ENGLISH: *THE CRUCIBLE*

Ignorance is at the heart of conflict.

Herein lies a monk. He sits impassively in prayer. There is no agony, no screams, not even a twitch of a muscle, yet here he sits with flames engulfing his body. The petrol bottle sits as peacefully as he. He is so ordinary. He could have been any of the other surrounding monks as they watch on. His composure is calm and serene, but his message is clear. He is the unwavering voice of equality. The photographer snapped the moment of utter desperation.

This photograph later became known as the 'Burning Monk.' It was the blind ignorance due to the strict Catholic Diem regime, which refused to counter any other religious faith, that led to this desperate tragic action of the Buddhist monk. The government refused to listen to the voices of the community and enable them the right to their beliefs.

Good Afternoon professors and university students,

My name is Li Ling, and as part of your Arts studies 'Human Rights in China and South East Asia', I have been invited to give you a speech as an activist of human rights with Amnesty International. For decades, authority has suppressed the rights of its people. History exhibits the countless lives and efforts of humans to fight back and develop an equal world. Authority is that of a behemoth, destroying everything in its path. These forces are engrossed in self-benefit, ignorant of the importance of humanity in the name of power.

This can be seen particularly in China where the corrupted Communist Party still continues to govern its people. Let me to you about Falun Gong. Falun Gong is a spiritual discipline that combines the practice of mediation, slow-moving qi-gong exercises and the moral philosophy based on Truthfulness, Compassion and Forbearance. Ironically, this practice was first accepted by Chinese officials, even encouraged for "safeguarding social order and security." However, as the number of practitioners grew into the millions, the Chinese Communist Party felt threatened by this practice, and a national ban was enforced that is still in place today. Those involved in any way with Falun Gong were captured and confronted with the most inhumane treatment. They would be put into questioning where officers were ordered to be ruthless and unrelenting. They would press their victims, demanding that they admit to being wrong. Similar to that of Arthur Miller's 'The Crucible': "there be no road between."

Whilst there were practitioners who relented, vowing never to practise Falun Gong again, those who refused to stand up to the blasphemy were sentenced to decade-long imprisonment in so called "re-education centres." The government was determined to eradicate this practise and the prisons were soon overflowing with practitioners. Some were punished merely for writing emails, condemned for "using the internet to voice grievances on behalf of Falun Gong." The government failed to bring the people justice, in the same way the theocracy of Salem failed to during the time of the witch-hunts. The figures of authority demonstrated ignorance in the truth of Abigail William's behaviour, and as a consequence many people's lives were sacrificed in the name of integrity and justice. As Miller describes it: "now the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom, and common vengeance writes the law!" The Chinese government failed to invest in the truth, only choosing to believe what was convenient just as the Salem theocracy was so adamant in their belief that the Devil was amongst them. The citizens, mere victims of their ignorance.

The Falun Gong practitioners who have since been freed from the prisons describe the on-going methods of torture that they were subjected to on a daily basis: being shocked with electric batons. Being suspended in the air for long periods of time. Being burned with hot irons. This is the reality of what the lives of persecuted Falun Gong practitioners became. It's treatment that you and I find hard to believe. In Australia, we don't believe that torture is a justifiable act of punishment, but in places like China, this sort of treatment is encouraged, even legalised as a means of persecution.

These people were treated as criminals. The crime? Merely for having their own beliefs. They were subjected to treatment worse than drug addicts, prostitutes and traffickers in pornography. The "re-education centres" were fundamentally used to brain-wash practitioners, telling them that Falun Gong was based on fallacies, destroying the community.

How does this make you feel? Can you imagine living in a country that suppresses the right to practice your own beliefs? Not only a country that suppresses the right to your beliefs, but punishes you for it. How would you feel to live in a country that refuses to respect human dignity? The worst part about this is the degree of ignorance fuelling the country doesn't allow for an opposing voice to be heard. There is no political, religious or environmental conflict. At least nothing that would be found in the media. The Chinese people live in constant fear of prosecution. There is no opposing view for all books, movies, poems, websites- anything that is remotely anti-Chinese has been banned through the government's refusal to recognise a belief system other than their own.

The growing awareness of the torture, organ harvesting and death surrounding Falun Gong has captured the attention of millions of people around the world. It is fortunate to see the action and results of this awareness. Just in April of this year, Amnesty International successful released a Chinese practitioner, Zhou Xiangyang from prison as a result of a combination of international and domestic pressure on the Chinese authorities. However, there still remain thousands…thousands of lives that have been destroyed as a result of the government's inability to bring justice to its people. The Chinese Communist Party remains defiant in their ban, entrenching citizens with lies and deceit. The government claims that such a ban was in the interest in the people, for it posed a "threat to social and political stability." A threat, that was ultimately in their own interests. To see that this self-interest has been governing a country and destroying countless lives, and will continue to in the future is mortifying.

More than 1000 Falun Gong practitioners have been sentenced to death, tens of thousands detained in forced-labour camps and prisons. The true number of innocent people who have been affected such oppression, however, is in the tens of millions.

And yet, this sort of treatment, this abuse of human integrity it not secluded to China. What brings me the greatest despair is that this ruthless ignorance is universal and has been an issue surrounding our history for decades. When those are in a position to act and make change are blinded by ignorance, it is us, the mere everyday people that are forced to act. Many of you would not have been able to do what this monk did in the name of justice and humanity. I'm not asking you to go to such lengths for the fight towards freedom and justice; but I urge you to recognise that at the core of our very existence, is the need for human dignity. This monk is not and will not be the only person sacrificing his life as a small step towards ensuring that you and I can exist today in a society that values and accepts choice.

You may think that the Communist regime has little to do with yourself, but you only have to look in our own backyard to realise that this ignorance is still very much present in our lives and society. I'm sure you are all aware of the anti-Islamic protest in Sydney just the other month. This sort of religious intolerance is spreading to Australia. Is this the kind of world you want to be a part of? We are the generation responsible for shaping the future and a part of humanity that continues to fight for equality.

Ignorance has cost too many lives to date, and it is part of our responsibility to recognise the need for action and encourage an acceptance for all races, all religions and all beliefs. It has been happening, time and time again for too long. The ignorance of suppressive societies, whether that be the authorities governing China, or those in Salem during the witch-hunts, has been responsible for anguish and heart-ache of its people. Finally, I would like to leave you now, and urge you to reflect upon this quote from Dalai Lama: "Where Ignorance is our master, there is no possibility of real peace."