

Desire for Liberty in China will Outlive Liu Xiaobo

Doug Bandow

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Before Xi Jinping became China's president in 2012, some observers hoped he would be a liberal reformer. But today he increasingly looks like at best a civilized Mao Zedong. Imprisoning the dying Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo showed Xi to be equally cruel, if not quite so crazy, as Mao. Indeed, the last Nobel Peace Prize winner to die under state control was Carl von Ossietzky in *Nazi Germany*.

The desire to create a democratic China is not new. Sun Yat-sen's revolution a century ago offered the Chinese people hope of a transition from decrepit empire to liberal republic. Sun, a Christian convert, studied medicine in America. He called for a three-phase process of "national reconstruction."

He knew moving his nation into the future wouldn't be easy. Overthrowing the moribund Qing dynasty was easy compared to coping with what followed: Competition among feuding warlords who filled the political vacuum, autocratic rule by Chiang Kai-shek, who took over the dead Sun's Nationalist Party, Japanese invasion and occupation which ravaged much of the country, bitter civil war which prolifically killed and destroyed, and finally Communist revolution and near ruin.

However, the end of Mao Zedong's mad rule revived hope for democratic change. In 1978 Chinese people debated politics on the "Democracy Wall." The next year demonstrators filled Tiananmen Square and erected a statue to the "Goddess of Democracy."

Liberal sentiments even infected the Communist Party leadership. Party chairman Zhao Ziyang sought to defuse the protests without violence. After paramount leader Deng Xiaopeng chose a military response, bloodily dispersing the protestors, Zhao landed under house arrest for the remaining 16 years of his life.

With a PhD in literature, Liu Xiaobo was a writer and literary critic. A visiting scholar abroad, he returned to China to support the Tiananmen Square demonstrators. He called for ending the "one-party monopolization of ruling privileges." He was arrested and imprisoned through 1991. Then again from 1995 to 1996 and 1996 to 1999. Next he headed the *Democratic China* magazine and Independent Chinese PEN Center. In December 2008 he was arrested again after co-authoring the Charter 08 manifesto, which demanded protection of human rights, including freedom of expression, and democratic elections.

Convicted for "inciting subversion of state power," he was sentenced to 11 years in prison. While incarcerated, he received the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize for "his long and non-violent

struggle for fundamental human rights in China.” Beijing was enraged and blocked access to stories on the award in China. The Communist regime denounced the Nobel committee as “a political instrument for some Western forces.”

Still, the People’s Republic of China was authoritarian, not totalitarian. Liberal sentiments didn’t disappear. The PRC’s immersion in the global economy ensured greater contact with Westerners and Western ideas. As the Chinese came to enjoy greater prosperity, they wanted more say over their political future as well. The Chinese Communist Party arrested anyone who challenged its authority, limited domestic criticism, and restricted access to the internet. But Chinese students studied abroad, businessmen and tourists traveled overseas, the intellectually curious evaded online controls, and cooperation with liberal thinkers expanded.

While the PRC wasn’t exactly undergoing an intellectual renaissance, it was hard to find a young person who wanted the government deciding what he or she could read, think, or say. President Hu Jintao’s government was oppressive but not systematic. A liberal revolution might not have been inevitable, but it at least seemed possible.

Unfortunately, when President Xi Jinping took over in 2012 he launched a wide-ranging purge under the guise of fighting corruption. As he expanded his power he extended the state’s reach. Censorship tightened. Punishment of criticism deepened. Organizations dedicated to liberty disappeared. Obstacles to academic exchange heightened. Demands for obedience increased. Recently censors even targeted references to Winnie-the-Pooh since Chinese internet users used the cartoon character as a stand-in when referring to Xi.

It was not just critics who were jailed. So were human rights lawyers who dared to represent those arrested. The number of political prisoners now likely is in the thousands. With the number of Christians surpassing the number of members of the Communist Party, the government also stepped up its attack on believers and churches. Beijing has tightened controls over nominally free Hong Kong. And Beijing impatiently denounced criticism of its human rights malpractices from abroad. The CCP treated the Chinese people as property of the state.

Liu was a powerful symbol of the Communist regime’s ruthless determination to enforce its demand for obedience. He advanced the simple view that political leaders should be accountable to their people. Beijing so feared his message that it placed his wife, Liu Xia, under house arrest. An artist and poet, she was never charged with committing a crime, even under the CCP’s warped conception of law. Yet she was denied contact and companionship not only with her husband, but also with her family and friends.

Beijing’s vindictiveness was evident in May when the regime announced that Liu was suffering from liver cancer and would be granted medical parole; he was transferred to a closely guarded hospital. His request to leave the PRC for treatment was denied. He deserved to be treated as an “ordinary convicted criminal,” said the Xi government. Liu Xia was allowed to see her husband but not speak of his condition to anyone.

After Liu Xiaobo’s death on July 13 China ensured that no dissidents attended his funeral: it was “just a big performance,” dissident Mo Zhixu declared. That was followed by Liu’s cremation,

apparently ordered by Beijing to prevent creation of a burial site that could have become a focal point for protests. Chinese censors worked overtime—for instance, blocking any mention of Liu or his death, or photos of him, on the popular messaging service WeChat. And Liu Xia remained under house arrest. The status of the Lius, said Beijing, was “China’s internal affair” and no other state had “the right to interfere.” Such conduct makes a mockery of President Donald Trump’s praise of Xi as a “great leader,” “terrific guy,” and “very good man.”

The Chinese leadership claims to be proud of the nation which it has created: possessing what had been the world’s fastest growing economy, enjoying increased military capabilities, and taking on additional global responsibilities. Yet the regime desperately fears the ideas of liberty and democracy. Liu noted “China’s long record of treating words as crimes.” How the CCP detests those who believe the state is to serve individuals, not the reverse. How those with political power are willing to impose their will irrespective of the human cost.

Liu suffered greatly for his beliefs. Liu Xia is still being mistreated for apparently sharing the belief that China’s original revolution should be completed. That after suffering through decades of oppression by their government the Chinese people should control their own political destiny.

But Xi Jinping and his CCP cronies only can slow the process of change. Beijing’s brutality is a sign of weakness. The regime fears that popular allegiance is fragile. So near-absolute rulers deploy ever more force to maintain their hold over those they claim to serve. Doing so will only make their eventual fall that much greater.

Observed Liu in the speech he prepared for his sentencing, which he was not allowed to present: “there is no force that can put an end to the human quest for freedom, and China will in the end become a nation ruled by law, where human rights reign supreme.” Someday the Chinese people will be free.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of "Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World" and co-author of "The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea."