

“Two Years Later: The Ongoing Detentions of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

Liu Xiaobo and His Wife Liu Xia”

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On October 9th, 2010, the day after Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the Chinese Communist Party arranged a meeting between him and his wife Liu Xia.

Liu told his wife that he had already learned of his award from prison officials. Then, facing her with tears in his eyes, he said, “this prize is for the lost souls of June Fourth.”

Liu Xiaobo’s confinement made him only the second recipient, in more than a century of the prize’s history, to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize while in prison. As Liu was unable to attend the ceremony held in Oslo, an empty chair was placed onstage to symbolize his absence: as you might expect, empty chairs are a rare sight at such ceremonies.

Vaclav Havel, a fellow intellectual, dissident, and political prisoner who strongly supported Liu’s nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize, also shares with Liu a common casual fashion sense. Even after becoming President of the Czech Republic, Havel never abandoned his aversion to formal dress. He once refused a suit given to him by his friend Karel Schwarzenberger, a descendant of Austrian royalty, exclaiming “I can’t wear this! It would make me look like a clown.” Havel continued to wear a simple pullover and jeans throughout his presidency, riding his scooter through the winding halls of Prague Castle.

Like Havel, Liu Xiaobo has always had a casual and simple style. You are not likely to see him in a suit and tie. Once when a friend invited him to dinner at an exclusive club, the host stopped Liu at the doorway and required him to change out of his jeans: he was less than happy with this formality. When Liu was a rising star in the academic world in the 1980s, he would often lecture at Beijing Normal University in worn old jeans and sandals. One classmate recalls that Liu, who always did things his own way even then, would often “wear a t-shirt, shorts, and sandals, with a tattered book bag on his back.” And whoever chose to criticize his sense of style would inevitably receive the self-satisfied response that “this entire outfit cost less than ten *yuan*!”

If one day Liu Xiaobo regains his freedom, we can be certain that China will have already started on the path to democratization. Would he be invited to Oslo City Hall, to make up for the prize ceremony that he missed? Would he wear a neatly pressed black tuxedo to the ceremony? I can’t help but wonder how he would look, dressed so immaculately from head to toe.

Every person’s life is filled with countless “ifs.” Liu Xiaobo’s is no exception.

If Liu Xiaobo’s father had not been a literature professor, if Liu had not been sent down to the countryside as an “educated youth,” or if he had not been accepted into the Chinese Department at Jilin University and joined the Innocent Hearts Poetry Group, amidst the unrivaled reign of the technical sciences in that era, would he have become just another bumbling engineer?

If Liu Xiaobo had not been accepted into the Chinese Department at Beijing Normal University and remained as an instructor after graduation, if he had not published his declaration on the crisis of contemporary Chinese literature, and if he had not challenged Li Zehou, one of the more influential thinkers of that period, would he have become just another inconspicuous and obscure professor of aesthetics?

If Liu Xiaobo, amidst the tumult of 1989, had only completed his term as a visiting scholar abroad rather than returning to Beijing like a moth to a flame, if he had only stood on the sidelines of the student movement rather than becoming one of the leaders of the hunger strike that marked its peak, or if he had just not stood ground with fellow protestors on Tiananmen Square until the very last moment, would he have avoided the tragedy of prison?

If, as more and more Chinese dove into the sea of entrepreneurship in the 1990s, Liu Xiaobo had decided to change course and just focus on making some money, if he had returned to the ivory tower to refocus his energies on textual research, or if he had only dedicated some of his talent to publishing bestsellers, would he have become just another showy nouveau riche intellectual-turned-businessman?

If, in this new century, Liu Xiaobo had not been elected to the presidency of the Independent Chinese PEN Center and dedicated himself to the struggle for freedom of expression, if he had not published millions of characters worth of political commentary in the overseas media and on overseas websites, and if he had not participated in drafting and organizing Charter '08, would he have faced a fourth prison sentence? And would he have received the Nobel Peace Prize?

Each of these “ifs” presents a crossroads in life. But if, over the past thirty years, China did not have Liu Xiaobo, or if Liu’s sense of duty... or shall we say the combination of his sense of duty, ambition, and other aspects of his complex personality... were not quite as strong as they have been, what would our world be like today?

Liu Xiaobo’s existence, and Liu Xiaobo’s suffering, are a reminder to us all: we are not alone in this world, and cannot think only of ourselves. We have to remain engaged with and reflective upon the world around us, and bear our shared responsibility.

In 1977, after years of work in the countryside as an “educated youth,” Liu Xiaobo was admitted into college, beginning his journey to becoming an independent intellectual at the age of twenty-two. Liu’s growth and activism over the three decades that followed can be divided into four main passages.

The first passage, from 1977 to 1989, was a period in which Liu pursued his studies, began his career, and made a name for himself in literary circles.

The late 1970s and 1980s were a rare moment of vitality and hope in modern China. Despite the occasional reemergence of political campaigns like the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Drive and the Campaign against Bourgeois Liberalization, the control and restraint of leaders like Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang ensured that such temporary flashbacks to the Maoist era did not devastate the recently revitalized cultural and intellectual fields. The liberation of thought that characterized the 1980s continued through the spring of 1989, when it was suddenly and cruelly extinguished.

Liu Xiaobo benefited greatly from the open intellectual atmosphere of this period, while also becoming a central contributor to its continual expansion. Liu began his studies from literary criticism and aesthetics, gradually expanding into a far-reaching critique of Chinese traditional culture, Chinese intellectuals, and the prevailing political system. His books sold faster than they could be printed, and his speeches were all the talk of college campuses.

In the spring of 1989, while Liu Xiaobo was a visiting scholar in the United States, student protests began in Beijing. Liu was determined to return, and soon dedicated himself wholeheartedly to this movement. Liu's decision transformed him from the "dark horse" of literary circles to the "black hand" behind the student movement, from a detached intellectual to a man of action, and from a young scholar to an enemy of the state. The echo of gunfire reverberating through the streets of Beijing officially marked the end of Liu Xiaobo's youth.

The second passage, from 1989 to 1999, was a period in which Liu was imprisoned, persecuted, and remained committed and active while increasingly isolated

This was a decade of unrelenting social and political stasis, combined with unprecedented economic growth. It was a decade of intellectual suppression and of the widespread abandonment of even the most basic of moral values. Deng Xiaoping's call to build a "well-off society" left the people of China with no choice but to accept the reality of being robbed of their freedom and denied their fundamental human rights, and to focus their energies upon the sole acceptable goal: making money. Money became the only thing in which people could truly believe. In academic circles, one after another, nationalism, populism, postmodernism, neo-traditionalism, and the "New Left" took intellectual circles by storm with the tacit approval and encouragement of the state. Liberalism, by contrast, was gradually marginalized.

Liu Xiaobo's human rights activism in this period led to his imprisonment three separate times, totaling nearly six years behind bars in one decade. And even when he was not in prison, Liu was still followed, closely monitored, and even placed under arbitrary house arrest by state security, making his life anything but easy. Yet he refused to give up, to be discouraged, or to even feel a hint of anxiety about his increasingly marginalized position within Chinese society. Instead, he continued on his course, reading the latest commentaries, observing the social and cultural developments around him, collaborating with similarly minded colleagues, and searching for new possibilities.

Throughout this decade, Liu composed and organized signatories to a number of open letters addressing such pressing issues as implementing democracy, protecting human rights, and overturning the official verdict on Tiananmen. Despite these far-reaching efforts, Liu's influence continued to be limited primarily to a small circle of dissident intellectuals: he had become a lonely trailblazer.

The third passage, from 1999 to 2008, was a period in which Liu wrote extensively on political affairs, and emerged as one of contemporary China's central public intellectuals and human rights activists.

This was a decade in which China's economic development continued to accelerate, while political reform continued to lag far behind. Corruption continued to plague society, and social tensions continued to intensify. Throughout the reigns of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, the Chinese Communist Party has declared to the outside world the rise of a new great power, and attempted to export the so-called China model. Yet domestically, the Party has proselytized its "harmonious society:" beneath its pleasant sounding veneer, such harmony is in reality nothing but the maintenance of "stability" through unrelenting violence, with the growing ranks of secret police running wild with increasingly free reign.

Yet from another perspective, in this decade civil society gradually took root and slowly expanded, NGOs sprung up one after another, and rapidly expanding Internet use resulted in unprecedented access to free information. However, divisions continued to grow within the

intellectual world, as more and more scholars began to willingly abandon their independence and stand wholeheartedly with the government.

Totalitarianism with Chinese characteristics has undergone repeated metamorphoses on its path to modernity. The majority has chosen to bow down and submit to this superficially benevolent yet actually quite coldblooded force; they justify their decision by repeating, “if you can’t beat them, join them.” And as one sector after another gave up and joined in this game, cynicism has come to reign over Chinese society, erasing any remaining momentum for further reform.

In this era, Liu Xiaobo continued to be closely monitored by the state security forces. However, with the exception of brief periods of house arrest and interrogation at particular “sensitive times” each year, he managed to stay out of prison, allowing for a relative sense of security and stability. Combining his extensive knowledge with a growing awareness of the essential role of public intellectuals in social transformation, Liu maintained a sharp awareness of pressing issues and a passion for critical reflection. As one scholar has noted, “he never stopped thinking through a workable program for political transition, as well as possible directions to pursue following such a transition. His thought provides a unique and extremely valuable perspective that links the intellectual world with grassroots society, in search of a soft landing in a ‘post-transition’ era yet to come.”

Between 2003 and 2007, Liu Xiaobo also served two terms as the president of the Independent Chinese PEN Center, finally developing on-the-ground infrastructure for the center’s activities within China. Cooperating with and drawing support from his colleagues, Liu overcame the authorities’ restrictions on independent organizations, making Chinese PEN an unprecedentedly vibrant independent organization dedicated to protecting freedom of expression and promoting the development of Chinese literature. In 2008, Liu Xiaobo retired from his post in Chinese PEN and dedicated himself wholeheartedly to drafting, revising, and organizing signatories to Charter ’08 work which lasted until his arrest on December 8th of that year. The dual leadership roles that Liu assumed in this decade, both in Independent Chinese PEN and in the preparation of Charter ’08, unveiled his new identity as a civil society organizer and coordinator.

The fourth passage in Liu Xiaobo’s life began in 2009, and continues to this day.

From the moment that policemen abruptly stormed into his home in the middle of night on December 8th, 2008, Liu Xiaobo lost his freedom. One year later, in December of 2009, he was sentenced to a total of eleven years in prison. But then, one more year later, Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Although the Chinese authorities have imprisoned Liu Xiaobo’s body, they cannot imprison his name and his ideas. Liu’s experience unmasks the fundamentally dictatorial nature of the Chinese Communist regime for the world to see. And no matter what disguises the Party may try, so long as Liu remains locked away in prison, there is no way for this regime to hide its despicable nature.

Now, the honor of the Nobel Peace Prize has elevated Liu Xiaobo to a new status. Although Liu’s contributions cannot be measured solely through this prize, this honor nevertheless places him directly at the heart of any future sociopolitical transition in China. Chen Jun, a good friend of Liu, notes, “I strongly believe that Xiaobo has his own expectations and even preparations in this regard. If he can persist, and continue on the path that he has followed over the years, he will become an outstanding figure in history, like Vaclav Havel, leaving a deep and lasting imprint

upon China. This imprint could be far more significant than simply realizing democratization in China. And I strongly believe that he is qualified to play such a role.” In the not so distant future, will Liu Xiaobo finally realize the Herculean task of bringing real social transformation to China?

As for what this new passage in Liu’s life might bring, we all have yet to see. But each one of us who cares about China’s future and its fate is eagerly waiting, and imagining what is still to come.