



Watching the East Wind

January 20, 2005

On April 8, 1976, another Chinese leader, Zhou Enlai, passed away. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution had just ended. Modern China had gone through its 10 most tormented years. During the previous months, Mao had refused to provide treatment for his Premier who had cancer; the Emperor wanted Zhou to die before him. Even in communist China, there is a protocol! A problem in China is that dead leaders are often more popular than living ones. After Zhou's departure, Dr Zhisui Li, Mao's private physician, commented: "What worried me most was the power struggle to follow." In Beijing, memories of the Cultural Revolution purges were still fresh in the people's psyche. Anger mounted, but the citizens in Beijing had to wait to openly express their respect for the deceased leader.

Dr Li wrote: "Beginning in mid-March, knowing that the Qing Ming festival for honouring the dead would be celebrated on April 4, the citizens of Beijing began going to the Monument to the Revolutionary Heroes in Tiananmen Square to place mourning wreaths for Zhou. The movement was spontaneous, and the crowds grew larger by the day." As April 4 approached, Dr Li visited Tiananmen clandestinely: "The Square was filled with tens of thousands of people singing, making speeches, and reading poems... thousands of banners were flapping in the breeze. It was impressive and moving." A similar event occurred 13 years later. On April 9, 1989, Hu Yaobang, the former Secretary General of the CCP (sacked two years earlier), had a stroke. A week later he passed away.

The same day, Zhao Ziyang, then Secretary General of the CCP, made the

customary assessment of Hu's life and agreed that he would have a national funeral service "with the norms of standing members of the Politburo". During that meeting, Zhao had requested Qiao Shi, number three in the party and responsible for security, to "keep a close watch on how Comrade Yaobang's death might impact the society." Qiao Shi is said to have replied: "At the moment, society is in pretty good shape. Things are fairly stable." In the afternoon of April 17, 600 students of Chinese University of Political Science and Law marched into the Tiananmen Square with mourning banners and wreaths. They were 10,000 by the evening.

The next day, students and onlookers poured in from Beijing University and other places. Wreaths accumulated in front of the Monument to the Revolutionary Heroes. The rest is history. During the following days and weeks, the students demanded freedom of speech, independence of the press, democratic elections, greater transparency in Government dealings. The pretext for the explosion of the students' ire was the fact that Hu Yaobang had been sacked though he had followed "correct" policies. They demanded that the Government "should affirm as correct Hu Yaobang's views on democracy and freedom".

What infuriated most of the students was an editorial in the People's Daily describing the first spontaneous demonstrations as "dongluan" (turmoil). The word had a derogatory meaning in Chinese -it was reminiscent of the black days of the Cultural Revolution.

The man who played the main role during the 1989 Tiananmen Square events was Zhao Ziyang. Like Hu Yaobang, he thought that a possibility of political reform existed in communist China. He tried to negotiate a compromise with the students till the last minute. His approach failed but had he succeeded, it could have changed the Middle Kingdom's fate.

One of his collaborators, Wu Guoguang, remembered in the Time Magazine: "In the wrong place at the wrong time, Zhao Ziyang did the right thing. It was

close to midnight on the night of May 19, 1989. China's leaders were finalising their plans to declare martial law and crush the Tiananmen Square democracy protests that had, in the preceding 48 hours, swelled to include more than a million demonstrators. Zhao, then general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, might have remained with the commissars inside Beijing's Great Hall of the People as they called in the troops. Instead, stooped with fatigue, tears in his eyes, he waded into the throngs of students and in the gathering darkness pleaded with them to abandon their vigil before it was too late."

Three days earlier, Zhao Ziyang had received Mikhail Gorbachev. Was Zhao trying to emulate his Soviet homolog when he spoke to the students? The Chinese party chief told Mr Gorbachev that "some young people now had doubts about the superiority of socialism, that these doubts arose from genuine problems with party leadership and certain entrenched habits, and that the only way out for socialism was continued vigorous reforms." This view was certainly not shared by all in the standing committee of the politburo. Just after Zhao had met Gorbachev, an important meeting of the committee was held. Zhao lost and the hardline prevailed. The next day, the matter was referred to a group of elders led by Deng Xiaoping.

Deng confirmed the need to use force. On May 20, the martial law order was signed by Li Peng. Two days later, Zhao Ziyang was sacked and Jiang Zemin was called from Shanghai to replace him. During the night of June 3, Li Peng ordered the tanks to roll on the Square. Between 3,000 and 10,000 students lost their lives during the night. The party was saved and the fate of China was sealed. One of the many ironies was that Li Peng was Zhou Enlai's adopted son.

October 17, 2004, was Zhao's 75th birthday. A human rights group in China reported: "In the past three days large groups of people have been gathering outside of Zhao's Beijing home, requesting permission to see him." On the same day, a group of senior Chinese citizens and Zhao's supporters wrote to

President Hu Jintao about the continuous detention of Zhao: "...we strongly urge that you unconditionally and immediately release Mr Zhao Ziyang from house arrest, restore his freedom, and resume all his civil rights! No matter how CPC and its Government would now judge the 1989 political storm, and whether Zhao was right or wrong at that time, as a citizen of the People's Republic of China, his civil rights ought to be respected and protected... We believe that you share this common view with us, and with all those who respect the Constitution and laws of China."

On January 8, 2005, media reported from Hong Kong that Zhao Ziyang had died. This was denied by the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman though one can doubt this statement's veracity. The announcement of his death was stage-managed to ensure that all arrangements for his "non-official" funeral were complete. Two days before his official death, the BBC announced: "A thousand policemen are to be deployed every morning on Beijing's Tiananmen Square to escort visitors to the flag-raising ceremony. The new rules may be designed to prevent any dawn protests on the square, scene of a bloody pro-democracy crackdown in 1989."

All this coincides with the publication of a Gallup report which concluded: "The people of China may be far wealthier than they were a decade ago, but they are not very satisfied with their quality of life, a survey showed." Meanwhile, the EU prepares to lift the arms embargo imposed after the Tiananmen events: This will be the third death of Zhao. Politically, he died on the Square on the evening of May 1989; he probably died in a Beijing hospital early this month; and the principles he fought for will be buried by President Chirac and his European colleagues for the sake of selling a few weapons more.