

Silent Protest

The disquieting, remarkable photography of a Chinese dissident.

Perry Link January 25, 2012 | 1:43 pm



The world knows well the story of Liu Xiaobo, the Chinese poet and dissident who won the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize—and who is currently serving an eleven-year sentence in prison. Less well-known is the story of his wife, Liu Xia, an artist whose brilliant photographs are equal parts upsetting and compelling. It is a cliché to say that lovers “are one,” but in this case there is much truth to it. Liu Xiaobo’s poems and Liu Xia’s photographs struggle with shared demons and feed from a shared intelligence.

The couple met in Beijing art circles in the 1980s and began living together in 1996. A few months later, Xiaobo was arrested and ordered to spend three years in a reeducation-through-labor camp in Dalian, apparently because he had been too outspoken on the question of political autonomy for Taiwan. Somehow, three years of physical separation only brought the pair closer together in spirit. Initially, Liu Xia was denied permission to visit Xiaobo in the labor camp because the two were not formally married. When they promptly applied for a marriage license, camp authorities, puzzled at the unusual request, felt they needed to check with her to be sure she knew what she was doing. She answered: “Right. That ‘enemy of the state’? I want to marry him!” A wedding ceremony inside the camp was impossible, and regulations forbade Xiaobo from exiting the facility, so they married by filling out forms. On April 8, 1998, it was official.

Visit TNR's Online Gallery
“Silent Protest”

Liu Xia's photography
will be exhibited at *The Italian Academy for*
Advanced Studies at Columbia University
from February 9 through March 1.

After the marriage, Liu Xia was permitted one visit per month and, for the next year and a half, did not miss a single opportunity to make the 1,100-mile round-trip from Beijing to Dalian. In this, she resembled Yelena Bonner, wife of Andrei Sakharov, the 1975 Nobel Peace Prize winner. In January 1980, Sakharov was exiled to the closed city of Gorky, where Bonner visited him regularly. Shuttling between two cities—Moscow to Gorky in Bonner’s case, Beijing to Dalian in Liu Xia’s—the two wives served as spiritual and intellectual lifelines for their confined husbands.

After his release, Xiaobo remained free for a decade, but, in late 2008—having helped to write a document called Charter 08, which called for democracy and human rights in China—he was arrested again. One year later, he was tried and convicted on charges of “incitement of subversion of state power.” As part of his trial, he gave a “final statement” that included the following words directed to his wife:

Your love has been like sunlight that leaps over high walls and shines through iron windows, that caresses every inch of my skin and warms every cell of my body. It has bolstered my inner equanimity while I try to stay clear-headed and high-minded; it has infused every minute of my stays in prisons with meaning. ... Even were I ground to powder, still would I use my ashes to embrace you.

But the light and warmth that Xiaobo expressed in his statement—and that binds the couple so strongly—has another, darker side: their shared vision of what has befallen the Chinese people since the middle of the last century. It is this darker vision that is the predominant theme of both Liu Xiaobo's poetry and Liu Xia's photography.

Liu Xia's photographs are all square. In ancient China, the walls around cities formed squares. The Forbidden City is square. Tiananmen Square is square. Square in China means order, regularity, solemnity, confinement. (I should note that I am indebted to the keen eye of the artist Li Huai for helping me to understand these photos.) In addition, the photos are all black and white. Traditional Chinese painting sometimes includes color, but the purest art, calligraphy, is always in black and white. If we read Liu Xia's photos as commenting on China in recent decades, and clearly we must, their use of black and white also seems to be making a certain documentary claim, as if saying: *Look, here is history.*

The primary subjects of the photos are dolls. They are odd creatures, the size of infants but with adult faces—faces that show pain or terror, frozen cries, a hint of biliousness. They are unpleasant to look at, but we look at them anyway—in part from a sense of duty to the real human beings whom we know lie beyond. If the dolls are infants, their faces have already been imprinted with the grisly futures of adults. If they are adults, they somehow never grew. Genderless, they are everybody. Some of the dolls appear to be imprisoned; others appear to be the victims of violent trauma and massacre.

Liu Xia saw Liu Xiaobo on October 10, 2010, two days after the announcement of his Nobel Peace Prize, during a monitored visit in the prison where he is being held. When Liu Xia returned to Beijing, the telephone and Internet lines to her apartment were cut. She was put under house arrest and remains in that status to the present day. She has never been formally charged with anything. When she used her cell phone to report on her condition to the Hong Kong press, the police confiscated the phone. There are reports that she has been permitted monitored prison visits with Xiaobo in recent months, but the reports are unconfirmed. Close friends of hers tell me that she has been allowed temporary release from her apartment in order to have meals at the home of her parents; but she is not allowed to communicate through her parents to anyone else, and the authorities have made clear that the visits are a privilege, not a right, which can be ended at any time.

Perry Link is a professor at the University of California, Riverside. This article appeared in the February 16, 2012 issue of the magazine.

Source URL: <http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/magazine/100036/liu-xia-xiobao-china-dissident-photography-nobel-peace>