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Howard W. French
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By Howard W. French

I am eager to read Chinese news accounts of the life and death of Vaclav Havel, whose central message might be summed up as the necessity for individuals everywhere to cast off their apathy and assume their rights – and agency – as citizens.

The death of this figure of major importance to the history of the late- and post-Cold War world will inevitably generate talk that is heavily focused on Europe, just as the attention of the Western media and foreign ministries tended to stay almost exclusively bracketed on this region (with China, for a time, serving as a crucial exception) as the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union crumbled.

Scarcely noted around that time, were citizens' democratic uprisings in Africa (Benin 1990-'91, Mali and Zambia '91) that opened history's door for a new era of participatory representative politics around the continent. I say scarcely noted by the press, but also scarcely heeded by Western chancelleries, which judged such events to be small beer when compared to the exciting things happening in more "important" places elsewhere.

Little diplomatic energy was invested in supporting this early wave of African democratization. In part, this was due to the fact that it seemed to violate tenets of conventional wisdom in political science, and hence diplomacy, which held that democracy could not take root in countries that did not have a substantial middle class.

What contributes to making China so interesting today is that the country now boasts a large and fast-growing middle class, making it ever riper, some theorists hold, for the emergence of real citizens' movements that can push back the frontiers of the state and win greater space for the individual, and for civil society.

Havel's death coincides interestingly with an example of just what the tender green roots of such a movement might look like, meaning of course the protests underway in Wukan. Six years ago, [I covered a remarkable, and remarkably similar uprising](#) in Shanwei, in the very same part of southeastern China.

It was ruthlessly put down by paramilitary police, and mention of it in the Chinese press and Internet was largely suppressed. In all likelihood, the state will find a way to quash the Wukan protests, as well, but even as it works furiously to censor the Internet, word of the uprising, and of its significance for the emergence of a broadening rights consciousness in China, is getting around.

In Africa, largely ignored and scarcely supported by the outside world, a similar kind of rights consciousness began to spread and take root in the 1990s. That it was able to do so without the existence of a robust middle class in so many places remains an important and largely untold

story; a fertile subject awaiting book-length exploration by enterprising journalists and historians.

Western Europe and the United States ignored African calls for a Marshall Plan for the continent, as it emerged from the ruinous misrule common during the Cold War. Remarkably, in more recent times, Africa has gradually begun to harness its own wealth, so long stolen and misappropriated. Growth is said to be fast and accelerating on the continent, which finds itself in a demographic sweet spot, and courted by rich new players, conspicuously led by China. Middle classes, ever more familiarly globalized, are emerging nearly everywhere one looks.

Whether this growth will lead to real and solid development remains an open question. Outcomes will naturally be very different according to the country. Here's my wager, though, that the emergence (or not) of the Havelian citizen, the networked individual who is jealous of his rights and demanding of the state, will be decisive.

This essay first appeared at Howard French's [personal website](#) and is being reposted here with permission.