



# CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

## Acceptance Speech

Yu Jie

2012

The Oak and the Calf

Ladies and gentleman,

I am especially honored to have this opportunity to stand before you today.

Less than two years ago, on the evening of December 9th, 2010, as the Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony for Liu Xiaobo was being held in Oslo, I was kidnapped by the Chinese Communist Party's secret police and taken to the outskirts of Beijing. In the hours that followed, they put me through the cruelest torture until I lost consciousness; by the time that I arrived at the hospital, I was on the brink of death. But at that uncertain moment, I still firmly believed that as an author committed to speaking the truth, even if I died, my writings would live on. It was this faith that allowed me to emerge victorious over their chilling threats: "we could easily dig a hole, bury you alive in a snap, and no one in the world would ever know what happened to you."

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn had a similar faith. Reflecting upon the cruel fates of those throughout history who had fought against authoritarian governments, he exclaimed: "for the writer intent on truth, life never was, never is (and never will be!) easy: his like have suffered every imaginable harassment-defamation, duels, a shattered family life, financial ruin or lifelong unrelieved property, the madhouse, jail." Nevertheless, Solzhenitsyn continued to believe "that my work would not be in vain, that it would someday smite the heads I had in my sights and that those who received its invisible emanations would understand."

At the time that Solzhenitsyn wrote these words, the majority of so-called experts believed that the Soviet Union would continue to be a presence on the world stage for decades to come, and that it would grow ever stronger in relation to its main rival, the United States. When Solzhenitsyn arrived in exile expressing his confidence that he would be able to return home in his lifetime and declaring that the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse, most simply laughed and shook their heads. They thought he was dreaming. The Soviet Union's massive army and advanced weaponry had terrified the Western world into accommodation, imagining this failing empire as much stronger than it really was. In this environment, when Ronald Reagan challenged Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall" in Berlin just a few years before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the entire Eastern bloc, most saw these comments as a dangerous provocation rather than a vision of the future.

But who had the last laugh? The Soviet Union collapsed like a house of cards. And the words of a few dreamers became reality.

Today, I stand before you based in a similar conviction. And similarly, as I declare the inevitability of the collapse of Chinese Communist tyranny, I am sure that many of you will continue to disagree.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the people of the Western world have reliably projected one naive illusion after another onto this polity. Imagining a more humane alternative to Stalinism, Yen'an of the 1940s was reliably characterized as the birthplace of Chinese democracy by Western media and intellectuals. After the Party took power, the series of cruel political campaigns unleashed by Mao against his own people led to the death of nearly one hundred million Chinese citizens. Yet many intellectuals, disaffected with the shortcomings of capitalism, continued to view China as a sort of utopia removed from the worldly struggles of the United States and the Soviet Union. Jean-Paul Sartre is perhaps the most prominent example of this type of idealism in the intellectual world. The economic reforms exploited by the Party to maintain power following the loss of any and all political legitimacy in the massacre of 1989 have gradually made China the world's leading manufacturer of cheap goods. The billions of workers laboring away in slave-like conditions has made China a twisted new promised land for multinational corporations, for whom the bottom line is always more important than human rights. In recent years, everyone from the CEO of Citibank to professors at Harvard have reliably had plenty of warm words of enthusiasm for the so-called "China model."

But in the end, the Communist Party is still, after all, the Communist Party. No matter how much they change on the surface, lies and violence remain at the core of their power. Just as the 1936 Berlin Olympics could not disguise the harsh realities of Nazi rule, so the dazzling show put on in Beijing in 2008 cannot disguise the reality of the Chinese Communist Party and its rule over China. Thinking only in terms of short-term benefits, all of the cheap products coming out of China and landing on the shelves of Wal-Marts in America might be good for American consumers at the moment. But in order to see this situation from a long-term perspective, we have to move beyond low prices to understand the real price of these products: the trampling of human rights, the pollution of the environment, and the careless waste of resources. The rush to separate trade relations from human rights and other concerns can bring nothing but lasting harm to the fundamental values of a free market, rule of law, and democracy upon which this civilization was founded.

Yet after arriving in the United States, what surprised me most was my assumption that I had escaped from the propaganda apparatus of the Chinese Communist Party. I was sadly mistaken. As a subscriber to the Washington Post, I recently discovered one quite interesting supplement section of the paper entitled China Watch. China Watch looks exactly like any other section of the Washington Post, with the exception of one small disclaimer: "Paid supplement to the Washington Post." This paid supplement just so happens to carry stories directly from the official Chinese media. I don't know how much money the Chinese Communist Party pays the Washington Post for their propaganda to be carried abroad, but I do know that seeing this type of propaganda following me all of the way to the United States was nothing short of traumatic. The Nazis and the Soviet Union could never have pulled off such a feat, but it is all too easy for the Chinese Communist Party. Skimming through recent issues of "China Watch," I have seen plenty of stories about how the people of Tibet enjoy complete religious freedom, alongside beautiful pictures of smiling monks and nuns. Glancing at these images, it is all too easy to forget that more than fifty Tibetans have self-immolated in final desperate protests against the brutal rule of the Chinese Communist Party in their homeland. A few decades ago, the self-immolation of one Vietnamese monk shocked the Western world and ended American support for Ngo Dinh Diem's regime. Today, more than fifty Tibetans have set themselves aflame, yet the world watches in silence. How could this happen?

As a human rights activist from China, I often feel that I am far more isolated than Solzhenitsyn ever was. The Chinese Communist regime is far wealthier and far craftier than the leaders of the Soviet Union, and is particularly adept at realizing its goals while maintaining its image. As a result, criticisms of the Chinese Communist Party do not receive sufficient attention in the Western world today. But isolation can never be a reason for me to halt my struggle. There are far too many truths waiting to be revealed, and too many of my fellow countrymen and women continue to suffer persecution, waiting eagerly to hear even a single voice of support. I can't say that I am really courageous. Looking at all that this prize's former honorees have accomplished over the years, I can only humbly say that they are models of courage. But as for myself, I am not brave enough. The bravest of my compatriots, like my friend and teacher Liu Xiaobo, are in prison. When I remember them and their efforts, I no longer feel quite so lonely. The main reason that I became a writer dedicated to speaking the truth at all costs was the Beijing Massacre of 1989: I decided in the aftermath of these events to break completely with a government that was willing to kill its own people in order to protect its power. Ten years later, when I met Ding Zilin, the founder of the Tiananmen Mothers, she told me that her son Jiang Jielian, who was murdered by the Chinese government on the streets of our capital that evening, was just one year older than me. Seeing me, she said, made her think of him. Indeed, had I been in Beijing in 1989, rather than in a small town in remote Western China, I might have been one of the young people slaughtered that evening. Now, having come face to face with death, what else is left to fear? As Paul said in the Bible, even after the death of a body, the soul lives on. There is nothing to fear.

Alexandr Solzhenitsyn named his autobiography *The Oak and the Calf*, or in Russian *The Calf butting the Oak-Tree*. Indeed, each of us may just be that little calf, but together we can bring down that stubborn old oak tree. Tellingly, there is a similar traditional saying in Chinese: filling the sea with pebbles. The story behind this saying tells of one little bird who brought one pebble a day out the sea. Eventually, through these small yet persistent efforts, the sea was filled with these pebbles. Indeed, we may not have weapons, we may not have money, and we may not have power. But we do have our belief in freedom. And as President Reagan once so presciently said: "the march of freedom and democracy... will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history."

In conclusion today, I would like to express my thanks to my wife. Although she has faced house arrest and countless other challenges for being together with me, she has always stood strongly by my side. I would like to thank human rights activist Harry Wu, who has supported my work for all of these years. I would also like to thank Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Michael H. Posner for nominating me for this honor. I would like to thank the Honorable John Train and the Train Foundation for selecting me to be the first Chinese recipient of the Civil Courage Prize. And I would like to especially thank Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, whose life inspired the establishment of this prize. I believe that he is looking down upon us from heaven, and supporting us calves as we head-butt the oak tree. Finally, I would like to thank each and every one of you. Your presence here tonight reminds me that in the fight for freedom, there are no nationalities or races. Freedom is the aspiration of all of humankind. Once the bells of freedom begin to chime in China, I can only hope that we will all have a chance to meet again one day in Beijing.

Thank you very much.

*Translated by Kevin Carrico*