

A long-time advocate for human rights and democratic political reform in China, Wei Jingsheng was first detained by the Chinese authorities in 1978 after posting an essay entitled “The Fifth Modernization” on Democracy Wall in Beijing, China’s capital. While in prison, he won the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought (1996) and was thrice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Chinese Dissident Wei Jingsheng

Wei Jingsheng, a leading Chinese dissident who has spent most of the last 18 years in prison for his unwavering defense of democracy and human rights, was allowed to leave China for the United States on November 16, 1997.

The 47-year-old Wei, reportedly suffering from high-blood pressure and other illnesses, was released from a salt-works camp on medical parole. Under the terms of his release, Wei will be imprisoned if he returns to China.

Born in Beijing, the capital of China, in 1950 to parents with prominent connections in the Chinese Communist Party, Wei's early life was a privileged one. In 1966 Wei dropped out of middle school to participate in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) as a member of the Red Guards, a youth movement organized by Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong to eliminate his political rivals and revolutionize Chinese society. By the mid-1970s Wei, who had become an electrician at the Beijing Zoo, was thoroughly disillusioned with Communist ideology and had come to believe that democratic reforms were necessary to address China's problems.

Wei first gained prominence in January 1978 when he posted a bold essay calling for major democratic reforms on Beijing's Democracy Wall, a public forum for political debate that was banned after a few short months. In October 1979 Wei received a 15-year prison sentence for sedition. During his incarceration, Wei refused to recant his views, despite miserable prison conditions that caused him to lose numerous teeth and to develop a heart condition. Instead, Wei openly and repeatedly attacked the Chinese government in a series of letters and other writings.

Wei was released in 1993 and quickly returned to pro-democracy activism, defying government warnings to refrain from speaking out about his prison life or from meeting with foreign journalists. Less than six months later, Wei was arrested and sentenced to 14 years in prison after meeting with a high-ranking U.S. human rights official.

Source: Encarta Yearbook, November 1997.¹

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