

“THE FIFTH MODERNIZATION: DEMOCRACY” (1978)
By Wei Jingsheng

Introduction

Wei Jingsheng, born in 1950, was in many ways typical of his generation. Growing up in the “new China,” he was well instructed in Marxism and Mao Zedong Thought. During the Cultural Revolution Wei, like many young Chinese, took advantage of the chaotic times to travel widely around the country. Like many of his generation, he was “sent down” to the countryside during the later part of the Cultural Revolution. After doing some time as a soldier in the People’s Liberation Army, Wei returned to Beijing, where he was working as an electrician in the Beijing Zoo in the late 1970s.

Wei Jingsheng was particularly active in the Democracy Wall movement of 1978-1979. Like other activists, he wrote posters expressing his ideas and pasted them onto the “Democracy Wall” on a street corner in Beijing. The poster calling for China to pursue a “Fifth Modernization” was written in response to the Communist Party’s emphasis on building the “Four Modernizations” (i.e., agriculture, national defense, industry, and science/technology). In an unusual gesture, Wei signed the poster with his name and address. His activities — including this poster, co-editing an unofficial magazine, and another poster in which he suggested that Deng Xiaoping was becoming a new dictator — earned Wei Jingsheng serious attention from the authorities. He was arrested in 1979, charged with passing “military secrets” to a foreigner, and sentenced to 15 years in prison. Released in 1993, Wei was arrested after six months and sentenced to another 14 years on charges of “counter-revolution.” He was released in 1997 and exiled to the United States.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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After the arrest of the Gang of Four, the people eagerly hoped that Vice Chairman Deng Xiaoping, the possible “restorer of capitalism,” would rise up again like a magnificent banner. Finally he did regain his position in the central leadership. How excited the people felt! How inspired they were! But alas, the old political system so despised by the people remains unchanged, and the democracy and freedom they longed for has not even been mentioned. ...

...

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But now there are those who've offered us a way out: if you take the Four Modernizations as your guiding principle, forge ahead with stability and unity and bravely serve the revolution like a faithful old ox, you will reach paradise — the glory of communism and the Four Modernizations. Those kind-hearted “certain people” have also told us that if we find this confusing, we should undertake a serious and thorough study of Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought! If you're confused, it's because you don't understand it, and the fact that you don't understand it only goes to show just how profound a theory it is! ...

I urge everyone to stop believing such political swindlers. When we all know we are being tricked, why don't we trust ourselves instead? The Cultural Revolution has tempered us and we are no longer ignorant. Let us investigate for ourselves what should be done! ...

What is true democracy? Only when the people themselves choose representatives to manage affairs in accordance with their own will and interests can we speak of democracy. Furthermore, the people must have the power to replace these representatives at any time in order to prevent them from abusing their powers to suppress the people. Is this possible? The citizens of Europe and the United States enjoy just this kind of democracy and could run people like Nixon, de Gaulle, and Tanaka out of office when they wished ... In China, however, if a person so much as comments on the now-deceased “Great Helmsman” or “Great Man peerless in history” Mao Zedong, the mighty prison gates and all kinds of unimaginable misfortunes await him. ...

...

... We want to be the masters of our own destiny. We need no gods or emperors and we don't believe in saviors of any kind. We want to be masters of our universe, not the modernizing tools of dictators with personal ambitions. We want the modernization of people's lives. Democracy, freedom, and happiness for all are our sole objectives in carrying out modernization. Without this fifth modernization, all others are nothing more than a new promise. ...

Questions:

1. What does Wei Jingsheng mean when he says that the Cultural Revolution has “tempered us”? What would this kind of reference to the Cultural Revolution mean to someone like Deng Xiaoping, who was overthrown (twice) during the Cultural Revolution?
2. How does Wei's understanding of democracy and his democratic goals compare with those of Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-sen?
3. Compare Wei's ideas about democracy and its possible effects as described in this essay with Deng Xiaoping's ideas in “The Present Situation and the Tasks Before Us.”
4. How does Wei describe democracy? What, exactly, is democracy? How is it to be implemented?
5. Are there aspects of democracy that Wei does not discuss, which might change the nature of his argument if he did?

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Newspapers and television no longer assail us with deafening praise for the dictatorship of the proletariat and class struggle. This is in part because these were once the magical incantations of the now-overthrown Gang of Four. But more importantly, it's because the masses have grown absolutely sick of hearing these worn-out phrases and will never be duped by them again. ...

After the arrest of the Gang of Four, the people eagerly hoped that Vice Chairman Deng Xiaoping, the possible “restorer of capitalism,” would rise up again like a magnificent banner. Finally he did regain his position in the central leadership. How excited the people felt! How inspired they were! But alas, the old political system so despised by the people remains unchanged, and the democracy and freedom they longed for has not even been mentioned. ...

But now there are people warning us that Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought is the foundation of all things, even speech, that Chairman Mao was the “great savior” of the people, and that the phrase “without the Communist Party, there would be no new China” actually means “without Chairman Mao, there would be no new China.” If anyone denies this point, the official notices make it clear that they'll come to no good end. There are even “certain people” who try to tell us that the Chinese people need a dictator and if he is more dictatorial than the emperors of old, it only proves his greatness. The Chinese people don't need democracy, they say, for unless it is a “democracy under centralized leadership,” it isn't worth a cent. Whether you believe this or not is up to you, but there are plenty of recently vacated prison cells waiting for you if you don't.

But now there are those who've offered us a way out: if you take the Four Modernizations as your guiding principle, forge ahead with stability and unity, and bravely serve the revolution like a faithful old ox, you will reach paradise — the glory of communism and the Four Modernizations. Those kindhearted “certain people” have also told us that if we find this confusing, we should undertake a serious and thorough study of Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought! If you're confused, it's because you don't understand it, and the fact that you don't understand only goes to show just how profound a theory it is! Don't be disobedient or the leadership of your work unit will be uncompromising! And so on and so on.

I urge everyone to stop believing such political swindlers. When we all know that we are being tricked, why don't we trust ourselves instead? The Cultural Revolution has tempered us and we are no longer so ignorant. Let us investigate for ourselves what should be done! ...

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What is true democracy? Only when the people themselves choose representatives to manage affairs in accordance with their will and interests can we speak of democracy. Furthermore, the people must have the power to replace these representatives at any time in order to prevent them from abusing their powers to oppress the people. Is this possible? The citizens of Europe and the United States enjoy just this kind of democracy and could run people like Nixon, de Gaulle, and Tanaka out of office when they wished and can even reinstate them if they want to, for no one can interfere with their democratic rights. In China, however, if a person so much as comments on the now-deceased “Great Helmsman” or “Great Man peerless in history” Mao Zedong, the mighty prison gates and all kinds of unimaginable misfortunes await him. If we compare the socialist system of “democratic centralism” with the “exploiting class democracy” of capitalism, the difference is as clear as night and day.

Will the country sink into chaos and anarchy if the people attain democracy? On the contrary, have not the scandals exposed in the newspapers recently shown that it is precisely due to an absence of democracy that dictators, large and small, have caused chaos and anarchy? The maintenance of democratic order is an internal problem that the people themselves must solve. It is not something that the privileged overlords need concern themselves with. Besides, they are not really concerned with democracy for the people but use it as a pretext to deny the people their democratic rights. Of course, internal problems cannot be solved overnight but must be constantly addressed during the development process. Mistakes and shortcomings are inevitable, but these are for us to worry about and are infinitely preferable to facing abusive overlords against whom we have no means of redress. Those who worry that democracy will lead to anarchy and chaos are just like those who worried that without an emperor China would fall into chaos following the overthrow of the Qing dynasty. Their recommendation was, Patiently suffer oppression! Without the weight of oppression, the roofs of your homes might fly off!

With all due respect, let me say to such people: We want to be the masters of our own destiny. We need no gods or emperors and we don’t believe in saviors of any kind. We want to be masters of our universe, not the modernizing tools of dictators with personal ambitions. We want the modernization of people’s lives. Democracy, freedom, and happiness for all are our sole objectives in carrying out modernization. Without this fifth modernization, all others are nothing more than a new promise.

Comrades, I appeal to you: Let us rally under the banner of democracy. Do not be fooled again by dictators who talk of “stability and unity.” Fascist totalitarianism can bring us nothing but disaster. Harbor no more illusions; democracy is our only hope. Abandon our democratic rights and we shackle ourselves again. Let us have confidence in our own strength! We are the creators of human history. Banish all self-proclaimed leaders and teachers, for they have already cheated the people of their most valuable rights for decades.

I firmly believe that production will flourish even more when controlled by the people themselves because the workers will be producing for their own benefit. Life will improve

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because the workers’ interests will be the primary goal. Society will be more rational because all power will be exercised by the people as a whole through democratic means.

I don’t believe that all of this will be handed to the people effortlessly by some great savior. I also refuse to believe that China will abandon this goal because of the many difficulties it will surely encounter along the way. As long as people clearly identify their goal and realistically assess the obstacles before them, then surely they will trample any praying mantis that might try to bar their way. ...

If the Chinese people want modernization, they must first put democracy into practice and modernize China’s social system. Democracy is not merely an inevitable stage of social development, as Lenin claimed. In addition to being the result of productive forces and productive relations that have developed to a certain stage, democracy is also the very condition that allows for such development to reach beyond this stage. Without this condition, society will become stagnant and economic growth will face insurmountable obstacles. Therefore, as history tells us, a democratic social system is the premise and precondition for all development, or what we can also call modernization. Without this premise and precondition, not only will further progress be impossible but it will be very difficult to maintain the development we have already achieved. ...

Does democracy come about naturally when society reaches a certain stage? Absolutely not. An enormous price is paid for every tiny victory, so much so that even coming to a recognition of this fact requires sacrifices. The enemies of democracy have always deceived their people by saying that just as democracy is inevitable, so it is also doomed, and therefore it is not worth wasting energy fighting for.

But let us look at the real history, not that fabricated by the hired hacks of the “socialist government”! Every small twig of true and worthy democracy is stained with the blood of martyrs and tyrants, and every step taken toward democracy has been fiercely attacked by the reactionary forces. The fact that democracy has been able to surmount such obstacles proves that it is precious to the people and that it embodies all their aspirations. Thus the democratic trend cannot be stopped. The Chinese people have never feared anything; they need only recognize the direction to be taken and the forces of tyranny will no longer be invincible.