

CHINA

Ex-China Communist Chief Zhao Ziyang Gets a Proper Burial—Years After His Death

Remains of leader who was purged for opposing Tiananmen crackdown are buried in civilian cemetery



Communist Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang implored students to end their hunger strikes in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in May 1989. PHOTO: ANONYMOUS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Philip Wen

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BEIJING— Zhao Ziyang, the former Chinese Communist Party leader purged for opposing the armed crackdown on Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989, was finally laid to rest in a quiet burial ceremony on Friday, nearly 15 years after his death.

Mr. Zhao's ashes were interred at a cemetery for civilians on the northern outskirts of Beijing alongside his late wife, Liang Boqi, in a small ceremony attended by roughly three dozen close family and friends—and under the watch of police and plainclothes security officers.

After being dismissed as party general secretary in 1989, Mr. Zhao remained an official pariah, placed under effective house arrest behind the high walls of his central Beijing courtyard home. After his death in January 2005 at the age of 85, his ashes remained at the family home due to a protracted disagreement with party authorities over the location of his burial site.

“After many years of delays, the children of Zhao Ziyang have finally been able to bury their long-



Mr. Zhao in 1998 in the garden of the central Beijing home where he spent years under virtual house arrest. PHOTO: REUTERS
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deceased father and mother together,” Mr. Zhao’s five children said in a statement issued by Bao Pu, the Hong Kong-based publisher of Mr. Zhao’s posthumous memoirs.

Friday’s ceremony came a day after the 100th anniversary of Mr. Zhao’s birth on Oct. 17, 1919. Unlike similar milestone anniversaries for other top party officials, Mr. Zhao’s centenary and his burial weren’t memorialized by glowing editorials in Chinese state media outlets; in Chinese political discourse, his name remains a sensitive political taboo, despite the passage of time.

“The burials of political figures are all political events, and for the authorities to delay Zhao Ziyang’s burial shows they remain fearful of the people remembering him,” Mr. Bao, whose father was a senior aide to Mr. Zhao, said in an interview. “It shows that Zhao Ziyang’s choices [in 1989] still have strong potency in rallying support till this day.”

Mr. Zhao, a pioneer of China's economic reforms, is arguably best-remembered for his last public appearance. Visiting Tiananmen Square on May 19, 1989, he expressed sympathy with student demonstrators and apologized for coming "too late." Speaking through a megaphone, he implored them to cease their hunger strikes while advocating negotiation and compromise to end the protests.

Mr. Zhao was removed from office for "splitting the party" and, following the bloody suppression of the protests, his name was largely excised from official news media and party histories.

Mr. Zhao's family has attributed much of the delay due to authorities wanting to keep his ashes in a heavily guarded cemetery for Communist Party officials in Beijing's west, but relatives feared their access would be restricted.

On Friday, family members, dressed in dark colors with yellow ribbons pinned to their chests, carried a portrait of Mr. Zhao to the burial plot in the cemetery, each laying bouquets of flowers in front of a simple gray headstone with the names of Mr. Zhao and his wife embossed in black. The headstone made no reference to Mr. Zhao's former high political office.

"We are relieved and also rather moved that we can finally lay our parents to rest," his daughter, Wang Yunnan, said shortly after the ceremony. "We also regret that the back-and-forth discussions with authorities took so long. But in the end today went very smoothly, and it still feels a bit surreal."

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