

Highest Honor for Liu Xiaobo, Deepest Disappointment with China

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Liu Xiaobo's win of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize brought perhaps the most contradictory feeling one could have: you want to cheer and cry at the same time. Cheer because of the international recognition of Liu Xiaobo and the struggle he embodies for a free and democratic China. Cry because of the harsh reality Liu Xiaobo has endured that made his effort worth such an honor.

Along with all the congratulations and good wishes for Liu Xiaobo, one is overwhelmed by disappointment with China, the Chinese government to be exact: from its sentencing of Liu Xiaobo to 11 years in prison last Christmas to its current media blackout of Liu Xiaobo and his Nobel win.

As in an unfortunate relationship, one insists on looking at the positive side of the person, giving them all the benefit of the doubt, hoping that they would one day understand you, share your feelings, reciprocate your love and together be happily ever after, only to be disappointed again and again. The difference is that a big part of the world today, including governments, businesses, organizations and individuals, is in this unhealthy and unequal relationship with China.

How disappointed are we? Let me count the ways:

Wen zi yu(文字狱). Ask any Chinese-speaking person, you would learn the meaning of the three Chinese characters: written word jail. It was the name of a practice of persecution in ancient China where the emperor could put to death anyone whose writings expressed any dissent from the royal court. The Cultural Revolution was the largest-scale modern version of wen zi yu when Mao sent countless Chinese to death or labor camps for their un-Maoist writings or acts. In Liu Xiaobo, we see an Internet-age version of wen zi yu practiced by a government armed with a great firewall. How sad it is, especially knowing that Liu Xiaobo once expressed the hope that his would be the last case of wen zi yu in China!

Political party ban(党禁). Everyone growing up in China learned in school how the Communists had fought the Nationalists for a new China. One of the Nationalists' policies that Mao and his comrades fought tooth and nail was the ban on political parties, read opposition parties. In a speech in 1937 on forming a united front against the Japanese invasion, Mao called for reforming the dictatorial political system under the Nationalists, giving people freedom of speech, assembly and association. He specifically demanded the release of all political prisoners and the lift of political party ban. How ironic it is that the Nationalists have now turned Taiwan into a democracy while the Communists are keeping a ban on political parties! If you have never heard of a Democracy Party of China, that's because its members are in jail.

News censorship(报禁). Parallel with the ban on political parties under Nationalists in mainland as well as in Taiwan was a policy called newspaper ban, which controlled newspaper registration, size and circulation. Today, newspaper ban is as long gone as Jiang Kai-shek in Taiwan, news censorship in Beijing, however, has reached the level of cloud computing. Thanks to his Nobel, Liu Xiaobo now joins Tiananmen, Tibet, Taiwan independence as censored words on China's Internet. Even though newspapers are thriving in China today, they are so not because of free press, but because they stay away from anything sensitive. Talk about free press, a young relative in China told me this joke: it is the Chinese who have real free press because they are free to manipulate news while in the West news have to be truthful.

Harmony(和谐). The signature policy slogan of Hu Jintao, president of China and head of the communist party, is "building a harmonious society." It was very clever on the part of the Party to borrow Confucius' philosophy of harmony to unite the Chinese population in building a prosperous and strong China. What is bitterly funny but true is that one of the most popular satiric phrases in China today is "be harmonized(被和谐)." A vendor, for instance, could be harmonized, meaning removed. A voice of dissident could be harmonized, meaning silenced. A website could be harmonized, meaning shut down. What is more alarming is that even China's Premier Wen Jiabao was somewhat harmonized recently. In a CNN interview, Fareed Zakaria the host asked about China's political reform, the premier said that freedom of speech was indispensable and people's wish for democracy was irresistible. Those words, however, never appeared in China's official reports.

So disappointing, so deeply disappointing...

