth Peace Laureate to fail to appear for the Award Ceremony. In 1935, Carl von Ossietzky was held in a Nazi prison; in 1975, Andrei Sakharov was not allowed to leave the USSR; in 1983, Lech Wałesa feared he would be barred from reentering Poland if he went to Oslo; and in 1991, Aung Sang Suu Kyi was under house arrest in Burma. Each of the latter three prize-winners was able to send a family member to Oslo. Only Ossietzky and Liu Xiaobo could do not even that.

Chinese people have always shown special reverence for Nobel Prizes, in any field, and this fact has made Liu Xiaobo's Peace Prize especially hard for the regime to swallow. Two people born in China have won the Nobel Peace Prize—Liu Xiaobo and the Dalai Lama. One is in prison and the other in permanent exile. When China's rulers put on a mask of imperturbability as they denounce these Nobel prizes, they not only seek to deceive the world but, at a deeper level, are lying to themselves. When they try to counter Liu Xiaobo's Nobel by inventing a Confucius Peace Prize, and then give it to Vladimir Putin citing his "iron fist" in Chechnya, there is a sense in which we should not blame them for the clownish effect, because it springs from an inner panic that they themselves cannot control. Liu Xiaobo sits in prison, in physical hardship. But in his moral core, there can be no doubt that he has more peace than the men who persecute him.

Liu was born December 28, 1955, in the city of Changchun in northeastern China. He was eleven years old when Mao Zedong closed his school—along with nearly every other school in China—so that youngsters could go into society to "oppose revisionism," "sweep away freaks and monsters," and in other ways join in Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Liu and his parents spent 1969 to 1973 at a "people's commune" in Inner Mongolia. In retrospect Liu believes that these years of upset, although a disaster for China as a whole, had certain unintended benefits for him personally. His years of lost schooling "allowed me freedom," he recalls, from the mind-closing processes of Maoist education; they gave him time to read books, both approved and unapproved. Moreover, the pervasive cynicism and chaos in the society around him taught him perhaps the most important lesson of all: that he would have to think for himself. Where else, after all, could he turn? In this general experience Liu resembles several others of the most powerfully independent Chinese writers of his generation. Hu Ping, Su Xiaokang, Zheng Yi, Bei Dao, Zhong Acheng, Jiang Qisheng, and many others survived the Cultural Revolution by learning to rely on their own minds, and for some this led to a questioning of the political system as a whole. Mao had preached that "rebellion is justified," but this is hardly the way he thought it should happen.

Chinese universities began to reopen after Mao died in 1976, and in 1977 Liu Xiaobo went to Jilin University, in his home province, where he earned a B.A. in Chinese literature in 1982. From there he went to Beijing, to Beijing Normal University, where he continued to study Chinese literature, receiving an M.A. in 1984 and a Ph.D. in 1988. His Ph.D. dissertation, entitled "Aesthetics and Human Freedom," was a plea for liberation of the human spirit; it drew wide acclaim from both his classmates and the most seasoned scholars at the university. Beijing Normal invited him to stay on as a lecturer, and his classes were highly popular with students.

Liu's articles and his presentations at conferences earned him a reputation as an iconoclast even before he finished graduate school. Known as the "black horse" of the late 1980s, seemingly no one escaped his acerbic pen: Maoist writers like Hao Ran were no better than hired guns, post-Mao literary stars like Wang Meng were but clever equivocators, "roots-seeking" writers like Han Shaogong and Zheng Yi made the mistake of thinking China had roots that were worth seeking, and even speak-for-the-people heroes like Liu Binyan were too ready to pin hopes on "liberal-minded" Communist leaders like Hu Yaobang (the Party chair who was sacked in 1987). "The Chinese love to look up to the famous," Liu wrote, "thereby saving themselves the trouble of thinking." In graduate school Liu read widely in Western thought—Plato, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Isaiah Berlin, Friedrich Hayek, and others—and began to use these thinkers to criticize Chinese cultural patterns. He also came to admire modern paragons of nonviolent resistance around the world—Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Vaclav Havel, and others. Although not formally a Christian, or a believer in any religion, he began to think and write about Jesus Christ.

Around the same time, he arrived at a view of the last two centuries of Chinese history that saw the shock of Western imperialism and technology as bringing "the greatest changes in thousands of years." Through the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, China's struggles to respond to this shock cut ever deeper into China's core. Reluctantly, Chinese thinking shifted from "our technology is not as good as other people's" in the 1880s and early 1890s to "our political system is not as good as other people's" after the defeat by Japan in 1895 to "our culture is not as good as other people's" in the May Fourth movement of the late 1910s. Then, under the pressure of war, all of the ferment and struggle ended in a Communist victory in 1949, and this event, said Liu, "plunged China into the abyss of totalitarianism." Recent decades have been more hopeful for China, in his view. Unrelenting pressure from below—from farmers, petitioners, rights advocates, and, perhaps most important, hundreds of millions of Internet users—has obliged the regime, gradually but inexorably, to cede ever more space to civil society.

The late 1980s were a turning point in Liu's life both intellectually and emotionally. He visited the University of Oslo in 1988, where he was surprised that European Sinologists did not speak Chinese (they only read it) and was disappointed at how naive Westerners were in accepting Chinese government language at face value. Then he went to New York, to Columbia University, where he encountered "critical theory" and learned that its dominant strain, at least at Columbia, was "postcolonialism." People expected him, as a visitor from China, to fit in by representing the "the subaltern," by resisting the "discursive hegemony" of "the metropole," and so on. Liu wondered why people in New York were telling him how it felt to be Chinese. Shouldn't it be the other way around? Was "postcolonialism" itself a kind of intellectual colonialism? Liu wrote in May 1989 that "no matter how strenuously Western intellectuals try to negate colonial expansionism and the white man's sense of superiority, when faced with other nations Westerners cannot help feeling superior. Even when criticizing themselves, they become besotted with their own courage and sincerity." His experience in New York led him to see his erstwhile project of using Western values as yardsticks to measure China as fundamentally flawed. No system of human thought, he concluded, is equal to the challenges that the modern world faces: the population explosion, the energy crisis, environmental imbalance, nuclear disarmament, and "the addiction to pleasure and to commercialization." Nor is there any culture, he wrote, "that can help humanity once and for all to eliminate spiritual suffering or transcend

personal limits." Suddenly he felt intellectually vulnerable, despite the fame he had enjoyed in China. He felt as if his lifelong project to think for himself would have to begin all over from scratch.

These thoughts came at the very time that the dramatic events of the 1989 pro-democracy movement in Beijing and other Chinese cities were appearing on the world's television screens. Commenting that intellectuals too often "just talk" and "do not do," Liu decided in late April 1989 to board a plane from New York to Beijing. "I hope," he wrote, "that I'm not the type of person who, standing at the doorway to hell, strikes a heroic pose and then starts frowning in indecision." Back in Beijing, Liu went to Tiananmen Square, talked with the demonstrating students, and organized a hunger strike that began on June 2, 1989. Less than two days later, when tanks began rolling toward the Square and it was clear that people along the way were already dying, Liu negotiated with the attacking military to allow students a peaceful withdrawal. It is impossible to calculate how many lives he may have saved by this compromise, but certainly some, and perhaps many.

After the massacre, Liu took refuge in the foreign diplomatic quarter, but later came to blame himself severely for not remaining in the streets—as many "ordinary folk" did, trying to rescue victims of the massacre. Images of the "souls of the dead" have haunted him ever since. The opening line of Liu's "Final Statement," which he read at his criminal trial in December 2009, said, "June 1989 has been the major turning point in my life." Liu Xia, who visited him in prison on October 10, 2010, two days after the announcement of his Nobel Prize, reports that he wept and said, "This is for those souls of the dead."

The regime's judgment of Liu's involvement at Tiananmen was that he had been a "black hand" behind a "counterrevolutionary riot." He was arrested on June 6, 1989, and sent for a bit more than eighteen months to Beijing's elite Qincheng Prison, where he was kept in a private cell, but not severely mistreated. "Sometimes I was deathly bored," he later wrote, "but that's about it." Upon release he was fired from his teaching job at Beijing Normal University.

He resumed a writing career, but now wrote less on literature and culture and more on politics. He could not publish in China, but sent manuscripts to Hong Kong publications such as *The Open Magazine* and *Cheng Ming Monthly,* as well as U.S.- based magazines such as *Beijing Spring* and *Democratic China*. In May 1995 the government arrested him again, this time for seven months. No reason was specified for the arrest, but it came in the same month that he released a petition called "Learn from the Lesson Written in Blood and Push Democracy and Rule of Law Forward: An Appeal on the Sixth Anniversary of Tiananmen." On August 11, 1996, barely half a year after his second stint in prison, Liu joined with Wang Xizhe, a well-known dissident from the southern city of Guangzhou, to publish a statement on the sensitive topic of Taiwan's relations with mainland China. Earlier that year the Chinese military had fired missiles into the Taiwan Strait, in an apparent attempt to intimidate Taiwanese voters on the eve of presidential elections in which the issue of a formal declaration of independence from the mainland was at stake. In their statement, Liu and Wang wrote, "Is the government of the People's Republic of China the only legitimate [Chinese] government? In our view, it is both legitimate and not completely legitimate." Less than two months later, on October 8, 1996, Liu was arrested again and sent for three years to a reeducation-through-labor camp in Dalian, in his

home province of Liaoning. (Wang fled the country right after the declaration was issued and has since settled in the United States. He has never been back to China.)

The story of Liu Xiaobo's courage from the mid-1990s on cannot be separated from his wife, Liu Xia. Four years younger than he, Liu Xia is a poet and art photographer whom Liu Xiaobo has known since the 1980s and with whom he was living after his release from prison in January 1996. During his labor-camp incarceration, Liu Xia was allowed to visit him once a month, and, not missing a single month, made the 1,100-mile round-trip from Beijing thirty-six times. Shortly after Xiaobo entered the camp, Liu Xia applied to marry him. Camp authorities, puzzled at her request, felt that they needed to check with her to be sure she knew what she was doing. She reports answering them by saying, "Right! That 'enemy of the state'! I want to marry him!" A wedding ceremony inside the camp was impossible, and regulations forbade Xiaobo from exiting the camp, so the two married by filling out forms. On April 8, 1998, it was official.

It was during the three years at the labor camp that Liu Xiaobo seems to have formed his deepest faith in the concept of "human dignity," a phrase that has recurred in his writing ever since. It was also the camp environment that gave rise to many of his best poems. Many of these camp poems are subtitled "to Xia," or "for Xia," but that does not make them love poems in the narrow sense. They span a variety of topics—including massacre victims, Immanuel Kant, Vincent Van Gogh, and others—that the poet addresses with Liu Xia standing beside him, as it were, as his spiritual companion. Liu Xia has prepared a book of her art photographs, which are deeply probing in what they suggest about China's moral predicament in contemporary times, and she subtitles her book "accompanying Liu Xiaobo."

On October 8, 1999, Liu Xiaobo returned from the reeducation camp, unreeducated. He resumed his writing career with no alteration of range or viewpoint, and lived primarily off his manuscripts, for which he was paid the equivalent of about US$60 to $90 per one thousand Chinese characters. In November 2003 he was elected chair of the writers' group Chinese PEN, and served in that post until 2007. During those years the rise of the Internet in China began to make a huge difference for Liu Xiaobo as well as for China as a whole. Finding ways to evade the government's "Great Firewall," Liu now could access information, communicate with friends, organize open letters, and edit and submit his manuscripts all much easier than before. He also watched with great satisfaction as the numbers of Chinese Internet users passed 100 million in 2006, giving rise to what he saw as "free assembly in cyberspace" and "power of public opinion on the Internet" that have turned into autonomous forces pushing China in the direction of democracy. In October 2006 Liu took over editorship of the Internet magazine *Democratic China* from his friend Su Xiaokang, who had been editing it from Delaware, and greatly expanded its reach inside China.

Charter 08, which was conceived in conscious admiration of Czechoslovakia's Charter 77 of the 1970s, and which became the main piece of evidence against Liu Xiaobo at his criminal trial, did not originate with Liu Xiaobo. A number of his friends had been working on a draft for several months in 2008 before he chose to join them. I do not know why he at first stood aside, but my surmise is that he felt the project was unlikely to get anywhere. When he did join, though, his efforts were crucial, and became increasingly so in the weeks and days immediately before the charter was announced. He insisted that the charter not be a "petition" to the

government; it was a way for citizens to address fellow citizens about shared ideals. He persuaded his friends to remove certain confrontational phrases so that a wider range of people would feel comfortable endorsing the charter, and this judgment was vindicated when more than twelve thousand people eventually signed. He personally did more than anyone else to solicit signatures, but his most courageous move in the days before the unveiling of the charter was to agree to present himself as its leading sponsor. He was already known as the most prominent "dissident" inside China; taking primary responsibility for this text would only put him more in the government's spotlight and at greater risk for punishment.

He was not the only person punished for Charter 08. In the days right before and after it was unveiled, several others who had worked on drafting it saw their homes raided, or received from the police "invitations to tea" (i.e., interrogation) of the kind one is not at liberty to decline. Then came a nationwide campaign to suppress the charter itself. But even in this context, the eleven-year prison sentence that Liu received surprised many observers for its severity. Liu himself said of the ruling, which arrived on Christmas Day 2009, only that it "cannot bear moral scrutiny and will not pass the test of history." In his "Final Statement" he thanked his captors for the civil treatment he had received during his detention and declared that "I have no enemies." Then he appealed the ruling—not because he expected it could possibly be overturned, but because he wanted "to leave the fullest possible historical record of what happens when an independent intellectual stands up to a dictatorship."

When the police came to remove Liu from his apartment late at night on December 8, 2008, they took him to a police-run hostel at an undisclosed location in Beijing for six months of "residential surveillance." (Chinese law says that "residential surveillance" happens at a person's residence, but for Liu this was not the case. He was allowed two monitored visits with Liu Xia during this time, but those occurred at a third location, neither his home nor the secret place where he was being held.) On June 23, 2009, he was formally arrested and charged with "incitement of subversion of state power," after which he was held at the Beijing Number One Detention Center. He continued to be held there after his trial in December 2009, and on May 24, 2010, was transferred to Jinzhou Prison in his home province of Liaoning. (By custom, notable Chinese criminals are sent home for punishment.) Liu Xia has been granted occasional, but closely monitored, visits at the prison.

We know very little of his prison conditions. Chinese Human Rights Defenders has reported that—as of late 2010—he was sharing a cell with five other inmates (although veterans of Chinese prisons suspect that these five, real inmates or not, are there to report on him). The other five are allowed weekly visits from family members, but Liu is allowed only monthly visits. Whether or not these visits can be from his wife depends on his behavior, on hers, and on the political "sensitivity" of the times. (A Nobel Prize and an Arab Spring are the kinds of things that generate great sensitivity.) Liu eats low-quality prison food. His cell mates are allowed to pay the prison to get specially prepared, better food, but Liu is denied this option. He has chronic hepatitis and stomach problems, but receives only cursory medical attention. He gets two hours each day to go outdoors. He can read books that Liu Xia has brought to him, but only if they are books published and sold in China. There is a television set in his cell, and the prison authorities control which programs he can watch—but not, of course, how he understands them.

This statement is based on my Introduction to No Enemies, No Hatred: Selected Essays and Poems of Liu Xiaobo *(Harvard University Press, 2012).*