

Hunger Strikers, Heart of China Protest

By **SHERYL WUDUNN** and **SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES** MAY 19, 1989

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems. Please send reports of such problems to archive_feedback@nytimes.com.

Xie Wanjun is a gawky, 21-year-old agriculture student who is so disarmingly meek and boyish that it is not easy to imagine him as part of the brigade of young people who in the last few days have handed the Government a crushing humiliation.

Mr. Xie and nearly 3,000 other college students have rocked the Government by the simple tactic of not eating. Their hunger strike has galvanized the nation and led to mass demonstrations for more democracy, including calls for the resignation of the nation's top leaders.

But if Mr. Xie is willing to take on the Government, he is more cautious in dealing with his family. He has still not told his parents that he joined the hunger strike in the capital and kept with it for 84 hours. After he lost consciousness and was rushed to the hospital for the second time, the medical authorities in his school persuaded him to drop the fast, and now he is eating once more and helping the other hunger strikers. **Worried About His Mother**

His political views already have estranged Mr. Xie from his father, a private entrepreneur in Jilin Province in the northeast, and he lied to his grandfather and older brother about his intentions to protest. His mother, sensing her son's radical spirit, has written letters pleading with him to stay out of the student demonstrations.

"I just thought about my mom," Mr. Xie said after a pause, recalling the moments just before he fainted as he lay in the hunger strikers' area of Tiananmen Square, the political center of the nation. "I worried that my mother would feel anxiety for me."

Workers, intellectuals, teachers and students in cities all over China are protesting the Government's antagonistic response to the hunger strikers. Fast Is Focus of Movement

Public support encourages the hunger strikers, who can hardly envision the flood of people who have poured into the streets on their behalf, but what carries them through their bouts of hunger, dizziness and fatigue seems to be an intensely personal conviction that the ideal of democracy is worth suffering for.

The hunger strikers have become the focus of a growing nationwide movement for democracy, and while they are bold young people who dared to rebel against the authorities, they are also inexperienced not only in fasting but also in leading a movement that has risen to dimensions beyond what many of them had imagined.

Their fasting has weakened almost all of them to the point that they spend most of their time sleeping. And yet they are still looked upon by their fellow students as leaders. They are still deciding what strategy and tactics the rest of the students will follow in the struggle with the Government.

A group of seven or eight strikers is the driving force behind the movement, working out the policy options that will be put to the hunger-striking students, although they work closely with many other student leaders who are not fasting. Some of them have been catapulted into prominence in the last month: Wang Dan, a Beijing University history student, and Wuer Kaixi, a freshman at Beijing Normal University, are the movement's most conspicuous leaders.

Mr. Wang, like some other student organizers, initially took part in the hunger strike but then was persuaded to start eating again so that he could negotiate more effectively. Mr. Wuer has continued the hunger strike, and its effects on him are showing. In a nationally televised meeting today with Prime Minister Li Peng, he fainted from hunger and exhaustion.

Some students and teachers are now saying the hunger strikers' thinking is not as lucid as before. In fact, the kind of emotional conviction they need to drive themselves on through the fast is perhaps the trait that makes discussion and negotiation with them very difficult.

"They are too emotional," said an exasperated official who has dealt with

them.

When decisions are made on tactics or demands, the options are devised by a few leaders but are voted on by the 3,000 strikers, a cumbersome, if democratic, process. He Lost His Appetite

Mr. Xie denied that he was not clearheaded while he was fasting, although he admitted that sometimes he felt as though he were immersed in a complete "void," and that he was tired most of the time. After the second day, when the hunger pains came in short regular intervals, he lost his appetite. Even in the hospital, he said, he could not take more than a couple of spoonfuls of rice porridge.

"We are too obsessed with the movement to concern ourselves over our own physical condition," he said.

Mr. Xie's only compunction is that he is no longer fasting with his comrades, and that he broke the oath that all student hunger strikers take: "Not before my aims are met do I eat again."

"I had no doubt about the reasons for my striking," said Mr. Xie, whose eyes are bloodshot and whose voice still quivers.

"My only hope is that the Government will carry out democracy," he said. "We cannot rely on rule by one leader. We must search for a beautiful, perfect system."

A version of this article appears in print on May 19, 1989, on Page A00001 of the National edition with the headline: Hunger Strikers, Heart of China Protest.