

# China and the Quest for Dignity

—John Fitzgerald

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*That the people is without shame means  
that the state is without shame.*

—Kang Youwei, c.1900

**M**ARXISM has completed its historical tour of duty. Thus although the relationship between Marxism and nationalism has hardly been exhausted as a subject of theoretical inquiry, it barely seems to matter any longer in contemporary China. What does beg analysis now is the relationship between *liberalism* and nationalism in contemporary public life.

In recent years, the respective—and, to both participants and most Western observers, conflicting—claims of individual human rights and collective national rights have been thrown into relief by the publication of Wei Jingsheng's *Letters From Prison*<sup>1</sup> alongside a series of books that have appeared in China under variations on the title *China Can Say No*. In his letters, Wei recounts his struggle for individual dignity over almost two decades of internment and intermittent political activism. His message is that the state should recognize the inherent dignity of indi-

viduals. The authors of the *Say No* books, on the other hand, have no time for "individualism" or for "American-style human rights." Instead, they rise to defend China's dignity as a nation, and brand local human rights activists as foolish if not treacherous for conspiring with foreign governments to obstruct the country's rise to great power status. For all their differences, both are concerned with the same issue: that of dignity.

This, however, does not mean that the differences between liberal and nationalist discourses in contemporary China can be reduced to a simple conflict between individual and national dignity. For both sides share a concern for the national dignity of China. Wei wrote his first articles on democracy precisely to show that the Chinese were not "a bunch of spineless weaklings", and that when individual citizens learned to straighten their spines China would stand tall in the world. Similarly, there is no lack of concern for individual dignity in the writings of his nationalist opponents. The resentment that surfaces in the *Say No* literature is grounded in deeply etched personal experiences of national humiliation.

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Editor's note: All primary-source Chinese citations are available from the editor upon request.

<sup>1</sup>Wei Jingsheng, *The Courage to Stand Alone: Letters from Prison and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Kristina M. Torgeson (New York: Viking, 1997).

Liah Greenfeld has argued that the politics of indignation, or *ressentiment*, drives nationalism.<sup>2</sup> I shall argue that *ressentiment*, grounded in personal indignation, also drives the struggle for individual dignity and human rights. The motive we commonly ascribe to China's drive for economic development and its citizens' struggle for civil rights is the rational pursuit of self-interest—variously described as the self-interest of a party seeking to maintain its legitimacy in an ideological vacuum, or of a government intent on maximizing revenues and authority, or of citizens hoping to multiply options for the pursuit of life, liberty and personal happiness. We make too little allowance for the possibility that China pursues wealth and power for the sake of asserting national dignity, and that citizens demand rights, not in pursuit of liberty or happiness, but out of concern to preserve personal dignity. If this is indeed the case, then personal resentment and nationalist *ressentiment* appear to be fused in a complex and explosive mixture.

The most volatile element in this mixture is what Francis Fukuyama has termed the struggle for "recognition." In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama identifies the passion that drives people to make war against one another with the longing that drives them to fight for democracy. This he terms (after Plato) *thymos*, or the "desire for recognition." *Thymos* accounts for a "propensity to feel self-esteem":

It is like an innate human sense of justice. People believe that they have a certain worth, and when other people treat them as though they are worth less than that, they experience the emotion of anger. Conversely, when people fail to live up to their own sense of worth, they feel shame, and when they are evaluated correctly in proportion to their worth, they feel pride.<sup>3</sup>

In the field of China studies, the idea of recognition has been tainted by association

with a discredited nineteenth-century ethnography of "face." As Fukuyama defines it, however, *thymos* is not a particular cultural trait but a universal characteristic of human societies, and he appeals to it in order to answer one of the critical political questions of our time: Is there a necessary connection between the pursuit of national wealth and power, on the one hand, and the attainment of liberal democracy and human rights on the other?

Some have argued for a mechanical, functional connection between the two, on the assumption that democracy alone is capable of mediating the tangled web of conflicting interests created in the course of developing a complex modern economy. Fukuyama disagrees. Others have argued for a managerial relationship, suggesting that as autocratic regimes degenerate over time, elites responsible for managing the state come to assume a leading role in liberalizing it as well. Again Fukuyama disagrees. Another well-known line of argument is that democracy arises when successful industrialization produces an ascending middle class that develops an interest in defending its class position by institutionalizing its rights. Yet again Fukuyama disagrees. Democracy, he argues, has no simple economic rationale. "The choice of democracy is an autonomous one, undertaken for the sake of recognition and not for the sake of [material] desire."<sup>4</sup>

Fukuyama's emphasis on *thymos* presents a serious challenge to the analysis of national development and international politics, for it undermines the rational, empiricist assumptions of Anglo-American political philosophy, while celebrating the triumph of its political achievements. Basically, Fukuyama—and

<sup>2</sup>Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup>Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. xv.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 117, 205-6.

Isaiah Berlin, too<sup>5</sup>—argues that the impetus for both national economic development and liberal democracy is best explained by reference to “irrational” forces arising from the struggle for recognition, not as an outcome of the rational pursuit of self-interest. The drive for economic self-improvement is not the engine of political development; both are by-products of an even deeper impulse.

THIS HYPOTHESIS presents a particular challenge to students of modern China. Fukuyama presses us to identify with precision the processes whereby rising prosperity may lead to political pluralism. Of itself, the economic argument that economic development leads to democracy is abstract and dehistoricized. “It papers over the interval until the calm of wealth prevails”, Eric Jones has observed, “a time that in reality has to be *struggled through*” [emphasis added].<sup>6</sup> We need to consider the forms such struggles may assume in different historical instances—in particular, the forms assumed by thymotic desire for national and personal dignity in China today.

National dignity clearly held a prior claim over individual dignity in public life when the Chinese people “stood up” in 1949. The two were momentarily congruent: when the state was without shame, the people who made up the nation were without shame as well. After the Cultural Revolution petered out in the 1970s, space emerged in public life for people to challenge such congruence. Jonathan Spence caught this moment in his foreword to a translated collection of Chinese short stories published in 1983:

There is extraordinary agreement among these writers about the loss of dignity that afflicts all Chinese denied privacy, in housing as in thought, forced forever to jostle and bargain and plead until the shouts become cries and the cries blows.<sup>7</sup>

For many people, the loss of private dignity casts the achievement of national dignity

into doubt. What is the good of a whole people “standing up” in the world if they cannot “stand up” as individuals in their own homes? This question has left its traces in biography, essays, wall-posters and letters produced in China over the past decade. In this essay I select a sample of recent literature touching on the subject of dignity—Li Zhisui’s memoirs, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*,<sup>8</sup> examples of the *China Can Say No* genre, and selected writings of Wei Jingsheng—to highlight the incongruence between a China that “stood up” in 1949 and the felt experience of a people reduced to jostling, crying and trading blows at home. The same body of literature hints at the potential for reconciling the claims of individual and national rights around the idea of dignity itself.

Are there grounds for hope for China in this respect? I shall argue that a common ideal of dignity lies at the heart of nationalist discourse and liberal democratic theory alike. I shall argue, too, that, inadequately, Chinese nationalism has inadvertently incubated an ideal of individual rights and individual self-determination within its discourse on national rights. For almost half a century, official

<sup>5</sup>Well before Fukuyama, the place of dignity in history was eloquently conveyed by Isaiah Berlin in a lecture delivered in New Delhi in 1961. In it, Berlin maintained that what drove nationalism was “a wounded or outraged sense of human dignity, the desire for recognition.” See Berlin, “Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality”, in *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997).

<sup>6</sup>Jones, “Kegs of Powder, Barrels of Oil”, *Quadrant* (November 1996), pp. 80-1.

<sup>7</sup>Spence, foreword to *Mao’s Harvest: Voices from China’s New Generation*, ed. Helen Siu and Zeldia Stern (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>8</sup>Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao: The Inside Story of the Man Who Made Modern China* (New York: Random House, 1994).

nationalism has developed a popular language of exploitation, oppression, dehumanization and humiliation through which people could explain and resolve affronts to China's dignity. Today, they can appeal to an identical language to press their claims for individual rights before the state. The politics of individual dignity, far from being antithetical, appears to be parasitical on the idea of national dignity. Paradoxically, then, resurgent nationalism does offer ground for hope that China's wheel is turning, slowly but surely, to recognizing the inherent dignity of the individual.

### *Standing Up: The Rhetoric of National Dignity*

LI ZHISUI'S *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* is infamous within China for divulging intimate court secrets about the founder of the People's Republic. In passing, however, Dr. Li also discloses the personal ruminations of an educated Chinese doctor from a comfortable family background who happened to be traveling abroad before becoming Chairman Mao's physician. Dr. Li was in Sydney, Australia, in January 1949 when news came through that the People's Liberation Army had occupied Beijing. He was elated that "China could finally assume her rightful place in the world" and within six months had resolved to return home to devote his life to his people and his country.

Over the course of his travels in China and abroad, Dr. Li had grown acutely aware of China's decline as an imperial power, a decline, he says, that was captured poignantly by "the famous sign at the entrance to the riverside park along the Shanghai Bund—'Chinese and dogs not allowed.'" He encountered further evidence of China's national humiliation in Sydney:

As a Chinese, I could live there temporarily, practice medicine, and make good money, but I could never become a citizen. My pride and self-respect cried out against this racist policy. Still, I

stayed in Sydney, in a small boardinghouse, surrounded by Australians who thought China was hopeless. I became increasingly depressed.

Dr. Li cured his depression in Beijing, to which he returned in time to witness the triumphal founding ceremony of the People's Republic at Tiananmen on October 1, 1949. He recalled Mao Zedong's role in the event:

Mao's voice was soft, almost lilting, and the effect of his speech was riveting. "The Chinese People have stood up", he proclaimed, and the crowd went wild, thundering in applause, shouting over and over, 'Long Live the People's Republic of China!' 'Long live the Communist Party of China!' I was so full of joy my heart nearly burst out of my throat, and tears swelled up on my eyes. I was so proud of China, so full of hope, so happy that the exploitation and suffering, the aggression from foreigners, would be gone forever.

After some time back home, Dr. Li learned to attribute to impersonal historical forces all of the personal humiliation that he had suffered. He also learned to attribute to the communist battle with these impersonal forces all of the pride and joy that he felt in Tiananmen in October 1949. Once the Communist Party had been installed in power, Dr. Li recalls, people learned to attribute their shame and their pride to China's battle with "the foreign powers . . . what we later called imperialism." His personal struggle against racism was now subsumed into the greater struggle against that malign force. Hence when the "People" stood up, so did Li Zhisui.

As they unfold, however, Dr. Li's memoirs highlight a mismatch between his personal sense of grievance and pride, and the formulaic prescriptions of communist official ideology. The basic Maoist idea—that foreign capital had allied with domestic feudalism to bring China to its knees—only partly explained the humiliation and indignation people felt as the old empire collapsed about them and the new Republic failed to deliver

on its promises. While for the moment that explanation sufficed for Dr. Li, in the nature of things it would never be able to explain the humiliation and suffering forced upon the people of China by Mao himself, after the founding of the People's Republic.

Virtually all popular Chinese memoirs published since the Cultural Revolution have been, in one sense or another, chronicles of disappointed expectation. *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* is no exception. Li Zhisui traces a downward spiral of frustration over two decades of service at the inner court of Mao Zedong. He is exceptional, however, in the privileged vantage point from which he observes the personal *as* political. By focusing on the sexual behavior of Mao Zedong, in particular, he exposes a striking incongruence between the depersonalized Maoist language of national pride and longing that first drew him into the service of the Chairman, and the intimately personal experience of shame and humiliation that the Chinese people endured under Mao. As a Chinese abroad, Dr. Li knew from personal experience how it felt to be despised by foreigners. From his time at court, he discovered as a professional functionary among ideologues how it felt to be despised by Marxist-Leninists. It felt much the same.

**I**N SEARCHING FOR an alternative idiom in which to recount his personal experience, Dr. Li resorts to two widely shared memories of national shame and pride: one of the sign in a Shanghai park, barring "Chinese and dogs", and the other of Mao Zedong announcing that "the Chinese People have stood up." The resilience of these two motifs is all the more remarkable for their having virtually no basis in fact. There *never was* a sign by the entrance to a park in Shanghai that proclaimed "Chinese and dogs not allowed" (or any similar form of words), nor did Mao say that "the Chinese People have stood up" (or any similar form of words) when he declared the founding of the People's Republic.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless Dr. Li,

along with many others in China in recent years, chose to locate his life story between these two historical boundary markers, one of national humiliation and the other of recovered national dignity.

The tenacity of these two literally incorrect, yet psychologically authentic, memories of China's triumph over national humiliation demonstrates the persistence of *thymos* in cultural memory. Beneath the authorized Maoist rhetoric of "imperialism" and "feudalism" is another language that has lain submerged these four or five decades past. This alternative language revolves around issues of humiliation, recognition and dignity, in contrast to the official language of oppression and liberation. Hence in the remembered history of national dignity, "dogs" and "standing up" are misrepresented *together*: the motif of a dog that gets around on four legs is redeemed by the motif of a state that stands up on two.

The idea of China "standing up" in 1949 has many different discursive roots in Chinese literature and ritual practice. The most important source is probably the one that gave us the legendary sign in the park in Shanghai. Basically, when China "stood up" in 1949 it signaled to the world that the country had straightened its back and would no longer tolerate humiliation at the hands of foreigners. In a style characteristic of British municipal administration the world over, there appears to have been a sign listing a number of regulations governing use of the park in the Shanghai International Settlement, including one concerning the entry of dogs, and another dealing with the admission of local Chinese (but permitting entry by Chinese servants of Europeans). The intervening regulations needed to be elided by an editorial stroke of the nationalist imagination to arrive at the condensed statement that dogs and Chinese were forbidden.

<sup>9</sup>See Robert Bickers and Jeffrey Wasserstorm, "Shanghai's 'Dogs and Chinese not Permitted' Sign: Legend, History and Contemporary Symbol", *The China Quarterly* (June 1995).

It took time before the sign could reveal itself with such elegant simplicity, for the residents of Shanghai had first to learn that their daily routines and personal habits were linked to the welfare of the nation.<sup>10</sup> But once the municipal noticeboard was read as a sign of racial subjection, it stimulated the people of China to get up on their hind legs, or "stand up." Lao She's novel, *Ma and Son* (1929), offers an explicit example of this rhetorical connection:

In the twentieth century attitudes towards 'people' and 'country' are alike. Citizens of a strong country are people, but citizens of a weak nation? Dogs! China is a weak country, and the Chinese? Right! People of China! You must open your eyes and look around. The time for opening your eyes has come! You must straighten your backs. The time for straightening your backs has come unless you are willing to be regarded as dogs forever!

Lao She concedes the comparison between Chinese and dogs only to turn it back on his countrymen as an injunction to stand up. This connection goes a long way toward explaining the persistence of the mythical Shanghai sign as an historical signpost marking one of the boundaries of modern Chinese political life. It also summons into existence another sign announcing that China has recovered its dignity.

The second of these signs, Mao's famous statement that "the Chinese People have stood up", shows similar evidence of historical tampering. In this case, the tampering serves the added purpose of encoding the personal experience of individual shame and racial humiliation in the language of Marxism-Leninism.

What did Mao actually say at Tiananmen in October 1949? After Lin Boqu, newly appointed secretary of the Council of the People's Government, introduced the Chairman of the People's Republic to the crowd assembled on the square, Mao ascended the podium to announce, "The Central

People's Government of the People's Republic of China has this day been established" (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhongyang renmin zhengfu yi yu benri chengli*). He stepped aside while the flag of the People's Republic was raised over Tianan Gate, and then read aloud from a prepared statement on the formal arrangements of government, on key personnel who would take up leading positions in government and military agencies, and on the status of the new government as the sole legitimate government of China for the purpose of diplomatic recognition. Next came the swearing in of numerous state functionaries before the proceedings continued with an impressive military parade. As the ceremony drew to a close, members of the crowd cried out, "Long live the People's Republic of China!" and "Long live Chairman Mao!" Mao responded by raising his hand in acknowledgment and calling back, "Long live Comrades!"

The significance of the event today is far better captured by Dr. Li's capricious recollection than by an accurate record of what was actually said, and he is in good company in misremembering the event. On October 1, 1984, Deng Xiaoping drew a similar connection. "Thirty-five years ago", Deng recalled at an anniversary ceremony in Tiananmen, "Chairman Mao Zedong . . . solemnly proclaimed here the founding of the People's Republic of China. He declared that the Chinese people had finally stood up."<sup>11</sup> Western memories are no more reliable. Harrison Salisbury repeats the same story in *The New Emperors*,<sup>12</sup> and Western video and film records of Mao's speech from the podium

<sup>10</sup>See my *Awakening China: Politics, Culture and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup>Cited in Richard Evans, *Deng Xiaoping and the Making of Modern China* (New York: Viking, 1994), p. 273.

<sup>12</sup>Salisbury, *The New Emperors: China in the Era of Mao and Deng* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1992), p. 187.

at Tiananmen invariably carry an English voice-over statement along the lines of "the Chinese People have stood up", over the top of Mao's statement on the establishment of the Central People's Government. Regardless of what Mao in fact said on that day, that is how it has been remembered.

In fact the expression "the Chinese People have stood up" (*Zhongguo renmin zhan qilai le*) dates from the title ascribed to a talk that Mao had delivered a week earlier, to an assembly of old warlords, former bureaucrats, aging literati, "democratic elements", overseas Chinese and delegates drawn from all regions of China, all of whom had gathered to convene the opening session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) on September 21, 1949. Mao's speech on this occasion bore little relation to anything uttered at Tiananmen. Its tone was not faithfully captured by the formal title either. Mao appealed for the unity of the Chinese nation, made a number of gestures to evoke China's heroic and glorious past, and paid due reference to Sun Yatsen's contribution to the national revolution. While he repeated the phrase "stood up" several times in the course of the talk, he refrained from using the Leninist term "people" (*renmin*) in favor of the particularistic "we" (*women*), "nation" or "race" (*minzu*), and "Chinese" (*zhongguoren*). His first reference reads, "The Chinese, who occupy one quarter of humankind, have now stood up." The second refers pointedly to the humiliation of the Chinese at the hands of other nations: "Our nation", Mao assured his audience, "will never again be a nation despised by others. We have stood up." I stress the point because the universal term "people" does not quite catch the sense of racial or national pride conveyed in Mao's address.

This should not perhaps surprise us, given that the speech was targeted not at the "people" but at an aging audience of Republican functionaries, who were long accustomed to mulling over China's lost imperial dignity and recent history of national

humiliation. At the same time, Mao's failure to mention these humiliations when he stood before the "people" a week later at Tiananmen was an omission in need of correction. The compound memory of these events, as they are recorded in Mao's collected works, is a curious blend of primordial racial pride and instrumental Leninist reasoning, mixed by an imaginative editor whose contribution to history has passed largely unacknowledged. This contribution involved yoking an earlier language of thymotic racial pride to a new, depersonalized, Marxist language of imperialist oppression and national liberation.

Dr. Li was not alone in imagining that these two languages came together when Mao spoke at Tiananmen. In the years that followed, he was not alone in attributing to "imperialism" the personal humiliation that had been etched on his soul as a youth. Nor was he alone, later still, when he abandoned this official language in favor of a cruder idiom of national humiliation and personal betrayal to portray the private life of Chairman Mao.

### *Saying No: The Rhetoric of Indignation*

THYMOS, FUKUYAMA reminds us, compels us not just to "stand up" and be recognized but also to "say no" to others. The muse of thymotic resentment has been busy in China in recent years. The books that have appeared under variations on the title *China Can Say No*—for example, *China Is Still Capable of Saying No*, *The China That Can Say No*, *Why Does China Say No?*—point consistently to the humiliation of the Chinese people at the hands of foreigners. It is only in terms of those humiliations, write the authors of the sequel to *China Can Say No*, that "we can understand why China's writers have been crying out to the heavens for a hundred years now: 'When will China become great and powerful?'" And the answer to that question, it seems, is only when the country finds the courage to stand firm and "say no."

One notable feature of the genre is the casual displacement of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought by unadorned *ressentiment*. While many of these works refer to Mao's reported statement that "the Chinese People have stood up", they draw little further inspiration from his voluminous speeches and writings. They waste no effort, for example, reiterating the old Maoist explanation for China's historical condition that would attribute blame to international capital or feudal forces of reaction. They offer instead a simple catalogue of grievances set against a crude inventory of recent economic achievements. On the whole, the authors resent the fact that China is not treated with the dignity that they believe it deserves in light of its size, its history and its present rate of economic development.

All the same, Qin Xiaoying reminds us in his foreword to *China Is Still Capable of Saying No* (1996) that Mao's place in history is assured. Many foreigners appear to believe that economic reforms and the opening to the outside world initiated in 1978 marked a clean break with Mao's New China, he continues, but in this they are mistaken. China is simply accelerating its quest for status. Hence the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping are read as enabling China to rise in the twenty-first century as firmly as it stood up in the middle of the present one:

As our chief architect, Deng Xiaoping, once pointed out: 'When did the Chinese people stand up in the world? It was in 1949. In years to come, once we have achieved modernization, the Chinese people won't be merely standing up. We'll be flying up!'

In the literature of national humiliation, then, Deng emerges as Mao's equal, because he helped China to straighten its wings and "fly up."

The achievements of Deng's economic reforms are valued for enhancing national self-esteem. "There is no dignity to be had in poverty", complain the authors of one of these

books, "no matter what country you come from." If it came to a choice, they would have the country raise its standing in the world before it raised its GDP another percentage point. We tend to assume that the legitimacy of the present regime rests largely on its capacity to deliver the good life to China's citizens. But little respect is shown in China's literature of complaint for a government that would deliver prosperity at the price of national dignity. Its tone confirms one of Fukuyama's stronger statements: "The nationalist is primarily preoccupied not with economic gain, but with recognition and dignity."<sup>13</sup>

The favored metaphor for economic growth—that of stretching one's wings and flying up—is now framed in the idiom of "national self-respect." It is not the "people" who fly up but the Chinese nation. Qin Xiaoying, for example, records that Deng once remarked at a meeting with Richard Nixon that "a country lacking in national self respect [*minzu de zizunxin*] and failing to cherish its own national independence, can never straighten itself up [*li bu qilai*]." Like Li Zhisui's memoirs, the *China Can Say No* books remind us that the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal model of Maoist nationalism overlies an earlier form of nationalism, one grounded in personal experience of racial or national humiliation, rather than general and anodyne recollections of political and economic oppression. Again, like Li Zhisui, the authors inadvertently acknowledge that their loss of dignity has been institutionalized in perpetuity by the Communist Party state.

Neither the party nor the regime is presented with any appreciable sympathy in this literature of complaint. While its "no" is directed explicitly against foreigners, the present government is held implicitly to account for yielding too readily to foreign political and commercial demands, and for surrendering China's national dignity in the process. Even more pertinently, the texts shed light on a

<sup>13</sup>Fukuyama, p. 201.



parallel struggle for personal dignity within China itself. They demonstrate a significant loss of self-regard among people within China, and reluctantly acknowledge that this loss lies exposed for all the world to see.

Basically, the "say no" authors appear to resent the twist of fate that delivered them into the world as citizens of a state that cannot afford the liberties that citizens of other states take for granted. None concedes that the time is ripe for democracy in China. None questions the wisdom of the armed suppression of democracy activists in 1989. Yet none can draw comfort, either, from the knowledge that they belong to a state that refuses to acknowledge their dignity as individual citizens. By abandoning hope for civil liberties, China's nationalists have discovered *shame*. This appears to be the indirect source for much of the resentment driving the *China Can Say No* phenomenon. It is sired by the anger of a nation not taken at its worth, and the shame of a people who tried to stand up before their own state and discovered that it could not be done.

### *Life Itself Plays the Master*

IN FUKUYAMA'S terms, the popular protests of 1989 were staged to achieve "universal recognition"—that is, to assert the value of the individual citizen before that of the state. Since 1989, state repression has had the effect of redirecting this quest back onto the old and more familiar track of national recognition. This redirection has been effected partly through brute force, partly through censorship and misinformation, but chiefly through the state playing upon a feeling of the inevitability of things that seems to be widely shared by people in China today. The idealism of 1989 has yielded to "realism" today. "Unrealistic hopes of 'universalism' [*tianxia zhuyi*] are no more than wishful thinking", writes the team headed by Song Qiang. The day for cosmopolitanism might dawn in a hundred years, although by Song Qiang's reckoning

this, too, may be unduly sanguine. Mao's timetable was more like one thousand years. The Chinese people have a long wait ahead of them before they can realistically expect to enjoy the freedoms that are theirs by right.

Impotence in the face of history means, in Fukuyama's words, that people cannot live up to their own sense of worth. China's nay-sayers seem simultaneously resigned to their fate and frustrated by the circumstances that compel their acquiescence. One way or another, the outcome is a feeling of shame. But nay-sayers are compelled to acquiesce to the "realistic" conditions governing life in their own sovereign state. The Chinese *nation* may have stood up long ago, we are told, but the Chinese *people* remain slaves to this day. They have become "slaves of life", inescapably tied to their families and their children, and bound to their country for want of a passport. Much as they might like to "mount political resistance in Hyde Park" (an indirect reference to Tiananmen), or join the Greens and "save the whales", China's people are for the moment prevented from becoming "citizens of the world." Their servile condition has not been forced on them by the state, nor can it be attributed to foreigners. In this particular master-slave relationship, life itself plays the master. There is no escaping it.

Such admissions hint at the shame of growing up in a society and a state that offer no hope of realizing the simple aspirations of the common citizen. Worse, they hold out no hope of liberation. For "slaves of life", bondage is a condition of existence and not a consequence of the particular arrangements or policies of a given regime.<sup>14</sup> The rhetoric of shame and indignation running through the *Say No* literature suggests that the quest for individual dignity on the part of ordinary citizens is still far from reconciled with the

<sup>14</sup>Geremie R. Barme, "To screw foreigners is patriotic: China's avante-garde nationalists", in *Chinese Nationalism*, ed. Jonathan Unger (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 183-208.

quest for national dignity. What little respect people can muster is found by "saying no" to foreigners, in the belief that foreign critics fail to appreciate and make little allowance for the particular conditions that apply in China.

But the claims of national dignity and individual dignity cannot be reconciled by saying no to foreigners alone. National liberation offers no way out for "slaves of life." The path to liberation entails challenging the conditions that threaten personal dignity. This path leads inevitably to challenging head-on existing constraints on thought, speech and assembly.

### *The "Irrationality" of Wei Jingsheng*

FUKUYAMA identifies the passion that drives a people to "stand up" in the world with the longing that drives them to "stand up" for civil rights and democracy. This longing is the desire for recognition, and it is not a rational longing in the standard instrumental or utilitarian sense of the term. In pursuit of recognition, people set aside their better judgment and risk their lives and livelihoods to fight for a nation, for a creed or for the right to be counted the equals of their masters. Developments in the economy and society may enable these sacrifices and struggles to take place, but in the absence of human desire and human agency there is no struggle at all. It takes irrational nationalists to make nations, and irrational democrats to make democracies.

Wei Jingsheng is a democrat in Fukuyama's mold, a "thymotic man", a "man of anger who is jealous of his own dignity and the dignity of his fellow citizens."<sup>15</sup> Wei's critics in China and abroad (and he has many) complain that he is out of touch with the mood of his country. They are right. His routine insistence on maintaining personal dignity before his political leaders, his jailers and his family presents a model of behavior not widely practiced in China today. What is more, he refuses to share the feeling of political impotence that afflicts many of his compa-

triot, and has avoided the shame that comes of failing to live up to his own expectations.

Fukuyama insists that "there is no democracy without democrats." The case of Wei Jingsheng asks us to carry Fukuyama's line of reasoning a little further, to ask whether there can be *nationalism* without democrats in China today. Is it possible for the people of China to recover national self-regard without first recovering their individual self-esteem through recognition of their universal rights? In other words, is it possible for the Chinese people really to take pride in their nation while they still remain ashamed of themselves?

Wei is proud of his country because he can look himself in the eye. One source of his self-esteem is his refusal to concede a point on which his critics have long yielded: that the people of China deserve less than others. His critics generally concede that democracy is a universal aspiration of people in all societies, including China's, yet for now they place democracy beyond realistic expectations. Democracy is not something to struggle for, his critics assume, but something history delivers to the door when the order is ready. Again, Wei demurs: "Which country has acquired democracy, freedom, and human rights without hard struggle, without shedding sweat and blood? You could not possibly wait for someone to present you with democracy."<sup>16</sup>

Wei Jingsheng is just one of many Chinese citizens who have spent time in jail for speaking their minds. Some have endured considerably longer terms in jail; some have held equally fast to their views. He stands out in this company, however, not simply on account of his international status, but because he has attempted to reconcile the

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<sup>15</sup>Fukuyama comments on China: "It is only thymotic man, the man of anger who is jealous of his own dignity and the dignity of his fellow citizens . . . who is willing to walk in front of a tank or confront a line of soldiers", p. 180.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Wei Jingsheng, *China News Digest*, January 1998.

claims of national and universal recognition in an old and familiar language that was forged in the country's struggle for national recognition. He is the first to acknowledge the power of national dignity in the armory of his enemies. Indeed, national dignity is a source of inspiration for him as well. He wrote and posted his major essay on democracy, "The Fifth Modernization", to demonstrate to his fellow countrymen that not all Chinese were spineless weaklings. His subject was democracy; his muse was thymotic nationalism.

By his own account, Wei had thought long and hard about the condition of his country and people for many years before the advent of the Democracy Wall Movement. Still, he had no intention of posting anything on these subjects until he overheard bystanders complain that Democracy Wall activists would probably pack up their pens and go home once Deng Xiaoping had issued a veiled warning, which he did on November 27, 1978. Wei took this complaint as a slight on his country and his people, and it stirred him to action:

As soon as [Deng's] notice was posted, citizens all over Beijing were critical: 'The Chinese are simply inept, and spineless. Look at it, having the freedom only for a couple of days, being able to speak out, now with a little directive from someone, they want to retreat. A bunch of spineless weaklings. (Sigh) There is no hope for China.'

After I heard such commentaries, I was particularly saddened. I felt that not all Chinese were spineless. Certainly my thoughts and my ideas, with years of deliberation, had long been stored in my mind. I decided to utter them, do something, with the primary motivation to prove to everyone that not all Chinese were spineless. So I posted 'The Fifth Modernization' there. It was written one night, and posted there the next day.<sup>17</sup>

Wei thrilled to see people queuing ten deep to read his new poster, and felt reassured when they nodded in agreement. What

moved him most was public acknowledgment that the people of China could stand up for their rights. He alludes to this nationalist motive in the opening paragraph of the second section of "The Fifth Modernization", which was pasted up shortly after another writer had urged Wei to stop criticizing the regime. "Our young men are not the 'sick men of the East'", Wei began. "They have sufficient courage to put up and to read posters, and to discuss different views even though some of them are taboo."<sup>18</sup> Everyone, he later recalled, could now acknowledge that "the Chinese were brave and fearless people after all."<sup>19</sup> The language through which he has conveyed this conviction is the same language employed by Mao Zedong in his speech to the CPPCC, when he proclaimed, "Our nation will never again be a nation despised by others. We have stood up." Now, however, the nation was asked to stiffen its spine *against* Mao's Communist Party itself.

These few references to national dignity stand out in a body of work otherwise devoted to the dignity of the individual. In "The Fifth Modernization", Wei mounted his argument for democracy around the implicitly Hegelian framework of the master-slave relationship. People everywhere wanted democracy in order to become "masters of their own destiny", Wei asserted. In China, however, "it may be more correct to call them slaves." A people that could not maintain its autonomy was forced into servitude.

Wei scorned apologists who argued that the regime had fed and clothed the Chinese people. First, they were plainly wrong: Mao had systematically starved the people in his Great Leap Forward. Impoverished and ill-

<sup>17</sup>Interview with Wei Jingsheng, *China News Digest*, February 15, 1998.

<sup>18</sup>Wei Jingsheng, "The Fifth Modernization", in *The Fifth Modernization: China's Human Rights Movement, 1978-1979*, ed. James D. Seymour (Stanfordville, NY: Human Rights Publishing Group, 1980), pp. 47-70, 56.

<sup>19</sup>Interview of February 15, 1998.

fed people had every reason to feel angry when they saw their masters gorging on fluffy white rice. What caused gravest offense in Wei's eyes, however, was the servitude that their hunger revealed in their relations with their masters, who denied them the simple right "to lead a normal life." Bowls of white rice represented more than the promise of a full stomach. They whetted the appetite for equality between slave and master. The heroes of the centuries-old epic *Water Margin* rarely went hungry, Wei observed, but they fought and struggled with their masters all the same. So they should. Their struggle was identical to his own: "exactly the kind of struggle aimed at winning equality of rights for man as a human being." The bravery and bravado of the *Water Margin* heroes has served as a model for many different kinds of rebellion in China's modern history, not all by any means undertaken in pursuit of human rights. For Wei, however, these heroic tales signified the historical continuity of the political struggle of the Chinese people's desire for recognition.<sup>20</sup>

In his letters from prison, Wei refuses to concede the shameful inevitability of being born into a state that will not grant him recognition as an autonomous human being. Even after it takes away his freedom, he refuses to kneel. The simple audacity of this refusal can be measured by the scale across which Wei pitches his complaints from prison, ranging from self-confident letters to Deng Xiaoping through to the studied naivety of brief notes to his jailers complaining about the fittings and facilities of his prison cell.

To some, such behavior suggests madness, and in fact Wei feigns madness. In his childhood, he recalls, Wei and his sister used to play the roles of legendary "mad geniuses" of folklore, to flaunt local customs and criticize national political figures with impunity. He learned at an early age that the mad enjoy a degree of licence that is denied sane people. He hints at another source of his irrational behavior in one of his asides on the people of China: "The people have great reserves of

self-confidence, self-respect, and self-consciousness stored away." The source of both his madness and his confidence is Wei's self-respect.

INDIVIDUAL SELF-RESPECT is a sturdy foundation on which to claim national respect. This is not, however, how the relationship between democracy and nationalism is generally understood in China today. As Edward Friedman has recently observed, "Recent events have fostered a feeling among many educated Chinese that promoting democracy is virtually synonymous with treason, with splintering China and blocking its rise and return to greatness."<sup>21</sup> It is worth recalling that Wei Jingsheng was initially jailed for selling state secrets, not for democratic activism. Since his release from prison in November 1997, he has again been branded a national traitor for speaking out against continuing civil rights abuses in China. Far from constituting treason, Wei's behavior demonstrates that the fight for individual dignity is a powerful antidote to the shame and self-loathing that converts national pride into parochial chauvinism in China today.

Others among Wei's critics are prepared to concede the inevitability of democracy, although on economic grounds rather than thymotic ones. There is no place for dignity or democrats in their divinations. Democracy will simply arrive, under its own steam, once the elite responsible for the ship of state finally acknowledge its practical advantages. Wei

<sup>20</sup>The *Water-Margin* epic is the *locus classicus* of China's many tales of popular rebellion found in the democratic literary canon. Only a few years before Wei's poster was mounted on Democracy Wall, in 1975 and 1976, *Water Margin* had been the focus of an orchestrated political campaign. See my "Continuity within discontinuity: The case of *Water Margin* mythology", *Modern China* (July 1986).

<sup>21</sup>Friedman, "Thoughts on Wei Jingsheng", *H-ASIA*, January 24, 1998.

places little faith in any newly emerging bureaucratic "bourgeoisie." The major beneficiary of market-driven economic reforms, he says, has been a new bureaucratic class "cultivated intentionally and systematically by the Communist Party", one that has no interest in democratic reform. Ordinary people will fight and die for democracy, he maintains, not because they are growing rich but because they no longer wish to be treated as slaves. It follows that democracy can only come to China through an economically irrational and politically naive choice on the part of aggrieved citizens who want the state to recognize their dignity as ordinary human beings.

So the *ressentiment* that pushed China to "stand up" in 1949 now drives the struggle for liberal democracy. Nationalist *ressentiment* is of course still alive and well—the ideal of national dignity drives the literature of *Saying No*. Yet the nay-sayers themselves highlight a growing incongruence between national pride and personal indignation when they boast of China's long and glorious history in an angry and grumpy tone. The incongruence arises in part because the problem lies closer to home than many will concede. Hence, the more indignant they become, the more China's "say no" nationalists are likely to inflame the desire to restore some balance, or symmetry, between individual and national dignity. More importantly, the incongruence arises because personal indignation can no longer be mollified by China "standing up" in the same old fashion. The solution also lies closer to home.

People in China increasingly acknowledge that the world has become reluctant to recognize states that treat their citizens with derision—and there is no dignity without recognition. As Hegel observed, it takes two

subjects to turn a slave into a master: one to stand up, and the other to witness and acknowledge the standing up. Even if China manages to "fly up" in the twenty-first century, as the nay-sayers predict, the world is unlikely to extend it full recognition until the Chinese citizen is allowed to stand up as well.

When all is said and done, however, the world is a relatively minor witness to China's predicament. An old and familiar vocabulary of national rights, national self-determination and national equality continues to supply a framework for personal reflection by Chinese themselves on individual rights, individual self-determination and equality before the law—all grounded in the pursuit of recognition. People who can say no to foreigners can, of course, eventually learn to say no to anyone they choose. True, when they resort to thymotic resistance to the state or try to appeal to their formal rights before the state, they risk landing themselves in jail. "Sensible", rational people do not expose themselves to such risks. Unless they do, however, they run the greater risk of surrendering their dignity. Many people in China are acutely aware of this dilemma.

Wei Jingsheng has pressed on, regardless of the risks, because he places dignity first. The fight for democracy is not a fight for comfort, or for happiness, or for profit, as Wei understands it, but a struggle to retain one's sense of self-worth. Asked recently how he managed to survive his seventeen years in prison, he answered, "For your own dignity, you have to endure. . . . For people like us, death was not the outcome we feared most. What we feared most of all was the possibility of developing a mental disorder, of losing our dignity—that would have been the worst outcome." □