Net keeps Tiananmen spirit alive
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HERE'S how to score a trip out of Beijing, courtesy of China's police apparatus. Plan a public memorial event in Tiananmen Square for the anniversary of the massacre on June 4, 1989. Then tell a couple of friends about it by mobile phone.

This year, as in previous years, all known dissidents have been confined to their homes or whisked out of Beijing for the anniversary this Friday.

The municipal government threatens to crack down on any unrest in the square with a new law for "rigid control" through emergency measures. Even to fly a kite there requires a permit.

And as the day approaches, plainclothes police rival genuine visitors milling about in the world's largest city square.

China's communist leaders fear nothing more than a repeat of the 1989 clashes. But protest by public demonstration is almost passe among agitators for democratic reform here. The internet offers a far more potent channel for dissent, spreading divergent views far more widely and quickly within China, with less risk to those involved.

So Hu Jia's idea looks not only naive but quaint. He planned to visit the centre of the government's brutal quashing of the mass uprising in 1989. He would lay down 15 yellow roses at dawn in tribute to the hundreds he calls "martyrs" who died under the soldiers' guns in and around the square 15 years ago.

He would sit in the square until dark then light 15 candles - one for each year the memories of those killed have been blackened in the official account.

"I want to clarify and correct the innocent deaths," the 30-year-old activist, who is better known for his work on AIDS and environmental issues, tells The Australian. "They are not just innocent deaths, they are the people's heroes."

But after Hu mentioned his plan to friends by mobile phone, he was picked up by police outside his home on April 3 and held in a basement for two days of interrogation. On Saturday, police again went to his home, saying they would take him to "have fun" in rural Anhui province. He refused to go, and yesterday he was awaiting further developments. Earlier, Hu's captors sought to bar him from carrying out a similar protest he had planned for April 4, the day when Chinese traditionally mourn the dead. He believes they were under orders to scare him off his June 4 plan.

They particularly wanted to know about his links with the celebrated Beijing surgeon Jiang Yanyong. Dr Jiang, the man who blew the lid off last year's cover-up of SARS, raised the June 4 temperature in an already sensitive year with a poignant but searing letter to China's leaders.

It described his experience in a trauma ward for victims on the fatal night, and called on the Chinese Government to reverse its verdict on the clashes.
"The uneasiness has not gradually diminished just because the June 4 incident has become farther and farther away," he wrote. "On the contrary, the people have become increasingly disappointed and angry."

The letter was circulated widely on the web, although the surgeon has insisted he sent it solely to the leaders to whom it was addressed. Dr Jiang has become a reluctant figurehead in an upsurge of pressure for reform from inside the Chinese establishment. The fight has shifted from students to academics, lawyers, entrepreneurs, teachers and the middle class. The internet has become their virtual salon, and the online petition is their weapon of choice.

The web has transformed the lonely lives of people like Liu Xiaobo, a veteran of the 1989 protests who has been jailed or detained for subversive activities for six years in three separate episodes since then, and remains under surveillance.

This week, Liu is practically a prisoner in his home. He knows only too well the kind of "fun" Hu Jia might be subject to on his forced holiday in Anhui.

"If I live in a hotel, the police occupy the neighbouring rooms," Liu says. "If I eat in a restaurant, they will sit at the next table. If I go boating, they go boating. If I climb a mountain, they climb a mountain."

Not so long ago, to get his voice heard Liu had to trek across Beijing from his home to the compound for foreign journalists and ask them to fax his type-written essays overseas, or report on them. But now he has potentially 80 million cyber pen pals.

"There are 80 million people who regularly log into the internet in China, so that might mean 80 million potential criminals," he says.

Once, only high officials or intellectuals got space in newspapers to talk about political issues, Liu says.

"But now everybody can do it. It is a platform for producing new and younger intellectuals."

Now Liu can log in to what he says is the "unique phenomenon" of regular "salon activities" in every city.

Du Daobin, a minor official in provincial Hubei, is on trial for subversion after his writings, including his support of Hong Kong democracy, gained an internet following. Du wrote an essay in support of Liu Di, 23, a psychology student and active contributor to the online forums who was held in jail for a year, then released on bail, for her web essays questioning state authority.

An ultimately successful online petition calling for Liu's release gained 1000 signatures. Then 2000 people, including the freed student, put their names to an open letter on the internet seeking Du's freedom, while 104 leading writers, editors, lawyers, economists and dissidents wrote a petition calling for a definition of subversion to clarify the line between legal and illegal expression.

Online reports say 30,000 internet police trawl the web for subversive postings in China. "But if they want to catch all these people, they can't," Liu says.
At least 16 people are in jail in China for writing or distributing information online, the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists says.

In one celebrated case last year, a Beijing academic lawyer, Xu Zhiyong, 31, organised an online petition condemning the practice of arbitrary detention after a college graduate picked up in southern Guangzhou for not carrying his ID card was allegedly beaten to death in custody.

Within weeks, China's cabinet abolished the regulations under which the student had been arrested. There have been other recent cases of authorities acting against official abuse following controversy - not in the mainstream media, but on the internet.

However, another petition by Liu Xiaobo and others for the removal of Mao Zedong's body from its mausoleum in Tiananmen Square, is not considered likely to be successful any time soon.

Liu, a veteran protester, sees greater activism by lawyers as a "very helpful phenomenon" in the struggle for civil rights, not least because the Government, committed to the principle of rule by law, takes notice of them.

But for older-style rebels like Han Dongfang, a former railway worker jailed for his role in the 1989 Tiananmen demonstration who now runs the Labor Rights Watch organisation, which agitates for mainland workers' rights from Hong Kong, the activism of "well-paid professionals" is not all good.

For him, the action stays on the streets. To force change, Han says, "the anger must outweigh the fear".

"The people in the street have much more anger than those high-level intellectuals and law professors," he says. "My area is to remind ordinary people you have to rely on yourselves."

_Catherine Armitage is The Australian's China correspondent._

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