

# UP FRONT WITH WANG YU

For this special issue, Wang Yu interviews several veterans of the 1989 Democracy Movement.

**Wang Dan** became a leading figure in the 1989 Democracy Movement in Beijing at the age of 20. After the movement was crushed on June 4, the authorities placed Wang at the top of their “Most Wanted” list, resulting in his arrest and imprisonment for four years. After his release in 1993 Wang was detained again, and in October 1996 was sentenced to 11 years in prison for “incitement to subvert state power.” Exiled to the United States on “medical parole” in April 1998, Wang is now working toward his doctoral degree at Harvard University.

**Wang Yu:** The June 4th Movement in 1989 was characterized by protests against corruption and degeneracy, demands for freedom of speech and calls for political democracy. Now that fifteen years have passed, what influence do you think these protests and demands have had on the Chinese government?

**Wang Dan:** The Chinese government has learned nothing from the June 4th Movement. They ignored the students’ proposals then and have done nothing about them up to now.

The economic reform launched in China in 1978 did bring some improvements to our society. However, in the late eighties economic reform encountered difficulties because of a corrupt and incompetent political system. That’s why in 1989 our movement’s demands concentrated on political reform and democracy.

**Wang Yu:** What change has the Movement brought to society as a whole? Is the situation better or worse than before?

**Wang Dan:** Since the June 4th Movement, the Chinese government has granted more economic freedom, but the problems of corruption and degeneracy have gotten much worse. Bribery has become commonplace. Business people give money to government officials to ensure lucrative contracts; they scratch each other’s backs. The rich become richer and the poor become poorer. Because of this Chinese society is out of balance.

If the government had paid any attention to the Movement’s demands, China would not be in such chaos. If the Communist regime continues to put its own interests before the nation’s, I’m sure a big social movement similar to the June 4th Movement in 1989 will reoccur.

**Wang Yu:** China is beset with problems: unemployment, unhealthy environment, poor medical care and income disparity. What do you think is the most serious problem now?

**Wang Dan:** The most serious problem that has emerged from economic reform is injustice. Corruption in government has led to uneven distribution of social benefits. If the government cannot work out a solution, more disturbances will take place. A supervisory body and proper legal system must be set up. To sum it up, we need a constitutional government and a system of checks and balances. Only a good political system can keep unrest at bay and preserve civil order. But the current Chinese government doesn’t follow this line of reasoning. They think reforming the political system will cause chaos.

**Wang Yu:** How do you see the future of China?

**Wang Dan:** Something important is evolving in China.

Civil society is gradually developing. More and more people are learning to fight for rights they didn’t know they had, but have discovered in part through the Internet. The government has made some concessions but has no intention of losing control. It reminds me of Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, also in 1989.

Of course, the problems in contemporary China are much more complicated.

Nonetheless, civil society is evolving in a positive direction, and because of this I see a bright future for China.

**Wang Yu:** How has your participation in the June 4th Movement influenced you personally? Do you have any regrets? Is there anything you would do differently if given another opportunity?

**Wang Dan:** My life has been greatly influenced by the June 4th Movement. Since then I have come to feel my life is no longer

my own. I cannot do whatever I want. I no longer have free choice. My public profile keeps me under the constant scrutiny of public expectation. I'm obliged to constantly promote ideals for social improvement. I don't know whether this is my good luck or bad luck, but in any case I have to face and accept it.

The actions I took 15 years ago were led by emotion and not reason. They were the product of youth fed by idealism. I was lucky to have this experience when I was young. As I age I may lose this beautiful feeling. It was a good experience.

Life is short and I will never forfeit any chance to connect my life closely to my country. I am part of it. If the same thing happened again I would not hesitate to take the same action.

I feel deeply for those who lost their lives for the Movement. I feel pain for their families. My conscience is always troubled about these deaths. Although I'm not suited for politics, I'll remain involved.

**Tang Baiqiao** is a democracy activist and president of a New York-based pro-democracy organization, "China Peace." During the 1989 Democracy Movement he was a student in Hunan Normal University, and his involvement in the Movement resulted in his imprisonment for three years. He fled to the United States in 1992, since which time he has lived in New York.

**Wang Yu:** What influence do you think the protests and demands of the June 4th Movement have had on the Chinese government over the past 15 years?

**Tang Baiqiao:** Since 1989, great changes have occurred in China. These include, first of all, sustained economic development; secondly, greater freedom in the economic, social and cultural fields; thirdly, an increase in corruption and inequality; and fourthly, stagnation in political reform and a deterioration of human rights, especially civil and political rights.

Contrary to the claims of some, China's rapid economic development is not a result of official efforts to maintain political stability; China had already achieved an annual economic growth rate of nine percent before 1989. However, as a consequence of the 1989 incident, the government has in fact allowed greater freedom in the economic, social and cultural fields. This is because the Chinese Communist Party has learned from the experience of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that in order to maintain its power, it has to relax some of its totalitarian control over the people. The result is today's abnormal situation in which economic development is accompanied by political repression. This is, however, a politically explosive situation, because serious contradictions in society will eventually lead to full-scale dissatisfaction and turmoil. It is an ominous sign that in 2003 more than 10 million people took part in protests in China.

**Wang Yu:** What do you think of the overseas dissident community? What are the advantages and disadvantages of promoting democracy in China from the outside?

**Tang Baiqiao:** In the last 15 years, overseas activists have on the whole brought about many positive results. For example, movements within China over the last two years to promote and protect individual rights resulted directly from the efforts of overseas democracy groups led by Liu Qing, Han Dongfang and others. Regrettably, however, there are also activists who have done things detrimental to the democracy movement.

Overseas democracy activists are handicapped by a lack of resources and the absence of a solid popular base. On the other hand, they enjoy personal security and freedom. They should try to build on their strengths and make effective use of their limited resources.

**Wang Yu:** If the 1989 Movement had not been suppressed by force, what do you think would have happened? If the Movement took place today, would there be a different outcome?

**Tang Baiqiao:** If the Movement at Tiananmen Square had not been suppressed by force, the students and intellectuals would have gradually withdrawn with sadness and disappointment. But the authorities would have definitely arrested the Movement's leaders eventually.

If a similar movement were to occur today, I think it would be quite different. First, the movement would certainly demand the end of the Communist dictatorship. Secondly, the participants would be workers and other elements of society rather than students.

**Wang Yu:** How has your participation in the June 4th Movement influenced you personally? Are there any things you wish you had done differently?

**Tang Baiqiao:** The 1989 Incident has completely changed my life. I experienced the worst side of Communist rule while I was in prison. It makes me feel a sense of responsibility to try to change that society. I have absolutely no regrets about that experience. Rather, I am deeply grateful for the way it has enriched my life and redirected my thoughts and concerns.

**Dai Qing**, a journalist, writer and environmentalist, resides in Beijing. During the 1989 Democracy Movement she expressed sympathy for the students but urged them to return to their universities in order to avoid the disaster that ultimately occurred on June 4th. Following the violent crackdown, Dai resigned from the Party in protest, and in July 1989 she was jailed for ten months.

**Wang Yu:** Fifteen years after the June 4th Incident, what is your assessment of the event?

**Dai Qing:** The June 4th Incident was a real turning point in modern Chinese history. In my view, there have been two brief periods of promise and hope in modern Chinese history since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The first was from 1954 to 1956, a period of stability and optimism after many years of war and revolution. It did not last

very long before Mao Zedong launched wave after wave of political campaigns that ultimately culminated in the Great Cultural Revolution.

The second period of great hope was from 1986 to 1988. After the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao, there was a general feeling of awakening among intellectuals. Young scholars such as Hu Ping wrote his important thesis, “On Freedom of Expression.” I myself organized a series of interviews with progressive scholars and published them in the *Guangming Daily News*. Many liberal magazines and periodicals such as *The World Economic Tribune* and *The Study of National Affairs* also came into full bloom.

Within the Communist Party, progressive and liberal-minded officials began to implement their programs. When Zhao Ziyang became General Secretary of the Party, one of his first orders was to disband the Study Unit of the General Office of the Central Committee—an organ with the responsibility of collecting information on various political dissenters. Zhu Houze, a very competent and open-minded official, was assigned first to head the Propaganda Department, and then to direct the Chinese General Labor Union in preparation for the privatization of state-owned enterprises. I heard from some sources that Zhu was being groomed as the successor to Zhao Ziyang. On another occasion I learned from Hu Qili, a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee, that control over the publication of newspapers and even the organization of political parties would eventually be relaxed. Deng Xiaoping was also thinking in terms of liberalization. On April 15 I accompanied a Taiwanese journalist, Diana Yin, to visit Wang Feng, the director of the Central Committee’s Bureau of Taiwanese Affairs. Wang mentioned that Deng Xiaoping was considering removing the Four Cardinal Principles<sup>1</sup> from the Chinese Constitution and relegating them to the Party Constitution. If these trends and developments had been allowed to evolve, China would now be totally different and so much better than it is. On June 4th China truly lost her golden opportunity to become modern and democratic. Of course, this is only my personal view. I hope that after fifteen years the various people who participated in the event—students, intellectuals and officials—will come forward and tell their side of the story so that the world can know the truth about those events.

**Yan Jiaqi** is a prominent Chinese intellectual and co-author with his wife, Gao Gao, of *A History of the Cultural Revolution*. Because of his involvement in the June 4th Movement Yan and his family fled into exile and now live in New York.

**Wang Yu:** As a historian, when you look back at the June 4th Movement, how do you assess its historic significance?

**Yan Jiaqi:** I believe this historic event consists of two parts. China’s 1989 Democracy Movement was a movement dominated by students. But the “June 4th Incident” is an event that had impact on the whole world. The former was a movement of the Chinese people aiming towards democracy. The latter

was a bloody event in which the Communist regime massacred defenseless students, workers and city residents who were protesting peacefully. So I refer to the democracy movement during the spring and summer of that year as the “1989 Democracy Movement,” while the tragic event of June 4th should be called the “June 4th Incident.”

June 4th should be memorialized annually to honor the victims of that event.

The 20th century was characterized by the rise and fall of Communism. The “June 4th Incident” ultimately altered the political outlook of the world, hastening the end of Communism and putting an end to the Cold War. It is a historical turning point.

The 19th century was characterized by the rapid expansion of colonialism and capitalism. The rise of Communism in underdeveloped countries such as the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, Korea and Vietnam was a logical reaction to this historical trend. These Communist countries put up an invisible wall between themselves and the West in order to resist the encroachment of colonialism and free trade. However, the system of one-party dictatorship, planned economy and autocracy suffocated and collapsed under its own weight. Before the events of 1989 there were signs that Communism was in decline in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The massacre of the “June 4th Incident” was witnessed and condemned by the whole world. When people subsequently protested against Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, no government dared to take the same military measure as Deng Xiaoping. So the “June 4th Incident” facilitated the fall of Communism. Three months after the Incident, Hungary opened its western border, allowing more than ten thousand people to escape from East Germany to West Germany. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the invisible wall separating Eastern and Western Europe also disintegrated.

The “June 4th Incident” also caused a great deal of change within China. From that time on the Chinese Communist dictatorship has been leading the country away from Communism, and China is now Communist in name only. By doing so the Chinese regime is ringing the death knell of Communism.

The world has now entered a new era of multicultural conflict and coexistence.

1. The Four Cardinal Principles, stated by Deng Xiaoping in 1979, are:
  - 1) upholding the socialist path; 2) upholding the people’s democratic dictatorship; 3) upholding the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party; and 4) upholding Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought.