

'I still think my ideas were correct'

Prison fails to dim Wei's democratic principles

His 14 years in jail have only served to enhance Wei Jingsheng's ideas on democracy, social, political and economic development.
GEOFFREY CROTHALL reports.



Changing face of Wei Jingsheng: (from left) in 1979 when he was sentenced to 15 years' jail for counter-revolutionary action; in an early file picture; and after his release last week . . . his appearance may have changed but his belief in democracy remains steadfast.

THE fact that Wei Jingsheng survived more than 14 years in one of the world's toughest jail systems is testament not only to his iron will but also to the singular failure of China's penal system to do what it is supposed to, namely reform criminals through labour.

On the contrary, for China's most famous political prisoner, jail provided an opportunity to further develop and enhance his ideas on democracy, social, political and economic development.

He even wrote to state and Communist Party leaders explaining those ideas and suggesting ways of acting on them. Now he is free, albeit on parole, Mr Wei plans to have those letters published abroad, probably in Hong Kong.

"My thinking has definitely moved forward and become richer since the days of Democracy Wall," he said in an interview with the *Sunday Morning Post*.

"I still think my ideas then were correct but they were relatively simple. I've now had time to expand those ideas."

And, of course, it is not only Mr Wei who has emerged from long periods of imprisonment unbowed and vowing to continue the fight for democracy.

Almost all the political prisoners released this year have proclaimed their faith in democracy to be intact.

"There is a popular song called *I'm Still the Same Old Me*. I think that best expresses my meaning," said Xu Wenli when he was released after more than 12 years in solitary confinement.

Mr Xu, known in jail as Special Prisoner No 1, was arrested in 1981 for "plotting to establish a counter-revolutionary clique" but emerged in May this year unrepentant and repeatedly stressing he had done nothing wrong.

"I committed no crime. What I did, I did for my country," he said. Former leader of the 1989 student movement Wang Dan was likewise defiant after being released from almost four years in jail.

Asked only hours after his release if he would continue his fight for democracy, the former Beijing University student replied: "That is my greatest dream."

Despite suffering in prison, *People's Daily* editor Wu Xuecan and the Xian-based scholar Li Guiren were also "still the same old me" when finally set free.

So what is it about the Chinese penal system which proclaims that all criminals can be reformed into good communist citizens that has so patently failed to work its magic?

Mr Wei explains: "Chinese people are accustomed to brainwashing. It is no longer practised now but in the past it was a common practice, not only among prisoners but also the public.

"But, no matter how many times people are brainwashed, they still have the ability to think. They know what they are being told is not true and this has led to numerous democratic movements. This proves brainwashing is not a successful measure.

"Moreover, ordinary Chinese peo-

ple have all been through the wash and they gradually develop a kind of 'antibody' towards it."

Speaking at his father's apartment in western Beijing last week, Mr Wei said his jailers never even bothered to "educate" him in prison. "They knew their efforts would be in vain, so they decided to save their energy," he said with a chuckle.

Although he has only been out of jail for little more than a week, the for-

year-old electrician and he has mixed feelings about what he sees.

"There has been some progress, although the party is still in control. There is more flexibility. China is changing, so how can the Communist Party remain unchanged?"

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mer Democracy Wall activist has rapidly come to terms with the new Beijing, a city which has undergone tremendous change since 1979.

"At first glance it looks completely different but if you look beneath the surface, the old, poor quality, low-rise housing where a lot of people live has not changed at all, that's still the same," he said.

Social and political change has also come under the critical glare of the 44-

democratic system without revolution but the French Revolution led to autocracy as did the revolutions in China and Russia even though their intentions might have been otherwise.

"It is my view, looking at history, that democracy is very hard to achieve through violent revolution."

But, Mr Wei was hopeful the party would heed the demands for change coming from the public.

"I think the wiser sector [of the party] is gradually getting the upper hand. But I really need more time to observe the situation," he said.

The current generation of leaders, President Jiang Zemin, Premier Li Peng and Vice-Premier Zhu Rongji, was different from those running the show in 1979, he said.

"They are very different in their mannerisms, knowledge and ideas, but who knows to what extent they have really changed?"

Mr Wei is optimistic about the democracy movement, which he has pledged to rejoin, the conditions of his parole permitting.

"The biggest problem with the 1979 movement was that the well-known intellectuals were quite weak and timid. They didn't dare make contact with us," he said.

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better and they all aired their views in public."

Indeed, two of the best known intellectuals in the 1989 movement, Mr Wang and literary critic Liu Xiaobo paid a visit to Mr Wei last Thursday, bringing the modern democracy movement full circle.

Mr Wei spent most of the meeting asking questions about contemporary China and the international situation.

As he explained: "I've got a lot of catching up to do."

From talking to Mr Wei, it is clear reports of him being mentally traumatised by his time in prison are incorrect. His mind is sound and he has wit and ready answers.

Nevertheless, the pain and discomfort Mr Wei suffered during his incarceration should not be underestimated.

He spent almost a decade in the gulags of Qinghai in the far west of China before being moved in 1989 to labour camp to the east of Tianjin.

Mr Wei will never forget the inhuman treatment he has suffered and is considering asking for compensation when the time is right.

"If legal conditions in China improve, that is something I will have to consider but right now there's no point."