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Why I Support Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel Peace Prize

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By Wang Chaohua

1. The Nobel Peace Prize

What does a Nobel Peace Prize stand for politically? We probably can’t take the written words of Alfred Nobel himself and of the awarding committee at face value. In the past century, the prize has stirred up numerous controversies. For example, a war-mongering, coup-conspiring politician like Henry Kissinger was chosen to be honored, leaving the rest of the world with jaws dropped and the winner himself reluctant to revisit the moment in public. After all, the prize was decided and awarded by a committee of five retired politicians. In addition, no matter how politically balanced each of the actual committee members might be, there could hardly be universal consensus in today’s world as to which candidate is more worthy than the others, and on what grounds. Controversy is almost an integral part of the peace prize.

Yet, bolstered by its sister prizes in other fields — fields of natural sciences in particular — as well as following historical trends towards social justice, democracy, and multi-ethnic, multi-cultural co-existence for “peace,” the Nobel Peace Prize has indeed built up a certain international reputation for itself by awarding the prize, for example, to Martin Luther King, Jr. of the U.S. in 1964, the International Labor Organization in 1969, Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar in 1991, Rigoberta Menchú Tum of Guatemala in 1992, and Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank he set up in Bangladesh in 2006. Not surprisingly, the prize’s influence has grown, with matching expectations around the globe. Some activists overlooked by mainstream Western media have tried to draw attention to their causes by lobbying for the prize for one of their own. Likewise, both George W. Bush and Tony Blair were nominated right after they launched the second Iraqi War in 2003; if either had won, it could have indicated an international consensus on the war’s legitimacy. The prize’s symbolic meaning matters to those who oppose the committee’s decision no less than to those who congratulate the chosen laureate(s).

This year’s winner of the Nobel Peace Prize is Liu Xiaobo, a Chinese dissident I know personally from the heady days of the Tiananmen protest of spring 1989. When the news of his winning the prize came through on October 8, it was an exciting and moving moment for me. It is true that we have not seen each other for more than twenty years, though we did maintain some contact before he was arrested in late 2008. He was sentenced to eleven years in prison a year later.

Yes, Liu Xiaobo was serving his prison term when his win was announced in Oslo. He is only the second in the peace prize’s history to be named a winner while in prison. The first was Carl von Ossietzky of Germany, who was given the prize in 1935-36 while being held in a Nazi concentration camp. A more recent comparable case would be Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar, who has virtually been under house-arrest for more than two decades. To many Chinese, as to the Chinese government, the symbolic significance of the award can hardly be exaggerated.

To be sure, Liu Xiaobo is no pacifist as Aung San Suu Kyi was. I have had significant disagreements with him in regard to war and peace around the world in the past, especially on matters concerning the U.S. But that was not the point in awarding Liu the peace prize. His prize touches on a different raw nerve for the Chinese government and, we may say, for the world at large. It raises the question of whether peace and prosperity must be grounded on equal civil participation by members of the society, instead of on the basis of coercive stability with the State presiding over an obedient population.

2. Liu Xiaobo and Charter 08

On Christmas Day 2009, Liu Xiaobo was sentenced to eleven years in prison for “inciting subversion,” based on six of his hundreds of articles on the internet and his role in drafting Charter 08, a political manifesto modeled after Charter 77, a famous document by Czech dissidents resisting communist rule. Liu went around collecting the initial 303 signatures on Charter 08, before being taken away by
police hours before releasing it to the public (planned for the 60th anniversary of World Human Rights Day on December 10, 2008).

I signed my name on the charter a few weeks later. It was already circulating on the Internet, especially on Chinese websites outside China. To be honest, I had my reservations concerning certain formulations in the text, but I did not hesitate to join. It was a decision based on careful consideration about possible political options inside China, under the CCP's iron-fisted control over political power.

Many people would question this phrase of "iron-fisted control over political power." They would list numerous examples to show how much more relaxed political control is today than it was in previous decades in China. My response to this kind of argument is to look into how many "political" resources are available to the public. Once focusing on publicly accessible resources in politics, I believe you'll find the iron-fist is everywhere, blocking the paths of individual citizens in their efforts to become proper, modern, political citizens of a “People’s Republic.”

Most importantly, this control begins at monopolizing political discourse. The Beijing Olympics could be regarded as the "most important political mission” of 2008, and so too the Shanghai World Expo and the Guangzhou Asian Games in 2010. But it is the authorities alone who could define such missions for not only themselves but also everyone under their rule. It would be impossible for anyone else to appropriate the political discourse for positions challenging power-holders. Of course, advisory, suggestive proposals, or even warning statements can be tolerated, so long as the authorities retain their power to hand down a final say on the suggested proposal; or, in the case of sounding out alarms, to grant an audience to the author(s).

The Party’s monopolization of political discourse had its weakest moment in the 1980s. It regained control in today’s China with the assistance of ruthless repression of organized dissent. In addition to the bloody suppression of the Tiananmen protest in 1989, the Beijing government sentenced a group of young intellectuals organizing a democratic party in the early 1990s to up to twenty years in prison (e.g. He Depu and Zha Jianguo); a reading group of young faculty members were given prison terms ranging from five to ten years (e.g. Yang Zili and Xu Wei); and another attempt to legally register a China Democracy Party in 1998 met with no less harsh terms of imprisonment.

Talk with activists in China — be they environmental, gender, AIDS, or poverty-prevention NGOs — and you will hear that “we don’t want to go into politics,” or "we are not political.” Once I watched in Los Angeles an impressive documentary about forced immigration in southwest China. When it came to discussion time, the director was visibly frustrated by the audience’s questions and eventually brought them to a stop by firmly declaring that his documentary has no political implications whatsoever. I have my sympathy with those who want to do good things for Chinese society and the Chinese people. At the same time, I feel sad that things have come to this point, where the most intelligent, sensitive minds in China are internalizing the fear of becoming "too political" for the authorities to stomach.

What makes Charter 08 different is the nature of its demands and the approach it takes towards supporters. This document does not budge from demanding political rights for citizens — it is NOT a document focusing on human rights in China alone. On the other hand, by asking for constitutional reform, it avoids the suggestion of an imminent revolution to overthrow the CCP’s rule. This should have defused the government’s accusation of “subversion” (see below). It asks supporters to sign on the basis of independent, individual consent — you grant your consent to the document and that’s it. There would be no more organizational activities based on this.

Some people may not agree completely with the charter’s formulation (like me); and they may decline to sign it on these grounds (unlike me). My signing is a political decision based on assessment of the entire situation, not merely on the text itself. One key factor for me is that the charter cannot be seen freely, let alone debated, inside China. And another, no less important factor is this is the least I can still do to demand political participation for ordinary Chinese people — no organization of whatever sort, just the individual, the citizen her- or himself. Unfortunately, the Party could not allow this minimal demand of civil rights outside its control.
3. Liu Xiaobo and the Tiananmen Mothers

But there might be more that led to Liu’s long imprisonment and I believe it is his intrinsic connection to the June 4th Massacre of 1989. In all the noisy reactions to the Nobel Peace Prize since October 8, Liu’s own response speaks volumes to this connection. According to his wife, who was allowed to see him on October 9, he was weeping emotionally to the news, saying that the prize is essentially for the victims of June 4th. His reaction was by no means accidental.

By the time Liu was handed his sentence last December, Charter 08 had gathered thousands of signatures. Except Liu, none of the other initial 303 signatories was tried for it, not even Zhang Zuhua, who was a co-drafter and was arrested at the same time as Liu but released soon afterwards. Liu’s six articles listed by the prosecutors are indeed harsh in tone in their critique of the Chinese government. However, out of almost a thousand articles penned by the prolific author and published overseas or online (as he is not allowed to publish anything inside China), the six are certainly taken out of context by the court. Even if the six texts are to stand alone, the trial was by all measures a prosecution of ideas.

I need to say a few more words about the trial here. A key twist, which the court emphasized at the trial and the Chinese propaganda machine is now repeating again in response to the peace prize, is this: on the one hand, Charter 08 was never formally charged as a crime-carrying text; on the other hand, even if the six texts were to be prosecuted word by word, Liu never went out to collect signatures for these six texts. Charging Liu on the ground of “collecting signatures” for a supposedly innocent text would lead us back to the question of monopolizing political participation and political discourse that I have discussed above. Moreover, Liu Xiaobo was not the most radical activist writing either online or abroad. In fact, he is often criticized by fellow democracy-fighters for his milder position on constitutional reform (as mentioned above) or his softer approach towards the authorities (e.g. “I have no enemies,” the title of his written final defense at his trial).

What does make Liu Xiaobo stand out among many, I believe, is his unique connection to the Tiananmen Mothers, a group composed of those who lost their loved ones in the bloody oppression of 1989.

As a literary critic in the 1980s, Liu Xiaobo cut an image of a rousing “black horse” against China’s establishment. From then to now, he has grown from youthful rebellion to obliging humility. What brought about this reincarnation are mainly two forces — his loving wife, on the one hand, and Professor Ding Zilin, the leading figure of the Tiananmen Mothers group, on the other.

Liu Xiaobo was a visiting scholar at Columbia University in spring 1989, when he decided to cut short his program and rush back to Beijing from New York to join his students in the rising popular protest on Tiananmen Square. Arrested afterwards, he thought for awhile that it was mainly the student leadership who led the masses to the tragic end, and so sometimes cooperated with the authorities. When he was released in the early 1990s, he learned the death of Professor Ding Zilin’s son, 17-year-old Jiang Jielian, on that tragic night. However, when he went to see Ding and her husband, intending to express his condolences, Ding refused to meet him, angered by his harsh words about the protesters and cooperation with the government. Agonizing self-examinations followed for Liu, fortunately helped by meeting his future wife, the immensely loving and sympathetic Liu Xia. Later, Professor Ding would recollect that it was largely thanks to Liu Xia that the two families eventually became trusting friends in their joined effort to continuously demand rights and justice in China.

That was in 1995. In the past fifteen years, Liu has taken it as his utmost duty to safeguard the memories of Tiananmen and, in particular, of the June 4th victims. Every year before the anniversary of June 4th, he would write commemorative poems or essays to remind the world that the event should never be forgotten.

As early as 2002, Liu Xiaobo put forward the idea to nominate the Tiananmen Mothers group for the Nobel Peace Prize. Though unable to leave China, he worked hard on this proposal through his contacts abroad, especially when he was elected Chairman of the Independent Chinese Pen Center.
His friends tell stories about how he was asking for help to nominate the Tiananmen Mothers group once again only days before he was taken away by police in December 2008.

Precisely because of Liu’s connection to Professor Ding, when the news of Liu’s Nobel Peace Prize came, she as well as Liu Xia were put under virtual house-arrest by the police. Many celebrating friends were taken away for interrogations, and Professor Ding and her ailing husband were also under police control in their hometown in the south, unable to move freely and without normal communications with the outside world. If the prize has symbolic significance, in Liu Xiaobo’s case it cannot be separated from his insistence on remembering this not-so-remote page in modern China’s history, the Tiananmen protest and the June 4th victims.

Since the announcement of this year’s Nobel Peace Prize, there have been celebrations and congratulations around the world. Sadly for those inside China, their celebrations attracted swarms of police and caused Liu’s supporters to lose their freedoms as ordinary citizens of the People’s Republic. It makes Liu Xiaobo’s prize all the more important in its symbolic meaning, to most Chinese people and to the world — What is peace if a government can roll its tanks over peaceful civilian protesters at will, in the name of maintaining stability? What is peace if a victim of the government’s wrongdoing has no way to seek redress, yet could easily invite greater police harassment merely for doing so? What is peace if a citizen has no free access to political discourse, let alone political participation, in a country where social conflicts are suppressed by coercive forces?

Because of all the above, I support Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel Peace Prize.

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