

Lisa Peng

*Passive Acceptance, Active Scrutiny*

Resolved: The United States is justified in intervening in the internal political processes of other countries to attempt to stop human rights abuses.

This was the 2013 topic at the City Club of Cleveland's Annual High School Debate Championship featuring Lincoln-Douglas debate, a one-on-one form of debate centered on the morality and ethics of a value proposition. Each year, the City Club of Cleveland provides two high school debaters the opportunity to debate in a room historically renowned for celebrating the freedom of speech. As I researched the topic of human rights abuses in preparation for the debate, I reflected on the moral obligation of countries to protect human rights and the fundamental role human rights ought to play in foreign relations. I learned that despite such a moral obligation, it is easy to stand by as human rights are abused; it is easy to passively accept human suffering. This topic was personal for me because my father, Peng Ming, is serving a life sentence in a Chinese prison, branded a criminal by the Chinese government because of his work advocating for human rights.

My journey to advocate for the release of my father and for human rights in China began two years ago with a debate topic that piqued my interest in learning about those rights and about my own father. I had always known that I am his mirror image and that we both share a love for the art of debate, but, beyond that, I did not know much else. After all, my last memory of him was from eleven years ago. Thus, I began to piece together a timeline of my father's life and my family's journey of escape to America.

My father, Peng Ming, is an environmentalist, an economist, and a human rights activist. He is the author of *The Fourth Landmark*, a book on China's economic and political growth that was sponsored by the Ford Foundation. He was also the founder of China Development Union, a think tank established to address the censored topics of rule of law and human rights. However, in 1999, the Chinese government shut down the think tank and sentenced my father to 18 months of labor camp. His crime? Passionately advocating for human rights and freedom in China. Upon his release, the government wire-tapped our house, began following our car, and even threatened my father with a second arrest. It became too dangerous to continue living in China, and so my family decided to flee political persecution.

We eventually made it to Thailand, where we were granted UN Refugee Status. On August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2001, we landed in the United States, the land that stood for us as a beacon of freedom, human rights, and rule of law. For the first time, we experienced freedom of expression and justice not as values confined to an underground think tank, but rather as values championed by a nation.

In the United States, my father continued his human rights work. In 2004, he traveled to Thailand to establish a safe haven for political refugees. However, he was lured to

Myanmar, kidnapped by Chinese secret police, and quickly sentenced to life in prison. The United Nations Working Group for Arbitrary Detention has determined that the deprivation of my father's liberty is in contravention to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Furthermore, my father is a U.S.-based dissident with UN refugee status who escaped political persecution in China. Therefore, his kidnapping is in violation of the principle of non-refoulement, which forbids the return of a victim of persecution to his persecutor. My father has also been deprived of his right to due process, as he was denied access to a lawyer and a jury of his peers, rights we take for granted here in the United States.

That Lincoln-Douglas debate resolution prompted my journey to discover who my father is and the values for which he stands. While I had the privilege to debate in a room that celebrates the freedom of speech, my father remains locked in a room built to stifle and punish prisoners of conscience. It has been a decade during which I have been privileged to receive an American education and learn about freedom, democracy, and justice, but a decade during which my father has remained imprisoned for fighting to secure those very same values. As an American citizen, I cannot merely stand by and passively accept the denial of these fundamental freedoms.

In the past two years, I worked with members of Congress, written op-eds and essays on my father's story, and testified before the Taiwan Parliament, the European Union Parliament, and the United States Congress to advocate for my father's freedom and for the freedom of thousands of other political prisoners in China.

Although the support from US congressmen has give me great hope for my father's release, I know that his case is only the tip of the iceberg. There remain thousands of prisoners of conscience and innocent Chinese civilians who suffer the same denial of basic freedoms. If we don't speak up, there will remain no hope for human rights in China, and activists like my father will continue to suffer.

Sadly, the human rights issue is one that is easily ignored in light of pressing economic concerns. China has become the world's second largest economy and a major trading partner of the United States. Powerful economic interests want us to turn a blind eye to China's human rights record. Respecting America's values and standing up for human rights has never been easy. And it is not easy now. But isn't this what the promise of America is really about?

Though I am no politician or expert in this field, I have learned through Lincoln-Douglas debate that human rights are the foundation from which meaningful and effective discussions of economics and politics must proceed. In fact, these are the same values and fundamental freedoms on which our great nation was founded. And as someone who was rescued, raised, and educated by this country, I feel that I owe the United States my utmost gratitude. However, gratitude for one's country is not demonstrated by passive acceptance of our country's actions, but in active scrutiny. We show our gratitude and love for our nation by holding it to the highest of standards, the standards on which it was founded.

In doing so, I have realized that the issue of human rights is not only political – it is personal. It is a personal commitment to speak up. It is a refusal to remain silent. It is acting on the principles that we read and write about. It is the efforts of people like you who speak up and take a stand on human rights that give me hope for the future. They give me hope for the possibility of telling my father in person how much we have all cared about him and his dream for China's future. They give me hope for the possibility of securing human rights in China, and for paying the utmost respect to the values on which our own great country was founded, the values for which I hope it will always stand.