

# A Voice for Democracy in China

A CONVERSATION WITH  
CHINESE ECONOMIST  
PROFESSOR YELIANG XIA



**F**or years, Professor Yeliang Xia has served as an economist of distinction in China—a protégé of Justin Yifu Lin, the first avowed Chinese communist to serve as chief economist of the World Bank. Professor Xia has taught for decades at Peking University—the preeminent institution in China for social and economic sciences. With close ties to Wellesley College in the Boston suburbs, he also serves as a prime example of the fine line that so often divides academic discipline from freedom in China. And lately, he has come up on the wrong side of that line—at least with respect to his future as a member of the Chinese academic establishment.

In October, following years of pressing for greater intellectual freedom, a pluralistic society, and a shift toward democratic expression in China, Professor Xia was removed from his post at Peking University and effectively barred from working at any other institution of instruction or research. Rather than constricting his work, he has found this action of the Chinese establishment liberating. A cautionary tale of how education functions in contemporary and still centrally-controlled China, and a sharp contrast as he points out to so many failings in democratic but still dysfunctional India, Professor Xia talked via Skype from Beijing with *World Policy Journal* editor David A. Andelman and managing editor Yaffa Fredrick.

**WORLD POLICY JOURNAL:** Given our theme: China vs. India—the two paths to success, we'd like to examine the education system of China, compared with that of democratic India. So give us some background on the Chinese university system. How competitive is it? How free and open is the discourse in the university setting? What is the atmosphere in a Chinese university today?

**YELIANG XIA:** With respect to the leadership, we have one party with a communist ideology. Ideological education is seen to be the basic foundation for control and organization of the universities. People joke about Chinese universities as “party schools.” In China, there is no single university, which is privately owned and operated without control from the party. It is not comparable to the university before 1949. From 1919 to 1949, the old China created some remarkable academic figures—many people we called masters. None of them exist anymore.

**WPJ:** If you go back some centuries, there was the old Confucian Mandarin system, which was heavily controlled by the emperor. Does this represent a return to that system?

**XIA:** In some ways yes, but it is also like a dictatorship—a power-oriented culture. In all of China, not only the education system, all systems are under party control. All players try their best to favor the party, and you cannot say that anyone can be called an independent scholar in China. If you try to fight the party's ideology, you lose your job or the opportunity to be promoted or to receive any benefits. All funding comes from a specific unit, the National Social Science and Humanities Planning Office. This office is under the direct leadership of the party propaganda ministry. Under its guiding principles, any research that conflicts with Marxism, socialism, or communism, would not be acceptable or funded in any way. There is no free research in China, except perhaps for pure science. If your research is on mathematics, you would not deal much with ideology. But economics, while many believe it is close to a science, it is still more of a fine art, and ideology plays a role.

**WPJ:** Given the limits on free speech, why did you decide to pursue a career in academia? Why did you decide to go into this field knowing that there were all these obstacles to free research and free expression?

**XIA:** It has been quite a natural evolution since the 1980s. My undergraduate major was English and American literature. Since I studied English for several years, I could read books in English—and that broadened my vision. After graduation I worked in the government as an interpreter in the municipal foreign affairs office,

and had a chance to visit other countries like Denmark and West Germany. At that time, China was just opening to the outside world, so I passed an exam and was sent to the University of Toronto, then to University of San Francisco to study management.

On June 4th [1989] the Tiananmen massacre happened. My son was a year old, and my wife needed me, so I came back. I quickly found that the study of management itself was not sufficient. I needed more research tools to develop more interesting economic theories. So I entered Fudan University as a research division chief. I taught a course dealing with the economics of development. At that time, I paid more attention to research and teaching. After my graduation I had an opportunity to follow Justin Yifu Lin, who became the World Bank's chief economist. I stayed with Justin for two years.

**WPJ:** So it was after you left Lin's institute that your position began to deteriorate? Most recently, when you were dismissed from Peking University, the authorities said the reason was academic, but you've insisted it was politics.

**XIA:** Since the year 2003, I've joined more social activities. I've paid much more attention to public issues other than my own discipline. I often attend conferences discussing public issues. And I served as vice-director of the Public Policy Research Institute under the leadership of the China Society for Restructuring the Economic System. That institution is quite influential in China. I became a frequent speaker and guest speaker on China Central Television (CCTV) and other major television broadcasts, and a columnist for major newspapers and magazines.

**WPJ:** What kind of views did you express that might have made the authorities question your acceptability?

**XIA:** After 2008, university authorities talked with me several times under instruction from the top leaders. I don't believe the university forms its own judgments or its own intentions. Normally, it's simply instructions from the top leaders who say you've made serious errors. And you would not be acceptable among the faculty members if you keep on doing this.

**WPJ:** What sort of errors?

**XIA:** They said that the intention of Charter 08 is to overthrow the Communist Party, so it could be dangerous. [EDITORS NOTE: Professor Xia is a signatory of Charter 08, a manifesto signed by more than 10,000 Chinese and foreign intellectuals and human rights activists, first published on December 10, 2008, the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and adopting the same style as the anti-Soviet Charter 77 signed by Czechoslovak dissidents in 1977.] So if you keep doing these things, they told me, then you won't be acceptable in Peking University.

**WPJ:** So were you, in fact, advocating the overthrow of the ruling party in China?

**XIA:** We believe that in China the unavoidable path for the future is constitutional

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democracy, rule of law, and individual freedom, so I would fight for freedom of publication, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly. Of course, in my teaching I also mention those issues, and for the most part students accept my ideas. Only in the past three years have there been some strong responses, particularly from some of the students' unions. But for more than 10

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years, there was no challenge to my ideology or my lectures, whether in public or in the classroom.

**WPJ:** China is in the midst of a global competition, particularly with its largest neighbor, India, where there is a free and democratic education system. At how much of a disadvantage does this leave China when it comes to the truly innovative thinking essential to be competitive in the world today? Can China be competitive when it is not allowing the free expression of individuals like yourself?

**XIA:** Well, compared to India, infrastructure is much better in China. China has the efficient resources to build new campuses, new buildings, new equipment. Our organization and control is more efficient. India is more democratic, but resources are more scattered, not as concentrated.

**WPJ:** Right, but does efficiency lead to the kind of innovation, the free thinking, that can really produce new advances and make it truly competitive in the world, or do you need the ability to think freely and think imaginatively to build a competitive system in the world today?

**XIA:** Private firms in China are more innovative than state owned firms. But they are lacking in resources compared with State Owned Enterprises where the government is paying more attention in terms of policy and investment. They will get less support. China must return to the path that it took for ten years, from 1993 to 2003. Those ten years could be considered a golden decade in China, when we had more or less a market economy. There was more encouragement for our private firms. The atmosphere was much more open, much looser, compared with the current situation.

**WPJ:** Some of the most innovative thinking in the West and in India have come from universities and research institutions. What kind of innovations are possible under a monolithic system where clear, original thinking is not encouraged?

**XIA:** There are some scholars in China who become non-governmental independent scholars, which means that they have to develop their own means of support. Then they can do their own research, and may publish in Taiwan, Hong Kong, or outside China. They may print it themselves, then distribute among friends and other academics. This may not be as influential, but is quite admirable because they are relying entirely on their own judgments. Still, very few economic scholars can do this sort of independent research. You need economic research organizations to promote your work and get it publicized so that the public can know about it. Independent research in China is more focused on science and history, where there are some prominent independent scholars. But this is very rare among economic scholars in China. Indeed, people said to me, "since you're an

economist, you should be rational. Your behavior seems not to be rational.” Yes, I understand that; I know. Yet my needs are quite modest—one bowl of noodles with beef would be the most beautiful food for me. I won’t wear any famous brand names. I won’t consume like a rich person— I never do that.

**WPJ:** You’re free to be an independent scholar now. Is that exciting to you? Do you think you can now do some real and original and exciting work?

**XIA:** I have friends and scholars who have sent their congratulations to me. “You are free,” they say, “you can do whatever you like.” Yet it’s frightening for my family members—first my wife, then my parents who are over 80 years old. My mother says, “since you have no job, no income, how can you live your life?” I just comfort her. I say, “No worries. I can support myself. And I can do even better than before.” But she does not believe me. She cries, “How can you go against the party and the government who are so powerful? You are just an individual. Is there any way for you to just confess that you did something wrong and go back, ask for their forgiveness, and then they’ll assign another job to you?”

I said to my mother, “I don’t think you are right to say something like that. You don’t know your child very well. You should know me better. I have never changed my ideals, especially if I have the determination to do something.”

**WPJ:** So what role do you think you can play in developing this national dialogue as an independent researcher and scholar?

**XIA:** I will call on young people to learn more about the real history of China, the

real facts about the Tiananmen Square massacre; about 45 million people who’ve died of hunger. Then I would persuade them that the only way for China’s future is a constitutional democracy. Take Japan, which became a modern country since the reform in the 19th century. China missed that opportunity. Conservative forces here are so strong. Conservative power will not allow any kind of fundamental reform. Ten years ago, I would have said that evolutionary reform would be good for China. Now I would say that evolutionary reform can never work in China. I think only fundamental change is possible. Institutional change is possible. But that depends on the top leader, not the individual.

It also depends very much on civil society. There is no organization in China without the permission of the party. Yet on the Internet we can access magazines every day. And with more and more magazines, people begin to realize that in the case of certain public issues and events, it is acceptable for them to express themselves. So people have been enlightened in some way in the last decade. Indeed, I’ve seen actual progress in recent years. I feel very optimistic. I think the one-party dictatorship will end in 10 to 15 years.

**WPJ:** Do you think India has done that—has taken that road and in some degree made a success there? My sense is that India does not play much of a role in your consciousness. Did you look to India as any sort of democratic model?

**XIA:** Well, India is not a model of success for China. Many people would take India as a negative model for China. They may have the institution of democracy, but they are so poor and so disorganized that people cannot choose the best governing

party. Sometimes they may choose a party to lead the government, but you could wait several months or several years for one program to be carried out.

**WPJ:** But there is a contrast. In China, it happens almost instantly if the party wants it, but it's only the way the party wants it and may not be the way the people want it?

**XIA:** That's true. The party and the government always say they represent the people's will. But now more and more people in China realize we have a very strong demand for democracy. Some even say they are trying to learn Robert's Rules of Order—how to run a country, even on a village level. Some Chinese scholars have tried to translate this system into a very simple language and very simplified rules so that even villagers can understand some basic structure. So now in the last five or six years there have been some experiments in villager elections. I think it's a very good beginning.

**WPJ:** Professor Thomas Cushman from Wellesley, who started the petition objecting to the action against you by Peking University, has offered you the chance to serve as a visiting scholar at Wellesley. Are you inclined to accept that? Unfortunately a lot of Chinese who are not toeing the party line and who do leave are never able to come back. Are you concerned that would be the case?

**XIA:** My goal is to change China—fundamental institutional change. My goal is to play a major role in promoting this process. I must keep that responsibility. I know that at the moment there are more than 2,000 university and research institutions in China that are not accepting me as one of their employees so if I were to be a visit-

ing scholar at an institution in the United States, I would have no institution to return to. If I were to stay in the United States, the authorities would not allow me to come back here, and that could be a huge tragedy for me. I must fight for my fellow citizens' basic rights and freedom. That's my personal purpose and goal.

**WPJ:** Given the constraints on public expression in China and control over the media as a means of reaching the masses and large numbers of the intellectual community, do you think that you will be able to get these ideas out there? There is some loosening, but it's still very difficult for many people to have a voice there. How can an independent voice, like yours, with no institutional base among 2,000 institutions in China, really begin to present a view that is, as you suggest, in opposition to the authorities?

**XIA:** During the last ten years I have traveled widely to give speeches to government institutions, universities, and businesses, even local libraries. So many people like and appreciate my ideas and accept those concepts. After these speeches, so many people have come up to me to express their grievances and ask how we can organize to work toward our goal? I tell them it is hard to organize now, but they must have ideas. Then they must begin to communicate on a micro scale—through their mobile phones. The cell phone makes communication easier. They can use their cell phone to text their friends, colleagues, and relatives. In this way, good ideas and knowledge can be shared. That's social progress. I believe that it will be influential in the future more and more.

**WPJ:** Let's discuss the role that Western academics can play in your story and in China's political future. Wellesley is talk-

ing about ending its partnership with Peking University. Do you think that Wellesley and other major institutions can influence the Peking administration or the Chinese government by threatening to end such partnerships as a price for denying free academic discourse?

**XIA:** You know Chinese authorities use all their resources to fight back. So it's not sufficient if only Wellesley takes up such a challenge. If Harvard and Stanford and more major universities in the United States said something, than that would be more pressure on China's authority. It would seem that when Wellesley faculty members support you, it's a big help for you. Actually, it's just the opposite. When they appeal for you, it doesn't help. My situation is getting worse. You see, the leadership doesn't care much at all about this action. So I think that the major universities in the United States, and not only faculty members, but their administration, could say something on the situation—on Chinese academic freedom

in general. That would be more, perhaps decisively, influential.

**WPJ:** Do you think that American universities dare do this? China is so powerful, both with respect to the funds they can commit to American universities and the risk of cutting ties?

**XIA:** It's a great challenge for Western academics. In China, we are suffering. Yet China is getting stronger and stronger. Soon we will become the number one economy and try to influence the whole world. They say they want to make the rules instead of just obeying the rules. This could be a great threat for the West, for the whole world. So I keep repeating, the Cold War has not ended yet. Don't believe that. How can you be so confident that the Communist Party will not do anything harmful to civilization in the future?

**WPJ:** Professor Xia, thanks so much for spending this time with us. ●