

Freedom Reflex: The Photographs of Liu Xia

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The Tang-dynasty poet Wang Jian (766-830) wrote a lyric in the patient voice of a wife stoically contemplating her husband's long absence. Roughly translated, it bears the title "Stone of Love," and goes as follows:

On this hilltop I wait for you,
The river below quietly flowing.
Never moving or looking homeward,
Standing here still, I become a stone.
Days and nights pass, rain and snow,
Till you return so I can speak again.

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Liu Xia's photographs speak volumes.

To make them, she employs the simplest of means: an old Russian-model twin-lens reflex camera and black & white roll film she can process herself -- generic analog-photography tools, materials, and processes that haven't changed radically in over a century. Through this camera's lens she addresses subject matter no less elementary: a cluster of small dolls from Brazil, gifts from a friend, that she calls the "ugly babies," juxtaposed with each other and simple props (a birdcage, a heap of cigarette butts, tea candles, scraps of cloth, stacks of books, a jar, some flowers) and then configured on a table, a bookshelf, a chair, a couch, a mirror. She registers these scenarios in her negatives with no special effects (save for occasional double exposures), using only available light. She develops and prints the results in her home darkroom.

On rare occasions she takes her dolls outdoors, to the beach or Tiananmen Square or what looks like a barn or cowshed, to direct their performances in other settings. In a few cases one of them interacts visibly with a human being, boldly confronting some oversized fingers or perching like a parasitic twin on the shoulder of a man who resembles strikingly her husband, the writer and activist Liu Xiaobo; another

suffers the crushing squeeze of a giant hand. Sometimes she dispenses with the dolls entirely, draping her fingers with dark cloth to turn the visible tips thereof into featureless faces atop oddly feminine shrouded figures, mourning and bearing witness. Or she merely knots and configures a dark silk scarf into dimensional forms to examine, or scrutinizes some slowly decaying vegetables.

We might consider this a form of child's play, albeit freighted with all the gravity and emotional identification that children bring to such games. Taken out of context, considered simply as another body of work presented to the international image community, it's hard to imagine anyone finding these images, or their patently introverted maker, dangerous. Yet Liu Xia, though never charged with any crime, has lived under house arrest in their Beijing apartment since January 2011, this extralegal incarceration following the October 2010 announcement in Stockholm that Liu Xiaobo, already imprisoned on trumped-up charges, had received the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. Only her mother has permission to visit her on occasion. And these pictures, extracted under the government radar by the French economist and social commentator Guy Sorman, cannot be exhibited or published in the People's Republic -- even though, like Liu Xia, they have broken no laws.

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Thus we must consider these nominally mute images and their unassuming, reticent creator as somehow quite vocal and deeply threatening to what the Chinese Communist Party likes to refer to as "social harmony," by which they mean their own unchallenged grasp on power and control over their 1.4 billion subjects.

Statistically, of course, Liu Xia and Liu Xiaobo have no significance as members of a population that size. Yet the totalitarian mind cannot allow exception; permitting even a single citizen to adopt a shape other than that of the "mold" that Mao Zedong notoriously devised for his people threatens the hegemony of that matrix. The modern totalitarian state does not afford anyone the luxury of such divergence.¹ "Propaganda cannot be satisfied with partial successes, for it does not tolerate discussion," as

¹ Except, of course, for those who feed from the golden trough at the top, with Mao's extravagant example as a case in point.

Jacques Ellul wrote half a century ago; "by its very nature, it excludes contradiction and discussion."²

Some would argue that the new China, with its capitalism-friendly economic policies, power-hungry princelings and princesses, flamboyant billionaires, and rampant governmental corruption, has moved away from its totalitarian past. But, even if so, the Tiananmen Massacre is little more than two decades past, still fresh in the memories of many. Meanwhile, a new generation has emerged whose access to information and communication via social media make Procrustean Mao-style "molding" all but impossible -- a fact that the old guard in the current regime, with their limited grasp of these technological and sociological shifts, fail to comprehend yet find profoundly unnerving.

As Ellul argued presciently half a century ago, electronic technologies make other, subtler kinds of social control eminently feasible.³ Yet even were China's rulers technologically savvy enough to use the new media to their full advantage, they would still face the problem of the occasional, intractable exception. The Russian scientist I. P. Pavlov wrote thus about one of the otherwise domesticated dogs he tested in his laboratory:

*We started off with a very simple experiment. The dog was placed in a stand. It stood quietly enough at first, but as time went on it became excited and struggled to get out of the stand, scratching at the floor, gnawing the supports, and so on. For a long time we remained puzzled over the unusual behaviour of this animal, until it occurred to us at last that it might be the expression of a special freedom reflex, and that the dog simply could not remain quiet when it was constrained in the stand.*⁴ (Emphasis in the original.)

Pavlovian science stands mostly refuted and discredited today.⁵ Yet its premises

² See Ellul, Jacques, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 11.

³ Ellul wrote his germinal study in the pre-digital era; his models were print, radio, film, and especially television. Yet his insights translate readily to the internet and social media of our time.

⁴ Pavlov, I. P., *Conditioned Reflexes and Psychiatry. Lectures on Conditioned Reflexes*, Vols. 1 and 2, trans. and ed. by W. H. Gantt (New York: International Publishers, 1927). See Vol. I, Ch. XXVIII.

⁵ See, for example, Bernard J. Baars, "I. P. Pavlov and the Freedom Reflex," *Journal of Consciousness*

underpinned the indoctrination techniques of all the totalitarian states of the twentieth century -- not just the U.S.S.R. but Nazi Germany and the People's Republic of China -- and, in an ostensibly benign form, entered the infrastructure of behaviorist psychology, to become a central component of all subsequent motivational research, including marketing and propaganda studies.

Apparently it comforted Pavlov and his colleagues to cast this dog's refusal to submit and conform as merely another, previously unidentified "reflex," no different in kind from the salivating at the mere sound of a bell that they conditioned in more obedient dogs. Though they had already made propagandizing their subjects an official policy, the first state ever to do so, the Soviets had not yet refined it. Pavlov thus could afford his bemusement at this exception to the rule, tolerating it by bringing it into the fold via nomenclature.

Mao and those who served him learned that Pavlov's "freedom reflex" is contagious, and must be contained if not expunged. Easier to achieve that in Mao's time than in ours. Since Tiananmen, the strategy of his successors has been to substitute, gradually, the seductions of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* for the repressions of George Orwell's *1984*. People in China today feel free to express their political opinions to each other without fear of the thought police swooping down on them, so long as they do so privately -- not publicly, and certainly not on the record, not in print, not on radio or television, not on the internet, in either words or images. Most of them seem willing to accept those restrictions now that they can choose to eat McDonald's hamburgers, drink Pepsi-Cola, and accessorize with iPhones.

But not all. That problematic "freedom reflex" just keeps cropping up. It manifests itself in straightforward acts of citizenship such as Liu Xiaobo's co-authoring of Charter 08, a call for the democratization of China. It takes the form of Liu Xia speaking out on his behalf, marrying him in prison, enduring like a rock until he's released. And it imbeds itself in these photographs, made by Liu Xia between 1996 and 1999, while Liu Xiaobo was serving his second jail sentence and shortly after his release.

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From the Russian Revolution on, the various regimes in the former Soviet Union identified photography as central to revolutionary practice and promoted it as the medium of the people, actively encouraging photography as a hobby, endorsing and supporting a formal and informal network of camera clubs. Neither dynastic China nor the PRC during its first decades enabled so widespread an amateur use of photography. Certainly Communist China did not make film and cameras and darkroom equipment and film-processing available at bargain rates to the population at large, as did the Soviet Union.

China's internal political struggles in the first third of the twentieth century, followed by the war with Japan, concentrated almost all photographic activity on the modes of documentary, photojournalism, and press photography in the service of various causes. That condition intensified once the CCP came to power in 1949. The photography of the time, most of it either photojournalistic or propagandistic (or both), was closely censored, and consciously avoided any evidence of individual stylistic choice or personal concerns. Indeed, recognizable style, a personalized way of seeing, and anything resembling self-expression became anathematized in all media, subsumed under the conformist, doctrinaire demands of the theory and practice of so-called social realism. Photography manifesting any independence of thought or motive, or noticeable western influence, was not only unpublishable, it was punishable. In the context of a citizenry trained to spy on its members and report any deviation, such work became unthinkable.

Consequently, the tendencies that encompass what we in the west think of as creative photography, broadly defined, has a much shorter history in China than it does beyond that nation's borders – perhaps thirty years' worth, starting virtually from scratch in the early 1990s. This alone makes it difficult to position Liu Xia's work in relation to the production of other Chinese photographers and photo-based artists. The absence of anything resembling a robust critical dialogue conducted by independent critics of art and photography compounds the problem. Nor are there any histories of photography in China – not even in Chinese, much less in English – to help us situate her project. So we have little to go on beyond the work itself.

"You may find the dolls in my photos have lives and the silk in my photos has soul," Liu Xia wrote to a supporter in the United States.⁶ Dolls, mannikins, masks, and other simulacra of the human form have proved useful to photographers ever since the Surrealist movement began a century ago, making their appearances in works by Man Ray and Hans Bellmer. They continued that service through the late modernist photography of figures like Ralph Eugene Meatyard and M. Richard Kirstel and then into the postmodern photography and photo-based art of Laurie Simmons, David Levinthal, Andres Serrano, and many others. Similarly, photographers have long found diverse ways of rendering inanimate objects as energized and inorganic substances as alive.

Chinese photography has no extended tradition of the symbolic still life. If Liu Xia's theatricalized dolls hark back to any authentically Chinese photographic antecedents, it would be to Zhang Yaxin's elaborately staged, melodramatic, hyperreal color photographs of the "Eight Model Operas" developed by Jiang Qing in the first three years of the Cultural Revolution. Those seem an unlikely reference point for this project of Liu Xia's, yet her familiarity with western predecessors remains uncertain.⁷ Regardless of the extent to which Liu Xia has absorbed the history and traditions of world photography, her work with the medium connects her to practitioners around the world, past and present.

But their photo-historical lineage hardly jeopardizes China's status quo or justifies her captivity. Nor does their literal subject matter -- dolls, silk scarves, vegetables, commonplace household furnishings and objects. What troubles the waters is their content. For these dolls have much to say, and at least one of them (which I take as a surrogate for Liu Xiaobo) just won't shut up.

Some force -- infrequently visible, always much larger than them -- puts these homunculi through an endless series of ordeals: ties them up, cocoons them in plastic, sticks them behind bars, seals them in jars, stuffs them into a birdcage, sets them adrift in the dark, subjects them to a unilluminating harangue, squashes them brutally in a fist.

⁶ Letter to Jim Glanzer, undated.

⁷ As she's kept incommunicado, it has proved impossible to interview her or correspond with her about these photographs. I've learned only that she made the majority of them, the interior still lifes, during Liu Xiaobo's prison term 1996-99; the few images made elsewhere date from after his release.

Yet in the next image they're back. In addition to the male doll already mentioned, two female dolls recur, one of them apparently perplexed by the bizarre goings-on, the other really angry about it all; I read them as aspects of Liu Xia herself. If the frequent presence of books symbolizes the life of the mind, then the silk sculptures function as metaphors of the life of the spirit, the calm center, the combination of softness and strength needed for survival. The cowed fingertips serve as a Greek chorus, looking on.

In short, a whole drama plays itself out in these images, a narrative of survival under extreme duress and stubborn persistence in bearing witness and speaking truth to power. Thoughtfully crafted, they convey their layered messages with persuasive acuity and uncompromising directness. These pictures tell their story to anyone visually literate, from any culture. Their power is inherent, their messages clear, yet there is nothing specific in them to which the Chinese government could object -- nothing, let's say, that would legitimize the authorities rounding up a thousand people who decided, on a given day, to don T-shirts bearing these images and wear them around Beijing, or Shenzhen, or Chengdu.

What else explains why Liu Xia lives under house arrest in Beijing, and why these simple black & white photographs of dolls cannot be shown in mainland China today? They constitute acts of resistance, visible and on the record as such once she gave her permission for their public display. They also open a conversation about the situation and rights of the individual citizen in relation to his or her government, a dialogue whose commencement the Chinese Communist party cannot afford -- because, as Jacques Ellul wrote, "Propaganda ceases where simple dialogue begins."⁸ Through the dispersion of these image-spores of Liu Xia's that "freedom reflex" can propagate; they invite the viewer to breathe them in deeply, then exhale.

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Let me finish with a few words about my involvement with this project, and the results thereof.

When you elect to live and work as a public intellectual, you build a platform for yourself in the agora, that metaphorical "marketplace of ideas" in which concepts

⁸ Ellul, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

contend energetically and truth, like cream, eventually rises to the top, or so we like to think. At that same moment you also step into an arena in which ideas struggle with each other, often violently and even brutally, for dominance. That those contests take place mostly with words and images rather than swords and spears does not make them less fraught with danger or less consequential than a confrontation between gladiators on the Roman sands. People have paid for their words with their lives; this audience surely needs no list of names to verify that fact.

In my professional role as a working critic and cultural journalist, I have reported and editorialized for over over four decades on behalf of photographers embroiled in censorship disputes, sometimes offering expert testimony in relevant court cases. In those ways, I've stood behind photographers and their right to freedom of vision. As a long-time member of PEN American Center, the U.S. branch of the writers' organization, and one who has served in the past on its Freedom to Write Committee in New York, I have supported my fellow writers everywhere in their struggles for freedom of thought and expression, their battles against censorship. In those ways -- via donations, letters to various authorities, service in professional organizations -- I've supported Liu Xiaobo and other writers over the years. But my involvement in this project is different.

I got into this entirely by accident -- though it begins to feel like karma to me. In my professional life I work as a critic, historian, and curator of photography. In those roles I've traveled to China on numerous occasions since mid-2005. Knowing that, my oldest friend, Doug Sheer, with whom I played in the sandbox in my infancy, introduced me in New York last February to Guy Sorman, the French economist and social commentator, who had extracted a set of prints of these images by Liu Xia from mainland China after his 2007 book *The Empire of Lies* persuaded her that she could trust him, and who had initiated this touring show.

Guy needed someone who knew more about the world of photography and traveling exhibitions than he did to carry the project forward. Having spent a late-winter morning admiring the images and some hours talking with Guy, I couldn't think of anyone more qualified than myself to perform those tasks. My wife Anna Lung, my partner in my professional projects involving Chinese photography, encouraged me to

take it on, so I volunteered. It didn't feel as if I had much choice, nor did I want one. I thank Guy Sorman for making me an offer I couldn't refuse.

My participation in this venture differed fundamentally from anything I'd done previously as a curator. In all those situations I winnowed down from much larger oeuvres to those examples that I considered central, illuminating, and synergistic. I dealt directly with the picture-makers themselves, so the curatorial process became dialogic and interactive, with the final curatorial choices – including the physical form(s) of the works' presentation – understood and agreed on. I could thus feel confident that, even if my selections and my structuring of the shows sometimes surprised their makers, the end results had their full approval.

The works we had for the show and catalogue – 26 prints plus an additional 14 images in the form of digital files – come from a larger body of Liu Xia's photographic production to which neither Sorman nor I had access. Nor can we ask the artist herself for answers to our questions, as she's held incommunicado in her apartment. There's no accompanying artist's statement, no published interviews about her work in photography, no critical dialogue from the mainland art/photo press contextualizing the work. From a curatorial standpoint, they're messages in bottles that have washed up on our shores; aside what I'm saying here tonight, neither I nor Sorman can tell you more about them.

With that said, this work of Liu Xia's deserves the international audiences it's reaching because, first and foremost, it's potent, evocative imagery. It demonstrates that twenty-first century China produces world-class visual artists whose work communicates across the boundaries of language and culture. Though its specific messages may not have the approval of the current hierarchy on the mainland, by employing photography, often considered the most democratic of all creative media, restricting herself to basic techniques, and using the most mundane subject matter, Liu Xia makes photographs so passionately engaging and readily accessible to the average citizen that critical exegesis becomes superfluous. They manifest in creative action the aspirations of which China's then-Premier Wen Jiabao spoke to CNN in October 2010: "I believe freedom of speech is indispensable, for any country. . . . Freedom of speech

has been incorporated into the Chinese constitution. . . . The people's wishes for, and needs for, democracy and freedom are irresistible."⁹

This exhibition premiered in the fall of 2011 in Boulogne-Billancourt, just outside of Paris. From there it went to New York, next to Hong Kong and Taipei, after that to Berlin, thence to Madrid, now to Richmond, Virginia, and hereafter to points still to be determined. Most of the venues, including this one, have produced printed catalogues with essays by numerous authors, leaving a permanent trace of the show's travels and the response thereto. Additionally, and not surprisingly, "The Silent Strength of Liu Xia" has generated considerable and overwhelmingly favorable press response, both in print and online, adding to its impact. When she is freed from her captivity – and I say when, not if – Liu Xia will discover that at least this chunk of her work has already established a substantial track record for itself outside the PRC.

You can view and download most of that material, including the various catalogues in PDF form, at the website we've developed, liuxiaphotos.info, where you can also track the show's itinerary, find the latest news about her, and learn about the evolution of any corollary projects. This site, the most extensive online source of information about Liu Xia in English, will remain online indefinitely.

My participation in this effort, and that of my wife Anna, began in New York almost exactly a year ago. Aside from maintaining the website, a long-term commitment, that involvement concludes with tonight's events – not by our choice, but by the decision of Liu Xia and Liu Xiaobo. Nonetheless, on behalf of Anna and myself I want to thank both of them for the opportunity to engage with this imagery, and with the crucial issues embedded within it.

We hope this tour continues at least until Liu Xia is freed from house arrest and can determine the show's subsequent trajectory herself. We look forward to attending, someday, the conclusion of this exhibition's world tour at a venue in Beijing, with Liu Xia herself, and Liu Xiaobo, present. Meanwhile, through these remarkable images they're both here with us in spirit, and we're honored to have this small role to play in today's

⁹ "Fareed Zakaria: Interview With Wen Jiabao," CNN, aired October 3, 2010. Transcript accessed May 24, 2012 at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1010/03/fzgps.01.html>.

celebration.

Thank you.

(This is the complete text of a lecture delivered in conjunction with the opening of the exhibition "The Silent Strength of Liu Xia" at the Lora Robins Gallery of the University of Richmond Museums, VA on February 28, 2013.)

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