

# Plight of Wei Jingsheng

SIR — We wish once again to direct the attention of the world scientific community to the dire plight of Wei Jingsheng, a political prisoner in the People's Republic of China. Imprisoned 13 years ago (on 16 October 1979) for pro-democratic writings, Wei is reported by confidential sources to be in poor health under harsh conditions, and possibly in danger of dying before completing his 15-year sentence.

As oceanographers, our concern was aroused by Chinese pamphlets calling for Wei's release found in a bottle by one of us (R.S.) in June 1990, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. This finding, once communicated to Beijing, provides Deng Xiaoping with an honourable justification for pardoning Wei Jingsheng before his sentence — and his health — expires.

After analysis (described in a manuscript submitted to *Eos* for publication), we conclude that the bottle was one of many released by Taiwanese activists shortly after Wei's imprisonment. In itself, the bottle is scientifically unremarkable. The inferred course of the bottle from its probable release off the islands of Quemoy or Matsu close to the Chinese mainland is consistent with known ocean currents as verified by computer simulation. Probably 50 per cent of the bottles reached their intended target of mainland China, and bottles containing similar literature have been reported from coastal Japan.

The significance of the finding lies in the fact that the bottle was found by an oceanographer and transmitted to a colleague (C.C.E.) studying drifting objects. We estimate that fewer than one per cent of the bottles released would have reached the sparsely populated northern coast of North America more than 10,000 km away. Most such notes, even when found, are never translated, let alone interpreted.

We call Deng's attention to a passage in the Japanese legend, The Tale of the Heike, that he could cite as a precedent for releasing Wei. In the year 1177, the priest Yasuyori was exiled for political subversion to an island 100 km offshore. From his exile, he released 1,000 *stupas* (thin wooden boards offered as graveside memorials), each bearing his name, the date and two poems. Against steep odds, one *stupa* was found by a priest on the mainland. He transmitted it to Yasuyori's family and thence to the emperor and to Kiyomori, head of the Heike, who had ordered Yasuyori's exile. Two years later, upon the birth of a grandson and heir, Kiyomori pardoned Yasuyori.

We recognize the formidable obstacles

to obtaining Wei's release. His fellow scientist Fang Lizhi petitioned Deng on Wei's behalf in a letter in January 1989. Influential organizations such as Asia Watch, Committee to End the Chinese Gulag and Amnesty International have been working hard for the freedom of Wei and numerous other Chinese prisoners for many years.

Nevertheless, we hope that Deng will view this rare finding and deciphering of a message in a bottle by scientific 'priests' — and our communication of it to the latter-day 'emperor' in keeping with the 800-year-old Asian legend — as an omen and an opportunity to pardon and possibly spare the life of Wei Jingsheng.

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## Women in science

SIR — We are pleased that, in your comment<sup>1</sup> on the practice of the National Science Foundation to require evidence of the participation of women in scientific conferences supported by public funds, you recognize that the practice is laudable, but you underestimate the magnitude and subtlety of the challenges faced by women in science, especially in relation to meetings.

Although the numbers of women studying and teaching science in colleges and universities are increasing, they are still under-represented in the higher academic ranks of tenured positions<sup>2</sup>. Part of the explanation is that to gain tenure one must demonstrate the respect of one's colleagues, which is in part measured by activity at meetings, especially by invited participation.

In scientific communities, as elsewhere, informal networks of colleagues effectively preside over their respective fields. When sponsoring or proposing a meeting, these networks strongly influ-

ence who is invited to contribute and often identify appropriate speakers from their ranks. Thus such networks tend to function, often unwittingly, as closed units, connecting people who share an intellectual pedigree and giving to meetings a restricted view of the potential intellectual breadth of a discipline. More subtly, because such restricted meetings may serve to galvanize a field, they further narrow the field's mindset, and strengthen the network that created the meeting.

Entering such a network from the outside is difficult for both men and women, but one important mechanism for circumventing this and other problems is through mentors<sup>3</sup>, established professionals in the field who advocate the merits of an outsider and his or her ability to further a scientific field. The problem lies in developing a mentor relationship. This requires personal contact with professionals in the field, which is most easily established by active participation at meetings. Unless the circle is broken, the representation of women in science will not increase.

Increasing the participation of women in scientific conferences is one way to facilitate the entry of women into the controlling networks, to help their research programs excel and to increase their entry into tenured positions.

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1. *Nature* **359**, 92 (1992).

2. Benditt, J. (ed.) *Science* **255**, 1363–1388 (1992).

3. Gibbons, A. *Science* **255**, 1368 (1992).

## Wrong book

SIR — There is nothing like reading the original sources. In the Opinion piece discussing the Vatican's grudging resurrection of Galileo (*Nature* **360**, 2; 1992), you presume that the Catholic Church's stand was based on "the account of the Creation in Genesis". There is in fact no mention in that text of the motion of the Earth or the Sun. The reference you want is from Joshua 10:12, "Sun stand thou still". The Church's argument was that these words would not have been spoken had the Sun not been moving.

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