China’s Path to Reform
And Russia’s Example

Interview with Fang Lizhi*

This is a compilation of two interviews conducted on May 19, 1992 and August 8, 1992 for Demokratizatsiya. The interviews were conducted and translated by Yun-shi Wang and Jun Tu.

Question: Professor Fang, if China begins to institute moderate reforms similar to Gorbachev's perestroika, would you consider returning to China to participate in the reform process, like Andrei Sakharov who returned to Moscow?

Fang: Yes. If China begins its reforms, and if I can work there, I will go back to China to continue my work.

Question: Do you think that China can continue to expand its economic base, even under a Communist regime? Or is it inevitable that China must forgo its past, in a similar way to what occurred in the former Soviet Union?

Fang: I believe that China will continue its economic development. The Chinese government has been losing control over the local economies. The development of rural industries is a good example. There is space for economic development. Like the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe, China must forgo its past. I mean the past forty years under Communist government.

Question: Do you see any parallels between Tiananmen Square and the August coup in the Soviet Union?

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Fang: Tiananmen Square occurred in China because the society was in an unstable situation. Average people as well as college students wanted to further the economic and political reforms. However, the outcome of Tiananmen Square was different from that of the August coup in the Soviet Union. The Communist regime had ruled the Soviet Union for about 70 years, while in China's case it was only 40 years. The people in the Soviet Union, after being repressed for three generations by their government, could no longer put up with Lenin and Stalin's model of a socialist regime. Whereas, the leaders in China still belong to the first generation of Old Guards. It will take time for the change to occur in China.

Question: In the south of China, many areas have become oriented away from communism and towards a free market. Do you think that such changes are indications of people's desire for change, or the government's desire for change?

Fang: The Tiananmen Square massacre was a significant event, since it showed the people's desire for change. It also weakened the system of central control. The reformers in southern China could, subsequently, have freely developed their own market economy and managed to deter the efforts of the hardliners to re-centralize power. This indicates that we, the Chinese people, need a prosperous economy as well as a democratic government. I think all segments of society have come to realize this.

Question: Currently, China's Most Favored Nation (MFN) status is under review. For many, there is strong resistance to granting China that right because of its political system and its human rights abuses. Do you think that China will be granted MFN status nonetheless? Or if not, do you think that China will make some reforms to gain that MFN status?

Fang: MFN status is a very complicated question. I believe that cutting off China's trade with the outside world is not good for China's development. However, I do appreciate the people of the United States for their just demands on the Chinese government to improve its human rights record. I believe that a renewed MFN with attached conditions would be good and economically, as well as politically, possible. The Chinese government has accepted conditions from the U.S. government thus far.
Question: Do you feel that there may be a strong enough constituency within the current Chinese government for a more democratic majority? Or do you feel that the Communist hard-liners will continue to prevail? And, will the people's attitude have any impact on the existing political system?

Fang: I cannot predict the numbers of those who are in favor of reform within the government without some research. I can say that most people of my age want more reforms. Hardliners, the first-generation Communists, cannot live and rule forever. The government will face more and more pressures to change from all sides, including from its grass-roots officials. The demand for democracy from the majority of the population is increasing. However, we cannot define the "demand for democracy" narrowly. Political freedom is only one of the freedoms we need. Democratization is actually a change, an increase in freedom of choice. For example, freedom of internal movement by peasants is also an essential part of democratization. Chinese peasants are not now allowed to move into the cities. But peasants are currently demanding their right to move to the cities to engage in business. There is also vast pressure from many other sectors of society. The college students, although small in number, represent a force, a signal for democratization. There are differences between the demands made by the students and from the rest of society, from the average people. But students are part of the Chinese people after all, aren't they?

Question: Yes, of course. Now, Dr. Fang, lets talk about the unification of Hong Kong with mainland China in 1997. What impact will this have on trade? What are the implications for the relations between China and Hong Kong? How about with the rest of the world?

Fang: It all really depends on who will control the Chinese government. If the hardliners have the upper hand, there will be a great negative impact on Hong Kong. They will certainly demand more control over Hong Kong, thus destroying Hong Kong's market economy and damage business confidence. Hong Kong is a successful model of a market economy. It is at the same time an important part of the global market economy. Its position as a financial and trade center in East and Southeast Asia cannot be replaced by any other city in that region. If the hardliners remain in Beijing after 1997, the trade pattern in that region will be seriously affected.
**Question:** If there is a change of administration after the American presidential elections, will there be an impact on American foreign policy towards China?

**Fang:** Since there are many different voices in the U.S. Congress and in the political circles over the existing administration's position towards China, there might be some changes if a new person sits in the White House. We'll see.

**Question:** If China were to adopt democratic institutions, do you think that the U.S. and other countries or international organizations might provide more assistance? Would this be essential if China's economy begins to slide?

**Fang:** I believe that the contacts between the two countries are necessary. The issue here is on what condition. If we insist on respect for such international principles as human rights and freedom of speech, for example, then the contacts are beneficial. Otherwise, the contacts are meaningless. If China were to adopt democratization, the U.S. and other governments will indeed give China moral support, and will help the Chinese create a better environment for further development. Unlike the Soviet Union, I don't foresee that the future government will demand more financial assistance--it's simply not a first priority. If there is a dramatic change in China, the world's attention will turn to China because of China's potential as a major participant in world affairs.

**Question:** And speaking of world affairs, where do you see China in five to 10 years time? How would you like China to expand and develop so as to become a major participant in the world arena?

**Fang:** It is difficult to predict China in five to 10 years time. The old politicians will leave, and new individuals will come to the political stage. It's no easy task to predict the outcome of power struggles within the Communist party. Nevertheless, the central control of the totalitarian government will continue to decline, and a trend towards democratization will begin in China. We have entered an era often referred to as the 'multipolar world.' The relative decline of America as a superpower is a natural trend since many other countries are developing. The world shall not be dominated by one, or two countries. Western Europe is getting
stronger, East Asia is also coming up. China as a member of the world village, with its vast territory and a huge population, should bear some of the responsibility for building a better world. China shall not pursue the position of a superpower, but the position of an active participant. China can do that, and China will do that.

Question: When did you start to seriously promote the issue of human rights in China?

Fang: I think it was in the 1950s we began to realize that we needed more freedom of scientific research. At that time, even scientific research was directed by the Party and Marxism. We thought that the freedom to do research and pursue the truth was a fundamental part of human rights. Actually, this was written in the International Scientific Conventions. Freedom of scholarship is a part of the more general freedom of thought. After the Cultural Revolution, we began in earnest to promote and realize human rights in China.

Question: Now that you are away from China, what do you do? And what do you think that as a physicist, you can contribute to the political world?

Fang: I am working in a tenured position at the University of Arizona at Tucson. Here we have the best equipment for astrophysical research. As a scientist, I believe in telling the truth. Our task as scientists is to find the truth, and to find logical explanations about the world. We try to find answers to questions we don't understand. This could also be true of politics. There, we also want to know what is right and what is wrong.

Question: What did you think of your colleague Andrei Sakharov?

Fang: I think he was a great man. He was an excellent physicist as well as an excellent statesman. He tried to help the USSR emerge from communism into a more open democratic society. Everyday I am more impressed by the work he did and what he achieved for the great people of his country.

Question: Now let us turn back to the former Soviet Union, Dr. Fang. What is the biggest success of perestroika, in your opinion?
Fang: I think perestroika was quite successful, overall. It was very necessary, and still is; it is the key to the improvement of that society. It is also an inspiration for us Chinese.

Question: What was perestroika’s biggest mistake?

Fang: Some people say perestroika was a big failure. I don’t think so. Many of the problems generally associated with perestroika were not really caused by it, but by other forces which were hidden from public view until perestroika uncovered them. So I would say that overall, perestroika’s mistakes were dwarfed by its successes.

Question: If one day you are placed in charge of China, who would you study more? Would you study the Russian reformers, Yeltsin and Gorbachev, or whom?

Fang: This question is not difficult to answer. The Chinese are different from the Russians, especially our history. During the past 100 years, China underwent some changes which coincided with changes going on in Russia, but overall the models of reform best suited to our situation can be found within China; so, I would use our history and our rich experience as a compass.

Question: Russia is undergoing serious difficulties with its reforms, as you know…

Fang: Yes—yes it is.

Question: So in light of this delicate time, what advice would you give Yeltsin?

Fang: I don’t have any specific advice for him, because I am not an expert on Russia, and I have never been there. Right now Russia is going through many difficulties and troubles, but these troubles are caused by the painful transition from the communist system. Personally, I believe that this type of transition for Communist societies is inevitable—the transition from communism to capitalism. A transition from the dictatorship of the centralized economic system to a free market system. Again, this transition is inevitable. So I think that my advice to Yeltsin would be that he should decentralize power and responsibility away from Moscow, and
simultaneously push reforms farther. That is the only way to let society progress. The people, regrettably, have to pay the price while the reforms are going on. But in the end it is all worth it.