

LETTER FROM BEIJING

ENEMY OF THE STATE

The complicated life of an idealist.

BY JIANYING ZHA



Beijing Second Prison is on the outskirts of the city for which it is named, and you can drive past the drab compound without ever noticing it. It's set about a tenth of a mile off the highway, and when I visit I usually have to tell the cabdriver about the exit on the left, because it's easy to miss. The first thing you see, after the turnoff, is a heavy, dun-colored metal gate framed by a white tiled arch, and then the guards standing in front with long-barrelled automatic weapons. Electrified wires are stretched taut along the top of the outer wall; it's a maximum-security facility. Inside the waiting room, adjoining the gate, I stow

my purse and cell phone in a locker, present my documents, and wait to be called. The guards recognize me but maintain a professional remoteness. I'm visiting my brother, Zha Jianguo, a democracy activist serving a nine-year sentence for "subverting the state."

Jianguo was arrested and tried in the summer of 1999, and I remember with perfect clarity the moment I learned what had happened. I was standing in the kitchen of a friend's country house, outside Montreal, drinking a cup of freshly made coffee, and glancing at a story on the front page of the local newspaper. It was about a missile that China had just

test-launched, which was supposed to be able to hit Alaska; in the last paragraph, Jianguo's trial was reported. I was astonished and outraged, and, as his little sister, I was fiercely proud as well: Jianguo's act of subversion was to have helped start an opposition party, the China Democracy Party (C.D.P.). It was the first time in the history of the People's Republic of China that anyone had dared to form and register an independent party. Jianguo and his fellow-activists had done so openly, peacefully. Now they were going to prison for it.

My first visits, seven years ago, were particularly arduous. I had to obtain spe-

COURTESY JIANYING ZHA; COURTESY XU WENJI

Above, Jianguo (age thirteen), with Jianying (age five), a younger brother, Jianming, and their mother. Opposite, Jianguo on a Hong Kong magazine cover from 1999: "Zha Jianguo and Gao Hongming"—a fellow-organizer—"are sentenced heavily."

封面人物：查建國（中國民主黨）



查建國高洪明被重判

cial permits each time, and during our thirty-minute meetings Jianguo and I were flanked by two or three guards, including an officer in charge of “special” prisoners. I was shocked by how changed Jianguo was from when I’d last seen him, two years earlier. It wasn’t just his prisoner’s crewcut and uniform of coarse cotton, vertical white stripes on gray; his eyes were rheumy and infected, his hands and face were swollen, and his fingernails were purple, evidently from poor circulation and nutrition. We sat on opposite sides of a thick Plexiglas panel and spoke through handsets—they were an incongruous Day-Glo yellow, like a toy phone you’d give a child. Our exchanges, in those days, seemed fraught with urgency and significance. After the first few visits, I also met with the warden, who turned out to be a surprisingly cordial young man. (“You expected a green-faced, long-toothed monster, didn’t you?” he said to me, smiling.) We discussed various issues regarding Jianguo’s health. Within weeks, he granted my two main requests. Jianguo was taken out of the prison in a van with armed guards to a good city hospital, where he received a medical check-up, and he was moved from a noisy cell with eleven murderers to a less crowded, quieter cell.

Four years ago, I moved back to Beijing, where I write for Chinese magazines and work for an academic institute; the monthly trip to Beijing Second Prison has become a routine. I try to make conversation with the officer at the “book desk,” where you can leave reading material for the prisoner you’re visiting; he excludes whatever he deems “inappropriate.” Anything political is likely to be rejected, although a collection of essays by Václav Havel got through: the officer peered at the head shot of the gloomy foreigner, but didn’t know who he was.

The so-called “interview room” is a bland, tidy space, with rows of sky-blue plastic chairs along the Plexiglas divider; you can see a well-tended garden outside, with two heart-shaped flower beds. Farther away, there’s a row of buildings, gray concrete boxes, where the inmates live and work. (They’re allowed outdoors twice a week, for two-hour periods of open-air exercise.) You can even see the unit captain lead the prisoners, in

single file, from those buildings to the interview room.

These days, I’m just another visiting relative, and, though the phones are monitored, the guards have long ago lost interest in watching my brother and me. Time passes quickly. Jianguo and I often chat like two old friends who haven’t seen each other in a while. I start by inquiring after his health and general condition, then report some news about relatives or friends. After that, we might talk about the books he’s read recently or discuss something in the news, such as the war in Iraq or Beijing’s preparation for the 2008 Olympics. Sometimes we even exchange carefully phrased opinions on China’s political situation. Finally, I make a shopping list. Each month, a prisoner is allowed about eighty yuan in spending money (about ten dollars) and a hundred and fifty yuan of extra food if a visiting relative buys it at the prison shop; this is for security reasons, but it also provides a source of income for the prison. Jianguo often asks me to buy a box of cookies. Another prisoner, who is serving a ten-year sentence for being a “Taiwanese spy,” has been teaching him English. The man’s wife left him, and no one comes to visit. Apparently, he really likes the cookies.

In the first couple of years, I kept asking Jianguo whether he was ever beaten or hurt in any way. “I’m on pretty good terms with all the officers,” he would tell me. “They are just following orders, but they all know why I got here, and they’ve never touched me. My cellmates have fights among themselves but never with me. They all kind of respect me.” He told me that the jailers let it drop when he refused to answer if he was addressed as *fan ren* (or “convict”) So-and-So; he objects to the title because he doesn’t believe that he committed a crime. He has also refused to take part in the manual work that all prisoners in his unit are supposed to do: packing disposable chopsticks and similar chores.

A family friend told me that Jianguo



might be able to leave China on medical parole, and I asked him many times if he would consider it. He wouldn’t. “I will not leave China unless my freedom of return is guaranteed,” he insisted. I have stopped asking. Jianguo repeatedly mentions the predicament of exiled Chinese dissidents in the West, who, in the post-Tiananmen era, have lost their political effectiveness. “Once they leave Chinese soil, their role is very limited,” Jianguo says. But how politically effective is it to sit in a tiny cell for nine years—especially when most of your countrymen don’t even know of your existence?

That’s something I’ve never had the heart to bring up. The mainland Chinese press didn’t report the 1999 C.D.P. roundup, so few people in China ever knew what had happened. Outside China, there was some media coverage at the time, and some protests from human-rights groups, but the incident was soon eclipsed by the Falun Gong story. After almost eight years of incarceration, Jianguo is unrepentant, resolute, and forgotten.

Jianguo is the older of two sons my father had from his first marriage. He was seven when my father divorced his mother and married mine. Although my father had custody of Jianguo, the eight years that separated us meant that my childhood memories of him are mostly dim. As was the fashion at the time, he went to a boarding school and came home only on Sundays. He remained a gangly, reticent figure hovering at the edge of our family life.

Divorce was uncommon in China at the time, and no doubt it cast a shadow on Jianguo’s childhood. My mother recalls that, when Jianguo slept in the house, she sometimes heard him sobbing under his quilt. In letters written from prison, he described those weekends as “visiting someone else’s home” and said that he “felt like a Lin Daiyu”—referring to the tragic heroine in the Chinese classic “The Dream of the Red Chamber,” who, orphaned at a young age, has to live in her uncle’s house and compete with her cousins for love and attention. But his mother, whom I call Aunt Zhong, says that Jianguo was ambitious from a very young age. When she first told him the story of Yue Fei, a legendary general of the Song dynasty who was betrayed

and died tragically, Jianguo looked up at her with tears in his eyes, and said, "But I'm still too young to be a Yue Fei!" She was startled. "I didn't *expect* him to become a Yue Fei!" she told me.

She probably expected him to become a scholar. After all, the boy was surrounded not by military men but by academics and artists. My father was a philosopher. Aunt Zhong is an opera scholar and librettist from a distinguished intellectual family; her father was a university vice-president, her mother a painter who studied with the famous master Qi Baishi. In another letter from prison, Jianguo described those primary-school years as "uneventful," aside from a vivid memory he has of a great summer storm that struck while he walked back to school one Sunday afternoon. In heated language, he recalled how he fought the wind and the downpour all the way, how he was drenched, alone in the deserted streets, but, oh, the awesome beauty of the thunder and lightning and the ecstasy he felt when he finally reached the school gate, the feeling he had of having beaten the monstrous storm all by himself!

Jianguo was also a voracious reader and a brilliant Go player. At the age of fourteen, he was accepted to an elite boarding middle school in Beijing, receiving the top score in his class in the entrance exam. Yet he felt restless. School life was confining, and he disliked the petty authorities he had to contend with. During this period, he began to worship Mao Zedong. He read Mao's biography closely and tried to imitate his example: taking cold showers in winter, reading philosophy, and pondering the big questions of politics and society, which he debated with a group of friends. His first political act was to write a letter to the school administration attacking the rigidity of the curriculum and certain "bourgeois sentiments" it enshrined. This was something that Jianguo is still proud of: even before the Cultural Revolution, he had challenged the system, alone.

My own sheltered childhood ended with the Cultural Revolution. My parents were denounced as "stinking intellectuals" and "counter-revolutionaries." Our house was ransacked. Under the new policy, I went to a nearby school of workers' children, some of whom threw



"How dare you—in a straitjacket, no less—psychoanalyze me."

rocks at me and even left human excrement on our balcony. But Jianguo thrived amid the social turmoil, and became a leader of a Red Guard faction at his school. He seldom came home. When he did, he dressed in full Red Guard fashion: the faded green Army jacket and cap, the Mao button on the shirt pocket, the bright-red armband. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and, with his manly good looks, he seemed to me larger than life. I was shy and tongue-tied in his presence.

Two years later, in 1968, Jianguo left for Inner Mongolia with a group of other Red Guards. He was answering Chairman Mao's call for the educated city youth to transform China's poor countryside. My parents held a going-away party for him: I remember the din of a houseful of Red Guards talking, laughing, and eating, my mother boiling pot after pot of noodles, my father sitting silently in his study watching the teenagers as though in someone else's house, and Jianguo, seventeen years old, holding court like a young commander on the eve of battle. He invited his friends to take whatever they liked from my father's library; many books were "borrowed," including my mother's favorite novel, "Madame Bovary," never to be returned.

Aunt Zhong went to the railway station to see him off. When the train started leaving, she waved at her son. "But he acted as if I wasn't there," she

told me. "He just kept yelling 'Goodbye, Chairman Mao!' The Cultural Revolution really poisoned his mind."

Millions of urban youngsters went to the countryside in those days, but not all of them were true believers: some felt pressure to show proper "revolutionary enthusiasm," while others went because there were no jobs in the cities. Most of them, shocked by the poverty and backwardness of rural life, became disillusioned. And as the fever of the Cultural Revolution waned, in the mid-nineteen-seventies, many returned home, getting factory jobs or going to university, which in those days depended not on your exam results but on your connections and political record.

Jianguo wasn't among them. During the seven years he spent on a farm in Inner Mongolia, he had served as the village head and was popular among peasants. He was a good farmhand. He could drink as much *baijiu*, the hard northern liquor, as the locals could. He had married a former Beijing schoolmate and Red Guard, who stayed on because of him, and they were making a life for themselves in the countryside. The villagers ignored whatever "revolutionary initiatives" Jianguo tried to introduce, but his personality—honest, warm, generous—won him their affection.

In 1976, Mao died, the Cultural Revolution ended, and Jianguo's daughter was born. Jianguo named her Jihong ("Inher-

iting Red"). The next few years were critical in China: Deng Xiaoping began to steer the country toward reform and greater openness. The university entrance exam, which had been suspended for more than a decade, was reinstated; I was among those who took the exam and went to university, a welcome change from the farmwork to which I'd been consigned. But Jianguo seemed stuck in the earlier era. He framed a large portrait of Mao with black gauze and hung it on a wall of his home; he would sit in front of it for hours, lost in thought. His wife later told me that Jianguo spent two years grieving for Mao.

Jianguo eventually took a job with the county government of his rural outpost, working for the local party secretary, a Mongolian named Batu, who took a

shine to the bright young Beijinger. Then Jianguo criticized one of Batu's policy directives, which he saw as disastrous for the peasants, and even took Batu to task in front of a crowded cadre assembly. Jianguo lost his post and was placed under investigation. Condemned as a "running dog of the Gang of Four," he was locked up in solitary confinement, allowed to read only books by Marx, Lenin, and Mao. Two years later, Batu left the county for a higher position, and Jianguo was released. He was given various low-level posts, and was never promoted.

In 1985, when I was a graduate student in comparative literature at Columbia University, I went to visit him. After an eighteen-hour ride on a hard-seated train from Beijing, I arrived at a dusty little county station. The man waiting

for me there looked like all the other local peasants hawking melons and potatoes from the back of their oxcarts. He was dressed like a peasant, spoke with a local accent, and had even developed a habit of squatting. His torpid movements suggested years of living in a remote backwater where nothing much ever happened.

It was early 1989 when Jianguo's wife finally prevailed on him to move back to Beijing. She was a practical woman, and she wasn't reconciled to a life of rural squalor. She was the one who, driven by poverty, sewed Jianguo's last piece of Red Guard memorabilia, a faded red flag bearing the guards' logo, into a quilt cover. Now she was determined not to let their daughter grow up a peasant. For Jianguo, however, their return marked a humiliating end of a twenty-year mission. The idea of bringing revolution to the countryside had turned out to be a fantasy. He changed nothing there. It changed him.

Four months after Jianguo's return to Beijing, students started marching on Tiananmen Square. Going to the square each day, listening to the speeches and the songs, watching a new generation of student rebels in action—for Jianguo, it was a profoundly moving experience. Twenty years earlier, the Red Guards' god was Mao. Now the idealistic kids in blue jeans and T-shirts had erected a new statue: the Goddess of Democracy.

I was living in Beijing at the time and visited the square daily. Jianguo said little when we met, though he was evidently in turmoil. One afternoon, I asked him to join me while I visited a friend who was active in the protests. Outside on the square, my friend greeted me warmly and invited me to come inside the tent where a group of student leaders were meeting, but when Jianguo followed me he frowned and barred him: "No, not you!" I explained that the man was my brother. My friend looked incredulous. Here, in his native city, Jianguo stood out as a country bumpkin. And, in 1989, the democracy activists were members of an urban élite. My friend's snobbery must have driven home the message to Jianguo: *Stand aside. This is not your revolution.*

Soon, it was nobody's revolution. What happened to the Tiananmen protesters on June 4th showed what awaited



those who openly challenged the system. After the massacre, all government ministers were required to demonstrate loyalty to the Party by visiting the few hospitalized soldiers—"heroes in suppressing the counter-revolutionary riot." The novelist Wang Meng, who was then the Minister of Culture, got out of it by claiming ill health and checking into a hospital himself. He was promptly removed from office.

During the spring demonstrations, reporters for the *People's Daily* had held up a famous banner on the street: "We don't want to lie anymore!" It was a rare moment of collective courage. Two months later, they were forced to lie again. A journalist at the newspaper described to me how the campaign to purge dissent was conducted there: meetings were held at every section, and everybody had to attend. Each employee was required to give a day-by-day account of his activities during the Tiananmen period, and then to express his attitude toward the official verdict. "Every one of us did this—no one dared to say no," he said, recalling the scene seventeen years later. "Can you imagine how humiliating it was? We were crushed, instantly and completely."

Among journalists and intellectuals, a brief interval of exhilaration had given way to depression and fear. Many withdrew from public life and turned to private pursuits. (A few, like me, moved to the United States or Europe.) Scholars embarked on esoteric research—hence the *Guoxue Re*, the early-nineties craze for studying the Chinese classics. A friend of mine, the editor of a magazine that had been an influential forum for critical reporting, turned his attention to cuisine and classical music. Meanwhile, Jianguo, whose residual faith in the Communist Party and in Mao had perished on June 4th, was adrift, both politically and personally.

The driver of the gypsy cab was a stocky man with a rugged, weather-beaten face, and wore a cheap, oily-looking blazer. He was leaning on a Jetta, smoking a cigarette, when I got out of the prison snack shop. On this particular afternoon, three years ago, I was the last visitor to leave. As soon as he saw me, he took one hard draw on the cigarette and flicked it away.

"Good thing you're still here," I said as I got into the car, "or I'd have had a long walk to the bus stop."

"I was waiting for you," he said simply, and started the engine.

I told him my city address. "Thirty yuan," he said. I agreed, and we were on our way. At the end of the long asphalt road, the car turned right, onto a wider street, passing enormous mounds of construction material. In the distance, a line of silos was silhouetted against the horizon. Though we were just a forty-minute drive from the city, everywhere you looked there were old factories, low piles of rubble, industrial-waste dumps, half-deserted farm villages on the brink of being bulldozed and "developed." The farm I'd been sent to work on when I was in my late teens was just a few miles away.

I was in my usual post-visit mood: tired and unsociable. I closed my eyes, and drowsed until a sharp horn woke me. When I opened my eyes, there were cars everywhere: we had got off the expressway and had entered the maw of downtown traffic. We were hardly moving. It was about four o'clock, the beginning of rush hour.

"You were visiting your brother, weren't you?" the driver asked.

My eyes met the driver's in the rear-view mirror. "How did you know?"

"Oh, we know the Second Prison folks pretty well. My father used to work there. Your brother is a Democracy Party guy, right?"

"You know about them?"

"Oh, yes, they want a multiparty system. How many years did he get?"

"Nine. He's halfway through."

"Getting any sentence reduction?"

"Nope, because he doesn't admit to any crime."

The driver spat out the window. "What they did is no crime! But it's useless to sit in a prison. Is he in touch with Wuer Kaixi?"

This gave me a start. Wuer Kaixi was a charismatic student leader of Tiananmen Square, who, after years of exile in the United States, now lives in Taiwan. "No! How could he be?"

"But you know some foreigners, don't you? You should tell your brother to get out, and get together with the folks in America and Taiwan. Most important thing is: get some guns! How

can you beat the Communist Party? Only by armed struggle!"

"That's an interesting idea," I said, taken aback and trying to hide it. "But then China would be in a war. It would make for bloody chaos."

"That would be great!" the driver said.

I was appalled. "If that happened, don't you worry that the biggest victims would be ordinary people?"

"The ordinary people are the biggest victims already!" the driver replied, his face mottled with fury. "You look at this city—at what kind of life the officials and the rich people have, and what kind of shitty life we have."

During the next ten minutes, while navigating traffic on Chang'an Avenue, the driver told me about himself. He had worked in the same state plant for more than twenty years, first as a machine operator, later as a truck driver. Then, a few years ago, the plant went bankrupt and shut down. All the workers were let go with only meagre severance pay.

"But they must give you partial medical insurance," I said. I was thinking about three high-school friends with whom I've stayed in touch over the years: all three women were state factory workers now in their forties, all were laid off, but all have since found new jobs, and are making more money than before. Two of them even own their homes.

"The insurance is a piece of shit!" the driver replied. "It doesn't cover anything. I'm scared of getting sick. If I'm sick, I'm done for. For twenty years we worked for them, and this is how they got rid of us!" He spat again. "You look at this city, all these fancy buildings and restaurants. All for the rich people! People like us can't afford anything!"

On both sides of Chang'an Avenue, new skyscrapers and giant billboards stood under a murky sky. When it comes to architecture and design, most of this new Beijing looks like some provincial official's dream of modernization. It's clear that there is a lot of money in Beijing and a great many people are living better than before. But the gap between the rich and the poor has widened. I wondered whether Jianguo, or someone like him, could be the kind of leader that people like this aggrieved cabdriver were

waiting for. Under the banner of social justice, they could vent their rage against China's new order.

MERCURY DRESSING

Despite the emotions that the Tiananmen massacre had awakened in Jianguo, he had a more pressing matter to deal with that year: he had to make a living. Legally, Jianguo and his wife were "black" persons: they had no residential papers, no apartment, no job. Worse still, they had no marketable skills. So for a period they stayed with relatives and took temporary jobs at an adult-education school that Jianguo's younger brother, Jianyi, had started. Jianguo worked as a janitor, his wife as a bookkeeper. The school was a success, mainly because it offered prep courses for the Test of English as a Foreign Language. During the chill that followed Tiananmen, studying English was becoming ever more popular, and TOEFL was crucial for applying to foreign schools. Jianyi was growing rich, fast. It was an awkward reversal of roles. The two brothers had very different personalities: next to his serious, ambitious, and hard-working big brother, Jianyi was always viewed as a baby-faced "hooligan": he goofed off at school, chased girls, and squandered his money on dining out and having a good time. But in the new China the free-spending playboy was thriving. At first, he'd wanted Jianguo to help him manage the business, but Jianguo declined; he preferred to have more time to read and think, and being a janitor allowed for that. "He is always interested in saving China, but he can't even save himself!" Jianyi once said to me about Jianguo. I wondered how Jianguo felt about pushing a mop around for his little brother.

Jianguo didn't stay on the job long. In the following decade, he moved frequently, from apartment to apartment, and from job to job, mainly low-level office work. But he seemed to have decided that he'd spent enough time reading and thinking; he was eager to try something bigger. After 1992, when the society was seized by an entrepreneurial fever, Jianguo tried a number of ventures. He got involved in a scheme to buy coal in the north and sell it in the south. He set up a factory producing a new licorice soda. (It tasted like cough syrup.) He ran business-training programs. But he al-

To steal a glance and, anxious, see
Him slipping into transparency—
The feathered helmet already in place,
Its shadow fallen across his face
(His hooded sex its counterpart)—
Unsteadies the routines of the heart.
If I reach out and touch his wing,
What harm, what help might he then bring?

But suddenly he disappears,
As so much else has down the years . . .
Until I feel him deep inside
The emptiness, preoccupied.
His nerve electrifies the air.
His message is his being there.

—J. D. McClatchy

ways ended up either quitting the job or closing the shop. By the summer of 1997, the last time I saw him before he was arrested, he had filed for bankruptcy several times. His personal life was in disarray as well. He had divorced his wife of nearly twenty years and married a young, pretty girl from Inner Mongolia who worked in the soda factory. This second marriage lasted less than a year, collapsing as soon as the business did, and Jianguo ended up moving in with his daughter.

By then, Jihong ("Inheriting Red") had been renamed Huiyi ("Wisdom and Pleasure"). The girl attended a community college, and spent her time reading pulp romances and chatting with her girlfriends. But she was devoted to her father. When she graduated, in 1998, she got a job as a front-desk receptionist at the upscale Jinglun Hotel, and turned over half her salary to him. It was clear to both of them, by now, that he wasn't cut out for business. Then, in 1998, Jianyi died, of a brain tumor, and Jianguo inherited his Beijing apartment. Finally, Jianguo had a place that he could call his own. With a home, and the help of his daughter, he was free to do what he wanted.

That August, I received a long, wistful letter from Jianguo. Jianyi's death, at the age of forty-four, was obviously a shock. "He's gone, and the sense of life's bitter shortness presses on me more ur-

gently," Jianguo wrote. "Yesterday was my forty-seventh birthday. Will my remaining twenty or thirty years also slip away in the blink of an eye?" Now he looked back on his existence:

My whole life I have had a strong mind but my fate has not been good. Over the past few decades I have been fighting this fate, clenching my teeth and not crying. I am an idealist. For the ideal of democracy, I quit the Party; for the ideal of freedom, I quit my job, over and again; for the ideal of love, I divorced, over and again. To this day I am, intellectually, professionally, financially and emotionally, a "vagabond." . . . The Chinese market is now in a slump, and the majority of businesses are not doing well. China, too, is floating in wind and storm, not knowing where it is heading. When will there be an opportunity for people like me to rise up with the flagpole of rebellion?

Jianguo hadn't changed, I remember thinking with a vague sense of foreboding. Within the striving, clueless businessman was a rebel waiting for a new cause.

What I did not know was that Jianguo had already found it. A couple of years earlier, he had met a man named Xu Wenli, a former railway electrician and a veteran dissident from the Democracy Wall period. That was a brief political thaw in the late nineteen-seventies, when, on a wall at a busy intersection in the heart of Beijing, people put up posters, essays, poems, and mimeographed articles, attracting huge crowds who read and discussed what had been posted. (In late 1979, the government cracked down, and cleaned it up.) When

a friend introduced Jianguo to Xu Wenli, he had just emerged from a dozen years in prison. The two men had passionate discussions about Chinese politics, but at first they also planned to go into business together. One idea was to start a car-rental company. They did some market surveys, and decided on their own business titles: Xu would be the chairman of the board, Jianguo the vice-chairman. In the end, the venture didn't work out; a loan that Xu was counting on never materialized.

In early 1998, the atmosphere in China was unusually relaxed—the government was negotiating for membership in the World Trade Organization; President Clinton was coming to visit—and small groups of dissidents in different cities decided to take advantage of the new mood, moving to form an opposition party. They settled on the name China Democracy Party. Xu assumed the title of the chairman of the C.D.P.'s Beijing branch, Jianguo that of the vice-chairman, the two reclaiming their business titles for a loftier cause. With peculiar daring, or naïveté, the officers of the C.D.P. decided to do everything openly: they tried to register the party at the civil-affairs bureau, they posted statements and articles on the Internet, they talked to foreign reporters. For a few months, the government allowed these activities, but, shortly after Clinton's visit, in June, a crackdown began, and a first wave of arrests and trials took place. Xu Wenli, among others, received a thirteen-year sentence. Jianguo remained free but was followed by four security agents every day. He assumed the title of the party's executive chairman and carried on: he called meetings and urged the few C.D.P. members who came to stand firm; he posted new statements on the Internet, expressing his political views and demanding the release of Xu Wenli and his other jailed comrades. When the police finally arrested Jianguo, in June of 1999, he had long been ready for them. He had even taken to carrying around a toothbrush.

Heroic deeds are not appropriate to everyday life," the Czech dissident Ludvík Vaculík wrote, in the nineteen-seventies. "Heroism is acceptable in exceptional situations, but these must not last too long." Those words were

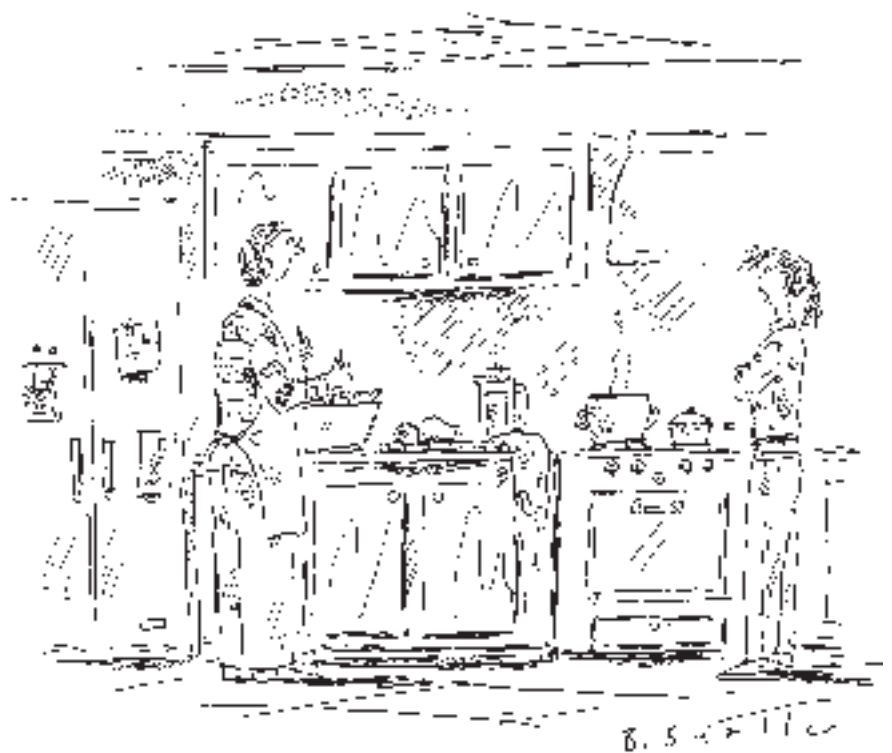
born out by the tenor of post-Tiananmen Beijing. Over time, a semblance of normalcy returned. Throughout the nineteen-nineties, while new market reforms were launched and people's energies were directed toward the pursuit of wealth, the Party established clear guidelines about which topics could be publicly discussed and which topics could not (such as the infamous "three Ts": Tiananmen, Taiwan, and Tibet). As the economy boomed, the ranks of the educated élite splintered: some plunged into commerce, some—notably the economists and the applied scientists—built careers selling their expertise to the government and to corporations. Artists and scholars scrambled to adapt to the marketplace.

Gradually, a tacit consensus emerged, which was captured in the title of a book published in the late nineteen-nineties: "Gaobie Geming" ("Farewell, Revolution"). The book was written by two of the star intellectuals of the previous decade, Li Zehou, a philosopher and historian, and Liu Zaifu, a literary critic. Both men had been hugely influential figures during the movements that led up to Tiananmen. Both became involved with the Tiananmen demonstrations, and ended up living in the United

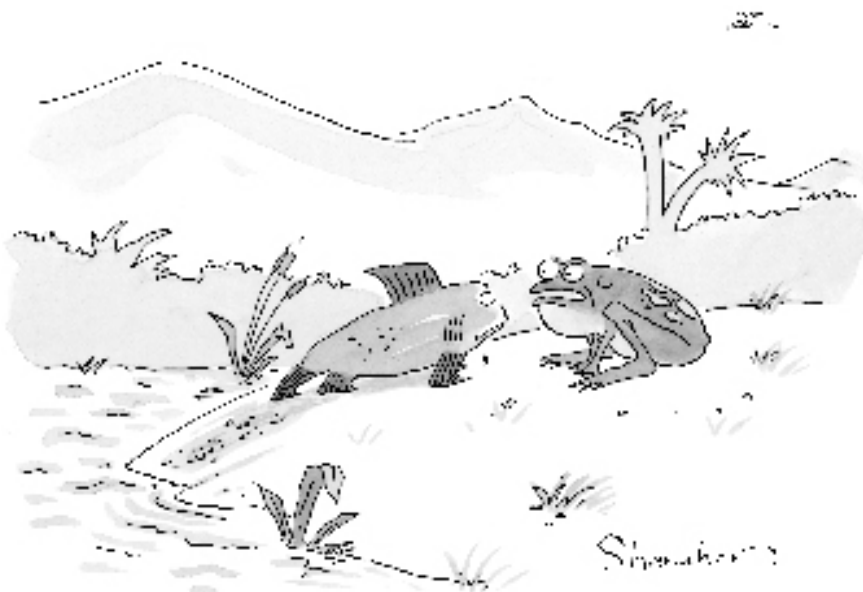
States in the nineties. Yet their book was a scathing critique of the radicals and the revolutionaries. Looking back upon the past century of Chinese history, Li and Liu observed that attempts to bring about radical change had always resulted either in disaster or in tyranny. China was too big, its problems too numerous and complex, for any quick fix. Incremental reform, not revolution, was the right approach. In a separate article, Li also laid out four successive phases of development—economic progress, personal freedom, social justice, political democracy—that stood between China and full modernity. In other words, achieving real democracy wasn't a matter of throwing a switch.

These were the arguments of two smart, reasonable Chinese with liberal-democratic sympathies. And they struck a chord with other smart, reasonable Chinese who were equally sympathetic toward liberalism but increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of radical change. Though the book was published in Hong Kong, it gave voice to a subtle reconfiguration in the attitude of mainland élites during the nineties.

The new consensus was shaped by a curious combination of trends. Outside China, the exiled pro-democracy move-



"Oh no, not dinner again!"



"The first thing you need to do is update your résumé."

ment had foundered, beset by factionalism. Inside China, the tone for public life was Deng Xiaoping's mantra "No debate"—that is, forget ideological deliberation and focus on economic development. While the technocrats moved to the politburo and pushed market reforms, the ideologues stayed in the propaganda ministry and tried to muffle voices of criticism. Meanwhile, the economy kept growing, at breakneck speed. As China integrated into the international marketplace, four hundred million Chinese were lifted out of poverty. A new affluent class began to emerge in the cities and coastal areas, where the younger generation, reared on the pop culture of consumerism, shied away from politics. As beneficiaries of the boom, they were generally "pro-China"; nationalist sentiments were growing. But "pro-democracy"? It's unclear whether these young people cared enough to give it much thought.

So when Jianguo and his comrades formed the China Democracy Party, in 1998, they not only failed to grasp the limits of the government's tolerance; they failed to take the measure of the national mood. For the most part, they lacked deep roots in any particular community; they weren't well educated or connected to the country's élites; and they had little contact with other liberals and reformers. A few, like Xu Wenli, were marginalized

because of their former prison records and their continued refusal to recant or compromise. They had the courage of their convictions, and not much else. Some, like Jianguo, had tried to do something "constructive," and join the entrepreneurial ferment, but got nowhere. They had, in short, lost their way in the new era.

When I first started visiting Jianguo in jail, I could tell, despite his disavowals, how much he cared about the outside world's response to what he'd done, and to what had been done to him. So I tried to tell him every piece of "positive news" I could find. His eyes would light up, or he'd assume a look of solemn resolve. My task got harder as the C.D.P. faded from the news. In late 2002, Xu Wenli, the star dissident, was released on medical parole and was flown to the United States on Christmas Eve. Afterward, coverage of the other jailed C.D.P. members largely ceased.

Once, I had a sobering conversation with a woman while waiting for the prison interview. She was visiting her younger brother, who had killed another man in a quarrel and had been sentenced to twenty years. "He was in the restaurant business and the guy owed him money," she explained. "He was young, too rash." She asked me what my brother had done. When I told her, she was flabbergasted. "Organizing a party?" she

said, and blinked as though I were speaking in tongues. "I didn't know our country still had political prisoners. I thought everyone here got in trouble because of something to do with money."

The last time I saw the C.D.P. mentioned in a major publication was in March, 2002, in a profile in the *New York Times Magazine*. The subject of the article was my friend John Kamm, a former American businessman who became a full-time campaigner for Chinese prisoners of conscience. The article dismissed the C.D.P. as "a toothless group of a few hundred members writing essays mainly for one another." The line made me wince. The C.D.P. men could take pride in their status as "subverters" of a totalitarian state. And they could forgive their countrymen for not rising up with them: they are heroic precisely because most other people are not. But how could they face this verdict—of laughable irrelevance—from the *Times*, a symbol of the freedom and democracy for which they'd sacrificed everything? Toothless men writing for one another: the words were heartless. They were also true. And perhaps it didn't much matter that these men were toothless because their powerful opponent had rendered them so; that they were writing only for each other because in China a message like theirs was not allowed to spread further. I felt like weeping. But I wasn't sure whether it was because I was sorry for Jianguo or angry at him—for being such a fool. While he sits in his tiny cell, day after day, year after year, the world has moved on.

"You can't say the world has forgotten about him," John Kamm insisted, when we spoke not long ago. "I haven't! I care about what happens to your brother!" We were drinking coffee in the lobby café of a Beijing hotel where John was staying during one of his trips to China.

John is, by his own description, "a human-rights salesman." Formerly the chairman of the American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong, he had a lucrative business career, with a chauffeured Mercedes, maids, and a condo in a prime location. Then, in the mid-nineteen-nineties, he gave all that up to become an advocate for political prisoners in China. Shuttleing frequently between Beijing and

Washington, D.C., and meeting with high-ranking officials on both sides, John uses everything in his power—hard data, personal connections, cajoling, name-dropping, bargaining—to make sure that the issue of Chinese political prisoners doesn't go away.

He's a big man with a sonorous voice, earthy humor, and gregarious charm. He's also a devout Catholic with a missionary fervor, and his conversation glistens with Biblical cadences. ("Justice will flow down like a river and righteousness a mighty stream.") He has been my main adviser on all questions concerning Jianguo and my prison visits, and if Jianguo has been treated better than some political detainees it's probably because of John's efforts. But he acknowledges that Jianguo's name has fallen off the annual list of political prisoners compiled by various Western governments and watchdog groups. I once asked John what he would do if he were in Jianguo's position. John thought for a moment and told me a story about what had happened in the late nineteen-forties when Bertolt Brecht, then living in the United States, was subpoenaed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He agreed to testify, assured the committee that he had no sympathy for Communism, and was thanked for cooperating. Then he flew to Europe, and ended up in East Berlin, where he doesn't seem to have given a second thought to anything he might have professed on the stand. "If I was arrested, I'd do exactly what Brecht did," John told me. "I'd lie to save my ass. Then I'd have a life!"

I sighed. I consider John, who abandoned his career to devote himself to the plight of strangers in someone else's country, to be an American hero. So, if even a man like him would do what was necessary to stay out of jail, why must my brother be so stubborn? Doesn't it make more sense to chip at a wall, little by little, than to bash your head against it?

The harshest comments I have heard about Jianguo come from his own mother. "It's not bravery," she once told me. "It's arrogance and stupidity. He's had a hero complex from childhood. The problem is, he's not a hero. He is a foot soldier who wants to be a general, but without the talent and the skills of a general."

Aunt Zhong was a beautiful woman when she was young. Purged as a "right-

ist" in 1957, she lost her job and labored in a camp for years. She is now a little white-haired woman in her seventies, with a kind smile and swollen, aching legs. She has no illusions about the Communist Party, but thinks that change can occur only slowly. In her view, the C.D.P. was "banging an egg against a rock." She had tried to talk Jianguo out of his involvement in the C.D.P., by reminding him of his responsibilities to his own family. Jianguo had replied with a classical saying: "*Zhong xiao bu neng liang quan*"—"One must choose between loyalty and filial devotion." Upset by Jianguo's obstinacy, she did not visit him for two years after his arrest.

Her exasperation is reciprocated. Aunt Zhong and I once went to visit Jianguo together. During the interview, we took turns speaking with him by phone. At one point, Aunt Zhong started talking about how China was too big a country to change quickly, how the situation was gradually improving and many things were getting better. I watched Jianguo's face darken steadily, until he said something and Aunt Zhong handed the phone to me. As soon as I got on, Jianguo said in a voice shaking with emotion, "I don't want to listen to her! She only makes me angry!"

After the visit, I told Aunt Zhong about a conversation I'd had with Han Dongfang, a workers'-union activist who had been jailed after Tiananmen. When we met, Han had been living in Hong Kong for many years, hosting a radio call-in show on Chinese labor problems. His credentials as a dissident were impeccable: during his two years in jail, he was tortured, got violently sick, and nearly died. Refusing to yield, he staged a hunger strike. Unlike many Chinese dissidents, though, Han is decidedly urbane (stylish clothes, fluent English, polite manners) and reflective about his past and his personal weaknesses. He was critical of Chinese dissidents on the whole, including himself. "Please don't get me started on that topic," Han told me. "I

don't have anything nice to say about the lot." He believed that many Chinese dissidents were afflicted with an inflated self-regard. "It's a sickness so many of us are not aware of," he said. But, Han said, one should not discuss these things with a dissident in prison. "Because to get through prison you need to mobilize all your strength, to be self-righteous and believe that you are a hero," he said. "You need that kind of mental arrogance to prop up your spirit. You cannot afford self-doubt."

Aunt Zhong listened to what Han had told me, and accepted the point. She promised not to discuss politics again with Jianguo. "I just hope he will get through his term and come out in good health," she said, shaking her head. "After that, maybe we can all have a good talk with him. I hope he will change his way of thinking and not get back in jail again."

The political landscape in China has grown more complex since the days of the C.D.P. crackdown. After years of rapid growth, China is now the fourth-largest economy in the world, poised to surpass Germany and Japan before long, and widely expected to catch up with the United States around 2050. It has the highest foreign-currency reserve in the world. The transformation, however, has been accompanied by endemic corruption, environmental destruction, a widening income gap, and unravelling social services. The policies of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao have tempered some of these problems, by eliminating the agricultural tax, paying more attention to the "weaker communities," and taking measures to curb graft. But there's a growing sense that deeper accommodations must be made: on the one side is a swelling mass of disadvantaged people who bear the brunt of social inequity and want more reform and fairness; on the other is a large body of mid-level bureaucrats who are in a mercenary alliance with business interests and resist any structural change. Everyone knows that, in the political realm, something will eventually have to give.

Agitation for political reform has, in the past four or five years, grown more assertive, while taking on more varied and artful forms: instead of using the fraught term *ren quan* ("human rights"),



for example, people talk about *fa zhi* (“the rule of law”) and *wei quan* (“defending civil rights”) to discuss consumer rights or migrant-labor rights or private-property rights. Each year, there are more cases in which journalists expose corruption, lawyers take up civil-rights suits in court, scholars investigate the “blank spots” of history (the Sino-Japanese War, the great famine of 1959–62, the Cultural Revolution), publishers defy taboos and print “sensitive” books. From time to time, a statement or a petition is signed by a group of people, though they usually take pains to present themselves as an assortment of individuals, rather than as an organization. Acts of this nature tend to be sporadic and spontaneous, although, with the rapid expansion of the Internet and international communication, news travels fast, and the task of controlling information becomes more daunting. On the Chinese Internet, the voices of criticism are so diverse that censors face the equivalent of a guerrilla war with a thousand fronts. For every offender who gets caught and punished, a hundred get away. These critics can’t be easily located, isolated, and destroyed, the way the C.D.P. was.

Meanwhile, globalization has made the government and the leaders more mindful of their own image. The official talk of “peaceful rising” and “building a harmonious society” in recent years reflects a softer approach in both international and domestic politics. On the

whole, the political atmosphere in China really has eased, and people are a little less afraid. In private and in public, Chinese discussions of political reform are getting louder.

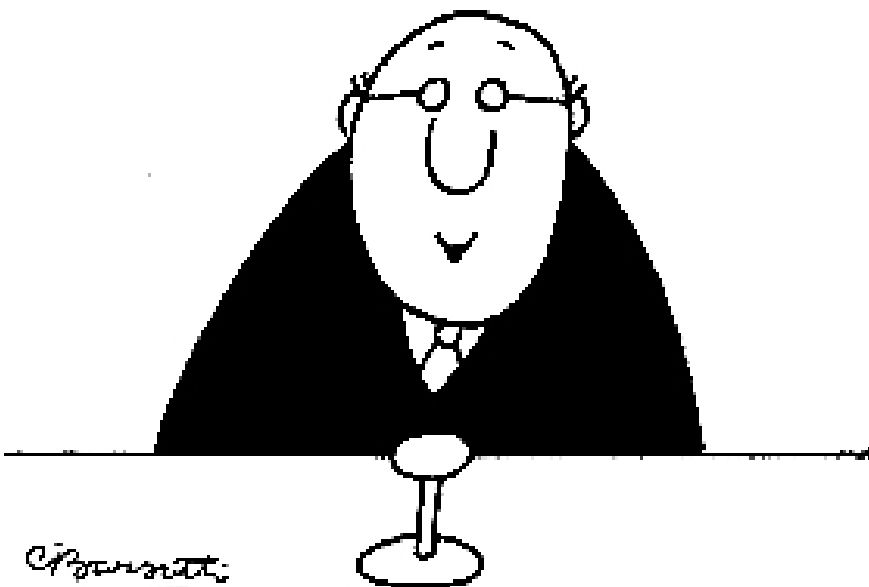
So Aunt Zhong had a point when she told Jianguo that the situation in China is improving. And not everyone has forgotten the C.D.P. incident. Several of my liberal Chinese friends have told me that, thanks to men like Jianguo, who tested “the baseline” with their lives, others now know exactly how far they can push. As one of them, Cui Weiping, put it, “The officials think of us as moderates because of them. They are the reason we are not in prison. For this alone we are grateful.” Cui, a literary and film critic, has translated Havel’s essays into Chinese. She writes publicly about the need to build civil society in order to battle totalitarian culture. She respects men like Jianguo but says that “real change will come from small, ignoble places. Social movements, not the élite or lone heroes, are going to make history.”

Another prominent liberal figure, Xu Youyu, a philosopher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a forceful advocate of political reform, told me that he would never make “foolish decisions” such as those made by the C.D.P. founders. “It was stupid in terms of political strategy,” he said. Xu, who is well-versed in Western analytical philosophy and liberal theory, emphasizes the importance of “rational analysis” before tak-

ing any action. “Perhaps they were eager to set a record—to be the first to openly form an opposition party in Communist China,” Xu said. “If that’s what motivated them, it’s the sort of human weakness I could forgive.” Like Jianguo, Xu had been a Red Guard, and he has written a candid and moving memoir about the Cultural Revolution, with soul-searching reflections on his own youthful delusions. He signed a copy for Jianguo and asked me to bring it to him. Not surprisingly, the censor at the prison book desk rejected it.

But Jianguo isn’t an educator, like Xu. He’s a man of action. The C.D.P. founders are all men of action, and history has not been kind to them. I remember something I heard a Chinese C.E.O. once say: “The person who takes one step ahead of others is a leader. The person who takes three steps ahead of others is a martyr.” The C.D.P. men are martyrs. I used to console myself with the old Chinese saying “*Bu yi chengbai lun yingxiong*”—“Do not judge a hero by victory or defeat.” Yet Jianguo also seems a mulish simpleton, a man with a black-and-white vision of politics, oblivious of all shades of gray, not to mention the rainbow of hues that you’d need to paint a semblance of Chinese life today. In other moods, I would think of Confucius’ remark about one of his disciples, Zilu: “He has daring, but little else.”

Neither attitude seems quite right to me now. I recall a conversation I had with Perry Link, a distinguished China scholar at Princeton, about Wei Jingsheng. Wei is Jianguo’s personal hero, a legendary figure in the Chinese democracy movement. Back in 1978, when he was a twenty-eight-year-old electrician, Wei had the audacity to post essays on the Democracy Wall demanding democratization; Deng Xiaoping, he said, was a dictator. Wei was charged, absurdly, with “leaking state secrets,” and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. During his time behind bars, through sickness and periods of solitary confinement, he never backed away from his views. Once he had been released, he immediately resumed his pro-democracy writing and activities, and was sent back to prison. After serving two years of a fourteen-year sentence, he was freed, ostensibly for “medical reasons,”



“It wasn’t a lie, Senator, it was a larger truth.”

and flown to the United States, where he kept up his personal campaign against the Chinese government. The West must not be fooled by its reforms, he warns, for the Communist Party will never change its true nature. What's certain is that Wei will never change. Over time, many of his early admirers have come to see him as a man with a simplistic, static vision of China and the Chinese Communist Party. In fact, the Party appears to be far more agile and adaptive than Wei Jingsheng.

I told Perry about my ambivalence toward people like my brother and Wei. I admired their courage, their deep sense of justice, but felt uncomfortable with their almost religious sense of self-certainty. "People like Wei Jingsheng are like the North Pole," he told me. "They are frozen, but they define a pole."

Yes, I thought, my brother is frozen, with his unchanging, unchangeable vision of what is to be done. He reduces a vast, complicated tangle of problems to a single point source of evil: the Communist Party. End one-party rule, and the evil is eradicated. Even as he is locked up, he has locked the world out, refusing to listen to anything that disturbs his convictions, closing his eyes to a reality ridden with contradictions, ambiguities, and possibilities. For all this, Perry is right: people like Jianguo define a pole.

And, of course, those who locked him up are on the wrong side of history. Liu Ge, a friend who is a partner at an illustrious Beijing law firm, likes to remind me of this. "All the countries that have succeeded in modernization have a multiparty system, while those sticking to one-party rule are losers," Liu said. "Democracy makes a country win and dictatorship makes a country lose. The rulers today want to make China better, and they have done a lot of things well, but they cannot face their ugly past, how they turned China into a place with a hundred holes and a thousand wounds, the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward, and so on. So they are not confident enough to take radical critics like your brother."

Gradually, though, I have come to feel a certain degree of impatience with the impulse to see Jianguo mainly through the lens of Chinese politics. I'd rather see my brother not as an integer in the realm of political calculation but as a



flawed but admirable human being, with perhaps one striking oddity—his uncompromising insistence on upholding his idealism at any cost. A novelist friend of mine who has listened to me talk about Jianguo over the years once compared him to the creatures she'd seen in the 2005 documentary "March of the Penguins." "The penguins are silly, laughable creatures—they are fat, they waddle, they fall on their belly, and they are single-minded," she said. "But when they are in the water they are beautiful! What your brother does politically is absurd, but his idealism and his courage in their purity are beautiful."

Maybe the question of whether Jianguo is a hero or a fool is beside the point. Above and beyond the consequences of his action is the moral meaning of his action. By keeping his promise to himself, he has fulfilled his own vision of a righteous life, his own sense of purpose. During one of my prison visits, I mentioned that a former classmate of Jianguo's, an expert on rural issues, had just won a prestigious official award. "That's good," Jianguo replied. "He helps the reform from within the system. I'm outside the system. There are a lot of big intellectuals who can help reform with their knowledge. I don't have enough systematic education to do that. But people like us have a role to play, too." He smiled at me. "Character is fate.

Just remember this: your brother is a simple, old-fashioned, outdated, and stubborn man. Once I make up my mind, I stick to it." In the past few years, he has lost much of his hair, and a recent attack of shingles had left some scabs on his forehead, but his face was as serene as I'd ever seen it.

With a year and a half to go, Jianguo has started talking about how many books he'd like to finish reading. "Really, it's not bad here," he assured me recently. "I'll get out in 2008, and if you are in Beijing then we'll watch the Olympics together." We spoke about several of our Shanghai cousins, all successful businessmen and lawyers. "I'm very happy they do well in their business," Jianguo said. "But each person has his own goal. To achieve democracy in a country, some people must offer their blood and lives in the struggle. Look at South Korea, or Taiwan: there had been so many crackdowns, so many prisoners. But, wave after wave, individuals rose up. They gave their lives to pave the way to their democracy."

His eyes were intent, his gestures expansive; for a moment, you could tell, he had even forgotten that he was in prison. "China is a huge country," he went on. "We have 1.3 billion people. We ought to have at least a few men who are willing to do this." ♦