Reflections on China and the Nobel Peace Prize

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By Jennifer Clibbon CBC News

Protestors in Hong Kong demand the release of pro-democracy activist Liu Xiaobo in October 2010, shortly after he won the Nobel Peace Prize. (Bobby Yip/Reuters)

This year's winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, won't be attending the award ceremony in Oslo on Friday. Liu Xiaobo is serving an 11-year sentence in a Chinese prison.

His wife, Liu Xia, won't be attending either, as she is under house arrest in Beijing, and the Chinese government is detaining or refusing exit visas to many fellow activists in China, to ensure that they, too, are unable to mark the historic event.

Lui Xiaobo's story has rattled the Chinese government and created a public relations disaster for a regime intent on putting forward its best face to the outside world.

But when Chinese officials sentenced the well-known writer to a hefty prison term last December, for organizing a citizens' charter calling for human rights, they sparked an international outcry.

Charter 08, for the year it was written, 2008, calls for democratic reforms and an end to single-party rule in China. It was signed, via the internet, by thousands of Chinese people, some of them Communist party officials.
Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo and his wife Liu Xia, from an undated family photo. (Reuters)

Liu Xiaobo's case is being watched closely by the human rights community as his win of the respected Nobel prize has galvanized and encouraged Chinese activists.

CBC producer Jennifer Clibbon talked recently with two prominent members of this community.

Yvonne Tong, a member of the so-called Tiananmen Square generation, served almost three years in detention for her human rights activities. Today, she practices law in the U.S.

Dai Qing is a journalist and activist based in China who has spoken out on environmental and human rights issues for more than two decades.

She gave this interview in Toronto but is now back in Beijing where the Chinese government has told her not meet with foreign reporters this week.

CBC News: China's public relations image seems to have become tarnished since the 2008 Olympics. Does Liu Xiaobo's award signify a kind of showdown between the West and China over the country's political future?

Yvonne Tong: I tend to agree with that assessment. People in the West had hoped that after China hosted this big international show it would conform to international standards. But the last two years has shown that China has gone in the opposite direction.

China's economic muscle has been strengthened. It's very willing to throw its weight around on international issues and has started to push back the West.

So the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo is a direct showdown in the government's eyes.
The Nobel Peace Prize is such an important award. It will have a long-term effect on China's relationship with any Western country. If Western countries do not put Liu Xiaobo's case on the agenda when they talk with the Chinese government, it's going to be embarrassing for that country's leader.

**Dai Qing:** We felt moved when we got the news that Liu Xiaobo won the Nobel Peace award. [In recent decades] our activists have fought, like Liu Xiaobo, for freedoms.

For this reason it's very significant for the fighters in China because the Nobel committee understands what they have been fighting for all these years.

I don't think the Nobel committee intended a confrontation with China. It just hopes to make China part of the same family with shared values.

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**CBC News:** In your view, how representative within China are the views of Charter 08 and the aspirations of Liu Xiaobo and his circle?

**Yvonne Tong:** He represents many, many voices, all those powerless voices inside China. All Charter 08 says to the Chinese government is: You've got to respect your own law. The Chinese constitution already gives citizens the right of freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom of press.

We are only asking to honour those rights already provided in the Constitution. It's a very moderate, rational document.

Very quickly it garnered more than 10,000 signatures. After the Nobel announcement, in the online community, there were twitter messages, cellphone messages, email messages floating about Liu Xiaobo winning.

He deserved this prize more than any other activist because he's not only a living figure in the Tiananmen Square movement. He has been in and out of prison four times over the last 21 years and he has written the most articles and political commentaries on China's day-to-day political issues.

*Chinese journalist Dai Qing. (Timothy Neesam/CBC)*
He has transformed himself over the years into a very persuasive advocate of those downtrodden people.

**Dai Qing:** An activist can be someone trying to organize an underground party, or someone trying to introduce common sense in China and push the government to realize what it has promised in its constitution and laws. Or people who have suffered and want rights.

When you factor all these people in then Liu Xiaobo represents more than half of the population.

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**CBC News:** Why do you think he was finally arrested? Many Chinese activists play a kind of cat and mouse game with the authorities over the years. Did he cross a line with Charter 08?

**Yvonne Tong:** I think the fact that Charter ’08 garnered 303 initial signatories is the main challenge to the Chinese government.

The government can tolerate one single article published online overseas. Liu Xiaobo did this many times before.

But now there is a political blueprint for the future activist to act upon and it has a collective signature. That's threatening for them. That's the association part that they cannot tolerate.

Also, this document is calling for the end of the monopoly of power by the Communist party. That's something that is very irritating to the government.

The 11-year sentence was beyond anybody's expectation. It was beyond any precedent also.

But the difference with Charter 08 is the fact that this document was backed by so many similar-minded folks inside China. That's significant.

That's why they handed down such a severe punishment.

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**CBC News:** You, Yvonne Tong, are of the Tiananmen generation. Activism was very different in the 1980s. It was social, it was personal. Has the internet changed activism in China today? Has it raised the bar so that the government feels it has to act because the internet is so pervasive?

**Yvonne Tong:** Yes, but there's an optimistic part to today's activism in China.
Twenty years ago, even 15 years ago, activists felt so lonely. They belonged to such a tiny minority and their conditions or voices weren't heard by fellow activists.

Nowadays, people could get around the firewall and then get on twitter and send messages to each other.

The whole world is watching. Here, Green party members of the European Parliament wear T-shirts that reads free Liu Xiaobo during a vote in Strasbourg, eastern France, in November 2010. (Christian Lutz/Associated Press)

They feel they are belonging to a community. They feel that once they are in danger, their fellow activists will come to rescue them, either morally or by publishing a story calling for help.

All of these things give them a sense of belonging, which didn't exist 15 or 20 years ago. That's very encouraging.

After the award was announced, people with liberal political views felt a lot more confident. When they talked with folks, they felt very encouraged by this prize because they feel the whole world is recognizing their struggle.

They don't feel alone anymore. That's a morale boost.

CBC News: Do you think the continuing silence over Tiananmen is a psychological barrier to the type of discussions that Charter '08 calls for? Yvonne Tong: If China wants to move forward politically, it has to squarely address the Tiananmen Square issue.
Liu Xiaobo became famous because of his leading role in Tiananmen. He negotiated a peaceful retreat from the square for the students on the morning of June 4 [1989]. He saved countless lives then.

And, of course, he continued working on this issue for the last two decades. He showed his courage and his determination. I think the government has to address both his case and also the Tiananmen massacre issue to move forward politically.

**CBC News: You were in Beijing recently, Yvonne. What did you learn about the conditions of Liu Xiaobo or about his wife, Liu Xia?**

**Yvonne Tong:** When I met Liu Xia she was very calm. She is very loyal to her husband.

I learned later that she met with Liu Xiaobo two days after the announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize. He told her that the guard in the prison had already told him the night before that he had won the Nobel Peace Prize.

He wept. He said the prize belongs to the martyrs in the Tiananmen massacre. He was very moved and very encouraged by that recognition.

![Hundreds of thousands fill Beijing's Tiananmen Square in May 1989 in China's biggest populist upheaval since the Cultural Revolution. (Reuters)](https://example.com/image)

I don't have information about his condition. But as to Liu Xia's condition, it's very bad. Liu's friends are very worried about her house arrest and about what kind of treatment she is receiving.

The government doesn't want her to communicate to fellow activists about who should go to Oslo to witness the historic moment of the ceremony.

**CBC News: It is interesting that, after the news that he won the Peace Prize, Liu Xiaobo focused his comments on the victims of Tiananmen.**

**Yvonne Tong:** He felt guilt about those students and people who died in the massacre. He felt morally responsible for those deaths.
That's why he transformed himself from a radical — sometimes — critic of the Chinese system to a somewhat moderate and non-violent advocate of the peaceful transformation of the country.

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CBC News: In all fairness to the Chinese government, it faces an incredible challenge as it moves forward politically. How do you modernize such a diverse and gigantic state and transition away from one-party rule, all the while maintaining peace and avoiding economic collapse?

Yvonne Tong: Sympathetic Westerners or sympathetic Chinese view the government this way. They look at the country and say it's chaotic, pollution is bad, resources are limited, so that we need a government that can clamp down.

But look at how many problems the current regime has created. Issues such as corruption, disparities, between rich and poor, environmental degradation, forced evictions. All these things happen everyday.

There are at least 100,000 protests happening every year inside China.

So all these social grievances will eventually get to a point that they will explode. It will be beyond the Chinese government's control someday because people will not tolerate the same kind of treatment they have suffered so long as China's status in the international arena rises.

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*Prime Minister Stephen Harper shakes hands with Chinese President Hu Jintao on Parliament Hill in June 2010, prior to the G20 summit. (Adrian Wyld/Canadian Press)*
If the Chinese government or officials are wise enough, they should gradually open some space. For example, loosen control on internet censorship. Let people give out their grievances freely.

Eventually people will congregate and form a viable opposition party and then allow a national election. That is the rational direction for the Chinese to move forward politically.

Western countries in this struggle should side with the Chinese people on human rights issues, and not focus on trade or economic benefits.

This is short sighted. That's not a long-term solution. A long-term solution is to side with the Chinese people in their struggle for a freer society.

**Dai Qing:** We have two traditions. One is the same as Taiwan's. The other one comes from the Soviet Union.

We are trying to avoid a new rebellion and revolution. We hope for evolution. There has been so much suffering over the past 60 years. There are models for us, like Desmond Tutu. He says: show truth and show justice. Then people can work together.

This is the way to change China from a dictatorship to a new political system.

**CBC News:** What will happen if the current regime just maintains the status quo?

**Dai Qing:** If they insist on [the status quo], then there will be social instability. Our resources and environment cannot support this.

**CBC News:** But as China gets ever stronger internationally, where does the West's bargaining power come from?

**Yvonne Tong:** This is a wrong assessment. Even though China may seem to be a very strong and confident player in the international arena, it's very worried deep down about losing control inside China.

It's a false image, even though the Chinese government has become more aggressive in throwing its weight around.

The Western countries' strengths are their core values such as human rights and citizens' freedoms.

This serves as a beacon for the Chinese people. They are longing to have the same treatment from their own government.