

Archives | 1989

HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHINA: AN ACT OF DEFIANCE

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ON FEB. 22, A REPRESENTATIVE from the American Embassy in Beijing arrived at a bleak apartment building in the Zhongguancun suburbs of the capital and pressed a bell on the 11th floor. When it finished ringing out an electronic rendition of "Happy Birthday" and the door opened, he delivered two crisp envelopes for the astrophysicist Fang Lizhi and his wife, Li Shuxian, a professor of physics. They were not a little surprised to discover that the envelopes contained invitations to a Texas-style barbecue banquet, to be given by President George Bush four days hence in the grand ballroom of the Great Wall Sheraton Hotel. Their surprise was understandable; since January 1987, when Fang was dismissed from his job as vice president of the prestigious University of Science and Technology and expelled from the Chinese Communist Party for his advocacy of democracy and human rights, he had been an official nonentity in China. (In his new job, as a researcher at the Beijing Astronomical Observatory, he has been allowed to retain his membership in the Chinese Academy of Sciences.) "I had simply not imagined that we would be invited to such an occasion," he told me later, his boyish face registering delight and his voice still tinged with incredulity. For the last decade, Fang, now 53, has been recognized for his work in cosmology as one of China's most brilliant scientists. It was not until 1986, however, when he traveled around

the country speaking out at major universities on the need for the party to democratize its reform program, that he also began to emerge as China's best-known and most respected dissident political thinker. But unlike many Chinese intellectuals, who in the past had been silenced by party censure and persecution, Fang, after his defrocking in 1987, broadened his critique of the undemocratic nature of Communist Party rule and of socialism's failure in China.

By doing so, he earned not only the adulation of students and many members of the intelligentsia, but the ire of ranking officials, including that of senior leader Deng Xiaoping, whose notions of reform do not embrace the kind of freewheeling political dialogue espoused by Fang. Given his vulnerable position within China, it is understandable that Fang welcomed Bush's invitation, both as a form of personal protection and as a means of helping focus worldwide attention on the fledgling democracy movement which, during the months preceding the President's visit, had been gathering new momentum.

On Feb. 25, the day before the banquet, Fang discovered that Perry Link, an American professor of Chinese literature and director of an office that conducts scholarly communications between the United States and China, had also been invited. Because Link knew Fang and lived nearby, the two decided to drive to the event together. As Fang would soon appreciate, this was a fateful decision.

When Fang and his wife emerged from their building the next evening around sunset, he in a dark Western suit and tie, she in a white-and-black checkered evening dress and heels, they were in high spirits. They stepped into the Datsun in which Perry Link and his wife, Jean Wong, had just arrived with their driver, and set off.

But 20 minutes later, as they came within a few blocks of the Great Wall Sheraton, they found their car suddenly halted and ominously surrounded by a phalanx of armed police. Thinking at first they had been stopped for a routine security check, they did not try to get out. But when their driver was told to pull across the street next to the Kunlun Hotel - which is reported to have been built and run by the Public Security Bureau -and then suddenly charged with an unexplained traffic violation, the two couples found themselves obstructed from getting out of the car so that they could walk to the Sheraton.

As Fang, ever the logician, later recalled: "Since we were not driving. I said, 'All right. If the driver has violated traffic laws, why don't you keep him and let us go?' " The police did not respond, however; nor did they respond to attempts by Fang

and Link to show them their official invitations.

When the four finally did succeed in getting out of the car, Fang and his wife were suddenly shouldered off by a scrum of police. Only after Fang's repeated requests to speak to someone in authority did a man step forward and identify himself, according to Fang, as the "main person in charge of the security for President Bush's visit." He told Fang that because neither his nor his wife's name was on "the list provided to us by American security," they would not be allowed to proceed.

"I thought this was quite an amazing statement," recalled Fang, "for the truth was that they had not yet even asked us our names!"

Shortly thereafter, the two couples finally managed to join up again and they decided to go to the American Embassy, where they hoped someone would be able to confirm their invitations. At this point, they discovered their car had disappeared.

Mindful that Fang might well have been destined for detention inside the Kunlun Hotel had the Links not been accompanying him, the two couples found themselves with no choice but to head over to its main entrance, where a few cabs were waiting. Finally getting a car, they had gone no more than a few blocks when they were again halted by police, who this time declared that the taxi could not continue because of an allegedly defective rear light.

Leaving their second impounded vehicle, this "strange little band," as Fang referred to them, next tried to board a series of public buses. But each of these, in turn, was directed away from the bus stop by agitated police. By this time, it was nearing 8 o'clock - an hour after the banquet had begun - and with no alternative left, they set off on foot, a retinue of police cars and plainclothesmen with walkie-talkies following along behind.

Later, Fang expressed his unalloyed gratitude for the way the Links had stood by him and his wife: "There was never any question about what they would do. Again and again they reassured us that under no circumstance would they leave us, that we would all stay together throughout."

"If Fang had been alone in his own car, I don't know what the police would have done with him," said Link. "But the unanticipated presence of my white face probably made it 'inconvenient' for them to do what they had originally planned."

After an hour wandering around trying to find a phone in the back streets of Beijing, the four finally reached the residence of the United States Ambassador.

Unable to raise anyone inside, they were considering what to do next when David Horley, a Canadian diplomat, happened to walk by on an evening stroll with his wife. Recognizing Fang immediately from photographs, the Horleys invited the wanderers to take refuge in their nearby apartment.

MEANWHILE, IN the banquet hall, Chinese President Yang Shangkun stood up, facing an enormous flag of Texas, and delivered a speech which was utterly out of synch with what was going on outside.

"We are most delighted tonight to be able to meet again joyously and to chat freely at this grand dinner given by President and Mrs. Bush," he intoned, then declared that the President's visit had "added another chapter to the annals of friendship between the Chinese and American peoples."

President Yang had entered the ballroom with Prime Minister Li Peng only after Fang, whose activities had been particularly galling to party leaders in the weeks before the banquet, had been waylaid.

Although the state-controlled media has tried to embargo almost all news about him since his defrocking two years ago, word of Fang's outspoken views has still managed to spread through the grapevine. In fact, his reputation seemed to grow exponentially in proportion to the party's efforts to suppress it, so that few educated people in China are now unfamiliar with his name.

This is not to say that all Chinese intellectuals agree with Fang's uncompromising views. Over the last two years, however, more and more of them have come to sympathize not just with what he was saying, but with the fact that he dared speak out so forthrightly. Like a volatile new chemical element which is capable of transforming a stable compound, Fang's voice was becoming an ever more powerful catalyst in changing the once-fearful attitude of intellectuals toward the Communist Party.

Particularly alarming to the leadership about this change was their recognition that in the past it was precisely the alienation of the educated elite which had prefigured the downfall of so many other Chinese governments. It had been just such alienation, in fact, that sent intellectuals into the streets in 1919 during the May 4 Movement, in effect launching the Chinese Communist Revolution itself.

Before the much-publicized student demonstrations of 1986, Fang was already describing socialism as a "failure" and human rights as "a critical component" of China's reforms. In May 1988, while Party officials were busy celebrating the 90th anniversary of Beijing University in a nearby stadium, Fang suddenly appeared

elsewhere on campus, and before a crowd of several hundred enthusiastic students spoke of the "urgency" of stressing "freedom of the press, of ideas and speech." On a trip to Australia and Hong Kong that summer, he proclaimed the necessity of a two-party system in China, and repeatedly criticized party officials - including the children of high-ranking leaders - for using their privileged positions to bilk the state and then deposit their ill-gotten wealth in foreign bank accounts. Shortly thereafter - reportedly on direct orders from Deng Xiaoping - his exit visa for a trip to the United States, where he had applied to lecture at several universities and engage in six months of cosmological research, was canceled.

Undaunted, on Jan. 6 of this year, Fang made his boldest move yet. With the same calm rationalism that distinguishes his scientific work on the origins of the universe, he wrote an open appeal to Deng, which, though appearing abroad and circulated among Chinese intellectuals, was never officially published in China.

"Dear Chairman Deng," he began, "1989 is both the 40th anniversary of the People's Republic of China and the 70th anniversary of the May 4 Movement. . . . Therefore, I would like to sincerely suggest that a general amnesty be declared, and what is more, that Wei Jingsheng and all other political prisoners be released. Regardless how one might view Wei Jingsheng, to release someone such as him who has already served nearly a decade in prison would, in my view, be a humanitarian gesture which could not but have a beneficial effect on the morale of society. . . ."

Wei Jingsheng is, of course, the Democracy Wall activist who in 1978-79 protested that Deng's vaunted Four Modernizations - agriculture, industry, science and technology and national defense - should have included a fifth, namely, democracy. Arrested on a contrived charge of having given military secrets to a foreigner, he was ultimately sentenced as a "counterrevolutionary" to 15 years in jail. In spite of the fact China continues to deny that it has any "political prisoners," Wei remains in prison - along with other Democracy Wall activists such as Liu Qing, Xu Wenli and Wang Xizhe.

Until Fang's letter, no concerted effort had been made in China to protest their arrests or their treatment in jail, never mind to make an appeal to China's paramount leader to set them and all other "political prisoners" free. By publicly raising this question, Fang's letter, with its electrifying simplicity and directness, had succeeded not only in resurrecting the names of these prisoners from oblivion, but in forcing forward the boundaries of permissible discourse in China by one

more giant step.

As if in antiphonal response, a second public letter was released to foreign correspondents in Beijing on Feb. 16, this time addressed to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and written by the short-story writer and poet Bei Dao:

"After having learned of Mr. Fang Lizhi's open letter of January 6th to Chairman Deng Xiaoping, we are deeply concerned. We believe that the release of political prisoners, especially Wei Jingsheng and others on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Peoples Republic of China and the 70th anniversary of the May 4 Movement would be a salutary move, and would create a more harmonious atmosphere which would be good for reform, and which would conform to the universal trend toward human rights in the world today."

The letter was signed by 33 intellectuals, not just the handful of already disaffected cultural figures whom the party might have expected, but a host of new people, who had much to lose and little to gain. Their support was a clear indication that levels of alienation among intellectuals had now reached a new and dangerous high-water mark. As Fang noted at the time, "There will be more events like this, because they are part of a larger trend that will be hard to stop." Indeed, before the month was out, yet another letter of support calling on China's leaders to guarantee freedom of speech, publication and information had been signed by 42 prominent scientists.

On Feb. 22, the Chinese Government responded in a way as confusing as it was hapless. Using a convoluted form of quasi-legalese which has become typical of recent party efforts to stifle its adversaries, an unnamed Justice Ministry official declared, "It is against China's legal principles for the writers of this letter to stir up public opinion in an attempt to overturn an independent jurisdiction by soliciting signatures."

THUS, ON FEB. 25, when Bush arrived for his 40-hour visit in Beijing (from Tokyo, where he had attended the funeral of the Emperor Hirohito), he found himself in a country not only transformed since his days as head of the United States Liaison Office in 1974-75, but also steeped in political dissent.

From the outset, there were conflicting agendas on the American side. On the one hand, Bush's trip had been conceived as a nostalgic homecoming which would help cement Chinese-American ties, in advance of the summit between Deng and Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev scheduled for mid-May. On the other hand, as a

State Department official who was closely involved with the trip later explained: "Mindful of the whole precedent of Reagan's trip to the Soviet Union, where he had met with dissidents in 1988, Bush wanted to include some of the people who had been speaking out in China."

United States officials seemed only dimly aware of how Chinese intellectuals, lacking the ability to make themselves heard at home, looked toward the President's visit as a way to help focus world attention on China's continuing lack of freedom and democracy. It should hardly have been surprising that these intellectuals would be inclined to place some hope in Bush, the self-proclaimed heir, after all, to Ronald Reagan's legacy of uncompromising anti-Communism.

As it turned out, however, the original list of invitees -which included several other politically controversial Chinese figures - had not been prepared in Washington, but by Bette Bao Lord, Ambassador Winston Lord's Shanghai-born wife. Having long taken a keen interest in China's new and more independent intelligentsia, Bette Lord had frequently entertained large numbers of intellectuals at Western-style gatherings in the Ambassador's residence. In fact, not since "liberation" in 1949 had Beijing seen such an energetic social hostess, and her soirees - complete with disco dancing - had turned the residence into a kind of liberated zone of United States culture in the middle of the People's Republic.

The list had finally been approved by Washington, but how far Bush would be willing to take his symbolic gestures of solidarity with dissidents was unknown, and how the Chinese Government would react never seemed to have been adequately considered by American officials.

"I knew that the Chinese probably would be irritated," admitted one United States official involved in arranging the trip. "But I did not anticipate a major reaction."

As soon as the guest list became public, however, there was indeed a "major reaction." Chinese officials began insinuating that the United States had violated protocol by not having "checked" the list with them before issuing invitations. They also let it be known that under the circumstances, Prime Minister Li Peng and President Yang Shangkun might refuse to attend President Bush's farewell banquet.

After hailing China's "courageous" economic reforms at the welcoming banquet in the Great Hall of the People, Bush managed only to allude to certain "areas of disagreement" between the United States and China, and spoke only in

passing of the need to base future relations "on respect for the individual as well as the integrity of the state." And the next day, when he met with Prime Minister Li and Deng Xiaoping, he said nothing more about China's distinctly undemocratic political system, or the human rights violations in Tibet. Nor did he challenge General Secretary Zhao Ziyang that afternoon when he found himself being sternly lectured about the "serious consequences" of "some elements in American society who support people who are dissatisfied with the Chinese Government. . . ."

It was not until just hours before the banquet that Bush's silence seemed to be rewarded. Protocol officials on both sides reached a compromise: the Prime Minister and the President of China would attend the Bush barbecue if the Americans promised there would be no mingling during the sit-down dinner, and if those at the head table agreed not to proffer toasts to guests on the floor.

INDEED, EVEN AT 8:30 that evening, as Perry Link was trying to call the Great Wall Sheraton from David Horley's apartment, the Americans, having not yet noticed Fang's absence, thought the compromise had succeeded. It was only after duty officers at the Citizens Services Section of the United States Consulate, where Link had finally gone in desperation, reached the Great Wall Hotel a half-hour later that the White House realized something had gone wrong. By this time, the banquet was ending.

Returning to the Horleys' apartment, Fang and Link decided that, since members of the foreign press had now frantically begun telephoning around the city to try to ascertain what had happened to the banquet's most celebrated guest, they should immediately go to the White House press briefing room, which had been set up at the Shangri-La Hotel on the other side of the city.

At about 10:30 P.M., hungry, tired and slightly dazed, Fang entered the glittering lobby of the luxurious hotel. It was as if he had crossed a symbolic line. Outside lay the world of the Chinese Communist Party and its minions from the Public Security Bureau; inside, like the interior of a Faberge egg, lay a miniature and elegant Western world, which tonight was filled with media representatives from every television network in the United States and most major newsmagazines, wire services and newspapers in the world. It was, in short, an authoritarian government's most nightmarish vision made incarnate: an articulate political dissident loose in the sanctuary of a Western hotel with 300 members of the free press. Ushered to the podium in the grand ballroom, Fang stood bathed in klieg lights between Chinese and American flags, and in broken but steady English

responded to questions shouted out to him from the floor. Then, rushed upstairs, he was shuttled back and forth from ABC to NBC, and from CBS to CNN. Responding to questions candidly and with great dignity, he held up his Presidential invitation for the cameras, told the world what had happened, spoke both of the humiliation he felt his country had inflicted on itself that night and of his hopes for a new and more democratic China.

"What we are calling for is extremely basic, namely, freedom of speech, press, assembly and travel. . . . However, it is easy to see from this incident what the human rights situation is like here in China. . . . How can I tell you I was not afraid? But since such human rights violations have happened so often here, I am by now somewhat used to them. . . . Concepts of human rights and democracy, although the founding principles of the U.S. government, should not be viewed as something exclusively Western. Actually, they are a legacy to the world. Only if we view them in this way can progress toward democracy be made around the world. And only if the U.S. acts as a leader can such progress take place."

It was strange to watch Fang as he made these rounds, sheltered by an army of interested foreign reporters inside this brightly lit, warm and comfortable hotel. It was momentarily almost possible to forget the reality outside against which Fang was making his protest. But by 2:30 that morning, the brouhaha was over, and Fang once again found himself back in his own precarious world, eating a bowl of noodles in his small, cold, dimly lit apartment.

LIKE MANY OTHERS, Fang waited the next day to see what President Bush's reaction would be to the bizarre hegira which had been forced on him and the Links the night before. But at the airport that morning, Bush did nothing more than briefly to express "regret" over the affair, ask the United States Ambassador in Beijing to look into the matter, and then fly off to Korea. He left the rest to his press secretary, Marlin Fitzwater, who later that day on board Air Force One told querulous reporters that when it came to China, as far as the United States was concerned, "Human rights is one aspect of the relationship . . . we wouldn't want to say that it is the cornerstone. . . ."

Later on, Bush himself would finally be confronted at a Washington press conference by a reporter who wondered if the incident meant that the United States would henceforth adopt a policy toward other countries of seeking "harmony rather than confrontation over human rights."

"But you know," Bush replied, "there's two schools of how you do the human

rights agenda. So, it all depends, you know, what approach you take. But I think quiet discussion is a good approach to try to effect the human rights objectives that I feel very strongly about."

As the President's plane was making its way home, however, scores of reporters back in Beijing trooped up to Fang's apartment for their own post-mortem of the night's events. When they asked a weary Fang if he had been contacted yet by United States diplomats, he said that he had not, admitting that their failure to do so did impress him as "a little strange." When informed of Bush's evasive expression of "regret" at the airport, he said simply, "It is not enough." And then, in his straightforward but understated way, Fang said:

"Some say that Bush was too soft. . . . I will only say that the West should not operate on a double standard by criticizing human rights in the Soviet Union but not in China."

A version of this article appears in print on April 16, 1989, on Page 6006027 of the National edition with the headline: HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHINA: AN ACT OF DEFIANCE.