

CHINA / *Citizens hoping to leave run gantlet
ensnarled with red tape and booby-trapped
with tests to weed out the politically incorrect*

Obtaining visa long, tough fight

BY JAN WONG
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WHEN Su Xiaokang's 10-year-old son tried to leave China last year, he ran into a snag.

To obtain a passport, the fourth-grader needed a letter saying he had not taken part in the demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Although he had been only eight at the time, the Communist Party committee at his primary school refused to vouch for him.

"I can't sign this," the vice-principal said. "How do I know what he did during June 4th?"

U.S. Secretary of State James Baker declared in Beijing last Sunday that he had made some progress in human rights because China had pledged to ease exit permits. "We've been assured that any person with no criminal proceedings pending would be allowed to leave after normal procedures," Mr. Baker said.

What did Beijing really concede? In China, those facing criminal proceedings are already in jail. There is no concept of bail. For law-abiding citizens, "normal procedures" discourage all but the most determined.

A look at what Chinese must endure to get out gives a glimpse of how little U.S. officials understood when they sat down to talks last weekend. What is "normal" here might be considered horrendous elsewhere.

Simply put, Chinese must run a gantlet ensnarled with red tape and booby-trapped with tests for political correctness. Merely to apply for a passport, they often must quit their jobs, with no hope of getting rehired should they be turned down for a visa by a foreign country. At any point along the way, their boss, their boss's boss, their neighbourhood committee, the local police, the central police bureau or a Communist

that can lead to Catch-22 situations.

Hou Xiaotian, 28, is a college graduate who has worked for four years. She is willing to work one more year so that she can go to Columbia University in New York. But no one dares to hire Ms. Hou. The reason: her husband, Wang Juntao, was convicted of being one of the "masterminds" behind the demonstrations at Tiananmen Square.

But it isn't only red tape, which can be conquered by sheer persistence. The system also is designed so that at every level authorities can screen out the politically incorrect. The first obstacle is at the workplace. If a supervisor does not agree with the purpose of the trip or dislikes the employee, the chances of getting out are slim.

Take Dai Qing, for instance. The 50-year-old dissident writer has been unable to leave for a Nieman Fellowship for journalists at Harvard University because her newspaper, Guangming Daily, refuses to give her the official letter she needs to apply for a passport. The U.S. State Department said this week that China's latest statement on visas should make it easier for Ms. Dai to leave for Harvard.

Ms. Dai said she was abducted in Beijing by Chinese security men, who took her to a seaside resort to prevent her from meeting with Mr. Baker. On Thursday, the foreign ministry denied her story, saying she was not arrested and had left the capital on her own.

After the Tiananmen Square demonstrations, she was jailed for 10 months. Since her release, the paper has barred her from working. Now, Guangming Daily says that because Ms. Dai is not a journalist she cannot accept the Nieman Fellowship.

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To be sure, China is not the sole problem. When former U.S. president Jimmy Carter complained about China's lack of freedom of emigration, Deng Xiaoping is said to have replied: "Fine, how many do you want for starters? Ten million?" The story may be apocryphal, but about three of every four Chinese passport holders are prevented from going abroad because they fail to obtain a foreign visa, Chinese statistics indicate.

"The main difficulty is the foreign embassy, not China," said a woman in a red jacket shivering outside the gates of the British embassy. She motioned to the imposing red brick structure. "They only give out a few visas a month."

Still, getting a Chinese passport entails multiple visits to bureaucrats and officials, to designated translation bureaus and notaries, each with their special seals and sizable fees. If things go smoothly, the applicant will have to go to the police only four times. To finally leave, Chinese need not one exit permit, but two.

"If you go to the airport with just one exit permit, you won't get out," a Chinese woman, who asked not to be identified, said. "I saw a woman's whole family go to the airport to see her off, and the police wouldn't let her go. She was in tears. Nobody told her she needed a second permit."

There are other rules. College graduates, for instance, must work for at least five years before they can apply to go abroad. In some cases,

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But Ms. Dai's reaction was cautious. "I did that long ago," she said after hearing the news. "It doesn't say I can go. I won't be optimistic too soon."

Su Xiaokang, whose son had trouble obtaining a letter from his primary school principal, said that many people "get stuck" at the next stage — the police. According to little-known border regulations, the government has the right to prevent the departure from China of any citizen who "may threaten state security after they leave."

"You can see how easily they can keep people from leaving," said Mr. Su, a filmmaker who fled in 1989 in a speedboat, dodging bullets off China's south coast. "To Baker, they say we'll let anyone go who isn't facing criminal charges. It's not like that at all."

When Mr. Su's wife, Fu Li, applied to leave, police invoked the security regulation. "My wife is an ordinary doctor. How could she threaten the state?" asked Mr. Su, now a visiting scholar at Princeton University in the United States.

Under U.S. pressure last spring, five families of exiled dissidents, including Mr. Su's wife and son, were able to leave. It still took four months, however, from the time a top State Department official first pressed the cases to the time the last one left China in September.

"The spouses were getting a real runaround," said a U.S. official who was involved in the negotiations. "The police would say things like, 'Your husband is not making us happy.'"