

What Hong Kong still enjoys and treasures?

Speech at the SOPA ANNUAL MEETING 2008

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Chairman, Ladies & Gentlemen,

It is my great honour to address this esteemed audience from Asia's media industry. I congratulate all the winners of the SOPA awards and wish them yet greater success in the days ahead. I am sure the efforts of the individuals and the media they represent will contribute to the prosperity and health of Asia's media industry.

As you all know, I have just gone through a trying time. Through the ordeal I have come to realize the virtues of Hongkong, which is home to some 50 newspapers and 700 periodicals, as well as the regional headquarters for some of the agencies. Tonight I would like to share with you my experience, so that you do not have to share mine.

But before I start, please allow me a few seconds to publicly tender my most heartfelt thanks to one of the largest media players in Asia, my employer the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), for the very strong support, moral and material, that it had given me during my 1000-day ordeal. Deep from my heart I feel obliged to do so.

Many friends told me that they were very impressed by the way SPH supported me and that they developed a very positive image of Singaporeans because of this.

To a person in great distress and crying desperately for justice this unreserved support marked the critical divide between life and death. I was not exaggerating when I told my boss that I owe my new life to the strong hand that SPH lent me.

I am indeed fortunate to have an employer that knows me well, trusts me, gives me maximum liberty to bring my potential into full play, and supports me when I get into awful trouble. This last point is especially crucial in the media industry known for its high exposure to political risk.

I believe SPH has set a very good example for the media operators worldwide on how best to promote press freedom.

From my ordeal, I have also come to appreciate many beautiful things about Hongkong.

Foremost is the judicial system. Our common law tradition presumes innocence, places great emphasis on evidence, respects procedure, and gives the benefit of doubt to the accused. Thanks to these principles, we are adequately protected from political persecution.

Since we are brought up in the common law tradition, we aren't even aware of its existence, just like a healthy person is not aware that his heart is beating all the time. The moment we notice our hearts are beating, something is wrong with us. After enjoying the rule of law for most parts of my life, I learn now that we should not take good things for granted because common law principles are not universally upheld. If any one of the above points is missing, one can get into great trouble.

Freedom is our second virtue. Freedom, of thought, speech and expression, allows us to think independently and speak critically. It ensures that our society has a built-in fault correction mechanism such that injustice could eventually be corrected.

With this freedom, the public can create the necessary check and balance over the authority and provide a measure of protection for an individual who happens to be in a miserable condition of having to fight against the state machinery.

Respect for human rights is a third virtue. In times of distress, it might be the only lifeline available to an individual victimized by the state. In my case it expresses itself in the strong public pressure for greater transparency and fair trial which helps prevent arbitrary actions by those in power.

It also transforms into a strong humanistic concern for me. This public concern ensures that I get proper treatment while my family derives energy to brave the atrocity of life.

Rule of law, freedom and respect for human rights are the core values of our society. It is these values that distinguish Hongkong from mainland China, and explain why this city had been so attractive to mainlanders throughout the last one and a half century.

It is also precisely because of these values that Hongkong is able to catalyze

changes in the mainland, thus exerting a disproportionately big influence on China far exceeding its physical size. Indeed during the last 150 years Hongkong has been promoting idea changes and paradigm shifts in mainland China. In the last three decades, its impact on the economic reform in China is so phenomenal that Nobel Laureate Russian writer Aleksandre Solzhenitsyn couldn't help but lament that the former Soviet Union was not fortunate enough to have a place like Hongkong in its initial stage of reform.^{1[1]}

I am no Hongkong-chauvinist, but there is no denial that this city has been a place where issues pertaining to the country's fate were seriously debated in the last 150 years. For example in the last days of the Qing Dynasty, fierce debate between the Royalists and the Revolutionaries on the best political future for China took place in Hongkong. During the civil war the Chinese Communist Party made full use of Hongkong to stage propaganda against the ruling Kuomintang. Nowhere else in China could people express their views so boldly and openly without fear of reprisal. Whenever China reached a critical stage in her development, Hongkong will have a unique role to play, thanks to a free flow of ideas and information. This has become our glorious tradition, which is also our understanding of patriotism.

To those who have any doubts, both Dr Sun Yet-sen, the founding father of modern China, and Mr Deng Xiaoping, the communist leader that transformed China, found safety and strength in Hongkong in their younger days when they organized revolutions to save China. In fact Deng was an admirer of the common law tradition which he believed could prevent atrocities committed under other systems^{2[2]}

Hongkong has been able to build up this glorious tradition because it is found in this city the rule of law, freedom and respect for human rights, the core values that we all share and which allow everyone to do what he thinks is in the best interests of the country.

When I was in trouble, the Hongkong community mounted a city-wide campaign to secure my release. This rescue operation cut across all party lines and social strata. As veteran observer Frank Ching wrote: "The phenomenon of Hong Kong standing united in support of Ching throughout the past three years - from his initial detention

^{1[1]} Shi Qi-ping, Lecture on Cross-Straits Relations, No. 307 Dec 15, 2007

^{2[2]} Hong Kong Economic Journal Monthly, 2003, Jan

and through trial and sentencing on spying charges - was extraordinary"³[3]The reason why it has been so extraordinary is because, I believe, our basic core values are seen to be trampled on. The spontaneous effort to help me is a way of saying no to violation of these basic values.

This spontaneity also springs from Hongkong people's care about China. They want China to be democratic and free, to respect human rights and the rule of law. Without this deep concern for their motherland, few would be ready to confront the authority publicly at their own risk. This is patriotism as we see it.

Since the return to Chinese sovereignty, we all sense a gradual erosion of some of our treasured values. For example in recent years the SOPA annual dinner has become an annual occasion to remind people of the importance of press freedom. This public concern is welcomed, because it reminds us not to take good things for granted. If the erosion of our basic values is allowed to continue, it is not only our loss but also China's. Therefore we have to face up to this threat squarely.

Looking ahead, whether Hongkong can still play its traditional role of catalyzing changes in China depends on whether we are able to preserve our core values. In fact whether Hongkong could still be of use to China at all, a question in many people's mind, hinges upon whether we continue to play this catalyzing role.

We should not count on lone crusaders, or unwitting victims. The responsibility to protect and project our core values lies with each and every individual. But we certainly also count on positive changes in China – its leadership and people – and in this regard I am optimistic.

Luckily in recent years there seems to be a gradual meeting of minds between China and the world. In February 2007 Chinese premier Wen Jiabao wrote a long article in the People's Daily saying that "democracy, rule of law, freedom and respect for human rights are not the prerogatives of capitalism, but are common values that mankind aspires to and the cultural fruits that mankind concertedly works for". He repeated the same theme at a press conference a month later.

This indeed is an about face compared with China's view 30 years ago. The universality of such values was then denied. They were lambasted as hypocritical

³[3] 2008-02-12 South China Morning Post

bourgeois toxins that served to poison the mass.

Associated with this welcome change in political philosophy is the subtle abandonment of the class struggle thesis, the theoretical basis of all communist regimes. In the first 30 years of communist rule, this theory had led to widespread killings, inter-person hatred and gross disrespect for life, and accounted for one of the four biggest calamities mankind experienced in the Twentieth Century⁴[4].

Instead social harmony is much promoted now and people-oriented policies are much stressed. It is this greater respect for life and human rights – the result of the change in mindset – that the government is able now to impress the world in its handling of the recent earthquake. It acts fast to save lives, it lowers itself to accept foreign aids, and it places people's needs above everything else, including its long-standing policy of media control.

While welcoming all these positive changes, we should still be alert to any erosion of our core values and to do so we should:

1. Not take good things for granted. Like all treasures, our core values need protection or else they could be stolen.
2. Not be bribed or intimidated. Bribery can take various forms: power, money or fame. Intimidation too: by the powers that be, by peers, or by pressure to conform.
3. Be dictated by nothing but our own conscience, "unto thyself be true".
4. Think in terms of the bigger picture, which means that we have to realize that by defending our core values we are:
 - a. promoting positive changes in China;
 - b. protecting ourselves from political atrocities;
 - c. faithfully recording our history.Clearly the social gains far exceed the private loss, if any.
5. Protect our core values on the basis of professionalism. The media has its own industry standards to follow. It is only when we satisfy a high standard of professionalism that our fight for freedom of expression etc can be built on solid ground.

Thank you very much.

⁴[4] World Health Organization, First Report on Violence, 2002.