

RECOLLECTIONS OF A STUDENT PROTESTER

BY WANG DEBANG

Wang Debang was a fourth-year student at Beijing Normal University who became caught up in the student protests in 1989. On the night of June 3, having learned that soldiers had started killing protesters at Tiananmen, Wang led a group of Beijing Normal students toward the Square in hopes of preventing further bloodshed. Following is an edited excerpt of Wang's recollections, beginning at the point where he climbed on top of a bus parked at the junction of Xidan Avenue and Chang'an Avenue in order to get a better view of what was happening, and to signal his classmates with a banner he was carrying.¹

No more than ten minutes after I climbed on top of the bus, I heard the bang of an explosion above my head. Before I could even react to it, my eyes began to sting and swell shut. I think this must have been the tear gas that was subsequently reported. I hurriedly lowered my banner and signaled for my classmates to disperse quickly, and at the same time began groping my way down from the top of the bus. The young man who had climbed up with me had disappeared. I crawled down from the bus with great difficulty. Chang'an Avenue was suddenly pitch dark. Of course, since I couldn't open my eyes, lights would have been of no use. But the complete darkness of Chang'an Avenue at this time was not caused by my sightlessness, but by an intentional blackout aimed at inciting panic and covering criminal activity. I felt my way through the smoke to the south end of the wall along Chang'an Avenue. Having reached the wall, I had begun following it eastward when I heard the rumbling of a tank very close behind me. At the same time I felt an explosion near my feet on the muddy road, and as I forced my eyes open I saw a spark flash. I realized this was a percussion of a bullet, and anxiously hurried forward.

As I passed the entrance of a *hutong*, I heard a voice call to me, "Hurry, in here!" Following the voice, I found there were

quite a few people already in the *hutong*, each of them peering out from where they half crouched along the wall near the entrance. A citizen motioned for me to hide my banner and stay low. Just as I'd managed to conceal the banner, the troops appeared. The roar of a tank drowned out all other sounds. One by one, squadrons of armed soldiers headed toward Tiananmen Square, patrolling the streets as they advanced. At some point a resident managed to climb up onto the tiled roof beside the *hutong* and was crouching at the south side of the house. He compulsively mumbled out the scene he was witnessing: "So many tanks, and cannons, too, it's bad, several people over there have been hit, and the ones running away are being chased. More gunshots, it's over, two more have fallen . . . those bandits, warlords, fascists. Even the Japanese invasion of Beijing wasn't like this! Too cruel!" As he spoke his voice broke into a sob of emotion. Then the muttering stopped, and I heard the sound of a tile being pried from the roof. As I turned my head toward the noise I saw the man raise his hand and throw a piece of tile. Immediately there was the patter of bullets striking nearby as a squadron of soldiers began firing their guns into the entrance of the *hutong*. Fortunately the *hutong* was curved, so the bullets didn't hit anyone. One soldier looked as if he wanted to run inside, but someone stopped him, and the squadron of soldiers left, cursing loudly. The man on the roof flattened himself against the tiles, swearing furiously at the soldiers after they left. I thought, what good does it do to throw a piece of tile at a soldier fully armed with steel helmets and shields? Even if it struck him he would barely feel a twinge. You're just blowing off steam because of what you saw. But I saw no point in saying it out loud. When witnessing a massacre first-hand, what full-blooded person would not grind his teeth in rage?

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After about half an hour, the army had passed. I and the others rushed out of the *hutong*. Still worried about Tiananmen, I hurried eastward. Before long I reached Liubukou, and at the top of the street in front of the Beijing Concert

Hall I was horrified to see several young people lying on the ground in pools of blood. One of them, a student with his leg still bleeding heavily, was sitting up with his hand supporting his upper body and painfully relating to onlookers what had just happened. He said that when the troops moved in, he ran towards a hutong, but some female students were too slow and were held back by the soldiers. He and some others tried to rush out and save them, but in the process they were mowed down. As I looked at his agonized expression, I suddenly realized that we had to get him to the hospital immediately and I shouted, "Take him to the hospital, quick!" Other onlookers also seemed to have suddenly awakened from a dream, and began to carry the wounded one by one. I bent down and lifted the young man who was speaking onto my back. I heard him thank me over and over again, but his voice seemed to get weaker and weaker. My heart was bleeding. Such a nice young fellow! Just because he protested on behalf of the people and fulfilled his responsibility to his country, did he have to meet such an end? I carried him deep inside a hutong behind the Concert Hall, where I saw quite a few pedicabs already loaded with bleeding, wounded people. I laid the young man on the back of one of them and told the driver to quickly take him to the hospital. Many people could not hold back their tears as they carried the injured, and the hutong rang with sobs.

By the time I returned to the Concert Hall at Liubukou, the dozen or so injured people had all been sent to the hospital. Now I saw quite a few people gathered and exclaiming around a statue in front of the Concert Hall. I went forward to see what had happened, and found that a large piece had been broken from one of the corners of the statue's base. No ordinary gun could have damaged such hard stone; it must have been some kind of heavy machine gun or a canon. (The base of the statue was still damaged when I returned to Beijing in 1993, but I found it mended when I went back in 1998.)

Still thinking about the situation in Tiananmen Square, I hesitated no longer and accompanied others walking eastward. But before long, another squadron of soldiers appeared behind us, and the street filled with tanks and armed soldiers escorting a troop convoy. We had no time to hide, and ended up huddled at the base of the south wall of Chang'an Avenue. I saw a young man supporting himself with a stick, dragging one of his legs, which was clearly still bleeding. Amazingly, he was following the troops along the street, cursing furiously and demanding, "Look here! Who did you kill? Those people are all your parents and your brothers! Weren't they just demanding what you need, too? How can the People's Liberation Army kill the people? Are your guns for suppressing the people? Are you human beings? If you have the guts, then shoot me again!"

His firm and fearless demeanor and words deeply affected the crowd on the street. One man could hold back no longer and shouted, "Defeat the fascists!" A chorus of voices followed like a wave. As the slogan rang out, I suddenly saw a squadron of soldiers rush out from the direction of the Great Hall of the People, spraying the street with bullets and yelling. The crowd on the street immediately swarmed in retreat to the west. I followed the crowd and soon was back in front of the Concert

Hall at Liubukou. When I looked back for the young man who had been following the tanks, he had disappeared.

It seemed impossible to reach Tiananmen from the south end of Chang'an Avenue. After waiting for another squadron of soldiers to pass, I proceeded with others heading eastward from the edge of the Imperial City north of Chang'an Avenue. When we had almost reached Xinhuaamen,² I saw people in front being chased into retreat. The people heading eastward were also turning back. I stopped in my tracks and watched a group of fully armed soldiers cross Chang'an Avenue near Xinhuaamen, and another squadron of soldiers firing their guns to scare off anyone in the crowd who tried to draw closer. At the same time, I saw a couple of people among the retreating crowd fall down. Some soldiers hurried over and carried away the fallen, but I couldn't tell if they were dead or alive. Apparently the route from Chang'an Avenue to Tiananmen was completely closed off. In fact I should have realized this earlier. How can a street's south side be cordoned off while the north side is left open? In my impatience I had failed to think things out carefully, and was relying on luck.

At this point I joined up with another group of people and headed north around Nanhai Lake from Liubukou with the naïve expectation that the detour would allow us to evade the police cordon. By the time I reached Nanchizi,³ it was already dawn. The situation there was just as at Xinhuaamen, with fully armed soldiers having already sealed off the route from Nanhai Lake to Tiananmen. There was a cordon at a point 20–30 meters away from the soldiers that looked as if it was blocked with something. Citizens purposefully gathered outside the cordon. Everyone was eager to understand the situation at Tiananmen.

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As the sky grew brighter, more and more people gathered. Everyone was engaged in discussion, exchanging news with each other and expressing their concern, and at the same time repeatedly insisting that the soldiers in front of them let them in. With their demands rebuffed, people's concern over the situation inside Tiananmen and the accumulated effect of various scenes of the massacre led temperatures to rise. Demands changed to interrogation, and interrogation to condemnation, and finally people furiously began shouting slogans: "Defeat the fascists!", "We protest the massacre of students and citizens!", "Protest is not a crime!" Although everyone was sad and furious, no one crossed or attacked the cordon. All the same, after a while I saw an officer leading a group of soldiers suddenly appear out of the squadron and raise his gun and fire it toward the sky. When there was no response from the crowd, some armed soldiers began shooting at the feet of the people outside of the cordon, and a group of soldiers carrying batons began to brandish them and strike people. The crowd immediately dissolved into panic and scattered. I was struck by a baton and fell to the ground. As I began raising my body, I saw a

woman beside me struck by a soldier and falling to the ground, after which she was fiercely assaulted. I wanted to run over and drag her away, but someone grabbed my arm and pulled me into a nearby house. Once inside, I asked the person who had pulled me in to quickly look for the woman. The person turned around and went out, but came back after a while and told me that the woman was gone.

At this point I felt a burning pain on my arm. The shoulder of my shirt was ripped, my skin was wounded and fresh blood soaked my sleeve. My host hurriedly brought some medicine and sprayed it on my wound, and let me rest in his home for more than an hour, then called two high school students to take me back to the university on their bikes.

Quite a few classmates thought I had been killed, because the students who had accompanied me to Tiananmen had already come back. They were overjoyed to see me. Many classmates suggested that I leave the school, but I had no place to go, since I hadn't a cent, and at the same time I felt no need to go elsewhere. Instead, I curled up and slept like a log. I was really exhausted, as I hadn't been sleeping enough since the end of April. I had been sleeping only three to four hours a night, and running around and sleeping here and there—in Tiananmen Square, on Chang'an Avenue. So now it seemed there was nothing better to do than get some sleep. In the afternoon some classmates from the graduate school came and told me to hide for a while, so I decided to take the opportunity to look up some fellow townsmen who lived in Beijing.

Post Mortem

Fifteen years have passed in an instant. I cannot forget anything that happened at that time, with so many things to remind me every spring and summer, nor do I dare to forget the vibrant lives that were so heartlessly taken away. The reality of these many years has steeled my confidence in the correctness of the goals I pursued in 1989. Although many of the views proposed in 1989 were (naïve or immature) and unsystematic, they were constructive and scientific, and conformed to the needs of human and historical development. The short-term success in economic reconstruction that China has achieved since 1989 was the inevitable result of economic demands made in 1989. However, in respect of political, cultural and legal matters, China has regressed; its systemic corruption and elitist economic leadership, the proliferation of injustice and social contradictions, are all part of the distorted development that inevitably results from reform proceeding on only one leg.

There are many experiences and lessons drawn from 1989. I would like here to discuss what I consider the three bitterest lessons:

First, we lacked a clear recognition of the situation and an accurate understanding of ourselves. From the beginning right through to the end, the students and the citizens who supported them carried out their struggle in a rational and peaceful manner. However, the government's attitude remained consistently firm and unrelenting. The authorities regarded the will of the people as "hostility," the wishes of the people as treason and power struggles as subversion, an attitude consistent with the mindset of a party inured in violent power strug-

gles. However, the students and citizens regarded this as a minority attitude and decided their approach on this basis. This was too great of an error in judgment! The consequence was naturally inconceivable.

Second, we did not fully recognize the power of unity and cooperation among various social circles. Without the selfless support shown by ordinary citizens in Beijing and all over the country, the students would have had great difficulty sustaining their movement for even a single day. Indeed, during the entire process of the movement, I was much more deeply moved by the people from all walks of society than by the students; I often felt that I would gladly give my life for such good and selfless people. However, in their insistence on preserving the "purity" of their movement, the students resisted cooperation with other elements of society. I clearly remember the scene where "citizens' representatives" who tried to enter the Square were rebuffed by the students, and the feelings that Han Dongfang⁴ and I had at the time.

During the middle phase of the movement, a group of intellectuals, especially university professors such as Liu Xiaobo, blended into the movement, but unified action between students and intellectuals were never discussed. Of course, there was even less understanding of reformists within the government system such as Zhao Ziyang. The loss of this crucial opportunity for a mutually advantageous movement was disastrous. It caused more than a decade of errors in China's reform through the purge of a group of reform-minded political elites with the capacity for self-examination, and a consolidation of power by the conservative faction of a totalitarian system. Given this lack of coordination on all fronts, the movement was doomed to fail.

Third, we lacked mechanisms for organizing a cooperative movement. The rapid development and spontaneity of the 1989 movement bred an improvisational and impermanent organizational mechanism that was inadequate for determining an appropriate direction and guaranteeing implementation of organizational will. The whole movement relied entirely on the ideals and enthusiasm of students and citizens, with no benchmarks for progress and setback. A social movement that lacks a scientific organizational mechanism to assure the formation and implementation of appropriate strategies cannot succeed.

Translated by Akiko Kageyama

1. Wang Debang contributed this article to an archive being created by the June 4th Memorial Global Coalition (www.98-64.org). The full article can be accessed at <http://www.dajiyuan.com/gb/4/4/19/n514627.htm>.
2. Xinhuaamen is the southern entrance to the Zhongnanhai compound where China's top officials live and work.
3. The first street east of Tiananmen Square.
4. Han Dongfang participated in the protests at Tiananmen Square as a representative of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation.