

Another Chinese puzzle

Trying to figure out what was going on in China this past week has been like watching six men fighting under a blanket. After a lot of grunts and bumps, out rolled a badly battered Hu Yaobang, freshly fired as leader of the world's largest Communist party.

China's Premier, Zhao Ziyang, was quickly named to succeed the unfortunate Hu. Zhao lost no time in telling the world that Hu had been ousted for promoting "rightist bourgeois liberalism" and failing to prevent last month's noisy student demonstrations for more freedom. On the surface, it seemed clear that old guard leftists in China's Communist party had triumphed over the liberal faction of Hu Yaobang that wanted greater freedom and closer links to the West.

But things in China, and within its secretive leadership, are rarely as they appear. Who, after all, invented the Chinese puzzle? We should not forget that the crafty Chinese are splendid artificers who delight in misleading western observers and visitors. The Chinese let us see only what they want us to see. After Hu's firing, many questions remain:

- If leftists have gained the upper hand, this is scary news for Hong Kong. Deng Xiaoping and Hu promised to preserve Hong Kong's freedoms and western institutions. Who will guarantee them after the 82-year-old Deng departs? Smart money in iffy Hong Kong will flow even faster into Toronto real estate.

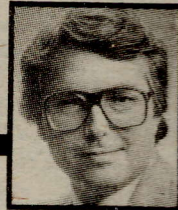
- Hu was Deng's chosen successor as China's leader. Did Deng — perhaps sensing over-eagerness to rule on the part of his 71-year-old heir apparent — dismiss Hu as a threat? Old dictators tend to do that. What, then, about the thousands of party cadres and officials put into office by Hu and loyal to him? Will they be purged as well? Curiously, while Hu was fired as party leader, he retained his position — at least for now — on the key Central Committee and Secretariat. Perhaps a Phoenix-like Hu will resurface at a later date, just as his mentor, Deng, did twice before.

- This week we also saw a number of high-profile Chinese intellectuals denounced and thrown out of the party for "bourgeois tendencies." In China, it is a tradition to attack a senior figure by bashing his subordinates. So the scourging of intellectuals was obviously aimed at Hu.

But wait a minute. Deng himself and Zhao had also encouraged these same intellectuals to speak out in favor of "liberal" reforms. In fact, Deng was perceived as the moving force behind the entire liberalization campaign. Question: Is Deng himself under attack? If so, did he throw Hu to the wolves?

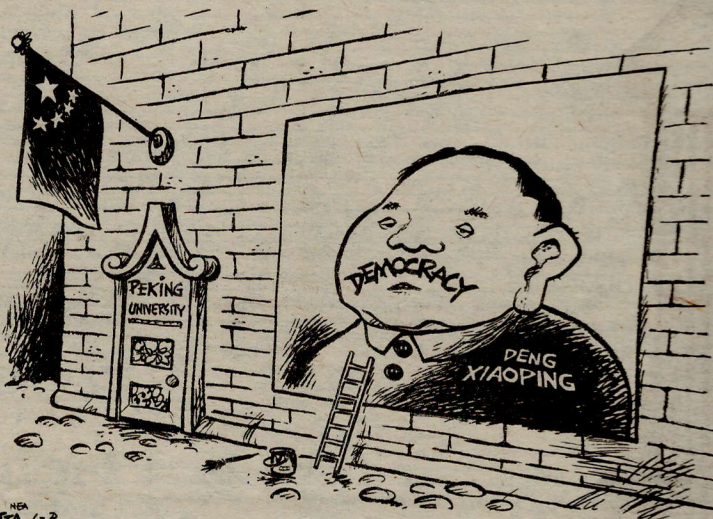
- The aged Deng is only able to work a few hours daily. A power struggle to succeed him is imminent if not already under way. If so, we may begin to see more attacks on Zhao Ziyang as a way of getting at Deng. And just as the aged Mao

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unleashed the Red Guard against his party enemies, it might also be conceivable that Deng could riposte by using China's restless students against his leftist foes. Will we be seeing White Guards in China?

- Don't forget that Deng, Hu and Zhao have recently slashed the Chinese armed forces, one of the nation's most important institutions, by 25%. There are a lot of old generals who are unhappy with Deng and they might already be on the move. Joining them will be brigades of party officials bitterly opposed to their loss of power stemming from the economic liberalization and freer market policies of Deng/Hu/Zhao.



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- Or, we may be seeing a replay of Mao's "Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom" ploy. Mao encouraged dissent from party cadres and intellectuals as a way of smoking out opposition. Those who were rash enough to speak out soon found themselves in big trouble or in jail. Deng may be doing the same thing.

One important point to remember while watching these Chinese shadow plays. We are not seeing earnest, pro-western democrats struggling against Marxists. Such labels no more apply to China than did "radicals" or "moderates" in Iran. What we can imperfectly discern is a continuous power struggle between orthodox Maoists and Stalinists on one hand, and neo-Leninists on the other.

Perhaps a better description would be "rigids" versus "flexibles" (more about this in another column). Neither of these factions will prove to be the warm, smiling Chinese democrats that so many long to see.