

CCBE Human Rights Award Ceremony
November 24, 2023

Speech to thank CCBE for awards to Chinese human rights lawyers DING Jiayi and XU Zhiyong
Presented by Sophie LUO Shengchun, wife of DING Jiayi

Dear CCBE Members, Friends,

Thank you so much for inviting me to this CCBE Human Rights Award ceremony! I am deeply grateful to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of my husband Ding Jiayi and Dr. Xu Zhiyong, both of whom are human rights lawyers and civil society leaders in China.

My thanks go to the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE) for your solidarity and active support of Chinese human rights lawyers and rights defenders who continue to suffer daily harassment and persecution by Chinese authorities.

While I was preparing for this speech, I felt emotional. How I wish that my husband and Xu Zhiyong could be here to deliver their own speeches, giving voice to their human rights efforts and ideals for justice and freedom! But, as you know, Chinese officials detained them about 4 years ago in connection to a small gathering of like-minded friends to discuss political and civil rights. And, in April of this year (2023), a Chinese “court of law” sentenced Ding Jiayi to 12 years in prison and Xu Zhiyong to 14 years in prison. Keep in mind that these prison sentences are in addition to previous sentences they served from 2013 through 2017.

Ding and Xu have experienced inhumane conditions in Chinese detention, including physical and emotional torture. Their current conditions can only be described as inadequate, such as a lack of access to basic hygiene and medical care; given food without the nutrients needed to support basic health; and given a minimal amount of time in fresh air and sunlight. Even worse for them as lawyers and intellectuals, they are denied pen and paper for writing down their thoughts, and they are forbidden to have books and newspapers to keep their minds active and sharp. Not least, Chinese authorities continue to deny them any direct communication with their family members, denying them the direct emotional support and love that we as humans most need.

I know that they would be deeply honored by the CCBE human rights award, and that this is an important platform to give voice to Ding Jiayi and Xu Zhiyong’s hopes for respecting human rights in China. I know that they both want their voices to be heard, and especially want their ideas about a “Beautiful China,” a China of freedom, rule of law, and an unfettered civil society, to be heard by ordinary Chinese citizens and by international society. But Chinese authorities have done everything they can to silence them. Their very names are politically sensitive words in the Chinese censorship system and thus few Chinese living in mainland China know their names, let alone their ideas or what they have done.

With my husband in detention for most of the past 10 years, part of my life experience has been to advocate for him even though I didn't have the professional training or knowledge for this work. I have observed that human right abuses in China are getting worse and worse day by day. Chinese authorities are systematically harassing and prosecuting human rights lawyers and rights defenders including their families and loved ones. Chinese authorities have falsely accused human rights lawyers of bogus criminal charges and used the law as tool of repression. At the same time, authorities have used extralegal methods, such as forced disappearance, torture, and secret detention, have denied detainees access to defense lawyers, and conducted secret trials and secret sentences without even issuing an actual verdict. Xu Zhiyong's partner, Li Qiaochu, has been detained for the past three years simply because she was Xu's girlfriend and revealed that authorities had tortured Xu. Human rights lawyer Yu Wensheng and his wife were forcibly detained while en route to a meeting with European officials.

As you may know, China's Supreme People's Court claimed that it was going to be transparent about court verdicts and created "China Judgements Online." But this online tool had a very short life, and most criminal verdicts either were removed or were never published online in the first place. I know that some of you may have future opportunities to meet with Chinese judicial officials—Please ask them about China Judgements Online and judicial transparency and independence.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government again has been making outreach efforts to the international community. But ask yourselves whether China's current authoritarian dictatorship is a reliable partner for trade, for business, for academic exchange, or even for other forms of people-to-people exchange. The Chinese government continues to blatantly violate Chinese law and ignore its obligations to international legal standards.

Outside China, I am well aware that many human rights defenders in exile continue to work very hard on advocacy for freedom and democracy. Not least, many international organizations and human rights NGOs like CCBE are tirelessly speaking up and standing together with human right defenders. I am also very excited that a younger generation of Chinese inside and outside China are becoming aware of the importance of human rights and developing their own advocacy methods.

I'd like to end my speech by citing my husband's words from his statement to the court earlier this year.

"All Chinese who care about the future of our nation must shoulder the historical responsibility of our generation, which is to eradicate autocracy and build a beautiful China. This requires us to overcome the fear in our hearts, speak loudly for justice, and resolutely oppose the dictator, resolutely oppose the privileged interest groups, and reject their autocratic rule. As long as we strive together, the light of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law will surely illuminate the land of China!"

Thank you!