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Jean-Philippe Béja on Liu Xiaobo

October 7, 2010 in [Awards](#), [China Behind the Headline](#), [Interview](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)

In only a few hours, word will come from Oslo and the world will know whether or not this year's Nobel Peace Prize winner is Chinese activist and author Liu Xiaobo, currently serving an eleven-year prison sentence for "subverting state authority." Speculation about Liu's odds has been running at a fever pitch this week, so much so that Irish bookmaker Paddy Power made an early payout to those who had put money on Liu by Tuesday. Authorities in Beijing, however, have made it clear that this is one international prize that [China doesn't want to win](#).

*For more about Liu Xiaobo, his work, and his Nobel nomination, Jeff Wasserstrom interviewed Jean-Philippe Béja of the Paris-based [Centre for International Studies and Research](#). Béja is author of *A la recherche d'une ombre chinoise. Le mouvement pour la démocratie en Chine (1919-2004)* and "[The Massacre's Long Shadow](#)," which appeared last year in the *Journal of Democracy*.*

JW: What do you consider Liu Xiaobo's most powerful essay? Or, to put it another way, if we were to direct our readers to one or two pieces that would give them a sense of his ideas and style of argument, what would they be?

JPB: I would certainly direct them to read "猪的哲学" ("The Philosophy of the Pig"), where he describes how the elites let themselves be bought by the regime after the Tiananmen massacre. It is a very lucid analysis of the social contract proposed by Deng Xiaoping after his Southern tour. Another one is the speech he gave when he received the prize of the 民主教育基金会 (Chinese Democracy Education Foundation), in which he emphasizes one of his most constant positions: by living in truth, it will be possible to change a regime which is based on lies. This is his most Havelian speech, which illustrates his deepest convictions. When many Chinese intellectuals were abandoning ethics in order to be "modern", Liu Xiaobo always insisted on the value of ethics.

Finally, if your readers want to know more about the way he became the "black horse" of literary circles, they should read the article 危机 ("Crisis") he published in the 深圳青年报 (*Shenzhen Youth Daily*) in 1986.

JW: Were you surprised when it became clear how seriously his candidacy for this prize was being taken?

JPB: Yes quite, because in the course of the years, I have noticed that Westerners very rarely understand the value of Chinese intellectuals. But, of course, Central and Eastern Europeans are different, because they have gone through a comparable experience. Václav Havel perfectly understands the situation of Liu Xiaobo, and he knows the courage which is required to stand up as he always did.

JW: Were you surprised that the Beijing government tried to get involved in the Nobel Prize process, or did this strike you as quite predictable, given the things China's leaders have done in the past (like [trying to keep Dai Qing from speaking](#) at last year's Frankfurt Book Fair)?

JPB: It did strike me as predictable. The Chinese leaders always blast the NGOs or the Western governments who comment on Chinese affairs, accusing them of "hurting the feelings" of 1.3 billion Chinese, but they seize all the opportunities to try and influence their partners on the international scene.

JW: Can you tell our readers something about Liu Xiaobo, as a political figure or simply as a person, since in [a recent article](#) in the *Guardian* you are described as one of his friends?

JPB: I admire Liu Xiaobo's courage and determination. He is a very mild person, his analyses are always quite rational, and, for example, he has always refused to judge the political situation in function of his personal position. Let me explain. At the time he was followed everywhere by two or three plainclothes policemen, when they prevented him from leaving his home, even to buy food, he

would acknowledge the progress that was accomplished, congratulating himself of the greater space for society to express its opinions. Personally, he likes discussions, he can be very tough and we often argued about how to analyse some political situations. But our disagreements never had any consequences on our friendship. Liu Xiaobo is a 东北人 (Northeasterner) and, despite his strong criticism of Chinese tradition, he has a deep sense of 义气 (loyalty).

Tags: [Liu Xiaobo](#), [Nobel Peace Prize](#)