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## CHINA

A lesson in diplomacy

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### **John Fitzgerald argues that democracy matters in Australia's dealings with China**

PUBLIC DISCUSSION since the airing of allegations by First Secretary Chen Yonglin and former security officer Hao Fengjun that a large Chinese spy network operates in Australia has focused on the facts of the case, the reactions of federal government departments, the response of Chinese ambassador Fu Ying, and the lessons that might be drawn for Australia. Missing from the discussion so far is some understanding of the historical background to this affair one that offers clues to its resolution. That background is the struggle for democracy in China. This has been regarded as a Chinese domestic affair since the crackdown in 1989, but looms once again as a crucial issue in China's relations with Australia.

In September 1999, the courageous Chinese democratic activist Wei Jingsheng stood in line outside Parliament House in Canberra to catch a glimpse of Chinese President Jiang Zemin as he made his way to a formal lunch with Prime Minister John Howard. For the occasion Wei had composed a brief hand-written message that he hoped to pass on to Jiang. Translated, the message read:

Honourable Mr Jiang Zemin,

This is not our first encounter, and as you can already hear what I have to say through public channels there is no need for me to go into any detail here. I simply want to alert you to something.

China is bound to change. In thinking about the changes that lie ahead, do you want to deal with reasonable people, or do you prefer dealing with unreasonable people? This is the biggest question that you face, and the biggest question confronting your party.

It is easy to contact me through my New York Office [details follow]

Wei Jingsheng [1]

The question Wei framed for Jiang touched directly on the dilemma the Falun Gong movement presented to the Chinese government in 1999. Not long before Wei penned his message, the government launched a massive onslaught on the Falun Gong T'ai-Ch'i movement in China. The assault flowed from the unauthorised assembly of an estimated 10,000 Falun Gong members who converged on Beijing from around the country in April, catching city authorities unawares when they gathered outside the central government's residential

compound near Tiananmen Square.[2] Tellingly, Jiang's first reaction was to excoriate the county, city and provincial officials who had allowed Falun Gong practitioners to travel from their jurisdictions to Beijing without monitoring their departures. Local officials were sacked for failing to keep a close eye on their patch. At the same time, Jiang classified the Falun Gong movement as an evil cult bent on bringing down the government and Communist Party and banned its practice in China.

At the time Wei drafted his letter, China was growing so rapidly under the impact of market reforms that the Communist Party state was confronting the limits of its capacity for managing, manipulating and controlling a rapidly diversifying national community. The Falun Gong movement was a sign of rapid social change and a measure of the party-government's failure to monitor and control it.

A decade earlier, the authorities had turned down an opportunity to manage change by dealing with democratic reformers who spoke the language of reason, as Wei called it, when they appealed for a free press and the rights of organisation and assembly in the democracy movement of 1989. Indeed, Wei himself had led such calls in 1978-79, during the Democracy Wall movement, which was suppressed by Deng Xiaoping.[3] Having dismissed the voice of reason in 1979 and even more brutally in 1989, the government confronted, in 1999, a host of Falun Gong practitioners whose beliefs revolved around notions of miracle cures, alien invaders, the supernatural powers of the supreme leader and other claims that lay outside the range of any reasonable warrant.

In asking whether the president preferred to deal with reasonable or unreasonable people in planning for the future, Wei was simply reminding Jiang that by crushing reasonable aspirations for democratic reform his Communist Party had unleashed irrational forces that would compel China to respond and change in ways that could well force the country to spin out of control.

What are the facts and the lessons of the case? In 1999 Wei's warning was directed to the Chinese government. Today it could well be directed toward the Australian government and Australian citizens who live in fear of harassment from Beijing. Leaving aside the rationality or otherwise of the Falun Gong religious movement, the liberty to believe and practise religion is a fundamental right in Western liberal democracies. Freedom of religion is not negotiable. If it can be established that China's secret security system has spun out of control in Australia in response to Falun Gong and other alleged threats to the Communist Party state, then Chinese attempts to suppress dissent at home becomes a matter of concern not just to the Australian Federal Police, or to Foreign Affairs, but to all citizens of this country.

The size and impact of the Chinese informant network in Australia reaches far beyond the small cohort of cloak and dagger intelligence operatives who are based in embassies, consulates, information bureaux, travel agencies and other legitimate businesses. Like the old East German Stasi informant system, China's informant network is built on the benign principles of neighbourhood

watch under the less benign supervision of paid operatives. These operatives gather and file information from a large number of formally recruited informers and informal volunteers in Australia, who report on their fellow students and working colleagues, before passing it on to higher authorities in the intelligence system back in China. It is estimated that one in 50 East Germans was an unpaid Stasi informant. With 40,000 to 50,000 visitors from China in Australia at any one time, one thousand informers in Australia is well within the range of plausibility. And given the flexible scalability of the operation, Chen Yonglin's estimate of 1000 informants in Australia as likely underestimates as overstates the extent of the informant network at any point in time.

The system has been functioning since diplomatic relations were first established in 1972, a time when Australian intelligence agencies were equally active in recruiting spies and informants to keep an eye on Australians in China. The scale was modest. This changed exponentially after the Beijing massacre of 1989. The Chinese informant network in Australia expanded to the point of recruiting a significant proportion of Chinese visitors to the country. These recruits informed embassy and consular officials about people the security services placed under surveillance, and occasionally carrying message back from officials to harass Chinese-Australian citizens.

The system soon came to embrace the principle of plausible deniability. Throughout the 1990s, Chinese-Australian democracy activists were warned that their families in China would suffer if they attended public rallies in this country. Non-Chinese academics were pointedly advised that their universities' educational programs in China would suffer if they spoke at the same rallies. In some cases warnings were issued directly by consular officials. So a professor at Monash University, Bruce Jacobs, was warned that his access to China could be restricted if he spoke out. But in many cases warnings were conveyed through intermediaries whose roles could plausibly be denied by officials carrying diplomatic passports even though the intermediaries claimed unequivocally to speak on their behalf. These messages conveyed the impression that Chinese officials in this country would not hesitate to threaten Chinese-Australians if they stepped out of line. At no point however could Chinese officials be charged with exercising undue influence in conveying this message to Australian citizens and residents.

The rate of informal surveillance picked up apace after the Falun Gong crackdown in 1999. Colleagues at universities in Australia advise that many of their academic visitors from China were summoned to meetings with local security forces on the eve of their departures from China and told who to contact and who to avoid among Chinese-Australians they might run across in the street. Under the circumstances this was sensible advice given that the visitors would fall under surveillance themselves if they happened to meet up with a suspect person who was already under surveillance. The same visitors were invited to report back on their return to China about any suspicious activities they observed among Chinese-Australians.

In other cases, Chinese-Australian shopkeepers and people going about their

business were warned that their families and friends in China would suffer if they stocked Falun Gong publications or associated with Falun Gong members. In my neighbourhood, one shop closed down shortly after removing suspect Falun Gong texts and discs from its shelves. Not long before the store closed, I asked the proprietor why the materials had been removed. 'You know,' he replied in an indirect form of speech that hinted at intimidation, 'sometimes they can threaten people's families.'

Some might say that we need not be too concerned about this kind of harassment as it affects our friends in China, where surveillance is the currency of daily life. People in Shanghai and Beijing probably find this kind of surveillance less onerous to bear than the systematic repression and mass terror that characterised the Maoist era.[4] What should concern us, however, is indicative evidence of relentless attempts by the Chinese regime to monitor and report on the behaviour of Australian citizens by invisible means.

There is no formal mechanism for dealing with this kind of harassment of Australian citizens. Through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Australian government can and does lodge formal protests with the Chinese government concerning the exercise of 'improper influence' when such claims are fully substantiated. But formal diplomatic protests are extremely rare because substantiating a claim of surveillance or harassment involves two conditions that cannot normally be met.

First, foreign officials on diplomatic passports can be called to account for 'improper influence' only when they are caught red-handed. As the informant system operates through intermediaries without diplomatic status no official is likely to be caught in the act although as Chen Yonglin has shown some may come forward of their own account.

Second, Australians who are intimidated in this way are unlikely to test Chinese government threats to harm their families in China. Putting claims of this kind in writing to support an official complaint of 'improper influence' would be to sign a warrant for the arrest and persecution of their friends and families in China.

In defence of officials in China's Foreign Ministry, it should be recalled that the Communist Party stands above the law in China and behaves towards Chinese officials at home and abroad as menial servants of the party state.[5] Chinese Foreign Affairs officers are hauled over the coals on their return to China if they have not fulfilled their quota of dossiers on Falun Gong practitioners and dissidents, or have failed to make an appropriate number of strident complaints about their host government's relations with Taiwan. The party has little patience for the subtleties of international diplomacy and less inkling of the effects of its actions on public opinion abroad, because it has no domestic experience of being held accountable for anything.

This is where the danger lies for China's relations with Australia. A recent Lowy Institute survey of the standing of other countries in Australian public opinion

placed China sixth overall, well ahead of the US. It would be instructive to see where China rates in the public mind today.[6] By its behaviour the Chinese government runs a real risk of setting loose irrational forces in Australia that don't need much encouragement, history would suggest, to consider China a hostile power. It has long been clear that the people of Australia do not care a great deal about maintaining healthy government-to-government relations when the lives and livelihoods of its citizens are at stake, as the case of Schapelle Corby in Bali clearly illustrates. The same principle could be extended to China with little prompting and, if not properly managed, with damaging consequences.

Leaving aside questions of bureaucratic competence in the handling of Chen Yonglin and Hao Fengjun, four broad lessons can be drawn from recent events. First, China's Foreign Affairs representatives in Australia need to send a clear message home that Australians do not like foreign governments harassing Australians. Failure to heed this message in China could have long-term consequences for the sensible management of relations between our two countries at a time when economic, political and people-to-people links have every reason to grow from strength to strength.

Second, there is little that the Australian Federal Police, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, or the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade can do directly to put an end to the harassment of Australian citizens on the scale revealed by Chen Yonglin. The government is constrained not by a commitment to placing economic interests above basic human rights but simply because Chinese informants in Australia cannot be effectively cautioned within prevailing diplomatic codes. Nevertheless, the Australian government can reinforce the message that Australians do not like foreign governments harassing their fellow citizens by publicly stating and privately restating this proposition at every available opportunity.

Third, given the formidable constraints on government action it is up to the people of Australia to engage in a bit of plain speaking. Bob Brown of the Greens showed during Jiang's visit in 1999 that we do not all need to be dumbfounded by the ambiguities that confront a government in office when it comes to managing relations with China. More recently, Brown has distinguished himself as the only member of parliament capable of talking about Chinese government harassment of Australians without a forked tongue over the week since Chen Yonglin went public in Sydney.

Finally, the case brings home to Australians a lesson that people in China learned many years ago. There will be no end to harassment until the Communist Party is prepared to share power with other contenders in an open society that operates under the rule of law and holds the party accountable to the law. For Australian citizens no less than the citizens of China it is critically important that Communist leaders start to deal with 'rational people', as Wei put it in his letter to Jiang. The Chinese government must start negotiating with those who advocate freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion and, above all, government accountability. Australians who may have

imagined that the call for democracy in China was a domestic Chinese affair are coming to appreciate that it is a matter of concern to us all including those who would wish China well as it seeks to establish its rightful place in the world.

## Notes

1. Wei Jingsheng asked me to pass his letter to President Jiang, a task I tried to do through an intermediary. A copy is in my possession.
2. For the official account of these events see the *People's Daily*, August 13, 1999.
3. Australian China specialist David Goodman captured these events in his book *Beijing Street Voices* (Marion Boyars, 1981). Wei Jingsheng's role in the wider democracy movement is the subject of Paul Monk's new book, *Thunder from the Silent Zone: Rethinking China* (Scribe 2005).
4. For a recent account of terror in the Maoist era see Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Untold Story* (London: Cape, 2005).
5. See for example Minxin Pei, 'China's Governance Crisis', *China Review* 23 (2002) and Suisheng Zhao, 'Political Liberalism without Democratisation', *Journal of Contemporary China* 12:35 (2003).
6. *Australians Speak 2005: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy* (Lowy Institute, 2005).

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