



PEN

American Center

588 Broadway
Suite 303
New York, New York
10012

(212) 334-1660
www.pen.org

President

Kwame Anthony Appiah

Executive Vice President

Laurence J. Kirshbaum

Vice Presidents

A.M. Homes

Jessica Hagedorn

Treasurer

Maria Campbell

Secretary

Roxana Robinson

Board of Trustees

Ron Chernow

Barbara Thompson Davis

Francisco Goldman

Beth Gutcheon

Jhumpa Lahiri

Joanne Leedom-Ackerman

Jaime Manrique

Claudia Menza

David Michaelis

Michael F. Moore

Steven Pleshette Murphy

John Oakes

Walter Pozen

Victoria Redel

Susanna Reich

Hamilton Robinson, Jr.

Esmeralda Santiago

Elissa Schappell

Tracy K. Smith

Scott Spencer

Annette Tapert

Lynne Tillman

Monique Truong

Danielle Truscott

Doug Wright

General Counsel

Leon Friedman

Executive Director

Steven L. Isenberg

PEN American Center is an association of writers working to advance literature,
to defend free expression, and to foster international literary fellowship.

November 5, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

We are writing on behalf of the 3,400 members of PEN American Center, an organization of writers dedicated to protecting freedom of expression wherever it is threatened, to urge you to use your influence during your trip to China this month to press the cases of our many Chinese colleagues who have been imprisoned because of their work.

PEN has defended writers and the right to write internationally for almost 90 years. As the largest of the more than 140 PEN centers around the world, our center has often played a pivotal role in PEN's campaigns to free writers who have been jailed for exercising their right to freedom of expression, thanks in large part to the support and leadership of the United States government in advocating for their release. Mindful of this record of shared success, we address you both as our president and as a fellow writer to enlist your support for the more than 40 writers, journalists, and bloggers currently in prison in China, five of them members of our organization.

We understand that our concerns do compete for attention among the many issues on the agenda for your trip to China. This meeting between the leaders of two great nations has importance not only for our two states, but for the entire world, and the range of subjects that you will be addressing—some mutual, some national, but all complex and compelling—demand great agility, statesmanship, and diplomacy.

But progress on any of these momentous issues will ultimately require the talents, the vision, and the involvement of the entire citizenry of both our countries—and in China, some of those most engaged in envisioning China's future, and most committed to engaging their fellow citizens in questions that matter, are currently in prison. In our experience, finding writers in prison is a warning sign not only of the state of fundamental liberties in a country but also of the health, character, and vitality of the ideas in play and of the ability of citizens to act on these ideas. Letting the question of freedom of expression rest in silence would cast a dark shadow over the necessary hope that courage, creativity, and candor can bring change.

We are attaching a list of the writers, journalists, and bloggers PEN believes are currently in jail in China in violation of their universal right to freedom of expression. You will be familiar with many of them, including **Hu Jia**, a freelance reporter and blogger and a civil rights, environmental and AIDS activist serving a three-and-a-half-year sentence for "inciting subversion," and **Liu Xiaobo**, a

renowned writer, intellectual, and literary critic who was detained on December 8, 2008 and has since been charged with “inciting subversion of state power.” We have long admired Liu Xiaobo both as a writer and as an activist dedicated to promoting open debate and peaceful reform in China. Unfortunately, it has been necessary to protest his treatment at the hands of Chinese authorities more than once before: he spent nearly two years in prison for his role in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, and later, three years in a reeducation-through-labor camp for his outspoken views. This time, if convicted of the charges against him, Liu Xiaobo could face up to 15 years in prison.

This fall, representatives of PEN American Center visited with members of Congress to encourage support for H.Con.Res. 151, which calls for Liu Xiaobo’s release and which passed on a nearly unanimous vote in the House on October 1. We were joined in those visits by colleagues from the Independent Chinese PEN Center (ICPC), whose 250 writer members are doing courageous, on-the-ground advocacy work in China despite constant pressure from Chinese authorities. Liu Xiaobo served as President of ICPC from 2003 to 2007 and subsequently held a seat on its Board. On the attached list you will find the names of four other ICPC members currently imprisoned in China. These four, **Du Daobin, Shi Tao, Yang Tongyan, and Zhang Jianhong**, are all serving lengthy sentences simply for practicing their craft as writers. Both Yang Tongyan and Zhang Jianhong are seriously ill.

We do not write to suggest how or when you should raise these cases or what you should say. We only ask that you not be persuaded by those who would argue that pressing for the release of writers is somehow counterproductive or inappropriate to the occasion. China’s leaders know their human rights record is a matter of concern. The country has a long and distinguished tradition of literature, so they must also know that it thrives on free air and suffers in jail cells. And they must expect that a president of your character and background as a writer and a constitutional lawyer will speak of these issues with weight and urgency.

We entreat you to do so, confident that your personal intervention will give hope and strength not only to our PEN colleagues and other writers and journalists in prison in China, but to all who share our belief that freedom of expression is both a sign of strength and a human right that cannot be compromised.

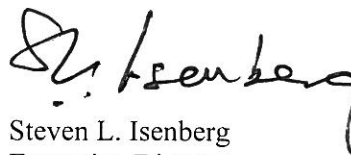
Thank you for taking these thoughts into your deliberations.

Respectfully,

K. Anthony Appiah
President



Steven L. Isenberg
Executive Director



Encl.