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FOR FREE EXPRESSION IN CHINA

Poetic Olympic torch for human rights arrives in Malta

Antoine Cassar

Since March 30, "June", a short meditative poem by imprisoned Chinese journalist Shi Tao on the 1989 protests of Tiananmen Square, has been translated into over a hundred languages in a relay journey across the planet. As part of a final lap of solidarity across Europe, Asia and the Pacific, "June" arrives in Malta on August 1.



Shi Tao

The Beijing Olympics are just around the corner, and within a few days billions of pairs of eyes will be directing their attention and admiration to the myriad of talented sportspeople representing their respective countries. With gallons of adrenalin, hope, national pride and corporate sponsorship pumped into their blood, thousands of athletes will stage a colourful spectacle of human physical and psychological ability, celebrating the Olympic spirit whilst generating enormous returns for multinational companies and their omnipresent trademarks.

One would be forgiven for claiming that an international sporting event should not be marred by the fixations of politics, yet there are a number of factors which could lead us to believe that today's Olympics are indeed more about political and economic competition than the universal message carried by sport. The simple fact that athletes represent nation-states as opposed to peoples (the overlap is not as overreaching as one may wish to believe), the likes of the USA, Russia, China and other so-called superpowers hoping to use the event as a platform to demonstrate their dominance, and the accusations that the International Olympic Committee has struck a secret deal with China to censor the international media during the Beijing Games, together point in a direction quite opposite to the planetary spirit symbolised by the five rings of the Olympic flag. Human might is after all a lot more profitable than human right, and thus appears to deserve greater visible presence in the media.

The Chinese government's repression of its peoples is no secret (Tibet and Uyghurstan quickly spring to mind), and censorship laws in the country have locked away a sizeable number of Chinese writers and journalists in prison. One of these writers is Shi Tao. In 2004, Tao attended an editorial meeting of the Contemporary Commerce News, where a document was read out from the Chinese Communist Party with instructions for the media during the upcoming 15th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests. Shi Tao e-mailed his notes about the document to foreign websites offering Chinese news and information, who published his notes. Yahoo! turned over his e-mail account to the Chinese authorities, after which he was convicted of "illegally providing state secrets to foreign entities" and sentenced to ten years in prison. He is due for release in 2014.

To honour the true planetary spirit of the Olympics, and in solidarity with all writers imprisoned due to lack of freedom of expression in China and beyond, members of International PEN, the worldwide association of writers, have organised a global relay of Shi Tao's short poem "June", a meditation on the 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square. The poem relay began in Athens on March 30, and for the first few months roughly followed the route of the Olympic torch through Europe, the Americas, Africa, the Middle East, Southern and Eastern Asia and Australia, although with a greater number of stops. At each destination, "June" is recited outside PEN centres and selected venues in the local languages, and can be read and heard online at www.penpoemrelay.org. Now on a final lap across the globe before reaching Beijing on 6-8 August, "June" is in Malta on August 1.

Chip Rolley, the Australian PEN member who set off the Pen Poem Relay initiative, describes his first encounter with the poem: *"Shi Tao's words were quiet and meditative, but they burned with pain underneath the surface. Just a few lines captured so many facets of the China I was beginning to know, the China that was seeping into my consciousness - the need to search for truth beneath the surface; the patience required for aspirations that must lie in hibernation; the bureaucratism that counts the dead in piles of letters"*.

The relay carries this message across borders, in and out of languages and cultures as a powerful act of solidarity thanks to poets and translators around the world. Included in the relay is a translation to Haitian Creole by Georges Anglade, himself a political prisoner under the Duvalier regime in Haiti and twice forced into exile. The Spanish translation arranged by the Cuban Writers in Exile Centre based in Miami is read by Angel Cuadra, who was a political prisoner in Cuba for 15 years. "June" has also been translated into a number of the indigenous languages of Australia, including Arrernte and Darug, Adnyamathanha (which has only 20 living fluent speakers), and Ngarrindjeri, a South Australian language which has not been spoken fluently for years.

To read Kevin Saliba and Antoine Cassar's rendering of "June" in Maltese, or to listen to a recording of the translation recited by Mark Vella, visit www.penpoemrelay.org and click on the pin above Malta on the world map. There you can also read and listen to "June" in over a hundred other languages. The Maltese version can also be seen and heard on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU-0UM9XJZI>.

Shi Tao
ĠUNJU

Ħajti kollha

lil hinn minn "Ġunju" mhi sejra qatt
Ġunju, meta mietet qalbi
meta mietu vrusi
meta l-maħbuba
mititli fl-għadira demm tal-imħabba

Ġunju, ix-xemx tisreg tfettaħli l-ġilda
u tikxef il-verità ta' ġerħti
Ġunju, il-ħut jgħumha mill-baħar aħmar dmija
lejn ilmijiet oħra biex jorqod
Ġunju, titharrek l-art, jisktu x-xmajjar
gozz ittri li ma jistgħux jitwasslu lill-mejtin

Maqluba għall-Malti minn Antoine Cassar u Kevin Saliba
