

Neujahrsempfang 2023

Voltaire Preis – Dankesrede Amy Lai | Transkript

Die Rede wurde auf Englisch gehalten

Dear President, Dr. Springer, ladies, and gentlemen,

It's my greatest honor to be here. It's the very first time I've visited a palace in Germany. This is also the very first award I've received in this country. Attending the new year reception at this university is both fascinating and unreal. At the same time, the excitement surrounding new year celebrations brought back memories of my childhood in Hong Kong.

I considered myself lucky to have been born in British Hong Kong, which was also the birthplace of my parents. Due to British governance, Hong Kong was shielded from the calamities in China, enjoyed the rule of law, and developed into one of the most stable, prosperous, and tolerant places in Asia. It was a city that embraced both Chinese and Western traditions and the diversity of thought and opinions. I went to a high school that was run by missionaries from Italy, which instilled in me the importance of hard work and intellectual curiosity. It was during my last year in high school that I first heard of Voltaire and his works.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I talked briefly about Voltaire in my law class on freedom of expression. Little did I expect to win this award. William Shakespeare said, "Some are born great. Some achieve greatness." I was not born great, nor did I achieve greatness. I am tremendously lucky to be associated with this great name. I feel especially pleased that this award bears his name: in other words, his name has not been cancelled.

Indeed, the "cancel culture" is now rampant in many universities in Anglophone countries, to the extent that the role of academy as a bastion of free speech and as a place of learning has been undermined. Many academics and students hold their mainstream beliefs as some kind of religion and shut down ideas and opinions that they find offensive, even where the expressions of those ideas and opinions do not violate any law. Some academics were fired for challenging orthodoxies. Many others stay quiet to keep their jobs. The disinvitation of speakers has become very common. Great historical figures holding opinions that are considered "racist" by today's standards also frequently get "cancelled," as streets and buildings named after these figures are being renamed. In some universities, even Shakespeare is considered "racist" and has been "cancelled" and removed from the curricular.

Those who promote the cancel culture may have acted out of good intentions. Yet the road to hell is often paved with the best intentions. The current development does not only remind me of George Orwell's masterpiece *Nineteenth Eighty-Four*. It is also reminiscent of China's Cultural Revolution, and the disastrous path that Hong Kong has been heading down since its unfortunate handover to China 25 years ago. Yes, the glorious Hong Kong that I knew of is gone. It is now a prison where people are motivated to snitch on their colleagues to please the authorities.

At present, many Western university campuses have turned into “safe spaces.” Democracy-loving Hongkongers do not take free speech for granted and many have sacrificed their well-being and safety to reclaim their liberties. For them, a “safe space” would mean a place that is free from teargas, bullets, surveillance, and arbitrary detention. Many people in Canada and the U.S. who have never got shot, teargassed, or punched tend to take their liberties for granted. For them, a “safe space” refers to a place that is free from ideas and opinions they find offensive. In these gigantic echo chambers that have no room for civil discussions, people get increasingly radicalized and easily triggered. What made the problem even worse is that many universities are run as business enterprises that rely on funding from China, meaning that many academics and administrators refrain from expressions that might offend the Chinese government, its agents, and rabid Chinese nationalists.

In case you find this phenomenon concerning, let me warn you that this wind might be blowing to Germany. As you may be aware, the Hong Kong story is a complex one that defies any simplistic narrative on colonialism. Intellectually honest scholars should open their minds to facts, rather than censoring facts to suit their preferred narratives. On one occasion, a humanities professor at a German university was upset that my Hong Kong story did not align with her simplistic narrative. Instead of reflecting on her beliefs and revising her narrative, she told me that my account was shocking—in a negative way—and even implied that I do not belong in academia because none of the people around her shared my views.

Winning this prize is one of the most defining moments of my life. It recognized that my work on academic freedom has tremendous values. It reassured me that there are good people around me who embrace true diversity that includes the diversity of thoughts and opinions. It reminded me of how lucky I am to be in a country that upholds academic freedom through its constitution. Germany has suffered two dictatorships. Yet it is still tempting to forget the danger of radicalism. Extreme ideologies are dangerous, left or right. We need no comparison to tell which is worse. We just don’t want another cultural revolution. Tyranny is evil.

I would like to end this speech with a quote that I found on the Internet: “If harsh criticism disappears completely, mild criticism would become harsh. If mild criticism is not allowed, silence would be considered ill-intended. If silence is no longer allowed, complimenting not hard enough would be a crime. If only one voice is allowed, then that only voice tells a lie.” The author is unknown. The real identity doesn’t matter. Great wisdom is often found among ordinary people who, as individuals, must resist groupthink as they continue to work towards a better society.