



**wilberforce**  
| e c t u r e t r u s t

**BERNARD O'HEAR, Amnesty International**  
**Monday 04 June 2007 | The Guildhall, Hull**

## **CHINA: YEAR OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OLYMPICS**

[Slide of Amnesty candle projected on screen behind speaker]

Good evening ladies and gentlemen and thank you for giving up this summer evening, if not quite summer sunshine, to come and listen to me. I am greatly honoured to have been invited to give this year's Hull Wilberforce lecture, on the subject of China and human rights in this Olympic Year. I have called this year's Games, "the human rights Olympics" and so they have been. Amnesty International has taken the opportunity presented by previous Olympic Games to highlight the human rights records of host countries – Spain, South Korea, the Soviet Union, the USA – but the significance of this Olympiad goes far beyond any of its predecessors in the effect the Games have exerted on the status of human rights and universal values in the wider World. And this time that effect has been entirely negative.

The resulting loss of standing for human rights globally is not just because one fifth of the human species remains subject to a dispensation where human rights are not respected at all, indeed where the government is hostile to the very idea of human rights and the rule of law. And not just because that government promised that human rights would improve in China as a result of the Olympic Games being held there, when in fact the opposite has happened. No, the real, substantial and global loss of stature for human rights has happened because the governments, corporations and institutions that could and should have exerted serious pressure on China to improve its human rights record in the years leading up to the Olympics chose not to do so. They decided that human rights were less important than currying diplomatic favour, making money, or even just gaining the prospect of making money. No one was prepared to incur the displeasure of the Chinese government, for fear of upsetting the all-important economic relationship. I will be saying more about that later.

The already very poor human rights situation obtaining in China got worse in most respects in the run-up to the Olympics, and in large part because of the Olympics. Whatever else was won in Beijing, human decency came in last and, in fact, was stretched out of the stadium. Cynicism, cowardice and greed were the real victors - and repression the laureate of the Games.

What then is the human rights situation in China? Well, there is no type of human rights violation that is not to be found there. And all of the most serious abuses are carried out systematically and extensively.

- Imprisonment for peaceful political, religious, trade union, or cultural activities;
- Unfair trials and administrative detention, where there is no trial, or other judicial process at all;
- Torture and ill-treatment, including the abuse of psychiatric medicine;
- Excessive use of force by police, military and informal security forces;
- Hostage taking and punitive house demolition;
- Massive use of the death penalty, including for offences like petty theft and fraud;
- Systematic official discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, religious or cultural background and social status

These are only the highlights – or rather the lowlights. China's use of the death penalty is particularly notable. There are no official statistics available, the Chinese government does not want the World to know exactly how many people are executed in China – and I do not believe it is because they think the World will be shocked at how low the number is. Many executions in China have been public, however, and on the basis of observation it is clear that China usually executes more people each year than the rest of the World put together – or even multiples of the rest of the World put together. Some informed estimates from within China suggest an annual figure well into the thousands. It is hardly surprising given the range of offences that carry the death penalty in China. Apart from murder, rape and assault there is also bribery, embezzlement, forgery, corruption, blackmail, tax fraud, organizing prostitution, dealing in cultural relics, car theft and cattle rustling. And many others – almost seventy in all. If judicial ritual murder were an Olympic event, China would surely have walked away with the Gold.

You may ask what has all this to do with the Olympics? Why are human rights in China being linked with the Olympic Games at all? Well, I can tell you that that was nothing to do with Amnesty International. When China was bidding for the Games in 2001, the Chinese government rather surprisingly, and curiously, decided to link the Games with their human rights performance. Wang Wei, the Secretary General of Beijing's Bid Committee said that if China won the Olympic bid, "Lots of things, including human rights, will be improved". Similar statements were made by government figures, before and after the award of the Games to China, and that line was maintained right up to the recent conclusion of the Games, not just by the Chinese government but by the International Olympic Committee.

Amnesty International and much of the rest of the human rights movement took the Chinese government at its word in 2001 and offered constructive suggestions and support in the years leading up to the Games, to help the authorities achieve the improvements they said they wanted to make. It turns out, though, that they did not really want to make any improvements. Their promises, like so much about these Games, were phoney.

In fact, Amnesty International concluded shortly before the commencement of the Games that the human rights situation in China had deteriorated because of the country's hosting of the Games – pointing especially to the ongoing and intensifying crackdown on human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers and the social cleansing of 'undesirables' from the streets of Beijing – by which I mean the removal without charge, or trial of people like beggars and unlicensed peddlers, or simply the unconventional and the unsightly into 're-education through labour' camps. 'Re-education through labour', is a process of physical and psychological brutalisation intended to alter the personality of whoever is subjected to it – or, in the view of the Chinese authorities, to 'improve' the personality of those subjected to it.

Nothing could be allowed to blemish the Utopian looks of Olympic Beijing, not even a little girl with uneven teeth. Only shiny, happy, people allowed.

And while the Chinese authorities did not want to make the human rights improvements they promised, the powerful and influential outside China did not really want to try and make them keep their word. International efforts for human rights improvements from governments, corporations and Olympic bodies, both national and international have been – well, what shall we say? – less than Olympian?

And the result? It will in future be considered acceptable for the Olympic Games to be held in an atmosphere characterised by repression and persecution. The atmosphere of heightened repression and persecution now prevailing in China thanks to the Olympics will, in all likelihood, persist long after the Olympic travelling circus has been packed up and moved on. The consequences of that will probably be felt beyond the large fraction of humanity living within the borders of China. Remember that China is now an important player on the World stage. China has a human rights footprint in other parts of the world – a fact to which the tragedy of Darfur eloquently testifies. I think that footprint is about to go up a shoe size, or two.

After all, what reason has the Chinese government to believe that the World seriously wants, or expects it to change?

While it should not be surprising that a government famous for widespread and serious human violations over many decades should continue to carry out such violations – the unwillingness of the Olympic movement to challenge those violations is certainly disappointing. Of course, it is understandable that the Olympic movement should feel embarrassed that the Chinese government perpetrated human rights violations to aid its preparations for the Olympic Games. But that embarrassment is not going to be lessened by saying ‘sorry, but this is really none of our business’. If it is done in your name, then it is your business. And even if it is not done in your name it is your business – human rights, anybody’s human rights – are the legitimate business of every human being and every human institution. If Martin Luther King was correct when he said, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter”, then the Olympic movement ought to be very concerned about the state of its health.

The Olympic movement subscribes to the notion of universal values. The Olympic Charter makes reference to core values of ‘preservation of human dignity’ and ‘respect for universal, fundamental, ethical principles’. This is all very like the core values of the human rights movement, which uses very similar language about universal, fundamental, indivisible, inalienable rights. The human rights movement too can summarise its aim as ‘the preservation of human dignity’. In fact the Olympic Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are really quite similar in tone and language – one can even imagine, at points, that they must have had the same author. The Olympic Charter states unambiguously that “The practice of sport is a human right”.

If human rights are indivisible – and they are – then you cannot just take one, you have to take them all, as a job lot. The Olympic movement has lost sight of that fact – if it ever knew it.

The complacency of the Olympic movement is depressingly illustrated by the case of Ye Guozhu. That’s him there. He is my Olympic Hero.

[Slide of Amnesty candle replaced by slide of ‘Ye Guozhu – Olympic Hero’]

Today is Ye Guozhu's anniversary – he was detained by the Chinese police on 27 August 2004, and then sentenced to four years in prison. His crime? He requested official permission to hold a demonstration in Beijing, to protest his forced eviction when his home became part of a site for development in preparation for the Olympic Games. He has been tortured in detention. Ye Guozhu is a bit of a human rights athlete – I think of him as a sort of Marathon runner. He has staying power, which is to say those in power are forcing him to stay - in prison. He remains imprisoned at an unknown location, though he was supposed to be released on 26 July 2008, at the end of his sentence. The Chinese government has decided –and openly declared - that Ye Guozhu is so dangerous that he cannot be allowed to walk free during the Olympic Games. He is to be kept in prison, illegally, by the government until at least the first of October, well after the end of the Olympic Games. Amnesty International asked the International Olympic Committee to intervene for Ye Guozhu. They answered that Ye Guozhu was not their business.

Closer to home, I wrote to the British Olympic Association about the case of the land rights activist, Yang Chunlin. He was detained by the Chinese authorities last year and in February this year was sentenced to five years in prison. His crime? He organised a petition on behalf of those who had been expropriated to make way for Olympics - related developments. The petition was headed “We want human rights, not the Olympics”, and attracted a lot of signatures - thousands. Amnesty International issued an urgent action alert when it was reported to us that Yang Chunlin was being tortured in police custody, by being chained, spread-eagled, to an iron bed continuously for several days, in which position he had to eat, drink and defecate. I asked the British Olympic Association if they had anything to say about this. They answered that Yang Chunlin was not their business.

I wonder if it would have been their business had Yang Chunlin been wrongfully arrested, tortured and unjustly imprisoned for saying that he was in favour of the Olympics? Would his dignity have been worth something then?

What price the ‘preservation of human dignity’ of which the Olympic Charter speaks? Sport, like human rights, is supposed to rest on a base of irreducible human dignity.

Sadly, in Beijing this year, the Olympic torch did not illuminate the progress of human dignity. It was not available for that purpose; it was too busy being used to light a bonfire of the rights and freedoms on which that dignity rests. For many, the ashes of that fire will be the abiding and bitter legacy of the 2008 Olympic Games.

But are we expecting too much? Does sport, as such, have anything to do with freedom? Are we asking it to lift too heavy a weight? I should say not. In his book ‘The Ascent of Man’, Jacob Bronowski, while discussing biological evolution, compares the natural athletic prowess of a gazelle and a man, and makes the following observation about what sport means to human beings. The gazelle is running because it is hunted and afraid. Bronowski writes: But there is a cardinal difference: the [human] runner was not in flight. The shot that set him off was the starter's pistol, and what he was experiencing, deliberately, was not fear but exaltation. The runner is like a child at play; his actions are an adventure in freedom, and the only purpose of his breathless chemistry was to explore the limits of his own strength.

Sport, as an adventure in freedom, with the purpose of exploring human potential. I think that is a marvellous definition of sport. And what an inspiring image!

However, this is not an appropriate image for what we have just seen in Beijing. Ye Guozhu and Yang Chunlin, to name just two, would have trouble believing that that had anything to do with

freedom. As would the many people arrested, placed under surveillance, or like the elderly and infirm, but still spirited, Mrs Wang and Mrs Wu - threatened with the labour camps for applying to protest at one of the Olympic Protest Parks, supposedly set up for that purpose. They might all have paid more attention to the Chinese government's own Olympic slogan – 'One World, One Dream' – which, to my mind, is rather suggestive of the Chinese government's desire for mental uniformity – 'one dream', 'one thought', 'one opinion', the one that the government wants you to have, indeed the one that they insist you have. Ye Guozhu and company made the mistake of having a dream that the government did not approve.

What would be a fitting image of the Beijing Olympics? I cannot help recalling George Orwell's essay, 'The Sporting Spirit', where he notes that international sporting events are a disguised form of warfare and usually result in "orgies of hatred". That would, perhaps, be going a little far.

However, Orwell does provide us with an image that would be highly recognisable to human rights defenders in China. In his novel 1984, the torturer, O'Brien, describes his vision of the future of the human race to his victim – he says "Imagine a boot stamping on a human face, forever". That is certainly an image that comes easily to mind when thinking of human rights in China - only now, and from now on, the boot has running spikes on it.

I would like now to consider the question why the powerful, the wealthy and the influential show so much hesitation in criticising China's human rights record. Well, I have already answered that question – it is the economic relationship. Governments and their corporate bedfellows see China almost exclusively as an economic prize. For example, they see China as a single market of 1.3 billion potential consumers of their goods. Or, they see it as a manufacturing, or assembly base, attractive because of the cheap labour that is to be had there, courtesy of the Chinese government's ruthless suppression of free trade unions. Many non-Chinese companies set up there precisely because they know that they will not have to deal with organised labour. There are bogus, state run, trade unions, which do not try at all to represent the interests of the workers. But anyone who tries to form an independent union ends up in jail, or in the labour camps having his, or her, personality 'improved'.

Governments and corporations do not criticise China's human rights record, or do not do so effectively, because they fear economic punishment by the Chinese government. They fear exclusion from, or disability within, that gigantic single market. They are bowing down to China's vast economic power.

And economics go a long way to explaining the attitude of the Olympic movement. Above all else, the Olympic Games are an immense business enterprise, disposing of huge amounts of money. For the major Olympic sponsors it is the advertising opportunity of a lifetime and for a much larger group of companies the games represent a chance to supply a wide variety of goods and services, as well as a way of boosting their profile as suppliers 'by appointment', so to speak.

I am not suggesting, incidentally, that companies should refrain from doing business with China, any more than I am suggesting that governments should be trying to have poor diplomatic relations with China. But I am saying that they should conduct diplomacy and do business with a proper regard for human rights. The human rights movement - and Amnesty International in particular - has always insisted vociferously that human rights are to be placed above and beyond all political interests. We should, I think, take more care to be equally insistent that they are also to be placed above and beyond all economic interests.

And this brings me to William Wilberforce. In his day he had to confront major economic interests that did not wish to see the abolition of slavery. There was much anxiety then about the economic cost of freeing the slaves, just as there is much anxiety now about the economic cost of criticising the Chinese government. But Wilberforce understood that there were more important things at stake. Things that had something to do with being human. Perhaps he felt that the soul of a nation was at stake. Perhaps his diverse fellow campaigners and supporters – among them William Pitt, the Tory and Charles James Fox, the Whig felt that way too.

As all of you will know, even now Wilberforce's work is not yet done. Slavery persists in various forms throughout the World, including in China.

It is not unknown for working conditions in private industry in China to amount to slavery. The Chinese authorities have shown that they are prepared to take action against instances of private sector slavery, when sufficient pressure is brought to bear. But what they are not willing to address at all is the use of forced labour within their own penal system. I am referring to the laogai, the labour camps. These camps supply labour for a broad range of economic activities and produce many of the consumer goods that China sells to the world.

The conditions today in the laogai would not be shockingly unfamiliar to Wilberforce if he were alive today. Let me tell you about the labour rights activist, Zhang Shanguang, who was released recently. He spent a decade imprisoned in Hunan No. 1 Prison, which is an electrical machinery factory, for his peaceful and legal activities trying to help laid-off workers claim their rights under Chinese labour law. Despite being ill with active tuberculosis Zhang Shanguang had to do heavy physical work in fetters. In March 2001 he circulated a petition demanding an end to torture and long working hours. The petition was smuggled out of the prison in April 2001. It describes appalling conditions at the Hunan No.1 Prison and terrible punishments amounting to torture for prisoners who were unable to do the heavy work required of them or who complained. For this, Zhang Shanguang was severely beaten by prison guards and put in solitary confinement. Other prisoners who signed the petition were also reportedly beaten.

The Laogai Research Foundation has estimated that there may be over one thousand laogai with up to 8 million inmates in total. Harry Wu, the founder of the Laogai Research Foundation, and formerly a long-time laogai inmate, has said his ambition is to make the word 'laogai' as recognisable as the word 'gulag' and for it to carry the same freight of menace – for the laogai to be regarded as the gulags of our time. His ambition is not yet realised, but then the laogai do not get nearly as much publicity as they deserve. I am happy to give them a share of the spotlight here tonight.

I have pointed to the 'drag' effect that economic interests have in challenging human rights abuses. This 'drag' effect operated in Wilberforce's day and it operates in ours, especially with regard to the economic powerhouse that is contemporary China. However, I would like to draw attention to another, more insidious, parallel - the justification of human rights abuses by denying the humanity of the victims.

In the eighteenth century, slavery was often justified by saying that the Africans who formed the slave class were not really, or not fully human beings. This may have been a sincere belief in many people, but it was a very convenient alibi for those who made a living from slavery. Basically, slavery was justified by racism. Something of the same sort is happening today, but 'culture' rather than 'race' is the determinant.

Anyone today who suggested that a person's human rights depended on their skin colour, the texture of their hair, or the shape of their eyes, would rightly be dismissed as a racist crank. But it is apparently possible, even respectable, to suggest that a person's human rights depend on their cultural background. I find that astonishing.

The idea is that by criticising China's human rights record we are imposing alien, 'Western', cultural standards where they are not appropriate. 'Asian values' should prevail in Asia and any attempt to replace them by 'Western Standards' is simply a kind of imperialism.

'Western values', on which human rights are based, favours individual rights over community rights, political freedom over development, whereas 'Asian values' are the reverse of these preferences. According to this argument Chinese people do not really want, or are not comfortable with, the human rights that Western busybodies like me are trying to foist upon them. This is the 'cultural relativism' argument and it is the most unspeakable rubbish I have ever heard.

It does not take much examination to see just what rubbish this argument is – the essence of which is that some people, or rather some kinds of people, are worth less than others, depending on the culture they are assumed to live within. The separation of peoples on the basis of cultural difference was the avowed logic of apartheid. It is hard to believe, I know, but apparently apartheid had its intellectuals and they spoke in terms of culture, not race. I am indebted to Conor Cruise O'Brien's excellent 1986 essay, 'What Can Become of South Africa', for making clear this point. I will quote one short passage.

'The Boer nation', said the ideologue G. Cronjé, 'can fully understand the sufferings of the Bantu. It is the same imperialism and capitalism, having them believe that the foreign is better than what is their own, which seeks to destroy their tribal life.' So the liberation of the blacks by the Afrikaners would consist in the restoration of their tribal life.

As Dr O'Brien points out this was, of course, an utter sham. Apartheid had other, exploitative, political and economic roots, but the whole ghastly idea was dressed up as anti-imperialist respect for non-European culture. Today the argument of cultural relativism is still being used to excuse human rights abuses.

Few are more tireless than the Chinese government in deploying the cultural argument. In a recent discussion held at the House of Commons a Chinese diplomat said that the government could not abolish the death penalty because "it was a tradition". A tradition – you know – like having turkey at Christmas. Discussions about this sort of thing are always in danger of becoming a little abstract, so I propose to show you an example of this particular cultural tradition.

[Slide of woman about to be executed by Public Security Bureau officers, titled- 'A Chinese Cultural Tradition?']

Is this really culture? Or, is it something altogether crueller? Is it cruelty itself we are looking at? I could not think of another word to call it. I wonder what this woman was guilty of. It could be murder, or it could be filling in her tax return incorrectly. Given the way the Chinese police and courts operate, I could not be confident that she was guilty of anything at all. Still, at least she was able to enjoy participating in a celebration of her culture, as the bullet tore through her brain.

There are many reasons why the death penalty persists in China, but a reverence for Chinese culture is not likely to be the most important of them. More important is the political theatre of execution. The authorities like to show what they are made of and remind people what can happen to them if they are not careful. The Chinese government says that it is trying to create a “harmonious society”. They probably calculate that keeping the population mindful of the fact that the state could, if it wished, take their life for the most minor infraction helps them to be ‘harmonious’. Though, of course, when they say ‘harmonious’ they mean ‘obedient’.

Another contributor to the continuation of the death penalty is its undoubted profitability, in providing the lucrative organ transplantation industry, in which Chinese officialdom has a large stake, with virtually its only source of livers, kidneys, hearts, lungs and corneas.

We need to remind ourselves just what human rights are. Human rights are a set of moral obligations that exist between human beings; they are a moral endowment that all human beings possess by virtue of being human. So it all comes down to being human – and what is a human being? How, for the purposes of respecting human rights, should we define what is a human being? Culturally? Is there a cultural definition of a human being? I am not sure how that would work. Culture is not even a uniquely human phenomenon. Other creatures have displayed the rudiments of culture, including apes, elephants and even whales. If human rights are culturally determined, do whales have human rights?

I think the most reliable and inclusive definition we can use is the zoological. Any creature that the science of zoology would classify as a specimen of *Homo Sapiens* is a human being and in full possession of all human rights. Human rights are species specific, not culturally specific.

Human beings are physical creatures and human rights arise from the nature of our physical being, which does not vary substantially from person to person. Our bodies are all made of the same stuff, we all depend on the same physical and chemical processes, we all have the same kind of central nervous system, we all experience pain the same way and we all have the same brain structure and psychological drives – every human being is motivated by more, or less the same basic set of desires, lusts and follies. And it is a fundamental psychological property of every human being that we all want our voice to be heard - demonstrated by the fact that we all emerge from the womb screaming our heads off.

These are the hard unvarying facts about human beings. They do not change from place to place. The minor, irrelevant and cosmetic differences associated with ethnicity make no difference to them, nor do the real and significant physical differences that exist between men and women.

Placed alongside these physical realities what is culture? It is an insubstantial thing; an invention of the mind; the merest figment. When I say that culture is insubstantial, I do not mean that it is unimportant. Our cultures are important to us, and help to shape our attitudes, towards many things, including human rights, but culture is an intangible and shifting thing. The assumption of the cultural relativists is that cultures remain fixed over time and that those who live within them have no choice but to accept everything about them – in effect, we are all complete slaves of our culture and have no freedom to choose how we live. But no culture is permanent and unchangeable. They are developing all the time and, especially in these globalised times, are constantly affecting one another. Salman Rushdie put it very memorably when he said that “we are like flavours in a cooking pot, we leak into each other”. He was talking about people, but it is even truer of cultures. Above all cultures do not remain pure and are not



uniform within societies – consider the cultural differences between social classes, for example. The cultures of ruling elites and the people they rule can often be markedly different.

And are 'Western values' and 'Asian values' so very incompatible?

I do not think this stands up to scrutiny, especially with reference to human rights. The idea of community and collective rights is not exclusive to Asian societies and the rights of the individual, supposedly so contradictory to the Asian point of view, is in fact supported by many eastern philosophies and religions. I am quoting from the book *Human Rights in the World* by Arthur Robertson and John Merrills.

The idea of individual worth can be found in the work of sages, philosophers, prophets and poets from different countries and many faiths in all continents, including India, China, Japan, Persia, Russia, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, several countries of black Africa and pre-Columbian civilisations of South America.

Human rights would appear truly to be a manifestation of universal values derived from many and varied cultures. The Nobel Laureate and human rights champion Aung San Suu Kyi has written:

When democracy and human rights are said to run counter to non-Western culture, such culture is usually defined narrowly and presented as monolithic. In fact, the values that democracy and human rights seek to promote can be found in many cultures.

Democracy and human rights do not seem to be alien ideas in Aung San Suu Kyi's country. When they got the chance to do so, eighteen years ago, eighty per cent of the Burmese electorate voted for Aung San Suu Kyi the advocate of 'Western' human rights. She has never been allowed to take office as President of Burma, however. The anti-human rights culture of the Burmese generals, though, very much a minority culture in the country, does hold the vast majority of the guns.

Asian values and Chinese values, specifically, had a great deal to do with giving the World the idea of human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the international master document of human rights was promulgated by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948. The Declaration was drafted by a committee of nations on behalf of the General Assembly. That committee represented a wide variety of cultures and religions and while not a member of the committee, China is recognised as having made a valuable contribution towards the drafting of the Declaration. The Declaration covers a great range of rights and freedoms, both individual and collective and was endorsed by China, without reservation, cultural, or otherwise.

Chinese people in general do not seem to have much difficulty, in theory, or practice, with the concept of individual human rights. Indeed one of the reasons why the human rights situation is deteriorating in China is that more and more people are trying to exercise their rights and the government is preventing them. This is not something new, incidentally. China has a long history of popular protest. There were many peasant revolts, in the time of the emperors, some involving millions of people and lasting for decades.

Here are a few more of China's human rights athletes.

[Slide with Shi Tao, Chen Guangcheng and Huang Jinqiu, titled 'A Few More Human Rights Athletes']

These are some of China's current human rights defenders. You may have heard of them already. A great deal of campaigning has been done on their behalf.

Shi Tao is a journalist and poet serving a ten year prison sentence for sending an e-mail to a civil society organisation in the US, with information on the government response to the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Chen Guangcheng is a blind legal activist who is serving a four year sentence on trumped up charges of "damaging public property and gathering people to block traffic". The real reason for his imprisonment was the assistance he was giving to women in Linyi City to sue the local authorities for subjecting them to forced abortions and sterilizations.

Huang Jinqiu is a writer and journalist serving a twelve year sentence for "subversion". His subversive act was to post essays advocating democratic change on the internet.

And there are many others. None seem to be inhibited by their culture from seeking to protect human rights. What they have been prepared to do is suffer abuses of their own rights, in order to protect those of other people. Unfortunately, the Chinese government is only too willing to make them suffer. China will not grant its people the human rights it helped to define for the whole World – not without pressure from the outside. People like Chen Guangcheng, Shi Tao and Yang Chunlin are depending on us to use our freedom to help them win theirs.

Bringing about human rights improvements in China is not impossible. Remember that in Wilberforce's day slavery had existed for many centuries and seemed one of the most natural things in the world. Very few people ever thought of questioning it. Now, no-one would ever think of defending it. That tells us that change, major change, is possible even in the most unpromising of circumstances. If these Olympic Games have told us anything positive it is that the Chinese government cares desperately what the rest of the World thinks and says about it.

So, we have a choice. We can do nothing and watch things get worse in China, to the detriment of us all, for if one fifth of humanity is to be deemed unworthy of protection then all our prospects are poor. Or, we can challenge the political and economic interests - and their ingenious alibis - and bring about change that could eventually rival the impact of the abolition of slavery. The latter is the better course, I think, and we can undertake it knowing that it puts us in the illustrious company of William Wilberforce.

Thank you.

27 August 2008