

Risking Alienation: Landscape Architect Kongjian Yu (China)

Story Adapted from Chapter 4, *Brave Leaders*



Kongjian Yu is the child of peasant parents who suffered financially and socially during China's cultural revolution of the '70s. His parents and his older brother were jailed for protesting against the politics of the state.

Kongjian managed to leave China in the '90s to study environmental planning at Harvard. But when he returned to China a few years later, he said he was shocked by what he saw: rivers were being polluted, ancient cities were being destroyed, and trees were being cut down indiscriminately in the name of progress.

"It took twenty years of public denial before my ecological thinking became a reality. Never give up on what you believe in."

Armed with his new knowledge and education, all of this struck Kongjian as "so wrong" and he would not keep quiet about it. Not only would he speak out, but he was determined to make as much noise about it as he possibly could. To quote Kongjian, "I wanted to expose flaws in Chinese policy and bring attention to how current policy was going against people's values and beliefs."

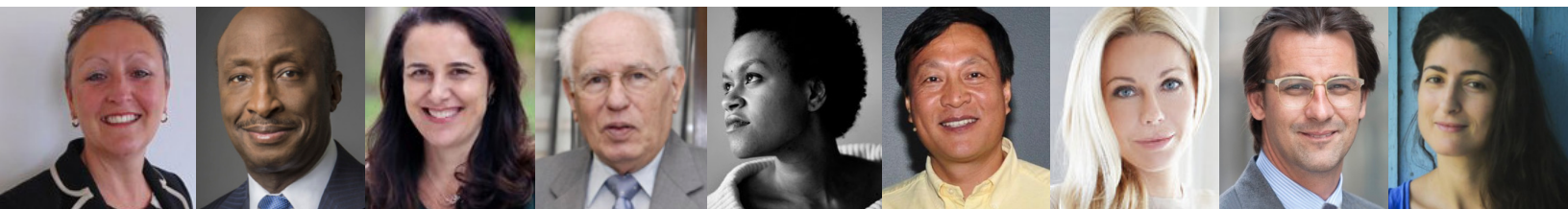
The more he spoke out, the more attention he attracted. "I don't hesitate to criticize traditions — both old and new — that I believe are wrong," he said.

To say that he disrupted a movement and angered influential people would be an understatement. Not only did people write negative articles about him, a whole conference was organized against him and his ideas. This was personal. Despite being called a "traitor to his whole culture" — by everyone from local government officials, to landscape professionals, urban planners, the academic community, and even former teachers — Kongjian never gave up. His secret to perseverance? "Trust your knowledge."

See our tips for self-guided writes on our website, then follow this 3-step process to reflect on a current challenge of your own:

Think It Through

Ask yourself: Do I hold any belief so dearly that I would risk being publicly discredited? Would I be willing to be called a traitor to my culture? Is there a way I could test my tolerance for this? Write down any thoughts you have.



Write It Out

Open your notebook or journal to a clean page. Set a timer for 10 minutes and take a few deep breaths. Start writing with this sentence prompt: *If I could move forward without fear, I would...Write as quickly as possible.* Don't "stop and think" and don't stop writing — rewrite thoughts if necessary. When you hear the timer, stop writing and proceed to Connect the Dots.

Connect the Dots

After taking a few deep breaths, reread what you've just written. Make comments in the margin or highlight words or phrases that stand out. When you are done, write a reflection using this sentence prompt: *As I read this, I have become aware...*

Interested in Coaching or a Small Group Workshop?

Contact Jeanne Westervelt Rice

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