



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Notes and Comment

A YOUNG man we will call Shu arrived in our office the other afternoon wearing headphones marked "USAir," a brand-new pre-faded denim jacket, a red sweatshirt, and jeans. When he pulled down the headphones to introduce himself, Chinese pop music poured into his collar. Talking non-stop, in English, he pointed to his sweatshirt. On it, the words

WE HAVE A DREAM
FREEDOM, DEMOCRACY
CHINA, CHINA, CHINA

were superimposed on a silhouette of the student-built Goddess of Democracy that for five days last spring stood in Tiananmen Square. "I just got it, at the demonstration in Washington," he said, grinning. "We left a full-sized black coffin at the Chinese Embassy there, for Deng Xiaoping, Li Peng, and Yang Shangkun." He glanced at his watch. "One-thirty, the ferry—let's go!" he cried. "Don't forget your camera!"

In Beijing last May, Shu mobilized the group of thirty or so students and artisans who built the Goddess of Democracy pictured on his sweatshirt. In September, with the help of friends, he managed to slip out of China on a routine student visa. When we heard from

an American journalist who had met him in Beijing while the statue was being constructed that Shu would be passing through New York, we asked to go with him for his first sight of the Statue of Liberty.

In the cab downtown, Shu recounted the story of the Goddess of Democracy. In Shanghai in mid-May, he had helped a group of art students make a small Statue of Liberty replica to carry in their local demonstrations, he said, and the replica proved such an attractive symbol that a few days later he tried to take it by train to Beijing. It was too conspicuous, though, and in the end he arrived at Tiananmen Square empty-handed. There he found the protest winding down. Disappointed, Shu went to where the Beijing art students were camped, and proposed building a large replica of the Statue of Liberty. He thought of it as a sort of closing statement that could later be taken to Beijing University, or even presented to the United States Embassy. He asked for volunteer sculptors and soon had a group helping him.

"We worked day and night for three days, no sleep, to have the statue ready before the occupation ended," he said. "An exact replica, which was what I had in mind, would have been a more powerful symbol, but it would have given the government an excuse to put

down the demonstration, because, although I think of the Statue of Liberty as universal, they could have said it was Western. Some students wanted a very abstract statue. Some wanted an Asian face. Eventually, we compromised. Then we took up a collection, and I bought the materials—plaster, plastic foam, cloth, and so on. We made the statue in the sculpture workshop of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, about a twenty-minute walk from Tiananmen Square. The academy had no objection; at that time, everyone supported the students. First, we made a very small model, using as a guide some Statue of Liberty postcards a friend had sent me, and drew on it in pencil to indicate how the big statue would be divided." There were four sections, he explained: roughly, from the feet to the knees, from the knees to the hips, the torso, and the head and upraised arm.

"We announced the unveiling for May 29th," Shu went on. "That day, a city official came to tell the academy director he must not allow us to carry the pieces to Tiananmen Square. But by then word about the statue had spread so far that the director just said, 'What can I do? Too many people expect it.' The official left, but we feared he might send police to stop us. So people came to link hands around us as we carted the pieces to the square. Thou-



sands moved through the streets with us. In the square, we had built a platform and scaffold, but we had no machines to lift the sections. I tried my hardest to find a crane, and some crane operators promised to come, but they didn't show up. Perhaps the police prevented them. We tried to get the window-cleaning machine from the Beijing Hotel, and the machine they use to repair the trolley buses—even a special machine they use to raise flags over the leaders when they speak. But we failed, and the way we finally assembled the statue was unbelievably dangerous. We wrapped long strips of cloth—banners used during the protest—around each piece and hauled it up onto the scaffold. First went the head. The people on top balanced it on planks a little higher than where it would finally rest. Then the torso, and so on, until the lowest part sat on the platform. As we succeeded in hauling up each piece, the crowd burst into cheers. The square was packed—you could not move. Then each section had to be partly lowered, and stacked onto the bottom. Again, people burst into applause as each piece was set in place. We worked all night to plaster the sections together. The next day, we covered the statue's face with a cloth and broke the scaffold. About noon on May 30th, we finally had the unveiling. It was the most splendid moment of my life."

Because the statue had drawn together so many people and inspired so much enthusiasm, Shu said, the student leadership changed an earlier decision to let the unveiling mark the formal end of the occupation, and agreed to stay till June 20th, when a National Congress was scheduled. Five days later came the massacre, and the statue was razed.

Our cab stopped at Battery Park. Shu, unusually silent, took his place among the sightseers at the ferry landing. He squinted out at the green figure rising from the glittering waters. When the gangway opened, he bounded to the front of the ferry's upper deck. "New York!" he said suddenly as the ferry began to move. "It's beautiful! Take a picture!" The sun was bright, but a cold wind blew, scattering the other passengers; Shu stood immobile during the crossing, staring at the looming monument. When the ferry docked, he tilted his head back to get

the full effect. "Wonderful!" he pronounced, and added judiciously, "Not as big as I thought. Should be bigger. But wonderful, yes."

Ellen Pall