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THE PRISONERS OF TIANANMEN SQUARE

By Sheryl WuDunn: Sheryl WuDunn is a correspondent in The Times's Beijing bureau.

A MOTORIST TAKING THE SINGLE NARROW ROAD LEADING TO the front gate of Qincheng Prison comes upon a strangely tranquil scene: above the low surrounding walls rise the tops of trees within the compound, and, beyond them, the gentle, rolling slopes of distant mountains. But those who have been inside, or who know people who have been imprisoned there, can scarcely mention the name of the prison without a quiver in their voice.

"Have you ever been to the Qincheng Prison?" a Chinese friend asked me while we were having dinner in a Beijing hotel restaurant. "I've been there," he said, leaning forward, his voice dropping to a whisper. "It's horrible. There is no way to escape. The outer compound is square-shaped, and on the four sides are the interrogation rooms. In the center is a circular compound, and that's where they keep the prisoners. A circle inside a square. You just can't get out."

Qincheng, about 20 miles north of central Beijing, is where the Chinese Government keeps at least 200 of its elite political prisoners. Among them is Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong's widow and one of the notorious Gang of Four that held power during the Cultural Revolution. Since the Government's crackdown on the democracy movement last June, she has been joined by some of the leading champions of that movement, including the writer Dai Qing and possibly the student leader Wang Dan. Bao Tong, the top aide to former Communist Party leader Zhao Ziyang, is also believed to be an inmate.

Even in the best of times, it is difficult to get reliable information on a place like Qincheng; today, when the Chinese leadership seems to be reviving a fair number of the repressive measures of the late Mao years, "facts" have to be gleaned secondhand, even thirdhand. Last summer, a friend of a friend of a Qincheng prison guard described the conditions there: 16 prisoners to a cell about 11 feet by 11 feet; each day, the inmates were fed two meals of salted cabbage and wotou, a steamed bread of cornmeal or sorghum that is, in China, the daily fare of the very poor.

I also heard that newcomers were brought in only at night so that prisoners would not know who had joined them. And last month, a friend of a friend was released from Qincheng; he had been held for several months with another prisoner, a college student, in a room of approximately 215 square feet. They were not physically abused, but had to study political literature, and twice a week they were allowed to take a walk in the yard.

In January, shortly after martial law was lifted in Beijing, the Government announced the release of 573 people who had been detained in the aftermath of the June crackdown. There have been reports that more people have been quietly released since then. Some of those freed say that, although they were not beaten by their jailers, they were mistreated in other ways; one was handcuffed for 35 days and was forced to rely on cellmates to help him eat, dress and use the toilet.

A year ago, the death of the former Communist Party leader Hu Yaobang sparked the largest democracy movement in the history of China, a movement that ended only when army tanks rolled toward Tiananmen Square and troops fired on the crowds. No one knows how many of the demonstrators subsequently detained by the authorities remain in prison. It could be as many as several thousand. What follows are portraits of six who dared push for sweeping change and are still paying the price with their personal freedom.

THE STUDENT. On a sunny day in late March last year, Wang Dan, a brainy student with owl-like eyeglasses, was trying to hold a discussion of democracy with about 100 students at Beijing University, China's most prestigious institution of higher learning. He was, however, the only one who would speak out. The other students were either reluctant to talk on a subject that had long been taboo in China, or they couldn't understand what he was saying. The meeting, a "democracy salon," it was called, was held outdoors on the campus because the students were unable to secure official approval to meet in a classroom.

That was the start of last spring's democracy movement, and it was the first time I saw Wang Dan. Having had my name passed on to him by a mutual friend, I went to see him on the evening of April 15. It was just hours after the death of Hu Yaobang, who had been forced to resign as Communist Party leader in 1987 following nationwide student demonstrations for greater democracy. Wang Dan was pacing in the triangular yard in the center of the university as students put up posters mourning Hu, who had come to symbolize democracy. A painfully thin young man, Wang Dan was on his way to becoming one of the most formidable student leaders in China and would soon take on his country's rulers. In late April, when the students disagreed among themselves on the direction of the democracy movement, they ousted Wang Dan from the leadership because many felt his approach was too confrontational. Within days, however, he was somehow back in charge. Unlike his co-leader, Wuer Kaixi, Wang Dan is not the least bit charismatic and was never comfortable under the spotlight. But he was determined. When the students' enthusiasm for the democracy movement waned and some students suggested a hunger strike, Wang Dan at first opposed it. But when momentum for the tactic grew, his name was the first on the list of volunteers.

"I'm not afraid," Wang Dan said during an interview I had with him on June 2. "I've nothing to be afraid of. I don't think they will be able to imprison me for as long as Wei Jingsheng." Wei, an electrician, had played a leading role in the Democracy Wall Movement, named for a stretch of wall along an avenue in Beijing where free expression was briefly encouraged by the authorities in 1978-79; he has been in prison for 11 years, with four more to go.

After June 4, Wang Dan headed the list of 21 students wanted by the Government. He was said to have first fled to the south, where he was to find an escape route to Hong Kong. It is not clear why he then returned to Beijing, where he was arrested in July. He is widely believed to be held in Qincheng Prison.

THE TEACHER. On April 27, 1989, the day when 150,000 mostly youthful demonstrators made their triumphal march through the Chinese capital - cheered on by hundreds of thousands of Beijing residents - Liu Xiaobo cut short a series of lectures at Columbia University to return to Beijing and join the democracy movement. That was also the day faculty members at Beijing University, after watching the protests for nearly two weeks, finally gave their support to the students. They waited at the university gate until midnight, when the marchers, including Wang Dan, returned to the campus after their stunning daylong parade.

Liu, a thin and intense man in his 30's, is known to be something of a maverick. A scholar of Chinese literature at Beijing Normal University, he once told friends that Chinese literature since the "scar" period of 1978-79 (when many wrote about their surviving the horrors of the Cultural Revolution) had gone backward, not forward. One of the few university lecturers to offer direct help to the student protesters, Liu advised them and gave speeches in support of their cause.

On June 2, he and three other pro-democracy demonstrators staged a hunger strike in Tiananmen Square, the majority of the student hunger strikers having abandoned theirs earlier. The following night, before the army forced them out of the square with guns and tanks, Liu huddled with the protesters to decide strategy. One worker had a machine gun, taken in a confrontation with some of the troops, and he proposed to fight it out. For about half an hour, Liu explained to the worker and the crowd around him why the gun should not be used and why they should resist peacefully. Finally, the worker gave up the gun, and Liu smashed it.

Liu believed in the power of logic over brute force. "Whatever extreme measures the Government takes will help it dig its own grave," he said in a phone conversation with me in May. "The leaders' actions will instigate greater discontent and arouse an even stronger reaction. The student movement will only become larger." Detained on June 6, according to his friends, Liu is believed to be held in Qincheng. He has been denounced on national television as the "sinister hand," the "madman." Last September, he appeared on national television, looking tired and somber, to back the Government contention that no students were killed in Tiananmen Square. (It is now generally accepted that most of the killings took place not within the square itself but on the north side, along the Avenue of Eternal Peace, and in other parts of the city.) Liu's statement on television does not seem to have won him any points with officialdom; a week or so later, he was excoriated in the official People's Daily for having "slandered the Communist Party" and "encouraged people to oppose the socialist system and the people's democratic dictatorship." The paper went on to say, "History will confound the aspirations of Liu Xiaobo and the like. Their dream to set up a bourgeois republic is doomed."

THE JOURNALIST. Zhang Weiguo is sharp, aggressive, ebullient, with a penchant for discussing

political theory. The first time I met him, in the fall of 1988, he lectured me for an hour on the reasons a completely American-style form of capitalism would not work in China. A portly man in his 30's, Zhang is a lawyer by training who abandoned law to become a senior journalist in the Beijing bureau of The World Economic Herald. This weekly paper, based in Shanghai, had already run into trouble with the authorities when, earlier in the year, it published an essay criticizing the Government. During the early days of the democracy movement, the paper won a huge following, in part because of the enterprise and dedication to a free press of Zhang Weiguo and his colleagues.

When Hu Yaobang died on April 15, Zhang helped gather the reactions of a number of intellectuals, and their comments were printed later that month in an issue of The Herald that devoted six pages to the ousted party leader. The issue contained some of the boldest criticisms of the Communist leadership anyone had ever seen in a major Chinese newspaper. The Government responded by banning it.

Shortly thereafter, Jiang Zemin, then the Shanghai party chief and now the Communist Party leader, announced the paper's "reorganization," a term widely understood at the time to mean the paper would be shut down or emasculated; Qin Benli, the newspaper's editor in chief and a daring newspaperman from pre-1949 days, was dismissed. According to the Government, Zhang then solicited the reaction of two noted intellectuals - Dai Qing, the writer, and Yan Jiaqi, a prominent political scientist who is a good friend of Bao Tong, Zhao Ziyang's top aide. (After the June crackdown, Yan escaped to France.) In late April, a senior Government official reportedly advised the editors of major Chinese newspapers not to cover the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. But by early May, local journalists had become defiantly aggressive and presented a petition (signed by Zhang and about a thousand other journalists) to the Government calling for greater press freedom. In the days that followed, China's newspapers and television stations boldly tested the limits of press freedom, and until martial law was declared on May 20, independence in the Chinese press was one of the most remarkable results of the student protests.

"We have seen a revolution during the last few days, but it is hard to say whether this revolution will stick, or whether it will fail," Zhang said at the time, tempering his delight with well-founded skepticism.

Since mid-May, no issue of The Herald has been published, although the newspaper has not been officially closed down. Zhang was detained in late June, and is believed to be in a Shanghai prison. A People's Daily article last summer accused him of "clinging stubbornly to bourgeois liberalization" and engaging in a "political conspiracy."

THE VETERAN DISSIDENT. "They are kids," Ren Wanding told me in early May last year, when the students were struggling to gather momentum for their pro-democracy movement. "I respect them, and they are brave, but they don't really understand human rights," he said, referring to the students' general lack of interest in the plight of the country's political prisoners.

A decade ago, during the Democracy Wall Movement, Ren Wanding had the audacity to form the

League of Human Rights. Others in China might have championed democracy, but Ren Wanding, an accountant by profession, was among the first there to push for human rights. In May, as a veteran dissident, he indulged in a bit of criticism of the students, but it was clear he was exhilarated by their pro-democracy movement.

Ren was first detained by the authorities in 1979 for pinning up a poster in Beijing calling for human rights in China, and he spent most of his four-year imprisonment in a cell less than 10 feet by 10 feet. He preserved his sanity, he told friends, by painstakingly writing on rolls of toilet paper 16 long essays on political liberalization.

In the fall of 1988, Ren wrote a 22-page political essay that he hoped to publish in commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the Democracy Wall Movement. The essay, an excerpt of which appeared on the Op-Ed page of this newspaper in December 1988, criticized the Government for its corruption and for ignoring the people's needs, and it called for greater political freedom.

Ren thereby became one of the first dissidents since the student protests of 1986-87 to raise publicly the issue of human rights and democracy. By late 1988, it had been five years since he was released from prison; he had spent the time living quietly with his family and working as an accountant. China at that time was a relaxed, almost carefree, place where people talked openly about politics and even about their country's leaders.

Ren was one of the first dissidents to use the foreign press to get his message out to the world. He called reporters whenever he completed a new essay, and was always disappointed when we, for one reason or another, did not report his views. He introduced journalists to other dissidents, and he arranged art exhibitions to help raise money for the families of dissidents still in jail.

About a week after I saw him in early May, his wife called. She was frantic.

"Do you know where Ren Wanding is?" she asked. "He hasn't come home for the past two nights, and I'm worried something has happened to him."

I had no idea where he was. I was at a loss. How does one comfort a woman who remembers all too well the spring day in 1979 when her husband was detained and disappeared for four years?

A few days later, I saw Ren with a large group of students. I tried to push my way through the crowd to tell him his wife was worried about him, but I was unsuccessful. He saw me, though, and gave me a broad smile. By mid-May, Ren had assumed a visible, daringly overt role as an adviser to the student protesters. One day, he mounted a soapbox at the Monument to the People's Heroes in Tiananmen Square, speaking to the crowd on democracy and human rights and criticizing the Communist Party leadership. On June 11, Ren's wife called again. "Ren Wanding was detained last night," she said, hysterical with fear. "They just came and took him away, and they searched our place. It's a horrible mess. They overturned everything."

Since then, Ren has been criticized in the official press for spreading lies and inciting unrest. There

has been no word of his fate, although he is believed to be in the same detention center - adjacent to Beijing No. 1 Prison - that he was held in after he was detained in 1979.

THE INTELLECTUAL. During last year's democracy movement, Dai Qing attracted international attention as one of the first prominent intellectuals in the capital to voice public sympathy for the students. A reporter and columnist for the Beijing-based *Guangming Daily*, a leading national newspaper widely read by intellectuals, Dai Qing in early May helped draw up a petition calling for greater independence for the press and direct talks between Chinese journalists and the Government. In fact, she became part of a small group that met with top propaganda officials to discuss the grievances of the news media.

Then on May 14, the eve of the first Chinese-Soviet summit in 30 years, Dai Qing implored thousands of hunger-striking students camped out in Tiananmen Square to leave. Many students resented this, accusing her of taking the Government's side. Months later, however, in its denunciation of the writer, the Government said that under the pretext of encouraging the students to leave she had been "inciting the students to make trouble." An energetic investigative journalist, Dai Qing, who is in her mid-40's, is known for her essays detailing the horrors of the previous crackdowns on intellectuals. Early last year, Dai Qing published a long account of the experiences of Chu Anping, an advocate of a free press who had been labeled a "rightist" during Mao Zedong's 1957-58 campaign against intellectuals. Dai Qing has also pushed for the release of political prisoners, and shortly after Hu Yaobang's death, she gave a speech, printed in *The World Economic Herald*, in which she called for Hu's rehabilitation.

By many accounts, Dai Qing was the first in China to mount a crusade on an environmental issue. With the zeal of a Ralph Nader, she mobilized an effective opposition against the Government's Three Gorges project, which called for the construction of a dam that, depending on its size, would have inundated between 11,000 and 114,000 acres of farmland along the Yangtze River, forcing the resettlement of between 200,000 and 1.4 million people. In February 1989, when the project was being publicly debated, Dai Qing organized in just 12 days the publication of a collection of essays by various writers revealing the problems of the dam, an issue that has been a concern of hers since 1985.

"Whatever the Government says, this problem [of resettlement] just can't be resolved," she said in an interview a year ago.

Not all of the ideas Dai Qing has embraced have appealed to China's reform-minded intellectuals. Some of her thoughts would hardly be labeled, as the Chinese Government has done, "bourgeois liberalist" ideas packaged for Chinese consumption. For instance, she has advocated a distinctly un-Western notion dubbed the "New Authoritarianism." The best approach for China, she has said, is not Western democracy but a government run by a strong enlightened leader. This notion, in fact, is a modern form of the Confucian ideal of a strong, benevolent emperor, and it is partly inspired by the political systems of such economically thriving places as Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea. The concept was reportedly commended by both Deng Xiaoping and ousted

Communist Party leader Zhao Ziyang.

By the end of May, when the student movement appeared to be winding down, Dai Qing seemed to have withdrawn from public involvement in the protests. After the June 4 military crackdown, she reportedly resigned from the Communist Party and became a target for those party hard-liners eager to purge all intellectuals who had been involved with the student movement. Some had hoped that Dai Qing's connection to the late Marshall Ye Jianying would save her from imprisonment; until his death in 1986, Ye was one of China's most powerful leaders, and he was known to have treated Dai Qing as an adopted daughter. In mid-July, however, she was taken from her home by the police. After months with no news of her whereabouts, her family was allowed to visit her in Qincheng over Chinese New Year; her husband said that she seemed to be in fairly good health.

THE POLITICIAN. As the student movement in Beijing was transformed from small street protests to a hunger strike to a standoff with soldiers, Bao Tong was analyzing the situation in his office in the center of the capital. The 57-year-old politician, then one of the most influential in China, was the top aide to party leader Zhao Ziyang; he was also secretary to the Standing Committee of the Communist Party Politburo. (The committee, which then had five members, including Zhao, is the most powerful policy-making group in China.) For nearly a year, criticism of Zhao's economic policies had been circulating among the Chinese leadership, and by January 1989 Zhao's political position had reached a low point. As a way of regaining his former stature, Zhao in early May, and with Bao Tong as his adviser, adopted the stance of a populist aligned with the students.

In the weeks leading up to the June crackdown, the Standing Committee met secretly to discuss the student protests and, as the committee secretary, Bao presumably attended the sessions. The Government now accuses him of passing information about the meetings, especially the decision to impose martial law, to the students as a means of building popular support for Zhao.

Nearly a decade ago, the slim, bespectacled Bao Tong was a bright technocrat at the Government's Science and Technology Commission when he was picked by Zhao to be his adviser. Bao went on to become a member of the Central Committee and the head of a think tank that was studying ways to restructure the political system.

Bao surrounded himself with young intellectuals who became the architects of many of China's political and economic restructuring policies. His contacts spread over the years to include officials in many areas of the country and at different levels of the party and Government. But his meteoric rise to power attracted the attention of hard-liners within the party who seemed to be biding their time to strike.

After martial law was imposed on May 20, Bao knew he was in danger. He noticed he was being followed and, on May 25, he stopped going home, moving instead from house to house to avoid arrest. But on May 28, according to a high-ranking official, he was finally picked up and placed

under house arrest; he is now believed to be in Qincheng Prison. Many Chinese fear his fate will be worse than that of Zhao Ziyang, who is somewhat protected by his stature both inside and outside China. Bao, they say, is a virtual unknown outside of China, so there is less risk to the Government in treating him harshly.

Why is Bao Tong such a threat? "He was the most powerful reformist," says a Chinese academic with ties to Bao's associates. "After Zhao, of course, the conservatives fear him most."

Photos: Dai Qing, top left, was one of the first prominent Beijing intellectuals to voice public sympathy for the student protesters. She is now in Qincheng Prison. (The Nineties monthly) (pog. 28); Believed to be in Qincheng is Liu Xiaobo, above, who cut short his lectures at Columbia University to support the students. (Ed Nachtrieb/Reuters) (pg. 28); After the June crackdown, Wang Dan, above, headed the list of 21 students wanted by the Government. He is thought to be in Qincheng Prison. (Nicholas D. Kristof/The New York Times) (pg. 28); Ren Wanding, left, was among the first in China to push for human rights. He is believed to be in a Beijing detention center. (Greg Girard/Impact/visions) (pg. 28); Bao Tong, below, was a close aide to the now-discredited former party leader Zhao Z