

DREAMS OF A FREE CHINA

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Note: Fang Lizhi died on April 6, 2012 (last week, as I write this). His death inspired me to search my hard drive for this article that I wrote in 1990 based on my experiences with him and in China during the demonstrations of 1989. The text below is the original article exactly as I wrote it in 1990, with the exception of the added footnotes. Although the full article was not published, a shortened version appeared in our local Daily Camera Magazine. Incidentally, the full article actually generated the nicest rejection letter I ever received: the prestigious journal Foreign Affairs told me that they really wanted to publish it, but ultimately decided they had room for only one article on these events and decided they needed to go with the one written by Winston Lord, who had been the U.S. Ambassador to China at the time.

I've also gone through my old slide show and uploaded a series of images from the time, with captions; you can see them at

<http://math-for-life.com/2012/04/20/remembering-fang-lizhi/>

Note: I have included numerous quotations in this article. Except where noted, they are taken from notes I made at the time or from a tape of our April 1 dinner with Fang. Where I have relied solely on my memory, I have noted that I am paraphrasing.

All-consuming exhilaration. It is the closest I can come to describing the feeling of being surrounded by a million people engaged in a non-violent frenzy for freedom. On April 27, 1989, 150,000 Chinese students marched through the streets of Beijing, drawing cheers of support and admiration from a million or more spectators. The march was a direct challenge to threats of lethal force, backed up by some 20,000 troops, announced the previous day in the government controlled media. But, on that beautiful spring day, the marchers brushed aside police and troops at nearly every major intersection along their 10 mile route. When they reached their destination, Tiananmen square, the people of China had effectively declared themselves free.

It is with tremendous sadness that I recall the events I experienced in China before and during the triumph of freedom. For the triumph proved short-lived, as the aging dictators of China responded in early June with brutal repression, turning dreams of democracy and freedom into a nightmare of blood and desolation. I was an accidental tourist in China; through serendipity I experienced the emergence of the student movement in a way seen by few others.

My first visit to China began with the arrival of the S.S. Universe in Shanghai on March 29. The ship, on which I served as visiting professor of astronomy and physics, is known as a "floating University"; twice each year it carries some 450 students, plus faculty, staff, and others on an academically oriented trip around the world. (The program, known as Semester at Sea, operates out of the University of Pittsburgh.) China was the tenth of twelve countries we visited. During the week that the ship remained

docked in Shanghai, I was part of a group of 50 who went to Beijing as guests of Qinghua University, one of the “key” universities in China for science and technology.

In Beijing, I had the extraordinary privilege of meeting with China’s leading dissident — astrophysicist Fang Lizhi, who now has taken refuge in the U.S. Embassy.¹ Prof. Fang is an outspoken critic of the Chinese government, and a proponent of greater democracy. He has drawn the wrath of the Communist Party on numerous occasions, and become a hero among Chinese students and intellectuals. When some of our hosts from Qinghua University learned that I planned to visit with Fang, they expressed enormous admiration: a member of the University administration said, “All young people in China love Fang Lizhi.” A student told me, “He is our Ghandi and our Martin Luther King”; another said, “The government is afraid to arrest Prof. Fang, because they know that demonstrations would erupt at every University in China.” (Alas, now that the government has issued a warrant for the arrest of Fang and his wife, the demonstrations already have been crushed.)

Despite his outspoken criticisms, Fang had earned the support of many inside the communist party; indeed, Fang himself remained a party member until he was expelled in 1987. (In fact, Fang had once before been expelled from the party, in 1957, but had rejoined in 1978.) By 1984, liberals in the party succeeded in promoting Fang to the position of Vice President at Keda, the University of Science and Technology in Hefei; there even were rumors of efforts among some reformers in the central leadership to give him membership in the Party’s Central Committee. In his new position Fang, along with his colleague and University President Guan Weiyan, instituted a series of successful reforms increasing academic freedom at the University, and encouraged exchanges which sent numerous Chinese students and scholars overseas and brought foreign intellectuals to China.

During his tenure as Vice President at Keda, and especially during the Fall of 1986 following his return from a trip to the U.S., Fang visited a number of Chinese cities giving speeches advocating greater democracy and reform. Although he never openly advocated demonstrations, his words inspired students throughout the country, and a massive round of protests began at Chinese Universities in December 1986. In a backlash against the demonstrators, the government launched the “campaign against bourgeois liberalism” in early 1987. Fang became the scapegoat, and was stripped of his position at Keda in addition to being expelled from the party. Other casualties of the short-lived rebellion included Hu Yaobang, who was forced to step down from his position as General Secretary of the Communist Party for his support of the student movement. Among the Chinese students I met, it is widely believed that Hu stepped down in exchange for leniency against Fang and others; indeed, it was significant that Fang was neither executed nor jailed in a country known for its harsh treatment of dissidents, but was allowed to continue in relative freedom as a scientist at the Beijing Astronomical Observatory. (As an interesting aside, the government next circulated copies of Fang’s

¹ The U.S. granted asylum to Fang and his wife, but the Chinese government initially denied them permission to leave the country. The government finally relented in June 1990 (more than a year after they had first taken refuge), and Fang and his wife moved to the United States. Fang spent most of his remaining years as a Professor of Physics at the University of Arizona, teaching and continuing his efforts in human rights.

speeches to party members for criticism; many of them were surprised, however, when they instead found merit with much of Fang's commentary.)

Thus, it was with considerable excitement that I had arranged my visit with Prof. Fang many months in advance, thanks to the help of my connections as an astronomer. (And, unfortunately, with some unwanted help from the Chinese government: Fang had planned to be a visiting scholar at my University — Colorado — during the time that I was in Beijing, but the government had revoked his permission to travel as punishment for comments he made in several interviews last year.) Nevertheless, I was surprised and delighted when the meeting actually took place because, just a few weeks before our arrival, Fang had become the center of an international incident. President Bush had invited Prof. Fang to attend a dinner during his February summit in Beijing, but the Chinese authorities had intercepted Prof. Fang and prevented him from attending. The incident became the cover story for the March 13 issue of *TIME* magazine's International edition; the cover featured a photograph of Fang with the caption: "The Man Who Did Not Come to Dinner."

I met twice with Prof. Fang, along with a group of my American students and several English-speaking Chinese students from Qinghua University. Our first meeting, at the Beijing Astronomical Observatory, took place on March 31 and the primary topic of discussion was Chinese astrophysics. Upon our arrival at the facility, we were greeted outside by Fang. I immediately recognized him from the many pictures I had seen, and was pleased to find that the stories I've read about his warm-hearted personality, disarming smile, and hearty laugh all are true. After speaking to us briefly, Fang graciously posed for photographs, and signed autographs over his picture on the *Time* magazine cover (which I had brought with me for that purpose) and on other items brought by students.

Because I was able to bring only a small fraction of our 50 person group to meet with Fang at the Observatory, I had decided to invite Fang to join our larger group for dinner at the University the following night. He quickly accepted the dinner invitation, but suggested that he should not try to enter the University campus; with laughter, he said, "If I try to come to the University I might again be the Man Who Did Not Come to Dinner!" (in reference to the *Time* headline). His next suggestion was for our entire group to visit his apartment, but we convinced him that it would be logistically easier to meet at a nearby restaurant.

The Chinese students who had joined our group took care of arranging a private dining room for us, and the following evening Prof. Fang, his wife Li Shuxian, and several Chinese students and friends joined myself, an American biology professor (John Baldwin) and 35 American students for dinner. At the time I was surprised to find that, despite his dissident status, there was no obvious evidence that Fang was watched or followed;² in typical Chinese fashion, he and his wife arrived at the dinner on bicycle.

During dinner, both Fang and his wife spoke openly about a wide range of issues; Fang even took care to point out which of the strange-looking dishes on the table tended to be unpalatable to Americans! We discussed his travel plans; he believed that he would

² I later learned that our entire dinner had been videotaped by the authorities (more on this in a later footnote).

get permission to go abroad (for his fellowship at the University of Colorado) within 6 months. He expressed interest in participating as an “interport lecturer” on China during a future voyage of Semester at Sea. Overall, he seemed very optimistic about the future.

After the meal, Fang stood up to give a short talk, and then answered questions at length; the main topic, of course, turned to politics. Though Fang has spoken honestly and openly all his life, he explained that he first realized he was a dissident when he learned that his research interest — cosmology and the origin and fate of the universe — was a violation of Marxist doctrine: “Cosmology is a forbidden field,” he said laughing, “because all of the problems in cosmology already are solved by Marxism! ... One of the great unsolved problems in cosmology is whether the universe is finite or infinite in extent. But, Marx and Engels said the universe must be infinite...”

Over time, Fang questioned more and more of the strict doctrines laid down by the Communist Party. I asked him about a recent quote from the *Time* article in which he said, “It is clear that socialism has been the scourge of humanity in this century.” He answered by describing how he had gradually lost faith in his government and in the basic principles of Marxist society. Nevertheless, he was pragmatic in his calls for greater democracy. China is not yet ready for true democratic elections, he said, because the population is not well enough educated. He suggested that there must be a transition period during which education is heavily emphasized to prepare the citizenry for the responsibilities of a free society. (As a minor example of the poor state of Chinese education, I note that the per person tab for our dinner — about \$15 — is about the same as the monthly salary of a Chinese teacher, or about one-fourth of the salary of a full Professor. Naturally, we Americans paid for our Chinese guests.)

I next asked him to elaborate on a set of principles that he had developed (I had encountered them in an excellent article by Orville Schell from the May 1988 *Atlantic Monthly*) to counter the Four Cardinal Principles of Deng Xiaoping — socialism, the people’s democratic dictatorship, the leadership of the Communist Party, and Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought. He said that his principles were adapted from earlier intellectual movements in China, and gave them in order as: Science, Democracy, Creativity, and Independence. He described the difficulties in trying to achieve these ideals, “China has no tradition of freedom, or of human rights... We need to take good ideas from any country, like your United States...” He lamented that Chinese people often blindly acquiesce to authority and discipline; their culture has taught them to accept dependence on a government. He complained that their educational system stifles creativity; students are not allowed to speak out in class, except to regurgitate the words of the teacher. Even in his own University physics classes, students rarely would ask questions, even when he made mistakes at the chalkboard. He railed against the Confucianist influence on Chinese society, stating that its emphasis on conformity and passivity were responsible for many of China’s ills, including the historical accedence of the Chinese people to the rule of Emperors, and their present acceptance of Communist totalitarianism. (I paraphrase:) “The Chinese people must learn to think and act as individuals, and not be afraid to question authorities or their elders.” Finally, about his first principle, science, he said: “You know, I am still an astrophysicist. I have many concerns, but my first concern is about the sky!” He pointed upward and smiled as he said this, drawing laughter throughout the room.

Fang, and his wife Li Shuxian, answered questions from many of the American students. Asked what American students could do to help the cause of democracy in China, Li suggested, "Make greater contact with the Chinese students at your own Universities. Help them to learn about freedom and democracy..." Asked how they were able to speak so freely in a country where most others are afraid to criticize the government; Fang answered with an amazing story: "Two years ago, someone called me and said I must stop speaking against the government, and stop giving interviews to reporters. But I checked our [China's] constitution, and it guarantees freedom of speech! So I still talk..." His obvious bravery and his strong stand for freedom and human rights were a great inspiration; many of the American students who attended the dinner said that the meeting was the highlight of their 4-month trip around the world.

Yet, in retrospect, one of the most significant statements of the evening was made not by Fang or Li, but by one of the Chinese students who had joined us. (To protect the Chinese students, I will leave them nameless.) It came when I asked why the student movement of 1986 had failed, and what had happened to the spirit of the movement. The Chinese student explained, with Fang nodding in agreement, that the students had made mistakes in the nature of their demands. They had focused on freedom of speech, of the press, and on other democratic ideals which have near-universal appeal among intellectuals; but they had failed to gather the support of workers and the rest of the population who are concerned more with economic stability than with ideology. He then said, pointedly (I paraphrase) "We have learned from our mistakes. Next time we will focus more on the corruption of the rulers, and we will draw the support of the people."

I asked, "does that mean there will be a next time?"

The student's expression and voice boldened; he seemed to be drawing strength from the infectious presence of Fang. "Yes. Some day. I don't know when, but the students will again demand greater democracy." Little did we know that "some day" would arrive only two weeks later.

Before leaving Beijing on April 3, I told my Chinese student friends that I was hoping to return to China as a tourist towards the end of April, at the conclusion of our shipboard semester. I asked them to suggest possible tours of China. Instead of simply suggesting a route, however, three of them offered to travel with me and to make all of the necessary arrangements (in part, I believe, because they were so grateful that I had taken them to meet their hero Fang). It was a fantastic offer, which I accepted, particularly since I speak no Chinese myself. We planned to begin in Beijing, and to take trains to several other cities in China.

By the time I returned to Beijing on April 23, however, China had changed drastically. Hu Yaobang, the political martyr of the 1986 demonstrations, died unexpectedly on April 15; the student protests were reborn soon thereafter. The students had sensed an extraordinary opportunity with the passing of Hu, who they considered a reformer and a supporter of their democratic ideals. They came out in mass demonstrations of mourning for Hu, and the government could hardly object since Hu still was as a member of the Communist Party Politburo when he died. Hu's funeral took place in the Great Hall of the People adjacent to Tiananmen Square on April 22, the day before my return to Beijing. The square was crowded by over 100,000 demonstrators for the funeral, many of whom had spent the previous night there as a form of protest. My

Chinese friends spoke with exuberance when they described the scene at the square. They took enormous pride in having spent a night there, feeling that they were now part of a revolution which would sweep China along the path of reform. But they decried the fact that China's official news organs made no mention of their demonstrations. And, they said, none of the government leaders showed themselves to the demonstrators at all.

Interestingly, some of the Chinese students reported that Fang had been one of the invited official guests at the funeral, a report which I have not seen confirmed elsewhere. They claimed that, at the conclusion of the funeral, Fang had walked out on the steps of the Great Hall and waved to the cheering crowd. Aside from this possible appearance, however, Fang judiciously stayed clear of any overt support for the student movement; he did not want to offer a pretext for the government to again blame him for the demonstrations. At this point (April 24), I made a naive mistake which I can only hope did not cause any damage. From students and faculty on the ship, I had brought gifts for Prof. Fang expressing gratitude for his spending time with us earlier. Feeling an obligation to deliver them, I telephoned Fang. He sounded obviously nervous to be taking the phone call, but said I could send the gifts to him. Realizing that further contact by a foreigner might be damaging to Fang, I had the gifts delivered to the Beijing Astronomical Observatory by a Chinese student. The package was accepted for Fang by his colleagues, and they spent some time asking the student questions about the demonstrations. For, although they supported the calls for reform, Fang's colleagues shied away from the protests, lest it be thought that Fang had incited them to action.

Over the next few days, immediately following the funeral for Hu, Beijing returned to near normal. True, many people continued to flock to Tiananmen square where students had left a large portrait of Hu Yaobang on the Monument to the People's Heroes, along with flowers, wreaths, and numerous pro-democracy posters and graffiti. But, outside of the campuses, life in Beijing otherwise went on without disruption, and there were no major demonstrations.

On the campuses, however, the revolution continued to ferment. (Because of the unrest, I was not permitted to stay in the Guest House at Qinghua university as originally planned; instead, I stayed at a nearby hotel. My friends had little difficulty, however, in getting me past the guards at the campus entrance so that I could view all of the happenings first-hand.) The students launched a boycott of classes, and the Qinghua campus was plastered with posters and slogans, while loudspeakers were used to disseminate information and broadcast reports from the Voice of America and the BBC. They hungered for news reports from abroad; students continually asked me (many mistakenly assumed I was a journalist, since I was carrying a notebook and camera) about world reaction to the demonstrations. With the official press mute, rumor was rife on the campus. Indeed, I often knew more about the demonstrations than the students themselves. Newspapers that I brought with me from Hong Kong, in which the protests had been daily front page news, were quickly photocopied and widely distributed. (And, surprisingly, I still was able to purchase foreign newspapers and magazines in the tourist-oriented Friendship Stores or in the large hotels; thus, I was able to continue to supply my friends with news on an almost daily basis.)

Groups of students began going out to collect donations from workers and citizens who supported their movement. They had indeed succeeded in gaining the support of at

least a substantial fraction of the Beijing populace, in large part by focusing several of their demands on issues of party corruption. They even had asked for disclosure of bank statements from party leaders, and suggested punishment for all corrupt officials. Other demands included press freedom, better support for education and intellectuals, a positive reappraisal of the 1986 demonstrations and the role of Hu Yaobang, a full, accurate disclosure by the government of the events since the new round of protests had begun, and direct negotiations between student leaders and the Party leadership.

Yet, the official press continued to ignore the events. A few students began to despair, and suggested that they return to their classes, but most wished for their movement to be continued until the government heard their demands. (It should be noted that most of the Chinese students are very serious about their studies, particularly since many of them hope to be accepted into graduate programs in the U.S. or other western countries.) Still, there was no consensus among the students as to the next step, or when it should be taken. In fact, I believe that the government could have defused the entire crisis at this point simply by promising to enter a long-term series of negotiations with the students. Such a promise would have allowed both sides to back down without a significant loss of face (a very important consideration in Chinese politics); the students could have returned to classes with at least some hope that their voices would now be heard, and the Party leaders could have claimed success in ending the demonstrations without violence. World reaction likely would have praised the moderation of the government, and China's ability to attract tourists and investors might well have increased. Alas, it was not to be.

Instead, the hard-line faction of Prime Minister Li Peng chose a path of confrontation, embarking down the road which led to the June 4 massacre of thousands of students and citizens. On the evening of April 25, the government broadcast announcements suggesting that a handful of troublemakers, including Fang Lizhi, were responsible for the demonstrations. The students were angered, and emergency meetings were called that evening on the campuses.

A middle-school teacher from Qinghua helped me get past the tightened security at the campus entrance. When I asked if it was safe for her to be seen with foreigners she said, "I don't care what happens to me. We must have freedom now... I gave all of my money today [which she had been saving in order to pay for going abroad; she already had been accepted to a graduate program in Canada] to the students for the demonstrations." Her attitude of defiance against the government was striking, but I saw it repeated among many others. Speaking of the students, she added, "I thought that the students of today were selfish, that they cared only about playing and having fun. But they have surprised me, and I must support them..."

On the Qinghua campus, student leaders met in a large lecture hall, while loudspeakers broadcast the proceedings to the thousands of other students outside. Somehow, the Qinghua leaders also were in communication with leaders from other Universities in Beijing. They debated for several hours over whether or not they should march to Tiananmen square the following day. The more radical leaders urged a march, while others wanted to avoid any possibility of violence. Eventually, they decided not to march until more was learned about the government's actions.

The following day, April 26, I visited Tiananmen Square with my friends. We were surprised to find the large portrait of Hu Yaobang still was perched against the Monument to the People's Heroes. A crowd of citizens still was gathered to read the many posters, and banners calling for democracy flew from the flag poles in front of the monument. A few soldiers and police were stationed around the square, but they seemed relaxed and were very friendly. Outwardly, it seemed like the government might be reconsidering their statements, and opting for a strategy of tolerance. But, in fact, the hard-liners had stepped up their war of propaganda. An editorial in the People's Daily ordered the students to return to classes, and warned against any further demonstrations. Radio broadcasts issued a call for a "brave political struggle" against the student unrest. Deng Xiaoping, China's senior leader, was reported to have said that the government was not afraid to spill blood if necessary, and suggested that repression would not cause serious harm to China's image in the world.

Instead of forcing the students to back down, however, the hard-line attack served only as further provocation. Despite reports that they would be met by thousands of troops, the students decided to march through the streets of Beijing, to Tiananmen Square, on the morning of April 27. "We are not afraid to die," was commonly heard. Indeed, many of the students took time to make out wills during the night before the march. By 9am, when I left my hotel along with an American friend, the students already were massed and moving in the northwestern part of Beijing where many of the Universities (including Qinghua) are located.

From each campus, students poured out to join the main formation. My friend and I worked our way along the march route, through the throngs of spectators who clearly supported the students. The students themselves marched in tight formation, linking hands to prevent the possibility of infiltration by agitators. Traffic along the major roads was brought to a complete halt. But, only about a mile from the Qinghua campus, the march had ground to a stop. Unable to see what was happening, we climbed over a wall and through an apartment complex, re-emerging forward of the halted marchers. Their path was blocked by several hundred unarmed police, standing in a three (or more)-deep line to prevent the passage of the students. From the vantage point of a nearby hillside, we watched the stalemate continue for nearly a half-hour. Then, suddenly, a few students emerged through a hole in the police line. It was not clear how the students had broken through, but later reports from my Chinese friends indicated that they had won the sympathies of the police by convincing them that their demands were patriotic and in the interest of all Chinese people. In any case, the flood gates had opened, and the students pressed on. After that, we were able to easily follow the march by walking along a pathway which ran parallel to that of the students, but was separated from them by a small water channel. We continued for over an hour, until we reached a station for the Beijing subway. There, we decided to board a train in order to reach Tiananmen Square ahead of the students.

We emerged from the station near the Front Gate of Tiananmen Square around noon. It had been less than 24 hours since my previous visit, but the Square was shockingly changed. Everything had been cleared — the posters and banners, the portrait of Hu Yaobang — and the Square was completely sealed off by lines of troops. Using side streets, we eventually made our way across Changan Ave. to the Gate of Heavenly

Peace at the entrance to the Forbidden City. We could see soldiers hiding behind the walls near the Gate; many more soldiers were gathered outside of the Great Hall of the People. Except for an occasional vehicle (including, once, a passing Mercedes³ — imagine the nerve of the officials while students were protesting against corruption!1), the street and the Square were clear, but the rest of the area was jammed with spectators awaiting the arrival of the students.

Time passed, the tension grew. Crowds of English-speaking Chinese occasionally formed around us, asking how we felt about the student movement. We expressed our support, and people from all walks of life thanked us, and urged us to spread word of the demonstrations to the world. They were happy and excited when I told them that the world already was watching. Then, while we were talking, a convoy of troop carriers appeared. A long line of trucks, packed with thousands of troops, parked along Changan Ave. in front of the Square. Though I did not confirm it myself, others told me that some of the troops were armed with guns. “I think there is going to be violence,” one man told me; another said, “Some people may be killed today.”

Suddenly, at about 3pm, the crowd began to move towards the west. We looked, and above the masses of people we clearly made out the banners of the marching students. The moment of confrontation was at hand. We worked our way towards the Zhongnanhai compound, where China’s leaders officially live and work, and witnessed a huge line of soldiers, perhaps 20 deep, blocking the further progress of the students. The crowd was fluid, we were pushed along with it and could not move freely. They cheered the students, and yelled at the soldiers. The crowd pushed; the troops held ground; the students chanted and spoke to individual soldiers. For a long time, it seemed, though it probably was far less than an hour. A few spectators occasionally panicked, and ran out from the crowd to try and reach what might be safety. And suddenly, just like earlier in the day, the marchers broke through.

As the long lines of students poured down the Changan Avenue, the spectators rushed into Tiananmen Square. The police simply got out of the way. Citizens climbed aboard the trucks filled with troops; the troops looked bewildered, and occasionally joined in smiling and laughter with the people. Finally, the trucks and troops simply drove away. The mood was jubilant. “There is power in numbers,” said one man, a worker, as he celebrated the victory.

With the confrontation ended, the students streamed down Changan Avenue. They did not stop at Tiananmen Square, but just marched on by. Their numbers were so large that it took many hours for all of them to pass. The crowds remained around the square, cheering and waving “victory” signs throughout the afternoon. When it was clear that we had seen the major events of the day, indeed, one of the major events of the decade, we left the square in search of a meal. By amazing coincidence, considering the huge crowds, we ran into one of the three Chinese students with whom I had made travel plans. He and two women students were on their way to eat at the Beijing Kentucky Fried Chicken, a three story building said to be the largest KFC in the world, located just a block off Tiananmen Square to the southwest. We joined them, and found many other

³ Note that at this time, private cars were extremely rare in China; those who could afford it rode bicycles (all of the same, standard black model).

demonstrators there to celebrate as well. We listened as the students recalled, with great pride, the events of the afternoon. It was a moment of absolute joy.

I left Beijing the next day, along with the three Chinese students and an American friend. Flush with success, the students were convinced that the main battle had been won. They correctly predicted that the demonstrations would quiet down for a few days, with no large protests again until May 4 (a significant date in Chinese history, recalling student uprisings in 1919). We travelled together for the next week, first by train to Xian, and then by train and bus to a small town called Yangshuo, just south of Guilin.

Xian, an ancient capital of China, is home to many historical sites. Some go back thousands of years, like a neolithic settlement, or the buried Terra Cotta warriors of Emperor Qin; others are more recent, like the site of 1936 “Xian incident” where Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-Shek) was kidnapped by his own army and forced to join Mao Zedong in fighting against the Japanese. With their deep knowledge of history, my friends constantly strove to find lessons or analogies for the present movement. But Xian also showed many of the problems facing modern China — overcrowded, dirty and polluted, increasing crime, and a bureaucratic nightmare at the train station. The small tourist town of Yangshuo, by contrast, is nestled in a quiet, rural area. There, among the rice paddies and the spectacular limestone mountains, we were able to rest and reflect on the recent events. Yangshuo was particularly interesting, as well, because we saw there not a trace of communism; the market was completely free, the people were friendly and, in the interests of business, most spoke English remarkably well. In that idyllic setting, the future of China seemed bright.

Everywhere we went, ordinary citizens stopped to talk to the students about the events in Beijing. Despite the media control, word of the demonstrations was widespread. My friends, of course, were able to talk to people from all walks of life, not just to the select few who speak English. They reported that the vast majority of the citizens praised the student movement, particularly the calls for action against official corruption. But, despite such verbal support, we witnessed no active participation in the movement elsewhere. In Yangshuo, May 4 passed as an ordinary day.

In spite of all the history, spectacular scenery, and diverse cultures, the clear highlights of the trip were the many hours of discussions I had with my Chinese friends. It seemed we covered nearly every subject at some point, from history and religion to practicalities about mortgage rates in the United States. I was impressed by the breadth of knowledge the students had of U.S. political history. Contrary to many reports that students did not really understand their own calls for democracy, I found that they readily appreciated the intricacies of freedom.

Not surprisingly, they argued that China, with its many deep-rooted problems, must retain at least some authoritarian control. They accept, for example, the policy which provides harsh penalties for families which have more than one child. Although this one-child policy appears universally despised, most of the students and intellectuals I met believe that overpopulation is China’s foremost problem and therefore requires undemocratic solutions. In fact, short of calling for western-style democracy, my friends believed that an imitation of Soviet glasnost was a more pragmatic immediate approach. (Indeed, they believed that an upcoming visit by Gorbachev, combined with the popular uprising, might prompt the government to take concrete steps towards much greater

openness.) Nevertheless, like Fang Lizhi, they believed that the transition to a multi-party democracy was a historical inevitability, and they were convinced that it would occur “within ten years.”

What would happen next? My friends were convinced that Li Peng, the primary target of the students at that time, would resign within days. They believed that Party General Secretary Zhou Ziyang, a reformer, would soon take power, and that a new generation of democratically-minded leaders would emerge. They even suggested that Fang Lizhi would soon be appointed as Minister of Education. Playing “devil's advocate” to their optimism, I worried that the government might simply try to wait out the disturbances, and questioned how the students could keep up the momentum of the demonstrations and retain public interest over a long period of time. They offered many possible answers and, I recall, one of my friends suggested that a hunger strike might be an effective public relations tactic, if necessary. I do not know if he later was one of the students who made the call for a hunger strike on May 13, or even if he was one of the strikers. But he was proved right in believing that a hunger strike could revitalize the democratic movement.

Worried that their classes would soon resume, my friends boarded a bus to Guilin on May 5, planning to catch a late train to Beijing. With high hopes of coming to the U.S. next year as graduate students, they did not want to risk any damage to their grades. That is the last I have seen or heard from them. They were activists, and almost certain to have been among the demonstrators in Tiananmen Square on the night of the massacre. I do not even know if they still are alive.⁴ I do not call or write, out of fear that the government might arrest them for having travelled with foreigners during the demonstrations. And, with the postal service in poor condition, I have little hope of receiving any mail from them in the near future.

I left China the following day, May 6. The dreams of a free China harbored by my friends had infected me, and I remained on an emotional high, closely following every news report, until the bitter end. I anticipated returning to China, perhaps next year, to see a society transformed. I looked forward to seeing my student friends at graduate schools in the United States, and to seeing Fang Lizhi next year at the University of Colorado.

⁴ They all lived, though with some interesting stories. I returned to China in 1993, and met up with one of the three students who had traveled with me in 1989. This student, who went by the English name Tony, was now married to a woman he had met on our trip to Xian. Tony and his wife traveled again with me, along with another American friend, for more than 3 weeks. I learned that after I left in 1989, Tony's proficiency with English had gotten him recruited as a translator for Dan Rather (CBS news anchor); I therefore would have seen him if I had watched CBS during the demonstrations, but I'd instead been watching CNN. He did this for a couple weeks, but after his father expressed concern for his safety, he left and went home to Shanghai before the June 4 massacre. Later, when he returned to school, the authorities arrested him as a result of his work with CBS. During his interrogations, they showed him a videotape of our dinner with Fang, which they assumed made him one of the instigators of the demonstrations. Of course this was not the case and they released him, but he said they continued to bring him in for more questioning almost weekly for more than a year. Anyway, I learned from Tony that the other two students were also fine, and had less problems with the authorities. Sadly, I have not heard from Tony since that time. He had hoped to come to the U.S. for business school, and I was willing to sponsor him, but my letters to him after that point were never answered. So I do not know if he had further problems with the authorities, or just a lack of mail delivery due to a move. I have tried to find him several times, but so far there are not good enough alumni directories in China for me to find where he has gone.

But the dreams have now been shattered, and it looks like it may be years, if ever, before they are revived.

With over one billion people, China's future hinges not only on the political turmoil, but hangs in precarious environmental balance as well. Global changes, like the planetary warming of the greenhouse effect, may drastically impact their ability to feed their population. Severe pollution, on a local level, threatens to poison their air and water, and may lead to increased spread of disease. Coupled with rampant crime and economic chaos, likely results in a country without a legitimate government, China may be thrown into a period of anarchy from which recovery may be impossible. In my most optimistic moments, I still dream that the popular uprising may yet prove successful, that the rulers will resign, and that China will become free and prosperous. But, as economic and ecological disasters encroach, time is of the essence. Unless the current government is soon deposed, and a true road to reform undertaken, I fear that the Tiananmen Square massacre may be only the beginning of a nightmare.⁵

⁵ It is with relief that I note that my worst fears have not come to pass. Instead, China seems to be continuing in a somewhat precarious balance between opening up and continued authoritarianism, a balance that has held at least in part due to tremendous economic growth. For the future, China has a lot going for it, including an increasingly well-educated populace (thanks in large part to China's success in curbing population growth, which makes it much easier to move toward a goal of universal education). But China also still faces daunting environmental problems, as well as continuing corruption and suppression of dissent that could lead to turmoil. Moreover, to a much greater extent than in 1990, China's problems are now the world's problems. China has surpassed the U.S. as the world's leading emitter of the greenhouse gases that cause global warming, and it is a growing power both economically and militarily. We can only hope that China's leaders will ultimately see the importance of democratic reforms, and will help the world come together to promote global human rights, peace, and environmental sanity.