

USING TRUTH TO UNDERMINE A SYSTEM BUILT ON LIES

Statement of Thanks in Accepting the Outstanding
Democracy Activist Award



Each year since 1986, the Chinese Democracy Education Foundation in San Francisco has presented awards for outstanding activism in the promotion of Chinese democracy. One of its awards for 2002 went to Liu Xiaobo, but government authorities denied Liu permission to leave China to attend the award ceremony, which was held in May 2003. Liu sent the following “statement of thanks” to the Foundation in lieu of an acceptance speech.—Ed.

MY LITERARY LIFE BEGAN when I was an “educated youth” in the 1970s. It was an era of revolutionary fervor when empty slogans and blind passions, including the lies in *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, ran rampant. As a young man I embraced all of them as the absolute truth. Then, in the 1980s, when my writings began to receive some public recognition, I saw myself with equal confidence as having outgrown Mao-era language and as now grounding my writings in a quest for human dignity and the living of an honest life. Like someone who strikes it rich overnight, I exulted in a new world that seemed to have no limits.

Then that bloody dawn in 1989, fourteen years ago, showed me how shallow and self-centered I still was, taught me to recognize the warmth and the inner strength of love, and gave me a new appreciation of what is most important in life. I knew that from that time on I would forever be living with the guilt of the survivor and in awe of the souls of the

dead. I began to feel mortified at my shallowness in the 1970s and my bravado of the 1980s. Indeed, it is only now, in looking back carefully, that I realize that my entire youth was spent in a cultural desert and that my early writings had all been nurtured in hatred, violence, and arrogance—or, alternatively, in lies, cynicism, and loutish sarcasm. These poisons of “Party culture” had permeated several generations of Chinese, and I was no exception. Even in the liberal tides of the 1980s, I had not been able to purge myself of them entirely. I knew at the time that Mao-style thinking and Cultural Revolution-style language had become ingrained in me, and my goal had been to transform myself from the bone marrow out. Hah!—Easier said than done. It may take me a lifetime to rid myself of the poison.

Respectfully Received in the Name of the Souls of the Dead

I receive this award today, May 31, 2003, only four days before the anniversary of that bloody morning in June fourteen years ago. I do not know whether my work has been worthy of the people who died and cannot claim to deserve this award. I can understand the honor only as a tribute to those who continue to speak the truth inside a system built on lies and as an offering to the souls of the dead, delivered through me, of memory that refuses to be erased.

I feel that those who perished that day are looking down on me from above. They look down on a person privileged still to be alive. They have been looking down for fourteen years now. I was a participant in the 1989 movement and observed how, in that dark night and early dawn, it was sliced by bayonets, pierced by bullets, and crushed by tanks. The glinting tips of the bayonets still stab in the recesses of my memory. As one of the survivors, I see before my eyes two things—the souls of those who died for a free China and the violence, the lies, and the bribery of the killers—and I am haunted by the grave responsibility of being still alive. I do my best to make every word from my pen a cry from the heart for the souls of the dead. I use my memory of their graves to combat the Chinese government’s pressure to erase memory; my searing desire to atone for having survived helps me resist the temptations to join the world of lies.

We may feel contempt for a regime that kills people and disgust when it lies to explain its killing, but we can feel only despair if a nation makes allowances for such a regime and forgets the people who were killed. How much more is this the case when the killings were on open display to the world and when the physical deaths of the victims have so well proven the moral deaths of the killers?

The crimes of the Communist dictatorship are many, and the victims whom we do not know about are far, far too numerous—both the souls of the dead from killings and the prisoners of conscience who remain behind bars. One way to compensate for their suffering is to be sure that we reflect upon it scrupulously in memory, and one of the moral preconditions of honest memory is that we utterly refuse the regime's indoctrination and refuse as individuals to repeat its lies. We fortunate survivors, and anyone who lives outside the regime's metal bars, must, each of us as an independent person, hold fast to memory of the victims and refuse to sell out to the material comforts that participation in the official lies can bring. To do anything less is to surrender the meaning of life, to sell one's personal dignity, and to lose sight of what it means to be a human being. Nothing can substitute for individual responsibility.

Refusing to Lie Can Undermine a Tyranny

All of us, obviously, are ordinary people, and we all have our weaknesses. We all seek security and at least a modicum of worldly comfort. With global modernization and the cultural and social changes that have come with it, the world has softened the standards that it applies to people. There is less emphasis on classic heroism or martyrdom and more acceptance of human weakness and the human desire for material comfort. We no longer need to declaim high-sounding principles or to emulate the ideals of the Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849), who wrote:

Life is precious
 Love yet more;
 But for freedom
 Both can be flung away.

We do not need to match this standard. We need not demand of ourselves any extraordinary courage, nobility, conscience, or wisdom; we need not ask ourselves to risk prison or to go on hunger strikes or carry out self-immolations. All we need to do is to eliminate lies from our public speech and to give up the use of lies as a tactic in dealing with the threats and the enticements of the regime.

Moral prohibitions against lying are fundamental in the ancient texts of all the world's cultures. For the people in this world who still live under dictatorships, resistance to lies continues to be the first step in the pursuit of freedom from fear and coercion, which is something every human being yearns for. Dictatorships need lies and violence in order to maintain the coercion and fear upon which they depend. They need both—violence alone is not enough; it needs the veneer that lies provide. No single person, of whatever status, can fight back against regime violence alone, but the refusal to participate in lying is something that every person can accomplish. To refuse to lie in day-to-day public life is the most powerful tool for breaking down a tyranny built on mendacity.

This tactic can be especially effective in today's post-totalitarian China, where conditions are ripe for a transition. Worldwide trends and the desires of the Chinese people are both clearly moving toward more openness and democracy; the appeal of Party rhetoric, as well as its sedative effects, are getting weaker by the day. Society is moving toward much more diversity in both its economic activities and its values, and these trends constantly eat away at the old, rigid, unitary political system. In this situation, the post-totalitarian dictatorship finds that lies are just about the only tools of argument left to it. Its position is so weak that it no longer even bothers to ask that people be sincere in their self-abasement. The regime understands that people do not believe in it and have no wish to praise it, so it compromises: just be cynical, just *pretend* that you recognize and support us, and that will be enough!

Why People Participate in the Lying

The regime has learned from the Mao era and the Tiananmen Massacre that use of brute violence has its costs. In order to extract even the superficial appearance of submission and support from the populace, the preferred method is neither bamboozlement by ideology nor repression

by brute force, but the soft tactic of buying people off. “Spend money to buy stability” has become the regime’s primary governing strategy. Any stability or public support that can be bought without use of bayonets or prisons is bought; violent repression is reserved for the very few who cannot be bought.

And so it happens that for people living in this post-totalitarian system, and especially for the notable figures in the intellectual elite, the main reason for going along with official mendacity is not a passive one—not a fear of meeting with violence—but an active, willing submission to the temptations of material gain. We can even say that what the autocrats at the top fear most is not violent uprisings, which they can put down (so long as these are not too large, and we should be wary of wishing for full-scale violent revolution, which might only bring a new dictatorship); their worst nightmare is a situation in which every person, beginning with intellectuals and the other notables who speak in public, is able to ignore material inducements and begins to refuse to utter lies. Even to say nothing, even just to remain silent, would be enough, so long as no lies are repeated and everyone agrees to stop living off the telling of lies. The system would choke.

Single Truths, Drop by Drop, Can Form a Flood That Washes Away Tyranny

Today the risks involved in truth-telling in China are much less than they once were. Statements that during the Mao era would have brought disaster to entire families can now be heard in informal contexts everywhere. Prominent figures who speak out today do feel pressure, but this falls miles short of what happened to people like Zhang Zhixin [tortured and raped in prison for six years, 1969–1975, and her throat slit prior to her 1975 execution to prevent her from shouting final words — Ed.], and does not amount to much, either, when compared to the prices that Democracy Wall activists paid. [Wei Jingsheng was sent to prison for fourteen years in 1979—Ed.]. The imprisonment of people like journalist Yang Zili [from 2001 to 2009] and Internet writer Liu Di [see “From Wang Shuo’s Wicked Satire to Hu Ge’s *Egao*,” pp. 177–187] shows that today relatively unknown people still sometimes pay a heavy price for speaking out. This makes the path taken by social scientist Li

Shenzhi (1923–2003) during his final years—especially in his very honest essay called “Perils and Panics of Fifty Years,” written on the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of Communist rule in China—all the more important as a model for prominent figures in our society to emulate. When society honors a person with the bestowal of high position, that person owes society a measure of responsibility that matches the honor bestowed; a famous public figure owes something that a Yang Zili or Liu Di does not owe. When prominent people speak in public, their fame is their greatest resource. When they speak truth to power, they not only bring greater moral pressure to bear than others can; they also help to expand the space for public discourse, thereby encouraging more people to emerge from silence.

We must note that speaking truth to power has rewards as well as costs. People who dare to speak out about major public events may not receive tangible benefits, but they receive the very considerable reward of high moral reputation among fellow Chinese as well as in the international community. They can emerge from civil society to become figures who carry substantial influence of their own. After the Tiananmen Massacre, for example, a single sentence of truth from Professor Ding Zilin punctured the Communist Party’s sky-covering lies about the events and brought worldwide sympathy and support to the professor. She was then able to create a durable movement, called the Tiananmen Mothers, and she has received many international human rights awards, including this award of Outstanding Democracy Activist.

Dr. Jiang Yanyong is another recent example of how a word of truth from a citizen can collapse a big lie of the government. Dr. Jiang’s letter last month to two television stations exposing the official cover-up of China’s SARS epidemic led to worldwide condemnation of the government’s lies. Jiang’s act of courage not only sent the regime running to shut the barn door after the horses were out; it also gave the Chinese people new hope that they could defeat the SARS epidemic, and—perhaps most important—established another precedent for how truth can undermine dictatorship. Predictably, the Party-controlled media inside China bottled up what Dr. Jiang had done, but news of it spread around the world on the Internet, including back into China, and he received a flood of messages of support, praise, and congratulations from both China and abroad. There could be no better reward for China’s voices

of conscience than the recent popular clamor for greater freedom of the press in China.

These examples make it plain that if every person were to speak just one sentence of truth on major issues that affect society, the dictatorship would fail, no matter how brutal it might be. As resistance to public mendacity builds among the people, drop by drop, eventually the drops will come together to form a flood, and a dictatorship that needs lies in order to maintain itself will find it hard to continue.

Encouragement for Speaking Truth to Power

I should emphasize that for people like me, who live inside a cowardly dictatorship, which is a prison of its own kind, every little bit of good-hearted encouragement that springs from the human nature of people who live in other places—even when the encouragement is small and expressed only privately—causes us to feel gratitude and awe. The Chinese Democracy Education Foundation's award is neither small nor private. The Foundation has been ceaseless in its encouragement of people who speak out against China's dictatorial regime, and its annual "Outstanding Activist" award is playing a distinctive role in China's political transition. The award is encouragement to people who are working under very difficult conditions; it helps them to pursue their goals, whether this is simply the quest to maintain dignity as a human being or the huge cause of bringing freedom to all of China. I trust that the Foundation will continue to use its Award to encourage those who speak truth to power until the day comes when China is absorbed into the mainstream of human civilization and truly becomes a land where freedom of speech is protected.

I remain acutely aware that I am the lucky and undeserving survivor of a massacre in the waning years of a dictatorship, and that I cannot speak for souls of the dead. What I can express, if indirectly, are my feelings of remorse and my wishes to atone. Please allow me to conclude with some lines I wrote on June 4, 1999, the tenth anniversary of the massacre, during my confinement in a reeducation-through-labor camp:

Gripping the prison bars
this moment

I must wail in grief
for I fear the next
so much I have no tears for it
remembering them, the innocent dead,
I must thrust a dagger calmly
into my eyes
must purchase with blindness
clarity of the brain
for that bone-devouring memory
is best expressed
by refusal

At home in Beijing, May 2003

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Translated by Eva S. Chou