A New Look at Chinese Patron-Clientelism: The Falls of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang*

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<Abstract>

This article focuses on three general points. First, the degree of penetration of the CCP into Chinese society means that informal, particularistic, and often corrupt political channels take precedence over legal methods of communication and influence. Secondly, this degree of penetration leads to extensive informal and personal politics, or patrimonial rulership, or patron-client networks. Thirdly, and most importantly, the political falls of key leaders Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang in the 1980s were the best illustrations of Chinese patron-clientelism in the reform era. Both leaders lost their positions, not only because they failed to develop adequate support networks, but because they lost the trust and support of their patron, Deng Xiaoping. The publication abroad of Zhao’s secret memoir and The Tiananmen Papers confirm the importance of patron-clientelism at the highest levels. By contrast, the rise of Hu Jintao illustrates how careful cultivation of patrimonial ties can lead to political success in China.

Key Words: Tiananmen Square Incident, Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, Patron-clientelism, Chinese Communist Party, Disputes in Chinese leadership

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* This work was supported by the 2009 sabbatical research grant of the University of Seoul.
I. Introduction

On January 17, 2005, a nearly forgotten old man died in Beijing. The news media did not note his passing for several days, and government officials had no comment on his demise. However, word of the death quickly spread, and over 2,000 former friends and associates, including several former government officials, asked to attend a memorial service. The service had been hastily arranged for the villa where he had lived his last years, but it was moved to a more public site. The police were concerned about possible disturbances, and carefully checked the guest list. The man’s family insisted that any memorial statement call attention to his life of service to the country, and not to any splitist actions that he had taken. In the end, no eulogies were allowed, but the New China News Agency’s official life assessment (shengping) noted his work for the party and the people, along with his grave errors. His ashes were interred at Babaoshan, China’s equivalent of a national cemetery (Kahn 2005).

The old man was Zhao Ziyang, a life-long Communist who had risen quickly from provincial administration, and served as China’s premier during the 1980s. Dismissed from his post as Communist Party secretary just days before the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, he had been under house arrest and incommunicado except for visits from his family. Only in 2009 was Zhao able to tell his story from beyond the grave, as his secretly recorded memoir was published in America. How did someone who had reached the pinnacle of Chinese politics, who had held the two top state jobs, rise and fall so rapidly? What does this indicate about the nature of Chinese politics? Why was it necessary to keep him away from public view for the rest of his life? Those questions have challenged observers since the tumultuous events of May-June, 1989.

That same year, another old man was quietly given an official commemoration, noting his efforts to rehabilitate victims of the Cultural Revolution, perhaps the first step to a complete reappraisal. In 2009, the twentieth anniversary of his passing was given little mention in Chinese media, and few young people today know much