

Wang Qianyuan's Open Letter:

My dear compatriots:

Today's demonstration has already ended, but the continuing reverberations have not quieted.

I am the person who stood today between the two sides trying to mediate. There are some unwelcome words of loyal advice which were not appropriate to say in front of other people. Now that your extreme anger has slightly subsided, I must speak them in full.

Today's demonstration can be called grandly impressive, and the participants' fully expressing their feelings can be called enjoyable. But if we only think of this event as one of physically confronting opponents, and of venting our anger, that would be a sophomoric attitude lacking the magnanimity of a truly educated person. Don't you know that "when the sandpiper and the clam grapple, the fisherman profits", and they fall into the trap set by one who acts after his opponents have erred?

Cao Zhi (3rd century CE), under compulsion [from his brother, the emperor], composed the [satirical] "Seven-Pace Verse", which remains unforgettable today: "To cook beans one heats the bean stalk, and the beans in the kettle crackle loudly. Originally sprung from the same root, why are they, being heated, all so agitated?"

Tibet is our country's territory; how could it be abandoned or given to others without good reason? Putting people inexorably under pressure will only result in turning friends into enemies. Forcing the naturally peace-loving Tibetan people into desperate opposition, into a fight for survival with their backs to the wall, is to create a serious and irresolvable conflict. Ask yourself: is Tibet more akin to China or to America? How can outsiders be allowed to rest comfortably in [our] home? Only when kin forget their discord will the enemy not be led into our lair, causing China's Tibet to be pushed into the arms of others. The more we treat Tibetans with proper kinship, the more distant the Americans will seem to Tibetans. Otherwise, they will rebel against us, and will become an extended part of America, set next to China.

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Sunzi wrote, “do not put adversaries under extreme pressure”, and also said, “diminish the hard and increase the soft”. Laozi said, “the highest good is like water” [i.e. soft yet forceful]. In strategy, the most important thing is to keep one’s mind on [opportunities for] attack. Propitious timing is not so crucial as material circumstances, which are in turn not so crucial as favorable human factors. Those who achieve great things can endure what others cannot endure, only then can they accomplish what others cannot accomplish. For the sake of China’s rise, this is precisely a moment for knowing how to apply human abilities; we must have the scope and the depth to tolerate other people. I’m not asking you just to wait passively, but to positively prepare for battle; only by voiding angry feelings will your minds be clear and alert, and your decisions correct; only by seeing the situation clearly can you respond without anxiety.

When two boxing masters contend, the wiser one often takes a step back, and lets the other one first reveal his weak point, then deals a decisive blow with a single stroke. A foolish boxer launches a furious assault from the start, exerting all his best abilities; however, an opening for counter-attack will be found by the opponent, and he will be constrained by his rival.

At present we have just arrived in America, and we have not established ourselves here. Behaving so hot-headedly and acting impulsively, the outcome doesn’t bear thinking about. Haven’t you heard that “filial devotion does not grow by caning [the child]?” When people are placed under threat of compelling force, how can their fulsome expressions of compliance be sincere? Rather, we should adopt the principles of “using virtue to govern the country” and “gaining people’s consent by reason.” We should avoid active engagement now and advance only later; we should first endure hardships and then be capable [of resolute action], not hoping for speedy results or attempting a decisive victory in one day.

Before Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty employed aggressive policies [against foreign powers], he first employed cunning deceptions through “edicts bestowing favors” [on foreign nations]. Apparently following the wishes of the

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various [powerful] bordering vassal states, he spread his gracious favor in all quarters. In fact, this policy converted great powers into numerous small states lacking the power to act effectively, so that contradictions between them and the Han dynasty were resolved naturally.

We should energetically strive to shift the moral balance in our direction, and turn the pressure of public opinion against our opponents, to make their blows strike against cobwebs, and cause them, like clowns, to taste the bitter fruits of their own misguided efforts. Why should we harshly engage with them, which on the contrary only would create endless troubles for ourselves?

“Know yourself and know your enemy, in a hundred battles you will meet no danger”. We don't understand their viewpoint well, and do we really comprehend thoroughly our own perspective? From this consideration we can see that, intellectually speaking, we have not yet occupied the strategic high ground, and are not much more enlightened than our opponents. On the contrary, by displaying our own wounds, we reveal before others' eyes an unattractive image; doing that does not help to establish a favorable example of China as a great and civilized nation.

Of course mainstream western media lack balanced reporting. But if we reflect on our own situation, can we say that our own media are perfectly balanced, and lacking in bias? Precisely because [foreign media] lack understanding, therefore [we] must actively communicate and take the initiative; only thus can we overcome the enemy and gain victory.

Apart from this, regarding the matter of speaking English [for which I was criticized by fellow Chinese students], in response I would like to urge that you consider these thoughts: Language is an important tool of communication; highly skilled persons, who respond comfortably in their native or other languages, can be winners whether at home or abroad. In fact, as I see it, if some Chinese are outspokenly unwilling to speak English, that's not some grand issue of principle. Rather, it's just due to their lack of proficiency and shrinking from appearing foolish in front of foreigners. On the contrary, [their expressed disdain] is an indirect confession of their own shortcoming.

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In sum, “the sword’s sharp point is produced by patient grinding”, and “the fragrance of the [virtuous] plum blossom emerges from bitter cold”. For “cultivating ourselves, putting right our family relationships, ordering our country, and bringing peace to the world” [four steps of the Neo-Confucian curriculum], we rely on great wisdom. How can we give up eating due to a moment of choking, or neglect the great goal because of a small distraction? “When the city’s gate catches fire, the harm spreads to fish in the moat” [i.e. in a disturbance, innocent bystanders suffer]. Tibet and China are as close as lips and teeth; therefore in handling relations [with Tibet] it’s only correct that we be more cautious and circumspect than America will be. The Americans want to roast us in the hot coals [of ill-considered contention]; be sure not to let them take advantage or show off their cleverness.

Duke [University] is a place for “cultivating oneself” and “nurturing one’s nature” [two Neo-Confucian practices], and I hope that in future you can all vigorously deploy farsighted strategy and bring order to the world, grasp firmly the core essentials and astonish mankind. “Ruling a large country is like frying a small fish” [as Laozi almost said]. Become highly talented people who bring practical good to society, and “show self-respect in the presence of the unenlightened” [as Tao Qian said].

Respectfully,
Wang Qianyuan

Written in the early morning of 10 April 2008