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From Athens to Beijing

By BRET STEPHENS



How strong can China be if it is terrified of Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo?

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This could have been the year of Greece. The country where Western civilization was born some 2,500 years ago in a spirit of critical inquiry suddenly offered itself up as a model for where that same civilization may soon end up. Namely, bankrupt, bailed out and deeply marinated in a culture of entitlement, venality and incompetence.

Then Liu Xiaobo won the Nobel Peace Prize last Friday. Now the year belongs to China.

Freedom or discipline, Athens or Sparta: That's the basic political question. Nearly anyone who lives under a regime based on an idea of political discipline, such as China or Iran or Cuba, wants greater freedom. Without it, life is morally intolerable and often physically so.

Also true, however, is that all free societies are haunted by the fear that their lack of discipline dooms them in the long run. It's why generations of Western thinkers—Shaw, Heidegger, Sartre, Foucault, Chomsky—were drawn to totalitarian regimes. It's why there's such a powerful strain of cultural pessimism in the conservative movement. It's why so many environmentalists would gladly suspend democratic norms to combat the notional threat of climate change.



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Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo

And it's why so many Westerners make such a fetish of China and its supposedly superior ways. They work; we whine. They save for the future; we borrow from it. They build skyscrapers, nuclear plants, airports and cities seemingly overnight. We spend years neurotically measuring, then greedily litigating, asbestos leaks.

Bottom line: They pay an invisible price for their way of civilization in the coin of freedom. But we pay a visible price for our way of it in the coin of efficiency.

Reasonable people are entitled to wonder: Are we really getting the better part of that trade-off?

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BINGHAM

Or at least they were entitled to wonder, until Mr. Liu won his prize. Who is he? To ask the question (and the questions that inevitably follow) is like pulling on a frayed thread in the otherwise seamless fabric that is supposed to be modern, confident and ascendant China.

Mr. Liu is a literary critic who became a political dissident around the time of the Tiananmen massacre. What is his crime? He's a repeat offender, but most recently he became involved in the Charter 08 movement. What's Charter 08? It's a human-rights manifesto, modeled on the Charter 77 movement that brought Czechoslovakia's Vaclav Havel to prominence, which says that the Chinese people "see clearly that freedom, equality, and human rights are universal values." To what was Mr. Liu sentenced for putting his name to that line? Eleven years in prison. On what grounds? "Incitement to subvert state power."

The thread grows longer. Who else has signed Charter 08? So far, more than 8,000 Chinese have put their names to it. Are there other political prisoners in China? The Congressional-Executive Commission on China documents 1,383 political prisoners known to be detained or imprisoned as of July 2010. Is that the total figure? No: the State Department's human rights report on China estimates that "tens of thousands of political prisoners" (including religious prisoners) remain incarcerated.

Who are some of these people? There's Wang Bingzhang, a longtime democracy activist serving a life sentence in solitary confinement. There's Shi Tao, a journalist serving a 10-year sentence for passing along notes of an editorial meeting to a U.S.-based website. There's Hu Jia, an activist serving a three-year sentence for writing essays critical of the Communist Party in the runup to the Olympics. There's Gao Zhisheng, a human-rights lawyer who simply disappeared in 2009.

Where do political prisoners serve their terms? Often in an archipelago of labor camps scattered across China called Laogai. How many camps are there? At least 909, according to the Laogai Research Foundation. How many prisoners? The low-end estimate is 250,000; the high-end is five million. How does the existence of these camps affect broader Chinese society? The Laogai "is more than a place where rights are violated directly, with beatings, medical neglect and forced labor," writes Columbia Prof. Andrew Nathan in "Laogai," a devastating recent book on the subject. "It is also the anchor end of a continuum of rights-violating methods that the regime uses to enforce its form of rule."

Two final questions: First, what does all this say about China? Last year, Hillary Clinton insisted that human rights could not interfere with the totality of the U.S.-China relationship. That is not possible. Repression isn't just woven into the fabric of Chinese life. It is the warp and woof. The regime has gone to extraordinary lengths to disguise that fact, just as it disguises the rest of its weaknesses. But a Nobel for Mr. Liu is the disentangling thread—not on Western terms, but on Chinese ones. How powerful can a state be if it is terrified of a single man?

The second question is about the West. No doubt the travails of Greece expose an Achilles heel. But the real test of the West isn't fiscal. It's moral. Are we willing to pay a small price to keep faith with a lone dissident, one who is willing to pay a large price to keep faith with us? Last week we did. Which is why the West may not be a spent force after all, and why the year belongs to China—the China of Mr. Liu.

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About Bret Stephens

Mr. Stephens writes the Journal's "Global View" column on foreign affairs, which runs every Tuesday in the U.S. and is also published in the European and Asian editions of the paper. He is a deputy editorial page editor, responsible for the editorial pages of the Asian and European editions of the paper, the columnists on foreign affairs, and the Far Eastern Economic Review. He previously worked for the paper as an op-ed editor in New York and as an editorial writer in Brussels for The Wall Street Journal Europe.

From March 2002 to October 2004 Mr. Stephens was editor-in-chief of The Jerusalem Post, a position he assumed at age 28. At the Post, he was responsible for the paper's news and editorial divisions. He also wrote a weekly column.

In 2004, Mr. Stephens was named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum, where he is also a media fellow.

Raised in Mexico City and educated at The University of Chicago and the London School of Economics, Mr. Stephens is married and has three children.

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