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Gao Wenqian. *Zhou Enlai: The Last Perfect Revolutionary, A Biography*. Translated by Peter Rand and Lawrence R. Sullivan. New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2007. xiv + 345 pp. US \$ 27.95 (hardcover).

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Xia-Wengqian.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Yafeng Xia**, History Department, Long Island University, Brooklyn

In 2003, Gao Wenqian, a former Chinese Communist Party (CCP) official historian now sojourning in the United States, published his *Wannian Zhou Enlai* [Zhou Enlai's Later Years] in Chinese. Before migrating to the United States in 1993, Gao was a deputy head of the "Small Group for Zhou Enlai Studies" at the CCP's Central Research Office for Documentation (*Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi*). Based on classified party documents and personal interviews with high-level party officials, Gao provides a revisionist account of the late Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai (who served from 1949-1976). In particular, Gao's work offers new perspectives and insights on how domestic factors affected Mao's decision to pursue rapprochement with the United States. The book under review is an abridged English translation. It has been adapted for Western readers by adding the stories of Zhou Enlai's earlier years prior to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and by elaborating the political context of the Cultural Revolution and the behavior of other actors (chapters 2-7, pp. 21-104).

The relationship between Zhou Enlai and the CCP's paramount leader Mao Zedong has attracted much scholarly attention, and it is a key issue in our understanding of Chinese politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s. There are three popular models of the relationship: Zhou was a faithful follower of Mao; Zhou was a puppet of Mao; and Zhou was a moderating force on Mao (the version the official Chinese Communist historiography would like to promote).

For years, Zhou was "the Beloved People's Premier", who was a sensitive and effective administrator and a moderating force in the politics of the People's Republic of China (PRC). He was a good-looking, urbane, brilliant and a master diplomat. He always valued the nation's needs above his own. He managed to save hundreds of purged officials

during the Cultural Revolution. Gao Wenqian turns the tables on Zhou. According to Gao, Zhou was a tragic backroom schemer, a puppet of his master Mao, and a man who so rigorously observed a Confucian sense of duty that he did almost everything Mao asked him. Zhou was an eager participant of the Cultural Revolution. He protected people only after first checking with Mao, Mao's wife Jiang Qing and Mao's no. 2 Lin Biao. Zhou was often self-serving and impotent in face of Mao's paranoid machinations. Gao claims that after Zhou was diagnosed with bladder cancer in May 1972, Mao denied Zhou further medical examinations and surgery. (p. 236)

As Gao states, his purpose in writing this book is “to reassess Zhou [Enlai], to denounce Mao [Zedong], to expose Deng [Xiaoping], and to lay bare the myth of official Chinese historiography on party leaders”.¹ Conventional wisdom holds that Deng Xiaoping had a close relationship with Zhou, which might be dated to their work-study days in France in the 1920s. Deng's rehabilitation and restoration to power in the 1970s was mainly due to Zhou's effort. Gao challenges this assertion and argues that Deng was Mao's protégé from the 1930s. Deng's political rise before the Cultural Revolution was due to Mao's blessing. Vilified as “China's second largest Khrushchev,” Deng was purged by Mao at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, but was treated much more leniently than Liu Shaoqi, the President of the PRC (1958-1969). Deng's rehabilitation in early 1973 was Mao's scheme to counterbalance Zhou's political influence in the wake of the Lin Biao Affair in September 1971. (pp. 245-46) Deng later rose to become China's paramount leader after Mao's death.

The book focuses on the last ten years of Zhou's political life (1966-1976), not his personal life. Gao has succeeded in offering a new and revealing perspective on the history of the Cultural Revolution, on Zhou, and on his relationship with Mao. In writing this book, Gao observes the rule of “neither concealing his faults, nor excoriating him [Zhou Enlai]” (*buhuiguo, bukeze*). Gao admits, “This book is only [my] interpretation [of this period of Chinese history and Zhou Enlai]”. He makes an effort to uncover the truth of history and leave the judgment to the readers.²

Since the publication of the Chinese edition in 2003, the book has gone through several printings. It has been praised as a major contribution to the study of Zhou Enlai. Notwithstanding this success, the following part of the review will delve into some general issues and interpretative flaws of the English edition.

How are scholars to interpret Mao-Zhou relationship in the 1970s? The English edition describes Mao as the master and Zhou the “ever-loyal servant”. (pp. 3, 161) The reviewer contends that the term is misleading and biased and that it can hardly help Western

¹ Gao Wenqian, “Return to the Public the Right to Know the Facts—Refuting Mr. ‘Si Magong’,” *Dangdai Zhongguo yanjiu* [Contemporary China Study], No. 4 (2004).

² Gao, “Return to the Public the Right to Know the Facts”.

readers to understand its essence. The Chinese edition defines Mao-Zhou as “a relationship between modern monarch and his minister”. What puzzles the reviewer more is that Gao places too much weight on the interaction of historical gratitude and resentment between Mao and Zhou in explaining Mao’s attitude and treatment of Zhou. He also tries to demonstrate that Mao’s vanity and anger at Zhou’s getting credit in the Western media after the Mao-Nixon handshake in Beijing in February 1972 was a major contributing factor in his decision to torture Zhou in 1973-1974. Zhou barely avoided a purge.³ (pp. 237-42)

A more plausible interpretation should look at Mao’s career as a revolutionary, China’s domestic political environment in the 1970s, pressure from China’s revolutionary allies, and Mao’s dilemma in maintaining his position as a world revolutionary leader and in seeking a new ally to counterbalance the security threat from the Soviet Union. Mao was constantly vacillating between promoting world revolution and seeking a détente with the U.S. “imperialists.” Mao was psychologically uncomfortable and hesitant when he switched from his hard-line anti-American policy to a more conciliatory approach in early 1970s. Further research should look into how Mao adjusted to his new role as seeker of an alliance with the United States rather than anti-imperialist revolutionary. Was Mao trying to vent his own frustration when he noticed the improvement in American-Soviet relations and failed to achieve his goal of “allying with the United States to deter the Soviet Union” after 1972? Did Mao simply want to shift the responsibility of a possible failure of the reconciliation policy toward the United States off to Zhou?

The most puzzling event during the Cultural Revolution is the Lin Biao Affair, on which Gao’s account is weak (pp. 188-211). The reviewer went through the Chinese edition and found that the section is primarily based on secondary sources,⁴ and thus offers no new revelations. In fact, the English publisher’s decision to eliminate the Chinese edition’s footnotes is a questionable choice. It is thus even harder for Western readers to appreciate Gao’s contribution to scholarship. Gao writes, “By early 1971, Mao was spreading rumors that Lin Biao opposed any rapprochement between the United States and China”. (p. 12) This is not accurate. It was during Mao-Nixon summit in February 1972, not in early 1971, that Mao intentionally threw out this claim. Mao told Nixon, “In our country also there is a reactionary group which is opposed to our contact with you. The result was that they got on an airplane and fled abroad.”⁵

³ Gao, “Return to the Public the Right to Know the Facts”.

⁴ See Gao Wenqian, *Wannian Zhou Enlai* [Zhou Enlai’s Later Years] (Hong Kong: Mirror Books, 2003), pp. 319-38.

⁵ For a recent study on this topic, see Yafeng Xia, “China’s Elite Politics and Sino-American Rapprochement, January 1969—February 1972,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 8, no. 4 (fall 2006), pp. 3-28.

As a former party historian of Zhou Enlai, Gao is mostly accurate on Zhou. But many of his accounts of Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi are dubious. The reviewer cites two examples to prove the argument. First, Gao claims, “Mao believed that Liu [Shaoqi] was contemplating an alliance with Peng [Dehuai]: He knew that Liu had informed Peng, who was still in disgrace, that he might be reinstated as minister of defense, due to Lin Biao’s ill health.” (p. 108) The reviewer double-checked the Chinese edition on p. 101 and found that Gao failed to provide his source. The relationship between Liu and Peng was never close. At the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference in January 1962, when Peng wrote to the CCP central committee to appeal for a review of his case (Peng was purged by Mao at the CCP leadership conference at Lushan in the summer of 1959 because he questioned Mao’s Great Leap Forward), many leaders thought that Peng should be rehabilitated. Liu, however, accused Peng of “maintaining illicit relations with a foreign country” – i.e. the Soviet Union.⁶ This was equal to a political death sentence. Obviously, he would never make such a promise to Peng. A recent article indicates that Liu made the promise to General Luo Ruiqing in early 1965, who was then joint-chief of staff of the Chinese army.⁷ But unfortunately for Luo, he was soon purged by Mao and became the first high-ranking victim of the Cultural Revolution. Second, after Zhou’s death in January 1976, the Politburo maintained that Mao should attend Zhou’s funeral. But Mao refused to play along. Gao writes, “Mao made it clear that ‘I was free not to attend,’ ... the huge gap separating the premier and me can never be closed.” (p. 307) Again, the reviewer checked the Chinese edition on p. 604. Again, Gao failed to provide his source.

Interpretative flaws and factual mistakes are replete, especially in the first chapter. Gao’s narrative of the Sino-American ambassadorial talks in Warsaw is not accurate. The Warsaw talk started in September 1958 and was not due to Zhou Enlai’s initiative. (p. 4) Gao also recycles Walter Stoessel’s account that the Chinese diplomat he tried to approach on 3 December 1969, was Lei Yang (p. 8), Chinese charge d’affaires to Poland. Actually, it was Li Juqing, the Chinese embassy’s second secretary, and the interpreter was Jing Zhicheng.⁸ Gao’s claim that “Mao had succeeded in destroying the pro-Soviet faction within the Chinese Communist Party” by late 1960s (p. 8) is farfetched. During the Sino-Soviet polemics in early 1960s, both Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping toed Mao’s line. Although they advocated more moderate policy toward the Soviet Union, they didn’t disagree with Mao on the split with the Soviets.

Gao’s assertion that “the USSR profited from the animosity between the United States and the PRC, and also from the sale to mainland China of outdated weapons left over from

⁶ Li Rui, *Lushan huiyi shilu* [A True Account of Lushan Conference], 3rd ed., (Zhengzhou: Henan Renming Chubanshe, 2000), pp. 232-33.

⁷ Gao Hua, “Variation and Degeneration of Revolutionary Politics: A Reassessment of the Lin Biao Affair,” *Ershiyi shiji* [Twenty-first Century], No. 97 (October 2006).

⁸ See Yafeng Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy: U.S.-China Talks during the Cold War, 1949-1972* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 277-78, note 55.

World War II” (p. 5) is wrong. Newly available Chinese and Russian sources demonstrate that the Soviet Union offered effective aid to the Chinese during the Korean War — air cover, weapons and other military equipment. For example, in order to strengthen the fighting capacity of the Chinese People’s Volunteer’s (CPV) air force, the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin took the initiative to provide a large number of a new type of airplanes to China free of charge. A telegram to Mao Zedong from Stalin on 22 May 1951 states: The Soviet Union would provide China with 372 MIG-15 airplanes only with a freight fee in two months.⁹ The Soviet-provided military equipment was not all new style or advanced; some were even surplus goods and materials from U.S. lend-lease during WWII. Nonetheless, these were advanced weapons to the Chinese, and the Soviet Union was the only country offering military assistance to China.¹⁰ The Soviet military aid played a vital role in CPV’s ability to carry out successful campaigns during the Korean War.

On 1 October 1970, the leftist American journalist and writer Edgar Snow and his wife were invited to review the annual National Day celebration parade on the wall of the Forbidden City overlooking Tiananmen Square in Beijing. They were escorted by Zhou Enlai to meet Mao and stood by his side throughout the parade. But Snow was not able to interview Mao until 18 December¹¹, not 18 October as Gao assumes. (p. 11) Gao erroneously claims that the American secretary of state William Rogers was excluded from Nixon-Mao summit on 21 February 1972 was due to Zhou Enlai’s machinations. (p. 18) It was President Nixon who wanted to exclude Rogers.

Gao’s citation of *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* by Dr. Li Zhisui is a disappointment (pp. 123-25, and more in the Chinese edition) as we know that Li’s work is not pure history. It went through literary recreation, and the historical value of the book is seriously compromised. This is another reminder that Gao’s sources are not completely reliable.

Gao censures Deng Xiaoping for criticizing Zhou Enlai at the Politburo meeting in early December 1973 [please provide date], and claims that the senior officials from the Foreign Ministry puzzled over Deng’s action (pp. 246-47). The reviewer argues that Deng didn’t go too far. The CCP political culture stressed “criticism and self-criticism.” Deng had to pass the test to win Mao’s trust. Zhou was pleased with Deng’s ascent. Gao has also suggested, “Zhou felt personal disappointment about this lost opportunity, undoubtedly his last, to represent the Chinese people to the world community at the UN, but he was even more concerned about the political message that Mao’s decision to send Deng in his

⁹ Shen Zhihua, et al, *Chaoxian zhanzheng: Eguo dang’an de jiemi wenjian* [The Korean War: Declassified Documents from the Russian Archives], Historical Materials Series (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 2003), vol. 3: pp. 607-608, 625-26, 694-95, 769-71.

¹⁰ Shen Zhihua, chief ed., *Zhongsu guanxi shigang, 1917-1991* [An Outline of the History of Sino-Soviet Relations, 1917-1991] (Beijing: Xinhua Chubanshe, 2007), p. 123.

¹¹ Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy*, pp. 149-50.

stead conveyed to the Chinese nation.” (p. 258). The reviewer disagrees with Gao’s assertion on two counts. First, Zhou Enlai was an internationally known senior Chinese statesman. A chance to speak at the UN would not be crucial for him; second, Zhou was already too sick to travel abroad. To him, Deng Xiaoping was a good choice.

These caveats aside, the book is a must read for anyone interested in the history of the PRC, Zhou Enlai and U.S.-China relations.

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