

## Australian writer quits China tour

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Award-winning Australian author Frank Moorhouse is pulling out of a Government backed writer's tour to China. He says it would be against his conscience to take part while the high profile dissident writer Liu Xiaobo is in jail. Liu was sentenced to 11 years jail last month for his part in writing a petition calling for political reforms in China.

*Presenter: Ashley Hall**Speakers: Frank Moorhouse, Australian Author; Clothilde Le Coz, Reporters Without Borders*Listen: [Windows Media](#)

ASHLEY HALL: When Frank Moorhouse received an invitation to join a Government backed good-will tour to China he quickly said yes.

FRANK MOORHOUSE: It seemed a very attractive idea. Seven years ago I was at the first Hong Kong festival and it seemed to be a good idea.

ASHLEY HALL: The Australian Writers' Week tour was designed to take a number of Australian authors to Beijing and Chengdu and give them the chance to read their work, speak in public and visit universities. And they'd participate in the international writers' festivals in Hong Kong and Shanghai.

But Frank Moorhouse says his enthusiasm waned when he learned that the Chinese authorities had sentenced the Chinese writer Liu Xiaobo to 11 years' jail for subverting state power.

FRANK MOORHOUSE: This alerted me to the fact that things weren't improving. And I'd had the impression that freedom of expression was gradually improving in China. But this brought home to me in a very glaring way that things were very grim there.

ASHLEY HALL: He says he had to take a stand.

FRANK MOORHOUSE: It seemed to me very easy to be a great advocate of freedom of expression in Australia. But at the time there were good reasons for writing an essay about it. That was because of terrorism and the new legislation that was coming through at that time.

But it seemed to me very difficult for me now to go to China in the face of the jailing of Liu.

ASHLEY HALL: At first Frank Moorhouse considered going ahead with the tour and pointedly displaying an empty chair wherever he spoke to signify the absence of Liu Xiaobo.

It's a tactic used often by the international network of writers devoted to freedom of expression, known as PEN.

FRANK MOORHOUSE: But I was advised that this was a very risky thing to do. It would endanger the organisers of the festivals and other people, Chinese people involved in organising this tour.

It would also probably put the other writers on the tour and myself at risk of some legal action.

I was told it would be very unwise to even mention the jailing of writers in China.

ASHLEY HALL: So he's decided he won't go at all.

The free speech group Reporters Without Borders has long been agitating for the release of Liu Xiaobo.

CLOTHILDE LE COZ: It's not the first time he's convicted and sentenced to prison.

ASHLEY HALL: Clothilde Le Coz is the group's Washington director.

CLOTHILDE LE COZ: But this time it's because he was helping to draft something that they called the Charter 08. And it's basically a charter wrote by prominent human rights activists and promoting human rights in China.

ASHLEY HALL: Ms Le Coz applauds Frank Moorhouse's decision to withdraw from the tour because she says it sends a message to Beijing that not everyone agrees with their policies.

CLOTHILDE LE COZ: The more you will make the Chinese authorities understand that you're not agreeing with them and you don't have to, the more they will have to do something to understand what's going on.

ASHLEY HALL: Mr Moorhouse is a member of the writer's advisory panel for Sydney PEN alongside another renowned Australian writer, Alexis Wright.

She is still planning to go on the tour and Frank Moorhouse says he wouldn't try to discourage her.

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FRANK MOORHOUSE: Individual writers have their own missions. They're not only concerned with civil liberties.

It just seemed to me that I was put in a special position by the fact I'd been so active and so vocal about freedom of expression and I thought that it would be against my conscience to now go and be fated and enjoy a good life in China while these writers were in jail and for me not to be able to speak out while I was in China.

ASHLEY HALL: But Clothilde Le Coz from Reporters Without Borders is urging anyone joining the tour to raise questions about human rights in China.

CLOTHILDE LE COZ: Every country says there is a Chinese way of business and there is a Chinese way of human rights. And if we always stick to that excuse, that it is Chinese and we don't have to interfere, nothing will move and nothing will change.

ASHLEY HALL: The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade says withdrawing from the tour is a personal decision for Mr Moorhouse and that the Writers' Week tour will go ahead without him because it's an important facet of Australia's bilateral relationship with China.

SHANE MCLEOD: Ashley Hall reporting.

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