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A Portrait of a Young Man as a Beijing Student Leader

By **SHERYL WUDUNN** and **SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES** JUNE 3, 1989

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Four months ago a scrawny, scraggly-haired student gave speeches about human rights that baffled his classmates, who wondered how anyone could harbor such a passion for what was then a remote concept like democracy.

Now, Wang Dan, a 20-year-old history student at Beijing University, is a national figure. He carries a beeper and is accompanied by two bodyguards, signs of his new status as perhaps the single most prominent leader of the student democracy movement that has thrust the Government into a political crisis.

He is rather embarrassed to talk about how his personal life has changed. But when his mail is given to him, he lets on that he has already received a dozen love letters. Certainly he has been the subject of some wild rumors. Some people say he has taken part in Politburo meetings, while others say he has been martyred in various grim ways.

Two students from the eastern city of Suzhou, who arrived in Beijing the other day, were surprised to learn that Mr. Wang was still alive. They said they had held a ceremony in Suzhou to mourn his passing. 'I'm Not Afraid'

What emerges from the last seven weeks is a picture of a survivor: an intellectual lacking charisma or oratorical skill, but bold enough and determined enough to remain a student leader despite factional bickering and Government

criticisms.

While other student leaders focus on tactics and mundane matters like where to obtain megaphones, Mr. Wang stands out as the leader who dares to articulate a world very unlike China today.

"I'm not afraid," Mr. Wang said. "I've nothing to be afraid of. I don't think they will be able to imprison me for as long as Wei Jingsheng." Mr. Wei is a dissident who was sentenced a decade ago to 15 years in prison.

There are other prominent student leaders, like Wuer Kaixi and Chai Ling from Beijing Normal University, but it is Mr. Wang who seems to have had the greatest influence. Mr. Wuer's popularity tumbled 10 days ago when he proposed leaving the square, and Miss Chai's role seems limited to the students now occupying the square.

Mr. Wang refuses to evaluate his own role as a leader, but admits there have been mistakes and lessons.

"I have one regret," Mr. Wang said. "I failed to persuade the elite intellectuals to give us direct support." Intellectuals should have been more involved in helping to lead the movement, he says. **Need for Coherent Goals**

Mr. Wang believes that the intellectuals joined too late, and he suggests that one of the results of this is that the students did not have coherent goals.

"I think that the student movements in the future should be firmly based on something solid, such as the democratization of campus life or the realization of civil rights according to the Constitution," Mr. Wang said. "Otherwise, the result is chaos."

Although many of the students' demands - press freedom, direct talks with the Government and the uprooting of corruption among officials - were more practical than in past demonstrations, they had no framework.

While certain themes, like opposition to official corruption, gained the support of workers, Mr. Wang says he believes the movement is not ready for worker participation because the principles of democracy must first be absorbed by students and intellectuals before they can be spread to others. **The Limits of Democracy**

The recent student movement went way beyond just ideas, and Mr. Wang has learned that there are limits to how one can apply those ideas, especially the concept of democracy.

When students went on their hunger strike, any policy decision that was made

had to be voted in unanimously by all the fasting students, whose numbers grew from 1,000 to 3,000.

Another difficulty was the election of a student leadership.

"You can't have direct democracy where everyone is electing leaders and trying to get involved because it only results in frequent changes of leaders and causes disorder," Mr. Wang said.

Another problem that hampered the student movement was the bickering among leaders. Most recently, a debate centered on whether to stay at or leave Tiananmen Square, which students invaded more than two weeks ago.

Mr. Wang and his fellow students from Beijing University and other colleges in the capital have essentially retreated from the square, which has lately been occupied mainly by students from outside Beijing. Popular Throughout

Through all this, Mr. Wang has remained a leader, partly because he is from Beijing University, the nation's most prestigious school, and partly because he has become a nationwide figure who has been involved all along, from the hunger strike to the talks with the Government.

In part Mr. Wang seems to have held on to his constituency because he has learned to sense how far his supporters are willing to go.

Other times, he displayed a knack for public relations. Mr. Wang says he did not spearhead the hunger strike, but when the idea became popular and a list of participants was posted, his name was the first on the list.

"The hunger strike was significant," Mr. Wang said, "because it brought out the ordinary people's enthusiasm."

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