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He Would Have Changed China

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Zhao Ziyang: Ruanjinzhong de tanhua (Captive Conversations)
by Zong Fengming
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In trying to make sense of their country's turbulent modern history, Chinese intellectuals sometimes resort to counterfactual speculation. How might things have been different if one or another accidental event had happened differently? For decades it was a sort of parlor game to guess how long the great writer Lu Xun, who died in 1936 possessing a keen eye for hypocrisy and a stiletto wit, and whom Mao Zedong praised in 1942 as "the bravest, most correct national hero," could have survived in Maoland had he lived beyond 1949. Eight years, most people said. If he had somehow managed to avoid prison until 1957, the Anti-Rightist Campaign of that year surely would have got him.[1] Harder to fathom is a question like what would have happened in China if Mao Yichang and Wen Qimei, parents of Mao Zedong, had lived apart in the spring of 1893, when Mao was conceived.

Zong Fengming's new book, *Zhao Ziyang: Captive Conversations*, raises a question of the same sort, and it has stimulated much debate both inside and outside China. Zhao Ziyang was premier of China from 1980 to 1987, during which time he gained much credit for pushing China's economy forward, and from 1987 to 1989 was general secretary of the Communist Party, when he became known for advocating reform of the political system. During the demonstrations at Tiananmen in 1989, Zhao advocated using "democracy and rule of law" to settle the crisis. But Party elder Deng Xiaoping, who held ultimate power and who was swayed by Premier Li Peng and others who saw nefarious intent within the student movement, chose repression.

After Deng had already ordered troops to surround Beijing, he summoned Zhao to ask that he concur in possible use of the military, but Zhao, well knowing that intransigence would cost him his position, declined. After the massacre on June 4, Zhao was charged with "splitting the Party" and "supporting chaos." He then further sealed his fate by declining to write the kind of "self-criticism" that is customary in the Chinese Communist Party when one is disgraced. He spent the next sixteen years under house arrest at his home at No. 6, Wealth and Power Alley, Beijing. In 2004 he developed pulmonary fibrosis, and he died on January 17, 2005, at the age of eighty-five.

Meanwhile the Deng Xiaoping formula of "market yes, democracy no" marched forward under Zhao's successors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. China's economy, military, and international influence have grown steadily while inequality, discontent, repression, and environmental degradation have worsened. All this is background for the counterfactual questions that frustrated Chinese reformers now ask about 1989. How would China be different if Zhao had stayed on? And how might he have done that?

In August 1991, when Boris Yeltsin climbed atop a tank in Moscow to defy a coup by Soviet hard-liners against Mikhail Gorbachev, and when Yeltsin won the support of a cheering crowd and helped to turn the tide against the hard-liners, some in China were led to ask why Zhao Ziyang could not have done a similar thing in 1989. There were about a million people in Tiananmen Square on May 17 of that year, and they were overwhelmingly on Zhao's side of the political debate. A *New York Times* reporter heard a policeman shout, "The student movement is terrific! If the Government commands a crackdown, will I obey their order? No, I will go against it."[2] Large crowds of similarly inclined protesters were in the streets of nearly all of China's provincial capitals.

But this flight of fancy is far-fetched. Zhao Ziyang by nature was circumspect, a bit timid, and hardly comparable to Yeltsin; moreover it is almost unthinkable that China's military, whose command is steeped in personal loyalties, would have obeyed Zhao instead of Deng Xiaoping no matter how many people were in Tiananmen Square. But what if the protesting students had listened to the outspoken journalist Dai Qing and her delegation of liberal-minded intellectuals who urged them on May 14 to declare (partial) victory and go home? If they had, the crisis would not have come to a head and Zhao might have remained general secretary. Or what if—even assuming that the students remained in the square—Zhao had made some compromises with Deng in order to stay? How much of a difference could he have made?

The question has layers. To guess what Zhao might have achieved one needs first to estimate what he might have attempted, and that requires us to extrapolate how his thinking as general secretary might have developed after 1989. As a first, albeit imperfect, approximation, we can look at how Zhao's thought actually developed even though he spent his post-1989 years observing China from house arrest. But on that question, until now, there has been extremely little to go on. We have a letter that Zhao wrote to China's Politburo in 1997 asking (futilely) for a reconsideration of the verdict on the Tiananmen demonstrations. We have a revealing account of a two-hour talk that Zhao had with a friend named Wang Yangsheng in July 2004 and that Wang published in Hong Kong shortly after Zhao's death. But that's about it. Zhao released no memoirs, and a family member told me recently

that "as far as I know, there is nothing left behind." Hence Zong Fengming's new book, containing 385 pages of records of conversations with Zhao Ziyang between 1991 and 2004, is an almost unique resource.

Zong, three months younger than Zhao, had known him a long time. They were both from Henan and had fought Japan together in the 1940s. Both had careers entirely within the Communist Party system. Zong was Party secretary at the Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics until he retired in 1990. His book is based on more than a hundred visits that he made to Zhao's house, which he entered at the sufferance of a squad of military police stationed inside the residence. Plainclothes police from State Security occupied the building directly across the alley, and from the second floor monitored comings and goings by camera. Periodic "renovations" of the Zhao compound kept electronic surveillance systems in shape. Zong was able to enter this police web in the guise of Zhao's *qigong* ("breath exercise") teacher. It also helped that Zong had played no role in the "turmoil" of 1989. The two elderly men talked outdoors in the courtyard, presumably to minimize electronic eavesdropping. Zong did not use a tape recorder and took no notes, but went home after each talk to write down what he could remember.

The book is arranged chronologically and is not tightly edited. The conversations, which retain their chatty flavor, are wide-ranging. They seem frank but not soul-baring. There no doubt were levels of Zhao's thinking that died with him, or—if they have survived—live only in the memories of people extremely close to him.

Zhao's family members say that Zhao was opposed to publishing the book because he feared that "inaccuracies" might result. Zong Fengming himself quotes Zhao as calling the talks "just some random thoughts and casual comments"—but whether this was from caution or from self-effacing convention is hard to say. Zhao's long-time political secretary Bao Tong, in his own memoirs, writes that when Zong Fengming presented the conversation records to Zhao for review, Zhao did not even look at them but said, "Let Bao Tong decide what to do." But Bao declined to edit them, fearful that his own taint (he had recently served a prison term for "counterrevolutionary agitation" and "leaking state secrets") might only make things worse for Zhao and his family.

Bao clearly treasured the book, however, as is shown by his agreement to write a second preface to it. The first preface is by Li Rui, once a secretary to Mao Zedong and now another leading reformist thinker. With few exceptions the book has been championed by liberal-minded Chinese everywhere. Even Zhao's family members, despite their reservations about accuracy, have expressed warm feelings toward Zong Fengming.

The state has taken a different view. Before the book appeared, a deputy chief of the Science, Technology, and Industry Commission of the State Council (the "leadership" authority for the university where Zong had worked) visited Zong at home, warning darkly that, in earlier times, his book would have been judged "counterrevolutionary," and demanding that he hand over the manuscript. Zong said no. His book was published in Hong Kong and banned in China.

It is easy to see why top leaders were worried, because Zhao's conversations address China's problems with a depth and clarity that they have been accustomed to calling "dissident." Zhao may not possess Fang Lizhi's elegant reasoning or Liu Binyan's magisterial grasp of Chinese society, but his basic outlook, especially near the end of his sixteen years of house arrest, bears close resemblance to theirs. His thinking does not show any radical breaks, but it does evolve as he watches developments and comes to see things in new ways.

He comes to see, for example, that democracy is not just an attractive luxury that a modern nation ought to want for its own sake but an indispensable condition for the survival of a healthy economy as well. He told Zong that, during the 1980s,

> I thought that as long as we get economic reform right and the economy develops, the people will be satisfied and society will be stable.

But by 1991 he felt that

> political reform must go forward in tandem with economic reform ...[otherwise] a lot of social and political problems will appear.

"Democratic supervision" is necessary. By 2004 he had concluded that "a market economy under a one-party system inevitably produces corruption" and that China's economic growth was now "deformed."

Zhao's analysis of how China's growth came to be distorted is very close to that of He Qinglian, whose 1998 book *China's Pitfall* Zhao read in captivity.[3] In Zhao's words,

> people who hold political power use that power to control resources and to turn the wealth of society into their own private wealth.

This happened inside a "black box," beyond public supervision, and on "an enormous" scale. On September 18, 1998, Zhao tells Zong:

> As the market economy grows, it leads to the marketization of power and the fungibility of money and power, which leads to large-scale swallowing up of state resources, chaotic capital formation, extortion, and blackmail. This, in turn, makes popular opinion boil and leads to the formation of a privileged class, a growing gap between rich and

> poor, and other social problems that only get worse the more they pile up.

Five years later Zhao observes:

> The government seizes land from the people, pushing the price down to a minimum, then hands it over to developers who sell it at a huge mark-up. It also manipulates stocks and figures out how to siphon off society's monetary resources—like the savings accounts of ordinary people—using the funds for public construction that stimulates internal demand and keeps growth high.... If people were free to shift their savings out of state banks, the savings would flow overseas and growth would end. There could be a rush on withdrawals and banks would be in crisis.

And where were China's intellectual gadflies as this went on? The voices that had been so eloquent in the late 1980s? By 2004 Zhao Ziyang saw the intellectual elite as having been co-opted:

> Economic reform has produced a tightly knit interest group that is now joined by students who have been educated in democratic countries of the West. These people have succumbed to power, and what we now have is a tripartite group in which the political elite, the economic elite, and the intellectual elite are fused. This power elite blocks China's further reform and steers the nation's policies toward service of itself.

Zhao concludes that "socialism with Chinese characteristics" has produced "power-elite capitalism," which is "capitalism of the worst kind." He reflects that he had once accepted the argument that free speech is a luxury when people have empty stomachs, but now (in 1998) sees that the two are connected: without free speech, one gets a "deformed economy."

China's common folk can see the deformed economy, and those who are losers within it—farmers whose land has been seized, state workers who have been laid off, retirees whose pensions vanish—have been protesting at increasing rates since the late 1990s. In 2003 the number of "mass incidents" reported by Public Security rose to 60,000, a sixfold increase since 1993. This rise helps to explain the tighter controls on unauthorized speech, publication, and assembly during recent years. In 2004 Zhao Ziyang told Wang Yangsheng:

> They [in the government] are afraid. They are afraid to open even a crack, because all kinds of unsolvable problems might then spill out. They have to protect their interests and those of their interest group.

In New York the exiled dissident Hu Ping, editor of *Beijing Spring*, has noted that when a booming economy creates a need for increased repression, as it has in China, a favorite theory of Western politicians is challenged. Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Tony Blair are all on record as predicting that economic growth inevitably will pull China toward freedom and democracy.[4] Hu Ping sees increased wealth for China's elite as providing not only better means to repress but more reason to, as resentment between haves and have-nots grows. The result, instead of democracy, could be turmoil—or, if the repression works, a successful monster state.[5]

Such a state would surely make use of Chinese nationalism, which Zhao Ziyang, in his chats with Zong, comes to see as "the greatest threat" to "China's progress toward a modern civilization." Nationalism has understandable roots, Zhao felt, because of "the sting of China's past century of foreign encroachment and bullying." But authorities can easily exploit this sentiment to "ignite parochial ethnic hatred" and build "the internal unity required to preserve stability and to consolidate rule."

By the end of his life Zhao feels that China's politics needs at least three things: a free press, an independent judiciary, and an end to the Communist Party's monopoly of power. Without a free press, citizens turn into "loyal instruments of authority." As for the courts,

> the experience of our own country shows that there is no good at any level, including the top level, in political interference in the judiciary.

And on Party power:

> The Party must release its right to control everything...[otherwise] other social organizations cannot get started and cannot marshal the power to do oversight.

The concept of "dictatorship of the proletariat" must go, and "parliamentary democracy is the necessary way forward."

Did Zhao hope that China might actually get these things anytime soon? At the end of his life he seemed pessimistic. The biggest obstacle to abolishing one-party rule, he suggests, is one-party rule. The privileged group that sits atop China and enjoys its boom will not easily give up and, as Zhao told Wang Yangsheng, "to confront such a large interest group would be very difficult" even if a leader wanted to. For Zhao there was not the slightest sign that China's current leaders wanted to. He told Zong Fengming that

> the policy of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao is only to hand out little favors to the common people in order to bolster their image of "caring for the people" without infringing any serious interests of the elite, let alone changing the system in any way. This just will not solve the problem.

The sharpness of Zhao Ziyang's views near the end of his life makes it more important that we recall what we know of his thinking before 1989. For most of the 1980s, Hu Yaobang, as general secretary of the Communist Party, had been leading the way for political change while Zhao, as premier, attended to economic matters. In 1987, when Deng forced Hu to resign as general secretary and transferred the title to Zhao, Zhao clearly wanted to continue Hu's political work. He established a "Central Small Group for Study of Reform of the Political System" and gave it a substantial staff. Asked at a news conference in October 1987 what his top priority as general secretary was, he minced no words: "political reform."

Before 1987 Zhao had not said much that was politically sensitive. He did allow for small-scale "capitalism"—restoration of private farming, free markets for certain agricultural products, and partial autonomy for industrial enterprises—as part of his plan to open the economy to market forces. But he conceived such changes within a Marxist frame, saying "the initial stages of socialism" needed to include capitalism. According to Zhao, Marx's argument that all capitalism must end in order to bring about socialism had not taken sufficient account of the necessity of capitalist enterprise to prepare the ground for socialism. Stalin and Mao had made big mistakes by expecting that a socialist utopia could spring directly from a peasant society. The capitalist stage cannot be omitted, Zhao argued, so China needed to go back and "make up this class." It would be, though, "capitalism under the leadership of the Communist Party" and only a passing stage. In the early 1980s Zhao saw no problem with the formula "capitalism plus one-party rule."

Between 1987 and 1989, however, he had begun to see how this formula bred corruption. Bao Tong records in his memoirs that Zhao not only realized that democratization is the answer to corruption but further saw that corruption, as a public issue, could be used to stimulate popular interest in building democratic institutions. This was a truly astute insight. The Chinese populace at the time was incensed at the growing evidence of official corruption, and if rule-based institutions like a free press, transparent administration, and legal procedure could be presented as instruments with which to combat corruption, there would instantly be public support for the efforts.

How would Zhao have been inclined to move after 1989? His notions about how to make the transition to democracy seem never to have changed much. He consistently held that, for China, the change should happen slowly and in stages. He cited the example of Hong Kong as showing that there can be civil rights without electoral democracy. So one could start there: release controls on speech and the press in China generally and encourage the establishment of nongovernmental organizations. Give more power to the provinces, less to the center. Then take steps to make the judiciary independent. Next press for more transparency and democratic decision-making inside the (still-monopoly) Communist Party. When all this is done, move toward democracy in general elections. One reason why Zhao felt that a transition to democracy could be carried out by an authoritarian leader was that such a thing had recently happened in Taiwan. Zhao admired Jiang Jingguo, son of Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek):

> Jiang Jingguo is an amazing person; he deserves to be studied carefully. He followed a world trend and pushed democratic reform on his own. He was educated in the traditions of KMT one-party rule, and also, for many years in the Soviet Union, in the tradition of Communist one-party rule. That he was able to walk out of these old modes of thought is truly impressive.

During his house arrest in the 1990s, Zhao retreated from thinking strictly in terms of Marxist "stages of history" in favor of more varied ways to measure a society's progress, including by its standard of living, life expectancy, educational level, and the size of the gap between skilled and unskilled labor and between rural and urban ways of life. Prescient among Chinese leaders, Zhao was worried about the effects of economic development on the natural environment as early as 1992.

But it is one thing to have a blueprint, another to carry it out. Here two questions arise: Would Zhao have really pursued a transition to democracy, had he been in power? And if so, could he have pulled it off? The first question arises because of a general pattern, widely observable in Chinese journals in recent years, of retired officials who, once free of the pressures of work-ing within the bureaucracy, suddenly sound much more liberal-minded than before. Zhao's house arrest may have had this effect on him, and we cannot infer that what he thought at home is what he certainly would have done as general secretary. There is, moreover, evidence that an ideal image of the Communist Party of China, arising from his experience with it in the 1940s, survived in Zhao's mind to the end. If he had stayed in power and had peered across the brink of actually ending the Party's system, would he still have moved forward?

The question is interesting but probably moot, because it is not likely that Zhao could have had much power after 1989 even if he had accommodated Deng and stayed on—not, anyway, before Deng died in 1997. Zhao's talks with Zong Fengming make it quite clear that throughout the 1980s both Zhao and Hu Yaobang were only "frontstage characters" for Deng. All real power rested with "the two old men," Deng and Chen Yun, each of whom had his network of loyal followers. Deng and Chen divided power awkwardly, controlling somewhat different spheres but with the balance favoring Deng. Zhao reports that Deng once sent a message to Chen that "this Party can have only one grandma." The seven-man standing committee of the Politburo meant even less to Deng, who called it a "many-headed horse cart" whose meetings are a waste of time. "As Party general secretary," Zhao asks Zong Fengming rhetorically, "could I change the chief of the Organization Department? The Propaganda Department? I could not—not so long as 'somebody' supported him." To fully grasp Zhao's predicament one needs to appreciate why Deng was using "frontstage characters" in the first place. Why didn't he just dictate?

Political power within the Chinese Communist system depends almost entirely on the favor of one's bureaucratic superiors, not on opinion "from below," but there is an interesting exception at the very top where no superior exists. There, the opinion of

people at the level immediately below the top can matter considerably. If the top leader makes "mistakes," these can be grounds on which his rivals who are one level down can try to move him out.

Even Mao Zedong was subject to this dynamic. When his Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s precipitated a famine that began costing millions of lives, his "mistake" made him vulnerable. His launching a few years later of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was in large part a counterpunch at rivals who had been holding him responsible for the famine.

Deng Xiaoping came to power in the late 1970s fully aware of the political role of mistakes. He was charting a radical new course for the Chinese economy and he knew that the risks involved might be tremendous. If something went wrong he might lose power. By bringing in "frontstage" people like Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, Deng gained not only energetic executors of his program but potential scapegoats as well. Of course, the underlings would need to remember who was really in charge, and in 1986 Hu seems briefly to have forgotten. When Deng offered that year to step down as chair of the Military Commission, he apparently expected Hu to say, "No, no, you have to stay." But Hu unwisely agreed to the idea. Deng then saw Hu as a usurper and nine months later Hu was out, ostensibly for "bourgeois liberalization."

Two years later it was Zhao's turn to feel the pinch of the "frontstage" position. In May 1988 Deng decided that China's system of fixed prices should be removed for an experimental period. Skirting Zhao, who was worried about the dangers of doing this too abruptly, Deng began to announce to visiting foreign leaders that China was instituting price reforms, and this left Zhao with no choice but to go along. In summer 1988, when rapid inflation led to panic buying and social unrest, and it became obvious that a "mistake" had been made, Zhao, as general secretary of the Party, had to take responsibility. In September, "representing Party Central," he published an official apology. Many people were left with the impression that Zhao had been the originator of the ill-conceived reform, and his authority suffered. But even people who knew the truth knew that it did not much matter; right or wrong, Zhao was now falling from favor. People close to Zhao say that by 1989 he was already so weak that he might not have lasted long even if there had been no demonstrations at Tiananmen.

Moreover, if he had wanted to keep his position beyond 1989, small concessions to Deng would not have been enough. He would have had to completely endorse the Deng approach, including Deng's decision to use troops at Tiananmen. But to do that, while still in a "frontstage" role, would mean that the massacre could have been blamed on him. Zhao does not say in his chats with Zong Fengming that he made such a calculation at the time, but several people close to Zhao have said that it could—and certainly should—have been part of his thinking.

Any doubt that the octogenarian Deng was still capable of such a maneuver against Zhao was dispelled in 1992 when Deng stripped his longtime comrade Yang Shangkun of his power base in the military. The purge of Yang left behind a tripartite division of power among Party chief Jiang Zemin, Premier Li Peng, and Party elder Qiao Shi, among whom relations were sufficiently strained that Deng, standing above them, could still dominate.

Zhao Ziyang would not have done well in such an environment. He never developed much of a power base even in his special field of economics. In early 1988, a chief of the State Bureau of Price Control, whose "backstage somebody" was Chen Yun, could still openly defy Zhao at meetings. For Zhao to have embraced controversial political reform in the 1990s would have required patience, persistence, and Herculean effort, and it is not clear that Zhao, for all his other virtues, was capable of these. Some of his friends defend his 1989 decision to quit rather than to persist by saying that his image as a martyr turned out to be the best practical contribution he could have made to the cause of political reform. A shining example of principle, they hold, has more value than a doomed effort.

Still, to "predict" a counterfactual past is as risky as predicting the future. Who knows? It is indeed far-fetched to imagine Zhao Ziyang atop a tank proclaiming a republic, and yet there was nothing imaginary about the broad, nationwide character of the 1989 upheaval, the government's fear of it, or Zhao Ziyang's lasting association with it. Zhao's sixteen-year house arrest was less intended to punish him than to foreclose any possible revival of his appeal. Could there have been any warmth left in the 1989 embers by the time he died?

China's top leaders apparently thought so. Within days of Zhao's death, Hu Jintao had formed an "Emergency Response Leadership Small Group" with himself as chair and China's top policeman Luo Gan as vice-chair. This group put the paramilitary People's Armed Police on alert, issued instructions on riot control, and declared "a period of extreme sensitivity." The group ordered the Ministry of Railways to speed up the movement of people, especially students, who were leaving the capital and to screen tightly anyone moving in. News of Zhao's death was kept out of the press and television. People approaching the Zhao residence to offer condolences were screened or blocked by State Security.

In fall 2006, when Zong Fengming's book was about to appear, some friends of his, including Bao Tong and Li Rui, became concerned. Beijing had just banned several other books; the authors were coming under considerable pressure; and Zong had a heart condition. Zong's friends sent a delegate to suggest that he postpone publication for a while. But Zong was unpersuaded. He was already eighty-six years old; what could they do to him now? Moreover the book was, in a sense, his own declaration of independence. He sent the messenger back with this poem:

SPITTING IT OUT

—on the concern that my friends feel for me

I'm a silkworm, I just expectorate,
Cheer for the truth, nudge justice along,
And hope to leave some pure strands behind.
But I'm a free moth, too.
Broken out of the cocoon, like a Buddha-spirit
Floating aloft, untouched, untouchable.

Zong underwent heart surgery on March 20, 2007, and seems to be doing all right.

Notes

[1] Mao himself contributed to the parlor game on July 7, 1957. In addressing a group of writers and others in Shanghai, Mao said, according to someone who was present, "Lu Xun? He'd either be writing his stuff in prison or else saying nothing at all." Huang Zongying, "Wo qinling Mao Zedong he Luo Ji'nan duihua," *Wenhui dushu zhoubao*, December 6, 2002.

[2] Sheryl WuDunn, "A Million Chinese March, Adding Pressure for Change," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1989.

[3] See Liu Binyan's and my review of her book in *The New York Review*, October 8, 1998. Zhao Ziyang, although formally educated only through high school, became an assiduous reader during house arrest and seems to have had a special taste for "dissident" writers. He mentions He Qinglian, Wang Lixiong, Wu Guoguang, Gao Wenqian, Gordon Chang, and others in his chats with Zong.

[4] See James Mann, *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression* (Viking, 2007), pp. 2–3.

[5] See, for example, Hu Ping, "Pochu jingji juedinglun de shenhua" (Abolish the myth of economic determinism), *Beijing Spring*, No. 147 (August 2005), p. 3.