

# What We Are Facing in China

## Hua Ze outlines difficulties that Chinese activists grapple with

As a journalist, I was part of the pro-democracy movement in China that culminated in the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, in which Deng Xiaoping's military killed hundreds—if not thousands—of peaceful and unarmed protestors, along with innocent passerbys. After the brutal crackdown, I was forced to leave the newspaper I worked for. I'm still in contact with some of the people who joined that remarkable movement, and whenever I recall that summer's events in Beijing, I'm again moved by the courage and sacrifice that had been shown by students and citizens.

Civil resistance hasn't disappeared in China. But it has changed form, and today's movement faces significant challenges. Before I can illustrate these difficulties, I must first outline some culture and history.

Many scholars tried to prove that Chinese culture or tradition was by nature democratic, and some politicians and philosophers expressed the idea that this Chinese version of "democracy" is such because it is "people based," meaning that the rulers must care about the people. However, democracy inherently means rule *by* the people; and this concept still appears to the Chinese people to be foreign. Building on this idea, the Communist Party spares no effort in emphasizing that democracy is an "illegal immigration" and slanders democratic activists as pawns of Americans and traitors of the country.

As for history, we've seen three waves of democratic uprisings in the post-Tiananmen Square years. The first arose in the late 1990s, following the deaths of Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun and other Communist Party leaders. During this time, Jiang Zemin's government was relatively weak in terms of social control. Democracy advocates tried to take advantage of this opportunity to organize opposition parties and create a multi-party system. The movement was crushed almost immediately. More than a hundred activists were thrown into prison while others fled abroad.

Charter 08 came about a decade later. This movement was started by Liu Xiaobo, who was inspired by the Cold War-

era Charter 77, the human rights declaration by a group of Czechoslovakian dissidents that included Václav Havel. Charter 08 was published online on December 10, 2008, coinciding with the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It presented a vision of a democratic China and solicited online signatures. More than 10,000 people added their names as co-signers.

Charter 08 ended when Liu Xiaobo was sentenced to 11 years for inciting subversion of state power. Thousands of co-signers were subpoenaed or warned by the police. When Liu was awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, the Chinese government responded with crackdowns. Between October 8 and December 10 of that year, the dates between the prize announcement and ceremony, Chinese dissenters, and even their families, were forbidden to leave the country. Because of the government's tight grip on media, few people heard about these incidents.

During this time, I was kidnapped. It happened on October 27, at the Capital International Airport in Beijing, where I had been filming interviews with two human rights lawyers. As I was leaving the airport, multiple plain-clothes men approached me and put a black bag over my head. I was secretly interrogated in Beijing for four days and then sent to Xinyu, a city in Jiangxi Province that is 700 miles outside Beijing. In Xinyu, I was held in isolation in some remote hotel for 51 days—the only human contact I had was with the police. My release came after the Nobel award ceremony.

The third wave is the Rights Protection Movement, which called on the government to abide by the nation's laws and constitution. These grassroots activists used media and lawsuits to help mobilize people against state abuses. Rights Protection began around 2003, so it developed before and continued after Charter 08. It therefore lasted longer and had a larger base of participation. It was founded by Xu Zhiyong, Teng Biao and Yu Jiang, and Xu and Teng went on to form the Citizens Union, whose goal was to realize social justice and the rule of law through legal aid and research.

During its 10 years, the Citizens Union collaborated with a



Top: A 2013 commemoration of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. Bottom: Students on a 64-day hunger strike to commemorate Tiananmen. Photos: Bandari Lei, via Flickr

number of human rights lawyers, participated in almost every important human rights lawsuit, wrote reports on social justice issues and led citizen-involvement programs to promote social justice and transparency. Then in 2012, Xu launched the New Citizens Movement with an essay in which he called for the end of authoritarianism and corruption so that a new civil society could arise. He also urged people to “[p]ractice the New Citizen Spirit in action” by using resistance tactics and campaigns. Movement activities included eliminating province-based discrimination in education and encouraging people to meet and discuss how to move the cause forward. These initiatives led to Xu’s imprisonment in 2014, and New Citizens participants have been arrested and imprisoned, one after another.

Since Xi Jinping took power in 2014, the Chinese government has become much more brutal in its crackdowns. Organizing and mobilizing are essentially banned. Yet activists still organize small-scale street protests. It’s worth pointing out that human rights lawyers are the core of all civil activities, as they provide free services to help victims of state abuse in court.

At this stage, in 2016, most of us activists are working with no strategic plan. The majority of dissident actions are spontaneous, chaotic stress responses. There’s scant involvement by the Chinese people, and there is little seeking of long-term relationships with people outside China concerned with civil resistance. As an isolated movement, we are facing the following difficulties:

**1. Fundraising.** With the government’s wariness of foreign money, many activists shrink from outside help. Because of speech and internet censorship, the Chinese people have no way to learn about and understand the idea and what’s going on inside the movement, making it hard to raise money from our fellow citizens.

**2. Little attention on community development and local relationship-building.** Activists prefer the supposed spotlight—unless a major incident occurs, the media ignores the villages and more remote areas. Those who would want to work locally don’t because they fear bringing trouble to their families. The belief that community-building is fruitless and problematic hinders progress.

**3. Paranoia.** Activists constantly suspect that government agents have infiltrated them, building a culture of distrust within the movement. Meanwhile, there are no measures

being put in place to prevent or handle infiltration. So the movement fails to attract mass-scale participation.

**4. Lack of strategy.** Chinese activists rely on confrontation—they regard civil servants as opponents, without considering possibilities to win them over. For example, activists will argue in and protest outside of the courts, sticking to raw emotion and spontaneity. Few see the need for a strategic plan, the basis of any successful large-scale, long-term campaign.

**5. Reluctance to learn from movements in other countries.** Some believe that our struggles in China are so unique that the experiences of activists elsewhere are either useless or impractical. Others believe that the democracy movement here should simply wrap around an opposition party—a political entity whose primary purpose is criticism rather than constructing a new country.

**6. A teetering towards violent revolution theory.** Understandably, activists feel angry and desperate about government repression. But when explosive emotions go unchecked, the illusion that only violence can free China sets in. Some activists even put their hopes on a foreign military strike.

**7. Resistance to transcend the Communist Party paradigm.** Many activists claim that they would rather give up freedom and democracy than give up a “unified” China. Plus, they misunderstand how a vibrant democracy functions. They believe that voting alone delivers rule by the people.

I find it daunting to describe all the complexity of today’s civil movement in a single article, especially since, as a participant rather than an observer, I’m in the thick of it myself. However, I’ve done my best and hope you will forgive any accidental inaccuracies or missed points that you may find.

**Editor’s note:** Do you have any strategic insights or plausible ideas to offer Chinese activists? If so, please email the Metta Center for Nonviolence, and we will do our best to pass them on: [info@mettacenter.org](mailto:info@mettacenter.org).

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A woman holds a Chinese-language newspaper showing the Tiananmen Square massacre. Photo: doctorho, via Flickr