

# AFTER LI SIYI

BY REN BUMEI

On June 21, 2003, a three year-old girl, Li Siyi, was found in her Chengdu home dead of starvation. Siyi's mother, a drug addict, had been arrested on June 4, and in spite of the woman's pleas to Public Security officers, no action was taken to ensure the welfare of Siyi, who had been left at home alone. According to newspaper accounts, neighbors heard the child's cries, but no one went to her aid. Only the smell of her decaying body led neighbors to finally break into the house and discover her fate. The case provoked horror and soul-searching throughout China. On September 19, Ren Bumei, a dissident intellectual who is also a Christian, organized a one-day hunger strike with other intellectuals and concerned persons in memory of the tragedy. In this essay, posted on his Web site, *Bumei Zhiye*,<sup>1</sup> Ren Bumei indicts China's intellectual elite in enabling tragedies such as Li Siyi's to occur.

On September 21, 2003, three months will have passed since three-year-old Li Siyi starved to death in her home in Chengdu due to police negligence. No one knows the exact date when Li Siyi left this world; June 21 is the day her neighbors discovered that she had died. As rain finally arrives in China for the first time since Siyi's tragedy was brought to light, deep sorrow seeps from classrooms to homes, from the Internet to the street, and from hearts to minds, but people cannot explain their grief. Li Siyi's tragedy has broken down widespread cynicism and people's lowest line of defense; their assumptions about the government's moral foundation collapsed a long time ago, but Siyi's death has led to further questions and recriminations about that collapse. Despair is

still no means for self-preservation, nor is it the last refuge of the soul.

On September 21, almost the 100th day after Li Siyi's death, I will fast for a day. I will fast so as not to forget, so as to reflect on the hell a little girl had to endure. My fast is but a symbol: in depriving myself, I cannot experience even an infinitesimal share of the suffering she went through. Perhaps my greater hope in this act of remembrance is to find some meaning in the death of this child. We the living must find a cultural starting point – however late in the day – from Li Siyi's death, even though, in the end, mourning the death of a child eclipses all cultural concerns.

## **Without witnesses, there is only memory**

Imagining Li Siyi's last days in that small room is a very painful experience. "What were those 17 days like?" This question has caused countless people overwhelming sorrow.<sup>2</sup> The question that remains is, after Li Siyi, how can we live on contentedly? What makes Li Siyi's death unique is that she was a victim incapable of recounting her experience. Other than the ever-fainter cries heard by her neighbors, she left no accounting to the world. There were no witnesses to Li Siyi's death. She can only live on in our imagination and our bitter remembrance. The sorrow felt by those who survive her is the only way to acknowledge and recount her tragedy.

Because of an unprecedented ideological blend of fascist authoritarianism and Asian autocracy, all too often there are no witnesses to the tragedies we experience. Our predicament presents a dilemma that is in some respects more difficult to come to terms with than the evidence humanity has of Auschwitz. What makes Li Siyi a peculiarly Chinese problem is that no one else was present when she died. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, his death and resurrection were announced to the world by his disciples and the women who followed him. In their memoirs, Auschwitz survivors have reported the horror of the gas chambers. And what about Li Siyi? No human eye witnessed the slow death of this three-year-old girl. She died without leaving a single fragment by which she could be remembered. She did not die in war, or at the hands of a murderer, and there will be no post-war academic symposia to discuss her death. Li Siyi "never lived" and her death "never happened;" that is what makes this Chinese tragedy

unique, and what provides such a vivid depiction of the Chinese soul fleeing the scene of the crime only to enter a new life.

At an international conference on the Holocaust held in 1974, the American writer Elie Wiesel (who went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986) declared: “the best accounts are given by ordinary people and by children.”<sup>3</sup> Wiesel stressed, “The purest stories are those written by children themselves. Their words more than those of anyone else bring us closer to that experience. Their words become the experience.” He concluded, “Whenever I read an account of the slaughter of children, I know that I will need all my strength to break away from it—without losing hope.” In *A Jew Today*,<sup>4</sup> Wiesel expresses the unspeakable pain experienced when facing the death of a child. It is turning one’s back rather than despair that constitutes the ultimate rejection of human civilization.

“Tell me, what crime have these innocent lambs committed?” No one has an answer to this question. Wiesel cites a short poem written by a young girl named Elena<sup>5</sup> “before entering the flames.” It is a child’s pure testimony of absolute evil:

I want to leave on my own  
For another place, with better people  
To go to an unknown, faraway place.  
To a place where no one kills other people  
Maybe more of us, a thousand strong ones  
can reach this destination  
before long..<sup>6</sup>

Li Siyi was not a concentration camp child, and lived many years after Auschwitz, but she had to travel the same road as Elena. The difference is that Li Siyi had neither the ability nor the opportunity to tell the world about her experience. In this sense, the destiny of the Li Siyis of this world provokes even more despair than that of children who perished in concentration camps. Although her tragedy was not as savage as Auschwitz, its diabolical “softness” can only be compared to the grim fate of being slowly dismembered or buried alive. Equally significant is the fact that in dying as she did long after Auschwitz, Li Siyi has shown that humanity suffers from persistent amnesia, which in its Asian strain may well be incurable.

Perhaps we should compare Li Siyi’s fate with that of Anne Frank (1929-1945). In 1942, this young Jewish girl and her family hid in a “secret annex,” the back-room office and warehouse of the father’s company, to escape being arrested and murdered by the Nazis. Anne Frank spent two years in a space as confining as a birdcage, and was murdered by the Nazis after her family was denounced by an informer. Anne later became known for the famous diary she wrote in the secret annex. On October 29, 1943, she wrote: “The atmosphere is stifling, sluggish, leaden. Outside, you don’t hear a single bird, and a deathly oppressive silence hangs over the house and clings to me as if it were going to drag me into the deepest regions of the underworld.... I wander from room to room,

climb up and down the stairs and feel like a songbird whose wings have been ripped off and who keeps hurling itself against the bars of its dark cage. ‘Let me out, where there’s fresh air and laughter!’ a voice within me cries.... Sleep makes the silence and the terrible fear go by more quickly, helps pass the time, since it’s impossible to kill it.”<sup>7</sup>

If Li Siyi had been able to write like Anne Frank, how would she have described what she felt during her final days? Li Siyi’s room was just as suffocating as the secret annex, and she also “climbed under her bed, scared to death.” Like Anne Frank, Li Siyi experienced the despair that comes with excruciating thirst and hunger. Such extreme suffering is beyond human comprehension, yet a three-year-old girl had to endure it alone. The fact that Li Siyi left no written account of her experience may be the most authentic testimony of it, for how could the suffering she endured be adequately described with words? While Anne was able to confide in her “Dear Kitty” (her diary) every day, little Siyi only had her teddy bear, which was able neither to speak nor to shed tears.

Why doesn’t Li Siyi’s teddy bear move people as much as Anne Frank’s diary? After all, just as during the Nazi period, children today are buried by the police and carted away on trains like innocent lambs. Without witnesses, there is only memory. But do we really remember? Li Siyi died after Anne Frank, after Elena, after the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, which shows that China suffers from chronic spiritual amnesia. What has “China” done in the 100 days since Li Siyi’s death? First we were not present, then we were totally unaware of what had happened, and finally we have in various ways buried our compassion. In that conference on the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel said, “Let us tell stories, that is our chief responsibility. Stories of intelligent children old beyond their years. Eternal stories of dark nights swallowing up life and hope. After the war, the dead ask all survivors one question: Will you tell our story?”<sup>8</sup> China’s intellectual elite, on the other hand, often issues a different call: “Let us forget. If we pay this price of progress, the situation will slowly improve.” Is this really how it is? After countless tragedies that were simply ignored, the extraordinary circumstances of Li Siyi’s death are a public indictment of our contemporary spirit. Li Siyi has badly shaken our moral self-satisfaction and good conscience.

#### **Without memory, there is only evasion**

Theodor Adorno’s question, “After Auschwitz, what is the poet to do?”<sup>9</sup> speaks to the responsibility that all humanity shares for disasters. No one is without guilt in Anne Frank’s tragedy. The poet must lower his head in regret and no longer indulge in lofty-sounding words, for it was precisely such words, expressed in the emotive language of literature and through pure rationality, that created the preconditions and cultural background for Auschwitz. The similar question that Chinese intellectuals must now urgently face is, “After Li Siyi, what is the intellectual to do?” not because we are living “after Auschwitz” but because we are now “in Auschwitz.”

Since the 1990s, the clamor surrounding the debate about Left and Right in the Chinese intellectual world has concealed

another conflict, namely the opposition between popular moral commitments and conservative academic rationality. The former requires that intellectuals remain morally sensitive to and politically engaged with social calamities and human rights cases. The latter employs a variety of rational calculations in calling for restraint and some sort of “cooperation” with the government. Since the SARS outbreak in the spring of 2003, and particularly since the establishment of the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao administration, this conflict has gradually come into the open. Conservative rationalists make every attempt to find or fabricate political events that imply that the future is theirs, while at the same time expressing “reasonable respect” for or “reasonable detachment” from popular political efforts. At the same time, as opportunism within the regime and among the people has intensified, it has not only prevented Li Siyi’s death from becoming a cultural incident, but has actually actively resisted such a development. In fact, conservative academic rationality and popular opportunism were not only complicit in Li Siyi’s death, but will continue to aid and abet the power structure in bringing about more of these human rights abuses.

In appraising the moral state of China’s intellectual elite since the 1990s, we must be aware that we are living with the political legacy of 1989. What this means first and foremost is that the fact that the intellectual elite have been able to survive and maintain a platform that affords them a certain freedom of speech in the mainland Chinese system, makes clear how adept these intellectuals have been in looking after themselves since 1989. Obviously, from a moral standpoint the intellectual elite cannot be mentioned in the same breath as those who have been exiled or imprisoned. Put another way, the current intellectual elite are “mature personages” well versed in judging the hour and sizing up the situation.

The trouble is that this “secondary elite” became the main constituent of the intellectual elite in the 1990s (the less “mature” intellectuals having already been dispersed by then). By making half-hearted noises about freedom and dabbling in a semi-free press, this elite has appropriated the role of spiritual spokesmen in the 1990s. Regrettably, given their inherent moral bankruptcy, these intellectuals invariably find justifications to avoid searching their own conscience or confronting external censure over atrocities. Such self-defensive reflexes have come to define China’s spiritual condition since the 1990s, and because of their pervasive influence have been brought into the open through Li Siyi’s death. Perhaps Li Siyi’s death has revealed in an instant that China’s intellectuals are emperors with no clothes.

By and large, the intellectual elite holds five “theories” to justify avoiding questions about Li Siyi’s death.

1. The emphasis on academic rationality and social life as two separate spheres, and concealing moral guilt behind a veneer of scholarship. When Liu Xiaofeng<sup>10</sup> gets bogged down in arguments about “internal conflicts in Western thought” and Xu Jilin<sup>11</sup> and academic journals such as *Ershi Shiji* (Twenty-first Century) insist on the “neutrality of values,” they reveal a shrewd rational calculus. I will elaborate on this point in the

discussion of German universities below. What we need to stress here is that we are in no way opposed to the search for truth; this kind of intellectual quest is precisely what the Chinese intellectual world needs. The point is that “the search for truth” and “the search for good” are not mutually exclusive principles. More importantly, when truth seekers say that they are “keeping a respectful distance” from the search for good, when they selectively express their own moral concerns, and especially when they “bravely” publish essays critiquing trends of thought that happen to be disapproved of by government officials, they reveal their cloven hooves all too clearly. (Chinese intellectuals have become experts at discerning what questions and issues the government allows them to broach, what cannot be said, how and when to say what can be said, and so forth. They have made a science of how not to cross the line.)

This posturing on the part of Chinese intellectuals clearly shows that the underpinnings of their “zeal for truth” are essentially comprised of three elements: political terror, moral opportunism, and begging the government for some freedom of speech or financial support. When begging for these favors, or sometimes just out of vulgar obsequiousness, intellectuals assume another posture: they attack “political zeal” or claim, “I don’t get involved in politics.” There is nothing mysterious about the reason why intellectuals make such claims:

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First, they thereby declare that they are engaged in pure scholarship, the equivalent of Germans proclaiming themselves pure Aryans in order to enjoy the superiority attached to academic or cultural status. Secondly, they tell the power holders that they are more trustworthy than others, or more deserving of favor or support. It’s a kind of political strip-tease: by stripping naked and showing I am unarmed, I prove my worthiness to represent the king or guide the people. Thirdly, because “politics” has a bad reputation, these assertions are designed to elevate intellectuals above the “disreputable” mob, and to demonstrate that they are of a different breed.

In fact, this “political cleansing” is as ignorant as it is meritless: it is ignorant because its practitioners don’t know what politics is, and consider political intrigues and the history of Zhongnanhai to be politics; it is meritless because in order to “cleanse” themselves, these morally flawed intellectuals have to attack, belittle and contrive to compromise those who assume moral responsibility. The fact is that this intellectual elite is more “political” than anyone (when it comes to political intrigue).

2. **The depoliticization of politics.** What is the key issue with China? Above all it is a matter of politics, as common sense attests. But some elite intellectuals have simply dismissed politics from their discussion of social questions in their respective academic disciplines. This academic avoidance of politics has occurred on three fronts in recent years: (1) Economists have turned the question of political reform into an economic question, arguing that as the economy is liberalized, everything will improve. The trouble is that we are living now, not in the future. (2) Legal scholars have turned political questions into legal questions. For example, by reducing the political question of the police system to a simple legal one, jurists divest it of its original relevance. (3) Political problems are transformed into administrative problems. A number of scholars have begun to speak of administrative reform while carefully avoiding mentioning political reform. The crux of the matter is that even if these misrepresentations stem from tactical considerations, they end up sidestepping the fundamental political nature of economic, legal and administrative reform, and political questions can only be meaningfully addressed head-on.

3. **Capitulating to political intrigue and getting caught up in “internal conflicts of official thinking.”** Chinese intellectuals make a point of being “politically more mature” than intellectuals in any other country. This trait manifests itself in their ability to respond to any event by carefully judging the hour and sizing up the situation, and invariably basing their response on a principle identical with the government’s. The economist Mao Yushi recently published an essay in the Shanghai journal *Shehui Kexue Pinglun* (“Social Science Review”). Dr. Mao’s essay is in a sense representative of conservative rationality. He writes that China’s reforms have already given Beijing political legitimacy, and that thanks to the sincerity with which the Hu-Wen reforms have been implemented, China’s democratization has “begun to dawn and will soon see the full light of day.” To help bring about this bright prospect, and out of consideration for the general good, intellectuals must actively cooperate with Beijing. Consequently, Mao Yushi is particularly critical of arguments made on the Internet for radical liberalization.

This is an example of how intellectuals voluntarily take on the role of guardians of public order and neighborhood-committee aunts. Mao Yushi’s theories often match those of the most sinified vein of conservatism in the 1990s, which has ridden roughshod over Li Siyi’s corpse in the name of compromise and political correctness, and has time and again hallucinated over the distant mirage of democracy. In the past, Dr. Mao has commanded respect for the courage he has shown concerning certain human rights cases, but his most recent remarks are difficult to understand. What makes his latest opinion even less comprehensible is that it coincides with Li Siyi’s death, a series of cases of self-immolation following the eviction of residents from their homes and a massive crackdown on Internet activists. In fact, Dr. Mao’s theory is questionable even from an economic standpoint. The excessive focus on GDP growth has been the subject of much debate

and, more seriously, the government has shown itself completely unable to discharge one of its three macroeconomic functions: creating jobs. Under these circumstances, what legitimacy have economic reforms given the government? Moreover, even if we accept official statements about the success of China’s economic reforms, this does not warrant the conclusion that intellectuals ought to cooperate with the government across the board. In a healthy society, tension between intellectuals and the government is necessary; whenever intellectuals confront the government, they must be first of all critics and only after that politicians.

The philosophy of political intrigue has affected intellectuals in various ways. Last year, the Liu Di incident<sup>12</sup> raised widespread protest on the Internet. In mainland China, some claim that taking this issue to the Internet was wrongheaded, and may have prevented confidential negotiations with the police to secure Liu Di’s release. A “liberal” academic in Shanghai, a “liberal angry young man” in Beijing, and other “mature personages” have voiced this opinion. I think that this opinion is based on a sound premise, and I even believe that the police have hinted as much. But when all is said and done, it is a bogus question. Let’s not forget how the German scientist Heisenberg appealed to Himmler during the Nazi period.<sup>13</sup> Only the most muddled thinking would attribute the arrest of dissidents to the support expressed for them by the outside world. Such distortions expose the deep-rooted Machiavellian political character of Chinese intellectuals: unable to tell right from wrong, they can’t tell boon from bane. To believe that if the outside world stops protesting the police will be more likely to release “hostages” is utter lunacy. It stands to reason that protest is just as likely to result in prisoners’ release as in their continued incarceration, and there is no question that protest did much more good than harm in bringing about an improvement in Liu Di’s conditions of imprisonment. This sort of specious argument is hardly unprecedented, but taken to its logical conclusion it is tantamount to admitting that the government is right to arrest dissidents.

4. **Defending cowardice and failing to acknowledge weakness, or feeling no shame even when it is acknowledged.** The Chinese intellectual elite can be said to have reached the peak of perfection in this respect. Weakness in the face of brute force is perhaps forgivable. But the Chinese intellectual elite not only fails to face up to its weakness and cowardice, it constructs myriad high-sounding reasons and theories in justification. Cowardice is a sin, but a sin that can be forgiven, and those who repent of their cowardice can thereby obtain deliverance. But to cover up one’s cowardice is to commit an incorrigible offense upon an offense.

Of the innumerable bogus justifications proffered by intellectuals, the two most commonly heard are the following:

(1) “The nature of our work is different. Intellectuals working within the system must exercise restraint, but with this restraint comes the reward of being allowed to speak and thus of having a greater influence on society.” The hypocrisy of this argument is manifested in statements such as, “I have great respect for your resolute stand, but I do what suits me

best.” (This sort of statement is often made with a wry face, to express a feeling of intellectual superiority or moral self-mockery.) Above all, this viewpoint expresses a mode of thinking that is identical to the official mode of thinking to which it is ostensibly opposed. Moreover, saying “the type of work we do is different” when confronted with individual tragedies is criminal, because in certain cases the difference between right and wrong is crystal clear to any observer, and taking the easy way out is inexcusable. Lastly, the “influence” intellectuals enjoy in this phony freedom is double-edged: it has created a world that is spiritually topsy-turvy, false, diminished and abnormal, and has thus caused society as a whole to lose its moral standards and basic humanity.

(2) “I cannot tell the truth, but I guarantee that I will not tell falsehoods.” This proposition, apparently made by a professor at Beijing University named Qian Liqun, drew sharp criticism from Liu Xiaobo and others last year. This absurd proposition reveals no sense of shame about not speaking the truth and manifests a sense of superiority about not speaking falsehoods. The crux of the matter is that in the case of Li Siyi, not telling falsehoods but remaining silent is a crime. This sort of proposition is first and foremost a defense of silence, and its aim is to ease a guilty conscience.

5. Two phony arguments. Intellectuals and ordinary people alike have come up with two opposite yet complementary phony arguments to avoid assuming moral responsibility:

(1) “Li Siyi’s is an isolated case; there is therefore no need to make a mountain out of a molehill.” This argument is easily refuted: First of all, every tragedy is particular or, put another way, all tragedies are specific events. When 30 million people starve to death, or 6 million people are massacred, but many more survive, these can be said to be events affecting a “minority.” If this argument is taken to its logical conclusion, there are no tragedies in the world. Secondly, because Li Siyi’s death was very much related to the police system, it was not an accident. Thirdly, humanity’s crowning moral achievement has been the shift in looking at human tragedy from the point of view of its victims rather than from that of society. This is the logical starting point of humanism. To the world, Li Siyi’s death was perhaps an isolated incident, but to her this tragedy was the whole world, her entire universe. This principle applies to every human being: those who dismiss Li Siyi’s death as an isolated incident would immediately implore the world to treat a tragedy that befell them personally as an “event of historic significance.” The maxim “Do unto others” guarantees that whenever an individual suffers a misfortune, he or she will be treated with solicitude and will not be abandoned or treated with contempt. But if we accept the argument that Li Siyi’s death was just an isolated incident, no person and no event is deserving of the world’s concern. The social consequences of this viewpoint are disastrous.

(2) The second opinion is the opposite of the first one, but it comes down to the same thing: “There are too many incidents like this, so there is no point in taking too much notice of them.” Refuting this argument doesn’t take much imagination either: it is precisely because there are so many tragedies

like this one that we must resolve never again to ignore a single one. It is precisely because all too many people mind their own business thinking that “there are too many incidents like this, so there’s no point in taking too much notice of them,” that such “incidents” are becoming ever more numerous. It’s a vicious circle. Those who follow this line of reasoning, which is founded on moral apathy towards social disaster, not only become morally insensitive to repeated tragedies, but actually take consolation at their own good fortune from the misfortune of others.

These five arguments are all based on the same mode of thinking: replacing moral reasoning with rational calculus. Zygmunt Bauman, a British sociologist, has written about this question with considerable insight in his study of the Nazi Holocaust. As Bauman sees it, the main factor that made the Holocaust possible was the close social cooperation, based on rational calculus, between its planners, executors and victims.<sup>14</sup>

Bauman cites a sentence by Hannah Arendt: “The most difficult problem that the initiators of the *Endlösung* encountered...was how to overcome the animal pity by which all normal men are affected in the presence of physical suffering.” “Overcoming animal pity” is a problem faced by all bystanders. How is it solved? By suppressing moral sensitivity in favor of rational analysis and by relegating moral questions to the sidelines of theoretical discussions. “Rationality” thus becomes a moral sedative that transforms the basest acts into normality and moral behavior into heterodoxy and abnormality. Clearly, the intellectual elite are natural masters at this. At the same time, what a regime requires most of all for its system of social oppression to work is the cooperation of the intellectual elite, which it obtains by threatening it with force and buying it off with benefits. Confronted with threats and the promise of benefits, the intellectual elite “rationally” makes the “correct choice,” precisely the choice the fascist system has schemed for and most desires to see.

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Bauman describes how the Jewish elite was bought off by the fascist regime: “Among the resources of resistance that must be destroyed to make the violence effective (resources whose destruction, arguably, is the central point of genocide and ultimate measure of its effectiveness), by far the most crucial position is occupied by the traditional elites of the doomed community...The inner structure of the group will collapse, thereby dissipating it into a collection of individuals who may be then picked one by one and incorporated within the new structure administered by the victors, or forcibly reassembled into a subjugated, segregated category, ruled and policed directly by the managers of the new order.”<sup>15</sup>

The Jewish elite's new role was the Judenrat,<sup>16</sup> more or less the equivalent of China's puppet army. "Jewish elites played therefore a crucial mediating role in the incapacitation of the Jews.... To some remarkable extent, the Jews were part of that social arrangement which was to destroy them. They provided a vital link in the chain of coordinated actions; their own actions were an indispensable part of the total operation and a crucial condition of its success.... Incorporated in the overall power structure, given an extended set of tasks and functions within it, the doomed population had apparently a range of options to choose from. Cooperation with their sworn enemies and future killers was not without its own measure of rationality. The Jews could therefore play into the hands of their oppressors, facilitate their tasks, bring closer their own perdition, while guided in their action by the rationally interpreted purpose of survival."<sup>17</sup>

### No longer centers of scholarly debate, China's universities have degenerated into arenas where people squabble over who will manage to sell out first and for how much.

As we have already seen, the [Chinese] regime is very successful at selecting members of the intellectual elite and breaking up the intellectuals' organizations. Moreover, the intellectual elite, speaking through the mouth of Mao Yushi, has already begun to talk the Chinese public into adopting an attitude of cooperation. An intellectual's cooperation with the regime does not only hinge on the calculus of actual benefits to be derived from collaborating, but also on whether the intellectual is able to construct a "rational theory" that will make his choice sound reasonable. The two motives are inextricably linked, but by and large the theory has to serve the interests of its author.

In this respect, the intellectuals who talk with such eloquence in Chinese universities are remarkably similar to their predecessors in German universities sixty and seventy years ago: "German universities, like their counterparts in other modern countries, carefully cultivated the ideal of science as an emphatically value-free activity; they bestowed upon their wards the right and the duty to serve the 'interests of knowledge' and to brush aside other interests with which the welfare of scientific pursuits might clash. Once one remembers this, then the silence, and even the keen co-operation of German scientific institutions in the implementation of Nazi tasks, loses much of its shocking power.... What truly mattered to German scientific (and more generally, intellectual) elites, and to the best and most distinguished individuals among them was the preservation of their integrity as scholars and spokesmen of Reason. And that task did not include (and did exclude in case of conflict) concern with the ethical meaning of their activity. As Alan Beyerchen found out, in the spring and summer of 1933 the luminaries of German science, people like Planck, Sommerfelde, Heisenberg, or von Laue, all

counseled patience and restraint in dealing with the government, especially regarding dismissals and emigration. Their primary goal was to preserve the professional autonomy of their discipline by avoiding confrontation and waiting for orderly life and procedures to resume. They all wanted to defend and to save what mattered to them – and save it they did, as soon as they showed a readiness to forget about what mattered less.... Their professional services were in high demand and praised, funds for ambitious and scientifically exciting projects were forthcoming, and for that no price seemed too high."<sup>18</sup>

As far as using research grants to incite and entice intellectuals to cooperate is concerned, China appears to be endowed with even greater "political wisdom" than Nazi Germany. Generally speaking, what little freedom Chinese universities (as well as some foreign media) once enjoyed has been totally sold out since the 1990s. No longer centers of scholarly debate, universities have degenerated into arenas where people squabble over who will manage to sell out first and for how much. As if this were not disgraceful enough, in every dispute opponents display remarkable "courage" in dishing out base accusations and malicious slander, and shamelessly attack anyone outside their own faction. (A particularly revolting practice is kicking people when they're down in the name of "freedom.") Even liberal and New Left intellectuals dabbling on the margins of post-1989 wheeling and dealing are often willing, at the slightest shift in the political wind, to negotiate with enlightened elements of the regime,<sup>19</sup> although the so-called "enlightenment" of these new wielders of power is often wishful thinking on the part of the intellectuals. The object of Chinese intellectuals' rational deliberations is not the threat of death, but mainly worries about getting or losing jobs and housing. These concerns are almost as important to them as government financial support for their projects. Under these circumstances, Chinese academics are even more cowardly than their German predecessors under the Nazis, because here the choices and opportunities are greater and the risks smaller, yet not even the trace of an independent university movement has emerged in China.

The process of moral degeneration has been nothing less than the steady victory of rationality over a sense of shame. But the sense of shame is so strong that it has proven necessary to devise theories to defend "rationality": in addition to the stress on a "professional spirit" mentioned above, rationality is invested with intrinsic value. "[The ruler] must protect reason, eulogize on the virtues of the calculus of cost and effects, defend logic against passions and values which, unreasonably, do not count costs and refuse to obey logic."<sup>20</sup> Here rationality is not only opposed to values, but is turned into a value. Simply put, clad in the right theoretical armor, amorality becomes morality. Shamelessness can reach no higher.

In this respect, intellectuals and the government cooperate hand in glove. "By and large, all rulers can count on rationality being on their side. But the Nazi rulers, additionally, twisted the stakes of the game so that the rationality of survival would render all other motives of human action irrational. Inside the Nazi-made world, reason was the enemy of morality. Logic

required consent to crime. Rational defence of one's survival called for non-resistance to the other's destruction. This rationality pitched the sufferers against each other and obliterated their joint humanity... Graciously, the noble creed of rationality absolved both the victims and the bystanders from the charge of immorality and from guilty conscience. Having reduced human life to the calculus of self-preservation, this rationality robbed human life of humanity... Evil can do its dirty work, hoping that most people most of the time will refrain from doing rash, reckless things – and resisting evil is rash and reckless.”<sup>21</sup>

The cooperation between the intellectual elite and the regime is not only limited to the tacitly agreed theoretical realm mentioned above. It is also manifested in all sorts of concrete ways in daily life, and requires intellectuals to “stay away from danger” and “fence off heretics and victims.” Bauman's concept of “sealing off victims” is illuminating. There are two aspects to “sealing off” a category of people: they must be “either removed physically from the context of daily life and concerns of other groups, or separated psychologically by overtly and unambiguously discriminating definitions and the emphasis on the targeted category's uniqueness.”<sup>22</sup> Bauman seems not to fully realize that the regime carries out its sealing off plan with the full cooperation of the entire society and intellectual elite.<sup>23</sup> The regime isolates victims and the persecuted either to cover up its crimes or to deter and eliminate dissidents; in either case, society and the intellectual elite often go out of their way, based on rational risk assessments, to cooperate with the government's efforts to isolate victims, thereby making them feel even more helpless and abandoned. Under these circumstances, the greater your moral sensitivity and courage, the more you live in a world without neighbors.

That the intellectual elite distances itself from “troublemakers” is precisely the goal the government wants to achieve—and in fact has achieved. When Liu Xiaobo was released from prison, many people avoided him, afraid that he would get them into trouble. In a certain way I wanted to challenge this type of “cooperation,” so I sought him out a few times, but as a result of this contact I too was kept at a distance. Ding Zilin is perhaps another case in point. A former fellow student of hers—now a famous professor at Beijing University who likens himself to a contemporary Lu Xun — has not paid her a single visit these past 15 years, although he grows teary-eyed whenever he talks of Lu Xun's essay “In Memory of Ms. Liu Hezhen.”<sup>24</sup> Theory is theory; in real life, however, some people are sealed off. As everybody knows, these absurd incidents happen most often to friends who speak their mind. Like the late Wu Zuguang, Hu Jiwei and Li Shenzhi are brave and upright men who speak the truth, which is precisely why like Wu, they have been refused invitations to academic conferences and private gatherings.

Ironically, those who ostracize their own friends are themselves often ostracized and spied on by the regime, but they still bend over backwards to show that they belong to a different political class. There are countless such examples. So-and-so is too controversial or has a certain background, so it's best

to stay away from him. Oftentimes, and even more tragically, the more some people are isolated by the regime, the more they want to isolate others to prove their own “purity” or to further personal or factional interests. These maneuvers amply demonstrate the lengths to which the regime has gone to seal off dissidents, as well as the fact that without participation and cooperation by the intellectuals, the current intellectual martial law would be unthinkable. There ought to be a critical self-examination of the perversions of rationality and cognitive maladjustments that underlie these “initiatives to cooperate.”

Taking the initiative to participate in sealing off others is also the result of rational choice and the calculation of benefits. In this context, we may cite Bauman's “save what you can game.” As the Nazi regime went about its project of sealing off categories of people, “the victims had to be convinced that the treatment of the group as a whole would not be uniform, that the lot of individual members would be diversified, and in each case dependent on individual merit... The sheer existence of bureaucratically defined categories of varying degrees of rights and deprivations prompted frantic efforts to obtain a ‘reclassification’, to prove that one ‘deserves’ to be assigned to a better category... On the whole, there was no shortage of persons and groups who all too eagerly embraced the idea of their own exclusive quality and right to a more benevolent treatment... Rejection of solidarity in the name of personal or group privileges... was prominent not only in the inter-communal relations. Inside each community, differential treatment was hoped and fought for, with the Judenräte normally cast in the role of survival brokers... The individualization of survival strategies led to a universal scramble for roles and positions deemed to be favourable or privileged, and to widespread efforts to ingratiate oneself in the eyes of the oppressors—invariably at the victims' expense.”<sup>25</sup>

The “division of labor” theory cited above is also based on this type of cost-benefit consideration. Because “my work is different,” my problem is not as serious as Liu Xiaobo's. These farcical arguments are also heard in the efforts to censor the Internet. For example, every time the Sleepless Night (Bumei Zhiye) Web site is closed, well-known cultural Web sites such as Century Salon (Shiji Shalong) and Guangtian Tea House (Guangtian Chashe) fail to take a stand in defense of liberty; instead, they make every possible effort to explain or demonstrate that they deserve different treatment and that they are different from Sleepless Night. The only reason is their need to survive. Under such “rational choices” any unity founded on freedom is bound to collapse. When self-preservation is put above moral duty, those who hold sway over laws and resources can “admonish the people to cooperate” with even greater brazenness.

Another consequence of fencing off victims is that by increasing the distance between them and the perpetrators or bystanders, the latter's sense of moral responsibility is blotted out. As Bauman observes, “It must be kept in mind that most the participants [of genocide] did not fire rifles at Jewish children or pour gas into chambers... Most bureaucrats composed memoranda, drew up blueprints, talked on the telephone, and

participated in conferences. They could destroy a whole people by sitting at their desk.”<sup>26</sup> And elsewhere, “Causal connections between their actions and the mass murder were difficult to spot.”<sup>27</sup> We ought to add that in China, the huge population gives the regime new possibilities to create social distance between individual tragedies and ordinary people. In a vast sea of people, the distance between people becomes greater, obliterating the practical and moral grounds for individual concern and further divesting individual action of meaning.

### **Without faith, there is no love**

Because no one witnessed Li Siyi’s death, it is all the more important that someone tell her story, that someone stand up for her by remembering her life. But how do we persuade more people, especially more members of the intellectual elite, to become chroniclers of Li Siyi’s death, and through a sense of guilt to participate in her suffering?

An in-depth examination of China’s spiritual condition shows that rational analysis has replaced judgment founded on values. In a predicament where rationality is the enemy of moral conduct, the expression of emotion in literature could stimulate opposition to rationality. But in practice the clamor of “poets” is manifestly a new form of emotional escapism rather than an unflinching assumption of responsibility for human tragedy. It expresses not courage but fear, not forgiveness but hatred, and not the affirmation of life but of death. Spiritual life having come to the end of the road, what we need is the strength that comes from faith.

**Cynicism does not believe that justice can triumph, but in fact it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is therefore necessary to face up to the consequences of one’s own attitude.**

Faith does not completely eliminate rational calculus. According to Bauman, the most important lesson of the Holocaust is this: “Putting self-preservation above moral duty is in no way predetermined, inevitable and inescapable.... The testimony of the few who did resist shatters the authority of the logic of self-preservation. It shows it for what it is in the end – a choice.”<sup>28</sup> This sort of analysis is likewise a “rational analysis”; it points out that choice can take another rational path. But just making this sort of rational decision is not enough, because the future remains uncertain. And under the influence of uncertainty, individual choice hesitates. I have said elsewhere that rational analysis cannot be a certain guide to action. One might claim, “If we don’t show concern for Li Siyi’s tragedy, we shall suffer the same punishment.” But in fact rational analysis makes clear that the retribution for this fate has no logical distribution; there is every possibility that one can escape this fate. Under these circumstances rationalism is powerless. The choice that rationalism faces is either to revert to the world of cynicism discussed above, or to enter the realm of faith and pray for help.

Bauman concludes his book with a discussion of the “road to salvation,”<sup>29</sup> writing that in all circumstances, an individual must unconditionally assume his moral responsibility. Bauman closes his farewell speech too hastily, and leaves us wondering how we can lead individuals to unconditionally assume their moral responsibility. Thus Bauman concludes where we must start: we must provide a reason for individuals to assume moral responsibility. If that reason is not born of personal experience, it must be transcendental, that is to say beyond the sphere of experience.

What makes the intellectual elite’s rational evasion possible is their lack of shame toward this evasion. Put another way, we live in sin but feel no guilt. All justifications are shameless, which is the essence of the problem. Only when they feel shame about personal weakness can intellectuals survive or demonstrate the courage to survive. Why then do Chinese intellectuals lack a sense of moral shame? Because they do not admit their guilt and fail to acknowledge that they are morally and rationally flawed. And even if they admit this much, it only increases their despair, because they lack the faith to surmount it. Only those who steadfastly affirm their faith can face this fact squarely. They believe on the one hand that God is our Lord and acknowledge that when humanity lived under the Law and the Old Covenant it was weak and powerless; and they believe, on the other hand, in the redemptive mystery that “the Word was made flesh,” and that those living under the “promise” and the “New Covenant” have the gift of grace. From their faith, neither aspect of which can be dispensed with, spring individual freedom, courage and salvation. Herein lies the meaning of Li Siyi’s death: in an immediate way, if only for an instant, Li Siyi leaves intellectual arrogance no place to hide itself and causes the intellect to regain its sense of shame. Or at least she ought to.

Li Siyi’s death also reveals something about the command to “love one another.”<sup>30</sup> A mere sense of shame is not enough; it must also turned into “love in action” (Mother Teresa). However, only when there is faith can there be love. Love is the fruit of faith. On this point we can turn to Martin Luther. Because we believe in Jesus, we have true love and the courage and strength that comes from love. Luther wrote, “A Christian man does not live in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbour, or else is no Christian: in Christ by faith; in his neighbour by love. By faith he is carried upwards above himself to God, and by love he sinks back below himself to his neighbour, still always-abiding in God and His love.”<sup>31</sup> Faith makes our world triumph over the narrow chain of cause and effect that ensues from cost-benefit analysis; it focuses the entire world on a single result, and extends the world beyond to its ultimate purpose. In this chain of cause and effect, death and fear are vanquished by the Kingdom of God, the flesh by the spirit, and the superficial self by the inner self. Upon this triumphant return, love will flow and gain resolute strength with the support and protection of faith.

Cynicism often arises from the expectation of bad consequences. Cynicism does not believe that justice can triumph, but in fact it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is therefore necessary to face up to the consequences of one’s own atti-

tude. From a religious perspective, these anxieties are brought about by unbelief. Matthew 17:14-18 describes how Jesus cast out a demon from a boy. In verses 19 to 21, we read: "Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, 'Why couldn't we drive it out?' He replied, 'Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. But this kind [of demon] does not go out except in prayer and fasting.'"<sup>32</sup>

Ultimately we can therefore say first of all that faith absorbs the causal connection of rational calculus into a higher causal connection in which rational calculus is no longer the only choice or dominant criterion; and secondly, that faith causes believers to assume moral responsibility with confidence and courage, so that they do not turn their back on their responsibility as disciples based on the deliberation of loss and gain. And of course there is also the third point: genuine love can only be based on faith. There are two aspects to this: (1) Faith turns the object of love into an individual. Every person is a child of God and therefore must not be ignored. Social or political status and most ideologies are a sham. (2) Faith brings humility to the person who loves, and does not allow love to become a new object in the calculus of loss and gain.

This is extremely important. Love without faith is often given with a view to gaining popularity or some other personal advantage. This is not true love but hypocrisy. Christian love honors God, and whoever loves as a Christian firmly believes that he himself is not righteous and is not made righteous by works.<sup>33</sup> Christian love submits to the Lord; it does not make a display of morality to one's neighbor. Likewise, the believer does not need to consider all sorts of objections a ruthless businessman might put forward — objections invariably leveled against compassion. For the values and meaning upon which the actions of a believer are based have nothing to do with those of unbelievers; the believer does not need the pronouncements of unbelievers for his existence to have value and meaning. He tries to please God, not to please men. Thus, when a believer is slandered with talk about "putting on a show" or about his motives (speculating about other people's motives is also a clever and all-too common Chinese way of shirking moral responsibility), it means nothing to him. Besides, it stands to reason that speculation about other people's motives says more about the one doing the speculating than about anyone else. The believer triumphs in Jesus, and can thus ignore accusations made against his conduct. Rebutting such charges is giving in to the basest sort of criticism, an intellectual waste and a deviation from faith—for what business of mine is it whether others believe or not? God observes my faith in secret, and that is enough. When a believer fasts before others, he is indeed "staging a show," but one with a meaning more clear than that of his accusers: it is the price that must be paid in obeying the command to "love one another," rather than an attempt to attain a political goal or personal profit.

This is why Jesus taught: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have

received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:16-18). Of course, Jesus was mainly talking about individual spirituality, and chiding the Pharisees for their blind observance of superficial rituals, which is altogether different from our fasting in remembrance of little Li Siyi today. A fast for Li Siyi is not meaningful in an ascetic but rather in a Gandhian sense. Jesus' teaching about humility remains a guide to this sort of action. In this respect all I can do is to pray to God for the strength to come before others in humility. And likewise to receive the Lord's instruction, "A city on a hill cannot be hidden" (Matthew 5:14)<sup>34</sup> and his call to believers to "rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15).

Thirty days after little Li Siyi left this world, I prayed again for her, and asked that the Lord might receive her soul and that she might find peace in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14),<sup>35</sup> and, "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). And in the story of the "dead girl and the sick woman" (Matthew 9:18-26), Jesus said, "The girl is not dead but asleep."<sup>36</sup> Li Siyi should have reached heaven, and I hope the Lord is looking after her. I also place another little girl's name in Jesus' hands, and hope that the Lord will guard her soul. I discussed three-year-old Duan Xuehua's fate in my first article introducing Li Siyi. Duan Xuehua's fate also demonstrates that the theory of "isolated cases" takes no account of reality. I thank God because although she is beneath mention in this world, in the kingdom of God she is great. This is what happened to Duan Xuehua: After her mother remarried, she went to live in her stepfather's home. Because she was regarded as a burdensome extra mouth to feed, she was repeatedly tormented by her stepfather's mother. She was thrown into a manure pit and her legs and skull were broken. At the time of her death, her scalp was completely covered in festers and her body had more than 60 bruises. Duan Xuehua died on April 10, 2003 in Hehua Village, Kaixian sub-prefecture, in Sichuan Province, as was reported by the *Chongqing Business Daily* (*Chongqing Shangbao*). The unique fate of our children in our time is that the villain who oppresses them is not always the state. Every person is a potential murderer.

Therefore, through my fasting I offer a prayer for China's soul, and hope that while the Lord accepts little Siyi's soul he will give meaning to her suffering here on earth by letting her awaken more souls from their deep slumber. I also pray that after Li Siyi, intellect and morality can be reunited on the foundation of faith.

Translated by Paul Frank

1. Editor's note: This is a slightly edited translation of an article originally

- posted on the *Sleepless Nights Forum* on September 18, 2003. After *Sleepless Nights* was closed down, yet again, by the authorities, the article was reposted at: <http://www.epochtimes.com/b5/3/9/19/n378883.htm>.
2. See Ren Bumei, *Ji Lisiyi wen* (A Eulogy for Li Siyi).
  3. Translator's note: This and other quotes from Elie Wiesel's works are back-translated from the Chinese.
  4. Translated into Chinese by Chen Dongbiao and published in 1998.
  5. Translator's note: The Chinese transliteration is *Alaina*.
  6. Translator's note: Back translation from the Chinese.
  7. Chinese translation by Peng Huaidong, published by *Nanhai Chubanshe*, 1996. Translator's note: English translation by Susan Massotty.
  8. Translator's note: Back translation from the Chinese.
  9. Translator's note: Ren Bumei slightly misquotes Adorno, who actually said, "To write after Auschwitz is barbaric."
  10. Editor's note: Liu Xiaofeng is director of Zhongshan University's Institute of Comparative Religion, and is one of the most prominent of China's "Cultural Christians."
  11. Editor's note: Xu Jilin is professor of history at Shanghai's East China Normal University.
  12. Editor's note: Liu Di is a Beijing university student arrested after posting opinions critical of the government on a Web site under the penname, "Stainless Steel Mouse."
  13. Translator's note: Zygmunt Bauman writes, "Heisenberg went to Himmler for reassurance that he and his colleagues (that is, except those who went missing) would be allowed to do what they wanted and cherished." See Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 127.
  14. See *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Chinese translation by Yang Yudong et al., published by Yilin Chubanshe, 2002. Translator's note: All quotes from Bauman are drawn directly from the original English text cited *supra* note 13.
  15. Translator's note: Bauman, p. 119.
  16. Translator's note: A council representing a Jewish community in a locality controlled by the Germans during the war of 1939-45.
  17. Translator's note: Bauman, p. 122.
  18. Translator's note: Bauman, pp. 126-27.
  19. Translator's note: The original Chinese phrase is *Kaiming quanli*.
  20. Translator's note: Bauman, p. 203.
  21. Translator's note: Bauman, pp. 203, 206.
  22. Translator's note: Bauman, p. 123.
  23. Translator's note: Contrary to what Ren Bumei says here, Bauman does speak of the full cooperation of the intellectual elite and most of German society under the Nazis.
  24. Translator's note: Lu Xun wrote this essay on April 1, 1926 to commemorate a former student of his who was killed on March 18 of the same year while demonstrating in front of Duan Qirui's government offices in Beijing. In addition to eulogizing his student and recounting the tragic event, Lu Xun also comments on violence in history and the lack of humanity surrounding him.
  25. Translator's note: Bauman, pp. 130, 132, 133, 134.
  26. Translator's note: Ren Bumei mistakenly attributes this statement to Bauman, who was in fact quoting Raoul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 1024, cited in Bauman, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
  27. Translator's note: Bauman, p. 24.
  28. Translator's note: Bauman, p. 207.
  29. Translator's note: I have not found an explicit reference to a "road to salvation" (*zhenggou zhitu*) in the original English edition of Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*.
  30. Translator's note: "A new command I give you: Love one another." John 13:34.
  31. Martin Luther, *Concerning Christian Liberty*, Chinese translation, *Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan*, 2003. Translator's note: English translation from Martin Luther, *Concerning Christian Liberty*, R.S. Grignion trans. (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910), reproduced on Project Wittenberg, [www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/cclib-3.html](http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/cclib-3.html).
  32. Translator's note: *Holy Bible, New International Version*, Colorado Springs, International Bible Society, 1995. The verse "But this kind [of demon] does not go out except in prayer and fasting" is omitted from most Bibles. It is included in a footnote in the *New International Version*.
  33. Translator's note: Cf. Ephesians 2:8-9: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."
  34. Translator's note: The reference is to Matthew 5:14-16: "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."
  35. Translator's note: Ren Bumei mistakenly attributes this quote to Matthew 9:13-14.
  36. Translator's note: The passage reads: "a ruler came and knelt before him and said, 'My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live.' Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples [...] When Jesus entered the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd, he said, 'Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep.' But they laughed at him. After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up."