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BOOK REVIEW

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

By Robert L. Suettinger

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Robert L. Suettinger's *The Conscience of the Party* offers a nuanced exploration of Hu Yaobang's political career, combining detailed biographical storytelling with incisive analysis of the structural dynamics within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during its reform era. Suettinger situates Hu's trajectory within the CCP's broader systemic challenges, notably its paradoxical reliance on reform to maintain legitimacy while resisting political liberalisation. This duality, as Suettinger demonstrates, exposed the tensions between adaptability and stability that shaped this transformative period in the Party's history.

At its core, the book examines how Hu navigated a political system defined by these contradictions. Suettinger argues that this tension not only framed Hu's career but ultimately led to his marginalisation. By integrating rich personal narratives with an analysis of the CCP's institutional and ideological evolution, Suettinger presents Hu's life as a lens through which to understand the challenges and complexities of reform in an authoritarian regime.

One of the book's key strengths lies in Suettinger's adept use of a wide range of sources, many of which are difficult to access. By drawing on memoirs of Party officials, internal documents, and journals such as *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, Suettinger constructs a detailed and nuanced portrait of Hu's political life. At the same time, he does not shy away from addressing the methodological challenges posed by restricted archival access and state censorship, critically reflecting on the inherent limitations of studying contemporary Chinese political history.

The book's well-structured narrative, organised into ten chronologically sequenced chapters, enables Suettinger to present Hu Yaobang's life not only as a personal journey but also as a reflection of the broader ideological and institutional transformations within the CCP. The opening chapters trace Hu's formative years in a rural Hakka village in Hunan Province, where his exposure to profound socio-economic inequalities and revolutionary upheaval shaped his enduring commitment to addressing systemic injustice. By linking these early experiences to Hu's later reformist vision, Suettinger establishes a compelling foundation for understanding how personal conviction and socio-political context shaped his approach to governance (Chapter 1).

A pivotal phase in Hu Yaobang's political journey, as Suettinger explores in Chapter 2, was his office-holding in the Communist Youth League. This formative experience served as a crucible for the development of Hu's pragmatic leadership style and his conviction that moral integrity and institutional renewal were inter-dependent. It was during this period that Hu cemented his reputation as a principled yet adaptable leader, equipping him with the skills to navigate the complexities of the CCP's evolving political landscape. Building on this foundation, Suettinger turns to Hu's early contributions in the nascent People's Republic (Chapter 3). Tasked with consolidating Party control during campaigns aimed at securing the CCP's authority, Hu encountered both the opportunities and the constraints of governance, experiences that would shape his approach to leadership while exposing him to the ideological orthodoxy and institutional inertia that would later constrain his career.

Suettinger's analysis of Hu Yaobang's responses to the Great Leap Forward, as detailed in Chapter 4, highlights how the catastrophic famine and growing disillusionment within the CCP deepened Hu's awareness of the Party's structural deficiencies, particularly its ideological rigidity and over-centralisation. Viewing these crises as a stark reminder of the need for reform, Hu adopted a pragmatic approach, focusing on addressing systemic flaws rather than managing symptoms. In the following chapter, Suettinger explores how Hu navigated the political turbulence of the 1960s, marked by factional struggles, ideological extremism, and instability. Despite setbacks and marginalisation, Hu displayed resilience and adaptability, maintaining Party loyalty while recognising the systemic inertia hindering reform. His temporary fall from favour and subsequent rehabilitation deepened his conviction in the need for institutional modernisation to stabilise the CCP and restore its legitimacy. Chapter 6 then turns to the Cultural Revolution, which Suettinger explores as a profoundly destructive yet transformative chapter in Hu's political development. The chaos and violence of this period forced Hu to confront the CCP's entrenched dysfunctions while enduring personal and professional hardships.

The central chapters of Suettinger's book (Chapters 7-9) focus on Hu Yaobang's tenure as General Secretary during the 1980s, a period marked by his ambitious efforts to address the CCP's structural and ideological deficiencies. In Chapter 7, Suettinger explores the immediate challenges Hu faced upon assuming leadership, particularly the need to rehabilitate victims of the Cultural Revolution. This effort was not only a moral imperative but also a strategic move to restore the Party's legitimacy and heal the divisions caused by years of ideological excess. Suettinger meticulously details how Hu initiated anti-corruption campaigns and sought to enhance transparency and accountability within the Party's ranks. These initiatives reflected Hu's broader vision of a CCP capable of modernising governance while maintaining ideological coherence, ensuring its continued relevance amid China's rapidly evolving socio-economic landscape.

Chapter 8 delves deeper into Hu's reformist agenda, highlighting his efforts to tackle systemic injustices and modernise governance structures. Suettinger emphasises how Hu's reforms extended beyond administrative adjustments to encompass a fundamental rethinking of the Party's role in society. By addressing historical wrongs and advocating for more inclusive and participatory governance, Hu sought to adapt the CCP to the demands of a rapidly changing China. However, Suettinger also illustrates how these efforts increasingly alienated conservative factions within the Party, who perceived Hu's initiatives as destabilising threats to their entrenched power and the Party's ideological unity.

In Chapter 9, Suettinger examines the culmination of these tensions, as conservative factions, wary of the risks posed by Hu's reforms, systematically undermined his authority. These factions adeptly weaponised ideological narratives – most notably accusations of “bourgeois liberalisation” – to frame Hu's initiatives as existential threats to Party stability. Combined with calculated procedural manoeuvres, these efforts led to Hu's political marginalisation. Suettinger's account of Deng Xiaoping's shifting stance is particularly incisive, showing how

Deng initially supported Hu's reformist vision but recalibrated his position as conservative elements consolidated their influence. Deng's eventual withdrawal of support is presented as a decisive moment in Hu's downfall, underscoring the precariousness of reform efforts in the CCP's rigid hierarchy.

Through these three chapters, Suettinger vividly illustrates the precarious balance reformers like Hu must strike between personal conviction and systemic constraints. Hu's steadfast advocacy for transparency and accountability frequently clashed with the Party's reliance on secrecy and centralised control, exposing the inherent contradictions within his reformist vision. By chronicling Hu's resignation in 1987, Suettinger highlights the factional resistance and institutional inertia that stymied reform within the CCP, making Hu's political trajectory emblematic of the challenges faced by reformers in rigid authoritarian systems.

The concluding chapter examines Hu Yaobang's death in 1989 and its far-reaching consequences for both the CCP and Chinese society. Suettinger situates Hu's passing within the broader political and social tensions of the reform era, highlighting how the unprecedented wave of public mourning became a focal point for widespread discontent. This reaction, Suettinger argues, transformed Hu's legacy into both a rallying cry for reform and a symbol of the CCP's entrenched structural resistance to substantive change. By linking Hu's death to the unresolved contradictions of the reform era, Suettinger underscores the enduring resonance of his reformist vision and its implications for China's political trajectory.

In *The Conscience of the Party*, Robert L. Suettinger achieves a remarkable synthesis of biographical insight and systemic analysis, crafting a study that transcends the confines of a traditional political biography. By portraying Hu Yaobang's life as both a personal odyssey and a reflection of the ideological and institutional currents within the CCP, Suettinger offers a compelling framework for understanding the complexities of reform within authoritarian regimes. This dual approach elevates the book to the status of a landmark contribution to the study of modern Chinese history and authoritarian governance.

A particular strength of Suettinger's work lies in his ability to balance vivid narrative detail with incisive theoretical analysis. His nuanced depiction of Hu as a reformer driven by ethical leadership and personal conviction is juxtaposed against the structural realities of the CCP – a party that consistently prioritised stability over substantive transformation. By exploring the tensions between individual agency and systemic inertia, Suettinger not only illuminates the challenges faced by reformers such as Hu but also sheds light on the broader dynamics that constrain change in authoritarian systems.

The book's ability to transcend the particularities of Hu's career and illuminate the universal dilemmas of reform in constrained systems solidifies its position as an essential resource for scholars of Chinese politics and comparative governance alike. By capturing the intricate dynamics of reform and resistance, *The Conscience of the Party* stands as a profound contribution to the broader discourse on political transformation in authoritarian contexts.