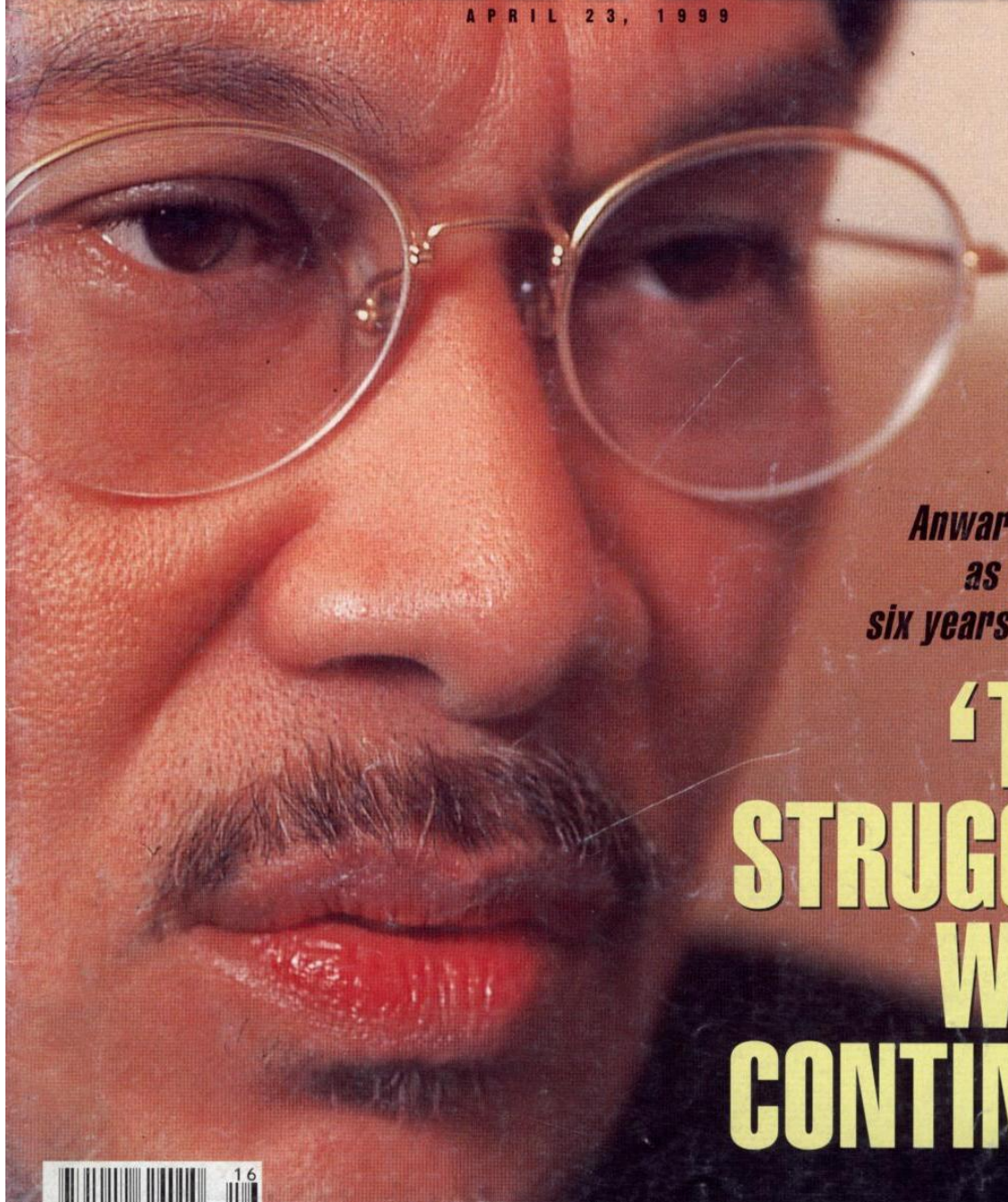


ASIA'S BEST UNIVERSITIES: THE 1999 RANKING

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*Anwar Ibrahim  
as he faces  
six years in jail –*

# 'THE STRUGGLE WILL CONTINUE'



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# DEMOCRACY WALLS

It's probably futile but an artistic protest is catching the eye in Beijing

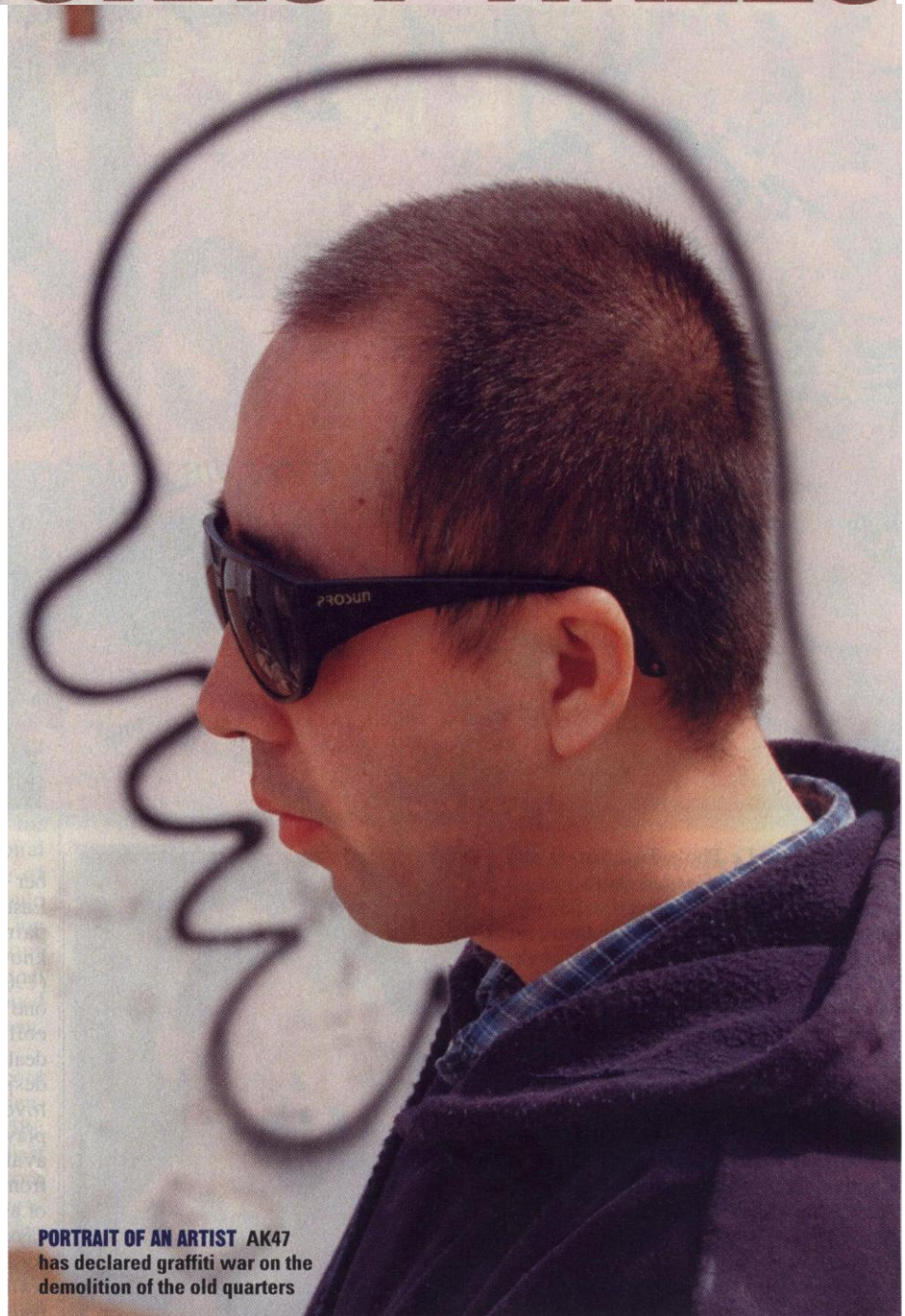
By FRANKIE FATHERS BEIJING

Masked by sunglasses and swaddled in a thick ski jacket, Beijing's phantom graffiti artist carefully scans the street for police. Once satisfied the coast is clear, he whips a can of black spray paint from a paper bag and begins his work. Within moments, another wall bears a protest against the way the city is changing. The quick-draw artist then jumps back on his Flying Pigeon bicycle and makes his escape.

Just another night in the life of AK47, as he is known, in his quixotic mission to halt the bulldozing of huge tracts of the capital's traditional lanes and courtyards to make way for apartment blocks, flashy department stores and subway stations. The maverick artist has sprayed thousands of his strange human profiles -- some nearly two meters tall and each with a gaping mouth, no eyes and a huge forehead -- on the walls of condemned buildings around the city.

He calls his paintings dialogues -- because "I want to create a dialogue between the image and a real person." So far, no one in officialdom seems to be listening, but AK47 is not deterred. For him, the task is an important one and plainly worth the effort. He spends his days cycling around Beijing, locating areas under threat or where demolition work has already begun. Every other night, he revisits these spots to leave his protest mark, to be discovered at dawn by citizens on their way to work.

Picking his way through the plaster and other debris of a razed house near the old area of Dongsishitiao, off the second ringroad, AK47 warns: "No one knows how our environment and our city will change. There are no rules for what is hap-



**PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST** AK47 has declared graffiti war on the demolition of the old quarters

pening." Another target of his creative ire: China's get-rich mentality, which he says is the core reason the old buildings are being sacrificed. Many of the dialogues are signed with "18K," for 18-carat gold -- and for AK47 a symbol of the avarice

he believes has gripped the city. His own nom de guerre comes from the Soviet assault weapon, representing the violence of a community being ripped apart. Whenever he can, AK47 emphasizes this message by spraying his work on the walls

of buildings that are already partly demolished. He then pays workers a few yuan to knock a hole through the profiled head. The result is a sense of double aggression.

The artist gives little away about his identity. He is in his 30s, and says his parents were factory workers in northeast Harbin. He moved to Beijing in 1983 to attend the School of Art and Design. After graduation, he set up what he describes as Beijing's first artists' village with a number of classmates. His prototype graffiti began appearing on Beijing walls in 1995. The rest of the mystery protester's life is not for public record, presumably for fear he will be identified and arrested. Oddly, though, he does agree to be photographed.

Ask AK47 where his dialogues are, and he seems unable to say with any accuracy, "I just bike around until I get to a suitable spot," he says. In fact, they are just about everywhere -- so much so that they have almost become part of the city scene. Some even adorn the main avenues, though most are in the alleyways that crisscross the capital and run through the old housing areas.

Not everyone thinks AK47 is China's Andy Warhol. "You can't call that art," says Chen Huang, 62, pointing to a profile on a wall near his home. "What kind of painting is it?" Xie Qianhua disagrees, Diverting down an alley to avoid renovation work on Wangfujing, one of Beijing's major shopping streets, the 20-year-old clerk comes across a dialogue. He says: "I think it's very interesting -- really quite unconventional." Copycat profiles with squashed heads and elongated necks have recently been appearing around the city, suggesting perhaps that Beijing is about to develop its own graffiti subculture.

Artists who are not as bold as AK47 have few legitimate venues to show their work. The authorities routinely close down exhibitions considered too sexually explicit or containing anti-government messages. Many artists now exhibit in remote warehouses or damp cellars, hoping to avoid official attention. A handful of small galleries dotted around the east of the city offer an alternative, but charge between \$60 and \$100 a day to present works. AK47 blames censorship and the lack of galleries and museums for what he considers a dearth of accomplished artists painting in modern styles.

As for his own work, he says he has no fear of officialdom. "What I am doing is not a crime. It's art. I don't know what law exists in China against outdoor art. Anyway, I am going to keep on painting until the Beijing people accept my images and they become a permanent part of the urban landscape." Or maybe until he runs out of canvases.