WEI JINGSHENG (1950-)

Deng Xiaoping, who dominated the Chinese government and Communist Party in the 1980s, at first seemed to support some of the growing demands for democratic reform. Once in power, however, he began arresting and imprisoning activists.

Wei Jingsheng has been called the “father of Chinese democracy.” Born in Beijing to committed revolutionary parents a year after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Wei was a loyal Communist until the oppression and injustice he saw during the Cultural Revolution disillusionsed him. He began his public career as a dissident in 1978, when he posted an essay demanding democratic change on Democracy Wall, near Tiananmen Square in Beijing. In 1979, he was arrested after posting a second essay and was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. He was first kept on death row and then in solitary confinement for five years; while in prison, several of his teeth fell out, and he developed a weak heart, high blood pressure, and arthritis. Despite the difficulty of getting pen and paper, he wrote many letters to government leaders and his family; when necessary, he wrote on toilet paper. Wei’s fame as a political prisoner began to embarrass the Chinese government, and he was released on parole in 1993. He was arrested again six months later for resuming his prodemocracy work. On November 16, 1997, strong international pressure finally brought about Wei’s release, but he was not allowed to remain in China. He immediately immigrated to the United States and has continued to write and speak about human rights abuses in China. The Courage to Stand Alone, a collection of his prison letters from which this letter is taken, was published in 1997.
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Dear Deng Xiaoping:

You might not be able to remember a person you wronged, but it isn’t easy for me to forget the one who wronged me. Our situations are very different—you are at the top of a billion people and I am at the very bottom—but life isn’t easy for either of us. It’s just that I am not the one making your life difficult, while you’re the one making it hard for me. Therefore, when things start looking up for you, you might still on occasion remember a person you once wronged. But if my days get better, then perhaps I won’t have time to remember all of the people who once wronged me. For the number of people you have wronged and who have wronged me are many.

Even if this letter does manage to make it into your hands, it will most likely have passed through many inspections along the way. All these readers probably had to cover their mouths and stifle their laughter: What a madman! An emperor and a prisoner—how can the two even speak to one another! But that’s not actually the case.

Your Excellency Deng, you hold supreme powers, but after eight years of “reform” the results are inflation and an upsurge in popular dissatisfaction; you’re cut off from the people and deserted by your followers; you have troubles at home and abroad; and you’re so confused and unsure that you’re “groping for stones to cross the river.” Moreover, there are signs that
you haven’t made it to the other side yet and are still pacing back and forth along your old path. “Emperor of emperors” and “chairman of the Central Advisory Committee”—such titles do you little good, and the honey-laden words of flattery from abroad don’t give you much comfort either! I don’t think that your weak points include being taken in by flattery anyway, otherwise you would have an easier conscience by now. Your weakness is that you have great ambition, but you’re untalented and small-minded. You certainly wouldn’t be happy to hear me say that you’re like Yuan Shao in *The Three Kingdoms*, and perhaps your attendants will see to it that you never have to read these words at all. But such a person doesn’t really cause much harm to others either, and few people would aspire to be ambitious, untalented, as well as small-minded. Being small-minded but without ambition, like a farmer or a craftsperson, presents no great obstacle either; at worst people might just look down on you. To have ambition but little talent is also not that harmful. The first and last emperors of the Han dynasty and the founding emperors of the Tang and Song dynasties were all ambitious and lacked talent, yet they managed to accomplish great things nevertheless.

It is the people who possess all three of these qualities (one positive, two negative), however, who have never come to any good. Not only is this bad for the individual himself, but it’s even worse for the people and society, especially for those who possess little power. On this basis, I no longer place any great hope in the future of China before your death. This isn’t because your plans for reform don’t have their reason, and it isn’t because China is without the social and material conditions for rapid development, but it’s because you, a man well into his eighties, are unable to overcome your greatest weaknesses and continue to persecute those who try to put a check on you. It’s already too late and, from the look of things, this situation is irreversible. If you feel happy living your days this way, then you’re not wise enough to go down in history as either a great sage leader or an infamous despot, but you’ll probably end up as one or the other anyway. You couldn’t end up mediocre even if you wanted to, I know you’re at least up to that level. But which one to choose? Of course you would like to go down in glory, not infamy. But things often depend on your actions, not your choice. Even hav-
ing good intentions or putting on a good show won’t guarantee that your
future will turn out as you like!

But Wei What’s-His-Name’s days are not easy either. I’ve passed eight
years in this prison—within-a-prison. As a result, I’ve managed to contract a
nervous condition, coronary heart disease, stomach problems, and chronic
arthritis; I don’t know what’s going on in the outside world or how my fam-
ily is. I’m confused and unsure too, but I don’t know what stones to grope
or even what river to cross, and besides, from all indications there isn’t even
hope of there being a riverbank on the other side or an old road for me to
pace back and forth on. “Human rights pioneer” and “champion of democ-

cracy”—such titles do me little good, and the attacks and smears being flung
by those “antidemocracy, antireform heroes” don’t give me much comfort
either. My weak points don’t include the self-comforting spirit of an Ah Q,
nor do they include the self-condemning spirit of a “capitalist-roader” like
yourself, otherwise I’d be able to set my mind at ease a bit more.

My weakness is that I lack great ambitions, but I am not entirely with-
out talent, and I may in fact not be as small-minded as I should be. I don’t
have just one positive point, nor only two negative ones—but then again,
nobody aspires to be this way either. With no ambition, but a few talents,
I’m not one of those who can learn to shamelessly flatter others, jockey for
position, or undertake other such trivial maneuvers. I often incur the jeal-
ousy of others, and yet I’m unable to perform the tricks that might improve
my situation. Whether in prison or out, I will always face endless troubles.
If back in 1979 I had been a bit more small-minded and not waited at home
for your police to come, but had hidden away instead in a place where you
couldn’t find me or even run away abroad, I don’t think it would have been
particularly good for you or, indirectly, for the country, but it wouldn’t nec-
essarily have been bad for me! Why should I act on behalf of others and the
country? It seems that this too is an incurable weakness that is extremely
easy for people like yourself to exploit. Just as Mao Zedong was able to take
advantage of your “capitalist-roader spirit.”

Of course, my optimism had something to do with it as well. It made me
believe that you were actually moving toward reform and democracy and
that you would show at least a bit of conscience, since I thought you would
remember how you yourself suffered when you were once persecuted! But this was my biggest mistake. Admittedly, you Party elders have fought for democracy and freedom ever since your youth, but it has been for yourselves alone; once power came into your hands, you didn’t plan to give the people the right to freedom and democracy. Your perspective is not much different from that of an emperor or king, of a Duvalier or Marcos. When others suffer even worse persecution than you ever did, you feel confident that you are justified in taking actions that are “proper and necessary.”

During the fascist dictatorship under Mao Zedong, many of you were accused of unwarranted charges. How did you feel then? Did not Mao Zedong and Jiang Qing consider their actions to be “proper and necessary” as well? This is no different from when you feel you have “proper and necessary” grounds to use unwarranted charges to blatantly slander and persecute others. Must we wait until after Deng Xiaoping’s death to clear away another “Gang of X” and for another Hu So-and-So to redress mishandled and mistaken cases? Sometimes history too is ambitious but lacking in talent and must pace back and forth along the old road before crossing to the other side of the river.

Of course, just as you yourselves boast, things are no longer the same as they once were. As political prisoners in the past, you generally enjoyed special treatment in prison. If I had been treated in such a way from the beginning, I wouldn’t be in my present condition. In passing, please let me remind you: the medical checkup carried out in your prison hospital in late 1979 proves that my health was excellent at the time—there’s a record of it in your files. But my current state of health is much worse than most of yours when you were released from prison. If I remember correctly, most of you were either rehabilitated or released on “medical parole.” This includes Peng Zhen, Bo Yibo, Wang Guangmei, the late Ding Ling, and many others. Why, then, when I am so ill, is it only appropriate for me to receive “treatment” in prison? I guess this is just another example of how things are different today from the time of the Gang of Four!

Is it possible for one to “recuperate” in prison? What a joke! A few of you probably heard this illogical sort of reasoning before as well! How did you feel then? But now you seem to think it is very reasonable. Not only am I
denied the special treatment that you once had, but even if I received it, there would be no way for me to “recuperate” in prison. My health is so poor that I need a great deal of sleep. Actually, all outsiders who come to the Qinghai highlands need more sleep—this is medical fact, not something I made up. I’ve been saying this for years, but it’s ignored, and I still can’t sleep well. It’s extremely cold here in this region, and people in poor health have even greater trouble bearing it. I’ve been wasting ink writing about the lack of coal every year since I’ve been in Qinghai, but the problem still persists. I won’t even bother raising any other matters again. My health continues to deteriorate at almost the same rate that the inflation caused by your reforms grows.

I’m complaining and being somewhat disrespectful and you’re probably grumbling about how this Wei—What’s—His—Name is always criticizing the reforms, and so on and so on. But this is just a habit of mine; I don’t pose any real threat. For a long time now I’ve been learning to be more small-minded and to keep my mouth shut and stay out of national affairs or other people’s business. After all, what I do to help others might be bad for me! Why should I harm myself for the sake of others? If you really change, or just pretend to, for better or for worse, it’s no concern of mine, I’ll stay out of it. I ask only that you actually keep the promises you have made many times and show more respect for human rights. Now that my condition is serious, I should be permitted to recuperate in more suitable conditions in accordance with the law—that is, I should be released on medical parole. As for a review of my case and a dismissal of the mistaken verdict against me, I’m still asking for this, but I’ve given up hope!

Wei Jingsheng