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Symbols: Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel Peace Prize

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By Paulina Hartono

Liu Xiaobo is, and now is probably much more so after Friday’s announcement, one of China’s most well-known dissidents—or activists, depending on the term you prefer. Most people who have heard of him know about his hand in penning part of Charter 08, a manifesto based on Charter 77, which advocates broad democratic political reform and human rights protections in China. Those who are more familiar with Liu’s name know of him for his hunger strike in Tian’anmen, or his prolific number of essays published in print and on the Internet.

For his role in drafting Charter 08, and writing six essays, he was sentenced to eleven years in prison on December 25, 2009 for state subversion. The sentence is an extraordinarily harsh one, considering other noted activists like Gao Zhisheng and Hu Jia were also sentenced for state subversion, but received sentences of three and three-and-a-half years, respectively. (For more on “incitement of state subversion,” see Article 105 of PRC Criminal Law.)

There is a well-known phrase in Chinese, 杀鸡儆猴 (shā jī jǐng hóu). Literally, it means “kill the chicken to scare the monkeys,” but should be more properly understood as “punishing one to warn the others.” Arguably, the state used Liu’s heavy sentence as a lesson to others as an example of what happens when one fails to adhere to Party ideology. In so doing, Liu was recast not only as a criminal, but as a pedagogical symbol.

Never mind that some people find the particular six essays to not be particularly reactionary, or wonder about whether Liu contributed so much to the Charter that his name appeared at the top, or if he just acceded to hedging the blow to come. These hinge on personal opinion and speculation, and are therefore moot. However, because Liu’s wishes for political change and human rights have not yet come into being, I think these documents remain firmly within the realm of political thought and speech. Though—or because—they are not concrete, they hold a lot of symbolic power, regardless of one’s subjective reception.

In some ways, the December 2009 sentencing seemed to be a layering of one symbol on top of the next. Now, the 2010 prize conferral appears to be yet another layer. This is largely because the goal of the prize is unclear. From Alfred Nobel’s will:

The said interest shall be divided into five equal parts, which shall be apportioned as follows: /- - -/-
one part to the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations,
the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses.

The prize is in large part, a recognition of an individual’s or group’s efforts. However, it has either had, or has come to have, other purposes as well. I use the following quotes to probe more deeply at this issue.

From Adam Smith, Editor-in-Chief, Nobelprize.org:

An article [Liu] wrote for the South China Morning Post in February 2010 contains the statement “Opposition is not equivalent to subversion”. This sentiment was echoed by the Norwegian Nobel Committee’s remarks, following this year’s Nobel Peace Prize announcement, regarding the sign that they hope this award will send about the importance of supporting debate, and those who champion it, in all countries of the world.

See also the Nobel Peace Prize press announcement:

China’s new status must entail increased responsibility.
Given the prize’s stated prescriptive aim ("this award will send about...") and its instructive claims ("must entail"), it is arguably also a type of pedagogical symbol.

* * *

Symbols lie within a tricky territory because they are so open to interpretation. Earlier, I wrote that Liu’s work has a lot of symbolic versus concrete power. That is not to rob it of its value in the least. If anything, I think it speaks to the might that is harnessed by a seed of thought, as made manifest through open—while not yet free—speech.

So I do find it somewhat ironic that while the prize is a recognition of freedom of speech advocacy, there won’t be much human rights dialogue going on.

First, because many of Liu’s ideas are rather broad-based, there is no settled understanding of what kind of human rights need to be discussed, or what China’s "entail[ed] increased responsibility" is. Nobody disagrees that China should have better human rights, not even its central government. The points of contention are which specific rights should be protected, how following legislation should be implemented, and in what time frame reforms must take place.

But who are the actors to make such decisions? The international community, or the Chinese state itself? If this prize conferral does not bring human rights dialogue to the table, it will provide heated discussion on national sovereignty and international relations. For one, you will be hard-pressed to find news on Liu’s prize in Chinese-language newspapers. But you will find governmental condemnations of Liu as a criminal, as well as questions over the validity of the Nobel Peace Prize more generally.

Notably, these same articles refer to fractured ties between China and Norway; Norway has effectively become conflated with the Prize Committee. Granted, the Committee’s members are appointed by the Norwegian parliament (Storting), but I think most people conceive of the Nobel Prize Committee as being a supranational entity. Perhaps that is too naive. In any case, clearly the Chinese government does not perceive it as a supranational entity.

Not only this, but Chinese activists have hailed Liu’s selection as indicative of the “West’s recognition.” In this case, the Committee is the West.

Most recently, the U.S. has also been implicated in this symbolic fray; see an Associated Press report “US-China Ties Strained by Dissident.”

A quote from Ma Ying-jeou that states the award is for all Chinese people around the world also lends no clarification to this extremely tangled topic.

In essence, if any human rights dialogue is to happen, we need to know what is going to be talked about, and who is going to talk about it. These very important components have become obfuscated in the past two days.

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In the short-term, I don’t expect any constructive developments. The long-term is of course the big question. But I hope that in the years to come, Liu Xiaobo will not be seen merely as a contentious symbol, a tool utilized by various powers for condemnation or glorification purposes, but as an important human being who had something to say.

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Note: My thoughts on this have been highly influenced by Lydia Liu’s *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (2004), and to a lesser degree, James Hevia’s *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (2003).
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Tags: Liu Xiaobo, Nobel Peace Prize