

# 'An Academic Breaks the Mold of Chinese Activists

A 65-year-old professor at Beijing University pushes his plan to overhaul the government

BY TED PLAFKER

**B**EIJING UNIVERSITY, well known both at home and abroad as a hotbed of political activism, has once again produced a vocal figure with bold new ideas about China's urgent need for political reform.

But Shang Dewen does not quite fit the stereotype of a Beijing University radical. That image, made famous worldwide during the student-led, pro-democracy protests of 1989, is of a brash young hunger striker wearing a headband, marching with comrades holding banners, and calling for the dismissal of top leaders.

A professor at Beijing University's Economics Institute, Dr. Shang, at 65, is neither young nor brash. But the blueprint for political reform that he recently released marks nearly as direct and profound a challenge to the government as anything the student protesters called for eight years ago.

His plan would take 25 years to put fully into effect and would produce something remarkably similar to the system of government in the United States. It would feature three branches of government, with checks and balances maintained among them, and would include popular elections for officials up to and including the president. The courts and the monetary system would be free from political interference. The military would be under civilian control, and the press would be free.

## SPARRING IN THE OFFICIAL PRESS

"It is very important that somebody speak out and talk about what needs to be done," says Dr. Shang in an interview.

He has chosen a particularly sensitive time to do so. This week, China's Communist Party is scheduled to start its full congress, which is held only once every five years.

*In advance of the opening of the con-*

gress on September 12, Chinese leaders have been sparring in the official press about how best to reform China's lagging state-owned enterprises and whether to keep a tight lid on inflation.

In Dr. Shang's view, China's main problem is far more basic. It is the rising tension between an economic system that has been allowed to thoroughly reform itself and a Stalinesque political system that has hardly changed at all.

"Theoretically, it is the friction and collision of these two contradictory systems which generate all malpractice and corrupt, illegal behavior," he wrote in an essay that he sent last month to Chinese President Jiang Zemin. "Therefore we need to speed up our pace of political reform."

## 'IDEOLOGICALLY NEUTRAL'

Given Dr. Shang's rhetorical style, it comes as no surprise to learn that he is also vice-chairman of the All China Association of the History of Marxist-Leninist Economic Theory.

Although he recognizes that his proposed reform program poses a threat to many people now holding power and influence in China, he insists that his ideas themselves are "ideologically neutral" and need not lead to the Communist Party's fall from power.

"Of course, the Communists might lose in a free election, but then they could just work harder and maybe do better the next time," he says.

He believes, however, that the Communist Party is the only force in China today



ROBYN BECK, AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

*Shang Dewen of Beijing University: "It is very important that somebody speak out and talk about what needs to be done."*

with the organizational structure to successfully manage the country's complex and changing economic and social situation. His essay makes frequent and favorable mention of the late Deng Xiaoping, the "paramount leader" who launched China on the path to reform nearly 20 years ago.

Although Dr. Shang's proposal for political change has received no official re-

sponse, he has received a fair bit of attention from the international press as well as from his family, friends, and neighbors. They have heard about his ideas from Chinese-language news programs broadcast from outside the country, and they worry about whether his candor will bring him trouble.

## LITTLE CONTACT WITH STUDENTS

Many political activists in China have landed in jail for making far less radical proposals, but Dr. Shang dismisses the possibility. He is not, he insists, organizing opposition to the government. He has merely made some suggestions, and he does not plan to cause any trouble if they are not heeded.

"I am nothing like Wei Jingsheng, or Wang Dan," he says, referring to two of China's better-known dissidents, now serving jail terms of 14 and 11 years, respectively.

Neither does he have much opportunity to rile up students on the ever-sensitive Beijing University campus. Scheduled to retire next year, Dr. Shang now teaches no regular classes and advises only a handful of students.

Rather than go to work at his departmental office, the professor spends most of his time at what is, by local standards, a roomy and comfortable apartment, just west of the campus.

More likely than a knock on the door from the police, Dr. Shang says, might be a visit from the Beijing University Communist Party secretary.

"But actually, I don't think he would dare give me trouble," says the professor. "After all, I have four great theorists behind me: Marx, Lenin, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping. And I also have behind me nearly 1.3 billion ordinary Chinese, who know that these changes must be made."

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