

**“THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF TODAY’S INTELLECTUALS”
(SPEECH, NOVEMBER 4, 1985)
By Fang Lizhi**

Introduction

As China’s Communist Party and government pursued economic reform and opened to the outside world in the 1980s, market forces and a decreased level of Party concern with the control of cultural activities led to a more lively intellectual atmosphere. Some intellectuals pushed the envelope, perhaps enjoying the increased level of freedom to the utmost, perhaps purposely trying to push the boundaries of acceptable speech and publication. One of those to push to the point where he discovered, through personal experience, just where the new limits on freedom of expression lay, was the astrophysicist Fang Lizhi (b. 1936).

Fang was a member of the faculty and an administrator at Science and Technology University in Hefei (Anhui Province). He was also a member of the Chinese Communist Party. Fang was much in demand as a public speaker in the mid-1980s. His public speeches were not on astrophysics: They dealt mainly with the status of intellectuals, democracy, political and economic reform, and modernization.

The document below presents excerpts from a speech given by Fang on November 4, 1985, at Beijing University.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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... In keeping with Chinese tradition, creativity has not been encouraged over the past three decades. It is a shame that, as a result, China has yet to produce work worthy for consideration for the Nobel Prize. Why is this? ...

...

... The reasons for our inability to develop our [full] potential lie within our social system. Therefore all of us, when considering our social responsibility, should dedicate ourselves to the creation of a social environment that allows intellectuals to fully utilize their abilities and encourages productivity in their work. ...

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Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on

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By Fang Lizhi

What is the real reason we have lost our ideals and discipline? The real reason is that many of our important party leaders have failed to discipline themselves. I will give you an example: There was recently an international symposium on particle accelerators. ... But in the Chinese delegation of over ten people there was only one from our university. Many of those sent had no qualification in physics and no familiarity with accelerators. Is this considered “observing discipline?” Among those attending was Beijing vice-mayor Zhang Baifa. I have no idea what he was doing there. ...

...

We Communist Party members should be open to different ways of thinking. ... At present, there are certainly some people in power who still insist on dictating to others according to their own narrow principles. They always wave the flag of Marxism when they speak. But what they are spouting is not Marxism. ...

Questions:

1. How does Fang Lizhi characterize intellectuals and Party/government leaders respectively?
2. If you were a Communist Party leader, what parts of Fang’s comments would you find most offensive?
3. Why does Fang present himself as a Marxist? What is the difference between what he thinks of as Marxism and what he says the Party leaders practice under the name of Marxism?
4. If you were a member of the Chinese Communist Party and were charged with writing a refutation of Fang’s remarks, how would you proceed?

Longer Selection

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As intellectuals, we are obligated to work for the improvement of society. Our primary task in this regard is to strive for excellence and creativity in our chosen professions. This requires that we break the bonds of social restraint when necessary. In keeping with Chinese tradition, creativity has not been encouraged over the past three decades. It is a shame that, as a result, China has yet to produce work worthy of consideration for the Nobel Prize. Why is this? We should reflect upon this question and take a good look at ourselves.

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One reason for this situation is our social environment. Many of us who have been to foreign countries to study or work agree that we can perform much more efficiently and productively abroad than in China. ... Foreigners are no more intelligent than we Chinese are. Why, then, can't we produce first-rate work? The reasons for our inability to develop to our [full] potential lie within our social system. Therefore all of us, when considering our social responsibility, should dedicate ourselves to the creation of a social environment that allows intellectuals to fully utilize their abilities and encourages productivity in their work. ...

Lately the state has been promoting idealism and discipline. [Its] idea of idealism is simply that we should have a feeling of responsibility toward our society. Of course, our goal should be the improvement of society, but it shouldn't be some Utopian dream a million years down the road. (Applause.) Scientists like myself, who study the universe, cannot see that far into the future. What is much more important is to identify problems that exist now and try to solve them and to identify problems that will beset us in the near future that we might be able to minimize or avoid. ...

What is the real reason we have lost our ideals and discipline? The real reason is that many of our important party leaders have failed to discipline themselves. I will give you an example: There was recently an international symposium on particle accelerators. Both Taiwan and mainland China were represented. In my mind, of course, the participants should be scholars and experts who are directly involved in this kind of work. But in the Chinese delegation of over ten people there was only one from our university. Many of those sent had no qualifications in physics and no familiarity with accelerators. Is this considered “observing discipline”? Among those attending was Beijing vice-mayor Zhang Baifa. I have no idea what he was doing there. (Loud laughter.) If you are talking about discipline, this is an excellent example of what it is not. (Applause.) And this kind of breakdown of discipline is the same thing as corruption. (Loud applause.) In the future, as you learn more about our society, you will find that this sort of corruption is very commonplace. If we are really serious about strengthening discipline, we should start at the top. (Applause.) ...

We Communist Party members should be open to different ways of thinking. We should be open to different cultures and willing to adopt the elements of those cultures that are clearly superior. A great diversity of thought should be allowed in colleges and universities. If all thought is simplistic and narrow-minded, creativity will die. At present, there are certainly some people in power who still insist on dictating to others according to their own narrow principles. They always wave the flag of Marxism when they speak. But what they are spouting is not Marxism. ...

We must not be afraid to speak openly about these things. It is our duty. If we remain silent, we have failed to live up to our responsibility.