

Democracy? In China, Write Morality

By **SHERYL WUDUNN** and **SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES** APRIL 28, 1989

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As 150,000 students filled the streets of the capital today, linking arms and singing revolutionary songs, it was still unclear exactly what they meant by the "democracy" they have been calling for in their 10 days of demonstrations.

The views of the students vary enormously, as do their sense of conviction and their ability to articulate a vision of democracy. Many students have scarcely thought about it, and in the last 10 days, they have marched to Tiananmen Square, the political center of the nation, to watch the spectacle and perhaps shout a few slogans along with the crowd.

"I don't know exactly what democracy is," said a 22-year-old physics student from Tianjin University. "But we need more of it."

What emerges from interviews with several dozen students over the last few days is the feeling that democracy is as much a moral issue as a political one: that it would bring about a cleansing of the corruption that many people believe has become customary for Government officials in China.

Thirteen years ago, when tens of thousands of militant marchers protested after the death of the former Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, the people were asking for new leaders. Now, they are asking for a change in the system. Democracy, the students believe, would stamp out corruption and bring more equality to society

because it would not bestow special privileges to those in power, nor to their sons and daughters. 'Many Officials Are Corrupt'

"Many officials in our society are corrupt," said a 24-year-old graduate student of journalism at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. "We are looking for a new way to reconstruct our society, and we are pursuing the separation of powers."

"We need to set up a system to prevent officials from exploiting the people and the country's resources," added the student, who identified himself only as Mr. Hu. "If a power is without supervision, it will commit crimes against its people. With democracy, we can punish people who commit such crimes."

Many students are still vague about the kind of democratic system they want, but when they speak about democracy, most students think of the American system of government -even if they do not believe in wholesale importation of the American way.

"Ours must be different from the United States," said another journalism student, who gave his name only as Mr. Hou. He said the three-branch American system of government is unsuitable for China, apparently because gradual modification of China's system is more realistic than radical change.

The grievances of most students stem from personal experiences: the work allocation system, which prevents many from choosing their own jobs; the common practice of giving privileged positions to sons and daughters of senior officials; the censorship of the press, which has restrained coverage of demonstrations this week. Avoid the Grand Questions

Because they start from their personal frustrations and experiences, many students seem to have thought much less about such grand questions as the ideal organization of government, or whether a multiparty system is feasible in China. Instead, they point to general areas they believe require change: elections to choose leaders, an independent judiciary, a legal system willing to punish officials as well as ordinary people, and supervision over Government through the press.

"Democracy means that all citizens have the right and the duty to participate in government policy making," said a 23-year-old student who gave her name as Miss Ma. "For example, not only should the representatives to the National People's Congress be able to express opinions, but those opinions should really represent the view of the people. We should be able to express our views to representatives who then carry the views to the leaders."

The anger that characterized the demonstrations in 1976 seems to be missing

today, say people who witnessed both, but the political awareness of the protesters has grown. This is partly because students have educated themselves through "big character" posters, unofficial open meetings on democracy, and even through participation in the protests.

The protests also have been marked by growing pragmatism, the realization that students may be more effective if they call for specific, moderate changes. No Talk of Political Prisoners

They have not called for the release of political prisoners, because they say that is a sensitive subject that might provoke hostility among the nation's leaders and jeopardize what chances they have of being heard on other demands. For a similar strategic reason, they have for the most part refrained from complaining about inflation because they realize that it is a byproduct of economic liberalization policies they favor, say teachers and university graduates close to the student leaders.

Many students admit that there is little likelihood their demands will bring about immediate change. In some ways, the movement is an attempt to deepen their own understanding of democracy and to spread it among their fellow students. But they also hope to influence the leaders or at least the representatives to the National People's Congress, China's legislature, which meets once a year.

"For a long time, China has never had a system of law, so we don't know what rights we have," said A. P. Xia, 28, a graduate student of international studies. "So many students are struggling with the idea of what it means to have democratic rights."

"Gorbachev perhaps has chosen the right way to begin with political reform, but it will still be a while before Chinese democracy will reach the stage of the Soviet Union," Mr. Xia said. "If China adopts a multiparty system as Hungary is doing now, it will be premature."

A version of this article appears in print on April 28, 1989, on Page A00006 of the National edition with the headline: Democracy? In China, Write Morality.