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Chen, Han, "Political Exiles Reckon with Rising China and a Lost Cause" (2017). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/206

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Political Exiles Reckon with a Rising China and a Lost Cause

By HAN CHEN

The last days of the most prominent Chinese dissident were brief.

In late June, prison authorities in China announced that Liu Xiaobo was being given medical parole to be treated for late-stage liver cancer. Two weeks later, he was dead at 61.

For dissidents abroad, like Hu Ping, the loss was as devastating as if a lodestar had fallen. Hu, a democracy activist who left China for Harvard University in 1987, saw Liu as the leading human rights champion among them. Hu twice hosted the future Nobel Peace Prize laureate at his home in the United States before Liu returned to Beijing to lead the mass movement against the government that began at Tiananmen Square in 1989.

“China desperately needs a symbol like Liu Xiaobo, and it will be quite hard to replace him now,” Hu said. “That’s why so many of us were deeply saddened by his passing.”

Barely hours after Chinese prison authorities announced Liu’s death, U.S. President Donald Trump reacted in a way that only multiplied their anguish.

At a G-20 press conference in Paris, Trump called President Xi Jinping of China “a terrific guy.” On the same day, he issued a tepid 45-word condolence, bypassing any mention of Liu’s incarceration under the authoritarian regime.

Human rights activists were dispirited.

They had lost another pivotal battle against what they perceive as the repressive Chinese Communist Party, which swept to power in 1949 after a bloody civil war and has ruled the country under socialist ideologies since then. Beyond their sorrow and indignation, the dissidents confronted an uncomfortable question: What use were they if their voices no longer really mattered to Chinese and foreign leaders?

The answer, Hu said, was sobering.

“The exiles were very optimistic that the Communist Party would collapse soon after Tiananmen because there was huge momentum for a more democratic China in the early ’90s with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union,” said Hu, the honorary editor-in-chief of the online
dissident magazine *Beijing Spring*. “No one could have foreseen that the Party not only would survive the turmoil but is growing apace globally.”

The Party’s absolute power was on full display in October. For a week, President Xi held court with more than 2,300 delegates of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. In his work report, Xi promised to reclaim China’s rightful position in the world in the spirit of party elders like Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Rising above the ashes of colonial vestiges and the birth pangs of economic reforms, he has planted himself firmly on the path of what he called “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” On his relentless quest, human rights and democracy-building are again in the cross hairs.

With the meteoric rise of the Chinese economy in the last two decades and the Party’s entrenched political monopoly, political exiles in the United States are watching their cause slipping away. Successive U.S. administrations have relinquished their leverage in exchange for the multibillion-dollar Chinese market, unwilling to take its leaders to task for human rights abuses as they used to.

To complicate the matter, the dissident community has been riven by infighting, which dealt a blow to its stature in the eyes of former patrons. Once young and determined, these activists are now reckoning with setbacks that are overpowering their democratic ideals.

**An Economic Order Transformed**

There’s little doubt that China and the United States share a future more than ever before as their trade, economic and cultural ties continue to expand.

Their bilateral trade has shot up almost thirtyfold to $578.2 billion in 2016 compared to just $20 billion in 1990, eclipsing U.S. trade with its neighbors, Mexico and Canada.

At the same time, bilateral direct investments skyrocketed from $546 million in 1990 to $60 billion in 2016, an increase of over a hundredfold. Many shareholders now depend on the economic well-being of both countries, a change that could create large ripple effects in times of political uncertainties.

Moreover, the annual number of Chinese tourists to the United States approached 3 million in 2016 compared with fewer than 250,000 in 2000. These visitors spent $33 billion in 2016, more than tourists from any other country.
Domestically, China’s economic heft has also grown steadily in recent decades. According to a projection last year by The Conference Board, a U.S.-based business research group, China’s contribution to the global GDP by percentage of global economic output will surpass that of the United States in 2018.

And as China solidifies its position as the world’s largest exporter, corporate America is coveting a bigger slice of the China market.

China now constitutes Apple’s second-largest smartphone market after the United States. According to online sales records, the Chinese bought 58.3 million iPhones in 2016, more than the number of the devices sold to Europeans and Japanese combined.

Google and Facebook have also tried to woo Beijing lately. Now blocked on the mainland for violating China’s tough censorship laws, the two companies crave restoration of their services to unlock the purchasing power of China’s 731 million internet users. They have made few inroads with Chinese internet regulators in the last few years, but they are still putting out more feelers.

In one instance, Facebook set up a demo page to show CCTV, China’s state-owned broadcast network, how to use the platform during President Xi’s 2015 trip to the United States. The page was used again this November to post pictures and videos when President Trump visited China for the first time.

As China’s foreign trade has ballooned, leading capitalist democracies have become unwilling or unable to confront Beijing on its human rights records, fearing that it would imperil multinational corporations and investors who bet on further market growth there.

In view of the circumstances, it’s certainly not lost on the political exiles that the interwoven destiny of the two economies could banish them to oblivion.

“The democracy movement in exile is going downhill because much of what the United States can do today is just posturing, since much of its political leverage has been squandered by indulging China on trade,” said Hu, a leading critic of the Chinese government since the 1970s. His 50,000-word treatise “On Freedom of Speech,” first published in 1979 in an underground magazine, is seen as a seminal polemic on democracy in modern China.

Hu also said the exile movement and dissident community in the mainland are usually in sync. As Chinese leaders’ strong-arm tactics have met little opposition internationally, the power of the political exiles is also circumscribed by the abject human rights conditions at home.
A Long Line of Modern Democracy Movements

Despite recent setbacks, the overseas activists have long celebrated their diverse backgrounds, according to Chen Jie, associate professor of political science and international relations at the University of Western Australia who writes about Chinese political opposition overseas.

While it is the memory of the Tiananmen crackdown—when the military forcibly cleared the square and killed hundreds if not thousands of civilians—that registers most keenly with Americans, Chinese democracy movements went far beyond Tiananmen Square.

After the scourges of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Chairman Mao Zedong in 1976, his successor Deng Xiaoping emerged as a reformer who was eager to open up the country economically and politically.

During this thawing period in the late 1970s, people started posting commentaries, literatures and petitions publicly on a brick wall in Beijing. The authorities initially acquiesced but turned against the project a few months later, when it appeared to be getting out of hand and posing a threat to the party. Hu Ping, editor of Beijing Spring, was one of the most recognized intellectuals from that era.

The 1989 Tiananmen protests and the bloody aftermath were better known because of extensive media coverage and international reactions, but it was not the first, Chen stressed.

The last major wave of political exiles followed the founding of the Chinese Democracy Party in southeastern China. It was among the country’s first opposition parties, with a platform to end the one-party rule. Before the new party could open more branches, the Communist leadership swooped in and made dozens of arrests in 1998, handing out lengthy sentences to its organizers.

Since 2000, few democracy movements have broken in China as the ruling party became more experienced in preempting public disturbances. The Party was also determined to keep matters under control before its all-out bid for the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics.

Respect for human rights in China remains miniscule today. Since July 9, 2015, nearly 250 rights lawyers and activists have been arrested in a coordinated government operation known as “the 709 Crackdown,” according to Amnesty International. In a 2017 Freedom House report, China scored 15 out of a possible 100 points based on political rights and civil liberties, ranking below Iran and Afghanistan.
A Climax, and It All Went Down from There

The United States, especially New York City, has been the hub for Chinese political exiles because it is seen as a beacon of the free world, according to dissidents based here. Those looking to settle down usually joined others who preceded them, Hu said at his Queens apartment.

At its peak in the early 1990s, the Chinese democracy movement in the United States comprised 800 support groups, he estimated, ranging from fundraisers for Tiananmen victims to refugee resettlement organizations.

“At the time, just about any Chinese immigrant on the street was cheering for the movement because so much momentum had built up after the crackdown,” said Hu, beaming as he recalled the golden years. “You couldn’t be a patriotic Chinese back then without declaring support.”

From 1988 to 1991, Hu was the second chairman of the Chinese Democracy Alliance, the first Chinese overseas opposition organization since 1949. The group was founded in New York by Wang Bingzhang, a U.S. permanent resident who was kidnapped at the Vietnamese border in 2002 and has remained in Chinese state custody ever since. During its heyday, the alliance counted thousands of members and branches in dozens of countries.

In September 1989, Tiananmen exiles helped found the Federation for a Democratic China and soon established branches in 25 countries, drawing 3,000 members into the fold. Along with the New York-based China Democracy Party’s Joint Headquarters, these organizations once formed the backbone of the overseas opposition, but today they are only a shadow of their old selves, said Chen. He estimated that the alliance had only 200 members by 2013 and the federation about 100 by the same year. The Chinese Democracy Party has now splintered into eight major factions, each with its own agenda.

When the alliance held its 17th Congress this October in Flushing, Queens, a smattering of attendees barely filled two rows of chairs. On what appears to be its official website, the alliance misspelled “democracy” in its name.

John Kusumi, who founded the China Support Network (CSN) in 1989 to promote democratic initiatives in mainland China in the wake of Tiananmen, said fragmentation was inevitable.

“I see a political divide that makes sense there,” said Kusumi, now a software developer who ran for U.S. president as a teenager in 1984 on a lark. “There’s a difference between genuine
revolutionaries who want to sweep away the Communist Party on the one hand, and on the other hand those who are willing to accept incrementalism and gradualism.”

Although ideological variations are often cited as a cause of disunity among activists, the hemorrhaging of support from both Chinese immigrants and non-Chinese goes far beyond healthy political debate, according to more than a dozen activists, scholars and former China correspondents interviewed. They contend that shifting global economics and internecine strife hastened the decline.

Zhou Fengsuo, who ranked fifth among the 21 most-wanted Tiananmen student leaders, attributed the loss of institutional support to two mistakes the United States made after the crackdown.

First, President George H.W. Bush secretly dispatched his national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, to Beijing in July 1989. According to a New York Times account, Scowcroft toasted Chinese leaders by candlelight, saying, “My colleagues and I have come here today as friends, to resume our important dialogue on international questions of vital interest to both our nations.” For Zhou, such a rapprochement was an affront to the sacrifice Chinese civilians had just made. Then, in 1995, President Bill Clinton renewed trade privileges, known as the most-favored-nation status, for China. A White House statement said that the sole requirement for the renewal was a presidential determination that it would “substantially promote freedom of emigration in China.”

The opening floodgate of trade between the two countries benefited the elite on both sides at the expense of others.

“Ever since 1989, the United States has colluded with China through crony capitalism,” added Zhou, who was jailed for a year after Tiananmen and arrived in the United States in 1995. “They allied with Wall Street and transformed China into a massive sweatshop. Such a relationship was already decided by politics based on mutual business interests.”

Zhou cited the huge trade imbalance between the countries as the best indicator that the United States had become too dependent on China’s cheap goods. Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, both Democrats, were equally complicit in perpetuating this asymmetrical tie by letting Chinese-made products flood the U.S. consumer market, he said.

At the same time, Chinese immigrants in the United States, who had overwhelmingly supported the democracy movement, gradually distanced themselves, largely because of demographic
changes.

From the 1970s to the early 1990s, most mainland Chinese who moved to the United States came from Fujian and Guangdong provinces. They arrived with minimal skills and could find jobs only in blue-collar workplaces, such as restaurants, laundromats and tailor shops. In the last two decades, however, Chinese professionals of better financial means started settling here, pursuing better job opportunities and a higher living standard abroad.

The newer professional class is much less committed to the exiles’ endeavors, Zhou said.

“These people feel that backing us won’t win them any benefits,” he explained. “And if they go back home, they can still enjoy a warm reception from the Communist Party.”

A Rough Trail of Endemic Feuds

It would be missing the bigger picture to say that the exiles’ changing relationship with the U.S. political establishment and their chillier reception among the Chinese diaspora, were entirely to blame for their decline. The biggest reason, experts and activists say, is infighting among the activists themselves.

Rarely discussed in English-language media, this infighting has in fact been so unglamorous that few community insiders would openly comment on it at length. But people who are familiar with the exile community and those who have left activism offered candid assessments of this side of the story.

“The exile community is a netherworld with unfathomable water, said Yi Sulaiman Gu, a Ph.D. candidate in chemistry at University of Georgia. “It looks clear on the surface, but if you stir it, it smells rotten.”

Gu said he is familiar with the activist group because of his online activism for social causes in China and frequent media appearances. To illustrate his point, Gu brought up an activist whom many consider controversial.

Tang Baiqiao, a Tiananmen-era dissident from Hunan province, was jailed for three years for counterrevolutionary crimes. After his release, he moved to the United States in 1992. Tang became widely publicized in the foreign media as he founded one nonprofit after another over the years, including the Tiananmen Generation in 1999, the Equal Education Foundation in 2005 and the Democracy Academy of China in 2012.
Many activists believe Tang’s morals are dubious, Gu said, claiming that he has pocketed donations for public causes.

Tang’s latest act, his critics said, was the Conference of the Democratic Revolution in China, which he hosted in New York this fall. Tang promoted the event weeks in advance but said it would be off limit to the media.

Tang said in August that he would not ask for public donations for the conference, but he later reversed himself and said he would hire certified accountants. The turnaround aroused skepticism among many activists, who said Tang had personally profited from donations he raised for numerous causes.

In one instance, Tang requested public donations on Indiegogo to commission a bronze statue of Li Wangyang, a Chinese labor rights activist who died under suspicious circumstances in 2012.

The sculptor, Chen Weiming, released a statement in September saying that he had not received any payment for the sculpture.

Tang did not respond to requests for comment left on his Facebook and Twitter accounts, and efforts to reach him by phone were unsuccessful.

Rose Tang, a Tiananmen survivor who was among the last students to evacuate the square in the early hours of June 4, 1989, also refuses to consider herself part of the movement. She arrived in the United States in 2005 after working as a journalist for more than a decade.

Now an artist with an autonomous streak, Rose Tang—who is not related to Tang Baiqiao—said the prevailing factor in the infighting among activists is the “cannibalistic culture” of the Chinese people.

“Many in the democracy movement hold aloft the banner of democracy and exploit human tragedy as a business,” she said. “They are a very marginalized group, and most could not speak English. They aim to fulfill personal ambitions while competing for limited resources, and I never cared to eat from their bowl.”

Despite all the talk about selfishness and egotism, some believe that difficult personal circumstances in exile are also a divisive force. Ming Xia, professor of political science at the College of Staten Island and a faculty member at the CUNY Graduate Center, is one of them.
In an interview, Xia called himself a “bipolar animal.” On one hand, he became a China expert by researching comparative politics and grew familiar with many activists in exile. On the other hand, he actively supported the 1989 movement as a young teacher at Fudan University in Shanghai.

After the crackdown, Xia decided to further his education abroad and earned a Ph.D. degree in political science from Temple University in 1997.

At once a scholar and a participant, Xia believes several factors fueled a schism among activists.

The most obvious, he said, is that the Communist Party is adept at infiltrating their ranks and bribed many of them in exchange for collaboration with the government. This claim is espoused by several other activists, who believe a vast espionage network works to undermine the movement. Although they could never be sure who were the operatives, they said countless fake social media accounts under the guise of prominent dissidents were the latest sign of continuing sabotage. These accounts, they said, are often used to smear fellow activists and create a perception of internal disarray.

To make matters worse, financial resources available to the exile community and to the Communist Party are so lopsided that the activists lack muscle in confronting a state machine. To avail themselves of tenuous outside backing, many have to fight it out, frequently with ad hominem attacks and groundless slanders.

A String of Promises Kept

Although the exile movement seems to be waning, activists said they remained undeterred and vowed to carry on as long as what they see as an illegitimate party continues to rule their homeland. By keeping the flame of democracy alive, they can deliver warmth to those who challenge the mainland political system.

Among those who have spent untold hours networking with Chinese dissidents back home is Lu Jinghua, 57, who closed her small clothing store in Beijing to raise money for student protesters in 1989. She was later wanted by the police for “counterrevolutionary crimes” as a working-class activist. Lu was subsequently rescued via Hong Kong and settled in New York in 1990. She said the exiles were the only hope that the international community would learn about China’s egregious and persistent human rights violations.

“What we are doing here is what people back home simply cannot do,” said Lu, who said she has
been communicating with mainland activists and ordinary citizens in recent years through encrypted messaging apps. “Those who are fighting for their rights in the mainland keep pushing the boundaries, but they hardly garner much outside attention. To change that, activists here have helped compile their cases and facilitated communications with foreign media.”

In addition to publicity work, she said the exiles have testified before major congressional committees to educate U.S. policymakers on Beijing’s myriad human rights violations.

In an emotional congressional hearing the day after Liu Xiaobo died, Yang Jianli, president of Initiatives for China, laid bare the lapses and responsibilities of the West.

“The Western countries’ appeasement policy towards China’s human rights abuses has made them accomplices of Liu Xiaobo’s slow murder,” Yang said in his opening remarks to a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee. “If the world continues to acquiesce to China’s aggression against its own people, appeasing the Chinese Communist Party without any moral clarity, Liu Xiaobo’s tragedy will repeat, and more human rights activists will languish and disappear in Chinese prisons.”

In a follow-up interview, Yang said lobbying the Congress was a daunting challenge.

“Theoretically, Washington has consistently recognized the importance of human rights everywhere, including in China,” Yang said. “But the biggest problem is that China’s human rights condition is a remote topic to both American politicians and their constituencies, so trying to keep it on their radar has been extremely difficult.”

Despite that apparent distance, the exiles have counted a few members of Congress among their steadfast allies. Their most recognized champion, activists say, is Nancy Pelosi, the House minority leader.

With a long track record of promoting human rights in China, Pelosi visited Beijing in 1991 and unfurled a banner in Tiananmen Square to pay homage to those who had died for democracy two years earlier. She has also befriended many overseas Chinese dissidents over the years and received numerous awards and recognitions from the exile community.

Pelosi did not respond to requests for comments on her role in Washington on China’s human rights and democracy issues.
A Fraught Presidency and Political Brinkmanship

While many exiles are diverting more resources home, they cannot ignore the more immediate reality in their adopted country. Now with President Donald Trump in power, activists and scholars interviewed for this article agree that they are living through a turbulent time.

While some said they hoped that Trump would exert much pressure on China as he promised during his campaign, the president has extensive business ties with China that might make him unlikely to risk for democracy or human rights.

Since 2005, Trump’s companies have filed at least 130 trademarks in China for businesses including restaurants, bars and hotels. A month before the 2016 election, the Chinese news media quoted Eric Danziger, the chief executive of Trump Hotels, telling attendees in Hong Kong that the company was planning to open new hotels in 20 to 30 Chinese cities. Since his inauguration, Trump has been sending mixed signals. Although he hired top political operatives critical of China’s trade surpluses—among them Stephen Bannon and Peter Navarro—and at one point vowed to impose a 45 percent tariff on China, the Trump family continued to register scores of lucrative trademarks with the Chinese government.

Critics say these practices signal that Trump has vast personal stakes in the Chinese economy, raising many conflicts of interest that would jeopardize key U.S. diplomatic positions with China, including human rights.

His indifference to such issues is a clear break from previous administrations, which advocated political democratization in China. In a March 2016 statement about the Tiananmen crackdown that outraged the overseas movement, Trump said during a Republican presidential debate that he saw the carnage as “a strong, powerful government that put it down with strength” and a legitimate response to a “riot.”

Andrew Nathan, an expert on Chinese politics and professor of political science at Columbia University, said that it has historically been difficult to lobby the Washington establishment to endorse the efforts of Chinese political exiles, and it has become more so now. As a result, it is a huge task for these activists to figure out how to step up their game.

“Human rights in China is generally a nonpartisan issue on the Hill, such as Liu Xiaobo and Tiananmen,” said Nathan, a board member of Human Rights in China since 1989. “However, when you get into what should be done about these human rights violations, you start to hear many opinions.
“Take this administration, for example. You have lots of Wall Street people who would like to preserve strong economic ties with China since there’s so much business to be done,” he continued. “You also have Bannon and Navarro who believe in a trade war between them. In the end, you’ve got to recognize that some U.S. political actors today take human rights issue in China as a bargaining chip, so activists should be very careful about whom they turn to.”

A Belated Reckoning

Many Chinese exiles, who became disillusioned by the tepid reception from foreign governments in recent years, are abandoning Western support altogether. They said countries that used to stand up to China for its human rights violations and authoritarianism, are ceding their principles for the economic bonanza that its 1.38 billion people represent.

“Chinese regime has become very thick-skinned and violates international laws with impunity, and the U.S. government is backing off so much that it barely protested when Liu Xiaobo died,” Zhou Fengsuo of Humanitarian China said.

Xu Wenli, who like Hu Ping was a Democracy Wall leader, also spoke frankly about the movement’s future.

“Whether a political movement happens and is sustained is not dictated by other countries but is rooted in the needs of its own people,” he said. “The democracy movement in exile strives for nothing but the welfare of people in mainland China, so it will certainly not die off.”

“Even in the past, we didn’t receive much from the West, and the pittances they did commit only had a limited impact. The lesson we have learned is that we should never rely on foreign states from now on.”

Despite fierce headwinds, activists agreed that their struggles to survive cannot ever give to capitulation, as history would more likely remember what had changed because of them than who they were.

“If no one who lives in the free world dares oppose the Communist Party, what kind of collective image does it paint for the Chinese people?” said Chen Jie, the professor who studies Chinese political opposition in Australia. “In that case, aren’t we becoming a laughingstock as a venal and bizarre people?”
Cover photo: Marta B. Haga/MFA, Oslo

To view the timeline of events that shaped the overseas Chinese democracy movement on a separate webpage, please click here.

If you would like to contact the writer, please email him.