

# Letter from China

## Angry Youth: The New Generation's Neocon Nationalists.

*Evan Osnos*

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On the morning of April 15th, a short video entitled *2008 China Stand Up!* appeared on Sina, a Chinese Web site. The video's origin was a mystery: Unlike the usual YouTube-style clips, it had no host, no narrator, and no signature except the initials "CTGZ."

It was a homespun documentary, and it opened with a Technicolor portrait of Chairman Mao, sunbeams radiating from his head. Out of silence came an orchestral piece, thundering with drums, as a black screen flashed, in both Chinese and English, one of Mao's mantras: "Imperialism will never abandon its intention to destroy us." Then a cut to present-day photographs and news footage, and a fevered sprint through conspiracies and betrayals—the "farces, schemes, and disasters" confronting China today. The sinking Chinese stock market (the work of foreign speculators who "wildly manipulated" Chinese stock prices and lured rookie investors to lose their fortunes). Shoppers beset by inflation, a butcher counter where "even pork has become a luxury." And a warning: this is the dawn of a global "currency war," and the West intends to "make Chinese people foot the bill" for America's financial woes.

A cut, then, to another front: rioters looting stores and brawling in Lhasa, the Tibetan capital. The music crescendos as words flash across the scenes: "So-called peaceful protest!" A montage of foreign press clippings critical of China—nothing but "rumors, all speaking with one distorted voice." The screen fills with the logos of CNN, the BBC, and other news organizations, which give way to a portrait of Joseph Goebbels. The orchestra and the rhetoric climb toward a final sequence: "Obviously, there is a scheme behind the scenes to encircle China. A new Cold War!" The music turns triumphant with images of China's Olympic hurdler Liu Xiang standing in Tiananmen Square, raising the Olympic torch, "a symbol of Peace and Friendship!" But, **349**

first, one final act of treachery: In Paris, protesters attempt to wrest the Olympic torch from its official carrier, forcing guards to fend them off—a “long march” for a new era. The film ends with the image of a Chinese flag, aglow in the sunlight, and a solemn promise: “We will stand up and hold together always as one family in harmony!”

The video, which was just over six minutes long and is now on YouTube, captured the mood of nationalism that surged through China after the Tibetan uprising, in March, sparked foreign criticism of China’s hosting of the 2008 Summer Olympics. Citizens were greeting the criticism with rare fury. Thousands demonstrated in front of Chinese outlets of Carrefour, a French supermarket chain, in retaliation for what they considered France’s sympathy for pro-Tibetan activists. Charles Zhang, who holds a PhD from MIT and is the founder and CEO of Sohu, a leading Chinese Web portal along the lines of Yahoo, called online for a boycott of French products “to make the thoroughly biased French media and public feel losses and pain.” When Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi denounced China’s handling of Tibet, Xinhua, China’s official news service, called her “disgusting.” State-run media revived language from another age: The magazine *Outlook Weekly* warned that “domestic and foreign hostile forces have made the Beijing Olympics a focus for infiltration and sabotage.” In the anonymity of the Web, decorum deteriorated. “People who fart through the mouth will get shit stuffed down their throats by me!” one commentator wrote, in a forum hosted by a semi-official newspaper. “Someone give me a gun! Don’t show mercy to the enemy!” wrote another. The comments were an embarrassment to many Chinese, but they were difficult to ignore among foreign journalists who had begun receiving threats. (An anonymous letter to my fax machine in Beijing warned, “Clarify the facts on China . . . or you  
**350** and your loved ones will wish you were dead.”)

In its first week and a half, the video by CTGZ drew more than a million hits and tens of thousands of favorable comments. It rose to the site's fourth-most-popular rating. (A television blooper clip of a yawning news anchor was No. 1.) On average, the film attracted nearly two clicks per second. It became a manifesto for a self-styled vanguard in defense of China's honor, a patriotic swath of society that the Chinese call the *fen qing*, the angry youth.

Nineteen years after the crackdown on student-led protests in Tiananmen Square, China's young elite rose again this spring—not in pursuit of liberal democracy but in defense of sovereignty and prosperity. Nicholas Negroponte, the founder of MIT's Media Laboratory and one of the early ideologists of the Internet, once predicted that the global reach of the Web would transform the way we think about ourselves as countries. The state, he predicted, will evaporate “like a mothball, which goes from solid to gas directly,” and “there will be no more room for nationalism than there is for smallpox.” In China, things have gone differently.

A young Chinese friend of mine, who spends most of his time online, traced the screen name CTGZ to an e-mail address. It belonged to a twenty-eight-year-old graduate student in Shanghai named Tang Jie, and it was his first video. A couple of weeks later, I met Tang Jie at the gate of Fudan University, a top Chinese school, situated on a modern campus that radiates from a pair of thirty-story steel-and-glass towers that could pass for a corporate headquarters. He wore a crisp powder-blue oxford shirt, khakis, and black dress shoes. He had bright hazel eyes and rounded features—a baby face, everyone tells him—and a dusting of goatee and mustache on his chin and upper lip. He bounded over to welcome me as I stepped out of a cab, and he tried to pay my fare.

Tang spends most of his time working on his dissertation, which is on Western philosophy. He specializes in phenomenology; specifically,

in the concept of “intersubjectivity,” as theorized by Edmund Husserl, the German philosopher who influenced Sartre, among others. In addition to Chinese, Tang reads English and German easily, but he speaks them infrequently, so at times he swerves, apologetically, among languages. He is working on his Latin and Ancient Greek. He is so self-effacing and soft-spoken that his voice may drop to a whisper. He laughs sparingly, as if he were conserving energy. For fun, he listens to classical Chinese music, though he also enjoys screwball comedies by the Hong Kong star Stephen Chow. He is proudly unhip. The screen name CTGZ is an adaptation of two obscure terms from classical poetry: *changting* and *gongzi*, which together translate as “the noble son of the pavilion.” Unlike some elite Chinese students, Tang has never joined the Communist Party, for fear that it would impugn his objectivity as a scholar.

Tang had invited some friends to join us for lunch, at Fat Brothers Sichuan Restaurant, and afterward we all climbed the stairs to his room. He lives alone in a sixth-floor walkup, a studio of less than seventy-five square feet, which could be mistaken for a library storage room occupied by a fastidious squatter. Books cover every surface, and great mounds list from the shelves above his desk. His collections encompass, more or less, the span of human thought: Plato leans against Lao-tzu, Wittgenstein, Bacon, Fustel de Coulanges, Heidegger, the Koran. When Tang wanted to widen his bed by a few inches, he laid plywood across the frame and propped up the edges with piles of books. Eventually, volumes overflowed the room, and they now stand outside his front door in a wall of cardboard boxes.

Tang slumped into his desk chair. We talked for a while, and I asked if he had any idea that his video would be so popular. He smiled. “It appears I have expressed a common feeling, a shared view,” he said.

Next to him sat Liu Chengguang, a cheerful, broad-faced PhD student in political science who recently translated into Chinese a

lecture on the subject of “Manliness” by the conservative Harvard professor Harvey Mansfield. Sprawled on the bed, wearing a gray sweatshirt, was Xiong Wenchi, who earned a PhD in political science before taking a teaching job last year. And to Tang’s left sat Zeng Kewei, a lean and stylish banker, who picked up a master’s degree in Western philosophy before going into finance. Like Tang, each of his friends was in his twenties, was the first in his family to go to college, and had been drawn to the study of Western thought.

“China was backward throughout its modern history, so we were always seeking the reasons for why the West grew strong,” Liu said. “We learned from the West. All of us who are educated have this dream: Grow strong by learning from the West.”

Tang and his friends were so gracious, so thankful that I’d come to listen to them, that I began to wonder if China’s anger of last spring should be viewed as an aberration. They implored me not to make that mistake.

“We’ve been studying Western history for so long, we understand it well,” Zeng said. “We think our love for China, our support for the government and the benefits of this country, is not a spontaneous reaction. It has developed after giving the matter much thought.”

In fact, their view of China’s direction, if not their vitriol, is consistent with the Chinese mainstream. Almost nine out of ten Chinese approve of the way things are going in the country—the highest share of any of the twenty-four countries surveyed this spring by the Pew Research Center. (In the United States, by comparison, just two out of ten voiced approval.) As for the more assertive strain of patriotism, scholars point to a Chinese petition against Japan’s membership in the UN Security Council. At last count, it had attracted more than forty million signatures, roughly the population of Spain. I asked Tang to show me how he made his film. He turned to face the screen of his Lenovo desktop

PC, which has a Pentium 4 Processor and one gigabyte of memory. “Do you know Movie Maker?” he said, referring to a video-editing program. I pleaded ignorance and asked if he’d learned from a book. He glanced at me pityingly. He’d learned it on the fly from the help menu. “We must thank Bill Gates,” he said.

When people began rioting in Lhasa in March, Tang followed the news closely. As usual, he was receiving his information from American and European news sites, in addition to China’s official media. Like others his age, he has no hesitation about tunneling under the government firewall, a vast infrastructure of digital filters and human censors which blocks politically objectionable content from reaching computers in China. Younger Chinese friends of mine regard the firewall as they would an officious lifeguard at a swimming pool—an occasional, largely irrelevant, intrusion.

To get around it, Tang detours through a proxy server—a digital way station overseas that connects a user with a blocked Web site. He watches television exclusively online, because he doesn’t have a TV in his room. Tang also receives foreign news clips from Chinese students abroad. (According to the Institute of International Education, the number of Chinese students in the United States—some sixty-seven thousand—has grown by nearly two-thirds in the past decade.) He’s baffled that foreigners might imagine that people of his generation are somehow unwise to the distortions of censorship.

“Because we are in such a system, we are always asking ourselves whether we are brainwashed,” he said. “We are always eager to get other information from different channels.” Then he added, “But when you are in a so-called free system you never think about whether you are brainwashed.”

At the time, news and opinion about Tibet was swirling on Fudan’s electronic bulletin board, or BBS. The board was alive with criticism of foreign  
**354** coverage of Tibet. Tang had seen a range of foreign press clippings

deemed by Chinese Web users to be misleading or unfair. A photograph on CNN.com, for instance, had been cropped around military trucks bearing down on unarmed protesters. But an uncropped version showed a crowd of demonstrators lurking nearby, including someone with an arm cocked, hurling something at the trucks. To Tang, the cropping looked like a deliberate distortion. (CNN disputed this and said that the caption fairly describes the scene.)

“It was a joke,” he said bitterly. That photograph and others crisscrossed China by e-mail, scrawled with criticism, while people added more examples from the *Times* of London, Fox News, German television, and French radio. It was a range of news organizations, and, to those inclined to see it as such, it smacked of a conspiracy. It shocked people like Tang, who put faith in the Western press, but, more important, it offended them: Tang thought that he was living in the moment of greatest prosperity and openness in his country’s modern history, and yet the world still seemed to view China with suspicion. As if he needed confirmation, Jack Cafferty, a CNN commentator, called China “the same bunch of goons and thugs they’ve been for the last fifty years,” a quote that rippled across the front pages in China and for which CNN later apologized. Like many of his peers, Tang couldn’t figure out why foreigners were so agitated about Tibet—an impoverished backwater, as he saw it, that China had tried for decades to civilize. Boycotting the Beijing Games in the name of Tibet seemed as logical to him as shunning the Salt Lake City Olympics to protest America’s treatment of the Cherokee.

He scoured YouTube in search of a rebuttal, a clarification of the Chinese perspective, but he found nothing in English except pro-Tibet videos. He was already busy—under contract from a publisher for a Chinese translation of Leibniz’s *Discourse on Metaphysics* and other essays—but he couldn’t shake the idea of speaking up on China’s behalf.

“I thought, OK, I’ll make something,” he said.

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Before Tang could start, however, he was obligated to go home for a few days. His mother had told him to be back for the harvest season. She needed his help in the fields, digging up bamboo shoots.

Tang is the youngest of four siblings from a farming family near the eastern city of Hangzhou. For breaking China's one-child policy, his parents paid fines measured in grain. Tang's birth cost them two hundred kilos of unmilled rice. ("I'm not very expensive," he says.)

Neither his mother nor his father could read or write. Until the fourth grade, Tang had no name. He went by Little Four, after his place in the family order. When that became impractical, his father began calling him Tang Jie, an abbreviated homage to his favorite comedian, Tang Jiezhong, half of a popular act in the style of Abbott and Costello.

Tang was bookish and, in a large, boisterous household, he said little. He took to science fiction. "I can tell you everything about all those movies, like *Star Wars*," he told me. He was a good, though not a spectacular, student, but he showed a precocious interest in ideas. "He wasn't like other kids, who spent their pocket money on food—he saved all his money to buy books," said his sister Tang Xiaoling, who is seven years older. None of his siblings had studied past the eighth grade, and they regarded him as an admirable oddity. "If he had questions that he couldn't figure out, then he couldn't sleep," his sister said. "For us, if we didn't get it we just gave up."

In high school, Tang improved his grades and had some success at science fairs as an inventor. But he was frustrated. "I discovered that science can't help your life," he said. He happened upon a Chinese translation of a fanciful Norwegian novel, *Sophie's World*, by the philosophy teacher Jostein Gaarder, in which a

356 I discovered philosophy," Tang said.



Patriotism was not a particularly strong presence in his house, but landmarks of national progress became the backdrop of his adolescence. When Tang was in junior high, the Chinese were still celebrating the country's first major freeway, completed a few years before. "It was famous. We were proud of this. At last we had a highway!" he recalled one day, with a laugh, as we whizzed down an expressway in Shanghai. "Now we have highways everywhere, even in Tibet."

Supermarkets opened in his home town, and, eventually, so did an Internet café. (Tang, who was eighteen at the time, was particularly fond of the Web sites for the White House and NASA, because they had kids' sections that used simpler English sentences.) Tang enrolled at Hangzhou Normal University. He came to credit his country and his family for opportunities that his siblings had never had. By the time he reached Fudan, in 2003, he lived in a world of ideas. "He had a pure passion for philosophy," Ma Jun, a fellow philosophy student who met him early on, said. "A kind of religious passion."

The Internet had barely taken root in China before it became a vessel for nationalism. At the Atlanta Olympics, in 1996, as the Chinese delegation marched into the stadium, the NBC announcer Bob Costas riffed on China's "problems with human rights, property right disputes, the threat posed to Taiwan." Then he mentioned "suspicions" that Chinese athletes used performance-enhancing drugs. Even though the Web in China was in its infancy (there were just five telephone lines for every hundred people), comments spread instantly among Chinese living abroad. The timing couldn't have been more opportune: After more than fifteen years of reform and Westernization, Chinese writers were pushing back against Hollywood, McDonald's, and American values. An impassioned book titled *China Can Say No* came out that spring and sold more than a hundred thousand copies in its first month. Written by a group of young intellectuals, it decried China's "infatuation with America,"

which had suppressed the national imagination with a diet of visas, foreign aid, and advertising. If China didn't resist this "cultural strangulation," it would become "a slave," extending a history of humiliating foreign incursions that stretched back to China's defeat in the first Opium War and the British acquisition of Hong Kong, in 1842. The Chinese government, which is wary of fast-spreading new ideas, eventually pulled the book off the shelves, but not before a raft of knockoffs sought to exploit the same mood (*Why China Can Say No*, *China Still Can Say No*, and *China Always Say No*).

Xu Wu, a former journalist in China who is now a professor at Arizona State University, says in his 2007 book *Chinese Cyber Nationalism* that groups claiming to represent more than 70,000 overseas Chinese wrote to NBC asking for an apology for the Costas remarks. They collected donations online and bought an ad in the *Washington Post*, accusing Costas and the network of "ignominious prejudice and inhospitality." NBC apologized, and Chinese online activism was born.

Each day, some 3,500 Chinese citizens were going online for the first time. In 1998, Charles Zhang's Sohu launched China's first major search engine. The following spring, when a NATO aircraft, using American intelligence, mistakenly dropped three bombs on the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, the Chinese Web found its voice. The United States apologized, blaming outdated maps and inaccurate databases, but Chinese patriotic hackers—calling themselves "honkers," to capture the sound of *hong*, which is Chinese for the color red—attacked. As Peter Hays Gries, a China scholar at the University of Oklahoma, details in *China's New Nationalism*, they plastered the home page of the US Embassy in Beijing with the slogan "Down with the Barbarians!," and they caused the White House Web site to crash under a deluge of angry e-mail. "The Inter-

net is Western," one commentator wrote, "but . . . we Chinese can use  
**358** it to tell the people of the world that China cannot be insulted!"

The government treated online patriots warily. They placed their pride in the Chinese nation, not necessarily in the Party, and leaders rightly sensed that the passion could swerve against them. After a nationalist Web site was shut down by censors in 2004, one commentator wrote, “Our government is as weak as sheep!” The government permitted nationalism to grow at some moments but strained to control it at others. The following spring, when Japan approved a new textbook that critics claimed glossed over wartime atrocities, patriots in Beijing drafted protest plans and broadcast them via chat rooms, bulletin boards, and text messages. As many as 10,000 demonstrators took to the streets, hurling paint and bottles at the Japanese Embassy. Despite government warnings to cease these activities, thousands more marched in Shanghai the following week—one of China’s largest demonstrations in years—and vandalized the Japanese consulate. At one point, Shanghai police cut off cell-phone service in downtown Shanghai.

“Up to now, the Chinese government has been able to keep a grip on it,” Xu Wu told me. “But I call it the ‘virtual Tiananmen Square.’ They don’t need to go there. They can do the same thing online and sometimes be even more damaging.”

Tang was at dinner with friends one night in 2004 when he met Wan Manlu, an elegantly reserved PhD student in Chinese literature and linguistics. Her delicate features suited her name, which includes the character for the finest jade. They sat side by side, but barely spoke. Later, Tang hunted down her screen name—gracelittle—and sent her a private message on Fudan’s bulletin board. They worked up to a first date: an experimental opera based on *Regret for the Past*, a Chinese story.

They discovered that they shared a frustration with China’s unbridled Westernization. “Chinese tradition has many good things, but we’ve ditched them,” Wan told me. “I feel there have to be people to carry them on.” She came from a middle-class home, and Tang’s humble roots and

old-fashioned values impressed her. “Most of my generation has a smooth, happy life, including me,” she said. “I feel like our character lacks something. For example, love for the country or the perseverance you get from conquering hardships. Those virtues, I don’t see them in myself and many people my age.”

She added, “For him, from that kind of background, with nobody educated in his family, nobody helping him with schoolwork, with great family pressure, it’s not easy to get where he is today.”

They were engaged this spring. In their years together, Wan watched Tang fall in with a group of students devoted to a charismatic thirty-nine-year-old Fudan philosophy professor named Ding Yun. He is a translator of Leo Strauss, the political philosopher whose admirers include Harvey Mansfield and other neoconservatives. A Strauss student, Abram Shulsky, who co-authored a 1999 essay titled “Leo Strauss and the World of Intelligence (By Which We Do Not Mean *Nous*),” ran the Pentagon’s Office of Special Plans before the invasion of Iraq. Since then, other Strauss disciples have vigorously ridiculed suggestions of a connection between Strauss’s thought and Bush-era foreign policy.

I saw Mansfield in Shanghai in May, during his first visit to China, at a dinner with a small group of conservative scholars. He was wearing a honey-colored panama and was in good spirits, though he seemed a bit puzzled by all the fuss they were making about him. His first question to the table: “Why would Chinese scholars be interested in Leo Strauss?”

Professor Ding teaches a Straussian regard for the universality of the classics and encourages his students to revive ancient Chinese thought. “During the 1980s and ’90s, most intellectuals had a negative opinion of China’s traditional culture,” he told me recently. He has close-cropped hair and stylish rectangular glasses, and favors the conspicuously retro loose-fitting shirts

**360** of a Tang-dynasty scholar. When Ding grew up, in the early years of

reform, “conservative” was a derogatory term, just like “reactionary,” he said.

But Ding and others have thrived in recent years amid a new vein of conservatism which runs counter to China’s drive for integration with the world. Just as America’s conservative movement in the 1960s capitalized on the yearning for a post-liberal retreat to morality and nobility, China’s classical revival draws on a nostalgic image of what it means to be Chinese. The biggest surprise best-seller of recent years is, arguably, *Yu Dan’s Reflections on the Analects*, a collection of Confucian lectures delivered by Yu, a telegenic Beijing professor of media studies. She writes, “To assess a country’s true strength and prosperity, you can’t simply look at GNP growth and not look at the inner experience of each ordinary person: Does he feel safe? Is he happy?” (Skeptics argue that it’s simply *Chicken Soup for the Confucian Soul*.)

Professor Ding met Tang in 2003, at the entrance interview for graduate students. “I was the person in charge of the exam,” Ding recalled. “I sensed that this kid is very smart and diligent.” He admitted Tang to the program, and watched with satisfaction as Tang and other students pushed back against the onslaught of Westernization. Tang developed an appetite for the classics. “The fact is we are very Westernized,” he said. “Now we started reading ancient Chinese books and we rediscovered the ancient China.”

This renewed pride has also affected the way Tang and his peers view the economy. They took to a theory that the world profits from China but blocks its attempts to invest abroad. Tang’s friend Zeng smiled disdainfully as he ticked off examples of Chinese companies that have tried to invest in America.

“Huawei’s bid to buy 3Com was rejected,” he said. “CNOOC’s bid to buy into Unocal and Lenovo’s purchase of part of IBM caused political repercussions. If it’s not a market argument, it’s a political argument. We think the world is a free market—”

Before he could finish, Tang jumped in. “This is what you—America—taught us,” he said. “We opened our market, but when we try to buy your companies we hit political obstacles. It’s not fair.”

Their view, which is popular in China across ideological lines, has validity: American politicians have invoked national-security concerns, with varying degrees of credibility, to oppose Chinese direct investment. But Tang’s view, infused with a sense of victimhood, also obscures some evidence to the contrary: China has succeeded in other deals abroad (its sovereign-wealth fund has stakes in the Blackstone Group and in Morgan Stanley), and though China has taken steps to open its markets to foreigners, it remains equally inclined to reject an American attempt to buy an asset as sensitive as a Chinese oil company.

Tang’s belief that the United States will seek to obstruct China’s rise—“a new Cold War”—extends beyond economics to broader American policy. Disparate issues of relatively minor importance to Americans, such as support for Taiwan and Washington’s calls to raise the value of the yuan, have metastasized in China into a feeling of strategic containment. In polls, the Chinese public has not demonstrated a significant preference for either Barack Obama or John McCain, though Obama has attracted negative attention for saying that, were he President, he might boycott the opening ceremony of the Olympics. Tang and his friends have watched some debates online, but the young patriots tend to see the race in broader terms. “No matter who is elected, China is still China and will go the way it goes,” one recent posting in a discussion about Obama said. “Who can stand in the way of the march of history?”

This spring, Tang stayed at his family’s farm for five days before he could return to Shanghai and finish his movie. He scoured the Web for photographs on the subjects that bother him and his friends, everything from inflation to Taiwan’s threats of independence. He selected some of the

pictures because they were evocative—a man raising his arm in a sea of Chinese flags reminded him of Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People*—and chose others because they embodied the political moment: a wheelchair-bound Chinese amputee carrying the Olympic flame in Paris, for instance, fending off a protester who was trying to snatch it away.

For a soundtrack, he typed “solemn music” into Baidu, a Chinese search engine, and scanned the results. He landed on a piece by Vangelis, a Yanni-style pop composer from Greece who is best known for his score for the movie *Chariots of Fire*. Tang’s favorite Vangelis track was from a Gérard Depardieu film about Christopher Columbus called *1492: Conquest of Paradise*. He watched a few seconds of Depardieu standing manfully on the deck of a tall ship, coursing across the Atlantic. Perfect, Tang thought: “It was a time of globalization.”

Tang added scenes of Chairman Mao and the Olympic track star Liu Xiang, both icons of their eras. The film was six minutes and sixteen seconds long. Some title screens in English were full of mistakes, because he was hurrying, but he was anxious to release it. He posted the film to Sina and sent a note to the Fudan bulletin board. As the film climbed in popularity, Professor Ding rejoiced. “We used to think they were just a postmodern, Occidentalized generation,” Ding said. “Of course, I thought the students I knew were very good, but the wider generation? I was not very pleased. To see the content of Tang Jie’s video, and the scale of its popularity among the youth, made me very happy. Very happy.”

Not everyone was pleased. Young patriots are so polarizing in China that some people, by changing the intonation in Chinese, pronounce “angry youth” as “shit youth.”

“How can our national self-respect be so fragile and shallow?” Han Han, one of China’s most popular young writers, wrote on his blog, in **363**

an essay about nationalism. “Somebody says you’re a mob, so you curse him, even want to beat him, and then you say, We’re not a mob. This is as if someone said you were a fool, so you held up a big sign in front of his girlfriend’s brother’s dog, saying ‘I Am Not a Fool.’ The message will get to him, but he’ll still think you’re a fool.”

If the activists thought that they were defending China’s image abroad, there was little sign of success. After weeks of patriotic rhetoric emanating from China, a poll sponsored by the *Financial Times* showed that Europeans now ranked China as the greatest threat to global stability, surpassing America.

But the eruption of the angry youth has been even more disconcerting to those interested in furthering democracy. By age and education, Tang and his peers inherit a long legacy of activism that stretches from 1919, when nationalist demonstrators demanded “Mr. Democracy” and “Mr. Science,” to 1989, when students flooded Tiananmen Square, challenging the government and erecting a sculpture inspired by the Statue of Liberty. Next year will mark the twentieth anniversary of that movement, but the events of this spring suggest that prosperity, computers, and Westernization have not driven China’s young elite toward tolerance but, rather, persuaded more than a few of them to postpone idealism as long as life keeps improving. The students in 1989 were rebelling against corruption and abuses of power. “Nowadays, these issues haven’t disappeared but have worsened,” Li Datong, an outspoken newspaper editor and reform advocate, told me. “However, the current young generation turns a blind eye to it. I’ve never seen them respond to those major domestic issues. Rather, they take a utilitarian, opportunistic approach.”

One caricature of young Chinese holds that they know virtually nothing about the crackdown at Tiananmen Square—known in Chinese as “the  
**364** June 4 incident”—because the authorities have purged it from the na-



tion's official history. It's not that simple, however. Anyone who can click on a proxy server can discover as much about Tiananmen as he chooses to learn. And yet many Chinese have concluded that the movement was misguided and naïve.

"We accept all the values of human rights, of democracy," Tang told me. "We accept that. The issue is how to realize it."

I met dozens of urbane students and young professionals this spring, and we often got to talking about Tiananmen Square. In a typical conversation, one college senior asked whether she should interpret the killing of protesters at Kent State in 1970 as a fair measure of American freedom. Liu Yang, a graduate student in environmental engineering, said, "June 4 could not and should not succeed at that time. If June 4 had succeeded, China would be worse and worse, not better."

Liu, who is twenty-six, once considered himself a liberal. As a teenager, he and his friends happily criticized the Communist Party. "In the 1990s, I thought that the Chinese government is not good enough. Maybe we need to set up a better government," he told me. "The problem is that we didn't know what a good government would be. So we let the Chinese Communist Party stay in place. The other problem is we didn't have the power to get them out. They have the Army!"

When Liu got out of college, he found a good job as an engineer at an oil-services company. He was earning more money in a month than his parents—retired laborers living on a pension—earned in a year. Eventually, he saved enough money that, with scholarships, he was able to enroll in a PhD program at Stanford. He had little interest in the patriotic pageantry of the Olympics until he saw the fracas around the torch in Paris. "We were furious," he said, and when the torch came to San Francisco he and other Chinese students surged toward the relay route to support it. I was in San Francisco not long ago, and we arranged to meet at a Starbucks near his dorm, in Palo Alto. He arrived on his mountain bike, wearing a Nautica fleece pullover and jeans.

The date, we both knew, was June 4th, nineteen years since soldiers put down the Tiananmen uprising. The overseas Chinese students' bulletin board had been alive all afternoon with discussions of the anniversary. Liu mentioned the famous photograph of an unknown man standing in front of a tank—perhaps the most provocative image in modern Chinese history.

“We really acknowledge him. We really think he was brave,” Liu told me. But, of that generation, he said, “They fought for China, to make the country better. And there were some faults of the government. But, finally, we must admit that the Chinese government had to use any way it could to put down that event.”

Sitting in the cool quiet of a California night, sipping his coffee, Liu said that he is not willing to risk all that his generation enjoys at home in order to hasten the liberties he has come to know in America. “Do you live on democracy?” he asked me. “You eat bread, you drink coffee. All of these are not brought by democracy. Indian guys have democracy, and some African countries have democracy, but they can't feed their own people.

“Chinese people have begun to think, One part is the good life, another part is democracy,” Liu went on. “If democracy can really give you the good life, that's good. But, without democracy, if we can still have the good life why should we choose democracy?”

When the Olympic torch returned to China, in May, for the final journey to Beijing, the Chinese seemed determined to make up for its woes abroad. Crowds overflowed along the torch's route. One afternoon, Tang and I set off to watch the torch traverse a suburb of Shanghai.

At the time, the country was still in a state of shock following the May 12 earthquake in the mountains of Sichuan Province, which killed more than sixty-nine thousand people and left millions homeless. It was the worst disaster in three decades, but it also produced a rare moment of national

unity. Donations poured in, revealing the positive side of the patriotism that had erupted weeks earlier.

The initial rhetoric of that nationalist outcry contained a spirit of violence that anyone old enough to remember the Red Guards—or the rise of skinheads in Europe—could not casually dismiss. And that spirit had materialized, in ugly episodes: When the Olympic torch reached South Korea, Chinese and rival protesters fought in the streets. The Korean government said it would deport Chinese agitators, though a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman stood by the demonstrators' original intent to "safeguard the dignity of the torch." Chinese students overseas emerged as some of the most vocal patriots. According to the *Times*, at the University of Southern California they marshalled statistics and photographs to challenge a visiting Tibetan monk during a lecture. Then someone threw a plastic water bottle in the monk's direction, and campus security removed the man who tossed it. At Cornell, an anthropology professor who arranged for the screening of a film on Tibet informed the crowd that, on a Web forum for Chinese students, she was "told to 'go die.'" At Duke University, Grace Wang, a Chinese freshman, tried to mediate between pro-Tibet and pro-China protesters on campus. But online she was branded a "race traitor." People ferreted out her mother's address, in the seaside city of Qingdao, and vandalized their home. Her mother, an accountant, remains in hiding. Of her mother, Grace Wang said, "I really don't know where she is, and I think it's better for me not to know."

Now in summer school at Duke, Grace Wang does not regret speaking up, but she says that she misjudged how others her age, online but frustrated in China, would resent her. "When people can't express themselves in real life, what can they do? They definitely have to express their anger toward someone. I'm far away. They don't know me, so they don't feel sorry

about it. They say whatever they want.” She doesn’t know when she’ll return home (she becomes uneasy when she is recognized in Chinese restaurants near campus), but she takes comfort in the fact that history is filled with names once vilified, later rehabilitated. “This is just like what happened in the Cultural Revolution,” she said. “Think about how Deng Xiaoping was treated at that time, and then, in just ten years, things had changed completely.”

In the end, nothing came of the threats to foreign journalists. No blood was shed. After the chaos around the torch in Paris, the Chinese efforts to boycott Carrefour fizzled. China’s leaders, awakening to their deteriorating image abroad, ultimately reined in the students with a call for only “rational patriotism.”

“We do not want any violence,” Tang told me. He and his peers had merely been desperate for someone to hear them. They felt no connection to Tiananmen Square, but, in sending their voices out onto the Web, they, too, had spoken for their moment in time. Their fury, Li Datong, the newspaper editor, told me, arose from “the accumulated desire for expression—just like when a flood suddenly races into a breach.” Because a flood moves in whatever direction it chooses, the young conservatives are, to China’s ruling class, an unnerving new force. They “are acutely aware that their country, whose resurgence they feel and admire, has no principle to guide it,” Harvey Mansfield wrote in an e-mail to me, after his visit. “Some of them see . . . that liberalism in the West has lost its belief in itself, and they turn to Leo Strauss for conservatism that is based on principle, on ‘natural right.’ This conservatism is distinct from a status-quo conservatism, because they are not satisfied with a country that has only a status quo and not a principle.”

In the weeks after Tang’s video went viral, he made a series of others, about youth, the earthquake, China’s leaders. None of his follow-ups generated more than a flicker of the attention of the original. The Web had moved  
**368** on—to newer nationalist films and other distractions.

As Tang and I approached the torch-relay route, he said, "Look at the people. Everyone thinks this is their own Olympics."

Vendors were selling T-shirts, big Chinese flags, headbands, and mini-flags. Tang told me to wait until the torch passed, because hawkers would then cut prices by up to 50 per cent. He was carrying a plastic bag and fished around in it for a bright-red scarf of the kind that Chinese children wear to signal membership in the Young Pioneers, a kind of Socialist Boy Scouts. He tied it around his neck and grinned. He offered one to a passing teenager, who politely declined.

The air was stagnant and thick beneath a canopy of haze, but the mood was exuberant. Time was ticking down to the torch's arrival, and the town was coming out for a look: a man in a dark suit, sweating and smoothing his hair; a construction worker in an orange helmet and farmer's galoshes; a bellboy in a vaguely nautical getup.

Some younger spectators were wearing T-shirts inspired by China's recent troubles: "Love China, Oppose Divisions, Oppose Tibetan Independence," read a popular one. All around us, people strained for a better perch. A woman hung off a lamppost. A young man in a red headband climbed a tree.

The crowd's enthusiasm seemed to brighten Tang's view of things, reminding him that China's future belongs to him and to those around him. "When I stand here, I can feel, deeply, the common emotion of Chinese youth," he said. "We are self-confident."

Police blocked the road. A frisson swept through the crowd. People surged toward the curb, straining to see over one another's heads. But Tang hung back. He is a patient man.

Letter from China. Peter James Froning. This is a poignant and irreverent diary of the author's yearlong (2001-2) experience of teaching English to college students in Beijing, People's Republic of China. From the very first pages, the author draws you into his struggle with a culture worlds away from his comfort zone. The author's humorous view of China is especially timely and dovetails with the current explosion of interest in that country as it enters the modern world. Letter from China is a poignant and irreverent diary of the author's yearlong (2001-2) experience of teaching English to college students in Beijing, Peoples Republic of China. From the very first pages, the author draws you into his struggle with a culture worlds away from his comfort zone. The authors generous and compelling personality allowed him to gain access to the lives of his students and their families, who became characters in his tale. One can experience the authors wit and humanity throughout the narrative. Letter from China, or CHAINA Kara no Tegami, is a soundtrack unreleased outside of Japan. It is performed by Ranma Saotome's male and female voice actors Kappei Yamaguchi and Megumi Hayashibara. Chainataun no katasumi de Anata no sugata sagashimasu. Narande aruita omoide ni Sasoware tabi ni dete imasu. Butsukaru hito-gomi wo kakiwakete Douzo watashi ni te wo totte. Maigo no kokoro sono mama ni Namida ga hoho wo tsutau kara Anata no inai sabishisa wo Kamishime tabi wo tsuzukemasu.