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Privately, More and More Chinese Say It's Past Time for Deng to Go

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF APRIL 17, 1989

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In a nation where there are no opinion polls to assess the popularity of national leaders, what people do with small bottles may be the best indication of the remarkable rise and fall in the popularity of Deng Xiaoping.

"Xiaoping" in spoken Chinese can mean "small bottle" - although the written character for "ping" in Mr. Deng's name is not the one used for "bottle" - and people seized on the symbolism a decade ago, when Mr. Deng was struggling to power and embodied the nation's hope for non-revolutionary prosperity. At that time, ordinary people registered their support for Mr. Deng by leaving small bottles in conspicuous places. These days, some people are expressing their feelings by smashing small bottles.

A decade ago, it was more talk than action, and these days, too, more people speak of breaking bottles than actually smash them. "What's the point?" explained a young man in Beijing. "If you smash it in public, you might get arrested, and if you smash it at home, you just have to sweep it up."

In any case, even Communist Party officials acknowledge that the public is growing tired of Mr. Deng. Some of the pent-up hostility has come into the open after the death Saturday of the former party leader Hu Yaobang, who was ousted two years ago after being criticized by Mr. Deng for tolerating intellectual

dissidents and student unrest. Deng's 'Stature Isn't Going Up'

In the early hours this morning at Tiananmen Square, the center of Beijing and the political focal point of China, white paper flowers fluttered in the breeze where mourners had left them to honor Mr. Hu. The only sign of litter was a freshly broken small bottle.

Public criticism of Mr. Deng remains a taboo in China, but in private it seems that few people have a kind word about him. Farmers blame him because they cannot get fertilizer. Workers blame him for the widespread corruption. Intellectuals blame him for ignoring education. And everybody blames him for rapidly rising prices.

"Everything is going up," according to a ditty now making the rounds in the capital. "Only Xiaoping's stature isn't going up" - a mocking reference to the fact that he is barely five feet tall.

The wave of discontent directed at Mr. Deng is an extraordinary come-down for a man who since 1978 has personally engineered China's "second revolution," including a policy of economic liberalization that has doubled people's real incomes in just a decade. Few people in the 20th century have changed so many people's lives by so much, overwhelmingly for the better. Reasons for Deng's Slump

Interviews in the last week with Chinese and with foreign diplomats and scholars suggest three reasons for the slump in Mr. Deng's popularity:

* There is general discontent over inflation, corruption, crime and shortages, and people blame Mr. Deng since he is the most powerful person in the nation. Incomes and living standards have risen enormously in China over the last decade, but aspirations have increased even more quickly.

* Many people believe that several of Mr. Deng's children have capitalized on their father's position in their business activities. Mr. Deng no longer seems to rise above the petty corruption and influence-peddling that people see all around them.

* Some say that Mr. Deng, 84 years old, has held onto power too long. People often compare him to the aging Mao Zedong of the mid-1970's, and say that he should completely retire and leave the stage. Called Victim of His Success

Implicit in many of the criticisms is the general perception that Mr. Deng has been superseded and outdated because of the very success of the liberalization process that he initiated.

"Deng may have been right for China a decade ago, but now the people have

gone beyond him," a Chinese journalist said. "It's a measure of how much China has changed in the last 10 years."

At Beijing University, where students have put up illegal posters mourning the death of Mr. Hu, there is an unmistakable edge to their grief.

"Overthrow the dictator," read one poster erected this morning. The authorities pulled it down hours later.

Another, pasted up Saturday night and meticulously copied by scores of students in small notebooks, bluntly declared, "The wrong person died."

When more than a dozen Beijing University students were loudly and simultaneously discussing their views with a foreign reporter on Saturday night, there was a sudden hush when the visitor asked what they thought of Mr. Deng. After a long pause, a woman asked, "Can't you tell?"

Wu Jiexiang, a 34-year-old rising star in the central party organization and the author of a laudatory biography of Mr. Deng, said he is convinced not only that Mr. Deng is a great statesman but that after 50 years the Chinese people will recognize his greatness in history. But for now, he said, the problem is that the Chinese are not used to leaders who spurn divine status.

"It's an irrational attitude," Mr. Wu said in an interview. "If he's not a god, he's a devil. Chairman Mao was a god, and ordinary people wanted another god. But they find out that Deng Xiaoping is a human being. No one could assume that role of a god, and so they think of him as a devil."

While ordinary Chinese principally complain about Mr. Deng on pocketbook issues, like inflation, some intellectuals make unflattering comparisons with Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader. They note that Mr. Gorbachev has gone much further in opening up the political system than has Mr. Deng, and they seem slightly embarrassed that they should envy anything in the Soviet Union.

Harry Harding, a China scholar at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said that some of the most enthusiastic proponents of further liberalization also have been disappointed because they no longer regard Mr. Deng as firmly in their camp.

"What a lot of the reformers complain about is the way Deng is obstructing reform," Mr. Harding said. "Obstructing leadership reform by failing to retire, and obstructing political and economic reform by his willingness to retrench rather than push forward at this critical time."

Mr. Deng is not the only Asian leader who has been accused of staying on too

long. In several of the rapidly developing countries in the region, particularly in Singapore, where Lee Kuan Yew has shaped and dominated politics for three decades, some domestic and foreign critics have argued that economic and education development have been so successful that the architect of the success should step down and give way to a younger, less authoritarian leader. Concern Over Succession

Yet in China the equation is far more complex, because people are apprehensive as well as impatient for the day when Mr. Deng will entirely give up control, especially if it happens suddenly on his death. Many Chinese worry that after Mr. Deng dies, no one may be able to control the nation and that the military might intervene.

Meanwhile, there is no indication that Mr. Deng's health is in trouble. Those who have met him say that while his hearing is failing and he is easily fatigued, he does not seem ill and his mind is still sharp. He is said to play bridge as well as ever.

Mr. Deng is said to spend his days at a heavily guarded house behind an iron gate near the Dianmen district in the center of Beijing. The two alleys on either side of the walled home are blocked to cars, although pedestrians are allowed, and a nearby garage brims with more than half a dozen limousines with the A01 license plates that are the prerogative of Chinese leaders. Mr. Deng is said to spend the mornings on affairs of state and the afternoons playing with his grandchildren, while evenings are often reserved for bridge.

A version of this article appears in print on April 17, 1989, on Page A00001 of the National edition with the headline: Privately, More and More Chinese Say It's Past Time for Deng to Go.