

A chair forever to be left empty

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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An empty chair was once placed on a stage to represent Chinese democracy activist Liu Xiaobo (劉曉波). Sadly, that chair will now forever stand empty. On Dec. 10, 2010, then-Nobel Peace Prize chairman Thorbjørn Jagland placed the Nobel citation and medal on a blue upholstered chair in Oslo to symbolize giving the award to Liu. That Liu was in a Chinese prison and that neither his wife nor any relative was allowed to attend the ceremony to accept the award showed “that the award was necessary and appropriate,” Jagland said.

It was the first time since 1936, when the Nazis refused to allow German journalist and pacifist Carl von Ossietzky — hospitalized after spending several years in concentration camps for his opposition to the regime — to travel to Oslo to collect the 1935 peace prize, that the medal and citation were not presented to either the recipient or a representative.

Now, like Ossietzky, Liu has died in police custody in a hospital, his health damaged by years of abuse at the hands of his government, although technically Liu died of advanced liver cancer and Ossietzky from tuberculosis. Separated by decades and cultures, the two men were kindred spirits who believed in peaceful change and the power of the written word. That is what made them so dangerous to their governments, which repeatedly jailed them. In the end, Ossietzky was convicted of treason, while Liu was found guilty of inciting subversion of state power.

Liu’s biggest crime, in the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) eyes, were calls for a constitutional overhaul to provide for the rule of law, elections and the freedoms of speech, the press, religion and assembly — which are supposedly guaranteed under the 1982 revision of the constitution of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Article 35 of that constitution says that PRC citizens “enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration,” while Article 36 says that they enjoy “freedom of religious belief.”

Yet, China continues to deny its citizens those rights, and Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) has presided over the oppression and incarceration of opponents in numbers not seen since the early days of the PRC or the Cultural Revolution.

Liu believed in liberty and democracy. He did not see them as unsuitable Western imports, as Beijing claims — a view promoted anew yesterday by the Global Times, which said that Liu

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was “a victim led astray” by the West. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs yesterday maintained its position that “the handling of Liu Xiaobo’s case is an internal Chinese affair, and other countries are in no position to make improper remarks.”

Ossietzky had a response for that kind of nonsense. Defying the Nazis’ efforts to get him to decline the Nobel prize, he wrote: “The Nobel Peace Prize is not a sign of an internal political struggle, but of understanding between peoples.”

The CCP is afraid of the people in whose name it governs. That is why it bullies its critics, why it feels the need to humiliate and degrade dissidents even on their death beds and why it spends millions of dollars every year to monitor words and deeds — scouring the media and the Internet to erase names, words or numbers that could be linked to opposition to its rule.

Xi and the CCP like to proclaim that they have returned China to its rightful position on the world stage, but they are afraid of men and women like Liu, of the term “empty chair” and of the numbers six, four and 89. Yet, the jailing of Liu and fellow Chinese dissident Wang Bingzhang (王兵章) and so many others like them has not stopped other Chinese from stepping up to fight for freedom and democracy.

Decades after his death, a statue was erected in Berlin to honor Ossietzky and a street was named after him. Perhaps one day there will be similar memorials in Beijing to Liu.

Until then, an empty chair will mark his place — and Beijing’s shame.

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