



# Human Dignity and Its Enemies



**JOHN FITZGERALD**

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Liu Xiaobo wrote eloquently and often about ‘simple human dignity,’ just as he found it. And he found it in the darkest of places: in working with the grieving mothers of young people killed in the 1989 Beijing massacre, in occasional glimpses of warmth between guards and prisoners amid the grinding routine of prison life.

Liu died eight years into an eleven-year jail term for speaking and writing about the value of human dignity and the political and social conditions required for it to flourish. It’s true that he wasn’t a celebrated figure in his own country, as foreigners with close ties to Beijing point out eagerly and often. This could be because people in China do not care for human dignity. Or it could be because human dignity cannot be upheld or celebrated openly in China without provoking the indignation of the Communist Party and the fury of its public security agents.

Either way, Liu’s ideas, his life’s work and his recent passing have barely been noted in China’s party-controlled media. When they have reported it, the character of the coverage reinforces Liu Xiaobo’s message to the West.

Chinese reports of Liu’s death betray what he called an “enemy mentality.” They point to Western perfidy in awarding Liu the Nobel Prize and to duplicity on Liu’s part in allowing the West to make him, in the words of one critic, “a pawn in its game to undermine China,” designed “to tarnish China’s image on the world stage.” Nothing better illustrates the lesson Liu Xiaobo

wanted the world to heed in his lifetime than claims such as these, demonstrating the party’s hostile anti-foreign enemy mentality in the wake of his death.

Liu’s primary message for the West was this: An enemy mentality long perfected by China’s Communist Party to suppress China’s citizens has now gone global. Liu and other rights activists are branded domestic enemies of the People not because of anything they have done themselves but because of their alleged association with foreign conspirators. The liberal West is Beijing’s real and only enemy. Today, Liu’s simple message has been refracted and reinforced through Beijing’s grim and condescending reports of his death.

Those outside China who see Liu Xiaobo’s personal struggle for dignity and freedom as a remote Chinese affair should listen up. Far from conspiring with knowing enemies in the West, Liu Xiaobo was concerned that the liberal West had not an inkling of the enemy mentality that Communist officials were cultivating and propagating within China. An enemy mentality designed to suppress dissent in China could, if Beijing got its way, undermine all societies that value dignity and freedom, and disarm the states that protect them.

## “I have no enemies”

Reactions among Chinese overseas to news of Liu’s passing reinforce this message – including reactions among Chinese-Australian friends and Independent Chinese

PEN Center representatives. Censorship may have limited Liu Xiaobo’s impact within China but he is widely remembered among people of Chinese descent in countries where the press and social media allow them to publish as they please. Chinese overseas remember Liu for many things, including a naive attachment to principles at the price of his own liberty, but above all for his signature statement “I have no enemies.” Liu Xiaobo was best known for denying Beijing’s “enemy mentality” any traction in his own life.

Shortly after Liu’s death, roaming freelance writer Wu Qiang explained that the meaning of Liu’s “I have no enemies” statement lay in his “continued insistence on non-violent resistance and political opposition, despite being sentenced to eleven years in prison.” Liu’s signature statement made sense as “the only way to preserve space for political opposition in a highly authoritarian state.”

True, but Liu’s statement arguably does more than this. For a Leninist state, the most infuriating citizens are those who refuse to grant their self-proclaimed “enemies” in authority the privilege of recognition. Human dignity involves mutual recognition of equality, Leninism mutual recognition of hostility. The politics of enmity that drives the Chinese government today demands mutual recognition among opponents: fierce denunciations on the one side, cowering admission of guilt on the other. Only with

highly visible foes can a self-appointed single-party state claim a mandate to mobilise and represent the People in their never-ending struggles with a spectral enemy. Who needs a Leninist vanguard party when there is no enemy? The citizen who stands up and says “I have no enemies” undermines not just the party’s style of politics but its *raison d’être*.

Today the Party is systematically silencing independent thinkers, lawyers, writers, academics, journalists and newspapers that draw attention to the party’s abuse of power, wealth and privilege. It attacks them as agents of hostile foreign forces and it parades many on TV where they are compelled to make abject public confessions of conspiring with hostile forces in the West.

All this is fabricated. In his lifetime Liu asked the West not to yield to such nonsense. In death his message takes on greater urgency.

Liu pointed out that China’s wealth presents new and grievous threats to liberal democracy through the application of what Liu called “cheque-book diplomacy” and economic leverage:

*International mainstream society must pay close attention to this reality: in its contest with the free world, the authoritarian Communist Party of China is already completely different from the traditional totalitarian Soviet Communist Party... It is not hard to see that, with its bulging wallet, the CPC regime’s cheque-*

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PHOTO: YAN XIA

*book diplomacy across the world has already enabled it to become the blood transfusion machine for other authoritarian countries – using economic and trade interests to divide Western alliances, and using large markets to entice and threaten Western capital.*

Liu was denied the right to speak, to write or to publish on the metastatic growth of this anti-Western enemy mentality during his final years in prison. In a way he didn't have to. Over his final term of confinement, Beijing did his speaking for him. Abandoning all reticence, it openly declared unflinching hostility to the universal rights and principles that underpin human dignity and to those countries that would protect and uphold these rights. The outcome is a battlefield mentality in China that now pervades every field of public policy, directed most immediately against domestic critics within and outside the party, but no less threateningly against the "hostile foreign forces" allegedly conspiring to bring China down.

Liu Xiaobo's warnings are not hyperbole. If we grant China's Communist Party the courtesy of believing that it means what it says, then we are in for difficult times. Liu agreed. "It would be a mistake to take this hyperbolic language as empty talk," he wrote. "Someday it could well be a basis for action."

If Beijing means what it says, we need to listen carefully. We also need to speak up. The advantage Australia enjoys

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How would Liu Xiaobo advise us to respond? Should we turn the other cheek, as he did, and declare, "We have no enemies"?

China is certainly not our enemy. Still, the Chinese Communist Party insists on regarding all who value human dignity and freedom as its enemies. Here too we could draw inspiration from Liu's comments from prison.

*Let's face it, the only way to live in dignity, inside this depraved society we inhabit, is to resist. That being so, to go to prison is really nothing more than to maintain simple human dignity, it's really nothing to brag about.*

— Liu Xiaobo, "Letter to Liao Yiwu," January 13, 2000

For those who have no enemies, one plausible way to live in dignity is to follow the path pioneered by Liu Xiaobo: to resist those who would make enemies of us.

*This is an abbreviated version of an article first published in Inside Story [www.insidestory.org.au/human-dignity-and-its-enemies/](http://www.insidestory.org.au/human-dignity-and-its-enemies/) Reprinted with permission.*

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