

Chinese Nobel Laureate's Death Turns Focus to Widow's Fate

Friends and supporters are now concerned that Liu Xia, Liu Xiaobo's widow, may never regain her freedom

By Gerry Shih and Didi Tang
Associated Press

BEIJING — Friends of the dissident who would become China's first Nobel Peace Prize laureate had for decades urged him to leave the country that sent him to prison time and again. Liu Xiaobo always said no.

When Liu had a chance to seek asylum abroad after the 1989 Tiananmen pro-democracy protests, he declined. Urged again in the 2000s to leave after needling the government with his essays, he again said no. He might be safer overseas, Liu told friends, but he would sacrifice the moral authority of a campaigner who persisted under one-party authoritarian Communist rule.

Then in March, one development finally broke the resolve of China's most famous political prisoner: his wife's declining health.

"For the person he loved, he changed his mind," said Wu Yangwei, a close family friend who writes under the name Ye Du.

Forcibly sequestered in her home by state security agents for seven years because of her husband's alleged crimes, Liu Xia had become severely depressed and was suffering heart attacks. Once Liu, serving an 11-year prison sentence, found out about her condition, he decided he would be willing to leave if it would save the soft-spoken poet and artist, friends said.

But following Liu Xiaobo's death Thursday after a brief battle with ad-



In this Sept. 28, 2010, file photo, Liu Xia, wife of Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, speaks during an interview in Beijing. Friends of Chinese Nobel Peace laureate Liu Xiaobo's family say that efforts to persuade Beijing to allow the couple to leave China were motivated not so much to seek treatment for the terminally ill political prisoner but to facilitate an escape from China for his severely depressed wife, Liu Xia. Liu's death on Thursday, July 13, 2017, has now returned his wife's fate back to the fore, with foreign officials calling for Beijing to release her from house arrest and let her leave the country as she wishes.

vanced liver cancer, friends and supporters are now concerned that Liu Xia may never regain her freedom. Foreign officials including the U.S. ambassador to China, European Council leaders and others have called on Beijing to release Liu Xia, who was never convicted of any crimes.

Back in March, before his cancer diagnosis, Liu Xiaobo's change of heart prompted a round of talks between Chinese authorities and the German government in an effort to get Liu Xia

out of China, possibly to Germany, for treatment of a heart problem, said Liao Yiwu, a close family friend and Berlin-based writer.

"We were encouraged by the negotiations' progress," Liao said. "But then Liu Xiaobo's situation exploded suddenly in June." Liao said he and the couple thought they could argue that some cancer treatments could only be performed in Germany. The German Embassy in Beijing declined to comment.

Beijing rejected the Liu's requests and the appeals from foreign governments, saying Liu Xiaobo was receiving the best possible care in China. Friends now fear Beijing may restrict Liu Xia's movements and prevent her from communicating with the outside.

"Liu Xiaobo surely shared with her his thoughts, which can be expressed through Liu Xia," said Wu, the writer. "Imagine the consequences if Liu Xia should be free and accept the Nobel Peace Prize on his behalf?"

After Liu Xiaobo was awarded the

Nobel Prize in 2010, Beijing placed tight controls over Liu Xia, banning her from using a cellphone or the internet, effectively cutting her off from the outside world. After she was diagnosed with depression, she was allowed to visit with a small number of friends. Guards remained outside her door 24 hours a day, sleeping on a cot at night.

"This kind of isolation is (a form of) torture, and it's been seven years for her," said Yu Jie, a family friend who has written a biography of Liu Xiaobo.

Born in 1961 into the family of a senior financial sector official in Beijing, Liu Xia quit her post at a publishing house in her 20s and pursued poetry and painting instead of the tax bureau job that her father arranged for her.

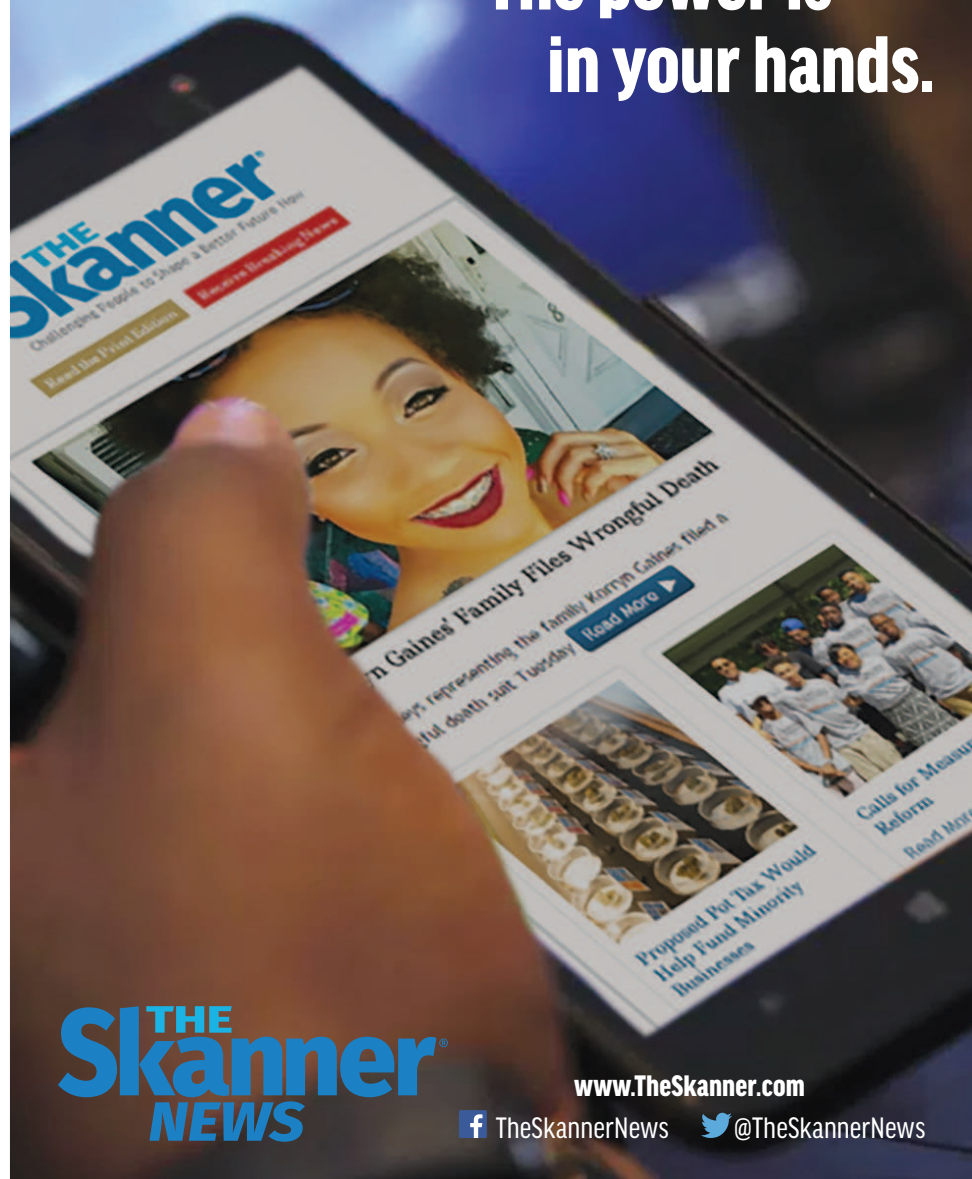
By the time they met, Liu Xiaobo had gained considerable notoriety for his bold criticisms of heavyweight authors. During the 1980s, a period of relative freedom and intellectual foment in China, he gave popular talks at Beijing Normal University and traveled to New York and Norway to lecture.

In later years, Liu Xia, an accomplished poet, would bristle at the suggestion she was subordinate to Liu Xiaobo. But on Tiananmen Square in the heady early months of 1989, she gazed from afar on the charismatic literature professor — her future husband — who was organizing a hunger strike days before the tanks rolled in.

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