

Václav Havel, the Conscience of Humanity

by Signers of Charter 08 in China
(Translated by Perry Link)

News of the passing on 18 December 2011 of Václav Havel, the distinguished playwright and moving force behind “Charter 77,” brought shock and pain to Chinese citizens who three years earlier had signed Charter 08, a manifesto calling for democracy and human rights. While we join people around the world in grieving since that darkest of days, our minds are filled as well with indelible memories of Mr. Havel and with the immense respect that we feel for this great defender of universal human rights. We express our sincere condolences to his family and wish, in addition, that the more than ten million citizens of the Czech Republic will know that we join them in their grieving. The loss of Mr. Havel is not only a severe loss to the Czech Republic. It is a loss that extends through the world; a loss to all defenders of freedom, democracy, and human rights.

Václav Havel grew up under communist dictatorship in Czechoslovakia and, over many years, persevered in a position of opposition to oppressive government and support of human dignity and basic human rights. He was active during the “Prague Spring” that surprised the world in 1968. In 1975, after he released an open letter to Czechoslovakia’s ruler, Gustav Husak, that brilliantly evoked the stultifying atmosphere of life under dictatorship, Husak’s regime subjected him to harassment and persecution. Still, he persisted with his ideals. In 1976, he and some colleagues who shared his vision drafted, and in early 1977 published, their Charter 77, which called upon their country to honor the human-rights provisions of the Helsinki Accords of 1975. Havel received a prison sentence of forty months for this initiative. In 1979, he was sentenced again, this time to four and a half years, for “subversion of the republic.” These imprisonments established him as the spiritual leader of the movement for democracy and human rights in Czechoslovakia and established Charter 77 as the movement’s primary emblem. In 1989, when the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe crumbled, a triumphant Velvet Revolution carried Havel into the presidency of a new Czechoslovak Republic. In 1993, when the country divided into separate Czech and Slovak republics, Havel was elected president of the Czech Republic and served until 2003. For the people of Czechoslovakia, to see the departure of a man who did so much to effect a peaceful transition to democracy is obviously a tremendous loss.

But Havel’s influence extended far beyond his own country. He was unrelenting in his censure of dictators or autocrats of any stripe and was equally unstinting in his moral support of anyone who spoke for freedom, democracy, and basic human rights. He supported NATO in its removal of the dictatorial Milosevic regime in Yugoslavia and also spoke in support of the American decision to send troops to end the autocratic rule of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. For China, he leaves a long record of moral support of democracy and human rights:

He condemned the June Fourth massacre. In 1989, when the communist regime used tanks and machine guns to suppress a peaceful student democracy movement in Beijing, Havel went to the airwaves to denounce this cowardly violence in the strongest of terms. In 1999, on the tenth anniversary of the massacre, when students at Harvard University organized a memorial

session, Havel—now as the president of his country—wrote an open letter expressing his support for democracy in China.

He stoutly supported Charter 08 and its call for democracy and human rights. In December 2008, Liu Xiaobo, Zhang Zuhua, and a number of other Chinese, inspired by Charter 77 and by the counsels of their own consciences, drafted and published Charter 08 calling for “freedom, democracy, human rights, and constitutional government.” Havel immediately expressed his strong support of this initiative. On 19 December 2008, he wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* comparing Charter 08 to Charter 77 and praising its authors not only for their stand on democracy and human rights, but also for their wisdom in calling for “better environmental protection, a bridging of the rural-urban divide, better provision of social security, and a serious effort to reconcile with human-rights abuses committed in decades past.” He referred to “the broad appeal of the ideas” of the Charter, as evidenced in the wide range of Chinese people who signed it. He denounced the repression of Liu Xiaobo, Zhang Zuhua, and others who had worked on the charter and wrote that “the Chinese government should learn well the lesson of the Charter 77 movement: that intimidation, propaganda campaigns, and repression are no substitute for reasoned dialogue.” Later he wrote in the *New York Times* that “Charter 08 has articulated an alternative vision of China, challenging the official line that any decisions on reforms are the exclusive province of the state... It has encouraged younger Chinese to become politically active, and has boldly made the case for the rule of law and constitutional multiparty democracy.” On 11 March 2009, at an international human-rights film festival in Prague, Havel represented the selection committee of the Homo Homini Human Rights Prize in bestowing the prize upon Liu Xiaobo and all who signed Charter 08.

He called for the release of Liu Xiaobo and all political prisoners. During 2008–2010, when the Beijing regime detained, arrested, sentenced, and imprisoned Liu Xiaobo for his part in Charter 08, Mr. Havel followed events continuously and closely. In an “Open Letter to President Hu Jintao” on 6 January 2010, he called Liu Xiaobo’s prison sentence “shameful” and wrote:

There is nothing subversive to state security or damaging to future prosperity when citizens act, guided by their own will and according to their best knowledge and conscience, or when they associate among themselves to discuss and express peacefully their concerns and visions about the future development of their society. On the contrary, a country’s material and spiritual future is undermined when its citizens are not allowed to act, associate, think and speak freely.

and:

We are also asking you and your government to end the house arrests and police surveillance which have been imposed on other Charter 08 signatories. We call upon you and your government to end the criminalization of free speech and to release all prisoners of conscience.

He nominated Liu Xiaobo for the Nobel Peace Prize. When Chinese authorities sentenced Liu Xiaobo to eleven years in prison, Mr. Havel expressed his outrage in several ways. First he conveyed his sympathy and encouragement to Liu’s wife, Liu Xia; next he berated the Beijing regime for its moral failure in repressing human rights; and then he led an international initiative,

involving Bishop Tutu from South Africa, the Dalai Lama, and other respected figures in the world, to join in nominating Liu Xiaobo for the Nobel Peace Prize. In January 2010, the group wrote a joint letter to the prize committee in Oslo, and eight months later, on September 20, Havel and others published an op-ed in the *New York Times* expressing the hope that the prize could go to the imprisoned Liu.

When the prestigious award did indeed go to Liu, it had a tremendous effect in raising the visibility and influence, both within China and internationally, of Charter 08 and the cause of Chinese democracy and human rights. The prize helped to establish Liu Xiaobo as the spiritual leader of China's movement for democracy and human rights and caused Charter 08 to be seen as its core document and primary emblem.

For all these reasons we feel the passing of Václav Havel to be a huge loss to the movement for democracy and human rights in China.

And yet, whether one speaks of the Czech people, of the Chinese people, or of all of the people on the earth, the spiritual legacy that Václav Havel has left behind is limitless in its resources and inexhaustible in the avenues through which it will continue to nurture human life. Havel made sacrifices to build human rights and democracy in his own country, supported human rights and democracy throughout the world, and wrote about the human spirit and the human conscience with an eloquence so powerful that no reader can doubt that he was writing about—and for—every human being, everywhere.

In grief, we here offer him our final salute. Esteemed Mr. Havel:

- The universal human rights that you defended are identical to those that we defend.
- The freedom and democracy that you pursued are the very ones that we pursue.
- Your Charter 77 and our Charter 08 are iron cousins.

We pledge to you that we will persist with Charter 08 in China and with the ideals of democracy and human rights that you and we share. We call upon our fellow citizens who feel a similar sense of crisis, responsibility, and mission—whether they are inside the government or not, and regardless of their social status—to set aside small differences, to embrace the broad goals of the Charter 08 citizens' movement, and to join in bringing a great new day to Chinese society. We are confident that the dream of a free and democratic China, under a constitution and the rule of law, is achievable in the not-too-distant future.

Rest in peace, dear Mr. Havel. You are not alone.

19 December 2011, China