

An unprecedented challenge is facing the

West One-party China is gaining power while the West suffers from deteriorating democracy

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Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Chinese political activist, passed away on July 13. As one of his peers who enjoyed her college life in China in the 1980s, a time when the country was full of ideas about change, I am filled with regret and grief at the news. At the same time, however, I am also overwhelmed by another wave of emotion -- the feeling of a tremendous loss of hope when I look at the current situation in China and the West.

Liu devoted his life to freedom in China, but people in the country are largely apathetic about his death. Some even say that his hardships were his own fault and that he asked for them. Liu became widely known when the Tiananmen Incident of 1989 transformed him from a quarrelsome literary academic into a political activist pursuing democratization through nonviolent resistance. He was one of the "Square's Four Gentlemen" who saved hundreds of students' lives through fierce negotiations with the authorities amid the Tiananmen Square protests. Against many people's expectations, however, the surviving three "gentlemen" did not say a single word about him after his death.

This reality is deplorable but somehow understandable. Because of the strict political control and, at the same time, a fast-growing economy in China, the Chinese people have rapidly grown affluent, and some even enjoy a life that is as good as, or better than average people in developed countries, including Japan and the U.S. For instance, the average net assets held by households in China reached some 974,000 yuan (\$146,294) in 2016, according to a survey conducted by the Southwestern University of Finance and Economics. As a result

of this “looking-forward-to-wealth” public psychology, interest in politics has cooled down among most people in China.

Feeling empty

Such a reality in China makes us feel empty when we look back on Liu’s life, and this sense of helplessness becomes even stronger when it comes to the West’s reactions to his death. Though the Western countries expressed sorrow and condolences in their own ways, there were almost no references to how Liu was treated by the Chinese government.

Some may argue that the stance taken by the West regarding Liu’s death reflects its inability to counter China’s economic power and further the diplomacy based on it. It is indeed true that the leverage for diplomatic negotiations used by the West through economic sanctions on China are now in the hands of Beijing.

Yet, another important reason for the West’s stance on this issue is rooted in the domestic political problems that most Western countries are now facing. Since the late 1950’s, along with a shift from “elite democracy” to “mass democracy,” civil rights movements have been greatly advanced in the West, especially in the U.S. Noticeable achievements have been reflected in protecting and expanding the interests of minorities.

Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that liberalism has gone too far in certain respects. This development, along with the shift from elite to mass democracy, has become one of the main reasons confrontation has increased in the U.S., and pushed the government’s fiscal condition to an unsupportable position, especially in the face of social welfare spending. In the end, democracy has seen its own deterioration.

The political establishment in the U.S. has been unable to address the situation or even to acknowledge that it is a problem, but Donald Trump did. For this reason, he ended up being elected as the president of the U.S., but without having a remedy for these problems.

Partly due to the deterioration of democracy and partly due to the rise of President Trump, confidence in democracy has been weakened worldwide. As a result, the West is losing its moral leverage over China.

Furthermore, for those who believe that the West has little in common with China, it may be hard to accept that there seems to be a substantive convergence of a sort between China and the West from the perspective of values.

For instance, Bank of England Gov. Mark Carney has voiced support for Karl Marx's stance on the redistribution of wealth, becoming the first central bank chief in the West to do so.

The New York Times even carried an opinion piece asserting that Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks might not be considered as devils but well-intentioned people who tried to pull their country out of crisis and to create a better world ("Socialism's Future May Be Its Past" by Bhaskar Sunkara, June 28).

The piece assumes they could have avoided their failures, which may be read as calling for another experiment with communism, which cost tens of millions of people their lives in the last century. But, I must say, devils are devils no matter how idealistic their targets were purported to be.

No easy solutions

At present, this convergence in values has yet to reach a level where socialism and communism are considered a righteous value system. Marxism-Leninism is cited in the form of partial reviews for promoting economic policy debate.

It is hard to find solutions to the problems the West is facing. Having experienced socialism, which stresses equality, however, I am gravely concerned about any convergence in the West toward the theory of income redistribution based on Marxism-Leninism -- even if only economically -- now rampant in Japan, the U.S. and Europe.

China, meanwhile, uses the fruits of its economic growth under iron-fisted rule to fund its omnidirectional competition with the West. I wonder what will happen

if the West remains unable to find a direction toward political and economic reinvigoration.

Some say that the death of Liu marks the end of an era in the world -- the era in which the West could influence China. This is probably true. However, the reaction to Liu's death from the West has also exposed the reality that democracy is at a major turning point.

In 1848, Marx declared that the "specter" of communism was haunting Europe. Now, the "specter" appears set to wander again as the West suffers from the difficulty of finding effective countermeasures to address the deterioration of democracy. Is this all right? Liu, who lashed out at China's experiment with communism, would be yelling "No!" if he were still alive. But what would be our answer? Can we revitalize democracy while avoiding being blindfolded by the "specter" coated with attractive words about creating an equal and just society? This might be a challenge that we have never faced.

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