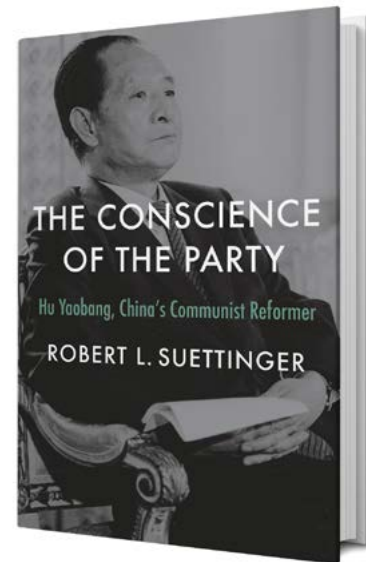


# intelligence in public media

## *The Conscience of the Party: Hu Yaobang, China's Communist Reformer*

Reviewed by Dr. Emily Matson

**Author:** Robert Suettinger  
**Published By:** Harvard University Press, 2024  
**Print Pages** 488, index  
**Reviewer:** The reviewer is an adjunct professor of modern Chinese history at Georgetown University.



In writing his comprehensive biography of the late top Chinese Communist Party leader Hu Yaobang, Robert Suettinger, a former senior CIA/Intelligence Community analyst and manager and now a senior adviser at the Stimson Center specializing on China and East Asia, has undertaken a monumental task. The result is not just a biography, but an excellent reading in China's history since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

Arguably, along with the PRC's first prime minister, Zhou Enlai, Hu Yaobang is one of China's most esteemed leaders: the deaths of each—Zhou's on January 8, 1976 and Hu's on April 15, 1989—catalyzed large political demonstrations in Beijing's Tianan-

men Square. Although many Chinese-language biographies have been written about Hu, Suettinger acknowledges that Hu is not well known among Americans, even among today's "China watchers" who closely follow events in the PRC. (1) Suettinger remedies this by introducing US readers to the life and legacy of Hu, one of China's most important reformers in the 1970s and 1980s.

For this biography, Suettinger relied heavily on the aforementioned Chinese biographies, including two by Hu's children, as well as other sources, many found in an online collection entitled "Hu Yaobang Historical Materials Information Network"—the website was taken

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down in March 2024, about eight months before the publication of this book.<sup>a</sup>

After the introduction, the book proceeds mostly chronologically. The introduction, however, situates readers in the month of Hu's death in 1989, when students and ordinary people flocked to Tiananmen Square to "place flowers, wreaths, banners, and slogans commemorating Hu Yaobang's virtue as a contrast to the CCP leaders ... who had brought about his downfall two years earlier."<sup>b</sup> (1) The demonstrations led to weeks of protest involving one million people, according to some estimates. The CCP leadership struggled to agree on a response, which finally came with the order to the People's Liberation Army to clear the square, which it did with tragic consequences on June 4.<sup>c</sup>

In my view, the book's strongest chapters address the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and the tumultuous reform years that followed into 1989. In his early years, Hu was a stalwart defender of Mao, although he did do his part as a provincial leader in attempting to mitigate the effects of catastrophic movements such as the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Leap Forward begun the year after. It was only during the Cultural Revolution, however, that Hu began to privately question his true feelings about Maoism and the revolution. (180-81) He had personally suffered greatly.

Suettinger asserts that in August 1966, Hu became one of the first members of the Central Committee of the CCP to be brought into a public "struggle" session and the first to be "physically harmed" (175). In these sessions, victims were often beaten and forced to write self-criti-

cisms (*jiantao*) of their "errors" in failing to adhere to Mao Zedong Thought (175-76). Hu would spend months in 1966 and 1967 confined to a so-called "cowshed"<sup>d</sup> as a class enemy, was briefly rehabilitated, but was later sent to labor in a rural area. Suettinger observes that Hu found relief in the hard labor, notwithstanding the harsh conditions and the lingering pains of the many beatings he had suffered earlier.

In these chapters, Suettinger, befitting his years of CIA analytical work on China, shows an impressive grasp of the factional politics that plagued the CCP between 1976 and 1989. For example, he details the memberships and political positions of "three identifiable factions" within the ranks of the CCP's leading body, the Politburo: the "leftist" faction, led by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing (and the other three members of the "gang of four" that would be purged in 1976); the "old guard" faction led by Ye Jianying and Li Xiannian; and the "second-tier officials" who had been chosen by Mao and had advanced during the Cultural Revolution. (216) Although Hu was not directly involved in these factional disputes, he was inevitably drawn into and affected by them because political decisions about people at Hu's rank and above were subject to the approval (or veto) of members of the Politburo.

Suettinger's narrative really shines as he writes of Hu's return to authority in the party's central bureaucracy in early 1977, first as executive vice president of the Central Party School and then as director of the Central Organization Department, which managed personnel issues. At the Central Party School, Hu worked to reform the school's leadership, ridding it of the ghost of the leftist faction's security apparatchik Kang Sheng, and developing the publication *Theoretical Dynamics* (*lilun dongtai*) to help CCP leaders better

a. Suettinger notes that many of the articles that had been on the site are not available elsewhere. For interested readers, however, he has retained printed copies of materials he used from the site.

b. In this context, Suettinger briefly mentions the connection between Hu and today's party leader, Xi Jinping. Hu had rehabilitated Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun, who had been purged during the Cultural Revolution. At the 1987 meeting leading to Hu's humiliation and dismissal, Xi Zhongxun was the only one to defend him, even at "great cost to his own career." (364)

c. For more on the Tiananmen Square massacre and the PRC's subsequent efforts to ban discussion of it, see Louisa Lim, *The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

d. Suettinger explained that the name "derived not from being a cattle enclosure, but from being the place where 'cow ghosts and snake spirits' (niugui sheshen), the designated enemies, were confined during the early phase of the Cultural Revolution." "Cowsheds" holding 10 or more individuals would pop up in government courtyards throughout Beijing and the country.

understand theory and policy, thus leading the school to serve as an “ideological change agent.” (227) As the director of the Central Organization Department, Hu began to vigorously overturn unjust past sentences to rehabilitate thousands of unfairly purged victims, including Xi Zhongxun (father of current CCP leader Xi Jinping).

Hu was heavily involved in the ideological debates of 1978, when he was also appointed to lead the Central Propaganda Department. In the midst of the infamous 1977–78 “Democracy Wall” poster demonstrations, in which dissident Wei Jingsheng directly critiqued the Four Modernizations as useless without the “fifth modernization” of democracy, Hu also called for a calm, nuanced response and challenged CCP members “not to use Marxism to persecute others, not to perpetuate a personality cult for anyone, and to learn from the Democracy Wall.” (260)

In addition, Hu was a passionate economic reformer. For example, speaking in January 1983 as the party’s titular top official since 1981 (initially as chairman then as general secretary, though Deng held the reins of power), he pressed leaders to advance the “Four Modernizations” and reform. (307) The next month, Hu went on an 18-day inspection tour of Guangdong, Hainan, Hunan, and Hubei, visiting the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone for the first time and encouraging local party leaders to “increase the pace of economic development.” (309) In this context, Suettinger argues that Deng Xiaoping gets too much of the credit for “reform and opening up” (*gaige kaifang*).

Among the many contributions Suettinger makes to English-language scholarship on CCP politics in the 1980s is to elaborate on the unofficial “Deng-Hu-Zhao troika” (306) and the understudied relationship between Hu and fellow reformer Zhao Ziyang. Although the two worked together, they did not “join forces against Deng” due to “structural, political, and personal reasons” (317). Zhao was ultimately one of many players complicit in Hu’s demise, and Suettinger argues that in the fall of 1986, “personal power considerations” must be taken into account in explaining Hu’s sudden fall from grace, including “Deng’s

aspirations, Chen Yun’s hindering actions, competition among potential successors, and ‘old man politics.’” (323)

Ironically, many of the men Hu had helped rehabilitate after the Cultural Revolution most strongly supported his ouster, as they felt threatened by Hu’s increasing calls for elderly party members to retire to make way for younger talent. After Hu’s old friend Ye Jianying died in Beijing in October 1986, Hu’s support base within the upper echelons of the party grew thin. Suettinger speculates that a meeting between Deng, Chen Yun, and Li Xiannian the day after Ye’s death may have been to “decide Hu Yaobang’s fate.” Whatever the case, subsequent events unfolded quickly, particularly in light of student unrest in December of 1986. (328)

As Hu did during the Democracy Wall Movement in 1978, he approached the protestors in 1986 with a nuanced view, arguing for a “cool handling” of the situation and engaging in “dialogue” with the students involved. Otherwise, he warned, some would try to stir up more trouble. As the protests continued, factionalism deepened in Beijing, and the political leadership was immobilized. Hu continued to call for “cool handling” and a patient approach. Ultimately, Suettinger concludes, “it is difficult to judge how impactful the demonstrations of December 1986 were, except insofar as they provided the impetus to a group of angry old men to push out a successful, even popular, general secretary.” (330)

Suettinger is most critical of the CCP elders’ treatment of Hu during a meeting on December 30, 1986, when Hu was forced to submit his resignation, which he did in the form of a personal letter, “Opening My Heart to Comrade Xiaoping.” (333) In response, Deng proposed another meeting of more than 50 senior CCP leaders to hear Hu’s *jiantao*. Suettinger portrays the meeting on January 10, 1987, as a political ambush. Hu spent most of that morning on an elaborate confession of his shortcomings, which “was all red meat for his antagonists.” (338) Starting the following day, as Suettinger notes:

*The barrage of criticism continued at high intensity over the next three days. Everyone was expected to*

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*say or write something. It didn't matter if it was fair or even true. The elders routinely violated Deng's restrictions on subject matter, accusing Hu of factional activity, abuse of power, ideological distortion, and personal ambition. They falsified or distorted information.... After the meeting adjourned, Hu walked into the hallway outside the meeting room, sat down heavily on the stairs, and sobbed loudly and bitterly. Wan Li and Tian Jiyun stood by to comfort him, but Hu Yaobang was a broken man - as had been intended. (339)*

This was one of the most powerful passages in the book. Emotionally raw, it captures the injustice of Hu Yaobang's abrupt dismissal from party leadership. That Suettinger found a record of this is in itself extraordinary.

Overall, I found *The Conscience of the Party* to be an outstanding study of Hu Yaobang's life and legacy. However, I wish that Suettinger had provided more details about the Tiananmen Square Massacre in the first chapter of the book, particularly regarding the decisionmaking behind it, which US readers are unlikely to be familiar with. Secondly, I was surprised that there was so little mention of Hu Yaobang's foreign policy, particularly vis-à-vis Japan.

Lastly, I must respectfully disagree with Suettinger's argument in the book's concluding chapter that "the fact of [Hu's] downfall and death also precipitated events that led the CCP, which Hu had sought to change, to return to its violent ways, dictatorial reign, and corrupt practices." (387) To me, this assumes too much of a deterministic framework of the "great man theory" of history. The overall trajectory of the CCP cannot be pinned on one man alone, nor do I agree with the portrayal of its history pre-Hu and post-Hu as an inevitable descent into ever-increasing authoritarianism.

I would also contest the book's conclusion, which portrays an increasing powerlessness on the part of pro-reform Chinese, although Suettinger is rightly concerned about the overall trajectory of power politics within the PRC. As I wrote in my book review last year of Ian Johnson's *Sparks*, we must be wary of the "misconception that China today is merely an authoritarian monolith."<sup>a</sup> Whether within China or in the Chinese diaspora, there continue to be many pro-reform voices, and it is essential that we continue to recognize them and thus honor Hu's legacy. ■

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a. Emily Matson, "Sparks: China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future" Review, *Studies in Intelligence* 68, No. 2 (June 2024), 53.