



Cashing in on Tiananmen

After the bloody crackdown in China, a few brave student leaders escaped to carry on the fight from American shores. At least that was the story. Here's what really happened.

by Yvonne Abraham

In the spring of 1989, Li Lu was hunger-strike thin, long-haired, fervent, and only 23 years old. A student leader in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations, he urged his fellow dissidents to stand firm against the Chinese government, even after it looked as though Deng Xiaoping had run out of patience. After Deng ordered the June 4 crackdown that killed at least 300 people, Li, with no possessions and little English, fled to America.

Here, Li learned just how much the West could offer. In the Tiananmen protest, he had been one of thousands of students; in America, he fast became one of the stars of 1989. Sure, he wore castoff clothing at first, but they were Sting's castoffs. Within a few years, he had collected scholarships to Columbia (business and law), a ghostwritten autobiography (*Moving the Mountain*), a film based on the book (Madonna attended the premiere), and a circle of influential friends. When Li graduated from Columbia with degrees in business and law, and billionaire John Kluge threw him a party, the *New Yorker* was there to write about it.

Now the former student radical is an investment banker at a large firm in Los Angeles, a world away from his days on the square. He pops up on television quite often, a stocky, bespectacled, clean-cut man in his early 30s, to talk to Charlie Rose or CNN about the events of 1989, or to offer his opinion on US-China trade relations.

Li Lu has made it.

Star power

But talk to members of Boston's sizable Chinese dissident community, and Li's story is recounted not with pride but disdain. Li is one of a handful of Chinese students who have traded on Tiananmen to make themselves darlings of the Western media, which has brought them book contracts, hefty speaking fees, celebrity friends, political access, Nobel Prize nominations, and roles as China pundits. But, say their many critics, these stars, these public faces of the near-revolution of 1989, have parlayed what were sometimes only small roles in

China -- and, in some cases, only a few weeks in Tiananmen Square -- into fame and fortune in the West. They marvel at the American public's naïveté in declaring these people world leaders. And accuse the star dissidents of hurting the cause they claim to represent.

With the anniversary of the Tiananmen crackdown approaching, the heroes of 1989 will be celebrated anew. Deng's death, Hong Kong's imminent reversion to Chinese rule, and the latest White House soft-money scandal will keep China in the papers and on television for months to come. And the telegenic, media-savvy few will turn up on our TV screens claiming to represent the many whose lives did not meet with such tremendous success. Many dissidents both here and in China look at these anointed heroes and see not success but failure -- but that's hardly relevant, since their criticism is rarely heard in the West.

In part, this is a familiar story of human weakness in the face of extraordinary opportunity and dizzying temptation. A few kids took the extravagant rewards and blandishments the West offered them and ran, some farther than others.

But more than that, this is the story of America's need to anoint heroes. And if those heroes are just like us, all the better. We watched the events of 1989 unfold live in our own homes. At times, the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square seemed targeted specifically for our consumption: students emblazoned banners and T-shirts with slogans in English to attract the cameras; when a 10-meter high Goddess of Democracy was brought into the square, it bore an uncanny resemblance to the Statue of Liberty. As we watched Tiananmen, we watched ourselves.

There is no denying that Li was brave in 1989. Or that his fellow students Wu'er Kaixi, Chai Ling, and Shen Tong, each of whom found their way to Boston after June 4, displayed enormous courage and a deep commitment to their cause, even against a despotic regime capable of enormous cruelty.

But there is also no denying that, once they'd left China, these heroes were fashioned for Western consumption, just like those English signs in Tiananmen Square. They were flaked and handled and tailored for a public just itching to bestow accolades on *somebody*. What they actually did in the square was less important than how well they presented themselves.

"I am much disappointed in the students," says dissident journalist Liu Binyan, editor of *China Focus*, a New Jersey-based periodical. "They are not what they say they are."

Part 2 - Almost a revolution

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Part 2 - Almost a revolution

by **Yvonne Abraham**

For six weeks during the spring of 1989, it looked as though the revolution would indeed be televised. The Tiananmen Square demonstrations -- thousands of students rising up against Deng Xiaoping and the tyranny of the Communist Party -- transfixed the world. Reporters had gone to Beijing to cover Gorbachev's visit; instead, they found the makings of a revolution. Cameras provided live, minute-by-minute coverage. The whole world was watching when 100,000 students gathered in the square on April 22, and when students from more than 40 universities marched on Tiananmen five days later. Cameras captured the drama of May 13, when several hundred of the students began a hunger strike, and of the next week, as more and more of them became ill and were carted off to the hospital, ambulance sirens bleating.

The whole world watched Wu'er Kaixi -- the bold, good-looking young education student, weakened by his hunger strike, still wearing his hospital pajamas -- aggressively lecture hardline premier Li Peng between drags of oxygen, and then finally faint from the strain. It watched as the diminutive, frail-looking Chai Ling shouted her baby-voice rallying cries into a megaphone over and over, exhorting her fellow students to maintain their resolve. And it watched when the tanks pushed toward Beijing, only to be stopped outside the city by the masses. And on May 30, when the luminous Goddess of Democracy was installed on the square.

From the world's living rooms, it looked like freedom and democracy were about to come to China. The students were unstoppable. It was a struggle to which any American with a basic understanding of what makes this country great could relate: as portrayed by the media, the students wanted a free press, the right to assembly, and an accountable government. Suddenly, the Chinese, hitherto inhabitants of an inscrutable and sometimes threatening nation, were completely fathomable. In the student movement, American TV audiences saw a reflection of their nation's own glorious past, the birth of democracy caught in a freeze-frame.

But Tiananmen was never quite what it appeared to be.

Sure, reporters found students who could quote a line or two from the Declaration of Independence or the Gettysburg Address, but the movement was never a push for American-style democracy, despite students' use of the word. Their aims, insofar as they even articulated them, amounted more to a reform of Communist rule than to a push for constitutional democracy. At the height of the protests, it seemed that all of China was marching arm-in-arm toward democracy. But fully three-quarters of the nation's 1.2 billion people live off the land;

they were not about to rise up and charge to polling booths. And the students weren't pushing for universal suffrage anyway.

Nor, indeed, did the demonstrators speak with one voice. There were bitter arguments between student groups on the square over tactics. And there were nasty fights over finances: Chai Ling was kidnapped and briefly held by members of a rival student faction over alleged financial improprieties. An AP reporter took Wu'er Kaixi to dinner at the height of the hunger strike and failed -- as did many others -- to report that for some students, the term "hunger strike" was applied rather loosely. Reporters had apparently decided that to portray the students as less than perfect would diminish the worthiness of their struggle, and would give Deng ammunition to use against them in a propaganda war.

There was also an ahistorical bent to the coverage of 1989, as if this were the first mass movement for political reform in China's history. It was not. In April 1976, for example, thousands of people gathered in Tiananmen Square to mourn dead premier Zhou Enlai, and to criticize officials close to Mao -- until police drove them out. In 1978, the Democracy Wall movement began, in which people put up hundreds of posters criticizing the political system. In 1979, the movement was crushed, and Deng had several activists arrested, including the most famous, Wei Jingsheng. Wei, who has been imprisoned for all but six months of the 18 years since then, remains China's most celebrated political prisoner.

But as long as TV audiences were unaware of the fate of those previous reform attempts, it was easier to believe that the students would prevail.

On the night of June 3, 1989, the tanks rolled into Beijing again, and this time the people could not keep them back. Soldiers killed hundreds of people in the streets, forced the students out of the square, and destroyed the Goddess of Democracy. The ultimate symbol of those six weeks came at their very end: on one of the streets leading to the square, a lone worker, a white-shirted nobody, stood motionless before a column of tanks, bringing them to a standstill -- the dauntless individual against the tyranny of the state. This image became the most enduring of the Beijing Spring, and one of the most memorable of the late 20th century.

Part 3 - Coming to America

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The TV cameras had protected the students for a long time: Deng would hardly have put up with such a flagrant challenge to his authority for six whole weeks had the world's media not been in China to cover Gorbachev. Nor, for that matter, would the students have been so bold. The protests were a testament to the power of the Western press.

That power wasn't lost on Chinese students in America. During the spring of 1989, hundreds of Boston's Chinese students and expatriates converged on a three-story house in Newton, part of the Walker Center for Ecumenical Exchange. The Walker Center had long been a haven for political exiles from all over the globe, including China. In 1989, the center provided phones and a fax machine so that Chinese expatriates living in Boston could keep in touch with friends and relatives, sending them Western newspaper reports on the protests, and, later, updates on the crackdown. It was one of the few ways those in China received news of the student dissidents' fates, which Deng's government was unwilling to make public. It became a kind of command central, a remote outpost of the movement, itself the subject of several national news reports.

It was here, at the Walker Center, that Tiananmen Square protester and former Beijing University biology student Shen Tong first arrived on June 11, 1989. The first of the students to come to America (others had fled first to Hong Kong or Paris), he emerged publicly on June 30, at his own press conference. The place was jammed.

At that first press conference, Shen was a shy youth who spoke halting English. Now he is a supremely confident, articulate, and, above all, media-savvy man of 28. He has exchanged biology for a PhD in political science at Boston University. He also heads the Democracy for China Fund (DCF), which he says is a full-time job, too.

So, he says, he sleeps little. "I follow the words of Napoleon," says Shen. "Anyone who sleeps more than four hours a night is a fool."

Sitting in Harvard's noisy Greenhouse Coffee Shop, remembering that press conference, Shen is struck most by the efficiency of the media machine. "There was a huge turnout," he says. "Reporters were flying to Newton from all over the country. The impact of that -- of how established the media response was -- was very important for me."

Indeed, Shen's first public appearance demonstrated that even the students in the square, with

their banners in English and their "of-the-people-by-the-people-for-the-people" soundbites, had underestimated the power of the media. Shen's future would be transformed by that power.

But at his first press conference, it was busy transforming his past. "We are taking great precautions about everything because he's very high on the most-wanted list," Gordon Shultz, executive director of the Walker Center, told the *Globe*, which described Shen as "one of the three major student leaders" of the movement. In fact, as Shen says today, "I was a small potato." Nor was he on the Chinese government's most-wanted list; he had come to America on a student visa. Already, the spin had begun.

"Today I am in mourning for all the Chinese people," Shen said, reading from a statement in English. He told the enormous press corps that he had been on Changan Avenue, where the worst violence took place, in the early hours of June 4, and that he had seen the soldiers killing people all around him. He wiped tears from his eyes. The *Globe* reported that he "projected charisma."

At one point, Shen turned his back to the television cameras to show off his T-shirt. "This is the Statue of Liberty," he said. "And this says 'Democracy,' and this says 'Freedom.'" He had crossed from closed society to media circus, and he was learning fast.

A month after Shen Tong's press conference, Wu'er Kaixi arrived at the Walker Center. Charismatic, telegenic, and number two on China's most-wanted list, Wu'er was one of the most famous people on earth. He had escaped first to Hong Kong, then spent several weeks in Paris, and had finally come to Boston. Wu'er was a star of the movement even before he left China. Once here, he was in constant demand. Rival Chinese student groups in Chicago fought over who would have him appear at their meetings. And then there were the social engagements: he spent one of his first weekends in Massachusetts on the Kennedy compound in Hyannis. He was so busy that first week that he stood up Mayor Raymond Flynn for breakfast.

Meanwhile, Li Lu (who was traveling on business and did not return calls by deadline) had fled the country and wound up in Manhattan. Chai Ling (who declined to be interviewed for this article) settled temporarily in Paris before coming to America in the spring of 1990.

In China, each of these students was one among many. In America, they were suddenly thrust, not just into an alien culture, but way up into its highest reaches. They'd gone from hunger strikes to banquets in their honor, most of them in the space of six months.

The most famous students were presented with a bewildering array of options, besieged with requests to appear on television, to speak at political rallies, to have their lives made into books and movies. They were also offered places at American universities -- Chai at Princeton, Li at Columbia, Wu'er at Harvard, and Shen at Brandeis. They were called on to brief Congress on the situation in China, and to make speeches at colleges and churches. They joined the speaking circuit, where they garnered thousands of dollars in fees to tell the American public about China, and the movement, and what it was like to be heroes.

Part 4 - Dissident PR

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Part 4 - Dissident PR

by **Yvonne Abraham**

No one knows exactly what became of the lone white-shirted worker. He stood his ground for several minutes; then other demonstrators pulled him back off the road. He disappeared into the crowd, his brief, glorious career as embodiment of democratic ideals over -- at least in China.

But in the West, his image became a star. The man in front of the tanks became the Man in Front of the Tanks, and he had a hectic schedule of public appearances: he popped up in a Benetton advertisement, a Wim Wenders movie, a Neil Young song, and speeches by George Bush. Everyone wanted to be associated with this star of 1989, who, despite the Western media's strenuous efforts to find him, remained hidden.

Americans were not about to let the student dissidents get away so easily. Just as the Man in Front of the Tanks was ripe for appropriation by all kinds of people, so too were the dissidents. They were much in demand -- not just by print media and TV, but also by individuals hoping some of their cachet would rub off on them.

Enter the patrons, who, from a certain angle, looked suspiciously like that most American of paraprofessionals: the handler. The most successful dissidents formed friendships with Americans who -- depending on whom you talk to -- either guided them through the circus or helped them polish their public images to best advantage.

"The dissidents were being offered everything that our wide-open, celebrity-driven society can cook up," says Marshall Strauss, a former DC fundraiser and lobbyist who was one of those Americans. "They were coming out of a closed, authoritarian society, and didn't know what they were experiencing. They developed relationships with patrons who'd offer them more and more concrete advice. And if you observed it from the outside, these people were handling them."

Chai Ling turned to David Phillips, of the Congressional Human Rights Foundation, in Washington, who helped her sort through the avalanche of media inquiries and career opportunities in the beginning. Li Lu, who had all of New York to himself, dissident-wise, had many Americans smoothing his transition. Mary Daly, a New York human-rights activist and public-relations specialist, gave him a home for a while, helped him to deal with the press, and raised money from her friends for his first semester at Columbia (scholarships took care of the rest). And he became good friends with Trudie Styler, Sting's wife -- hence the castoffs. Back then, Li didn't even know who Sting was.

Styler took up Li's cause with a fervor, buying the rights to *Moving the Mountain*, which she and Michael Apted made into an ornate, gauzy, reenactment-glutted documentary. When the *New Yorker* wrote about his graduation party, it referred to the former student as "a Nelson Mandela figure" for China. Of all the dissidents, Li had risen the highest.

For the first few months in America, Shen Tong and Wu'er Kaixi were a team, and to guide them at first, they had Marshall Strauss. "I developed a relationship with several Chinese," Strauss recalls. "The closest was with Shen Tong, but I also was friendly with Kaixi and others. I was as close as any American, but I didn't have a lock on them."

Strauss says patrons were sometimes possessive about their charges: "Everyone wanted to get to them," and, he adds, to keep others from getting to them -- to "have a lock on them." If the media wanted to speak to Shen Tong, they went to Strauss first. (He is still kicking himself for telling Charlie Rose that Shen was too busy for an appearance, suggesting Li Lu instead. "I thought it was just a local TV talk show," he says.)

During those first few months, Wu'er and Shen made a dizzying number of public appearances and speeches at pro-democracy rallies across the country. Their renown soon reached ludicrous proportions. Less than three months after tanks had rolled into Beijing, the two youths found themselves in a flashy house in the Hollywood hills negotiating a deal with studio executives for a film based on their lives. In October of 1989, rounding out their rise from Beijing to big bucks, they held court at the William Morris agency's New York offices as nine publishers vied for the rights to their joint memoirs.

"It was this incredible stage play," recalls Strauss, "the excitement of these famous Tiananmen leaders holding court, and every 45 minutes another editor comes in!"

Houghton Mifflin won, with a \$100,000 advance for *Almost a Revolution*.

But it was all too much for Wu'er. He had emerged from Tiananmen as the biggest star, but handled the hype machine badly, and, by the end of 1989, his celebrity began to exact a price. Chinese-language newspapers worldwide ran stories about his grand lifestyle: he had expensive taste in suits; he was petulant and arrogant in public, refusing to speak at one Harvard function because the audience had been "disrespectful." Being the star speaker at so many events had gone to his head.

Having reaped the benefits of media adulation, Wu'er did not quite grasp the importance -- and the perishability -- of good press. Wu'er admits that he was also completely out of control at the time. "I don't think anyone could really refuse that temptation," he says. "I was lost."

Part 5 - Money by the envelopes

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Cashing in on Tiananmen

Part 5 - Money by the envelopes

by **Yvonne Abraham**

In the end, the lobsters did Wu'er in.

For these few dissidents, the fame that brought access and celebrity friends and public appearances also, of course, brought money. The more celebrated the dissidents got, the more money they collected -- speaking fees that could run to four or five thousand dollars, film-option money, book-advance money, and, most important, envelope money. At rallies and gatherings, affluent Chinese expatriates handed the dissidents envelopes full of cash -- red envelopes intended as gifts for their personal use, and others to support their continued work for reforms in China.

Giving money was a way of being associated with what was, in the first few years, a glamorous cause: donors could feel like they were participating in the great revolution, affording them access to -- and an association with -- the stars who were in such high demand. It was also a way for expatriate Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong businesspeople to express their anger at the crackdown, and at Deng's regime in general.

In China, the dissidents had been struggling students in a just-improving economy, kids who got caught up in events that suddenly got much bigger than many of them had expected. In the first few years after Tiananmen Square, millions of dollars passed through their hands. Many of the dissidents were still in their early 20s, and they were running the equivalent of small corporations. Within months of the Beijing Spring, by virtue of their accidental fame, they were now both the embodiments of Western-style democratic ideals and the custodians of hundreds of thousands of dollars. They were, of course, hardly qualified for either role.

The lobster dinner that Wu'er Kaixi bought for 10 of his dissident friends was not cheap. He admits that it cost all of \$2000, but says he bought the meal with money from a red envelope. That fact was lost on the reporters who wrote of his decadent life in Chinese-language newspapers from America to mainland China. The GDP per capita in China is \$2660, and here was one of the Tiananmen leaders spending almost that on a single dinner for his friends -- while his comrades were languishing in Chinese prisons and camps, and most of the country was still impoverished, despite Deng's economic reforms. This was one story from the West that the Communist Party happily passed on to the Chinese people. *See?* the argument went. *This is who your so-called leaders really are. Now do you think they were right?*

"I could have deposited the money and nobody would know," counters Wu'er. Instead, he

shared it. But the damage was done. It was the kind of thing that eventually drove Wu'er out of the spotlight and away from the frenzy surrounding him.

It was also the kind of thing that helped diminish enthusiasm for the dissidents' cause, making donors reluctant to keep handing over envelopes. Most of the money donated to dissidents was meant for foundations they headed -- the Federation for a Democratic China (FDC), a Paris-based organization of which Wu'er was vice-president; Chai's China Dialogue Foundation; or Shen's Democracy for China Fund.

For the most part, those foundations, set up to continue to fight for reform in China, had little to show for the millions of dollars they received during the flurry of outrage in the years immediately after the crackdown. "The first dissidents did a terrible job [with] money in 1989 and 1990," says Marshall Strauss. "They received millions of dollars, and they pissed it away. They didn't know what to do with it all, and they wouldn't listen to advice, so the people who were giving the money became profoundly disenchanted." It was impossible to keep tabs on how the money was spent. Somehow, it just disappeared, and the foundations had nothing to show for it all.

The money paid for air travel and expensive conferences, and, in the case of the FDC, supported a disastrous scheme for a pirate radio station that was to broadcast to China from a boat in international waters off Taiwan. (After putting the FDC into the red, the project tanked when Taiwan would not cooperate.) Much of the money purportedly went to clandestine activities in China, which were impossible to monitor.

Eventually, the flow of money to dissidents slowed to a trickle. The envelopes stopped coming in, and the fight for political reforms in China acquired a fiduciary-credibility problem.

The FDC has now withered, and Chai's China Dialogue Foundation is difficult to locate: there is no record of it in central listings of nonprofits and foundations, even though on a recent Charlie Rose appearance Chai was identified as its president. Both Chai and Li tend to fly solo these days, anyway. Their critics say they have little real contact with the cause, except to speak about it to Americans. But the Democracy for China Fund -- which helps fund underground dissident activity in China -- lives, says Shen. By Shen's account, the DCF, with an annual budget of about a third of a million dollars, is still standing because Shen, under Marshall Strauss's tutelage, courted the support of American partners -- human-rights, civil-rights, and neoconservative groups -- so that he would be less reliant on funding from Chinese donors. He also learned the basics of Western business practice -- proposals, annual reports, grant applications, and all the rest -- so that Americans would be willing to deal with him.

He offered to teach other dissidents to build alliances with Americans, and to do business the way Strauss had taught him. Shen tried to tell them he could be "a bridge between the island -- the exile movement -- and Western society." But then, says Shen, with the kind of bravado that marked Wu'er's earlier days, "The island disappeared and the bridge became the island." In other words, these days, Shen Tong *is* the exile movement.

Part 6 - Almost a revolutionary

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Cashing in on Tiananmen

Part 6 - Almost a revolutionary

by Yvonne Abraham

Which is quite a claim for someone who started out -- like most other dissidents -- in Wu'er Kaixi's shadow after Tiananmen. Privately, most of the people interviewed for this story suggest that Shen Tong has constructed a career out of a not-very-prominent role in the events of 1989. In the gossipy world of the expatriate dissident community, Shen's ghostwritten autobiography, *Almost a Revolution*, is disparagingly referred to as *Almost a Revolutionary*.

After Wu'er Kaixi crashed and burned within months of his stardom, Shen Tong rose like a phoenix from his friend's ashes. Indeed, Shen Tong's career in the first few years following 1989 represents the Dissident, Inc., phenomenon in its purest form.

Late in 1989, Orville Schell, China authority and dean of UC Berkeley's journalism school, in a *Rolling Stone* article about Shen and Wu'er, had picked Shen as the dissident most likely to succeed. He had a good head on his shoulders and a strong commitment to the cause.

Of course, Schell failed to disclose that at the time he was one of Shen's closest advisers, making sure the young dissident kept a good head on his shoulders and a strong commitment to the cause. The prophecies of the celebrity machine were nothing if not self-fulfilling. Furthermore, Schell's wife, Liu Baifang, helped broker the film deal Schell describes in his *Rolling Stone* article. In December, *Newsweek* (again partly at Schell's suggestion) named Shen one of the men of the year.

In 1992, with interest in the movement -- and Shen's popularity -- waning, Shen and Strauss decided the student should make a trip back to China. The operation was conceived from the start as a media event. It was also a study in the manufacture of celebrity. Shen planned the trip to link up with dissidents who had been forced underground by Deng's crackdown in 1989. "Going back, we might have sparked something that's already there," says Shen. "But history doesn't always respond to this spark."

He and Strauss had planned the trip down to the last detail, apparently assuming Shen would be arrested. Shen spent three months in China, meeting with dissidents, all along being trailed by a French/German documentary team, and part of the way by ABC's cameras. Strauss had several people in Washington and in the media on stand-by. In the weeks before the trip, Shen filmed a public-service announcement, or PSA, in which he said, "My friends died for the right to vote. I'm going to go back to China for the right to vote. Please vote."

"We knew it would be an effective PSA anyway," says Strauss, "but it would be an extraordinary PSA if he was arrested. I wanted to bring home to Americans who this kid was who was going back to China." After five weeks, the inevitable happened: just after Shen had called a press conference announcing he'd be opening a DCF office in Beijing, he was taken from his mother's home and detained in a Beijing guest house.

All of the machinery Strauss and Shen had so meticulously put in place swung into action. Within a couple of hours of Shen's arrest, the story was everywhere. Strauss had already written an op-ed on Shen's behalf, which was published in the *New York Times* the very next day. He also slapped a postscript onto the PSA to say Shen had in fact been arrested, and sent out 200 copies. "The impact of Shen Tong's arrest was far greater because that PSA existed," says Strauss. "It was done, I proudly say, as well as any Washington operation would have done to get the story out."

Even after he was detained, Shen's high profile made him immune to real danger. But his trip was not without casualties. Ten of the dissidents Shen had met with were arrested, their hitherto hidden work in China exposed. Shen was allowed to leave the country seven weeks later. Those arrested for meeting with him were all released, he says, eventually. But not immediately. Shen had taken the media circus back to China, and -- like the cameras on Tiananmen Square -- it was no match for the power of the party.

Most of the people interviewed for this story criticized Shen for his China trip, characterizing it as naive and irresponsible. Ask Harvard China specialist Merle Goldman, usually mild and positive about the dissident community, whether there is an underground movement in China these days, and she says, "There *was* the beginning of one -- before Shen Tong went there."

Shen is aware of the controversy, but says those arrested knew what they were getting into. Besides, he says, "That trip really gave a pump, an injection to the cause. There was more media attention on the movement in general as a result of the '92 return."

There was also a great deal more media attention on him. "On my return, my profile was raised very much," he says. "But it was not something I enjoyed from a personal point of view or a professional point of view." Still, his enhanced reputation made it easier to raise money for his foundation.

Four years later, Shen says he has grown into his role as a dissident, and that he approaches his work differently since that trip to China. "In 1989, we were all on a ride," he says. "We came out, and we failed, and we were saluted as heroes. We got more recognition than if we had succeeded. That's an ironic twist. For me, I realize it's not a ride anymore -- it's a hard journey. Others hang onto the ride, though there's little to ride on anymore. Being a spontaneous dissident doesn't mean you can be a mature dissident and carry on the movement."

Part 7 - Changing China

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Cashing in on Tiananmen

Part 7 - Changing China

by Yvonne Abraham

His critics have been saying that for years.

"They were thrown to the fore by a very intense street movement," says Guo Luoji, a former Nanjing University philosophy professor who is now a research fellow at Harvard Law School.

Guo, a highly regarded elder of the dissident community here, is 65, slight, and serene. A student radical in the 1940s, Guo joined the Communist Party when one of its slogans was 'Against one-party rule'; he became disillusioned during the Cultural Revolution, and published articles critical of Mao's rule. Even after the Democracy Wall movement of 1979 was crushed, and Wei Jingsheng was jailed, Guo continued to criticize the party: an article he wrote called 'Political Issues May Be Discussed' -- a heretical concept, and an open act of defiance -- was published in the *People's Daily*, a Communist Party newspaper based in Shanghai. Shortly thereafter, Deng Xiaoping expelled Guo from Beijing for his views. Banished to Nanjing in 1982, he was forbidden to publish again.

His Nanjing University students came to him for advice during the protests of 1989, Guo says. But, he adds, they rarely listened to him, determined to perform rash -- and often pointless -- acts of defiance. After the crackdown, one of his graduate students was arrested, and Guo brought and won a civil lawsuit against the Communist Party for unlawful arrest. He continued to sue on other matters, chipping away at the party, doing damage. When Guo came to the United States from Nanjing in 1993, as a visiting scholar at Columbia, he was forbidden re-entry to China.

Having lived the last 56 years on the front lines of political dissent in China, even as the enemies shifted over the decades, Guo feels qualified to assess the student movement of 1989. Many of the young students who arrived in Tiananmen in the spring, Guo says through a translator, were political novices. He pulls out a copy of the *Press Freedom Guardian* and smooths a page. On the occasion of Deng Xiaoping's death, nine of the student leaders from 1989, including Chai Ling and Li Lu, published an announcement about China's future.

"The story of a democratic China," they write, "which began with the 1989 democracy movement, will turn a new page." *Began*. Guo has the translator read that sentence a couple of times. "They think they were the first ones to think about everything," he says. "They think they were the first heroes."

Guo Luoji is one of many dissidents fame has passed clean by, chiefly because few of them are as telegenic and as good with English as Shen Tong, Chai Ling, Li Lu, and Wu'er Kaixi. No matter that some of the residents of Boston's dissident community have done courageous things to reform the government in China, acts for which they have been imprisoned and exiled. The machinery of fame is highly selective.

And the selected few have reaped enormous rewards. Chai Ling and Li Lu, who had been close allies during the Tiananmen demonstrations, have that machinery figured out. Chai, who is now at Harvard Business School, is working on her memoirs. Li, a high-powered investment banker, is said to be parlaying his Tiananmen heroism and compelling story into business opportunities in the Chinese market economy his oppressor Deng Xiaoping created. Both are still frequently tapped for TV and other appearances to give the American public their perspective on China. Neither, however, has a great deal to do with the Chinese dissident community. Li Lu, for instance, writes almost exclusively for American audiences.

For Wu'er Kaixi, the machinery did not work so smoothly. Making the mistake of assuming that his courage in Tiananmen Square could sustain him as a public hero, Wu'er believed his own hype and paid for it, falling into obscurity and a succession of poorly paid jobs. Wu'er, now a father and husband, has recovered control; he lives in Taiwan and hosts a Charlie Rose-style talk show.

Shen Tong had to try a little harder to make the machinery of fame work for him. His life did not become quite the star-studded multimedia event Li's and Chai's did, but of all the dissidents he has remained in closest touch with the cause of reform in China. His trip back there in 1992, and the fact that his Democracy for China Fund is still functioning, has ensured that while his dissident star has not shone brightest here in the West, it well may shine longest.

Now Wu'er, once the most recognizable face of the movement, works in Taiwan for Shen's foundation. Both say they are uncomfortable with the accolades and responsibilities the West has conferred upon them. Both say they are trying to push more quietly for change in China these days, by supporting underground reform efforts.

But in the end, what can Shen, Wu'er, or any of the famous four really do for China? Not much, say their critics. In the pages of the Chinese-language newspapers and magazines, the future of China, and the best way to bring reform, is hotly debated. And the media stars of 1989 are not very highly regarded.

"I think people have become aware of their mistakes," says *China Focus*'s Liu Binyan, who was not allowed to write in China for 22 years because he'd called for press freedom in the '50s. "When they were still in China, they were too radical and self-centered, and acted as stars before the world's media. When they arrived abroad, they behaved like aristocrats, seeming to forget the ordinary people at home." He cites Wu'er Kaixi's behavior, and the fact that Chai Ling is never without her little white dog, even at important conferences.

Wu'er acknowledges the harm he did. "As painful as it is, I damaged the image of dissidents in general," he laments. "The criticism I have caused to myself also damaged the whole movement."

Other dissidents are less willing to find fault with themselves, even when they come under very harsh criticism. Ding Zelin, a Beijing academic whose son was killed by soldiers in 1989, is an activist and organizer in China who works to raise money for victims' families. She has been

critical of the students who made it big in the West, for failing to use their considerable heft and financial resources to support the efforts of activists back in China.

Last July, upon hearing about his great fame here, she wrote an open letter to Li Lu in a Chinese magazine. "How come I have never received one iota of help from the student leaders of that time, including you?" she wrote.

"Over the years, many of the families of the deceased, including myself, received a huge amount of letters, faxes and greeting cards," her letter continued. "How come I've never read any such expressions from the most 'outstanding' student leaders who are now abroad? There's only one explanation: that you really have not taken to heart the group of people who shouldered the heaviest sacrifice through the June 4 incident. Perhaps on your scales they're just a zero."

Li Lu wrote back to Ding to tell her that "over the past seven years, I dared not forget for one moment those who died on June 4th." But Li did not address Ding's more important criticism: that Li and the other stars of '89 have effectively abandoned those whom, in the West, they claim to represent.

What's at stake here is more than personal: debate over the dissident stars speaks directly to China's future. And that debate has become more urgent of late. Economic liberalization and Deng Xiaoping's death have lent an air of inevitability to political reforms, though many of the older dissidents still maintain they don't expect things to change significantly in their lifetimes.

Who will achieve those reforms? Not the most visible stars of the Chinese dissident movement, say critics. They can actually hurt the cause by giving it a bad name among Chinese: "They make Chinese keep their distance from so-called democracy movements," says Guo, the former philosophy professor. "These stars don't project a good image, so the Chinese don't want to be represented by them."

That point isn't lost on the Chinese government. In recent years, the party has taken to defusing threats by simply allowing troublesome dissidents to leave the country. After that, their influence on affairs in China is limited, and their potentially decadent lifestyles make good propaganda fodder. A dissident with a prominent public image is an ineffective dissident. A dissident with a *bad* public image is a discredit to the cause -- witness Wu'er Kaixi's rise and fall. The Chinese government has come to understand the Western media machine, and its usefulness, quite well.

For the party, far more threatening than a former dissident in a remote culture is a political prisoner like Wei Jingsheng, hero of the 1979 Democracy Wall movement. Li Lu, with his celebrity friends and successful career, is hardly a "Mandela figure," but Wei most certainly is: he exerts a powerful symbolic force in China, his continued imprisonment a testament to the Communist Party's capacity for oppression, undermining the diversionary effect of Deng's sweeping economic reforms and modernization.

Wang Juntao, who participated in the movements of 1976 and 1979, is alert to the perils of Western celebrity. One of the most important figures of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations, Wang was sentenced to 13 years in prison for his alleged role in planning the unrest. In 1994, President Clinton secured his release by threatening to withdraw China's most-favored-nation trade status.



Star power

On June 4, 1989, Deng Xiaoping's government put an end to the Tiananmen Square protests that had captivated the west for six weeks. A handful of the students who took part in the demonstrations came to America -- three of them to Boston -- and became celebrities.

Wu'er Kaixi

At the height of the demonstrations, Wu'er, still in his hospital pajamas, brazenly scolded hardline premier Li Peng as the world (even China) watched on television. In America, he was much celebrated, but handled his fame badly and dropped out of sight for a while, leaving Harvard for a series of low-paying jobs in California. He is now a talk-show host in Taiwan.

Chai Ling

In Tiananmen Square, Chai shouted rallying cries to the students and exhorted them to stay in the square even after Deng's patience was at an end. After the crackdown, she went to Paris, then Princeton, then ended up in Boston. She appears regularly on television and in newspapers to talk about China. She is now at Harvard Business School and is working on a memoir.

Li Lu

A close ally of Chai Ling's during the protests, Li came to New York after the crackdown and became a celebrity, the subject of a glitzy documentary, *Moving the Mountain*, produced by Sting's wife, Trudie Styler. He graduated from Columbia with degrees in both business and law. He is a fixture on television, called upon frequently to comment on trade or Tiananmen. He is now an investment banker in Los Angeles.

Shen Tong

A friend of Wu'er Kaixi's, Shen was the first student dissident to arrive in America in 1989; he came to Boston, to study at Brandeis and BU. His ghost-written memoir, *Almost a Revolution*, was originally to have been about Wu'er as well, but the friends had a falling out. In 1992, Shen went back to China and was detained for seven weeks. He is finishing a PhD in political science at BU, and heads the Democracy for China Fund, based in Wellesley.

-- Yvonne Abraham