

## For a thousand days Ching Cheong sought God in a Chinese prison

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by Laura Foo - Asianews.It - 07/23/2008

In an exclusive interview with AsiaNews, the Strait Times journalist sentenced to five years in prison for "selling state secrets abroad" talks about the strength he received from reading the Bible in prison. He highlights the contractions in the upcoming Olympic Games, still hopeful though that China might become a cultural and spiritual force in the world.











































































































































































































Hong Kong (AsiaNews) &ndash; Ching Cheong, 57, is a Hong Kong-based journalist and chief correspondent in mainland China for The Strait Times of Singapore. He was arrested in April 2005 on charges of espionage for Taiwan and sentenced to five years in prison. He is said to have confessed to selling military information to Taiwan and setting up an espionage ring to &ldquo;sell state secrets&rdquo; abroad. But he has always denied the accusations and still denies them. Dissident sources say that his arrest was carried out in connection with research he was conducting on Zhao Ziyang, party secretary at the time of the pro-democracy movement and the 1989 Tiananmen massacre.

In November 2006 his sentence was confirmed at the end of a day-long trial in which only evidence presented by the prosecution was allowed to stand.

As a result of the actions by his paper, wife and friends in Hong Kong, who have fought for his release, Mr Ching was freed on 5 February 2008 after purging half of his sentence. He has accepted to talk to AsiaNews about his experience in prison and on the future prospects for China and the Olympics.

He was in prison for more than a thousand days. In remembering those days behind bars, Ching Cheong had to admit that the mental trauma and pressure he experienced were far greater than the physical violence he had to endure.

The time of his arrest, when they put handcuffs on him, was the most painful moment in his life, a time of bitterness and low self-esteem. For the first time in his life he felt the humiliation of being handcuffed, broken hearted for being locked up in a cell. &ldquo;I had the impression of total failure. I had lost confidence in what I had done up to that time, as if everything was wrong.&rdquo;

Comfort in reading the Bible

In order to ease some of his confusion, Ching began reading some books on Chinese saints, &ldquo;but these books can only lessen the pain a bit and cannot help the deepest fears.&rdquo; And so he asked for a copy of the Bible.

&ldquo;I felt that what I could get from reading the Bible was greater than what I could get from other books. In fact I was very touched and after reading some chapters I even cried.&rdquo;

The section that most affected him was 1 Corinthians 13, Saint Paul's hymn to love, on the relationship between faith, hope and love, which set him free from his confusion.

"From that moment onward I regained comfort, confidence and strength," he said.

He also began praying to God every day for strength on the path of love for China, and a joyful heart and good health "to face with generosity the prison's poor conditions and (life's) adversities."

Ching said with modesty that he has not fully grasped Christianity in all its complexity and for this reason has not decided to join any one Christian community or Church. But he is determined to "know God." His wife, Mary Lau, is Buddhist and both are drawn to religion.

"Faith is a spiritual need people have," Ching said. Even though husband and wife have different religions, they respect one another.

### The Year 2008, the Olympic Games and amnesties

Another moment of enlightenment and hope came when he read an article in Nan Fang Zhou Mo (a Guangdong weekly) asking the authorities to make 2008 a year of amnesty. The article was the result of his friends Hong Kong pressuring Beijing to immediately release him. Various organisations had in fact called on the Chinese government to make the Olympic year a year of amnesty. As a result of these pressures Ching was freed. For him China should seriously think about the possibility of implementing a series of amnesties that to benefit others.

"Since my release on 5 February 2008 Beijing has had opportunities to follow this path of reconciliation. The article published in the Nan Fang Zhou Mo was seen as a sign that Beijing was planning to improve human rights and take steps towards reconciliation. Unfortunately, the process was stopped by the incidents in Tibet and the earthquake in Sichuan."

Nevertheless, Ching remains confident, noting that some pro-democracy lawmakers have been allowed to travel to the quake zone. At the same time Beijing has re-opened channels of communication with representatives of the Dalai Lama. This is a sign that China is re-opening the path towards reconciliation.

### China must grow in spirit and culture

The Beijing Olympics are still resisted and criticised because China is still trying to establish its "soft power" in the international community.

"China has experienced high economic growth but still needs a certain spiritual maturity, i.e. soft power," he said. "From the point of view of "hard power" China has surpassed many other nations, but its cultural appeal remains low. In organising the Olympic Games, China is showing its weaknesses and this has provided others with an excuse to criticise and oppose it. For one thing, China has all the (technical) means to host the Olympics, but cannot meet its main social expectations."

Ching is still hopeful that through the Games China can become politically more tolerant and improve its human rights situation.

He is still optimistic about the country's future. He remembers that when he was in prison he read an article written by Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. In it Wen said that freedom, democracy and human rights are not a prerogative of capitalist society but an ideal that every people strives for and an achievement of (world) civilisation.

Ching hopes that China can come to realise that human rights are a universal value for the whole of humanity, insisting on how that article strengthened his love for China.

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