



THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND BEYOND

By Wei Jingsheng

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Losing freedom is a painful thing. But exactly how painful it is can vary. For the average child, not being allowed to go outside and play, or for an employee, being forced to work, are also losses of freedom. These losses can be painful, and the child or employee might resolve to make trouble for his parents or boss. But by no means does suffering such a loss mean that you can understand what a much more extreme loss of freedom is like. So, reporters and goodhearted people always ask me questions like, "In prison, how were the meals?" or "Were you beaten?" Actually, those problems are much less important. The greatest and most serious problem is losing your freedom. That is the severe pain.

During my 18 years in prison, I was kept in strictly solitary confinement for three years. The rest of the time, although I was held alone in a cell, it was not as strict; I could chat with guards and fellow prisoners. During the three years of solitary confinement, there was a period of more than a year when I was not let out of my tiny cell even once. No one was allowed to speak with me; the door was always closed. Food

was delivered through a small opening in the lower part of the iron cell door. Outside my window there was a small yard, but even that no one was allowed to enter. In this environment of complete isolation from the outside world, a person begins to slowly lose his endurance. An indescribable feeling of torment comes forth from within. Many people in this sort of situation lose their sense of reason; more serious cases go insane, becoming mentally ill. Many political prisoners are driven mad this way, including those imprisoned as a result of political fights within the Chinese Communist Party.

During that time of confinement, many would pay no attention to the quality of the food or to being beaten. Many prisoners would even welcome a beating, the pain of which would be cathartic, because the suffering in one's heart would vent forth, giving one a feeling of being liberated. During that time, I would intentionally kick the door with my foot, yell and shout to draw the person guarding me to come quarrel and fight. I would seize the chance to vent the rising gloom trapped in my heart. Unfortunately this method only worked once. At the time the feeling of release exceeded my expectations. I felt relaxed and carefree for several days. But the second time it didn't work, they discovered my plot. No matter how hard I kicked the door or how much I yelled, they paid no attention to me. Later a kindly guard told me there were orders from above that no matter what commotion I made they were to pay it no heed, so I need not bother.

I then thought of a new plan. I had with me a few Russian middle-school textbooks. Every day I would read them out in a very loud voice. The entire prison could hear me. Actually I was only venting, I was not reading Russian at all. Many years later I encountered a convict who was in the same prison at the time, who told me: "It would be useful if your English were as good as your Russian." I asked, "How do you know my Russian is good?" He responded, "Back then I heard you read Russian in a loud voice. I never understood why you didn't study English, but were studying Russian." I did not know how I should respond, because, actually, I was not even studying Russian. The other convict had lived in a larger cell and had just a little bit more freedom than we did,

and so he could not understand the suffering of those with less freedom.

A long time passed. One day a guard suddenly called me to go out and play badminton. At first, I didn't know what was up. After playing for a while, I didn't feel anything unusual, we just played very happily all afternoon. That was much better than fighting with the guard. After a few days I asked a guard when I could play badminton. The guard said, "Play badminton, what, are you dreaming?" For more than ten years, I never understood why they only let me play badminton once. After being released there was a reporter who asked me: "The treatment in prison was not too bad, was it? We all saw the tape of you playing badminton." Only then did I realize why I had played badminton only once. It was to make a videotape to deceive the international community. Once it was recorded, it was over; wanting to play badminton again was of course like the guard said, dreaming.

After this sort of experience, I feel even more keenly that freedom is the most important condition for a person's existence. Indeed, I think that for the last few thousand years human society has been searching for a better social system. What is a better social system? A system that can more effectively guarantee everyone's freedom. With the prerequisite of upholding social order, a social system that can provide a greater guarantee of freedom is a better system.

Autocratic systems probably have greater social order than some democratic societies, but the prerequisite for that social order is a large sacrifice in personal freedom. People in that sort of system lose too much freedom and severely lack the necessary conditions for living. When enough people's lives become too hard to bear, they will eventually resist and revolt.

Social order seemed very good in China during Mao Zedong's time; the average people seemed to behave themselves, and prostitution and drugs were nearly eliminated. Some confused Western scholars thought Mao Zedong had created a society that conformed most closely to their standards of an ideal social system. But they were mistaken. Just as they were coming to believe that Mao had created an ideal society, the Cultural Revolution started in 1966. After more than a decade, the Communist Party's autocratic rule had finally deprived the Chinese people of too much freedom. The spirit in society to resist and revolt had grown.

When people live in a free society, they can undervalue the importance of freedom. They mistakenly believe that even without freedom, the Chinese people can live very well. When the Chinese people rise up to oppose the CCP, those who themselves are free cannot understand why people have to destroy a good social order. Foreigners could not comprehend why we had to have the Cultural Revolution.

According to normal understanding, cultural change is a slow process. What effect can that sort of violent storm of a revolution have on cultural change? Mao called for revolt, and many ordinary people took the opportunity to oppose the Communist Party officials. In this sense it was not really a "cultural" revolution. One aspect was Mao using the

"Cultural Revolution" that all in the Communist Party could agree with as a pretext for inciting a movement to strike down his political opponents. Another aspect was ordinary people seizing the opportunity to vent the pressure of dissatisfaction and unhappiness that had built up in their hearts for many years.. However, at the end, the Cultural Revolution took the "dictatorship of the proletariat" to the extreme and suppressed the movement that Mao had launched.

On these two points, Deng Xiaoping and later Chinese Communist leaders have something in common. They have feared that the people will revolt and also that the people will say they are the dictatorship of the proletariat. So they have not allowed people to talk about the problem of the Cultural Revolution. One of the greatest lessons from the revolts during the Cultural Revolution was that everyone believed that he would gain legitimacy by rebelling under the banner of Mao. In the end, rebelling under the banner of Mao was like rebelling while kneeling before the emperor. When the emperor wants to put you back in your place, you have no way out.

The CCP especially feared that after the people absorbed this experience, the next time their rebellion would not be under the Party's banner. So they did not permit the people to study the lessons from this experience and discuss the Cultural Revolution.

Under the CCP's autocratic rule, the people cannot participate in forming public opinion. With no freedom of speech, the so-called "four great freedoms"—to "speak freely," to "air your views freely," to write "big character posters," and to engage in "big debates"—were just to leave ordinary people with just a last little bit of the people's freedom.¹ Of course, they could speak nonsense, just as America's freedom also allows people to speak nonsense.

The main reason Deng eliminated the "four great freedoms" after the Cultural Revolution was that Democracy Wall² also was a matter of the people were using those freedoms to criticize the government, which caused fear among the leadership. So Deng used the Cultural Revolution as an argument to intimidate and persuade those within the party to support him in eliminating the Democracy Wall. "The four great freedoms" of the Cultural Revolution and Democracy Wall period vividly showed Deng the power of freedom of speech. Deng Xiaoping used Democracy Wall's

¹ A legacy of the Cultural Revolution, the "four great freedoms" were included in the Chinese Constitution adopted in 1978 as officially valued and validated methods of popular political participation. "Big character posters"—literally meaning (though not always in practice) posters that used large writing in Chinese characters to set forth political attacks and manifestos—were a favored tool of Cultural Revolutionaries, including Mao himself in the movement's initial phase.

² Democracy Wall refers to the group of Beijing-based writers—among whom Wei became the most prominent—and their writings critical of the regime and advocating democratic reform in December 1978 and into 1979. The name derives from a brick wall at Xidan in central Beijing where many of these writings were posted and near which impromptu journals from the movement distributed.

momentum to defeat Hua Guofeng's "Whatever" Faction.³ The power of the people had shown that it could interfere with power struggles in the central authorities, and that it was quite formidable in its own right. So, the first thing Deng did after he took power was to shut down Democracy Wall. Such was the lesson the new leaders had learned from the experience of the Cultural Revolution and Democracy Wall: be very afraid of ordinary people seizing the opportunity to rebel. So after they assimilated their experiences from the Cultural Revolution and Democracy Wall, the CCP leaders became very afraid of the people taking opportunities to rebel.

Deng Xiaoping sensed that for him to continue to rule, although he could wave the banner of democracy, by no means did he need democracy. He saw very clearly that he still needed to use the method of the dictatorship of the proletariat to handle the Chinese people. He did not want people to criticize the dictatorship of the proletariat. The major portion of the brutality of the Cultural Revolution was caused by the dictatorship of the proletariat; rather than by struggles among the people. Struggles between two factions were in fact caused by Mao Zedong and his gang sowing discord. This was precisely one of Mao's methods of playing with the dictatorship of the proletariat.

CCP intra-party struggles, as a rule, are ruthless. The Communist Party's type of despotic, autocratic politics, which also has certain characteristics of a religion, is fanatical and impervious to reason. So it manifests itself as even more cruel than autocratic rule of ancient times. Under such ruthless conditions, leaders become especially unable to acknowledge their mistakes, and the mindset of revenge becomes especially strong. I have heard that now it is also like this; there has been little change since the Cultural Revolution: "No matter what tactic I use, I have to cut you down, otherwise you will probably cut me down, and it would probably be a pretty nasty end." This type of situation brings about ruthless politics.

Here, I wish to speak about religion, but not the modern West's religion, which is separated from politics; rather, I refer to the religion of the Middle Ages with its unification of church and state. Much of the activity during the Cultural Revolution was similar to religious rituals. Every day one had to listen, read, ask for instructions in the morning, report back in the evening--in ritual forms resembling prayer. Bare your heart to the party, bare your heart to the leaders--this imitates confession.

³ Hua Guofeng was Mao's designated, short-lived successor. Hua's opponents (who included Deng) branded Hua and his allies as the "Whatever Faction," claiming that they believed in following "whatever" Mao had said or done (rather than the reformist policies that Deng and his "practice" faction allies favored and which they claimed to be based on the principle of "practice is the sole criterion of truth.").

This way of doing things was in part an idea of Mao's, in part it probably also is related to the May Fourth era⁴ idea of complete Westernization. At the time people summed up what they learned from the Westernization movement and from the failure of the Hundred Days Reform.⁵ They believed China's culture was inadequate and prevented China from adopting advanced Western things. So the first step was to destroy Chinese culture. Then it would be easier to paint a good picture on a blank piece of paper. This was the ideology of the far left during the May Fourth movement. It later became the ideology of the CCP.

In truth, many of the methods of the Cultural Revolution were anticipated in the May Fourth period. They developed to reach extremes during the Cultural Revolution. Wanting to destroy all traditional Chinese culture, and wanting to destroy all Western culture that was not beneficial to the construction of communist autocracy--this makes China a cultural desert.

Having been through the Cultural Revolution and Democracy Wall, Deng saw that using communism's ideals to rule people's minds had failed. Then, what thing is most easily to soften people's thinking, cause them not to rebel? That is exactly what Marx talked about as opium of the spirit. So he used other extreme means, for example: "looking toward money" and the desire material things; prostitution, drugs and other such things, to numb people's will to resist, to eliminate people's power to rebel. To continue to maintain the rule of the one-party dictatorship, the rulers don't really give the people freedom and democracy.

Some Western entrepreneurs and scholars are now making the same mistake. They believe the same freedom exists in America and in China. Their perception is correct, because in China they are treated as privileged friends of the Communist Party, and naturally they enjoy the same freedom as the Party.

But they have not noticed, or they have intentionally overlooked, that the freedom--greater than the freedom in America--enjoyed by them and the special privileged class of the CCP has been based upon sacrificing the freedom of the vast majority of Chinese. The majority that has been sacrificed of course is sure to resist this sort of oppression, create instability, and revolt. Yet the Communist Party wants to maintain its autocratic institutions, and of course it must be hostile toward democratic countries that are more in line with human existence. This [the hostile relationship and struggle between autocracy and autocrats, on one hand, and

⁴ The May Fourth era refers to the period early in the twentieth century when Chinese intellectuals, including those who would be among the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, articulated the principles of modern Chinese nationalism and called for major political and cultural changes. The name comes from the events of May 4, 1919, the date of student protests (followed by additional demonstrations, strikes and a boycott of Japanese goods) in response to provisions in the Versailles peace accords that accorded Japan former German concessions in China and thereby inflamed Chinese nationalist sentiments.

⁵ The Hundred Days Reform refers to a short-lived and unsuccessful effort in 1898 to salvage the Qing dynasty's crumbling rule by undertaking political, social and educational reforms, including principally those advocated by Kang Youwei.

realization of freedom and the needs of human existence, on the other] is the basic structure of modern international relations. This also has been the basic structure of all the basic changes that have occurred in social institutions over the last several thousand years.

There are some American politicians who say, "We can set aside ideological differences to develop amicable international relations." I believe that their intentions are good, but the Communist Party does not believe so. The CCP believes that America's existence is a threat. Because the

freedom that democracy guarantees is too appealing, every day that democratic institutions exist testifies to the failure of despotism. Every day those institutions provide an example for overturning autocracies. How, then, can the CCP trust that what America says is the truth? Why does America regularly make mistakes when dealing with China? It is because many Americans do not understand that lack of freedom is the fundamental reason that will compel Chinese people to revolt.

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