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Zhao Ziyang’s Legacy and 6/4 Memories

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As we prepare to mark the 30th anniversary of one turning point in the history of Chinese dissent (the appearance of Wei Jingsheng’s “Fifth Modernization” poster on December 5, 1978, the subject of a post we’ll run later this week), a debate on another major turning point (the 1989 protests and June 4th Massacre) may be re-emerging within China ahead of its 30th anniversary.

One of the earliest reports (in English) that the Ministry of Culture had sought the resignation of the editor of the well-regarded magazine Yanhuang Chunqiu over its recent cover story praising purged leader Zhao Ziyang was on Time’s China Blog. There, Simon Elegant mentioned the incident, which has slowly gained momentum over the past few weeks.

On November 16, Under the Jacaranda Tree provided more details about the situation:

The article in question is a cover story about Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳. This is the first positive account of Zhao to appear in any PRC publications since he was removed from leadership in 1989. The article was penned by Sun Zhen 孙振, the retired chief of Xinhua’s Sichuan branch. Sun served under Zhao during the Cultural Revolution. The article, which reaffirmed the popularity of Zhao among Sichuan peasants, was seen as a direct challenge to the official verdict of Zhao and of his mistakes in handling the Tiananmen Square incident.

Yanhuang Chunqiu is often seen as critical of the present CCP leadership. The Journal was inaugurated in 1991 under the patronage of senior party officials sympathetic to Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦. The editorial team headed by Du Daozheng 杜导正 openly advocates a gradual transition to liberal democracy, and has been critical of the government’s lack of tolerance of voices of dissident, as well as its inability to curb widespread corruption throughout the country. The Journal has a loyal readership among party veterans and intellectuals. With a circulation of over 80,000 copies, the Journal is financially independent and is believed to have received no government funding or commercial sponsorship.

On November 18, the Sydney Morning Herald reported:

An official from the Ministry of Culture visited the editor-in-chief of the magazine Yanhuang Chunqiu – Annals Of The Yellow Emperor – at his home on Friday, seeking his resignation.

The official told Du Daozheng that a retired leader had taken offence at the magazine’s favourable treatment of Mr Zhao, whose name has been taboo in the Chinese media for 19 years. It is understood the instructions were conveyed via a member of the Politburo, the Communist Party’s inner sanctum.

But Mr Du, 85, has been a feisty stalwart of the Communist Party since 1937, and his publication enjoys protection from many progressive senior party officials.

“He said, ”Old Du, you’re getting old. Are you thinking about ...” Mr Du told the Herald yesterday. “He never directly said change the editor ... but his meaning was extremely clear.

“I said the government’s official retirement age doesn’t apply to non-government enterprises like us; if I work until I’m 120 that’s got nothing to with you.”

Last week the story was picked up in various places, including China Media Project which, in addition to reprinting the entire piece in full (in Chinese), also placed the piece in context, explaining to readers why it was sensitive:

News surfaced this month that the journal has come under attack from an unspecified senior official after running a lengthy article in September that praised former premier Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳 for his
progressive leadership in Sichuan in the 1970s, before he was ousted amid the unrest that followed democracy demonstrations in Beijing in 1989.

The Zhao Ziyang piece is the first full-length article on the former top leader since democracy protests were violently suppressed on June 4, 1989.

*Asia Times Online provided more information about Du Daozheng in a recent piece:*

By raising his age as an issue, Du said, authorities are hoping to weaken the editorial line of his magazine. The offending article on Zhao was just the latest example of the kind of writing loathed by the conservative forces in the party, he said.

“This is the ninth time that we have encountered [pressure] in our 17 years,” Du said in a phone interview. “Now they have found an opportunity to target us, but they can’t say it directly.”

“Their aim is to change the direction of the publication,” he said. Du said he had resisted pressure to step down. “In our 17 years, the state has never given us a penny ... the magazine is not a state publication and there is no law on retirement age,” he said, adding that four out of six of its editors are under the age of 60.

Moreover, he said he represented the voices of more than 100 party luminaries and authors. "They told me: Comrade Du, you do not have the right to make a decision yourself because you were chosen by us,” he said.

Du said the magazine’s editorial policy would not waver, even if more interference came along. “If they want to fight, let the fight go on ... it is a contest of strength,” he said. “It is like a game of chess, it’s interesting to watch what the next step is.”

*Now, the story has gone to the next level. As Du told reporters last month, the cover story in this month’s issue of Yanhuang Chunqiu is by Hu Qili, who was purged after 1989, and praises Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. As reported by John Garnaut:*

Hu Qili’s new essay, ostensibly about the process of education reform in the 1980s, names Mr Zhao four times and Mr Hu three times.

“Frankly speaking, several major leaders at that time showed outstanding personal qualities, capability, wisdom and courage,” writes Hu Qili. “But they always took themselves as ordinary members of the leaders’ collective, sincerely and whole-heartedly studying and listening to different opinions, especially opposing opinions. People were encouraged to speak freely, or even confront each other face to face.

"Of course, such a situation was maintained by personal charm and character, self possession and statesmanship. However, this hasn’t yet become institutionalised. It is worthy of earnest study.”

Observers believe Yanhuang Chunqiu and its influential supporters are pushing the party to confront the legacy of 1989 ahead of the 20th anniversary on June 4.