

Ghost of Zhao Ziyang still haunts China's new leadership¹

Eight years after former Chinese Communist Party's General Secretary (and earlier Premier), Zhao Ziyang passed away, the new leadership in Beijing is still afraid of Zhao's ghost and tightly controls whatever is happening around his residence.

On January 17, The South China Morning Post reported: "More than 100 mourners flocked to a traditional house in a quiet alleyway in Beijing yesterday morning to pay their respects at the home of the late Zhao Ziyang. ...before his death, Zhao had been under house arrest at the courtyard home at Number 6 Fuqiang Alley since opposing the use of military force against the Tiananmen Square demonstrators in 1989."

Though according to Zhao's daughter Wang Yannan, this year the Communist authorities did not try to stop Zhao's family from receiving mourners, Government officials kept away from Zhao's residence.

Microblog postings on Zhao were also dutifully removed from the net.

Hu Jia, a two-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee explained to the Hong Kong daily that to visit Zhao's place, he had to sneak out from his apartment at 6 am, in disguise, when security was more lax. As soon as the police noticed that he was not home, his mother was warned that he could be arrested again (Hu was jailed in 2008 and released in June 2011).

Hu Jia said, "People are talking about the changes since the new leadership took power, but I don't see much change based on my own experiences."

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The Party knows that 'mourning' can be a powerful way of protest. In January 1976, Zhou Enlai, another Chinese Premier had passed away. At that time, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution had just ended. Modern China had gone through its 10 most tormented years. During previous months, Mao had refused to provide treatment for his Premier who had cancer. The Emperor wanted Zhou to die before him.

As the Chinese new year approached, crowds gathered outside Zhongnanhai (the residential enclave where Politburo members live). Crackers were heard on the square. Were they celebrating the new year or mourning the departed leader?

Suddenly, the Great Helmsman realised that the crowd was lamenting Zhou's death. The gathering was immediately banned.

Though Hu Yaobang had been sacked as the Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party in January 1987, two years later, he was still a member of the Politburo and entitled to attend important meetings.

During one of these meetings, he collapsed and passed away soon after.

Two days later, on April 17, 600 students of the Chinese University of Political Science and Law marched into Tiananmen Square with grief banners and wreaths. They were 10,000 by the evening. It was the beginning of what Beijing still calls 'the Tiananmen Square incident'.

Zhao Ziyang played a major role during those days. He saw the possibility of political reform in Communist China. During the following weeks, he constantly tried to negotiate a compromise with the students. This could have changed the Middle Kingdom's fate.

But Deng Xiaoping decided to use force. On May 20, the martial law order was signed by Premier Li Peng. Two days later, Zhao Ziyang was sacked

as General Secretary and Jiang Zemin was called from Shanghai to replace him.

Bao Tong, Zhao Ziyang's former secretary, who helped publish the former Premier's memoirs *Prisoner of the State: The Secret Journal of Premier Zhao Ziyang*, knows what it means to have been close to Zhao.

His home telephone is constantly tapped and periodically cut off. Bao Tong is still followed everywhere he goes, and is banned from 'sensitive' events or places. Even visits from his son, Bao Pu, who lives in Hong Kong need prior clearance from the Public Security Bureau.

Bao explains why Zhao is not popular with the regime. China's former Premier treated people as 'human beings': "Zhao Ziyang had a particular characteristic: he treated people as human beings... This doesn't sound very extraordinary... but it's not a misunderstanding to understand him in this way, nor is it an exaggeration." Bao then gives some examples: "He was instrumental in protecting the autonomy of farming communities, because he saw farmers as people. He was instrumental in protecting the autonomy of enterprises, because he saw entrepreneurs and their workforce as people. He was instrumental in stopping the Party pronouncing on everything, because he didn't see the Party as a judge."

Further, Zhao refused to believe that as the Premier of the State Council, he was superior to the masses. It cost him his job. Bao believes that to treat others as human beings is an affront to the leaders' superiority: "Of course, in an ordinary citizen, such a quality isn't anything unusual. But the leadership at various levels seems to regard treating people like human beings as an affront to their own superiority. I'm not talking about a myth. I'm talking about our country's modern history."

Will the new leadership bring a wind of glasnost to the Middle Kingdom like Zhao, and Hu Yaobang before him, had tried in the 1990s?

I believe some of the new leaders are willing to try. Whether they will succeed or not is another story, but the battle is on, and if they succeed, it would be a new birth for reform-minded leaders like Hu Yaobang or Zhao Ziyang.