



Photo by Jeff Widener (AP)

Tank Man

*There is no force that can put an end
to the human quest for freedom.*

Liu Xiaobo

THE IDENTITY OF THE MYSTERIOUS figure facing down a column of army tanks leaving Tiananmen Square on June 5, 1989 remains unknown after nearly four decades. He is commonly known in China simply as ‘The Unknown Protester,’ or ‘Tank Man.’

On the previous day, the army had cleared the square of protesting students after a six week long standoff, in a crackdown which killed a few hundred to a few thousand people mostly elsewhere in Beijing.

‘Tank Man’s’ moment in history was as brief as it was memorable, but there is another Chinese man who could very well be his historical double, a man who spent his entire adult life in opposition to the same ruthless authoritarian power structure.

Born in a rural area of northeastern China in 1955, Liu Xiaobo moved to Beijing to pursue a graduate degree and work as a university lecturer. By 1989 he was a prolific and well regarded writer of literary criticism, poetry, and political essays.

When the pro-democracy movement broke out in 1989, Liu was in the U.S., engaged in research at Columbia University. Cutting short his trip, he rushed back to China, soon enough to be in Tiananmen Square the day before the tanks rolled in.

Grabbing rifles from angry demonstrators, Liu persuaded them to protest nonviolently, while negotiating with the army to allow many of the the several thousand protesters in the square time to flee to safety.

Liu was commended later for his heroic actions, which no doubt prevented more lives from being lost, but was nonetheless jailed for his participation in the protests.

Liu was in and out of prison for most of his adult life, jailed for offenses as trivial as petitioning for human rights and criticizing the government's hardline policy on Taiwan.

In 2008, Liu was jailed for a 4th time, for his co-authorship of Charter 08, a manifesto calling for political reform and human rights in China. He was sentenced to 11 years for "inciting subversion of state power," a punishment whose harshness shocked even many hardly sympathetic observers.

In October 2010, while serving out his sentence at Jinzhou Prison near Shenyang, Liu was named the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for "his long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China." (Nominating Liu for the prize was another activist imprisoned for promoting peace: Israel's Mordechai Vanunu.)

After Liu's win, his wife, Liu Xia, reported in social media that upon hearing the news from her during a prison visit, Liu broke down in tears, dedicating the honor to the "lost souls" of Tiananmen Square.

Stung by this act of defiance and the award's recognition of Liu's heroism, the Chinese government rounded up many of his supporters, put Liu Xia under house arrest, and froze diplomatic relationships with the Nobel's host country, Norway. (The government refused to let Liu's wife or another representative travel to accept the award, so the medal and citation was placed on an empty chair during the ceremony.)

Ironically, in 2002, eight years before receiving the award, Liu had predicted that "if China has a dissident who becomes a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, it will be a big problem for the Chinese government." Nonetheless, he had hope that the honor would hasten his release, saying: "They can't imprison a Nobel laureate forever."

But this was not to be the case: Liu would spend the remainder of his life in prison.

Throughout his ordeal, Liu continued to denounce hatred and violence, and insisted that his activism was just his way of preserving his dignity. "In a dictatorship, if you want to be an honest person, you must fight for human rights" he said in a 2007 interview. "Going to prison is part of that, and I have nothing to complain about."

During his trial in 2009, Liu wrote an essay later known as "I Have No Enemies." Declaring he harbored no animosity, even toward his persecutors, he explained that "hatred is corrosive of a person's wisdom and conscience." (The essay was recited during the 2010 Nobel Prize ceremony.)

Finally bowing to international pressure, the government granted Liu medical parole in June 2017, after he was diagnosed with liver cancer. But denied timely medical care and forbidden to travel abroad for treatment, he died only a few weeks later, at age 61.

Liu Xiaobo died as he had lived, with remarkable integrity and courage. His struggle to bring freedom and human rights to the Chinese people will live on in the hearts and minds of future generations of Chinese inspired by his life, as well as by millions of others around the world.

Ironically, in a letter to a friend written in 2000, Liu lamented the lack of a Chinese equivalent of a "righteous giant" such as Europe's Václav Havel or India's Mahatma Gandhi, willing to sacrifice selflessly in an effort to "completely change a nation's soul and raise the spiritual quality of the people."

One is left to wonder if Liu, in believing that human progress was left to "the chance birth" of such heroic individuals, realized that he himself would be the "righteous giant" who would rise to fill that void. ■