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## To Touch On the Root of the Evil Who is afraid of Liu Xiaobo?

By Tienchi Martin-Liao<sup>1</sup>

### A Domino effect?

After the prominent writer Liu Xiaobo was sentenced to 11 years in prison for “inciting subversion to the states power” by the Beijing Number One Intermediate People's Court, the protests echoed from all over the world. Now, increasingly loud appeals for Liu's unconditional release are being voiced by politicians, international PEN Centers, Nobel Prize laureates, including the latest recipient of the literature prize, Herta Müller, religious leaders and even sports groups. By mid-February, Liu had been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Vaclav Havel and members of both the Czech and Slovak congresses. Joining them are also American and Norwegian members of congress. The PEN American Center also nominated Liu Xiaobo, with the support of a long list of prominent international personalities. The Chinese authorities responded with anger and a sense of helplessness, government officials criticized the nomination, saying that if Liu Xiaobo won the Nobel Peace Prize, it would be a mistake.

Should Liu Xiaobo's case continue snowballing, drawing more and more public attention, especially when China dismissed Huang Qi's appeal against a three year prison sentence on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2010, sentenced Tan Zuoren to five years imprisonment the next day, could it generate a domino effect within China's totalitarian system? The world has witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Eastern European communist regimes and the Soviet Union in the past. Their crashing down began with just a little crack, when the internal political and social tension had grown strong enough. Sometimes the change comes quicker than we can imagine, erupting like a volcano whether we are ready or not.

### The Internet: “God's present to China”

In the internet era of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, freedom of expression and freedom of information are a natural part of our daily life. Liu Xiaobo began publishing online articles after completing his latest sentence, three years of “Reeducation through labor”, in 1996. Liu is a proliferate writer, and because his articles and books cannot be published in Mainland China, he submitted his writings to overseas Chinese websites and published his books in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the USA. Liu's explosive and lyrical style, marked by its razor sharp criticisms and pervasive irony, has cooled down in recent years and transformed into more thoughtful and objective prose. He changed his role from an agitated activist to an observer and analyst.

Liu Xiaobo was one of the first intellectuals in China to recognize the immense power of the internet, which he referred to as “God's present to China.” This information channel allows people to speak, to publish and to communicate. Even the Chinese dictators, armed with their “Golden Shield Project” (including the Great Firewall), cannot fully censor the internet. Indeed, the internet has changed Liu's and his colleagues' lives as writers and activists. In earlier times, the fax machine was the quickest way, though not the safest, to submit an article to the media, but since the late 1990s, internet access has miraculously facilitated the transmission of information. As soon as an author's thoughts were written down, they can be transferred to the outside world within seconds, and the chance that they will be read by thousands of people is relatively high. Pandora's box was opened, and Liu Xiaobo has been one of the most diligent users of this new technology. His writings are a synthesis of his own knowledge and thoughts as well as the vast archive of information he can gather online. In the recent years he has written roughly 500 articles. Liu's talent is

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evident in each article that he writes. Whether an observation, analysis, or a critique, his writing is highly persuasive. Liu Xiaobo's language is clear and precise, and his thoughts are logical and down to earth, making his writing accessible to a large audience.

Liu Xiaobo is not a studio-writer. 20 years ago he took a leading role in the Tiananmen Square Pro-democracy Movement. By serving as a negotiator between the students and the authorities, he emerged as one of the few important figures to adopt a rational and strategically sophisticated approach to the protests. In the following two decades, using the internet as a platform for spontaneous organizing, Liu Xiaobo has initiated several large scale signatory actions, such as supporting the Tiananmen Mothers, aiding the villagers of Taishi Village, rescuing his young colleague, Du Daobin, as well as the "Stainless Steel Mouse", Liu Di. The impact of these actions could not be underestimated. They have woken the consciousness of the intellectuals and reinforced the common people in their fight for employment, land rights, and environmental preservation.

### **“Inciting Subversion of State Power” is a Joke**

Mimicking the form of Charter 77, Liu Xiaobo and his Chinese colleagues have selected a rational and peaceful way to express their concern for China's future development. Freedom, equality, justice and human rights are universal values, standard in a modern society, and not inconsistent with the official rhetoric of the Chinese Government, which touts China's rule of law. Both within the Chinese Constitution and within the international treaties the Chinese Government has signed, there is a guarantee of the freedoms of expression, assembly and publication. Thus, the accusation that Liu was “inciting subversion of state power” is a joke and a slap in China's own face. The 499 articles authored by Liu in the last few decades, indicate exactly the opposite. For instance, in a BBC interview on August 20, 2007 (<http://www.guancha.org>), Liu explained the central idea of his book, *Civil Awakening, The Dawn of a Free China* (The Laogai Research Foundation, Washington DC, 2005): reform in China is bottom-up not top-down, that is, it does not start with the government, but rather the real momentum of reform is generated in the civil society, among the people at the grassroots level. The constant confrontation between common citizens, peasants, workers and official forces, has awak-

ened the consciousness of the Chinese people, so that they now are aware of their basic rights. As Liu said: “The slow but progressive process of changes cannot be achieved through radical demands of the government to remodel the whole society. The present tendency is that the self-generated changes in the society will slowly push the regime to move toward change.”

In one of the six articles that the court used as evidence of his subversive intention, “Changing State Power Through Changing Society” (February 26, 2006, posted on [Observechina.net](http://Observechina.net)), Liu argued how social changes in the post-Mao era in the relationship between citizens and the state have improved prospects for political reform and urged a gradual, non-violent approach in the pursuit of a liberal democracy. Non-violence and rational thought and behavior always guide Liu's writing.

### **A Pattern of Persecution**

There is a certain pattern in the way the Chinese Government repeatedly violates its commitment to international standards of the rule of law and its obligation to uphold the freedom of expression for its citizens. Liu Xiaobo was taken away by police from his home on December 8th, 2009. 8 months later he was “officially arrested” and the court trial was one day before Christmas Eve, with the actual verdict having been announced on Christmas day, when the rest of the world was celebrating the holidays.

The same situation happened to AIDS activist Hu Jia and Falungong rights advocate and lawyer Gao Zhisheng. Hu was arrested on December 28, 2007 and Gao was sentenced on December 22, 2006. Both got three years imprisonment. Gao was kidnapped from his own home by the secret police during his probation in March 2009. To this day, no one knows his whereabouts. Recently, a rumor surfaced that he has been murdered, though, fortunately, this rumor has not proven to be true. Liu, Hu and Gao were all sentenced by the Beijing Number One Intermediate People's Court under Article 105, Paragraph 2, of the PRC's [Criminal Law](#), convicted of “inciting subversion of state power”.

In all three cases, the secret police applied mafia-like measures to intimidate and persecute the victims: eavesdropping and other forms of surveillance, house arrest, beating, searching of their homes, confiscation of computers, files, documents and bank savings, administrative punish-

ment affecting the employment of the victims' family members, etc.

### **The Earth Quake Activists Become State Enemies**

Detained since March 2009, tried in August, and finally sentenced on February 9th, 2010, the Chengdu Municipal Intermediate People's Court found the earth quake activist Tan Zuoren guilty of "inciting subversion of state power". The five years imprisonment is based on the charge for a long memo he has written about the June Fourth Event in 1989. However, his lawyer and the observers believe that the real reason for his conviction is that he angered local authorities by his investigation report on the earthquake in May 2008 and the victims list which he has collected arduously. At the catastrophe the poorly built schools collapsed and robbed tens of thousands of young lives. Tan was also a leading environmentalist who opposed to a planned petrochemical plant in Sichuan. His social engagements labeled him to the enemy of the authority. Tan's case indicates that the Chinese authority does not even bother to cover its apparent intention to suppress the freedom of expression and it stays deaf to the international critics.

Huang Qi, who originally set up a website in June 1998 to track cases of human trafficking by posting information about missing people, he was imprisoned between 2000 and 2005, after being involved in campaigning for human rights. When he helped to track the death toll of the Sichuan Earthquake, he was again arrested in July 2008 for "illegal possession of state secrets". In November 2009 he was sentenced to three years of imprisonment, by the same court in Chengdu city.

Ai Weiwei, the international well-known artist, who initiated a similar action by collecting the earthquake victims' names, was attacked and hurt severely when he tried to attend Tan's trial in Chengdu last August. The escalation of repression happened after Olympic Game was over and the persecutions accumulate. With its economic success, Beijing wants to demonstrate that the CCP alone can define what human rights, freedom of expression mean, no matter how the international standard is.

### **He Touches On the Root of the Evil**

There are other well-known writers, such as Yu Jie, Zhang Boshu, Zhang Zuhua, Dai Qing, Qin Hui and Gao Yu, who have written articles in a similar critical way and been published on overseas websites. Like Liu before his arrest, these intellectuals also live under the secret police's surveillance and must be deported to other locations when foreign statesmen visit China or during important events like the Olympics. Why though, has the Chinese Government singled out Liu Xiaobo, and why this heavy sentence? The CCP is extremely sensitive about organized opposition. Both Hu Jia and Gao Zhisheng are single fighters. Hu was active in the AIDS and environmental movement, while Gao was involved with Falungong groups. Through their diligent writings they became cyber-stars. Having achieved fame very quickly, their influence was limited. But Liu Xiaobo is different, having published articles and books since the 1980s. His critiques of the traditional subservient attitude of Chinese intellectuals to their ruler and of the CCP regime itself has inspired and shaken tens of thousand of Chinese. "Shall we lower our head or even kneel down to the perpetrator? Or shall we continue to be their accomplice?" he asked sharply. To speak truth to power is to be responsible for our history, for one's self and for the next generation. Liu is one of the few intellectuals who urged his countrymen to come to terms with their past. It is not only the CCP that committed egregious crimes and took over 30 million Chinese lives. To a certain extent, the intellectuals are not only the victims of the anti-rightist campaign, the Cultural Revolution, and many other political mass movements, but also the accomplices, Liu Xiaobo reminds his compatriots.

Liao Xiaobo is not only a fighter for democracy and freedom of expression, but also a humble humanist. That's why the Chinese regime cannot tolerate him, because he does not only demand reform and a democratic future for China, he also demands a reexamination of Chinese history and an end to China's one party dictatorship. He touches on the root of the evil, and so the fear of the CCP is justifiable.

Liu Xiaobo's case is a fight between the powerful and the powerless, but the question remains: who is the powerful and who is the powerless? The end is unwritten and the outcome is unpredictable.

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