

Jiang Qisheng: *My Life in Prison*

Chinese, memoir

Extract and open letter

Translated by Jeffrey Lee

Jiang Qisheng was born on 6 November 1948 in Changshu City, Jiangsu Province. In October 1978 he was 'sent down' to the countryside; from March 1978 to June 1984 he studied chemistry at the Beijing School of Aeronautics and from 1985 to 1988 he held a teaching post at Qinghua University. In the autumn of 1988, he started studying for his PhD at People's University. On 9 September 1989, he was put into Qincheng Prison and released again on 7 February 1991. He became a freelance writer in the summer of 1991, and published numerous articles in American, Japanese and Hong Kong journals. He also cooperated on translations of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas Kuhn, and *China's Crisis* by Andrew Nathan.

In April 1999, he wrote an open letter entitled *Light a Myriad Candles to Collectively Commemorate the Brave Spirits of June Fourth*. He was detained on May 18 and put into a detention centre in Beijing on the same day. On 27 December 2000 he was convicted of the so-called crime of "incitement to subvert state power" by Beijing No. 1 Intermediate People's Court; on 16 February 2001, Beijing High People's Court passed final judgement upholding the original verdict. China's totalitarian regime thereby falsely commissioned the court to implement an inquisition against letters, thereby creating a 'trans-millennia' prisoner of conscience.

A lifetime of telling the truth – my testimony

There are many people in China today who no longer need to speak duplicitously. Compared to the time of the Qingming Festival in 1976, this represents significant progress. Quite simply, people had to speak duplicitously in those days. To not say "The Tiananmen incident¹ was a counter-revolutionary incident" was not good.

As far as I'm concerned, I made the following demands on myself following 4 June 1989: not only must I not speak duplicitously, but I must actively speak the truth; do not speak a common truth, but speak a truth that government hates to hear. Four years ago I wrote an open letter to the government pointing out that the events of June 1989 had nothing whatsoever to do with a "counter-revolutionary riot"; rather, ordinary people were massacred by the military crushing the democracy movement. I was calling on the people of China to "light a myriad candles to collectively commemorate the brave spirits of June Fourth." The result was that prison followed hard on the heels of my words of truth. Many people in prison ask if I think it was worth exchanging four years of my life for an open letter, and I say yes. They ask if I'll continue writing when I got out, and I say yes. There are those who praise me for this, saying they respect the fact I would sacrifice myself for my ideals.

I know that they're speaking from the depths of their hearts. As soon as their voices still, however, I patiently and evenly explain that there is nothing noble about what I do; it is only for myself – at least, primarily, it is for myself. I say:

¹ The 'Tiananmen Incident' refers to protests in Tiananmen Square sparked by the death of Zhou Enlai in 1976.

First, it is wholly natural to speak the truth. For me to speak the truth is just the manifestation of an aspect of being a person. Life is short and difficult, and to live contrary to nature is an enormous effort.

Second, it feels marvellously good to tell the truth. For anyone who has lived through times of constraint, suffocation, vexation and irritation at not being permitted to speak the truth, to then experience telling the truth is an enormous release for a person, it's a joy and a happiness in a person's life, it can bring you the confidence of a clear conscience and a sense of gratification.

Third, there is great value in speaking the truth. Understanding life's true meaning and interest; building a platform for friendships and trust; and acquiring unique interpretations and great leaps of understanding – all of these can only be achieved if you speak the truth.

One can only truly realise one's own self if everything you say is the truth. In order to speak the truth I am willing to pay the price of sitting in a prison. Of course, I cannot deny that the spiritedness of my words and actions may be regarded by others as an example worthy of emulation. But it is my dearest hope that in the not-too-distant future, the weight given to speaking the truth on the scale of Chinese people's values will at the very least be no less than the weight given to the food they eat and the clothes they wear.

If nothing else is sought, at least speak a lifetime of truth.

Jiang Qisheng

6 April 2003

Beijing No. 2 Prison

Supervision District 6, Supervision Sub-district 16.

It makes more sense to regard the ancient phrase “the people do not fight officials” as the condensation of the people's blood and tears than it does to regard it as a crystallisation of the people's wisdom. And so where is China's hope? Where is China's escape? Naively put, if only we said “officials do not fight the people” rather than “the people do not fight officials”: in a society under a system of effective restraints on basic power, officials at every level would be in awe of the people. All would need to check the mood of the people before they acted; none would dare infringe upon a citizen's right to freedom of the spirit.

1. Refuse to lie, expose lies

This is something that every Chinese person can start doing themselves. These days, there aren't many Chinese people who believe lies anymore, and the people who participate in propagating lies are fewer still. However, the number of people who still tolerate lies and who accept the fact of living their lives within a lie is as great as ever before. In order to recover humanity, to liberate the soul and win back some dignity, and in order not to lose the fleeting chance of further destabilising this despotic system of lies, we should from this moment on – starting with ourselves and on a very small scale – speak truthfully, refuse to lie, and expose lies.

Starting with ourselves and on a very small scale, openly refuse the lies told so well and told so frequently by Beijing's taxi drivers! They do it every day; and it seems it happens in every single taxi; they almost always seem to get their passenger's sympathy and understanding, whereas they never come across anyone who'll confront them for lying!

In every kind of small gathering, whether it's a workers' group or an intellectuals' weekly gathering – and even at government and party training sessions – it's nothing new anymore for someone to bravely and openly reject lies. What's disappointing is the large number of people at these gatherings who reveal in their laughter, their jokes or their teasing that they recognise the lie; disappointing too is the far smaller number of people who rise to reiterate and support the original rejection of the lie. There should be more and more people brave enough to reject these lies and speak the truth until officials no longer dare to spread lies at meetings – until officials don't even dare to call meetings any more.

The vast majority of intellectuals no longer subscribe to, no longer buy, and no longer read specialised journals disseminating a twisted reasoning, such as *The Pursuit of Truth*;² such methods of rejecting lies as this can be extended to sanction the specially written lies known as the White Papers issued by the Information Office of the State Council and other materials issued by other similar offices.

Almost every university has a minority of teachers which dares to expose lies in the lecture halls; without exception they are praised and respected by their students, while their departments watch them with one eye open, one eye closed. Why can't there be more people with just a little more bravery who for the sake of conscience, dignity and truth will denounce lies in their lecture halls?

In lifts, in buses, in train carriages, in waiting rooms for clinics, in long lines of people, in classes where people are studying all kinds of *qigong*, in secretly assembled religious congregations, at agricultural markets, in classrooms, in offices, in conference rooms... One sentence. When more and more people start raising their voices to reject all the lies in more and more public spaces and public arenas, then the days of this sick and dying totalitarian system will surely be numbered.

Light a Myriad Candles to Collectively Commemorate the Brave Spirits of June Fourth

An Open Letter

Compatriots, Citizens.

Fully 10 years ago, a great and startling, tragic movement exploded throughout this land of China. It was a movement of resistance against corruption and bureaucracy; it was a democratic movement of speaking the truth and struggling for rights; it was a patriotic movement calling for transformation and the renaissance of China. During those 50-or-so days which will forever be etched into the history books, millions upon millions of compatriots were awakened by the humanity and conscience displayed in the actions of simple and solemn citizens. They raised the image of the people of China to great new heights; they coalesced together to form one of the brightest moments in China's history.

However, this movement which revealed the will of the people was denounced by the muddled and confused political authorities, who called it 'chaos' and a 'counter-revolutionary riot'.

² A journal of Marxism which itself was shut down in August 2001 for criticising President Jiang Zemin's decision to allow entrepreneurs – 'capitalists' – to join the Chinese Communist Party.

Outrageously, they mobilised tanks and machine guns to conduct their bloody massacre, creating an injustice, a false justice and an evil justice of such size that China and the rest of the world were horrified. The June Fourth Massacre is one of the most inhuman acts of the twentieth century; it is China's shame, and it is the world's shame.

In the 10 years since the June Fourth Massacre, corrupt officials have congratulated corrupted officials, and corruption in government has become ever more fierce; power and money go all the way to the top, while fairness and justice are on the verge of death.

In the 10 years since the June Fourth Massacre, the loss of state-owned assets has accelerated, state-owned natural resources have been disastrously plundered, the rich are incredibly richer and the poor are so much poorer, and popular discontent is once again seething towards a crisis.

In the 10 years since the June Fourth Massacre, the same prohibitions on speech, on publishing and on political parties remain, and speaking or publishing the truth or banding together with like-minded people is still sure to cause consternation.

In the 10 years since the June Fourth Massacre, the families of the people killed and the people who were injured are still suffering in pain; prisoners of conscience are still in prison, and unemployed workers, and helpless city-dwellers and impoverished peasants have grievances but nowhere to take them, they have truths they cannot speak, and they have tears they dare not shed.

All of this tells us: in the forgetting and dilution of the June Fourth Massacre, and in the stubborn ignorance that the assessment of the June Fourth Massacre 'has not changed and will not change', natural justice continues to be violated, and human justice continues to be trampled. Morality is perishing, society is deteriorating; the people struggle to survive, the people's rights are wronged; transformation is refused and renaissance is a distant hope.

Compatriots and Citizens, to ease our conscience, for our fundamental interests, for social justice and for the future of the motherland, we must oppose this forgetting and reject these false charges; we must take a stand on the strength of our spirit and use the opportunity of the 10-year anniversary of the June Fourth Massacre, extend a people's memorial, a citizens' memorial, a memorial from the entire Chinese nation throughout this precious vast land of ours. The types of memorial can be many and varied so that everyone is able to perform their own: on the evenings of the third and fourth of June in each home, lights can be switched off for an hour and a candle can be lit to illuminate our memories and shine on our conscience. One simple candle does not amount to much, but a million candles will fire our wills and bind our hearts and souls. And it will be a silent mourning a mourning for the sacrifices made ten years ago for freedom, dignity and happiness. And it will be a silent condemnation, a condemnation of the atrocity of might crushing human rights; and a condemnation of the perversion when "stability" crushed justice. And it will be a silent expression, an expression of yearning in the pursuit of freedom, the promotion of justice, the protection of human rights and the demand for democracy.

Compatriots, Citizens, as the night of the third of June approaches, let us light a myriad candles to collectively commemorate the brave spirits of June Fourth.

15 April 1999.

Appendix: Suggestions for marking the 10th anniversary of the June Fourth Massacre.

1. No entertainment.

On the third and fourth of June, deliberately avoid recreational activities.

2. Mourning clothes.

Wear mourning clothes on the third and fourth of June.

3. Make telephone calls.

Starting at 9:00 in the evening of the third of June, let the sound of a telephone's ring be a sound of mourning and a demand for the return of justice.

4. Send pager messages.

Starting at 9:00 on the evening of the third of June, send the three words, "in silent tribute" to all of the people you know with pagers.

5. Send e-mails.

On the third and fourth of June, send each other commemorative e-mails.

6. Send letters.

Starting from 15 April, send letters of condolence to the families of people who were killed and to the people who were injured at the June Fourth Massacre, and send a letter of condemnation to prime minister Li Peng.

7. Light a candle.

On the third and fourth of June, switch off the lights in your home and light a candle to the brave spirits of June Fourth.

8. Walk in unison.

On the third and fourth of June, gather together with like-minded people and deliberately step out together and walk en masse and in unison.

Some braver citizens may also want to consider calling the hotlines of international media organisations, distributing and posting commemorative essays, holding video evenings in their homes, or even going out to participate in public candle-lit vigils.

15 April 1999.

Concluding paragraphs from Jiang Qisheng's sentencing document on losing his statutory appeal, issued by Beijing High People's Court.

This court considers that the defendant Jiang Qisheng has by means of activities such as distributing or posting essays, writings and printed handbills with content inciting the

subversion of state power and the overthrow of the socialist system, committed the crime of incitement to subvert state power and should be punished according to law. Jiang Qisheng's reasons for claiming his innocence in this case have no factual or legal basis, they cannot be established, and they should be rejected. Jiang Qisheng's lawyer used an inappropriate application of the law with regard to his claim that the facts in the original trial had been unclear, and this trial cannot therefore accept the lawyer's suggestion that Jiang Qisheng's activities did not constitute the crime of incitement to subvert state power. In its ruling on the facts of Jiang Qisheng's crime, the nature of his crime, and the degree of harm done to society by his crime, Beijing No. 1 Intermediate People's Court correctly defined the crime and correctly applied the law, it passed an appropriate sentence following legal trial procedures, and the ruling should therefore be upheld. As such, and in accordance with the regulations of Article 189, Clause 1 of the Criminal Procedure Law of the People's Republic of China, ruling is as follows:

Jiang Qisheng's suit is rejected, and the original verdict is upheld.
This judgement is final.

Beijing High People's Court.
16 February 2001.

Synopsis

"I have no other demand, but to speak the truth all my life" Jiang Qisheng said to himself. In today's China, speaking truth is no small matter, Jiang, a Chinese free-lance writer, has paid a heavy price, he was jailed twice, first time for 17 month, arrested shortly after Tiananmen Square massacre on 4th June 1989. 10 year later in 1999, he was given a 4 year jail term for " inciting overthrow the government", yet all his crime was that he refused to accept government's version of the 1989 events, and wrote an article in 1999 entitled "lighting thousand candles, in memory of heroic souls of June the Fourth".

Jiang kept his words, in " my time in prison", a serials personal accounts smuggled out of jail by people who risks their lives, many of them are prison employees, Jiang documented in great detail what life is like in China's often very secretive prisons, not only for "prisoner of conscience", people like him, but also for ordinary criminals. From petty thieves to murderers, from illiterate farmers to corrupted communist high officials. "Beijing municipal detention center normally keeps about 80 prisoners on death run all year around", Jiang wrote, "the nearest one from me is merely half a meter, the furthest is no more than 50 meters away. Almost every week, there are people who are condemned to death and put on the death roll, and almost every week, there are executions being carried out----, before breakfast, the door to the cell where people on the death roll are kept, is suddenly opened, the sound of iron chain scratching the concrete floor echoes in the corridor, we know some one is 'on his way'-----"

It might because this was Jiang's second term, he was able to adopt some what detached posture, instead of normal self pity and bitterness, of which one would expect coming out of someone who was suffered gross "injustice", the extreme harsh environment did not dent his sense of humor, " this does not only happens on April the fools day, this happens day in and day out, every single day of the year----" he wrote in his 'my time in prison', " the library, for instance, we call it the deaf man's ear, there are quite a few very thick books in there, some are in hard covers. However, they are not there for loan, not for ' improving one's spiritual being', they are mere decorations, costumes to fool people, having a library in prison, its sole purpose is to show outside visitors, its real function as library is therefore castrated-----"

Jiang Qisheng was born in Jiangsu province, eastern China, on the 6 November 1948. From 1978 to 1984, Jiang was graduate and postgraduate student in Beijing's aviation university. At the time of his first arrest in 1989, he was doing his PHD on philosophy in People's University in Beijing. As a member of China's elite group, someone who obtained highest education in one of the China's most prestigious university, Jiang could easily join the ruling communist elite who reaped greatest proportion of rewards in China's booming economy and ever increasing political power, if only he chose not to speak "the full truth".

For those in the west who are overwhelmed by China's phenomenal economic growth during the past two decades, Jiang's "my time in prison" is potent reminder that China is still under iron fist of communist dictatorship, market liberalization does not give birth to political freedom. For those who are concerned with China's human rights record, "my time in prison" offers a rare first hand accounts for the horrendous and wide spread human rights abuse in China's barb-wired "Gulag".

My Life in Prison by Jiang Qisheng

Report by Jiao Gubiao (writer in residence, Norwich, City of Refuge)

In 1989, while studying for a Philosophy PhD, Jiang Qisheng helped to organise a major protest against the Tiananmen Square massacre. For this he spent seventeen months in jail. Undaunted, nonetheless, he has since become one of China's leading dissidents. The subject of his book is a second four year term of imprisonment after he had published an open letter asking for candles to be lit in every window in commemoration of the victims of Tiananmen. On release he was given a NOVIB Freedom Award, and the book was later published in Chinese in Hong Kong.

Consisting of ten chapters, it is fairly compact and is written in a light, ironic style that is easily accessible to the English reader. Starting with his arrest and trial, where he defended himself, the account of his experience of prison is interspersed with bitter indignation at the lack of democracy and human rights, so taken for granted in the West but brutally disregarded in his own country. He also denounces the corruption at all social levels and the fact that China's spectacular economic growth has been at the expense of the vast numbers of the very poor, whose condition, already miserable, is now desperate and a source of growing political unrest. Through brief quotations from Chinese poetry he laments, too, the destruction in the last half century of an ancient culture whose ideals, however imperfectly realised, were enlightened and humane. Some of this is expressed towards the end through letters to his son and modern youth.

Too well known to be abandoned among the millions languishing in the Chinese gulag, Jiang was placed instead in a prison for intellectuals reminiscent of Solzhenitsyn's *First Circle*. Although he suffered ill-health, his teeth coming loose from the rotten food, he was never tortured unlike the prisoners from the lower classes who, to his horror, were treated little better than animals. His cell was next to Death Row and often at night he could hear its wretched inmates being dragged, chains clanking, to execution. This 'model' prison, meanwhile, was equipped with a library, seemingly handsome, where all the books were fakes. Another example of 'face saving' is an Appendix on the trial that shows up the absurd and elaborate hypocrisy with which the authorities attempt to whitewash their arbitrary justice system.

The most unusual aspect of this book is that Jiang's is almost a lone voice. Dissidence in China is on the wane, partly through fear as the punishments are so cruel, but also because the educated elite are doing quite well and have no wish to jeopardise their new prosperity. With the

imminence of the 2008 Olympic Games when all eyes will be on China, this would be a timely moment to expose some of the abuses and inhumanity of the world's rising super-power.

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