

Flights of fancy

Jerome A. Cohen says the various theories that seek to explain the puzzling facts surrounding Chen Guangcheng's dramatic escape remain speculation that, while entertaining, can undermine Sino-US trust

Sino-American relations have long been plagued by unsubstantiated conspiracy theories that undermine needed efforts to develop mutual trust between the world's two most important countries. Yet events continue to spawn intriguing speculative possibilities, and who can resist spinning out seductive hypotheses to explain apparent riddles in the behaviour of either or both governments, especially when China's oppressive censorship exaggerates the role of rumours?

The ongoing saga of the "barefoot lawyer" Chen Guangcheng (陳光誠) presents Chinese and foreign observers with at least two new, related puzzles. How could China's protean internal security network, which costs the Chinese government more than its defence budget, have allowed this frail blind man to escape from years of illegal captivity in a remote village in Shandong (山東) and enter the American embassy in Beijing? And why, less than 48 hours after Chen left safety in the embassy, did Beijing officials open the way for the departure from China that they had just denied him?

Foreigners view Chen's dramatic escape to the capital with admiration. Thoughtful Chinese, however, are beginning to voice suspi-



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cions on the internet and in social media. Chen has impressive stamina, intelligence and determination. Yet his solo escape from the network of police thugs that surrounded his farmhouse and erected physical and electronic barriers seems to them as implausible as his prearranged, undetected meeting hours later with a well-known rights activist who drove from Nanjing (南京), herself eluding village guards, to take him on the long car ride to Beijing.

Equally implausible to internet users, who know the legendary reach of China's secret police, was Chen's ability to move around Beijing for three days, meeting Hu Jia (胡佳) and other prominent rights figures who are constantly under surveillance. And what China's foreign ministry denounced as the "abnormal means" of his entry into the US embassy, after being picked up by a diplomatic car that supposedly avoided two trailing police vehicles, also raised suspicions.

These circumstances have given rise to many imaginative interpretations. Was this a calculated Communist Party attempt to divert the world's attention from the fate of former Politburo member Bo Xilai (薄熙來) and the

criminal investigation of his wife for murder? Was it a sophisticated gambit by frustrated party law reformers to highlight the widespread lawlessness that the party's new leaders will have to curb after they are installed this autumn? Certainly Chen's case has temporarily drawn attention from the Bo scandal and further publicised the compelling need for government under law, but neither hypothesis seems persuasive.

More interesting is the theory making the rounds that Chen's escape may be linked to the leadership's succession struggle and to the impact that the Bo scandal has had upon it. Some believe that the blatant, unusual failures of the feared secret police in Chen's case may have been intentionally designed to embarrass Zhou Yongkang (周永康), a member of the all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee and leader of the party's central political-legal committee responsible for the nation's internal security. Zhou, a former minister of public security and a particular nemesis of the abused Chen, is possibly under investigation because of close ties with Bo.

Yet, if Zhou, who has continued to make public appearances, remains in control of the domestic security system, how could it have been used to embarrass him? One answer might be that, while he formally retains office, he may have effectively been relieved of power. Another is that dissatisfaction within his ranks might have emboldened some subordinates to follow the orders of even more powerful Politburo figures who oppose him. This is heady stuff but still speculation.

What about the second puzzle – the Chinese government's sudden decision to open the way for Chen and his family to leave the country? Some Chinese think that Chen and the US government might have orchestrated events after his arrival at the embassy as a means of focusing attention on Beijing's rights violations.

According to this theory, American participation in the long, difficult negotiations to come up with a formula for allowing Chen to stay and study law in China were designed merely to permit him to safely leave the embassy and then ostentatiously "change his mind" about remaining in China amid the glare of world publicity that would highlight his plight and that of other rights activists. A variation on this theme suggests that Chen alone might have tricked both the Chinese and US negotiators into giving him this opportunity.

These latter speculations seem to me to be entirely baseless. My own almost five hours of telephone talks with the American negotiators and Chen at their request last Monday and Tuesday convinced me of their collective good faith. State Department legal adviser Harold Koh, Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and ambassador Gary Locke worked around the clock for days under enormous pressure to take advantage of the Chinese side's desire to



find a solution before the start of the strategic and economic dialogue. Had they merely intended to get Chen as far as the hospital in order to give him a platform for renouncing the deal, they would not have squandered time and energy on the details of his post-hospital plans. And Chen himself – alone, uncertain and under severe emotional strain – seemed in no condition for daring trickery.

These conspiracy theories about the second puzzle may be flattering tributes to the presumed guile of American negotiators and/or Chen. Yet his sudden change of heart can be more readily explained by the impact of a series of events that should have been anticipated by both governments but apparently were not – the absence of American officials during Chen's first night at the hospital, the presence of many intimidating police including some from the group in his home province that had been

torturing him and his family, his wife's account of recent abuses against her after his escape, and strong warnings against staying in China from trusted rights advocates who surprisingly managed to phone him at length.

Beijing's rapid favourable response to Chen's unanticipated reversal reportedly reflects the foreign affairs bureaucracy's success in belatedly convincing the exasperated leadership that the sooner Chen leaves, the better for domestic stability and foreign relations.

We will some day learn much more about this fascinating and important case. Until now, however, the conspiracy theories it has hatched seem more entertaining than reliable.

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