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Understanding Elite Politics Through Relentless
Research: Warren Sun's *Hua Guofeng Nianpu*,
Chronology of Hua Guofeng (1971–1981)

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Understanding Elite Politics Through Relentless Research: Warren Sun's *Hua Guofeng Nianpu*, Chronology of Hua Guofeng (1971–1981)

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Abstract

This Working Paper is a pre-publication review of an immense documentary collection prepared over the past 25 years by Warren Sun, Adjunct Associate Professor at Monash University and Affiliate Member of the Sydney CSC. It is based on the intellectual premise that elite politics in the CCP cannot be understood without deep penetration into the details of political decision-making and conflict. In its absence, simplistic narratives emerge and become widely accepted, especially when the Party itself is creating the basis for the narrative. This is most prevalent for the immediate post-Mao period as a Hua Guofeng-Deng Xiaoping struggle between different ideological lines and in the profound misunderstanding of Hua as a limited, merely transitional political leader.

Hua nianpu uses a wide range of sources to uncover details that contest such views. These include: the contemporary PRC public record; official documentary collections; internal Party documents including unpublished speeches and compendia of circulars at major Party meetings; memoirs, oral accounts, and recollections published in the PRC by or about leaders; studies by Party history scholars in PRC journals; more-adventurous books published in Hong Kong by Party historians and former officials; interviews with scholars and retired officials; and unique interviews with officials who worked as secretaries or as aides to very senior figures and their family members, especially members of Hua's family. However, these sources have limitations that must be considered critically and discussed in terms of what they can and cannot provide. Taken together the detailed information compiled in *Hua nianpu* undermines central features of the accepted narrative, most notably by showing that the 1978 work conference and the subsequent Third Plenum were joint Hua-Deng ventures to advance modernization, and when unanticipated developments weakened Hua, Deng did not act

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against him. Instead, he worked to lower tensions and to return the focus to their original joint plan.

Hua nianpu is a major basis for our joint book project, *Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping, and the Dismantling of Maoism*. But this *nianpu* is entirely Professor Sun's creation and exacting work. The target for submission of both these projects to their respective publishers is early 2025.

Understanding Elite Politics Through Relentless Research: Warren Sun's *Hua Guofeng Nianpu*, Chronology of Hua Guofeng (1971–1981)

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Review of Warren Sun's *Chronology of Hua Guofeng (1971-1981)*

Full online version, University of Sydney China Studies Centre, 3-million-plus Chinese characters, about 2,500-plus pages.

Kindle e-book version, same content as online version.

Condensed book version, Taipei: Wunan tushu chuban 五南圖書出版. 450,000 Chinese characters, about 375 pages.

The distinguished historian Wang Gungwu strikes at the heart of the difficulties in adequately understanding the complicated and elusive course of Chinese Communist elite politics:

“Reality is never the same as historians’ portrayals of events. Nothing is ever clear-cut and, unless you see some of the messiness behind decisions and debates, in making judgments you will always either over-simplify or fit-an-agenda that exaggerates for political or moral purposes. Unfortunately, most people have no time to read the details and are content with judgments that are officially asserted or most widely believed.”

In several senses, Warren Sun's immense *nianpu* of Mao's successor as CCP chairman deals directly with the conundrum Professor Wang identifies, during a particularly misunderstood period of Chinese leadership politics. Despite the availability of an enormous amount of contemporary PRC information, details on the messiness of the decisions and the conflicts during this period largely only emerged after the fact, and accounts of these details often suffer from similar messiness. The difficulties in understanding are especially poignant because “judgments that are officially asserted or most widely believed” have persisted well after the availability of new disconfirming detail. The key problem is the link between what the Party says and what becomes the accepted narrative, notably among foreign scholars. This has been exceptionally pointed with respect to the politics surrounding Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping in the immediate post-Mao years. With the victors getting the spoils, the narrative included creating a false version of Party history. The CCP's June 1981 Historical

Resolution set the terms: Hua made many mistakes as leader, was responsible for leftist errors and wasting time, and clearly could not continue on as Party chairman; the crucial turning point was the December 1978 Third Plenum when Deng, while not specifically cited, in Party lore took control. While some recent publications avoid aspects of this official verdict on Hua, the field as a whole, and broader interested publics, have basically accepted this narrative that describes Hua as an ineffective figure too tied to Mao's legacy and who was bested by Deng in a power struggle, which, in turn, led to the latter launching reform and opening at the Third Plenum. All of this is extremely misleading at best.

Who was Hua Guofeng? Putting it this way may seem odd, but it points to the uncertainties about Hua that affect his status and authority among the CCP elite, the PRC public, foreign officials dealing with the regime, and outside observers. The critical deficit in Hua's claim to leadership is his lack of a significant role in the CCP's revolutionary struggle that resulted in the 1949 victory. This is magnified by the fact that Mao did not bring him to Beijing until 1971 during the Cultural Revolution decade—a period of great distrust and uncertainty among the elite. A suggestive reflection is offered by Marshal Ye Jianying who, despite having sat on the Politburo with Hua from 1973, confessed he did not understand his junior's "political color" until spring 1976. While the top elite, including Deng, were deeply impressed and grateful that Hua had arrested the "gang of four" when he assumed the post of CCP chairman, considerable concern remained over where he might lead the Party, especially over whether he would permit Deng to return to work. The contrast, of course, is Deng himself, a very significant contributor to the success of 1949, who combined three potent claims for the leadership—1.) as one of the few surviving Party leaders to receive the highest honor of "Chairman Mao's close comrade-in-arms," 2.) paradoxically, however, given that he had suffered (though not greatly) at Mao's hands during the hated Cultural Revolution, and 3.) in 1975 Mao had placed him in charge of overseeing a moderate policy shift for the regime, the results of which were seen as an indication of the Party's best future course. *Hua nianpu* grapples with how this vast difference in revolutionary prestige did not disrupt Hua's leadership before the Third Plenum, yet it was weaponized by Deng in late 1979 to initiate a quiet purge of his younger colleague.

A chronology has the benefit of focusing on the sequence of events crucial to political life and offers a sharper understanding of the outcomes that emerge from a messy process. Nowhere is this more relevant than in the case of the Third Plenum at the end of 1978 and the November-December central work conference that preceded it—41 days of intense but unanticipated political contention. As this *nianpu* shows, these events did not occur as depicted by the accepted narrative: there was no Hua-Deng conflict leading to a Deng victory, and there is no record of Deng launching reform and opening. Opening to the outside world had been one of Hua's key policy programs from early in his rule, while reform, never mentioned in the Third Plenum communiqué, largely only amounted to limited ideas that had been canvassed during a summer 1978 symposium on the economy, a symposium at which Deng played no role. Moreover, the work conference and plenum can be considered a joint Hua-Deng project to change the focus of Party work to economic development, while downplaying theoretical issues. Much is known about how the work conference became a “runaway meeting” due to appeals from old revolutionaries for the reversal of unjust Cultural Revolution verdicts and demands from liberal intellectuals to confront contentious ideological questions, notably the “two wherevers” editorial that had appeared early during Hua's term and that notionally pledged obeisance to whatever Mao had decreed. The detailed day-by-day account of *Hua nianpu* provides a nuanced understanding of the intentions and consequences of the actions of both Hua and Deng in this intense, rapidly changing environment.

Despite the array of sources, given the constraints of Party discipline and the secrecy surrounding the Party Center *Hua nianpu* cannot tell the full story. As revealed throughout the *nianpu*, what actually transpired in meetings of the Politburo Standing Committee is rarely revealed and, as indicated by contemporary private notes of a key conference participant, when the Standing Committee met with the leaders of the regional groups it was difficult, if not impossible, to detect differences among the top leaders. But what does come through is the paradoxical fact that during a meeting derailed by forces from outside the leadership, those forces accepted the ultimate authority of the Center, appealing for guidance during meetings with the Standing Committee and calculating off-stage what the Center would and would not accept. A further paradox is that the key disruptive impulses were encouraged by Hua and Deng, but they naively did not expect their actions would upset the shift in focus. Work under

Hu Yaobang on reversing unjust verdicts, which had been encouraged much more by Hua than by Deng (who generally had distanced himself from the issue), created a situation whereby those aggrieved that specific cases had not been reversed used the three days set aside by Hua for broader discussions to push their discontent rather than to focus on the work conference's economic agenda. Even more clearly linked to Hua is the important 1976 Tiananmen incident, which was reversed cautiously by the Beijing Municipal Party Committee on the eve of the work conference with the direct authority of Hua. Strikingly, Hua initially was diffident about emphasizing his role in realizing one of the elite's greatest desires, but he soon provided public support, and on November 25 he gave a plenary speech confirming other major reversal cases that would deeply impress his audience. Upon returning home that evening, Hu Yaobang excitedly told his son: "Chairman Hua has provided an inspirational vision that will break through past sufferings to create a new historical trend." The sentiment may be a reflection of Hu's excitable personality, but similar sentiments by other participants left Hua standing particularly high on November 25.

Circumstances changed greatly within 24 hours, however. Yu Guangyuan, who, in his account of the work conference two decades later, hailed Hua's speech as almost unprecedented by any top Party leader and describes Hua as one "who could solicit others' opinions [leaving virtually] no problem [un]solved so thoroughly and explicitly," on the evening of the speech took a step that damaged Hua's position. Disappointed that Hua had not addressed ideological issues, together with another liberal participant, Yu decided to prominently raise these issues, including the "two whatevers" editorial of February 1977 that notionally demanded complete obeisance to Mao's demands, and they further decided to criticize Vice Chairman Wang Dongxing. Wang, according to Yu Guangyuan and his liberal colleague, had been the main force behind the "whateverists" and further, he had engaged in sharp conflict with progressive theorists since spring 1978. Although there is no evidence that such criticism was undertaken with anti-Hua objectives, there is no way Hua could not have been affected given that the problem had occurred during his leadership. What was Deng's reaction to this unanticipated turn of events? Contrary to narratives that claim that Deng used the upheaval to eliminate his enemies and to push a reform policy, detailed evidence shows something quite different—an effort by Deng to calm things down, limit disunity, and bring the meeting back to what he and Hua jointly had initially set out to

accomplish. When the attack on Wang led to criticism of three other sitting Politburo members, Deng proposed that there be only limited criticism and that they remain on the Politburo. In his speech at the closing of the work conference, Deng ordered that those drafting his address avoid the “two whatevers,” and the content of his address reveals a striking continuity with Hua’s pre-conference instructions to the drafters of his own initial speech—an emphasis on “emancipating the mind” to pursue economic modernization. But the most telling aspect of Deng’s efforts was his attention to the consequences of looking too closely at the Cultural Revolution, which was unacceptable given that it could damage Mao’s prestige. There is no evidence that Hua dissented from this position, but Deng was the strongest pro-Mao voice, and he would remain so in the future as well. Although Hua’s position had weakened, he remained a significant figure, with Hu Yaobang continuing to shower him with strong praise after the plenum.

What sources does *Hua nianpu* rely on? For more than 25 years Professor Sun has assiduously compiled a vast array of material concerning Hua Guofeng. This did not begin with a comprehensive understanding of all the distortions in the accepted narrative about the seminal 1978 work conference and the Third Plenum or knowledge of many other misrepresentations of events involving Hua, and he had no overall assessment of Hua’s political performance. What was clear, however, was that the basic official claim of an ineffective left-leaning leader was unsustainable, and a detailed reconstruction of Hua’s activities was necessary not only to correct this false narrative but also to delve more deeply into the true nature of CCP elite politics during this tumultuous and transformative period. As appropriate for a *nianpu*, the sources are basically cited when they relate to Hua’s decisions and political standing, but given Hua’s position as chairman from 1976 to 1981, this also naturally addresses the most critical aspects of Party politics. Moreover, *Hua nianpu* also covers the entire period, from 1971 when Mao brought him to Beijing in the context of the Lin Biao affair and includes his arrest of the “gang of four” in October 1976, revealing significant aspects of his early life at the Center that are rarely covered in the existing foreign literature.

The range of sources canvassed throughout 1971-81 is immense: contemporary openly published speeches, editorials, communiqués, reports on major events etc.; subsequent official collections of Party documents, biographies, *Selected Works* and *nianpu* of

prominent leaders; internal documents, including Hua's unpublished speeches; extensive compendia of circulars and speeches at major Party meetings and fora, notably the theory forum following the Third Plenum, and the autumn 1980 discussions on the proposed Historical Resolution that involved diverse attacks on Hua; memoirs, oral accounts, recollections published in the PRC by or about leaders who interacted with Hua; provincial sources and archives covering leaders and events at that level that involved Hua, including speeches by top-level local leaders conveying the outcomes of central meetings; foreign diplomatic archives and media coverage involving Hua; studies by Party history scholars in the PRC; more-adventurous books published in Hong Kong by both scholars and former officials; the extensive output of what might be called the Hu Yaobang industry, notably the 1,390-page *Hu Yaobang sixiang nianpu*, also published in Hong Kong; revealing interviews with many of the same serious Party historians and retired officials; and unique interviews with officials who worked as secretaries or as aides to senior figures and their family members, especially Hua's family.

Even though in and of themselves they cannot penetrate the messy details that emerge around them, openly published contemporary sources concerning major developments are essential. The classic example, so central to elite misunderstandings as well as to the attacks on Hua, is the weaponized February 7, 1977, "two whatevers" editorial. Reading the editorial itself points in a different direction. As a directive to Party cadres, its title is "Study Documents Well and Grasp the Keylink." To what does this refer? Two documents are cited, Mao's 1956 "On the Ten Great Relations," the most bureaucratic essay ever penned by the late Chairman and Deng's favorite Mao piece, and Hua's December 1976 speech to the second Dazhai conference that emphasizes economic construction. The "two whatevers" were added merely to express general fealty to Mao, not to block Deng's return (which had already been approved by the Politburo on January 6), nor to create a rigid framework preventing innovation. Drawing on sources from those directly involved in writing the editorial, *Hua nianpu* demonstrates the indeed disorganized process leading to the published draft— further underscoring the dilemma of both hailing Mao's legacy but moving away from his policies. This is expressed most graphically by Li Xin, the theorist most responsible for the editorial, when he was under attack at the 1979 theory forum: "Holding high Mao's banner when preparing for Deng's return, but not being able to say [Mao] was wrong

in criticizing Deng was a big problem; no matter how you put it, it was not satisfactory.” Most revealing, however, is Deng’s use of a term even more extreme than the “two whatevers” couplet in the 1977 editorial when he determined the content of Ye Jianying’s September 1979 speech celebrating the 30th anniversary of the PRC: “[All] policies formulated by Chairman Mao were correct, our mistakes came from not insisting on [his] line.”

While it may be observed that the official documentary collections of events during this period are less valuable than non- or lesser official PRC sources because they are widely known to scholars of post-1949 China and because the authors are obligated to adhere to the Party narratives, they are nevertheless invaluable. Here I focus on the official *nianpu* to illustrate both their utility as well as the politics involved. The highest-level Party *nianpu* produced by the Central Documents Research Office (Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi) have only been bestowed on five leaders who were active during Hua’s period—Deng, Ye Jianying, Li Xiannian, Chen Yun, and Peng Zhen, and no subsequent leader since has yet been granted such a *nianpu*. It is only with the extensive and archival resources available to researchers in the Wenxian yanjiushi that such an extensive and detailed chronology is possible. Moreover, these *nianpu* underscore a political reality: Deng was a key actor across a range of areas but, apart from his role as "paramount leader" and in the military during the Hua period, he did not exercise any hands-on leadership. Li was deeply into economic management but a secondary political figure, Chen was significant but severely constrained by health issues, while Peng and Ye were politically limited by other political factors. Peng could not be denied a return to the leadership after the Third Plenum because of Hua’s support and his historic status, but, given the opposition of Deng and Chen, he could be denied Standing Committee membership in 1980 despite Hua’s support. The aged Ye began to fade in prominence after 1977 despite still having an influential voice at the Party Center, with his recorded activities over a longer period only slightly more than those by Chen. By late 1979 Ye was increasingly pushed aside due to his reluctance to see Hua removed, the details of which are presented by the non-official sources in Hua *nianpu*.

There is an important additional sense in which official *nianpu* are more revealing than other documentary collections, especially the *Selected Works* of top leaders. Such

nianpu were compiled after the subject has died, and thus they were significantly removed from the political demands of the earlier periods, while the *Selected Works* lay down the political line of the moment. Of course, *nianpu* are still subject to constraints—official narratives will not be frontally attacked, but more accuracy can be achieved. A case in point focuses on another aspect of the official narrative on the “two whatevers” when, on a September 1978 inspection visit to the Northeast, Deng made a rare reference (during this period) to the “whatevers” on September 16 in his comments to Party leaders of Jilin province. But the 1982 *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* begins with a critique of the “whatever” doctrine for denying the true meaning of Mao Thought and continues by stressing its threat to “truth from facts.” *Deng nianpu* published 22 years later, however, tells a different story. While similar criticism of the “two whatevers” is levelled, it only appears two-thirds through the text, essentially as a reference to the need to adhere to “truth from facts.” After listening to reports on provincial work, the bulk of Deng’s remarks focus on current economic issues in broad terms, something consistent with his other activities in the Northeast—as indicated by other entries in *Deng nianpu* as well as by other sources that are provided in *Hua nianpu*. In short, the *Selected Works* version presents a picture of Deng on the warpath against the “two whatevers” at a time when Hua was being attacked as an arch “whateverist,” while the *Deng nianpu* versions convey prosaic exchanges with local leaders on modernization questions. Yet while *Deng nianpu* reports on other significant events also provide nuanced understandings, in important cases it only inserts existing *Selected Works* versions.

Moving further away from the strictly official documents to other publications in the PRC presents a complex variety of insights into Hua and the surrounding elite politics. All such publications had to be attentive to what could be said, given the political situation of the times. Depending on the circumstances, the publisher involved, and the boldness of the individual official, restricted or revealing accounts emerge. A case in point is Gu Mu, a key figure in Hua’s policies to open China to the outside world. In his memoirs, published by the Central Documents Press, Gu discusses the process of opening, but with hardly any mention of Hua. Gu later confessed it had been necessary to attribute everything to Deng. Similarly, also concerning opening but this time dealing with the decision to authorize the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in April 1979, a policy promoted in much of PRC literature as a jewel in Deng’s reform crown and

accepted as such in foreign discussions, received a very different assessment from Wu Nansheng, the first leader of the Shenzhen SEZ. In an oral account published by noted investigative journalist Yang Jisheng, Wu discusses how Hua, not Deng, was the key figure in approving Guangdong province's proposals, and he goes on to observe that "the worst thing in our Party is to only speak of one person for good things [i.e., Deng], and to only speak of another person for bad things [i.e., Hua Guofeng in this context]." Another feature of Wu's account is that it applies also to the post-Third Plenum period, during which, in some narratives, Hua is reduced to a figurehead. Another example of Hua's impact during this period appears in a detailed compendium of rural policy decisions that reveals how Hua took the first steps in what would become household contracting, another "reform jewel" misleadingly attributed to Deng.

Publications in the PRC, and those pushing the envelope into sensitive subjects in Hong Kong, do more than correct distortions concerning who should receive credit for the achievements of the regime. They also allow for nuanced understandings of personal relations among leaders. Here I focus on Hu Yaobang and his interactions with Hua and Deng. The narrative of Hu as Deng's protégé can be understood given the long history of the two men, going as far back as when Hu served in Deng's revolutionary army. Their fortunes ebbed and flowed in a similar rhythm during the Cultural Revolution, and Hu was particularly active in supporting Deng's return to work. Yet, once Hu was given an important position by Hua in March 1977, his work relations were much more aligned with him. More remarkably, a close personal relationship, based in considerable part on a common desire to prevent a return to the excesses of the past, flowered between them. Hu's relations with Deng, in contrast, were of a different nature: still based on enormous respect for the great old revolutionary but marked by important policy differences and a decided gap in status. Zheng Zhongbing, an intellectual who admired and worked under Hu in the Party Department of Propaganda (Publicity), puts it succinctly: "Hu and Hua were basically the same, they spoke a common language, but for Deng the relationship was only about work and playing cards." Detailed evidence about both relationships, including Hu's tensions with Deng and his reluctance to remove Hua, are plentiful in *Hua nianpu*, often based on Hu's own *sixiang nianpu*.

This leaves the question of Hu's adaptation to the replacement of Hua by Deng as the considerably more powerful CCP leader, a process which also saw Hu replace Hua as

the nominal Party number one. There are puzzles here that *Hua nianpu* cannot resolve given the lack of evidence, but *Hua nianpu* does provide some relevant considerations. First, there is no definitive information on why Hu was promoted to Party secretary-general during the 1978 work conference; certainly support from progressive participants was a factor, while everything else suggests all three key leaders, Hua, Deng, and Ye Jianying, voiced support, but it is not mere speculation to suggest Deng's backing would have been more pragmatic than that of the others. Even more uncertainty exists about the process of placing Hu in the higher position of general secretary in February 1980 and Party chairman in June 1981, although it can be assumed both were ultimately Deng's decision. But what comes through clearly in *Hua nianpu* is Hu's reluctance throughout. Contrary to notions of CCP politicians inevitably grasping for greater power, as described by his son, Hu Yaobang found the larger authority of secretary-general a burden, an emotionally draining experience, whereas others close to him felt that the time that he served under Hua was the happiest time of his career. When Deng insisted on removing Hua and replacing him with Hu, the reaction, together with that of others of the same generation such as Zhao Ziyang, was to try to mitigate the situation, in Hu's case by proposing a rotating chairmanship rather than to assume the role himself. Earlier, Hu had already accepted Deng's dictates, including leading the attack on Hua at the nine Politburo meetings criticism in November 1980. This outcome reflected the belief in the superiority of old revolutionaries in basic Party culture that had always been there during Hua's leadership, but had not been activated earlier. While speculative, to the extent Deng chose Hu, it indicates a strong sense of Hu's underlying obeisance to this culture.

Another critical source for *Hua nianpu* is China's Party history establishment. Those who have dealt with PRC Party history scholars admire their professionalism and devotion to empirical evidence in a "truth-from-facts" approach. Of course, there are differences among them, and readers of their works must evaluate individual claims based on comprehensive evidence. These historians have contributed to this *nianpu* in two related ways, through books and articles published in Party history journals, and through interviews that allow further examination of what they have written and discussions of other unresolved questions. A major development was the spread of useful Party history journals in the 1980s that flowered with some of the most revealing historical analysis in the early 1990s. Of course, as with everything in China, there were

constraints, but there were also telling modifications of pre-existing accepted narratives. With regard to Hua, the most comprehensive rebuttal of the conventional view is by Party historian Professor Han Gang. In his “Some Historical Facts about Hua,” Professor Han subjects the major charges against Hua to close contextual analysis, demonstrating the inadequacy of each. It should be noted, however, that Han does criticize Hua for his presumed role in the execution of 50 or so political counterrevolutionaries in early 1977; similarly, *Hua nianpu* does not simply provide material that is favorable to Hua. The *nianpu* draws on a wide range of Party history journals, but *Yanhuang chunqiu* deserves special mention. It was founded in 1991 largely by veteran Party members seeking a better understanding of the complex history of the Chinese revolution. It quickly became one of China’s most influential journals, and its liberal political outlook allowed the publication of articles that challenged orthodox Party history. Concerning Hua, in addition to Han Gang’s article, a significant number of other pieces clarify important aspects of Hua’s career. Beginning in the late 2000s, however, *Yanhuang chunqiu* suffered pressure and disruption from the higher authorities, and with the mandated change of the editorial board in 2016, it now no longer challenges Party orthodoxy. After Xi Jinping’s 2013 attack on “historical nihilism,” there has been wider reluctance for Party history publications to be creative.

Finally, writings of and interviews with secretaries, other work staff, and families of major Party figures, including Chen Yun, Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, Ji Dengkui, and Wan Li, have been enormously valuable. It is also worth noting that some Party historians established close personal ties to major leaders, to the extent of being present at the passing of both Hua and Politburo member Wu De. Here I focus on two of the most significant family connections in the compiling of *Hua nianpu*, Ye Xuanji, Marshal Ye’s influential nephew, and Hua’s family members, including his widow and sons.

It should be said, however, as with the assessment of any materials on CCP elite politics but one arguably especially applicable to the views of close family members, that a degree of reserve and close checking with the available contextual information is required. Indeed, this is especially the case with Ye Xuanji who has admitted a lack of information on key events and has presented inconsistent views across various publications and interviews. But what he does convey is his uncle’s strong commitment

to Hua and his distress about Hua's removal, together with an inability, or a strong disinclination, to do anything about it. Ye Xuanji also insightfully characterizes the old marshal's real strength as his ability to influence considerations within the Standing Committee while basically avoiding organizing any action at lower levels, a situation that clearly made him valuable to Deng, yet he could be easily pushed aside when Deng objected to his support of Hua. In a fascinating 2010 discussion with several "princeling" children of other leaders during the Hua period, Ye Xuanji made several striking comments, while arguably not nuanced enough, still carry an underlying truth. Concerning cooperation between Deng and Chen Yun: "[after the Third Plenum] Deng and Chen joined forces to bring down Hua, [but] that was the only thing; on other matters the two of them were not together." More broadly: "To put it bluntly, one is Chen Yun and one is Peng Zhen, Deng did not want these two people to return to high positions." This last observation underscores how difficult it was for even high Party leaders to understand the reality of top-level politics. Before the June 1981 plenum when Hua was removed as chairman, the truth inadvertently dribbled out. Chen had believed Hua had blocked him from becoming a Politburo member at the 1977 Party Congress, now he learned that in fact it was Deng.

The Hua family is different from Ye Xuanji, who played an important role in carrying messages to various Party leaders. They were not directly involved in Party politics, although they were drawn in as observers when visitors came to Hua's home after Deng had launched his quiet coup against him at the end of 1979. Their insights include these events and surrounding rumors in 1979-80, descriptions of Hua's character, and Hua's son's negotiations with representatives of the Party Center at the time of his father's death in 2008, which is discussed below. Here I focus on what Hua told his family about events at key moments, and thus how they might be understood in the context of unfolding Party politics. First, concerning the concluding stage of the 1978 work conference when the "two whatevers" were highlighted by Yu Guangyuan and others. According to the recollections of one of his sons, Hua reported that Deng had sought to reassure him that this discussion was not aimed at him, saying the real bad guys in the episode, Wang Dongxing and Li Xin, were the targets. Hua replied that because it had occurred on his watch, he had responsibility and he proceeded to engage in a self-criticism on the final day of the conference. Although his speech was generally well-received by the participants and lauded by Ye Jianying on the same day as an example

of the proper response of a Party leader, the link between Hua and the “two whatevers” was surely enhanced in the consciousness of the elite. As for Deng, by avoiding the issue in his closing speech, he consciously did not reinforce any possible latent attack on Hua. Deng’s priority at the time was stability and unity, as he had repeatedly emphasized at the conference, particularly to calm foreign observers concerned about China’s uncertain political situation.

Fast forward three months to the conclusion of the theory forum and Deng’s speech on the “four cardinal principles” that was at odds with, and sometimes even countered, the progressive aspects of the Third Plenum. With relatively liberal outcomes expected from the theory forum, the plan had been for Hua to deliver the concluding speech, and theorists at the Party School were assigned to draft it in such a mode. But when progressive theorists criticized aspects of traditional CCP practice, various leaders, including Hua and Hu Yaobang, became concerned. Deng concluded that such criticism had to cease, so he came up with the four cardinal principles, affirming Party control and the dictatorship of the proletariat. When the time came, Hua informed his son, Deng approached him to deliver the speech. Hua was taken aback, and after consulting with some liberal thinkers, told Deng he could not quite understand the theory involved, but, in light of the evolving power situation at the time, suggested to Deng that he deliver it himself. As events unfolded, it became clear Hu Yaobang was equally concerned about the nature of Deng’s speech, but he essentially accepted it in as limited a sense as he could get away with. Looking at it from the perspective of the transition of power already underway but not yet in a comprehensive manner, it is plausible, although speculative, that this was a key factor confirming in Deng’s mind that Hua had to go. In any case, when Hua was eventually removed from the chairmanship, it was not as a neo-Maoist but rather as a leader who had done his best to move away from Maoist politics during a very complicated period.

In reviewing Hua’s career as it is so assiduously laid out in *Hua nianpu*, the most disturbing aspect is not the misunderstandings of particular events or even of the general distinction between Hua and Deng but rather the widely held belief that he was an inadequate leader, someone simply not up to the task. The worst offenders are actually foreign observers, including highly distinguished scholars, one of whom even had difficulty remembering the name of “the transitional guy.” Of course, Deng's real but

exaggerated leadership qualities contribute to such views, obviously together with his lengthy, essentially unchallenged, leadership. The same phenomenon exists in the PRC for various reasons. Reflecting the blackout of attention to Hua, Hu Yaobang's son, speaking at the 1997 Party Congress, observed: "I do not know how many of today's young people remember or understand Comrade Hua today, ... [but today] I am voting for him." Around the time of Hua's demotion, provincial Party leaders considered him a decent enough person, but one who lacked the necessary skills to be a Party leader. This, of course, was the message used against Hua in the process of delegitimizing him, but it also reflects the inbred Party culture in which senior revolutionaries have greater abilities and thus greater claims to power. Even those, such as Marshal Xu Xiangqian, who felt Hua was being treated poorly and questioned why Deng had to kick him out, had no clear answer about what Hua could have done in a situation where Deng was obviously the boss. The matter was simply settled by Deng's immense revolutionary status in the eyes of the elite.

However, the highest subsequent leaders of the PRC fully understood Hua's significance. Even Deng, in his own way, had a Hua complex. When he was persuaded to invite a despondent Hu Yaobang to visit following the latter's removal from power in 1987, Deng wanted to know whether Hu still had the same [high] opinion of Hua. Jiang Zemin visited Hua in hospital and told him he was the first leader to set China on its current course. Hu Jintao, together with all Politburo members in Beijing, visited Hua as he was dying, and Hu Jintao readily agreed to Hua's request that the Party make clear he had never sought to block Deng's return to work. Xi Jinping not only made the dramatic gesture of a very public handshake with Mme Hua at spring festival festivities in 2013 but he also authorized work on a yet-to-appear official biography of Hua. In 2021 on the anniversary of Hua's 100th birthday a high-profile celebration was held, publicly reversing the charges in the 1981 Historical Revolution.

Yet none of this can raise Hua out of relative historical oblivion nor was it intended to do so. According to Party tradition, upon a high leader's passing, a career assessment (*shengping*) is prepared, summarizing both his accomplishments and his shortcomings. In Hua's case, intense negotiations were held between Hua's son representing the family and central officials. The result was not only the removal of any reference to Hua obstructing Deng, but at the family's insistence no mention at all of Deng's name

would appear in the document. The *shengping* goes even further by reversing the historical judgment on Hua at the time of his removal. Now major credit for the arrest of the “gang of four,” which was grudgingly conceded in the 1981 document, was upgraded to accurately describe him as the *decisive* leader in that undertaking. Moreover, the areas in which he had been attacked were now, again correctly, reframed in terms of his initiatives that led to future successes. Yet this was hardly public, and it received only brief obscure mention in the media.

Despite Xi Jinping’s subsequent page 1 *People’s Daily* photo with Mme Hua and the 100th birthday celebration, these were brief blips on the horizon except for those who were especially interested. In the new 2022 Historical Resolution, essentially a paean to Xi, Deng and the 1981 Resolution retain honored places, but there is no room for Hua. CCP politics always places a priority on current leadership needs, which in turn means a place in the main historical narrative. Hua is not in that narrative as much as he should be. It is unlikely this will ever change very much, but serious scholars of Chinese politics require an accurate understanding of this history. There is no better place to start than with *Hua nianpu*.

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