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Liu Xiaobo's Dreams of a Democratic China Will Never Die

The Nobel Laureate May Have Passed Away But His Vision of a Democratic China Lives On.

By Jared Genser

The world's only imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Liu Xiaobo, died of liver cancer on Thursday at the No. 1 Hospital of China Medical University in the northeastern city of Shenyang. Despite a global outcry supporting his dying wish to travel abroad for medical treatment, including by 154 Nobel laureates, the Chinese government stood firm and willfully hastened his death by denying him access to treatments abroad that could have extended his life by several weeks. As his lawyer, I had arranged for a Medevac to take him abroad the moment Chinese President Xi Jinping might relent, but in the end Xi showed no humanity and no mercy.

Liu died totally cut off from everyone but his wife Liu Xia, and was not allowed to receive visits or calls from friends or other family. And as a further affront to his dignity, he wasn't even allowed to be alone with his wife – a Chinese security official was in the room with them around the clock and even when he died.

The last time the world heard from Liu was in a statement released by his counsel on Dec. 25, 2009, right after he was sentenced to 11 years imprisonment for "inciting subversion of state power." Liu said, "I have long been aware that when an independent intellectual stands up to an autocratic state, step one toward freedom is often a step into prison. Now I am taking that step; and true freedom is that much nearer."

China is indisputably a great power, with a population of 1.4 billion people, a GDP of \$11.2 trillion, the second largest economy in the world behind the United States, and annual military expenditures of \$140 billion. It is therefore stunning that Xi was so afraid of this one man and his ideas. Ironically, by its relentless persecution and silencing of Liu, China has made him a martyr for its democracy movement and ensured that his ideas will endure long beyond his passing today. Liu's soul is now free from his body, and even the powerful Chinese government cannot continue to persecute him.

Originally from northeast China's Jilin Province, Liu was a 61-year old former literature professor. He began an academic career at the Beijing Normal University as a lecturer and subsequently earned a doctoral degree before joining the faculty. A popular professor, he was invited to be a visiting scholar in Europe and the United States. In 1989, he left his position as visiting scholar at Columbia University to return to the growing protests in Tiananmen Square.

When Liu returned to Beijing, the students were occupying Tiananmen Square and demonstrations spread across the country. When the military were on the cusp of clearing the square by force, Liu and three other well-known intellectuals staged a 72-hour hunger strike as a show of solidarity. When the tanks were about to roll in, Liu negotiated with the military to allow many students to leave the square safely, preventing even more bloodshed. In response, the government detained Liu for 20 months at the Qincheng Prison on charges of "counterrevolution." He also lost his teaching position with Beijing Normal University and was prohibited from ever publishing again in China.

After Tiananmen, he became a moderate voice in the pro-democracy movement, rejecting the use of violence, rebellion or revolution. He also became a prolific writer, authoring hundreds of essays, which would eventually lead to further arbitrary detentions.

In 1995, the Chinese government placed Liu under house arrest for eight months for his writings and advocacy. The following year, he was sentenced to three years of "reeducation through labor" on charges of "rumor mongering and slander" and "disturbing the social order." These charges were in retaliation for his writings in support of freedoms of speech and religion.

Liu's last detention was again linked to his writings, in particular Charter 08. Drafted by a number of intellectuals, Charter 08 was modeled after the Charter 77 of then-Czechoslovakia and offered an alternative vision for China's political future. It called for political reform in China based on the principles of human rights, freedom and democracy. Though Liu did not initially begin as the leader of the group, he volunteered to be the first signatory on the petition. Charter 08 eventually garnered some 10,000 signatures before government censors removed it from the internet in China. Then-Chinese President Hu Jintao was heard to have said that the Chinese government needed to "cut off the head of the snake," a reference to Liu being the first signer.

On December 8, 2008, two days before the public release of Charter 08, authorities detained Liu. A year later, he was accused of having "disregarded state laws and by means of rumor-mongering and slander thereby inciting subversion of state power and the overthrow of socialist system." The charges were based on his participation with Charter 08 and six articles he authored.

I was hired to serve as Liu's pro bono counsel in mid-2010 by his wife and began to work to secure his freedom. As the announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize approached that year, it was rumored he was on the short list. Liu Xia and I discussed if it made more sense for her to travel abroad to fight for his freedom or remain in China. Despite the concerns I expressed to her that she would not likely remain free if Liu won the prize, she told me unequivocally, "My place is in China with my husband." Shortly after he was announced as the recipient of the prize in October 2010, she was placed under house arrest. She has been held without charge or trial ever since. With Liu Xiaobo's passing, the world must compel China to let her leave if that is her wish.

I had the tremendous privilege and honor to represent the Lius in Oslo and sit in the front row as the prize was presented to the empty chair. In the subsequent years, the United Nations found they both were being held in violation of international law; a group of 134 Nobel laureates urged their release; a global petition drive secured 450,000 signatures that was delivered to six Chinese embassies; and numerous other efforts were undertaken, but all to no avail.

Yet despite the tragedy that Liu's freedom has come from his death, it is clear today that the Chinese government has lost. Liu's ideas and his dreams will persist, spread, and will, one day, come to fruition. And his courage and his sacrifice for his country will inspire millions of Chinese activists and dissidents to persevere until China has become the multi-party democracy that Liu knew to his core was within its people's grasp.

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