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Where have you gone, Hua Guofeng?

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Let’s face it: Hua Guofeng just never could get any respect. He’s the former leader of China, but was sidelined by Deng Xiaoping and relegated to the ashbin of history: the triumph of mediocrity…the Gerry Ford of Chinese politics. His death last week was greeted with a chorus of “Who? He was still alive? No kidding. How’s Liu Xiang’s ankle?”

The great Han historian Sima Qian once wrote that a man’s death could be as weighty as Mt. Tai or as light as a feather. Hua’s death was eclipsed by the achilles tendon of a 20-something hurdler/professional product endorser.

Anyway, a quick round up of Hua remembrances, such as they are:

Blood and Treasure dismisses Hua as “Chairman Who?: The only Chinese leader to qualify as an answer in a pub quiz.”

Vincent Shih argues in support of the nepotism theory: Hua as Mao’s unacknowledged son.

The BBC gives a pretty straight-ahead timeline of Hua’s career, calling him “Mao’s loyal lieutenant.”

Mure Dickey writing in the Financial Times views Hua as an example of the ‘slavish sycophancy’ Mao sought in his subordinates, and includes an anecdote from the waning days of Hua’s rule when a young man looked up at a propaganda poster celebrating Mao’s famous passing of the torch (“With you in charge, I can rest easy”) and retorted: “With you in charge, I fart.”

No collection of Hua information would be complete without including Stefan Landsberger’s excellent collection of Hua Guofeng related prints at Stefan’s Chinese Propaganda Posters Pages. Black and White Cat has also put together some of Stefan’s posters into a Hua Guofeng montage.

In the NYT, Kenneth Lieberthal sums up Hua as “more a figure who was there when Chinese politics pivoted than himself being a pivotal figure.” Ouch. The Washington Post joins the, erm, fray calling Hua “an obscure functionary who briefly served as the handpicked successor to CCP chairman Mao Zedong.” Are you feeling the love? I know I am.

Joel Martinson at Danwei and the blog A shameful waste of madhouse time dig further into the Chinese reaction. Joel translates online commentary from Xinhuanet and excerpts from a short essay by Peking University law professor He Weifang while David Bandurski and Joseph Cheng at China Media Project offer an excellent overview of the coverage in the Chinese press.

Finally, The Guardian has perhaps the most complete and thoughtful obituary among the foreign media, arguing that while “Hua’s account of his mandate from Mao looked extremely shaky, there was logic behind his elevation.” Logic further explored in this essay (shameless self-promotion alert) at Jottings from the Granite Studio.