China: Made by the Revolution

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Zhou Enlai: A Life
by Chen Jian.
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Every modern revolution of significance, from 1789 to the present, has produced a diaspora. The exodus from Russia after the end of its ancien régime scattered minds of exceptional brilliance in the arts, humanities and social sciences across the West. In China, where the old order had a history thousands of years longer, and civil war preceded rather than followed the revolution that finished it off, the pattern differed, for two reasons. The first was that whereas in Russia the intelligentsia, a relatively recent phenomenon going back no further than the 19th century, had been from the start essentially oppositional to the regime, in China it had been integral to the imperial system of rule, recruited to state service by a long-standing examination system. The mandarinate might supply intermittent, sometimes requested, mostly unavailing, voices of conscience to the official order but never revolted against it. The Chinese Revolution, moreover, had been made against predatory foreign domination as much as against domestic oppression; and beyond the inherited reflexes of obedience it could appeal to national pride in the recovery of independence. Adhesion to the new order came more naturally to the lettered.

On the other hand, while the People's Republic, proclaimed in 1949, achieved a decisive national sovereignty, and within a few months proved capable of clearing American forces from half of Korea, it had not accomplished full territorial unity. After making the revolution, the Communists were in no hurry to reappropriate Hong Kong from Britain, which they could have done within a day or two, preferring to leave it under British control as a valuable economic outlet to the world at large, mitigating complete diplomatic isolation of the regime by the West. That was a voluntary sacrifice. Involuntary was the survival of Taiwan – to which, after rout on the mainland, the Nationalist leader, Chiang Kai-shek, had fled – as an American ward after the Korean War had begun. Each of these exclaves permitted Chinese thinkers either already or eventually averse to the new regime passage to the world beyond, in most cases to the United States – where scholarly links had existed since prewar times, allowing some to migrate from the mainland before the arrival of communism.

The first levy included Ho Ping-ti, C.T. Hsia, Yu Ying-shih, K.C. Chang, Lin Yu-sheng – respectively, China's most distinguished social historian, literary critic, intellectual historian, archaeologist and political barometer of the generation born between 1917 and 1934 – not to speak of its perhaps leading novelist, Eileen Chang. With the exception of Ho, who came in 1945, all of them arrived in America during the Cold War. When Sino-American relations were restored, and China opened up in the 1980s, study abroad was allowed and then promoted by Beijing, becoming over time a mass phenomenon – before the pandemic there were more than 300,000 students in the US, by 2023 a million overseas. From the beginning, many of those who went to the States chose to stay, the number naturally increasing after the crackdown of 1989 on student revolt at home. The result is a diaspora stretching around the richer states of the world, from America to Europe, Japan to Australia, that is not principally the product of expulsion or flight, but of emigration. Especially in the US, its members occupy positions at all levels of academic life, as Russians in earlier periods

rarely did; they include even writers of English-language fiction – Yiyun Li or Ha Jin – as once Nabokov, if more modestly. The diaspora continues to grow, with Hong Kong supplying the latest arrivals. China's most original political philosopher, Ci Jiwei, now lives in Oxford.

In this setting, the historian Chen Jian has published a monumental biography of Zhou Enlai that makes him the pre-eminent scholar of the contemporary Chinese diaspora. Today Zhou occupies a generally benign, if increasingly blurred position in the public memory of the West as an urbane diplomat who hit it off with Henry Kissinger, and is remembered mostly for a misunderstood reply about France (1968 taken for 1789). Beyond these stock images, little further is associated with him. Chen's new book, a comprehensive portrait of Zhou that took twenty years to research and write, will change that. Born in 1952 in Shanghai, Chen was fourteen when the Cultural Revolution broke out and was twice briefly imprisoned during it. He was in his early twenties when Zhou died. When campuses reopened in the late 1970s, he entered the universities of Fudan and East China Normal in his native city. In the mid-1980s he was awarded a scholarship to America, where he completed a PhD, got jobs successively in the SUNY system, at the universities of Southern Illinois, Virginia, Cornell, New York and NYU-Shanghai, with many visiting positions in Hong Kong, the UK and the PRC. When he began his research about Zhou in the new century, the field was not entirely empty. But earlier literature about him, overwhelmingly though not exclusively in Chinese, was for the most part highly polarised, presenting Zhou either as an admirably enlightened and progressive statesman, who helped to restore his country to its rightful place in the international community, or as an unconscionable (alternatively: guilt-stricken) servant of the blackest tyranny, accomplice of infamous crimes.[1] Chen's study supersedes these antithetical images. Rather than merely applauding or attacking Zhou, it sets out to understand him at a level no previous work has approached.

The central theme of the book is Zhou's relationship to Mao, under whom he served as premier for almost a quarter of a century. At the beginning the contrasts between the two worked in Zhou's favour. Four years older, Mao was the son of a barely literate, if relatively well-off, peasant in Hunan. Zhou, born in 1898, came from a once prominent gentry line in Zhejiang, the most developed part of the country, receiving a good education as a child. School-time in the treaty port of Tianjin, unsuccessful study in Japan, then political baptism in the May Fourth protests of 1919 led to four years spent in Europe. He was admitted to the University of Edinburgh but declined to take up his place, and on moving to London quickly decided that Paris was preferable as a base. In France he became a communist and began working for the Third International.

Equipped with this experience, in 1924 he returned to Guangzhou, where Sun Yat-sen had set up an insurgent regime at loggerheads with the warlords of northern and central China. There Zhou almost immediately acquired a role as political instructor and later director of the department of political affairs at the Whampoa Military Academy, whose commandant in 1926 was Chiang Kai-shek. Communists and Nationalists were in alliance at the time, working with Soviet advisers to launch a joint attack on their adversaries to the north. The expedition set off in the summer of 1926. Reaching Shanghai in April of the next year, Zhou organised communist workers to take over the city. When Chiang arrived, he ordered a massacre of those workers, the starting gun of a civil war that would end with his flight to Taiwan twenty years later. Escaping the slaughter, Zhou was elected to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and went underground, running its clandestine network from Wuhan and Shanghai. Three months later the Nationalists staged a similar coup in Wuhan, where Mao, a founding member of the CCP, had been working with the Nationalist party, the Guomindang (GMD). He too hid and escaped, and by October had reached the massif on the Hunan-Jiangxi border, where he created a guerrilla base that would develop into a soviet, nominally answerable to the party centre in Shanghai. Zhou made two trips to Moscow, each several months long, where he conferred with Stalin and acquired funds and coding skills for his intelligence

work in China. He remained throughout Mao's superior, with power of command over him.

In 1930 regional tensions in the Red Army base area, over-determined by factional conflicts in the CCP as the Comintern changed its line on China, triggered violent purges of party fighters and militants, ordered or covered by Mao without the consent of the party centre in Shanghai. At the end of 1931, Zhou was sent to Jiangxi to take charge. Arriving at a moment when Mao's exactions made him vulnerable to severe punishment, Zhou endorsed criticism of them, but did not cast Mao into the wilderness. After GMD armies closed in on the soviet in 1934, forcing the Red Army to evacuate, Zhou retained his authority on the first stretch of the Long March. When they reached Guizhou, Otto Braun, the German emissary assigned to the Red Army by the Comintern, is said to have wanted to wheel back to refuge further east, while Mao proposed to elude the enemy by heading further to the west. Zhou, sensing, as Chen has it, that Mao could not be expected to give his full military gifts to the harassed and depleted Communist columns unless he was integrated into the leadership of the march, urged acceptance of Mao's plan, and he was co-opted onto the politburo under Zhou as commander of the march. By the time the Red Army reached what would become its new base area in northwestern China nine months later, Mao's prowess as a strategist was clear and the roles were reversed. Zhou became Mao's deputy on the party's military commission, which was now its effective power centre. Zhou neither resisted nor resented the change. Why not? For Chen, the two men were not made of the same material. Zhou had ideas of his own, but was more a man of action than of utopian vision and lacked Mao's combination of ambition and will to be supreme leader of the revolution. He knew Mao to be subjective and suspicious, but had now witnessed his political skills and was convinced of his military genius.

In the summer of 1935, faced with the strengthening of the Nazi regime in Germany, the Comintern changed direction, calling for a broad anti-fascist front, to include not just social democratic but bourgeois democratic forces. In China, the Japanese army that had seized Manchuria in 1931 was encroaching south of the Great Wall. Rather than confront this threat, Chiang was determined to give priority to the destruction of the CCP, provoking Zhang Xueliang, a Chinese warlord ousted from Manchuria, to kidnap him in 1936 in an attempt to force him to fight Japan instead. In line with the new Comintern policy, Zhou was sent to reason with Chiang, who was then released. Back in Nanjing, Chiang duly announced a ceasefire in the civil war, pledging his commitment to national unity in the struggle against Japan, and Zhou was dispatched once again to negotiate the terms of another alliance between Communist and Nationalist forces. Chiang was set on merging these forces under his own political control and military command; Mao wanted to preserve the independence of the CCP and its armed forces so that they might carry out their own initiatives against Japan. Neither side had much trust in the other. Zhou displayed his diplomatic skills by defending the party's positions in the wartime capital of Chongqing, while contending that Chiang was in his fashion a genuine nationalist and that joint action with his troops was in certain circumstances required.

In the spring of 1943, Stalin dissolved the Comintern as a hindrance to achieving a full-blown alliance with Britain and the United States – a 'godsend' to Mao, releasing him from invigilation by emissaries from Moscow. Zhou was immediately ordered back to CCP headquarters in Yan'an to discuss how the party should proceed. There he found himself a target of the Rectification campaigns launched by Mao to assert his absolute control of the party. Arraigned both for his reservations about Mao in Jiangxi, and his illusions about Chiang and the GMD, for five days he had to abase himself with abject self-criticism for every episode about which he was assailed, and extravagantly celebrate the wisdom of Mao. For Chen, this ordeal gave a foretaste of 'how extraordinarily abusive a leader Mao would eventually be' and the dangers to the party and country of failing to create 'institutions to check and balance such power'. In his view, the experience must have come as an immense shock to Zhou, far exceeding anything he could have expected. 'Zhou

would live for the rest of his life in the enormous shadow of Mao's thought and power, from which he would never escape.' Saved from further disgrace by a telegram from Georgi Dimitrov, the former general secretary of the Comintern, protesting at Mao's treatment of him, Zhou retained his positions in the leadership and went on to play a key role in co-ordinating the victory of what by 1947 had become the People's Liberation Army in the civil war with the GMD.

Though humiliated by Mao at Yan'an, once the People's Republic was established in 1949, and he became premier and foreign minister, Zhou did not automatically fall in with every opinion or position Mao adopted. Attentive to indications already of a more moderate disposition in Zhou's dealings with the GMD, Chen traces a series of divergences from Mao. The first came in 1949 over Zhou's draft of a 'common programme' for the forces scheduled to preside over the 'new democracy' under creation, which would serve in lieu of a constitution for the PRC until one was formally adopted in 1954. Zhou's draft spoke of a coalition government for the new China and a republic that would be a federation of multiple nationalities. Mao deleted both formulations. The second occurred in early 1956, when Zhou warned against 'a rash advance' in economic planning, telling Mao that as premier he could not approve a call for accelerated investment in infrastructure: not only would it unbalance the budget, but light industry and agriculture were closer to the people's immediate needs. The third divergence arose in 1957, after the anti-Soviet revolts in Poland and Hungary, when Mao briefly encouraged a 'hundred schools of thought to blossom' in China. Whereas Mao defined the goal of this opening as 'a political atmosphere of liveliness in which there is both centralism and democracy, discipline and freedom, unity of will and personal ease of mind', Zhou – whether pointedly or inadvertently – reversed the order of values, calling for 'both democracy and centralism, freedom and discipline, development of individuality and unity of will'. The fourth, and in Chen's tacit reckoning the most fateful, arrived in 1959, when the dire consequences of the Great Leap Forward moved Marshal Peng Dehuai, commander in the Korean War, to a – respectful – remonstration with Mao, which Zhou at first regarded as unexceptionable, until Mao raged at it; then, as excommunicable. Yet during an inspection tour of the countryside in the spring of that year, Zhou asked whether 'six small freedoms' couldn't be granted to peasant families, in Chen's view presaging the 'household responsibility system' used by Deng Xiaoping and others to deal with the Great Famine. Zhou's explanation of his proposal, he suggests, was pregnant with meaning. 'This is about maintaining small "selves" in a big "collective", about walking with both legs. There should be space reserved for "self". Without individuals, how can the "collective" come into being?'

When he said this, Zhou – 'entranced with the Leap like all of us', as Deng later confessed – no longer had much administrative power, and in common with the rest of the Communist leadership had failed to register that the policy was leading to famine that winter. It was the last time Zhou ever deviated from Mao's course for the nation, though far from the last time he incurred Mao's suspicion. Peng Dehuai was the first of the major veterans of the revolution to fall victim to Mao's bouts of vengeful paranoia, requiring Zhou's complicity in his fate. The Cultural Revolution produced many more. Prominent at the highest levels of the party and state were Liu Shaoqi, president of the republic; Deng Xiaoping, general secretary of the CCP; Peng Zhen, mayor of Beijing; He Long, vice-premier; Luo Ruiqing, chief of the joint staff. All were covered with calumnies and ousted from office, meeting varied degrees of retribution: death in prison, expulsion from the party, reduction to manual labour, denial of medical care, attempted suicide. Zhou signed off the verdicts on each of them, and many others. For Chen, these were actions taken with extreme reluctance and against Zhou's conscience, conforming to the unconditional submission to Mao he had made twenty years earlier. Wherever he could, Chen argues, Zhou acted in the opposite way, to protect rather than strike down those at risk of destruction by the Cultural Revolution he publicly extolled. On her release from prison after Mao's death, Liu Shaoqi's widow refused to forgive him. 'She was certainly entitled to do so,' Chen writes. 'Yet, although this was a dark moment in Zhou's life and political career, there are reasons for history to pardon Zhou as a beleaguered politician and an entrapped

person' – for 'this was a time when Zhou was very much like a small boat, caught in stormy weather, that could be capsized at any moment. Yet without Zhou, the big ship that was China, carrying hundreds of millions of passengers, might have sunk.' Deng, who suffered less than most in the elite, held much the same view, telling Oriana Fallaci that his 'elder brother' did 'many things he would have wished not to. But the people forgave him because, had he not done and said these things, he himself would not have been able to survive and play the neutralising role he did.'

In 1971 Lin Biao, Mao's designated successor, became the next target of his suspicion. His ensuing flight and death in Mongolia, tracked by Zhou, dealt a heavy blow to Mao's aura, and checked the impetus of the Cultural Revolution. Soon afterwards, Kissinger was sent on a secret mission to Beijing to prepare for an official visit by President Nixon, who was received by Mao in 1972. At its conclusion, a communiqué was released announcing a new era in Sino-American relations. Within another year, Mao had made up his mind to stabilise his regime by recalling some of those he had disgraced. In March 1973, Deng became vice-premier and by late 1974 he had taken over much of the administration, working closely with Zhou, who lent him every support he could, as he did other veterans of the revolution restored to official positions. The worst seemed to be over. One day shortly after Lin's death, however, on saying as much to Zhou, subordinates were astonished to see him, a man of iron self-control, break down in tears, sobbing louder and louder. 'Finally, he calmed down. After quite a while, he said: "You do not understand, it is not so simple. It is not finished yet." He stopped and did not utter another word.' The ultras of the Cultural Revolution, who detested him, had not given up or lost all favour with Mao. They still controlled the media, and a campaign denouncing Lin and Confucius was soon under way, implying Zhou was a modern Confucius. To the end – he died in January 1976 – he was not out of danger.

In describing his last few years, Chen gives voice to his admiration for Zhou as a person and a politician, a figure gifted not only with a singular charm and intelligence, but exceptional diligence and stamina, good manners and lack of conceit, and when not forced publicly to their opposite, kindness and consideration for others. That his reputation for these qualities, perceived as the antithesis of the ambience of the Cultural Revolution, was not confined to those who knew him, but had become widespread, was shown by the mass mourning at his death. Spontaneously, hundreds of thousands bade farewell as his coffin passed through Beijing, and three months later large crowds expressed their grief and anger at the condition of the country in Tiananmen Square, rioting when police attacked them – turbulence that led to the second fall of Deng, who had pronounced the official eulogy after Zhou's death. Describing these scenes in the opening pages of his book, Chen's verdict is categorical. 'This was the funeral of China's revolutionary era. At that moment, the curtain was lifted on the post-revolutionary age.'

Chen's biography draws on a breadth of sources that is not just a tribute to his decades of research, but a revelation of the extent of materials – documents from party and state archives, personal memoirs, monographs, interviews with participants or witnesses – about its recent past available or discoverable in China during the Reform Era, which might surprise any Western reader given to the idea that the PRC was a wasteland of amnesia and censorship. Endnote references – there are three thousand of them – are frustratingly bald, since beyond once-only translation of Chinese titles into English, they rarely contain any comment either describing or situating the sources they cite; as Jonathan Spence once pointed out, not all report or reminiscence of the period in China is necessarily reliable. Chen's usage has to be taken on trust, which his judgment otherwise earns. The formidable scholarship on which the book is based yields a compelling narrative, free of any trace of pedantry, plainly designed by author and publisher for a general readership. But though eminently readable, the modicum of background knowledge required to make the narrative fully understandable is for the most part taken for granted – sensibly enough from the point of view of fluent composition, but potentially disconcerting to readers without it.

Intellectually, a more serious problem is that the focus of the book is the actions and tensions of the inner elite of the CCP, principally as they affected just two of its members, Zhou and Mao. The vast drama of the Chinese Revolution itself, involving huge social forces, is for the most part missing, as if a context too generic and abstract to affect unduly the judgment of individuals, however prominent, involved in it. Though a limitation of this kind is normal enough in the biography of major political actors in any country, here the result can be too narrow a lens. Mao and Zhou, as Chen points out elsewhere, were not just makers of the Chinese Revolution; they were made by it. But the implications of that dictum are insufficiently reflected in this book. Zhou was a leading figure in the Chinese Communist Party for fifty years, half of them spent in fighting to make the revolution, half in ruling the country. The space devoted by Chen to the second is double that given to the first.[2] This is in large part a natural consequence of the greater volume of evidence extant for the period when the party enjoyed power. But whether the same asymmetry holds good for the relative weight of years in the character and life of a revolutionary such as Zhou, who turned fifty before the People's Republic was declared, is not so clear. Some degree of skew seems likely.

With this necessary qualification, Chen's portrait of Zhou is persuasive and moving. Drawn with critical empathy, it is difficult to fault its declaratory judgment of either the overall trajectory or the principal phases of his career. As with all major works of history, there is more to be said about some of them than could be contained in one book, as Chen himself has made clear, beginning with his quite terse account of the civil war of 1945-49, abridged in two significant ways in this biography. The first is the change in the roles of which Zhou proved capable. Hitherto never a military star, his forte after the Long March had been diplomacy, for which he had shown an outstanding talent in Chongqing. When fighting displaced negotiating after 1945, he showed his organisational ability to the full, co-ordinating Communist forces widely separated across huge spaces as chief of staff under Mao: surely the reason he became premier when victory was won. Yet the civil war had also demonstrated one of the reasons the CCP triumphed so decisively over the GMD: it possessed an exceptionally rich array of military and political talent which had no counterpart on the other side. At the level where it counted, the human quality of counter-revolution, the assorted helpmeets and servitors of Chiang, not to speak of the hopelessly over-rated generalissimo himself, was far lower than that of revolution, whose galaxy of cadres – Lin Biao, Peng Dehuai, Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun, Li Xiannian, Chen Yi, Bo Yibo, Peng Zhen, Yang Shangkun and others – showed their mettle in the civil war, and some of whom saw the country through to its recovery in the Reform Era. Zhou needs to be seen as a member of this company. In Chen's story they figure as extras more than as fellow players, with the exception of Lin, whose character and fall are treated with a cool delicacy and detachment.

As premier and foreign minister, Zhou combined administrative energy and diplomatic ingenuity to impressive effect, and Chen teases out a series of occasions when his positions departed significantly from Mao's, in the direction of greater flexibility towards potential allies and sensitivity to popular needs. If the textual evidence for such differences seems in some cases rather slight, the pattern they form is clear and coherent enough. But how they came to an end is not given due weight. At later points, Chen raises the question of when it was that Mao took such a decisively wrong turn that thereafter it was too late for the leaders around him to resist him, picking out as the answer the spring of 1966 when he readied the Cultural Revolution to go full bore. For others, it was the madness of the Great Leap Forward that marked the dividing line in the history of Maoism. It can be argued, however, that it was the abrupt recision of the Hundred Flowers in the summer of 1957 that sent the revolution off the rails: when the CCP snuffed out the free expression of opinion to which it had invited the Chinese people and launched an Anti-Rightist Campaign to punish those guilty or suspected of having criticised the party as they had been asked to do. Around 400,000 individuals were dispatched to penal camps or prisons, where some died of starvation or were executed. Deng was in charge of the campaign, from which no party leader dissented. Chen does not speak of that.

By contrast, when the Great Leap Forward followed a year later, succeeded by the Cultural Revolution, there was dissent within the party, at first limited but open, then general but repressed, for fear of the consequences of expressing it. Chen recounts Zhou's part in both stages, and his description and explanation of Zhou's conduct during the Cultural Revolution, in particular, is more eloquent and effective than any other to date. Is there anything to be added? Perhaps this. Zhou certainly acted as he did partly from fear of what would happen to him and others if he did not. He was under orders, and there could be lethal sanctions. But that he was himself perfectly capable of ruthless measures, without compulsion from above, is clear. In China, revolution and counter-revolution had waged war to the death for decades. After the GMD unleashed political slaughter on the CCP in 1927, life was cheap on both sides. In his early thirties, when Zhou ran the party's underground organisation in Shanghai, where Chiang had wiped out most of the membership, its survival was threatened by the capture and confessions of a key operative. Zhou destroyed virtually the entire family of the man as a deterrent. One of his subordinates at the time was Kang Sheng, possibly later trained by the NKVD in Russia, who on his return to China became Mao's lieutenant in the Rectification campaigns that reshaped Zhou in his forties, when the two renewed what seems to have been a close relationship.

In his fifties, Zhou became one of the leaders – Liu Shaoqi was another – who drove the capable economic planner Gao Gang to suicide on fabricated charges, not on Mao's orders but to his discomfort. When the Cultural Revolution broke out, Kang resurfaced as the sinister professional inquisitor of the Central Case Examination Group, on which Zhou also served, rising to the summit of the party in 1969 as one of five members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo. So notorious became his role as a lesser Chinese version of the NKVD leader Nikolai Yezhov in the repressions of the time that after Mao died he was posthumously expelled from the party. Yet Chen describes him as still a close friend of Zhou's, whose last words to his doctors, in 1976, believing Kang to be dying in the same hospital, were: 'There is nothing left here. You may go to take care of Comrade Kang Sheng. He needs you more.' This is where the imbalance between the two halves of Zhou's life in this biography shows that it matters. Not that it cancels anything in Chen's account of his closing years, but it complicates it.

In contradiction to the part that Zhou took in the Cultural Revolution, Chen can legitimately point to interventions he also made at variance with it, and the widespread popular confidence at his death that he represented moral and political values that were its diametric opposite. The evidence on both counts is incontestable. It is also true that he adumbrated notions that would be critical to the Reform Era long before anyone else in a leading position in the party did so. However, in suggesting that without Zhou the hundreds of millions of passengers in the ship called China might have sunk beneath the waves in the tempest of the Cultural Revolution, Chen yields to a poetic rather than a historical impulse. Not just because when Zhou died the gale had not passed, but for a simpler and more decisive reason. Within a month of Mao's death in September 1976, the quartet driving it – dubbed by him the 'Gang of Four' – had fallen, removed with ease and zero repercussions. They were paltry figures, without any popular or official support, disposable prostheses of the chairman, jettisoned as soon as he was gone. Realistically, there was little if any danger of a general shipwreck.

Nevertheless, Chen can argue – making a clear distinction between what happened, a matter of evidence for the historian, and what might have happened, a matter of conjecture for the citizen – that had Zhou lived longer, a potentially happier outcome was imaginable. Younger than Mao, if he had lived to the same age or longer he would have occupied the position that came to be Deng's, steering China towards economic reform and opening to the world, but with the crucial difference of promoting political reform. Acting on the conviction, foreign to Deng, that without individuals there could be no collective, Zhou would have protected civil rights and freedom of expression in ways that the CCP of the Reform Era, when student and popular protest arrived, did not. On this view,

biological contingency issued eventually into political tragedy for China.

Is such a counterfactual plausible? Attractive though it looks, there are reasons to doubt it. How credibly could Zhou have put the Gang of Four on trial? For all its limitations, the Reform Era required a clear-cut repudiation of the Cultural Revolution and a critique of the personal tyranny of Mao which Zhou, who had so conspicuously served both, would have been ill-placed to make, as Deng was not, though even he had to wait two years. Chen observes that no one can know exactly why Zhou wept, but considers some of the possible reasons. Among them, he writes, could have been the stress of conflicting emotions over his success with Kissinger and grief at the fate of so many compatriots, or apprehension that now, as Mao's second in command, he might in turn suffer the fate of Lin Biao. 'It is also likely that Zhou believed Mao's Cultural Revolution was a catastrophe,' Chen then adds, 'and understanding that he could be seen as an accomplice of Mao's, he foresaw the difficulty he would encounter in facing the judgment of the Chinese people and of history,' a reflection that qualifies the optimism of his conjecture as to what might have happened if Zhou had survived Mao. Had he lived to lead the inception of the Reform Era, he would have had to explain why he fanned the cult of Mao and shared in his repressions, an issue the party's official verdict of June 1981 on the Cultural Revolution could sidestep.

What is Chen's explanation of Zhou's record after 1966? One factor was not specific to him. Party discipline was internalised by communists of his generation as a moral condition of collective efficacy, which in Yan'an became submission to the ordeal of Rectification demanded by Mao. The same compulsions were at work a quarter of a century later. But by then the party was in command of a big state, whose sanctions for dissent – rustication, imprisonment, brutalisation, execution – were more draconian, increasing the quotient of fear at the expense of conviction in the mechanisms of compliance. The Cultural Revolution involved all of these punishments, though rarely the last for senior party officials, where death was mostly the result of medical neglect rather than a bullet. There is no evidence Zhou had much fear of the more drastic measures in this repertoire. The risk to him if he fell out of favour would have been calumny and disgrace – not only dishonoured, but deprived of the ability to protect those closest to him. Mao might well have inflicted the loss of that power on him; but knowing his own prestige would be harmed by public denigration of Zhou, as it was by the fall of Lin Biao, was it ever likely he would have gone further?

Zhou's relationship to Mao was never reducible to reflexes either of party loyalty or personal fear. Chen believes he was under Mao's spell, even towards the end so stricken with alarm when Mao nearly died in 1972, nine days before Nixon was due to arrive in Beijing, that he lost bodily control. At the outset, Chen remarks that Mao possessed two qualities Zhou lacked: utopian idealism and charisma. Today charisma is typically associated with a public ability to captivate large audiences, verbally or visually. Though he could be memorably pithy and engaging in private conversation, Mao's high-pitched voice did not make for good platform speaking. Zhou had natural eloquence and charm, a personality often described as magnetic. But power in China had often radiated from what was hidden, not what was seen; authority from what was written, not what was spoken. The hold Mao acquired on his party derived less from personal charisma, as ordinarily understood, than from a more unusual quality. The secret of his sway, for Chen, lay in his command of a 'master narrative' that no other figure in the CCP could rival. What was that? A discourse of 'continuous revolution' that fused the utopian goals of communism with the patriotic recovery of China's traditional position as the Central – not, Chen emphasises, Middle – Kingdom of its world, in an insurgent modern nationalism which took 'we, the Chinese, have stood up' as its motto. Why was the party so powerless against Mao when he launched the Cultural Revolution? Largely, Chen maintains, because of 'the inability of either Liu, Zhou, Deng or any other CCP leader to come up with an alternative grand legitimacy narrative of the Chinese Revolution'. Having earlier reported Zhou's respect for Mao's political skills, admiration for his military abilities and fear of his autocratic temperament,

what else does this suggest about his attitude to Mao? That there was another side to it: fascination with his mind, as a thinker about their country's past and its possible futures, in the absolute commitment they shared to the revolution that had made them.

If Chen's portrait of Zhou, weaving together all these and other strands, is largely convincing, the qualification has less to do with anything he says about Zhou than with the absence of any comparable portrait of Mao. Chen has a good deal to say about Mao, nearly all of it acute and much of it extremely sharp, yet – perhaps inevitably – its sum is an outline, thinner than the thick description of Zhou: an asymmetry that comes at a certain cost. By the end of the 1950s, Mao was effectively a despot. But the now familiar comparisons of him to Stalin or Hitler miss the mark. His style of rule combined three forms of lawless power, each sharing some features with tyrannies elsewhere, but whose combination produced an autocracy fundamentally sui generis. The first lay in millennial traditions of imperial sovereignty in China, more or less unbroken until the 20th century: an absolutism utterly ruthless in quelling revolts against it, but from Han times onwards governing without a vast bureaucratic apparatus, depending rather on a limited mandarin elite recruited by an examination system and gentry co-operation, in a carapace of Confucian ideology extolling right conduct and benevolence (backed when necessary by its brutal complement, Legalism). Overlaying this was the impact of Stalinist organisation and doctrine, the only sort known to the CCP, as they hardened during the 1920s, generating a party designed to perform like an army, and which in China became one. Lastly, came the temperament of Mao himself, cast in these two moulds, but adding a bent for continuous mass upheaval – 'there is great disorder under the heavens, the situation is excellent' – entirely foreign to them.

The result was a compound like no other. Mao's repressions mixed Stalinist methods of mass propaganda and coercion to achieve Confucian goals of changing ideas, and therefore conduct, in the service of a ceaseless revolution taxed by critics early on as more anarchist than Marxist in conception. Chen's indictment of the cruelties and casualties of Mao's rule in the last decade of his life is unwavering.3 However, in launching the Cultural Revolution, he was not in Chen's view simply a villain. Victims were many, if far fewer than in the Great Leap Forward, but in neither case were most deaths deliberate. They were closer, as Mao's biographer Philip Short put it, to what is legally defined as manslaughter.4 Conversion and mobilisation were the aims, not extermination. Of course, over time Mao's gifts degenerated. His last significant essay, 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People', the text that licensed the Hundred Flowers, appeared in 1957. Thereafter, no longer brooking dissent, he had decreasing need to argue or persuade: an order would be enough. Though he kept his wits and their pungency to the end, he ceased to be the thinker he had been. But at the height of his career, it was not just a master narrative of the sort with which Chen credits him that gave Mao hegemony. It was a multiform set of ideas, delivered in a prose of classical vivacity, economy and clarity, which captured Zhou and his generation. For all the faults that came to disfigure him, the crimes he committed or enabled, no other ruler of last century possessed the same hand of trumps: capabilities at once military, political and intellectual.

The relationship between Mao and Zhou was not, as Chen shows, one-sided. Mao lacked the patience for consistent administration, and the experience of the world outside China (with the manners that came with it) for skilful diplomacy. He needed Zhou for these, and at no time more than when he launched the Cultural Revolution, pitching the country into political turmoil and international isolation, with violent clashes between disputing factions at home and escalating tensions with the USSR abroad – just as Zhou needed Mao as the one authority capable of containing, after stoking, these. The two were ensnared in a mutual dependence. Here, Chen writes, lay

> the dilemma the chairman had always faced and was never able to resolve, even with his

> unlimited power. On the one hand, he absolutely did not want to hand power and his 'grand revolutionary enterprise' over to Zhou. But on the other hand, he had to rely on Zhou's remarkable administrative talent to maintain the routine functioning of the party-state that he had founded.

It was a 'dragnet' that trapped him and which he begrudged.

In the same way, Mao knew he needed the diplomatic success of China's victory over Western ostracism at the Geneva Conference of 1954, on the Indochina War, and the end of the American blockade that came with Nixon's visit, but each time he was jealous of the prestige Zhou gained. Chen is much more expansive on Zhou's triumphs in foreign affairs than on his running of the state. This is natural enough, given episodes of spectacular drama in the first, humdrum issues of management in the second; though for ordinary citizens, domestic administration mattered much more than diplomatic coups. In the former, Zhou's achievement was relatively greater and more surprising, the economy registering steady rates of growth amid the chaotic scenes of the Cultural Revolution. As to the latter, Chen's admiration for the agreement signed at Geneva and the communiqué at Shanghai, both in different ways transforming China's standing in the world, is understandable. But he risks overstating what resulted from them. Obliging a reluctant Pham Van Dong to accept the terms for peace he negotiated at Geneva, Zhou failed to obtain enforceable guarantees that South Vietnam would hold the elections they stipulated – which the Communists would certainly have won: the reason that, with US backing, Saigon never held them – when he could all but certainly have wrested them from Paris, where the prime minister, Pierre Mendès France, was desperate to quit Indochina after the debacle of Dien Bien Phu.[5] Vietnam would have been spared the millions of dead in the American war to prevent what should have occurred more peacefully in the mid-1950s.

To this the objection can be made that there was no practicable way of ensuring free elections in South Vietnam once the US mantle covered it, given that by 1954 there was already discussion in the administration of whether or not to use atomic weapons to hold onto the North too. The same kind of reservation, and possible response, can be entered for the Shanghai communiqué Zhou signed in 1972, which didn't contain a US pledge to cease interference in Taiwan. After initially rejecting the evasions to save American face on which Kissinger insisted, Zhou consented to them. Could more have been extracted from the US than Nixon was willing to concede, at a time when he was at the peak of his power? Whatever view is taken of that, the long-term consequences of the bland formula announced in Shanghai are clear enough: the danger of war between the two countries in the East China Sea, with the island further than ever from the reunification sought by Beijing. Encouraged by Zhou's conciliation, Kissinger returned the next year for further talks, this time dangling the prospect of a military alliance against Russia. Uncharacteristically, Zhou did not immediately report this overture to Mao. Mao was so angered that he told the politburo that if the US were to invade the PRC, Zhou would prove a 'lowly capitulationist' – an absurd charge, typical of Mao's late tirades. That Zhou could have had illusions about the potential of new-found amity with Washington is not impossible. But if so, they would not have been out of keeping with Mao's own denunciations of the Soviet Union as a social-imperialist, indeed fascist regime that was a greater threat to the world than the United States.

One of the most striking themes in Chen's work is that for Mao there was no strict separation between his external and internal policies because the former were often a contribution to the latter. Initiatives abroad were often held to be ways of galvanising action at home, foreign affairs deployed as a spur to domestic mobilisation. The Korean War, the Quemoy crisis, the Sino-Indian War and the Sino-Soviet conflict would each offer a vivid illustration of the connection, the last of them fuelling Mao's campaigns against his opponents in the CCP, denounced for seeking to restore capitalism in

China as Khrushchev had done in Russia. But while they might feel obliged to repeat the litanies of the period, the higher echelons of the party included people – Zhou and Lin among them – who had lived in the Soviet Union and may have been less tempted to think, as opposed to say, that China now had fascism on its northern doorstep; or to believe (corollaries at the time) that Pinochet and Mobutu were natural allies in the battle against it. Though an unconditional critic of the Cultural Revolution, Chen skirts this dimension of it.

Coming to the end of Chen's book, a historically minded reader might ask: does the record of the past offer any precedent for the relationship between Mao and Zhou? Perhaps in some respects there is one, morally and psychologically, though much less consequentially. Napoleon usually opens the list of modern tyrants (particularly in England), as the first to display the lawless features of the species, if at a time when the enormities of an industrial epoch had yet to arrive. A greater general than Mao and, as Mao was not, a brilliant administrator, he too was by his own lights a man of ideas, if much lesser and more derivative ones, and though a poor politician, a natural leader of men. Many were dazzled by the combination, and around him emerged a group of devoted and often capable subordinates. He had conquered most of Europe when undoing came with his invasion of Russia in 1812: disintegration of the Grande Armée in the snows, defeat in Germany and fall in France.

To the end, Napoleon was served with unfailing loyalty by his grand equerry Armand de Caulaincourt, an aristocratic officer who rose from aide-de-camp to ambassador in St Petersburg to master of the horse; accompanied Napoleon on the Russian campaign and back from it; and as the Allies approached Paris, became his last foreign minister. Military by family background and vocation – a general at 32 – Caulaincourt became a diplomat on Napoleon's orders after Talleyrand had ceased to be foreign minister. Without the latter's exceptional gifts, he never had the same eminence. But unlike Talleyrand, notoriously venal and disloyal, he was a figure of unfailing probity and principle. Two misfortunes of imperial service scarred him. Used as a cover for the mission to kidnap and execute the Duc d'Enghien, a Bourbon exile in Germany accused of a conspiracy to overthrow Napoleon, he was held by royalists to be responsible for an outrage notorious across Europe of whose outcome he was innocent. Talleyrand was an instigator of the crime. Napoleon, its organiser, remarked cynically of the blame attached to Caulaincourt, which he knew to be unjust, 'It will make him all the more faithful to me.' Later, he refused to allow Caulaincourt to marry the woman he loved on the grounds that she was divorced. Caulaincourt suffered from each injury, but his loyalty did not waver.

Personally close to Napoleon, having commanded his armed entourage, when recalled from St Petersburg Caulaincourt warned him in seven hours of argument against the folly of invading Russia. After the fiasco he had predicted, escorting the emperor incognito back from Vilnius to Paris – thirteen days à deux by sledge and coach through the snows of Northern Europe, Napoleon talking to him throughout – Caulaincourt told him to his face that it was not Russia that Europeans feared but his own 'universal monarchy': its fiscal exactions, political inquisitions, military repressions. Napoleon did not hold it against him. In 1814, attempting suicide on being exiled to Elba, Napoleon summoned Caulaincourt at three in the morning to convey his last wishes. After the Hundred Days, when he was among those who rallied to Napoleon, Caulaincourt spent his final years in social and political ostracism in Picardy, composing memoirs that could not be published for a century. On St Helena the emperor remembered him as a 'man of feeling and integrity'. There lay the differences separating the two men, and the times and classes that formed them, from the autocrat and diplomat in China. In Europe, the traditional reputation of diplomats – already in the 17th century 'gentlemen sent abroad to lie for the good of their country' – was the serpentine antithesis of the heroic. In the Central Kingdom, which could dispense with them, there were no diplomats. Perhaps that's the reason, when they were finally needed in the 20th century, that the improbable synthesis of a revolutionary steeled in the intransigent practices of civil war and a grandmaster of the ductile arts

of negotiation was possible.

Zhou Enlai: A Life, a measured and very disciplined work, never strays far from its subject. Two earlier books, *China's Road to the Korean War* (1994) and *Mao's China and the Cold War* (2001), give a more direct sense of where Chen stands politically. Studies of a revolution written from the diaspora it produces tend, as one would expect, to be sharply critical of it and tacitly or vocally uncritical of the state that provides refuge for their composition. Chen, when he settled in the US, did not conform to this pattern. Mao was a contradictory figure, he wrote, because throughout his life he sought at once a revolutionary transformation of China and its restoration to the position of Central Kingdom that it had occupied for centuries, now lost to domination by foreign powers. In the 20th century every country under colonial or semi-colonial subjugation would develop a victim mentality, but its Chinese version was unique because it was surcharged by so stark a contrast between past eminence and present subjection. Mao's aim was to change that with a revolution that would both bring a social equality China had never known, and give the country equality with the leading powers, of which, when the revolution was won, the United States was the greatest.

Such a vision, Chen observed, was unacceptable to a US imbued with a victor mentality after triumph in the Second World War, as a 'traditional American sense of self-superiority' swelled with a new sense of 'world leadership responsibility'. Since China was not a significant military or industrial power, it posed no direct threat to US interests in the Far East. Its loss to communism was thus 'undesirable, but not unendurable'. Chinese communists were viewed with a mixture of contempt and hostility. Since the new regime disregarded the universal principles of international law, to which everyone on earth owed allegiance, it was not entitled to recognition – an attitude displaying the typical 'mentality of a dominant Western power in the face of a rising revolutionary country'. For his part, Mao had no intention of passively accepting American requirements for entry into the ranks of respectable states, as he showed in Korea. In the atomic age all states were insecure, and for Mao the insecurity was especially acute because of the huge gap between his ambitions for his country to play a leading part in the tide of revolution worldwide and the weakness of China as a fledgling great power. But he was not intimidated. The PRC would be 'a new type of international actor', a revolutionary nation resolved to break the existing norms and rules of international relations – which were a product of Western domination.

But at home the revolution against China's past could not escape the contradiction that it had to be articulated through discourse, symbols and identities derived from that past, not least the memory of its standing as the Central Kingdom of the known world, and the political traditions associated with this. Nor could it defeat the passage of time. In Mao's eyes, the revolution ceased to be one if it fell short of continuous momentum. After the failure of the Great Leap Forward, he decided that it was losing support even among the party elite, and to renew it unleashed the Cultural Revolution against the leadership of the party and the state itself. But despite the enormous, unchecked power he had accumulated, he often found himself unable to achieve his goals and by the end was more or less aware of the Cultural Revolution's failure. After his death his master narrative collapsed, and under Deng another replaced it. Dispensing with appeals to equality, it banked on prosperity and modernity, dismissing all other considerations with the dictum: 'Development is the irrefutable argument.' The new course raised living standards, but also widened divisions between rich and poor. This meant that emphasis had increasingly to fall on national rather than social goals, on the restoration of China through wealth and power to its role as the Central Kingdom. That supplied a solution to the legitimacy crisis of the CCP after Mao. But in the absence of any higher ideological vision offering a mission to the Chinese people, a 'lingering moral crisis' set in, especially among the young. Chen contends that this vacuum paradoxically enhanced the grip of the party on the country, leaving the population prey to the fear that without the party things could get worse and China could even break up.

What is to be done? As a historian, Chen is sparing of prescriptions, but not to the point of avoiding them altogether. At the outset of his biography, he explains that critical to its intention has been the 'challenge of correctly placing the Chinese Communist Revolution within the annals of history'. He goes on:

> Revolution is no sin, I believe. Revolutions happen for a reason. A revolution would not have erupted if the old regime that nurtured it had not deteriorated beyond repair. This is also the case of the Chinese Communist Revolution, which came as a dramatic response to the total failure of the Chinese old regime in the face of the daunting internal and external crises engulfing China's state, society and even civilisation. Therefore the coming of a revolutionary era in China was not in any way an accident; rather, there must have been historically justifiable factors for its occurrence.

That said, 'all revolutions have their downsides', especially those as radically transformative as the Chinese one, which was 'inevitably destructive, cruel and bloody', and whose enterprise of liberation became its negation in Mao's last years. But if we want 'to prevent such tragedies in future, we cannot merely reject revolution'. Mao and Zhou were human beings made by the revolution, and even someone like himself, born after 1949, should be self-critically aware that he too was in some fashion formed by it. Rather than simply extolling or rejecting revolution, what is needed is to understand the reason revolutions occur and, when they go wrong, to find the right path to a better future. In the case of China, that should mean a process of 'derevolutionisation', beyond the changes of the Reform Era, towards the interrelated goals of a more equal economic prosperity, more truthful social stability and more authentic political democracy at home; and abroad for the country to emerge from the shadow of the Cold War, to become 'a genuine "insider" of the international community and consistently play the role as a co-ordinator and promoter of regional and global peace and stability'.

Writing in *Mao's China and the Cold War in* 2001, Chen thought that could happen only when the last generation that grew up in the revolutionary era had passed from the scene, as it would within fifteen to twenty years: a schedule to reflect on. What of the US, the other side of the Cold War? His fear was of a further round of that war, one lacking any justification. Although China under Mao used force to protect its borders, it was not an expansionist power. Pursuit of centrality was not the same as pursuit of dominance in international affairs. The PRC aimed at the former, not the latter. The West should make a serious, sustained effort to understand China's perspectives and problems in the new century, without reverting to the stance it had taken in the 1950s and 1960s. 'Under no circumstances should a "second Cold War" be waged against China.' What if China failed to develop in the right direction? 'We should never be frustrated by China's lack of sufficient change in the short run; we should never surrender an attitude of goodwill towards China.'

That was written more than twenty years ago, in the time of Jiang Zemin. In China, as in the West and the world at large, the scene has darkened since. Would Chen say the same today? There seems little doubt that he would. The second Cold War he feared, not a simple or straightforward reproduction of the first, but not better than it, has come to pass. Amid a pervasive deterioration of the inter-state system, Chen's forebodings can be surmised from the near despair with which he recently asked: where is a counterpart to Zhou to be found anywhere today?

In a wider intellectual setting, Chen's outlook most resembles that of two Russian historians. Both sought a balanced assessment of Mikhail Gorbachev, who in character and career was quite unlike Zhou, but who was another communist with ideals visibly higher than the exercise of hard power, whose end was tragic too. Dmitri Furman, who came to admire him, could see his weaknesses, but

judged them with sympathy, holding Gorbachev the only ruler in Russian history who voluntarily limited his own power, to give his people freedoms they had never known before. The verdict of Vladislav Zubok, a decade younger, is more stringent. His masterpiece, *Collapse* (2021), is a devastating analysis of the reasons Gorbachev's reforms failed. If he could be so unceremoniously ejected from office, amid popular indifference, by a rival of far lower and cruder calibre, the fault lay in Gorbachev himself, in the limitations of his culture and the delusions induced in him by the flattery of the West. With better sense and less vanity he could have avoided his fall, for which the Russian people – already suffering under the fiasco of his economic management – would pay dearly under his successors. Though their assessments of Gorbachev are antithetical, Furman and Zubok share much the same values, which resemble those of Chen, as also, in their own way, those of Ci Jiwei: a temperate, humane realism, expressive of a sensibility not easily classifiable, somewhere between liberal and socialist. Zubok is closer to Chen as a scholar: both historians at universities in a West to which they emigrated without compulsion or loss of contact with their homeland, each producing works on it of an intimacy and depth no Western colleague can match. As the two continental states about which they write become steadily more feared and vituperated in the West, it would be good to see them in dialogue.

Perry Anderson

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