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Zhou Enlai: A Life

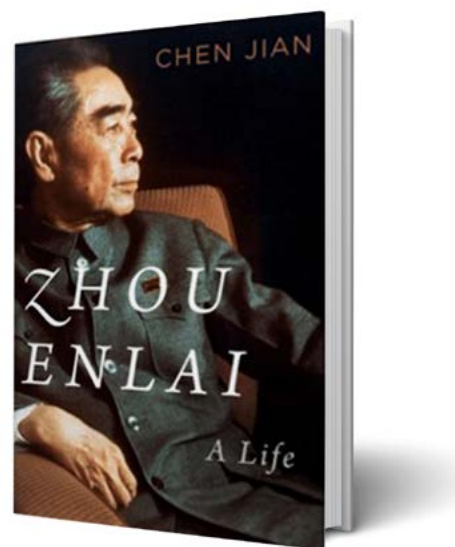
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In seeking to fulfill his ambition to remake the global order, People's Republic of China (PRC) President Xi Jinping often looks to Foreign Minister Wang Yi to help implement that grand vision. In his role, Wang is one of the most front-facing individuals of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) outside of Xi. Early in his tenure, Wang said that Zhou Enlai, the creator and first head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1949–58), would “always be a model for diplomats”^a and recounted Zhou’s view that PRC emissaries must tackle their duties in the same way the People’s Liberation Army did. Another PRC diplomat recounted that within the Foreign Ministry one

“can criticize Mao Zedong, but you cannot criticize Zhou Enlai.”^b These comments should come as no surprise, as Wang’s father-in-law served as an aide to Zhou, but today’s consistent mentions of the late premier reflect the reality that Zhou’s shadow continues to loom large over Beijing’s rise as a global power.

In *Zhou Enlai: A Life*, Cornell University historian Chen Jian traces Zhou’s life from humble beginnings in Jiangsu Province to a top CCP leader and China’s point figure in international relations. Chen, who was born in China and earned his first college degree in a Chinese university and still teaches in Chinese institutions, is well

a. Peter Martin, *China’s Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 199.

b. *Ibid.*, 16.

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placed to tell this story, having previously published well-received books on Beijing's decision to enter the Korean War and PRC foreign policy under Mao.^a Chen is extraordinarily adept in utilizing Chinese sources, a skill on ample display in this, the most deeply researched and comprehensive English-language biography ever written on Zhou. His sources included material found in the Chinese Central Archive, the Foreign Ministry Archive, several provincial archives, numerous diplomatic papers of key CCP leaders, as well as selected Chinese-language works on Zhou, even including a compendium of his poetry.^b

Zhou Enlai, A Life is told chronologically in four parts: Zhou's early life; the Chinese Communist revolution; the early PRC; and the years, including the Cultural Revolution, leading up to Zhou's death in 1976. In judging Zhou's legacy, Chen finds a middle ground, somewhere between the CCP's official record that hails him as an exalted individual and scholarship that holds Zhou responsible for supporting the worst excesses of the Mao era. (5–7) In sum, Chen provides a nuanced treatment of Zhou.

Beginning with Zhou's early life in Huai'an, Chen positions Zhou in a traditional Chinese class in which classical education was expected of male children who would compete for official government positions. Zhou's mother and aunt instilled in him an appreciation for knowledge and Chinese traditions, and Chen writes that there was "always a place reserved in his mind for the teachings of the ancient Chinese sages that he learned in his childhood, even once he seemed to have wholeheartedly embraced Communist ideologies and revolutionary philosophies." (17)

In 1910, at the age of 13, and one year before the fall of the Qing Dynasty, Zhou went to live with an uncle in Northeast China. He never returned to Huai'an, spending the next decade studying and working in different parts of China before traveling to Japan and Europe. Living in Paris in the immediate aftermath of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution made an impact on

Zhou, and it was there in 1922 that he wrote: "We should believe in the theory of Communism as well as the principles of class revolution and proletarian dictatorship." (59) Chen notes that Zhou's commitment to communism stemmed from his genuine feeling of shame over "China's backwardness" and his belief that national liberation was only achievable through revolution. Chen also notes that Zhou thought the "country's salvation should be associated with greater meanings and purposes," than those of capitalist and imperialist states. (60)

Zhou returned to China in 1924, meeting Mao for the first time and subsequently leading the CCP's clandestine operations in Shanghai from 1927 to 1931. There he earned the respect of party leaders as an individual who could run day-to-day intelligence operations. Of Zhou's time in Shanghai, Chen writes that "Zhou's control over the administrative power and intelligence network of the party, and then the party-state, would endure," and "although Zhou never became the paramount leader of the party, he consistently stood at the center of the party's operational network." (110) By 1943, Zhou made clear where he stood on Mao's leadership, publicly proclaiming that "Comrade Mao Zedong's direction is the direction of the Chinese Communist Party." (217) For Chen, Zhou's sincerity was unclear, but his statement supporting Mao "formed the basis on which Zhou was to work with Mao in the decades to come."

Following the CCP's victory in 1949 over Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang forces, Zhou became both the PRC's premier and foreign minister, occupying a key role in Mao's inner-circle in leading the government and China's diplomacy—Zhou was central in negotiations with the Soviet Union in 1950 which secured \$300 million in loans for Beijing along with territorial concessions in Northeast China. (298). He and his wife, Deng Yingchao, moved into the Zhongnanhai leadership complex in Beijing along with Mao and other CCP leaders.

a. *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (Columbia University Press, 1995) and *Mao's China and the Cold War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

b. Others who have used Chinese archival material as well include Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*; Julian Gewirtz, *Never Turn Back: China and the Forbidden History of the 1980s*; Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World*. Gregg Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry During the Cold War*.



Richard Nixon Library, February 21, 1972

In chapter 16, one of the book's most insightful, Chen meticulously recounts PRC diplomacy and strategy during the Korean War. Zhou oversaw China's involvement in Korea, meeting several times with Kim Il Sung and engaging with Moscow and Pyongyang as the conflict unfolded. Zhou also handled PRC diplomacy toward Vietnamese communists and their leader, Ho Chi Minh. After attending the Geneva Conference in 1954, it fell on Zhou's shoulders to convince Vietnamese communists to accept a negotiated settlement to end their war against the French. At a key meeting in Liuzhou, China, not far from the Vietnam border, Zhou delivered a detailed assessment of why it

was critical the Vietminh accept the deal, noting that an expanded conflict, like the one just stopped in Korea, served no one's purpose. Ho ultimately accepted Zhou's reasoning. (372) Zhou became a staunch advocate of supporting revolutions in Africa and Latin America. (492) With respect to Taiwan, Chen argues that Zhou played a role in softening Beijing's tone following a series of clashes in the mid-1950s. (418) However, a crisis in 1958, instigated by Mao, demonstrated just how much salience the issue had for CCP leaders.

Regarding domestic issues, which also fell into Zhou's sprawling portfolio, Chen paints Zhou as having a pragmatic side, while recognizing his need to stay in Mao's good graces. When Mao decided to rush Chinese economic development during the mid-1950s, Zhou initially cautioned against a "rash advance," drawing the chairman's ire. At a CCP National Congress in 1958, Mao chastised Zhou for "failing to get the bigger picture" and accused him of stoking divisions within the party. Sensing his political standing was faltering, Zhou took responsibility for his mistake of opposing a "rash advance," stating publicly that "as proven by China's revolution and reconstruction, Chairman Mao has represented the truth." (414) Within a year of this speech, Mao launched the disastrous Great Leap Forward. Chen credits Zhou's political sense for helping him navigate the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when Mao sought to reinvigorate his control over the CCP by turning loose mobs of young party members (Red Guards) to attack individuals who had putatively lost their way and slipped back into capitalist and counterrevolutionary behavior. In Chen's view, Zhou understood the chaos Mao had unleashed and did what he could, at times, to protect colleagues and maintain "administrative and executive power" in the country. (574)

The last chapters of the book detail one of the most important periods of Zhou's career—managing détente with the United States in the 1970s. Zhou held secret meetings with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in Beijing to lay the groundwork for President Richard Nixon's visit in February 1972 and succinctly set out the PRC's position on the most vexing question in the bilateral relationship: the status of Taiwan. In Chen's view, Zhou was shrewd and adept at taking

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on Mao's directives for what the PRC wanted to accomplish in any new relationship and articulating that vision to Kissinger. He could be pragmatic in one meeting with Kissinger and fiercely ideological in the next. Ultimately, Zhou and Mao were pleased with Washington's willingness to recognize "only one China and that Taiwan was part of China." (635) When President Nixon arrived in Beijing, Zhou's hand was the first he shook after disembarking Air Force One.

Zhou Enlai's approach to global affairs was based on a view that post-1949 China needed to act assertively to remedy a "century of humiliation" at the hands of Western powers. For those familiar with Beijing's

current thinking, that should sound familiar. While Zhou could be a shrewd and pragmatic diplomat, he was also a committed revolutionary whose ideology and sense of historical determinism influenced his foreign policymaking. For intelligence professionals, recognition of the CCP's complicated past and historical trajectory, from victors in the Chinese Civil War to rising power, is essential to understanding how Beijing approaches its place in the world today. Ultimately, Chen's book is as much a story of the CCP's rise and its influence on the Cold War and beyond as it is a profound biography of one of the PRC's founding leaders and most important diplomat. ■