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## Hu Yaobang, Ex-Party Chief in China, Dies at 73

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES APRIL 16, 1989

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Hu Yaobang, who helped navigate China away from orthodox Marxism and led the world's largest Communist Party for six years until he was forced to resign in disgrace in January 1987, died today, the Government announced. He was 73 years old.

The official New China News Agency said Mr. Hu died of complications from a heart attack suffered on April 8, when he reportedly collapsed during a Politburo meeting. The agency tonight distributed a glowing obituary of Mr. Hu, presumably at least in part to divert criticism that the party had mistreated him.

Mr. Hu's vigor and impetuosity carried him from a humble peasant family, which he left at age 14 to join the Communist guerrilla forces fighting in China's civil war, to the summit of power in the capital. And yet the same characteristics ultimately doomed him, for other officials chafed at his tendency to make startling statements without thinking them through or consulting his colleagues. Had Few Sacred Cows

Nothing was sacred to Mr. Hu, not the memory of Mao Zedong, not even chopsticks. On a trip to Inner Mongolia in 1984, he suggested that the Chinese might start using Western utensils.

"We should prepare more knives and forks, buy more plates and sit around the

table to eat Chinese food in the Western style, that is, each from his own plate," he urged. "By doing so, we can avoid contagious diseases."

Mr. Hu dropped the idea after his startled colleagues reproached him for criticizing a Chinese way of life.

In a nation where caution is often prized, he was the exception. Mr. Hu was one of the first Chinese leaders to abandon the Mao suit in favor of jacket and tie. And when he was asked which of Mao's thoughts were applicable in China's efforts to modernize its economy, he is reported to have replied: "I think, none." Right Arm to Deng Xiaoping

Mr. Hu played a critical role in helping his long-time mentor, Deng Xiaoping, gain and consolidate power in the late 1970's. In the early- and mid-1980's, he was in charge of day-to-day matters during China's liberalization.

And yet his extraordinary career was overshadowed by its even more extraordinary end: the blur in December 1986 and January 1987 that included tumultuous student demonstrations, a torrent of criticisms against him by top-level officials, his resignation, and the subsequent campaign against "bourgeois liberalization," or Western democratic influences.

His resignation came to be a milestone in post-Mao China, for several reasons. It showed that resistance to rapid change and personal style was considerable, especially among "old revolutionaries" and military officials. And it upset the plans for an orderly succession under which Mr. Hu could have taken over from Mr. Deng as paramount leader, instead opening the way for the rise of more cautious officials like Li Peng, now Prime Minister. Resignation and Crackdown

The "resignation" of Mr. Hu and the subsequent crackdown seemed to harm the party's credibility and to bolster his own. He became viewed, particularly by intellectuals, as a man who refused to bend with the political winds and who had paid the price.

"I am not a man of iron," Mr. Hu was once reported to have said. "I am a man of passion, of flesh and blood." It was a fair assessment of a leader who was so focused on change and the future that he neglected his flank.

In the period in which he served as top official of the party, from 1981 to 1987, Mr. Hu was often in the shadow of Mr. Deng. Thomas Chan, a China scholar at the University of Hong Kong, noted that while he was outspoken, Mr. Hu never transcended the process of collective decision-making.

Still, as time went on and Mr. Deng began to withdraw from day-to-day

management of the country, it was Mr. Hu as much as anyone who tugged China toward market economics and a more open political system. In some ways Mr. Hu seemed to resemble his mentor. Like Mr. Deng, Mr. Hu was barely five feet three inches tall, but fired with enormous energy and pragmatism. Criticism in the Military

Associates in the party and the military criticized Mr. Hu for moving too fast toward the market and for his tolerance of dissidents. Even Mr. Deng turned against him after students began demonstrating in several cities and calling for greater democracy.

Mr. Hu was born in November 1915 in Liuyang City, Hunan Province, the remote south-central region of spicy food and rebellious farmers. His parents were poor peasants and as a child he apparently never attended school, although he later taught himself to read. He took part in his first rebellion at age 12, and at 14 he ran away from home to join the Communists.

In 1934 and 1935, Mr. Hu was one of the youngest participants in the legendary Long March, during which the Communist rebels fled on foot 6,000 miles from southeast China to their new base in northwest China. Later he became an army political officer and quickly impressed his superior, Mr. Deng. After the Communist victory, Mr. Hu followed Mr. Deng to Beijing and became head of the Communist Party's organization for young people.

After Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Mr. Deng fell from power and Mr. Hu fell with him. His head was shaved and he was sent to the countryside to tend livestock. Mr. Deng was restored to power from 1973 to 1976, and Mr. Hu's career was resuscitated for that period. Then Mr. Deng and Mr. Hu were purged again in early 1976, near the end of the Cultural Revolution. A Landmark Meeting

In 1977, after Mao died and the country was seeking new directions, Mr. Deng and Mr. Hu began a slow return. At a landmark Central Committee meeting at the end of 1978, Mr. Hu was not only named to the Politburo but also head of the party's organization and propaganda departments. Mr. Hu won influence and helped consolidate Mr. Deng's rise to preeminence. His own star was also soaring.

He was named General Secretary of the Party, and in 1981 he succeeded Hua Guofeng as Party Chairman, then the top position. A year later his title was changed back to General Secretary and that became the highest post in the party.

His downfall came in January 1987, amid a flurry of secret meetings that are

still not entirely understood. On Jan. 16, 1987, a somber television announcer read a statement that Mr. Hu had resigned after making "a self-criticism of his mistakes on major issues of political principles in violation of the party's principle of collective leadership."

Mr. Hu subsequently went into seclusion, and Beijing Review reported in 1988 that he spent his time reading reminiscences of China's revolutionary marshals, practicing calligraphy and walking long distances for exercise.

Mr. Hu is believed to be survived by his wife, Li Zhao, four children and numerous grandchildren.

A version of this obituary appears in print on April 16, 1989, on Page 1001038 of the National edition with the headline: Hu Yaobang, Ex-Party Chief in China, Dies at 73.