

May 15, 1989 (Vol. 4, no. 17)

Dear Colleague:

Chinese students marched in Beijing on May 4, 1989 to demand more democracy and freedom. The date has symbolic significance, for seventy years earlier, on May 4, 1919, students also marched for democracy. In addition, they demanded--surprise!--more science. What distinguishes the student movement of 1919 from nationalistic and ethnic movements of our day is this demand for science, which the Chinese of seventy years ago equated with the search for truth--for hard truth as distinct from self-glorifying mythology. One effect of this modernist movement of 1919 was the dismantling of a great deal of traditional Chinese history: Chinese radical thinkers lopped off a couple of thousand years from their own past as unsupported by evidence and they dethroned their own culture heroes as largely products of wishful thinking. Chinese students of seventy years ago felt that they had gained a new sense of dignity, as Chinese and as human beings, by doing away with the support of consoling tales.

At a recent conference, a historian of science tells me that one reason why Joseph Needham's Chinese co-worker left the great project Science and Civilization in China was because he thought that Needham had unwittingly given too much credit to Chinese science. If ever I had a moment of unqualified pride in being a Chinese, that was it.

The Japanese discovered a very distressing statistic: Americans have won 143 Nobel prizes, Japanese 5. Rather than accuse the Swedish Academy of racism, the Japanese are putting the blame on their own educational and scientific institutions. They are determined to reform whatever deficiencies they find. Well, as a chauvinistic Midwesterner, I wish the Japanese won't be so hard on themselves. After all, the Swedish Academy may indeed be racist, if only in the mild sense that its members probably can't read scientific literature in Japanese. It seems to me significant that the Japanese people characteristically refuse to see themselves as victims. They know that to accept the status of victim, however justified, can only encourage a posture of passivity--a diminished sense of agency vis-à-vis the challenge to do better science--and that's no way to succeed.

Best wishes,

