Interview with Fang Lizhi: China, Science, and Human Rights

On Monday, astrophysicist Fang Lizhi and his wife, solid-state physicist Li Shuxian, presided over an unusual forum held during the AAAS annual meeting in Washington, D.C. The topic: China and human rights. Since fleeing China in 1990, the two renowned activists have lived in the West, coming this year as researchers to the U.S.—Fang to the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, and Li to Princeton University.

In the following interview, Fang speaks of the connection between science and human rights.

Q: Why hold a human rights forum at the AAAS meeting? What do you want from the members?
A: To concern [themselves] with their counterparts in China. We have a list of scientists who are suffering, and [members can help] by writing letters. (See sidebar.)

Q: How effective is that with Chinese authorities?
A: To one letter, they never respond. But if you have many, that kind of pressure works. When we stayed in the U.S. embassy [Fang and Li spent a year under U.S. protection following the Tiananmen Square massacre], so many scientists and academic organizations voiced their support that I know the authorities felt pressure. [It helped] that these were not politicians, but scientists speaking out.

Q: What's it like for scientists in China today?
A: Some still travel, some are in prison. There is no free communication. For instance, China has facilities for E-Mail, but the authorities cut off the national network.

Q: Should AAAS link up with any one organization in China now?
A: I think it is better to wait. In name, some organizations are independent. But in principle, all are part of the government.

Q: Does Marxist ideology continue to interfere with scientific theory?
A: Any science, such as cosmology, that comes close to philosophy has trouble. [And] there is no real social science in China; it is all Marxism.

Q: As a physicist, why do you concern yourself with politics?
A: Physicists look for the basic, fundamental, universal things. We try to find that and push that. From that point of view, we must also ask which are the universal needs of human beings. I think human rights is a universal human need.

Q: Can scientists work within China today for democracy?
A: I think so. Scientific education asks students to have independent thoughts. We never ask students to believe in physics. Authorities just say, believe Marxism, don’t ask questions.

Q: What are you working on these days in physics?
A: The topology of the universe. The cold dark matter theory has many troubles these days, but even this has contributed. You see, in Chinese politics, if somebody's wrong, they're down [gestures sharply down with his thumb]. But in science, if somebody's wrong, they've still contributed because it's very important to raise questions.

AAAS Writes for Life

Since 1976, AAAS has written letters on behalf of hundreds of scientists persecuted by their governments, according to Karl Hannibal of AAAS's Science and Human Rights program.

In 1989 and 1990, the AAAS campaign included Fang Lizhi and Li Shuxian, the Chinese physicists and human rights advocates, as well as other scientists and students arrested after the Tiananmen Square massacre.

"We helped get U.S. scientists involved in writing letters asking that [Fang and Li] be permitted to leave China," says Hannibal. "Sometimes governments respond to the pressure. Other times, as with Syria, they seem to ignore us."

Syrian health professionals and engineers who were arrested in 1980 after a 1-day general strike make up half of the 300 cases AAAS responded to in 1990. The rest stemmed from Africa (44), China (44), Latin America (15), Asia (13), the Soviet Union (2), and other Middle Eastern countries.

Art That Computes

As part of AAAS's on-going commitment to exploring the relationship between science and art, Windows, a mural by Anna Campbell Bliss, will be on view in the first-floor gallery at AAAS headquarters in Washington, D.C., through 28 March.

According to Jeannette Mur-
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