

Testimony of Perry Link

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at a hearing on the historic significance of Liu Xiaobo

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Liu Xiaobo's Place in History

In order to challenge a repressive regime like the one in China today—a regime that demands comprehensive control of society and resorts to extreme brutality if it perceives a threat to itself—a person needs to make a judgment that speaking the truth is more important than personal safety. Dozens of Chinese in recent decades have accepted those stakes, have persisted in speaking honestly in public, and have suffered dire consequences.

Liu Xiaobo stood out within this courageous group because of his unflagging determination. He went to prison four times, yet none of these punishments deflected him in the slightest from his view of the truth or from his willingness to express it. Three related events during the years 2008 to 2010 turned him China's most prominent dissident: his sponsorship of the citizens' manifesto called "Charter 08," which is the only public document since the Communist revolution in 1949 that calls for an end to one-Party rule; an eleven-year prison sentence that resulted mainly from the publication of the Charter; and the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, which came when it did because of the long prison sentence.

Intellectually, Liu was 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 noticed things that others also look at, but do not see. He was deeply erudite on a variety of topics in history and literature, both Eastern and Western, ancient and modern. His remarkable habit of writing free from fear was so natural and routine that it seemed almost genetic, almost something he himself could not stop. Most Chinese writers today, including many of the best, 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 did none of this. With him, it was all there. What he thought, he wrote.

The combination of Charter 08 and the Nobel Prize seemed, for a time, to open a new alternative for China. Chinese citizens had long been accustomed to the periodic alternations between "more liberal" and "more conservative" tendencies in Communist rule, as if those described the outer limits within which one could think, but Charter 08 removed blinkers and showed there could be another way to be modern Chinese. It was hard to find Chinese people who disagreed with the Charter once they read it, and this potential for contagion was clearly the regime's reason for suppressing it. Today, as the severe tightening of controls on Chinese society that has come during the last few years under the rule of Xi Jinping has pushed China in the opposite direction from what Charter 08 called for, the question arises, "Is the Charter dead? Was the effort in vain?"

The question is difficult, but my answer would be no. The movement has been crushed but its ideas have not been. The government's assiduous, unremitting, and very expensive efforts to repress anything that resembles the ideas in Charter 08 is evidence enough that the men who rule are quite aware of the continuing potential of the ideas to spread.

Liu Xiaobo has been compared to Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel, and Aung San Suu Kyi, each of whom accepted prison as the price for conceiving and pursuing more humane governance in their homelands. But Mandela, Havel, and Suu Kyi all lived to see release from the beastly regimes that repressed them, and Liu Xiaobo did not. Does this mean his place in history will fall short of theirs? Is success of a movement necessary in order for its leader to be viewed as heroic?

Perhaps. It may be useful, though, to compare Liu Xiaobo and China's President Xi Jinping. The two differ in age by only two years. During Mao's Cultural Revolution both

missed school and were banished to remote places. Xi used the time to begin building a resume that would allow him, by riding the coattails of his elite-Communist father, to vie one day for supreme power; Liu used the time to read on his own and learn to think for himself. One mastered the skullduggery and sycophancy that a person needs into order to rise within a closed bureaucracy; the other learned to challenge received wisdom of every kind, keeping for himself only the ideas that could pass the test of rigorous independent examination. For one of them, value was measured by power and position; for the other, by moral worth. Today, after their final standoff, one has “won,” the other “lost”. But two hundred years from now, who will remember the names of the tyrants who sent Mandela, Havel, and Suu Kyi to jail? Will the glint of Liu Xiaobo’s incisive intellect be remembered, or the cardboard mediocrity of Xi’s?

Liu’s Final Days

Before Liu Xiaobo died of liver cancer in a prison ward in a Shenyang hospital, he asked for safe passage for himself, his wife, and his brother-in-law to go to Germany or the U.S. The two Western governments agreed, but the Chinese government, saying Liu was already receiving the best possible medical care and was too weak to travel, did not.

Until then Liu had always rejected suggestions that he leave China, primarily because dissidents who leave China lose credibility at home. Moreover, Liu had made it his personal mission to show exactly what happens, right to the last detail, when an independent thinker confronts an authoritarian regime.

We do not know why he changed his position in his last few days, but we can guess at the reasons, and I have two guesses. One is the obvious one: he was critically ill and transfer abroad might have been the only chance, however slight, to save his life. Second—and I think this reason is the more likely—he knew his death was imminent and wanted to spend the last of his energies to help his beloved and long-suffering wife Liu Xia, who has been held under house arrest for the last seven years (even though formally charged with nothing) and who has had bouts with severe depression, to get out of China.

But if Liu’s reasoning cannot be known, there can be no doubt about the reasoning of his captors: their concerns had little to do with medical care and much to do with preventing Liu Xiaobo from speaking his mind one last time. What did he see, as he lay dying, for a world in which China’s beastly dictatorship continues to grow? China’s rulers are no doubt relieved to see that Liu’s answers to that question are, with his life itself, now sealed in eternity.