

Wei Jingsheng was right

by Linda de Hoyos

In February 1989, the Chinese democracy movement was relaunched with the circulation of a petition among China's elites for the release of China's foremost political prisoner, Wei Jingsheng. A leader of the Democracy Wall movement of 1976-78, Wei Jingsheng had been imprisoned in 1979 by the reform Deng Xiaoping regime. His three-part big character poster, "The Fifth Modernization," still stands today as the most serious challenge to the Deng regime and the Communist Party.

On March 28, 1989, the *Beijing Daily* answered the petition for Wei's release with an exercise in Kafkaesque logic that only proved Wei's charges against the Deng regime. The daily editorialized:

"Question: Does sentencing Wei Jingsheng mean punishing an 'ideological criminal'?"

"Answer: No. The so-called 'ideological criminal' means punishing the people's criminal ideas in ideology as if they were criminal acts. Such is the method of feudalism and fascism. Ours is a socialist country. The law of our country punishes acts, not ideas.

"The demarcation line between ideas and acts lies in whether the ideas are spread. Wei Jingsheng printed more than 5,000 copies of the reactionary articles he had written and posted, sold and circulated them in Beijing. This far exceeded the scope of ideological understanding and personal belief."

Wei has remained in jail for the past 13 years, during most of which time he has been physically and mentally tortured. Although colleagues say he has "lost his mind" under this torture, he has not capitulated nor "confessed." His treatment at the hands of the Deng Xiaoping "reform" regime is notice of the continued threat of his ideas to the iron rule of the Communist Party. If China is to escape catastrophe, Wei Jingsheng's ideas must become the polestar for today's democracy movement. Those ideas reflect not the British liberalism of the May 4th Movement of 1924, nor the philistine pragmatism of Deng Xiaoping, but radiate the ideas of Confucius and the principles of Sun Yat-sen.

Wei Jingsheng's most famous manifesto was his "Fifth Modernization" wall poster, which categorically stated that

Deng's campaign call for the "Four Modernizations" was impossible to realize without a fifth modernization—democracy. The *Beijing Daily's* reaction to the petition for Wei's release makes the point clear: How can a society be truly modernized, its economy developed, if the individuals in that society are not permitted to think?

For 30 years under Mao Zedong, Wei stated in 1979, the Chinese people were like "monkeys reaching out for the Moon and feeling only emptiness." Now, in their exhaustion, "when Vice Chairman Deng put forward the slogan 'Be practical,' people's enthusiasm was like surging waves. Time and again he was helped by the people to come to power. The people expected him to review the past and lead them to a realistic future with a 'seeking truth from facts' approach." However, Wei argued, there had been no review of the past, and the democracy movement of 1976 had been mowed down in the streets.

But, Wei asserted, "freedom and happiness are our sole objectives in accomplishing modernization. Without this fifth modernization all others are merely another promise."

Democracy, he states, is the "condition for the existence of productive forces and the relations of production. . . . We can see [from history] that democracy has always brought along with it the most favorable conditions and the greatest speed for social development. On this point, American history has supplied the most forceful evidence." And later, Wei states: "From the standpoint of modern history, we can see that the economies of all well-run democracies have developed fast and with increasing momentum until a very high level has been reached. The United States and Japan are good examples. Japan has been able to develop its economy despite a shortage of national resources."

In the second section of the Fifth Modernization, Wei explores the difference between totalitarianism and democracy. "Despite differences in vocabulary, autocratic rulers of all ages have invariably taught the people that since men are social beings, social interest should predominate; that since social interests are common to all people, a centralized management, or administration, is necessary; that since rule by a minority or even by a single person is more centralized, autocracy is the most ideal form; that, for this reason, 'people's democratic dictatorship' means the autocracy of a Great Helmsman [Mao]; and that for the same reason, the Great Helmsman is a savior without peers in 'centuries of human history and thousands of years of Chinese history.' "

However, states Wei, "society is composed of individuals. . . . People's sociality depends on individuality just as human societies necessarily depend on the existence of individuals. . . .

"Totalitarianism regards suppression of individuality as its basic condition of survival; essentially, this is a form of enslavement. Democracy regards harmony with individuality as its basic condition of existence; essentially, this is a form of cooperation."

What are human rights?

In a second article, entitled “Human Rights, Equality, and Democracy,” Wei Jingsheng defined the concept of human rights, which he sees as the foundation of democracy. “Human rights,” he says, “is an ancient concept. It was revived during the European Renaissance, when, under the influence of humanist thinking, human rights was given more thought as a social issue.”

From this standpoint, Wei Jingsheng rejects the egalitarianism of the Jacobins of the French Revolution or the Maoists of the Chinese Revolution, and instead places himself in the tradition of Confucius, Plato, and Sun Yat-sen. Echoing the Three Principles of Sun Yat-sen—right to nation, right to democracy, and right to the people’s livelihood—Wei states that “from the moment one is born, one has the right to live and the right to fight for a better life. These rights are not bestowed, but rather, are inherent.” These rights therefore define the individual as sovereign; these rights are inalienable, as the Declaration of Independence declares them to be.

“Once one loses these human rights,” Wei states in his Fifth Modernization, “he loses his rights as a human being, and what is left to him is nothing but enslavement.” These inalienable rights, Wei further states in his essay on “Equality,” do not permit everyone to act exactly as they wish to satisfy their desires, as “freedom” is defined by British liberalism. Wei rightly points out that “this would deny freedom for the majority with the inevitable result that a minority would be satisfying their desires at the expense of the majority.”

Based on the conception of “inherent” or “inalienable” rights, Wei elaborates that “equality” in this context “points to the similarity of opportunity and allows the same possibilities to be used for different purposes.” Wei decries the Maoist “leveling” process, which destroyed China’s intelligentsia, obliterated the idea of beauty in Maoist culture, and destroyed the family: “The absolute average, absolute sameness of achievement, is an unobtainable illusion. The equality of rights, or the similarity of opportunity, on the other hand, can and must be completely attained. Thus, it is realistic to struggle for equal rights. . . . To struggle to achieve an intellectual averaging is value-destroying, has no significance, and is to be eschewed.”

The indictment of totalitarianism

In the Fifth Modernization, Wei exposes the symbiosis between Marxist socialism and national socialism (fascism) and totalitarianism: “All forms of totalitarianism use a perfect ideal for the future as a compensation to the victims for their misery under tyranny. This compensation is used as an opiate to satisfy people’s yearning for good living. Like the ‘cake in the picture’ [Wei is referring to the idea that Maoism is like feeding a hungry man by painting a picture of a cake], it spiritually pacifies people, but actually deprives them of

their rights to enjoy good living. Acceptance and practice of this type of utopianism are heavily counted on by totalitarianism as a support.”

Marx, states Wei, made the “scientific achievement” of wedding socialism to utopianism and made socialist totalitarianism inevitable. The twisted logic of such utopianism, Wei states, is as follows: “Because democracy can only be beneficial to a small number of people, dictatorship is necessary; . . . because you are not accustomed to mastering your own destiny, entrust it to dictatorship; because only limited satisfaction could be derived from democracy no matter how hard you work for it, better dedicate all your energy to the ‘struggle for a beautiful future.’ This ‘most beautiful future,’ as we well know, is autocratic tyranny.”

Such tyranny—despite its own rhetoric—Wei points out, “invariably uses feudalist social philosophy to encourage blind faith in a small group regarded as saviors and leaders.”

In addition, “autocrats have to use conspiracy and violence in their struggle for power. . . . In socialist countries, every change of personnel at the top has been accompanied by an earthquake, bringing tremendous losses to national production and the people’s livelihood. . . . This is one of the important reasons why socialist accumulation of capital, though greater than that in democratic countries, fails to sustain the development of production”—as the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe attests today.

Lastly, in *The Fifth Modernization*, Wei Jingsheng attacks the legalist theories of Qin Shi Huang, the book-burning despot of the third century B.C. whom Mao took as his model for rule. In the legalist theory, the rule of law is the rule of tyrannical decree.

In contrast, however, he notes that the “‘benevolent government’ of Confucius was never put into practice either. Why? Because Confucius and his disciples counted on autocratic governments to realize equal rights. As a result, his disciples became either the accomplices of tyrants or they naively advocated struggling against tyrants (often themselves winding up as the victims of their own fantasies). We must reject the dregs of Confucianism, that is, the fantasy that tyrants can ever be persuaded to practice benevolent government. But the *essence* of Confucianism, which we do want to keep, is the concept that people are born with equal rights. . . .

“A ‘benevolent government’ is only a means to an end, and that end is the realization of human rights. We know now that this objective can be achieved by the rule of law, and we can even say it can be achieved only by democracy.”

Thus, Wei Jingsheng issued his indictment of Deng Xiaoping. As the decrepit Deng boosts his “market reform economy,” millions of Chinese are migrating from city to city, homeless and jobless and China teeters on the brink of total breakdown crisis. Although Wei Jingsheng remains in prison, his ideas have been proven right.