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, China’s long-imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate, could find human dignity in the darkest of places. He found it working with the grieving mothers of young people killed in the 1989 Beijing massacre. He found it in occasional glimpses of warmth between guards and prisoners amid the grinding routine of prison life. And he wrote eloquently and often about dignity as he found it.

Liu died on 13 July, eight years into an eleven-year jail term for speaking and writing about the value of human dignity and about the political and social conditions needed for it to flourish. It’s true that he wasn’t a celebrated figure in his own country, as foreigners with
close ties to the Chinese government point out, eagerly and often. This could conceivably be because people in China do not care for human dignity — or it could be because individual 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. And when they have reported it, the character of the coverage has served to reinforce Liu Xiaobo’s message to the West.

Official Chinese reports of Liu’s death betray what he used to call 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,” a game designed “to tarnish China’s image on the world stage.” Nothing better illustrates the lesson Liu Xiaobo wanted the world to heed about the Communist Party’s foreign enemy mentality than this.

The party’s response to Liu’s death reveals a deep and uncompromising loathing of societies that value human dignity. China’s leaders are obsessed with their position on the world stage, with their national dignity, and are prone to regard any citizen who values simple human dignity as a pawn of foreigners. They cannot concede that China’s citizens could possibly hanker after everyday human dignity for themselves.

Liu’s primary message for the West was this. The enemy mentality long perfected by China’s Communist Party for the purpose of suppressing China’s citizens has gone global. But where, back in Mao’s day, this mentality extended to foes both within and outside China, China’s enemy mentality is now directed exclusively overseas. 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. This simple message from Liu Xiaobo 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, or a purely domestic matter, 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. Censorship may have limited Liu Xiaobo’s impact within China, but he is widely known and remembered among people of Chinese descent in countries where the press and social media can publish as they please. Chinese overseas remember Liu for many things, including a naive attachment to principles at the price of his own liberty, and 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.
The statement “I have no enemies” has caused consternation among Chinese overseas communities for many years. A number of exiled democracy activists regard the statement as capitulationist. How could Liu not see that he was surrounded by party enemies, they ask, harassing and jailing him at every opportunity? Some regard Liu as wilfully obstinate in not recognising as his enemies those who branded him an enemy. Others go further, suggesting that his failure to reciprocate Beijing’s fury has disarmed his admirers and set back the struggle for basic rights in China. More cynical observers, such as the internationally acclaimed artist Ai Weiwei, openly mocked Liu on Twitter using the derogatory tag “No Enemies Liu.”

Others read his statement differently, as a political strategy based on principled commitment to non-violent opposition. Shortly after Liu’s death, 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.”

The statement arguably does more than that. 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 demands mutual recognition among opponents: fierce denunciations on the one side, cowering admission of guilt on the other. Leninists need highly visible foes because only by protecting the People from a spectral enemy can a self-appointed single-party state claim a mandate to mobilise and represent the People in a never-ending struggle. 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 distinctive style of politics but its raison d’être.

The statement also draws attention to the internal dynamics of the Chinese Communist Party, and how these dynamics play out in ways peculiar to China. It is worth recalling that Mao Zedong waged the fiercest of his periodic campaigns against “class enemies” at a time when there were none to speak of in China. The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) took place long after Mao had expropriated the property, killed the leaders and destroyed the families of rural landlords and urban capitalists. The party-constructed ‘proletariat’ and ‘peasantry’ aside, there were no residual social classes left in China, let alone class enemies, when his attack on class enemies reached fever pitch.

We now know that the ferocity of Mao’s invective at the time reflected a deep-seated hostility to political rivals within his own party, including Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, whom he wanted to discredit as “representatives” of counter-revolutionary social classes rather than simply as political rivals. He projected the spectre of “class enemies” onto China’s social fabric in order to brand his political rivals as agents of deeper conspirators somewhere out there in society at large. The result was a brutal charade involving spectral class enemies and very real political ones.

The same applies today, only this time the spectral enemies are foreigners.
After Mao’s death in 1976, the lesson China’s leaders drew from the Cultural Revolution was that the party needed to abandon imaginary “class enemies” because it would not survive another class-struggle campaign. Still, the dynamics of the party’s internal brawling for power and preference did not fundamentally change. For a time, competing networks arrived at power-sharing arrangements that kept their rivalries within bounds. That time has passed.

To all appearances, Xi Jinping is now shredding the protocols and established routines that underlay these unwritten agreements. Like Mao, he wants to create a vast cohort of cadres loyal to himself and shoehorn them into every position of power and authority in the country. Like Mao, he feels a need to elevate these efforts to a higher patriotic and ideological plane in order to lend his political ambition credibility beyond self-seeking gamesmanship. Even those who resist or oppose Xi Jinping within the party and state apparatus feel the same pull to invent a new enemy outside the party to draw attention from the real enemies they are plotting to outmanoeuvre in the party itself.

As a result, a party that still needs to project imaginary enemies outside itself — to ground its internal squabbles in something grander than greed or political ambition — can no longer do so in the language of class enemies. The spectral enemy has to be found somewhere else, in this case among “hostile foreign forces” and their “pawns” in China. These attacks grow in ferocity as actual political enemies within the party squabble among themselves for power and privilege.

This is how China’s Communist Party secures its mandate to rule, and how senior party leaders secure their mandate to lead. By mounting ferocious campaigns against imaginary enemies in the world beyond the party — class enemies in the past, foreign enemies today — party leaders can conduct the purges they need if they are to overcome their rivals and place their own people in positions throughout the system. This was the purpose of the Cultural Revolution and it helps to explain why the language of the Cultural Revolution is starting to echo again in China today.

The enemy mentality that drives China’s Communist Party is an existential requirement of a Leninist vanguard party. Still, the identity of the spectral enemy and the ferocity of attacks upon it have tended to change with the rhythms of Chinese party warfare. This is not to Understate the real-world impact of these swings: the “class struggle” of the Cultural Revolution may have been a phony charade, but a great many innocent people suffered all the same. The same is happening again, on this occasion targeting foreigners and their alleged pawns in China.

**Enemy mentality**

Liu’s statement “I Have No Enemies” was first broadcast to the world at the 2010 Nobel Prize award ceremony. But it goes back much further than this. Liu drafted the speech, delivered in absentia by actor Liv Ullmann, as the closing statement at his 2009 trial. He was not permitted to present it there.

The inspiration went back further still, to the hunger strike manifesto that Liu co-authored in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989: “We have no enemies,” it read. “We must not let hatred or violence poison our thinking or the progress of democratisation in
China.” And this 1989 claim was rooted deeper still in Liu’s understanding of the founding moments of the People’s Republic four decades earlier, when an “enemy mentality” came to be entrenched as the form politics would take in the People’s Republic of China:

By the dawn of the modern era, an “enemy mentality” had taken root in Chinese political thinking, and after the Communist victory in 1949 slogans like “take class struggle as the guiding principle” pushed the traditional hate psychology, enemy mentality, and battling of violence-with-violence to new extremes.

At one point, Deng Xiaoping’s reforms appeared to hold promise of relief. In his closing speech to the 2009 trial, Liu remained optimistic that Deng’s Reform and Opening Up policies were dissolving the “enemy mentality” that had marked China’s political system since 1949:

In my view, Reform and Opening Up began with the abandonment of the “using class struggle as guiding principle” government policy of the Mao era and, in its place, a commitment to economic development and social harmony. The process of abandoning the “philosophy of struggle” was also a process of gradual weakening of the enemy mentality and elimination of the psychology of hatred, and a process of squeezing out the “wolf’s milk” that had seeped into human nature… [Today] the current regime puts forth the ideas of “putting people first” and “creating a harmonious society,” signalling progress in the CPC’s concept of rule.

These hopes were dashed during Liu’s final term in prison. When party secretary Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, he began tearing down the promising signs of what Liu hoped was a “weakening of the enemy mentality” (including “diversification of culture,” a “shift in social order toward the rule of law,” an effort to “put people first,” growing state tolerance for independent social organisations, and respect for diversity of opinion). Instead, Xi cultivated a new and more virulent strain of enemy mentality by blending opposition to “hostile foreign forces” with his own “China Dream of National Rejuvenation.”

Liu might have been denied the right to comment on Xi Jinping’s reversals, but overseas Chinese have not remained silent. In an essay on Liu Xiaobo’s passing, the editor of prominent overseas online journal chinachange.org, Cao Yaxue, interpreted Xi Jinping’s actions as indicating a “campaign of elimination” that goes beyond the old enemy mentality in systematically eliminating independent thinkers, lawyers, writers, academics, journals and newspapers that draw attention to the party’s abuse of power, wealth and privilege.

Beijing has cast its enemy mentality abroad, as Liu warned, targeting “hostile foreign forces” that allegedly partner with treacherous elements within the country to undermine the president’s China Dream. Beijing presents itself daily through party agencies, government ministries, schools, colleges, museums and state-controlled media as being under sustained and ferocious attack from hostile foreign forces.

Liu had advice about this as well. China’s growing wealth as a single-party state presented new and grievous threats to liberal democracy through Beijing’s application of cheque-book diplomacy and economic leverage to get its way:
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-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 over his final years in prison. In one sense, he didn’t have to. Over his final term of confinement, Beijing abandoned its earlier “hide our strength and bide our time” strategy — a strategy that Liu earlier warned concealed nationalist intent — and proclaimed its hostility to liberal values and Western societies in its own very public proclamations. The outcome is a battlefield mentality that pervades almost every field of public policy in China today, 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.

**Enemies and history**

We could dismiss Liu Xiaobo’s comments as mere hyperbole were it not for explicit proclamations from Beijing that appear to confirm his every word. In education, for instance, the party has spelled out what amounts to an enemy-mentality manifesto in a series of formal party and state documents over recent years. History wars are part of this struggle.

One vector is historical education, the subject of some of Liu’s most powerful essays. After the 1989 Beijing massacre, Communist authorities instituted a patriotic education campaign through schools, universities and the media in which, to quote Liu again, it “became acceptable to distort history, even to fabricate it, so long as the goal was to recount the dastardly crimes that Westerners had committed in China in the last century or more, and to show how they had humiliated the Chinese race.” An authorised curriculum of hate intended to “inculcate passions of bloodthirsty revenge” against Western societies was being promoted, he argued, through “education-for-hatred in school curricula” and tightly-controlled media “misleading” the public.

Beijing offers ample confirmation. The 2015 State Council guidelines for higher education, for example, present the higher education sector as a “battlefield” between China and its enemies in the liberal West:
Higher education is a forward battlefield in ideological work, and shoulders the important tasks of studying, researching and propagating Marxism, fostering and carrying forward the Socialist core value system, and providing talent guarantees and intelligent support for the realisation of the Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation. Doing higher education propaganda and ideology work well and strengthening the construction of the higher education ideological battlefields are strategic projects... and have an extremely important and profound significance for consolidating the guiding position of Marxism in the ideological area and consolidating a common ideological basis for the united struggle of the entire Party, the entire country and all the people.

At the institutional level, individual academics are held accountable to institutional and national strategies through their universities’ performance appraisal systems, which measure compliance with the battle against “harmful ideas” under explicit direction from the Ministry of Education. The ministry’s guidelines on academic staff performance appraisal issued in August 2016 threaten teachers with criminal prosecution if they fail to meet the ideological targets of their performance appraisals (clause 10): “The illegal spread of harmful ideas and expressions in the classroom will be dealt with severely according to regulation and law.”

What are these “harmful ideas and expressions” with which teachers must do battle in China’s classrooms? The most poisonous of them were identified in a party communiqué issued early in 2013, known as Document No. 9, and forwarded to university presidents and party secretaries in the form of a prescribed list of “Seven Prohibitions” governing teaching and research. The seven topics banned from university classrooms, research seminars and publications all fall within the domain of the humanities and social sciences. They include constitutional democracy, civil society, economic liberalisation, freedom of the press, historical critiques of the Communist Party, challenges to socialism with Chinese characteristics, and “universal values” (local code for human rights and freedoms, including academic freedom).

Not only were these topics banned from the classroom and the seminar, but the party communiqué banning them was also designated a secret state document. A seventy-year-old journalist, Gao Yu, was found guilty of leaking state secrets for allegedly sharing the communiqué with a foreign journalist. She was sentenced to seven years in jail, subsequently commuted to five years under house arrest in deference to her age.

In 2016, the party launched a concerted program throughout the education system targeting several of these erroneous lines of thought. Four of the seven prohibited themes were singled out for correction in humanities and social sciences education: historical nihilism, universal values, neo-liberalism, and Western constitutional thinking. Historical teaching has a place in each of the four banned domains but especially in the campaign launched to prevent the spread of “historical nihilism.” This refers to any kind of evidence-based historical inquiry that goes beyond the party’s historical verities or exposes truths that could possibly embarrass the party. Since the end of last year, an old-fashioned Mao-era campaign has been under way to ensure that no historical facts, analysis, critiques or narratives presented in class or in print could in any way challenge the party’s bleak master-narrative.
Although it is led by party headquarters, the campaign is guided by China’s premier humanities and social sciences think tank, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, or CASS. An institution with a proud history itself, CASS is now working to ensure that no inconvenient historical data, unapproved historical narratives or unorthodox historical ideas find their way into research or teaching anywhere in China.

The language of CASS’s campaign against “historical nihilism” resonates with the campaign rhetoric of the anti-intellectual Cultural Revolution. To show beyond doubt that the academy is “actively undertaking resolute struggle against the rising tide of erroneous historical nihilist thought,” its president, Wang Weiguang, reports that:

- this year alone the Academy has published close to one hundred articles opening up a vast theoretical struggle… implanting the correct historical viewpoint and continually strengthening the discourse power and influence of Marxism in intellectual theory and philosophical and social science research, boldly seizing the initiative in ideological work, in managerial authority, and in discourse power, generating enormous resonance in theoretical scholarship and all elements of society, and receiving the affirmation and approval of the cadres and masses.

In December 2016, Xi Jinping endorsed the Marxist foundations of the new enemy mentality education policy, and extended its application beyond history and social sciences to all fields of science. Because all science is based on Marx’s scientific socialism, no discipline is to escape battle duty:

- Proper management of higher education requires perseverance in thoroughly implementing Party education policies guided by Marxism. It means persevering without fail in making students appreciate throughout their lives, by grasping Marxist theoretical education, that the intellectual foundation of science is the scientific theory of Marxism.

At the time of Liu Xiaobo’s death, no institution, class or discipline in China is to be spared Maoist-style political intervention to ensure that teachers and students are “firm believers in the core values of socialism” and that all classes are integrated, as President Xi commanded, through correct “thought work and political work.”

The only modern history that can be recounted in China today is a thoroughly anti-Western account of national humiliation and Communist-led rejuvenation, beginning with the Opium wars of the mid-nineteenth century, culminating in the brutal Japanese invasion and occupation of China from 1931 to 1945, and redeemed by Communist victory over the KMT Nationalists in 1949. Why it is that overthrowing the Nationalist government that defeated Japan (with the help of the United States) should be counted a victory for China, rather than a partisan victory for the Communist Party, is not explained. In recent commemorations marking the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war against Japan, Beijing has largely overlooked the contributions made by the United States and its allies and substituted the Soviet Union, Lenin, Stalin and the pre-Khrushchev pantheon of Soviet heroes as Beijing’s orthodox heroes alongside Mao Zedong.

This partisan version of the national humiliation narrative underpins a permanent exhibition, *The Road to Rejuvenation*, on display in the National History Museum overlooking Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. Xi Jinping’s first public act after his confirmation
as party general secretary in November 2012 was to lead members of his new Politburo Standing Committee on a tour of the exhibition and to lecture them on the party’s responsibilities to remain true to the struggle to achieve his Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation. The exhibition has become the foundational text for modern history education in China today, as recounted in school textbooks, public media and the scholarly press. Westerners would be well advised to don a flak jacket before venturing into the museum. Both the Road and the Dream follow a trail of history that leads, through war, to inevitable and lasting confrontation between China’s Communists and the liberal West, led by the United States.

Many of the claims about the role of the Communists in this historical account are well known as fabrications, and the positive roles played by the United States and other allies in defeating imperial Japan are played down dramatically. As Liu warned, China’s history is being invented and distorted at will to reflect poorly on whomever the party designates as its enemy and to reflect well on itself. The result is that an unrelieved diet of anti-Western vitriol is fed to China’s children and students.

What would Liu advise?

If state documents show that Liu Xiaobo’s warnings are not hyperbole, perhaps we should ask whether the battlefront language of state documents is itself merely theatrical — heaping hyperbole on hyperbole, so to speak?

The Communist Party’s champions in Australia reassure us that it is not China but Australia that is resorting to battlefront language in reviving what they call a “cold war mentality.” Professor Bob Carr of the University of Technology Sydney, the former Australian foreign minister, is one of several leading figures who revert to this formulaic response when they confront serious critiques of Beijing’s conduct in Australia. Professor Carr is in good company. China’s foreign ministry and security establishment routinely accuse Australia of adopting a “cold war mentality.”

If we want to grasp the severity of the problem that Beijing’s enemy mentality could present for countries that value human dignity and freedom, this is probably not the time to revert to ready-made communication dot points crafted in Beijing. China is a big, wealthy, powerful and in every respect important country. If Beijing means what it says, others need to listen carefully. They also need to speak up. The advantage that Australia enjoys in dealing with a secretive, authoritarian and intrinsically hostile Leninist state is that its citizens can speak out openly, freely and courteously in defence of human dignity and freedom. Liu Xiaobo did so at the cost of his life. It costs us nothing.

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 in 2002. “Someday it could well be a basis for action.”

How would Liu Xiaobo advise us to respond? Should we turn the other cheek, as he did, and say “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. We could take some comfort from
Liu’s reflections on life in prison. For those who have no enemies, the only way to live in dignity is to resist those who would make enemies of us.

Share

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