

BOOK REVIEW

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

Robert L. Suettinger. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2024. 488 pp. \$39.95 (hbk) ISBN 9780674272804

Alexander V. Pantsov

Capital University, Columbus, Ohio, USA

E-mail: apantsov@capital.edu

“China’s Gorbachev,” Hu Yaobang, whose death two years after his shameful dismissal triggered the 1989 Tiananmen events, has waited too long for his English-language biographer. The late Ezra Vogel had worked on Hu’s biography for the last five years of his life but never finished it. However, no place is empty, and Hu finally found his chronicler. Political scientist and former intelligent analyst Robert L. Suettinger has written an extremely detailed and fascinating life story that is sure to appeal to all students of modern Chinese history, as well as anyone interested in politics and global issues. The book is based on a variety of primary and secondary sources. In addition to printed documents, the author uses a huge number of previously unutilized internet sources located in the PRC, first of all the unique web collection of the Hu Yaobang Historical Materials Information Network. It is an important repository, although it is definitely not an archival source, as the author calls it. Sometimes the author’s fascination with the Chinese internet sources causes some confusion. For instance, he refers to a Chinese internet publication without noting that it is a translation of a chapter from Ezra Vogel’s book on Deng Xiaoping (pp. 263, 440).

Overall, it is a compelling book, but the author is too fond of his protagonist. Suettinger portrays Hu as a heroic politician, “honest and incorruptible,” who “embodied very high standards of rectitude in his personal life and professional deportment” (p. 373). “Hu was a classic tragic hero, whose efforts to do the right thing brough about his own downfall” (p. 387). Didn’t Hu have any faults? Wasn’t he himself guilty of crimes against humanity as a leading member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that organized the bloody agrarian reform, the struggle against so-called “counterrevolutionaries” that Suettinger for some reasons calls the struggle against “bandits,” collectivization, the anti-“rightist” campaign, and the “Great Leap Forward” that claimed 30-odd million lives? If he was always virtuous, how could “the conscience of the party” rise to the top in a “conscienceless party”? Didn’t the Communist Youth League he led participate in most of these tragic events? If Hu was so good, how could he not help his elder brother Hu Yaofu, who in 1952 was falsely labelled a “counterrevolutionary,” expelled from the CCP, and imprisoned? How could he vote to “forever expel” Liu Shaoqi from the Party at the 12th Plenum of the eighth Central Committee in October 1968? After all, a Central Committee female member, Chen Shaomin, refused to raise her hand? Maybe she should be named “the conscience of the party”?

Moreover, Suettinger does not clearly explain why Hu Yaobang became impressed with “socialism with a human face.” He simply notes that at the end of the Cultural Revolution Hu extensively read Marx, Engels and Lenin. But this kind of reading could hardly lead Hu Yaobang to liberal thinking. In fact, in the late 1970s Hu was really impressed with dissident communist views, including Eurocommunism, that penetrated China. He encouraged an investigation of various schools of socialism in the Central Party School and the Institute of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, stimulated open debates and emancipation of consciousness. He even set up an

All-China Scholarly Council to translate and publish dissident communist literature including works of Bukharin, Trotsky, Medvedev, Djilas, Orlov and Avtorkhanov. Suettinger misses this point.

The book is clearly divided into two parts. In the first part, covering the events until 1959, Hu himself somehow dissolves into the history of the CCP and the internal story of the intra-party struggle. In the second part, he stands out more vividly, but still not as a flesh-and-blood man in all his complexity and contradictions. The book is a not a comprehensive story of a man's life but rather a political biography. We learn little about Hu's private life and the life of his family, his wife Li Zhao and their children. The lone exception is Hu's eldest son Deping, although a very important fact from Deping's life is omitted: his marriage to An Li, a daughter of the famous communist activist An Ziwen. Head of Organization Department of the Central Committee of the CCP under Mao Zedong, An Ziwen was a victim of the Cultural Revolution, and then, in 1979–1980, vice president of the Central Party School who helped Hu greatly. Hu's wife disappears on page 178 and does not reappear until page 342. His second son Liu Hu is mentioned only once at his birth on page 63, his third son Dehua appears by the very end of the book, and his daughter Man Mei (Li Heng) is mentioned only as the author of a memoir about her father.

In addition, Suettinger's book contains a number of factual errors, repetitions and typos. For example, he argues that the Central Committee's "gathering" in Wuhan in late April 1927 "set plans for armed uprisings in various cities in southern China," (p. 18) but the Fifth CCP Congress in Wuchang and Hankou in April–May 1927 did not do so; he calls Li Lisan and Qu Qiubai "the CCP general secretaries" but they were not; he asserts that Zhang Xueliang was released in 1975 and died in 1993 but he was released in 1990 and died in 2001; he suggests that Kang Sheng in 1928 "supported Wang Ming and the returned students (from Moscow) in their struggle against Mao Zedong," (p. 46) but there was no such struggle at the time – Wang was in Moscow and Kang did not start working with him until 1931; and he asserts that Mao passed away "at twelve minutes past midnight" (p. 212) but he died at 00:10 a.m. There are several other mistakes.

Regardless of these shortcomings, the book is worth reading. It is a valuable source of information about a romantic revolutionary who was desperately trying to combine socialism and liberalism in a country that was not ready to accept this centaur-type creature.