

Transcript of Li Lu's Speech at John Jay Award Dinner – March 7, 2012

Thank you! Thank you, Columbia, for this enormous honor! I want to start by thanking all of my professors who made my life at Columbia possible. Some of them are here; Ruth Levenson, Jonathan Cole, Jack Greenberg, Lance Liebman, Meyer Feldberg, Kathryn Yatrakis, and many others. Thank you, and thank you for being here tonight, too.

Being here tonight surrounded by my old friends from twenty years ago, really is a throw-back in time. My good friend, Mary Daly, is here. And literally she was one of the first Americans that I became friends with 23 years ago. When I first escaped from Tiananmen Square, and everybody was asking me all these deep, philosophical questions like, "What's the democratic prospect in China." Mary patiently waited for everyone to quiet down then asked me: "Do you have a place to stay? Do you have any other clothes you can change into?" And of course the answer to both questions was "No." So basically, for my first six months in America, I literally stayed in Mary's living room, and she was sharing a townhouse with twelve other individuals, with a common living room. So every night I had to patiently wait for everyone else to go to their own room. I can still remember sitting there, wearing a white T-shirt, waiting. And when everybody else went to their rooms, I finally was able to sleep. But I was staring into the ceiling. Instead of sleeping, I was wondering what the future might bring. How can I ever make a living in this strange new country without knowing anybody, without a word of English?

Now fast forward twenty two years. That white T-shirt has turned into a white tuxedo shirt, with a black tie and all. It was quite an unbelievable journey!

If I have to account for the biggest reason for that transformation, if I have to name three reasons, they would be Columbia, Columbia, Columbia! It was really at Columbia, that I found a home. And mostly I have to say it was through the core curriculum. Through the core curriculum, for the very first time, I was able to trace the roadmap of the founding blocks of the western civilization. For the first time, after reading a hundred or so great classics that define our civilization, I was able to understand why people think the way they think, why the institutions are built the way they are built, how things function here. For the first time. I felt that this is not a strange place. Most of all, I felt that I belonged here.

What I also discovered, there is a commonality between America and China. They both define themselves as civilization states, instead of nation states that are defined by geography. To be an American is to really subscribe to a set of ideas and ideals, which is very similar to China. This is really when I realized, after the core curriculum, that I am as American as many other Americans, except

everybody else came a little bit earlier than I did. All of a sudden, I was sort of transformed from a “Stateless Alien,” which was exactly how my document classified me, a “Stateless Alien,” to a member of society. For the first time, I find a sense of belonging and renewed enthusiasm that I could make it here.

So, I have to say, when I heard Jim telling me that Columbia College is about to permanently endow core curriculum, I was elated. Future generations of Columbia students must be able to enjoy what we all believe is at the core of education. To be educated without an understanding of those hundred or so great classics, I don’t know how to call them educated.

So thanks, Andy Barth-- I took your advice. I brought my seven year old Francesca and my nine year old Julia here so they will remember clearly tonight, the best university in the best city. Don’t you dare settle for anything lesser! And you will be able to get as well educated through the core curriculum as all of us who went through it and understood it. And, well, their mom is even here. When you can convince your ex-wife to fly all the way from Los Angeles, to attend the award dinner here, I guess that I haven’t screwed up everything. So thank you very much for being here.

Thank you all! Thank you, Columbia! Long live the Core! Long live Columbia College!