

János Kornai

WU Jinglian – Birthday greetings 2010.I.5

My dear friend Jinglian, dear participants of the meeting,

I am very sad that I cannot be present at the joyful celebration of Jinglian Wu's 80th birthday. But it gives me some compensation that – thanks to digital technology – I can send my greetings with the help of this video message.

Our friendship has a long story. We met for the first time in Athens almost thirty years ago, in the summer of 1981 at a roundtable conference convened by the International Economic Association on relative prices. I had never met a Chinese economist before. These were the years of the conflicts and mutual suspicion between Hruschev's Soviet Union and Mao's China. It was expected from all loyal members of the intelligentsia of all countries of the Soviet empire on the one side and of China on the other side to ignore each other and maintain the atmosphere of hostility. That was not the case this time. In the discussion following my talk there was a debate between me and Professor Khatachurov, appointed by the Soviet leadership to preside over the Soviet Economic Association. He rejected the idea that chronic shortages are systemic. Professor Kantorovich, the great Soviet mathematician and economist kept silent. But Professor Wu stood up on my side in the controversy, explaining in much detail the systemic deficiencies of the centrally managed socialist system. Following the public debate we met in the hotel room and had a fruitful conversation. That was the good start of our life-long friendship.

The next occasion of seeing each other was in 1995 at the Basham cruise boat. The Chinese leadership invited seven foreign economists and asked their opinion about the desirable changes in China. I had the honor to be one of them – and Professor Wu was an influential member of the Chinese delegation. This gathering became known as the Basham conference and my Chinese friends explained me that it is regarded as an important event in the history of the Chinese reform. Also, I was told, behind the scenes Jinglian played an important role in the interpretation of the suggestions of the foreign experts.

We met again in 1999 when my wife, Zsuzsa, and I were invited for the presentation of the second Chinese edition of my book *Economics of Shortage*. Not much later, in the academic year 1999-2000 Collegium Budapest, Institute for Advanced Study, where I am working, invited Professor Wu, accompanied by his wife, Zhou Nan. He spent there an extended period working on his research. The members of the Collegium and the Hungarian economic profession were impressed by the ideas and the personality of Jinglian when he gave a lecture and met colleagues privately.

At a later occasion I met Jinglian again at a meeting in Beijing when he kindly accepted to serve as the adviser of the President of the International Economic Association. Ever since, beside his many other commitments, he has been giving strong support to the international organization of the economic profession.

We met time and again. I have vivid and fond memories of our last meeting in Beijing in January 2008. A group of my best Chinese friends gave a party celebrating my 80th birthday and they decided it was time to combine two occasions: my true 80th birthday and an advance first celebration of Jinglian's 80th birthday, which followed two years later – *now*. There was a birthday-cake and we blew the candles together.

Dear Jinglian, I will be, spiritually, on your side, when you are blowing the candles this time again. I feel I owe you gratitude for all the help you have given me in reaching out for the Chinese reader. You have supported, in various ways, the publication of my books and papers. Your own writings have been of great help for me in the understanding of the historical changes in China.

I feel great admiration for your intellectual contributions and for your exemplary conduct in public affairs. There are various forms of high intelligence. I know bright people who are aggressive, offensive, and like to be victorious, enjoying the humiliation of the intellectual opponent. You exhibit a different attitude. You speak with a low volume, modestly, with much restraint, relying on convincing arguments, with the characteristic smile on your face. We know economists who are like the general of the cavalry crying loudly for a stormy gallop. Jinglian does not call for a tempestuous attack, he prefers the slower movement, step by step – but with the certainty that he is moving in the right direction. As the Hungarian saying goes: “The slow water washes away the riverside”.

Wu Jinglian is a courageous man. He is taking serious risk in his activities. However, he does not do it in a light-headed way. If there is a police line, a barrier, he does not run to destroy it spectacularly. Instead he goes as close to the borderline as possible, and then he tries to shift the line a bit outwards, allowing also others a wider space. Or, if possible, he tries to take the barrier to pieces, cautiously, brick by brick.

Wu Jinglian is a shining example of learning, a great teacher, and a life-time student at the same time. He is open-minded, free from self-admiration and pretense. He is ready to accept ideas from others, young or old, Chinese or foreign – as long as they serve the good cause he is supporting. I know people who are repeating a few thoughts again and again. Not Jinglian! He is ready to adopt and also able to create new and again new thoughts. He was a creative mind when he was young and is still full of creative ideas when he is not as very young as he used to be.

Dear Jinglian, I wish you many more productive years, and an even larger group of young people ready to learn from you! You are the most influential Chinese economist today – and we wish you an even stronger influence.

There are no double personalities, one for the public and one for private life. Wu Jinglian is the same person in the public and in the private domain. We have been sitting more than once at the dinner table in China and in Budapest, with his wife, Nan, and my wife, Zsuzsa, on our sides, and we have witnessed his love for good life. He enjoyed the fine food and liked to be an attentive host. He had the same charming and wise smile on his face when we talked about Russian classical writers or about the exchange rate policy. I have just learnt that your favorites in music are the piano concerts of Mozart. Our taste is quite similar in this respect as well! Zsuzsa and I wish you not only great success in your work, but also the pleasure of listening to Mozart, enjoying your hobbies. We wish you good health, many cheerful days and years.

Happy birthday!