

Dreams Never Die

Bicentennial Speaker Li Lu Remembers Tiananmen Square

By Vicki Cheng



He doesn't look the part of the revolution leader.

Li Lu is a small man, neatly packaged in a dark suit and flowered tie, briefcase in hand. He is soft-spoken and bows forward slightly, the Chinese way, as he shakes your hand. Round wire glasses contribute to the impression that this man is a shy intellectual. There is an accent, but his grammar is as good as any American's.

But over four years ago, at the age of

23, this small, neat, quiet man helped lead 100,000 students and workers in a protest for democracy in China. They demanded reforms. They demanded the removal of Deng Xiaoping and other Communist leaders. Protests in other Chinese cities erupted. Television cameras captured the Chinese army firing on their own people in Tiananmen Square, at the heart of Beijing. An estimated 5,000 died, 10,000 were wounded, and hundreds were arrested.

Li was chief student adviser in the demonstrations and the official spokesperson for the press. He has spoken to crowds numbering up to half a million. On

October 11, 600 or so spilled into the Great Hall to hear him deliver the speech that would kick off the University's Bicentennial celebration. The crowd gave him standing ovations both before and after his speech.

UNC, America's first public university, was established in 1791. China's first public university was founded in 125 B.C., Li said. But both were built on the principle that with education, anything is possible.

"In many of today's societies, such as Communist China, freedom is not allowed in reality," Li said. "But people can be free in their minds. The oppressive regimes can choke every aspect of your life, but they cannot control your mind. The first home of the free spirit is in your mind. But it takes a truly educated mind to be able to light the flame of freedom that lives deeply in our hearts."

He was born in 1966 in a coal-mining town near Beijing.

"For those of you who know modern China, 1966 was the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the darkest times of mod-

ern Communist China," he said. "According to my mother, I somehow knew it was safer in the womb, even when I was still a fetus. So I delayed my arrival almost a month. The Cultural Revolution was just a few weeks ahead, and the beginning of a long period of suffering everywhere."

His pro-democracy parents and grandparents were denounced as enemies of the people and sent to prisons and labor camps. Li spent his first three years being passed around from family to family and ended up in a child care center until he was adopted at the age of 6.

"I was taken in by a kind-hearted coal-miner. And it was with him and his wife and five children that I spent the most wonderful time that I ever experienced in my childhood. For the first time I learned the basic words of mother and father, and understood the basic meanings of home and security and love."

But it didn't last. When Li was 10, an earthquake that would eventually claim some 240,000 lives destroyed his entire adoptive family.

By this time, his grandmother, one of the earliest woman educators in China, had been released after serving 20 years in a Communist jail. Li said that she came into his life and inspired him to take a path toward education.

Li said his grandmother gave him his first Confucian lesson. "She said, 'Boy, the key is education. With education, a weak man can be strong. With education, there is no limit.'"

So he began to read the books banned by the Communist government. "In Communist China, we don't have schools — only centers for brainwash. I have to find forbidden books to wash my head clear.

"Reading forbidden books helped me understand the nature of this totalitarian regime. I realized more and more clearly how mad the society had become. But I also realized how mad I had become in the eyes of Communist society. The regime put political dissidents in psychiatric hospitals and cast them as madmen.

"The practice continues even today. Three years ago there was one lone student

What Does China Remember?

It took Li Lu's visit for many of us — including Asian Americans — to be reminded of the struggle for freedom in Tiananmen Square. Most Americans witnessed the event through the eyes of American journalists sympathetic to the students' cause. But how was the event perceived in other places?

Wei Shih, a freshman biology major from Raleigh, said she was in Shanghai when the Tiananmen Square massacre occurred.

"The only thing they broadcasted was how many soldiers died," she said. "They didn't say how many civilians died."

The propaganda went even farther than that. There is a now-famous scene of a lone student standing in front of a row of army tanks. In the Chinese broadcast of the event, commentators talked about how foolish this student was, Shih said. In American broadcasts, the student was perceived as brave.

"Everyone (in China) is on the students' side," Shih said. "No one is on the government's side. But no one can say anything because they are afraid they'll lose their jobs."

In a private interview, Li Lu dismissed the Chinese government's propaganda of the event as a futile attempt to fool the Chinese people.

"Many people don't believe in the propaganda," he said. "(The Chinese government) claimed that American television stations used Hollywood gimmicks to create the images on the news. No one believes that. The public don't talk about (Tiananmen Square) now, but they still remember it."

Susanna Gaddy, a junior biology major from Cary who came to the United States from China when she was 11 years old, said she was on the campus at North Carolina State University when the events erupted at Tiananmen Square.

"When the news reached here, N.C. State students who had family there held an open forum. Mostly Chinese people spoke. We marched around the school, shouting 'Overthrow the government!'"

To escape from Communist rule, many people have had to leave their homeland over the decades.

"There was a lot of anger that we had to leave China, leave our roots," Gaddy said. "We had to leave the country to go to a place where we don't belong. But our hearts are still committed to the mainland."

The sad legacy of Chinese life, she said, was to travel the globe in search of a better life. If the political situation in China ever improved, Gaddy said she would want to return.

"When you lose your ancestry, you don't have anything."