



Remarks by Vera Zhou

My name is Vera Zhou. I am currently a senior student at the University of Washington.

Three years ago when visiting my father in China, I was detained by the Chinese government for accessing my homework online and then imprisoned in a Chinese re-education camp. While many in America advocated for my release from the Chinese “re-education camp”, my university’s fear of losing foreign funding illustrates a theme across U.S. universities and colleges: foreign donors can hold power over U.S. universities and influence actions.

My personal experience has shocked me with the great power of foreign countries.

I came to the United States in 2008 and became a permanent resident in 2010. During high school, I visited the University of Washington many times: it is one of my dream schools. In 2015, I received admission from the University of Washington and later majored in Geography Information System.

In October 2017, my sophomore year, I traveled to China to visit my father. I thought it was an ordinary trip as it used to be: a week of happy family time together. While I was in China, I needed VPN, a virtual private network that allows me to go on Canvas and check my homework and access to my course materials. I never thought this would be the start of my nightmare.

Two days before my flight back to the U.S., I was with a friend in a tea shop. He received a call from a local police station, telling us that they needed to talk to him. When we get to the police station, they took all of my personal belongings, including my phone, passport, and identification documents. At that time, I was still confused. Then five policemen took me into a police van and told me we were going to another police station for my documentation. While we were in the van, I was back hand-cuffed, that is when I started to panic and cry. On our way, they asked if I have ever downloaded VPN in my phone and laptop. I answered yes and told them the reason. It was late at night, two hours drive and two hours back hand-cuffed.

After we arrived, they had been interrogating me all night long until eight in the morning. Most of the questions were centered around the VPN. I answered all of the questions with truth, even the homework details.

Around 12 p.m. that day, they informed me that I will be sent to a “re-education class”, that was what they would call it.

It was a three-floor building located in a rural area with cells inside. I was required to change into their uniform which has neon green strips on the sleeves and pants. The door was locked from the outside.

I was there from October 2017 to March 2018. I spent my Thanksgiving, Christmas, and 2018 New Year in that cell. I cannot imagine how my family, especially my mom would pull through all these holidays.

Meanwhile, my mom first reached out to the University of Washington. English is not her first language, especially for emails and professional languages. Still, she made countless calls and wrote a great number of emails to different department of the University of Washington staff and officers, asking them for help. She had reached out to my major department, admission office, even the Office of Global Affairs. All she received were re-directions to somewhere else. The only kind help was from a scholar from the University of Washington School of Anthropology.

Eventually, by a chance, my mother reached to Bob Fu, the president of China Aid Association. He had been contacting to the University of Washington many times to discuss my case, asking them to advocate on my behalf, which was to release me. Unfortunately, there was no result out of it.

Until March 2018, I was finally released with a condition of house-arrest. The Chinese government still kept my passport and restricted my travel, I had to stay in that community area.

Because my mom and Bob Fu were eager for me to return to the States, they had the State Department Officer contacting the University of Washington to advocate my return. We thought it would increase my chance of coming back if the school intervenes.

During a call between the State Department and Administration Office of the President of University of Washington, one university official said that they would not get involved with pressuring the Chinese government because they were having a “multi-million deal” with China. Both Bob Fu and my mother were shocked to hear this; how would an university be a bystander behind a reason like that?

Finally, I returned in September 2019. However, there are many difficulties preventing me from getting my life back.

First, I found out that the University of Washington kept sending my student loan bills every month during the two years, knowing that I was detained in a re-education camp and under house arrest. I was also put in default for my student loans because I was not enrolled in school for two years. I contacted the University of Washington Student Fiscal Service to help me in removing me from the default list since they knew my situation very well, but they told me that it was not within their limit, they could not do anything to help.

Considering my current situation, I decided to take classes at a community college, at the same time, slowly working on my way to get back to the university.

Eventually, I am enrolled this autumn quarter, exactly one year after I came back to the States, without any help from the University of Washington.

Now we are impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, all university and college campuses are closed. Schools are offering remote and online classes to their student no matter where their students are in the world. I know some universities are providing free VPN to their students who are in another country. So I wonder, will the University of Washington still be a bystander to their International Students who, let's say, are unfortunately detained because they used VPN to access classes?

One thing I really appreciated is the American education system which allowed me to become more confident and passionate about the world and myself. I am very thankful for my middle school and high school experience, I think it has successfully enriched my knowledge and more importantly guided my values. As I entered college, I noticed at the University of Washington famous Red Square, it says "Be Boundless". I searched on my school website and it says, "A decade ago, the University of Washington launched the Be Boundless — For Washington, For the World campaign with the powerful idea that what you care about can change the world". From my perspective, it makes me wonder, as a prestigious university, what do you really care and what values are you contributing to your students and the world?

Thank you for your time.