

Fang Lizhi: Speaking Out for Human Rights

Fang, an astrophysicist, is barred from traveling abroad and his movements in China are restricted, but he has not been muted

Beijing

IN THE EARLY MORNING along the dusty boulevards here, it is common to see old, stooped Chinese men carrying bamboo cages with singing birds inside as they stroll to a nearby park. It wouldn't be surprising if well-known Chinese astrophysicist Fang Lizhi identified with those birds.

Fang made headlines in the West last month when he was barred by nervous Chinese authorities from attending a dinner hosted by President Bush in Beijing to honor the nation's top officials. The reason? Fang has become more than a good scientist: he is one of China's most prominent dissidents, regularly protesting what he sees as archaic, antidemocratic government policies. He has even written an outspoken public letter to 83-year-old leader Deng Xiaoping, and now, like those caged birds carried by old men, Fang is permitted to speak out but his movements are restricted. He is barred from foreign travel and even journeys inside China are closely proscribed.

Last month, 4 weeks after the Bush dinner, *Science* visited Fang in his Beijing apartment just a few miles from the seat of the country's power in Tiananmen Square. There, Fang provided a glimpse of the subtle, as well as the blatant, forms of government repression against him, and he de-

scribed the difficulties that hamper the fledgling human rights movement in China—a movement that took to the streets of Beijing last week when thousands of students demonstrated for democratic freedoms.

A visitor got a glance at the monitoring of Fang immediately upon entering his apartment building and asking the elevator operator for the 11th floor, where Fang's flat is. "Going to see Fang?" the operator said, more as a notation than a question. But the disconcerting moment was quickly dispelled when Fang's doorbell produced a zippy electronic rendition of "Happy Birthday."

Fang, 53, is an engaging man with a cherubic face and a playful personality, which belies his solemn message. "The situation is now quite tense," said Fang presciently before the student demonstrations occurred last week. When asked whether he fears for his own safety, he said matter-of-factly in fluent English, "So, so. If authorities feel I'm too active then maybe it is not so safe."

Fang has already paid a hefty price for speaking his mind. Two years ago, he was fired from his post as vice president of the Chinese University of Science and Technology in the city of Hefei in Anhui province and at the same time was ousted from the Com-

munist Party. Then he was transferred to the Beijing Observatory.

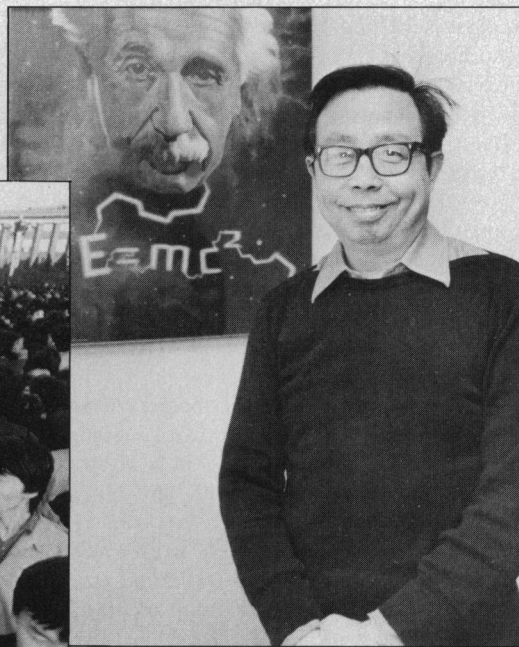
Fang, a theoretician, said his scientific work is not suffering too much, but it progresses more slowly now because he had to leave behind a research staff of ten in Hefei. "I'm not as efficient," he said. Before, at the university, "I could explore a new idea by dividing up the work among the staff. Without the staff, I lack stimulation." Fang, a theoretical cosmologist, is currently interested in the topology of the universe. Fang is influential among Chinese astronomers and has made interesting contributions to international astrophysics, two American scientists said.

His biggest frustration at present, he said, is the ban on overseas travel. "It is bad for Chinese astronomy. At the moment, I just want to travel and have a free exchange."

In the past year, Fang said he has applied several times to the Chinese Academy of Sciences, of which he is still a member, to travel abroad to attend scientific meetings and lecture at American universities. But more often than not, Fang's persistent requests simply go unanswered.

He has applied, for example, to attend an international physics meeting in Colorado in June sponsored by the International Congress of Scientific Unions, an organization affiliated with the United Nations. But, as yet, he said he has not received an answer from academy officials.

The lack of an official decision or explanation makes it difficult for Fang to fight back.



Fang Lizhi. Shortly before student demonstrations erupted in Beijing (left), Fang said "the [human rights] situation is now quite tense." (Photo credits: Wide World)

When he has confronted some officials whom Fang believes privately sympathize with him, they respond, "Zemne shuo? [What can I say?]"

Barring his travel overseas, Fang said, creates "a bad situation for research and Chinese astronomy."

His travel within China is also restricted to prevent him from broadening his base of support among students and intellectuals. Government officials have prohibited Fang from returning to Hefei where he has a strong following among students and intellectuals. Recently, on the way to attend a scientific meeting in Suzhou near Shanghai, three party members intercepted him at the Shanghai train station and drove him to Suzhou. They "were afraid I'd stop in Shanghai" to meet with students at the major universities there, Fang said. When he got to Suzhou, skittish officials at Suzhou University told him he could not attend a dinner on campus with students. Actions like these taken against him are "a lot of harassment," Fang said.

Fang is encouraged that he has the backing of some members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. He noted with enthusiasm that in February, he and nine other academy members sent a joint letter to Deng requesting the release of political prisoners.

But Fang said it is hard to discern the extent of underlying support for him among the academy's senior leadership. The academy is headed by Zhou Guangzhao, a member of the Central Committee and, like Fang, is a theoretical physicist. In fact, Zhou was Fang's teaching assistant when he was a student at Beijing University. It was Zhou who fired Fang from his university post in Hefei. But it was also Zhou who arranged a five-room apartment in Beijing for him. That is spacious by Chinese standards.

Fang wrote in the 2 February issue of the *New York Review of Books*, "As democratic consciousness spreads, it is bound to form pressure groups that will have ever greater power to weigh against the authority of the leadership" in China. However, though it is burgeoning, the human rights movement in China is still in its infancy.

Fang said, "The dissident movement is stronger in the Soviet Union. Until 2 years ago, the issue of human rights was too sensitive a topic to discuss at all" in China. Unlike the Soviet Union, "there is no underground newspaper here. There is no great connection among dissidents and no organization." The human rights movement in China is also significantly weakened because the Cultural Revolution created a "lost generation" of poorly educated individuals who are now in their 30s and 40s, he said.

But, Fang added, "more and more people

are becoming outspoken." Indeed, since the beginning of the year, in a politically bold move, some of China's leading scientists and artists have signed several letters advocating human rights and political reforms, which have been sent to top government officials. Fang noted with great satisfaction that more than 70 Chinese intellectuals signed two petitions sent last month to the National People's Congress that called for the release of political prisoners (for which there is no reliable count, Fang adds).

In recent weeks, however, the government has taken a firmer line against political dissidents. Authorities confiscated from a visiting Hong Kong delegation a petition with 24,000 signatures calling for the release of political prisoners, refused the entry of one of the six delegation members who were on their way to deliver the petition to the National People's Congress in Beijing, and expelled from China a prominent young political activist and writer Chen Jun.

A top party official also dampened hopes that China's most famous dissident in China itself, Wei Jingsheng, will be released from

jail soon when he said last month that there is no need to grant special pardons to prisoners this year, which is the 40th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Wei, a former Red Guard, was the leading figure in the pro-democracy movement in China at the time of his arrest in 1979. He is serving a 15-year sentence, although his whereabouts are unknown and there is some question of whether he is even alive.

Despite the enormous political challenges ahead, Fang remains spirited. He said that one of his strongest motivations to press for change comes from his conviction that "scientists have a responsibility for the direction of a country." So Fang continues to meet frequently with Western journalists and other foreigners as a way to maintain his international connections and visibility. Although he cannot go out of the country, at least many people can still visit him.

When asked what foreign scientists can do to help him and his cause, Fang paused and said, "Signing letters is the best, the only way to help right now." ■ MARJORIE SUN

WHO Seeks Global Data on Sexual Practices

The organization is about to launch a survey that could provide important clues to the spread of AIDS

THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION will soon begin asking Belgian housewives, Greek sailors, and Ugandan truckdrivers about their sex lives. Their answers will become part of a global survey of human sexuality, the first ever attempted.

WHO officials and scientists collaborating with the international health agency say that the study, which will span at least 20 countries, will help untangle one of the lingering mysteries of AIDS: why is there such variation in the spread of the AIDS virus among different populations?

"In AIDS, we tend to put people in categories: gay, straight, or whatever," says Paul Abramson, a psychologist at the University of California at Los Angeles who is serving as a consultant to WHO. "But AIDS is not a gay disease. Maybe, though, it is a disease that involves trauma to the rectum or sexually transmitted diseases or genital lesions. There might be some common element that runs through all the epidemics. This survey will help us sort that out."

Researchers also believe the information

is crucial for combating the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, especially in poor countries that cannot afford the kind of well-funded public health campaigns that have been launched in Europe and North America.

"Had we had more information about human sexuality, more knowledge about trends and practices, we would have been able to intervene with AIDS in a much more rigorous and intelligent way," says Manuel Carballo, who is heading up the survey effort for the WHO Global Program on AIDS in Geneva.

Scientists here and abroad note that it is ironic that the Third World is ready to go with a study on sexual behavior, while in the United States a long-awaited national survey on sex has become mired in politics (see box).

The Netherlands, Greece, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Belgium, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Thailand, Brazil, Costa Rica, and Sri Lanka have agreed to do the survey. By summer, the WHO hopes to have interviewers asking