



# Zhou Enlai: The Last Perfect Revolutionary

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## **Zhou Enlai: The Last Perfect Revolutionary** Wenqian Gao , Wenqian Gao

Zhou Enlai, the premier of the People's Republic of China from 1949 until his death in 1976, is the last Communist political leader to be revered by the Chinese people. He is considered "a modern saint" who offered protection to his people during the Cultural Revolution; an admirable figure in an otherwise traumatic and bloody era. Works about Zhou in China are heavily censored, and every hint of criticism is removed—so when Gao Wenqian first published this groundbreaking, provocative biography in Hong Kong, it was immediately banned in the People's Republic. Using classified documents spirited out of China, Gao Wenqian offers an objective human portrait of the real Zhou, a man who lived his life at the heart of Chinese politics for fifty years, who survived both the Long March and the Cultural Revolution not thanks to ideological or personal purity, but because he was artful, crafty, and politically supple. He may have had the looks of a matinee idol, and Nixon may have called him "the greatest statesman of our era," but Zhou's greatest gift was to survive, at almost any price, thanks to his acute understanding of where political power resided at any one time.

## **Zhou Enlai: The Last Perfect Revolutionary Details**

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# **From Reader Review Zhou Enlai: The Last Perfect Revolutionary for online ebook**

## **Louise says**

It appears that once the revolutionaries took hold of China, they had no idea what to do with it. In the absence of any program for bettering the country, Mao chose a legacy of power and adulation over one of public works. The result was a wholly dysfunctional bureaucracy where participants schemed not for corner offices, but for their lives. This book documents those internal battles.

Unless you have some background in this, not all the dynamics will be accessible. What is clear to the general reader is that at the core was the insatiable ego of the revolution's presumed hero.

The Author's Note tells about the brave people who helped to assemble this book, bringing notes from China index card by index card. The list of sources shows the impressive primary materials that were used. You also learn of the author's mother, herself a victim of the Cultural Revolution, who despite being harassed, encouraged him to write this book.

The title is misleading. This is not a bio of Zhou, there are pages and pages where he is hardly mentioned. The subtitle is strange since the author says he is trying to show Zhou as not the perfect man he is thought in some quarters to be. While not the main subject, Zhou is an organizing personality for this story, since he is, perhaps, the only enabler of Mao who could have done him in.

The big mid-twentieth century revolutions, China, Russia and Cuba ended in similar ways. The revolutionaries who put their lives on the line to remove autocracies easily surrendered those same dictatorial reins to their victorious generals. The generals had psychopathic needs for power and could not tolerate anything but a cadre of enablers. Fresh from fighting horrific revolutions they were inured to bloodshed and suffering and saw them as legitimate political tools. Perhaps these are the mindsets it takes to wage a revolution against a despot, but as history shows, they are disastrous in running a country.

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## **Kevin Tangonan says**

Interested by East Asian history, especially of the contemporary Cold War. This book definitely called out to me, knowing somewhat of the role the former premier of P.R. China, Zhou Enlai played in the state's foundation with Mao Zedong up to the ping-pong diplomacy he initiated with the U.S. and former president Richard Nixon. I can only imagine if I read the Chinese version how much more we'd learn of Zhou Enlai. Like the short brief on the back cover of the book mentioned, Zhou is indeed a mysterious figure in China, complex but very much complicit in his own way to the devastating Cultural Revolution. I never knew how much factionalism and inner-party feuding did occur during Mao's reign especially the conflicts between Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai, Jiang Qing, and Deng Xiaoping. It's truly a fascinating read, so much so I think on my first day reading it, I had read over 200 pages in one sitting. It's just truly tragic he wasn't as much a rebel as Deng, and never truly spoke out against Mao when the country was falling into chaos and the old cadres were being purged left or right. Even more tragic was Mao's denial of medical treatment for Zhou's malignant tumors because of his hatred of his most loyal servant. I can only imagine had Zhou lived on and was treated right away, he would have gone down as a hero in reforming China and opening it up to the world much sooner than Deng and probably less violently as well. A hypothetical what-if scenario just as

many speculated Lenin had he lived on, maybe would have realized the socialist utopia that was envisioned for the Soviet Union instead of the authoritarian Stalinist state that it would have become. I also liked the afterword in that the author informs the reader at the great cost of obtaining this information and sending it over in notecard parcels, being banned from returning to China and seeing his supportive mother before she passed. He went to great lengths to spread the truth of the dark days of China and the life of the premier and for that, I thank the author most sincerely, as this was a wonderful, illuminating read and I'm lucky to be reading it here in the west as a student of international relations and an aspiring diplomat. I only wish the book had maybe touched upon the deaths of his adoptive children by the pro-Jiang Qing faction of the Cultural Revolution and how he may have felt about their passing as I read about it somewhere.

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## **Hock Tjoa says**

The author, Gao Wenqian, was the official biographer of Premier Zhou in the 70s and worked in the Party Central Research Office for Documentation. He concludes in this unofficial biography (English translation published 2007) that Zhou "intended to be a good person, but failed," that "his life story conveys the tragedy of the Chinese Communist political system." Along the way, he quotes Deng Xiaoping's typically inscrutable comment: "Without the Premier, the Cultural Revolution would have been much worse. And without the Premier, the Cultural Revolution wouldn't have dragged on for such a long time."

The crucial enigma of Zhou's relationship with Mao runs through this book but the explanation does not do it justice. Does it help to be told that Zhou had a "servant mentality"? Or that Gao "attributes [Zhou's deep-seated inability to take existential risks and had a psychological need to be another leader's number two] to his childhood with two adoring mothers (biological and adoptive) who lack an active father." (Andre Nathan in the "Introduction.") This is the sort of babbling that gives psycho-history a bad name.

But though the analysis is weak, this book is full of interesting facts: that in the 20s, both the Communists and the Nationalists wished to use Zhou's clear gifts; the former made him their director of propaganda and the latter the commissar of Jiang Kaishek's Whampoa Academy. Zhou would be found repeatedly trying to mediate between parties or factions that were bent on each other's destruction - the Nationalists versus the Communists, Mao and the peasant revolution versus the Comintern influenced "regular" Communists, Mao and his increasingly active detractors during the Great Leap Forward, Mao versus Liu Shaoqi (president of China from 1959 to 1968), Mao versus Lin Biao (who had led the victorious Red Army into Beijing in 1949 and invented the Little Red Book in 1969), Mao against himself.

When Lin Biao died in a plane crash, the author informs us that the pilot had been shot while everyone else on board had died of smoke inhalation. There is a ring of authenticity to this report. We are also shown how Zhou mourned the passing of his one-time protege at Whampoa.

Zhou was forced to choose many times in his career and it may be argued that he seemed to have always chosen self-preservation. But he did not live the easy life of a sycophant and he lived long enough to enunciate the "Four Modernizations" that Deng built upon. If Zhou chose to play Apollo to Mao's Dionysius, he suffered for it but also achieved something in return.

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## **Andres Eguiguren says**

The title is somewhat misleading, as this biography focuses on the last decade of Zhou's life rather than his revolutionary career pre-1949. If you are at all interested in learning more about Zhou, Mao, and the Cultural Revolution this is well worth reading, however. I teach about China post-1949 for the IB Diploma History course and this confirmed my overall impression of Zhou as one of the most decent and smartest of the old CCP cadres. There is much to admire in his deft ability to read and adapt to the changing political winds and his resilience in surviving Mao's many attacks and vendettas. He personally did much to save the lives of many during the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, while at the same time he is also taken to task for never openly defying Mao and standing up to his ruthlessness. The Great Helmsman's refusal to allow Zhou to have treatment for his cancer while it was still treatable and the petty grudges he held against him dating back to the 1930s despite Zhou's years of loyal and devoted service say as much about Zhou as they do about Mao.

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### **Jon Falzon says**

A work of pure fantasy concocted by a biased author. Gao Wenqian appears to believe that all history is not the history of class struggle, but rather the history of power struggles between self-interested bureaucrats. In a writing style better suited for reality TV scripts, fifty years of history is boiled down to fanciful melodrama between a handful of politicians. Wenqian claims access to secret documents and knowledge that purport to give him insight to the real thoughts and motivations of China's legendary revolutionaries. Not once, however, does the author consider any motivation for their political actions apart from invented rivalries and supposed egoism. The book appears to be little more than an ill-conceived smear job against the dignity of the Chinese revolution and those that led it.

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### **Andrew says**

Zhou Enlai: The Last Perfect Revolutionary, by Wenqian Gao is a biographical look at Zhou Enlai, Mao Zedong's right hand man throughout much of China's post-revolutionary history. Zhou was an enigmatic politician, always looking to balance sides, build bridges and mend fences. He was also shrewd and sly, engaging in whatever political moves were necessary to survive and promote the internal stability of China's CCP.

The biography chronicles Zhou's early life with his family, which was stable and happy although he lacked a father figure. His education in France, a hotbed of Chinese revolutionaries during the early 20th century is chronicled, as well as his brief stay in Japan (another hotbed for revolutionary figures) as he pursued an education in politics and revolutionary doctrine. His work for the early Communists in China is touched upon, as he became a mediator between the Nationalist and Communist factions during their united front against Japan in WWII. When the Nationalist government began to crack down on Communists in China, Zhou moved to Shanghai to begin an urban uprising, which did not succeed. He eventually joined Mao in Jiangxi. The next bit up to the Communist victory in 1949 is glossed over quickly in this biography.

From their, the meat and bones of the book is revealed. Gao focuses heavily on Zhou Enlai's political career from the 1960's until his death from cancer in 1976. Zhou was a central party manager, adept at Party organization, logistics and personal interactions. This made him a natural number 2 to Mao, as he was adept and useful, but politically savvy enough to take blame, offer self-criticism and toe the Party line when needed. This served Zhou well during the political purges of Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao during this decade.

Zhou's star began to wane, however, when he gained much international acclaim for his work in the Nixon visit and subsequent warming of relations between the US and China. Zhou's acclaim meant Mao's concern, as Mao was quick to squash any threat to his own power and his plans for succession (as was evident in his purges of Liu and Lin, both at one time his chosen successor). Zhou was different in that he was ready to take the blame, and knew Mao so well that he could accurately predict the best form of self-criticism needed to appease Mao. Even so, Mao bid his time, and eventually pounced with the help of his wife, Jiang Qing, and Qing's political cadre known as the Shanghai gang or the Gang of Four. Zhou, who was able to survive multiple purges and the Cultural Revolution, was sidelined in his later years, as Mao increasingly promoted Deng Xiaoping to be the next successor (although characteristically, would turn on him too). Zhou perished in 1976, still the Premier of China, but constantly on the defense against Mao and his wife. He died trying to promote Deng, who he saw eye to eye with in terms of economic reforms, but still singing the praises of Mao, as was characteristic.

Gao's biography was a wonderful read in many ways. Gao states that Zhou was both an enabler for Mao's worst totalitarian excesses, by constantly acquiescing to Mao, and also a cushion for some of his worst decisions, as Zhou constantly protected old party cadre's who were being purged, and desperately tried to protect as many as he could during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Zhou could read the political winds in the CCP like a master sailor, and knew when to support someone, when to promote someone, and when to denounce them. He was tasked with promoting the stability of the CCP during his Premiership, and did so with Machiavellian brutality, and tactful and artful diplomacy, all while conforming to a Taoist style ideal of constant devotion and obedience to the "Emperor", "even when the Emperor is errant, the minister must be loyal." Only in his final days did he try and make amends to those whom he had wronged during the struggle meetings of the Cultural Revolution or the purges. Zhou carried massive amounts of guilt and regret, but was a realist in terms of politics. He always tried to balance the excesses of Mao with the well-being of the CCP and the Chinese state as a whole. He did what it took, even if it was personal debasement, betrayal or grandiose self-criticism and humiliation. He suffered his final days being denied treatment by Mao, and died in extreme agony, reportedly shouting "Long Live Mao" as he was wheeled in to surgery.

Gao's take on the political situation in China at this time is fascinating. He offers a blow-by-blow account of the political struggles for power in the CCP, and Mao and Zhou's brilliant political maneuverings as one sought ultimate power and the other tried to keep his head above the water. Gao, however, has two large flaws in the narrative - mostly in the books organization. His use of sources, although detailed in the index, are poor throughout the text. He does not cite anything in the body text at all, instead opting for a bibliography in the back. This lack of in text citations is detrimental, as one has to keep flipping here and there to check facts. It also effects the second flaw. Gao uses many deterministic statements throughout the book, and refutes commonly held beliefs for historical fact recently made available through archival sources. The lack of proper in text citations makes this difficult to refute, but leaves one skeptical. China has become famous for historical revisionism, but Gao's sourcing and lack of citations makes it difficult to enjoy the books deterministic streak, and leaves one reaching for the salt grains - so to speak.

Still, Gao's book is a really interesting look at the inner workings of the CCP through a biographical account of one of China's lasting historical figures, Zhou Enlai. His life was fascinating and monumental in Chinese history, and his impact on China, whether good, bad, or balanced, is still considerably important. Although suffering from some citation flaws that leaves the information presented slightly suspect, the book is entertaining to a high degree due to the inside look at China's political history in the 1960's and 1970's. I would recommend this book for those interested in Chinese history and politics, flaws aside, as something worth reading for an alternative look at this period in history.

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## **Meghan says**

After reading the Author's Notes, I found out that this book is banned in China. So being a guest of the People's Republic of China, I will avoid making any comments about the Cultural Revolution, as it's bad manners to suggest criticism of it or the former Chairman.

That said, this book is ultimately about the title man, Zhou Enlai--premier of China. He is a complicated man, and life required him to make complicated decisions. I believe he received criticism regarding some of those decisions as they effected specific people rather badly. However, if one looks at the bigger picture, he made choices (some can call selfish ones) in order to survive and live to serve another day. Thus, he was able to help a greater amount of people, which was his life's work--helping his fellow countrymen.

However, you choose to see his life, I think you can agree that he was one of the great statesmen of history, joining the ranks of Benjamin Franklin and William Churchill. He not only had to survive the political infighting within his country, but he had to survive "Cold War" politics internationally. And to that effect, he became well-regarded both by his countrymen and the international scene. One can argue that China would not be where it is today without this man.

To understand modern China, one must read this book. Not so you can become a fan of Zhou Enlai (although I did become one), but to appreciate where China was, what it went through, and how it came to be what it is today. They were turbulent times but China is a nation built on survivors. And Zhou helped laid a solid foundation for this country to rebuild on.

One can only hope that future Chinese generations have their own "Zhou". They would be in good hands, if they did.

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## **Andrew says**

This was an excellent book and provided a lot of insight to the political situation in China during the Cultural Revolution. The author drew from the still-sealed state archives and, I'd say that the book's content is as authoritative as possible. Basically, the idea of Zhou Enlai as having nothing to do with the Cultural Revolution- while obviously false when considered in light of Mao's obvious reliance upon him for keeping control of the country and managing foreign relations- is still something of a myth that surrounds the conflicted legacy of a man faced with a singular situation.

Perhaps the most interesting parts to me were the biographical details and revelations of the early history of Zhou Enlai's involvement in the CCP. The First United Front Era, which ended when Chiang Kai Shek brutally turned on the Communists and massacred them after they had delivered Shanghai to the KMT government under Zhou Enlai's command was shocking, but the revelations concerning Mao's political infighting are nothing if not astonishing. Far from marking any ideological goal, the Cultural Revolution was launched solely to destroy Liu Shaoqi's faction and return sole control of the country to Mao after he had lost (some) power following the Great Leap Forward. This book reveals Mao Zedong to be (in my opinion) possibly the most cunning and devious political figure in modern history, carefully shaping and testing his subordinates in order to ensure his solitary command of the country. The extent of his actions- which include the well-known purge of Shaoqi and Peng Dehuai- also includes significant responsibility for Lin Bao's 'defection'. While not speculating too much about the cause of Lin Bao's plane crash (except to discount that

he had ordered the plane to be intercepted by the air force), Wenqian relates how Mao had essentially forced Lin Biao into a corner which precipitated a coup attempt that nearly succeeded. Throughout, Zhou Enlai tries to manage the worst of Mao (and his genuinely awful wife, Jiang Qing) but still cooperates, following to the last his decision during the Yanao period to support Mao above all other contenders for power.

Additionally, the book provides a much more full explanation of Deng Xiaoping's rise within the party and subsequent, multiple purges- why, after all, bring Deng back to prominence if his economic views were antithetical to Mao's? The answer, as Wenqian relates, is that Deng's return to power was part of Mao's balancing the scales of political upheaval as Mao's own disciple in order to ensure the Great Helmsman's grip on power.

A great read, fairly quick, although some of the extra material for the English version begs to be more fleshed out- no good book about the first generation of leaders in post-1911 China should lack at least a few chapters on the 1920s-1930s.

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### **Phil says**

This book was well written- if a bit dry and academic in prose. My problem with the book is not with the writing, but the scope. It is not a detailed account of the life of premier Zhou En-lai, besides a brief family background and fascinating account of his student activism days, the book deals almost exclusively with the years of the Cultural Revolution. If you have already read Mao: The Unknown Story, there is unfortunately not enough new content in this volume :/

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### **Phil says**

This is a very interesting fragment of history. A researcher in the Chicom central archives, with full access to many top secret documents has written a book about the second most famous Chicom revolutionary. The complex character that emerges evokes the same ambivalent feelings as other not-completely evil men who served evil masters. Through the whole book the evil nature of Mao Tse-dong shines through. Zhou helped to save many people from destruction in the Cultural revolution and tried to preserve as much of China's economy as he could from the insanity of the radicals but he did it by engaging in a kind of mandarin servility to a man he could see was sacrificing millions of lives and the happiness of an entire nation to his personal whims and jealousies. In the end Mao murdered Zhou by not allowing his cancer to be treated because he was worried that if Zhou outlived him he would reverse the Cultural Revolution. This book is a well-written narrative and a good read for anyone interested in China.

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### **Justin says**

The author of this book, Gao Wenqian, was in charge of official research on Zhou Enlai for the Chinese National Archives during the 1980's. After the Tiananmen Square incident, Gao became disillusioned with the Communist Party and left China for the US. He smuggled out his notes, and used them to write this biography of Zhou Enlai. (Zhou was the Premier (*i.e.*, *Prime Minister*) of China from 1949 until his death in 1976.)

The book is not a comprehensive biography of Zhou, and instead focuses mostly on Zhou during the Cultural



Revolution. (1966-1976) Because Gao had access to government documents and had interviewed government officials from that era, he is able to give an unusually in-depth look into the power struggles at the top of the CCP/PRC leadership.

The only real downside to this book is that it assumes that the reader has some knowledge of modern Chinese history. However, a half hour spent reading about modern Chinese history should provide sufficient background knowledge.

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## **Hadrian says**

As the title of this book suggests, Zhou Enlai is one of the few (perhaps the only?) Chinese revolutionary figure with an unsullied reputation. The official party line on his reputation is that he was a great diplomat, the Beloved People's Premier, and a moderating force against Mao's excesses, especially during the Cultural Revolution. This is the story which our author challenges.

This translation is adapted from a Chinese book called Zhou Enlai's Later Years (????). Much of this volume is background, with extensive discussions on the Mao's struggle for leadership of the Communist Party in the 1930s, and his conquest of power after the Long March.

Most of the rest of the book is about the last decade of Zhou Enlai's life (1966-1976). This period covers the struggle to be Mao's successor, and the fallout of the Cultural Revolution.

Gao Wenqian's claim is that Zhou Enlai was an enabler for Mao's worst excesses, but he did try and protect old party comrades when Mao ordered the Red Guards to attack the party itself in the worst stages of the Cultural Revolution. In the last years of his life, he was diagnosed with bladder cancer, and Mao refused him treatment. Even with this most agonizing fate, Zhou worked to establish Mao's succession, settling on Deng Xiaoping, who proved to be a stunning administrator in his own right.

The book is apparently based on original research in secret archives. The bibliography bristles with new and exciting documents, but the most stunning omission is that they are not always cited. Furthermore, the author makes some broad assumptions using very sketchy material - for example, he assumes that Richard Nixon brought no State Department personnel in his 1972 due to Zhou's influence. Not so - Nixon had a difficult relationship with the State Department dating back to the 1960s, and he snubbed them in favor of Kissinger for years. The book also cites other unreliable sources which place the whole narrative in doubt.

Is this biography the final word? No. However, the research already done in this book is a worthy topic of further research. The fact that the book's Chinese version is banned on the mainland speaks loudly to its virtues.

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## **Don says**

Zhou Enlai was a much more complex actor in China's tumultuous existence under Mao than I previously had thought. Although he did a lot of good for the people and protecting China's cultural history, I feel that Zhou's conscious decisions not to stand up to Mao to protect his position w/in the ruling party, keeping his ability to deflect some of Mao's actions however lead to the rule Mao had for so long over China.

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## **Omar Ali says**

This book is an edited translation of a Chinese book written by a Chinese historian (Gao Wenqian is the former official biographer of Zhou Enlai at the Chinese Communist Party Central Research Office for Documentation and director of the Zhou Enlai Research Group. He left China after the Tienanmen massacre and now lives in Queens, New York). So it can be a hard book to follow, even for someone interested in Red Chinese history, as a lot of things are taken for granted by the writer and others are written in what can only be described as "Chinese fashion". There is little attempt to explain what the Chinese revolution was (or was not) or to try to explain what drove the senior leaders of the Chinese communist party (beyond the usual factional struggles) and little or not overview of the events that were taking place as these struggles unfolded at the top. But it is still a fascinating book, rich in detail and well worth reading. The details are the key here; if you are not much into contemporary Chinese history and the characters that played big roles in it, then this may not be the book for you, but if you are, then it is a must read. For example, the day to day uncertainty and drama in the senior echelons of the People's Republic is richly detailed (especially in the last section about the Cultural revolution and it's aftermath) and it can be perspective-altering. And my impression that Zhou was close to Deng and saved or rehabilitated him is corrected: the role of Mao in bringing Deng back into power (before kicking him out, not too effectively, one last time) and Deng's unwillingness to speak directly against Mao even after he had dismantled Maoism are an interesting little tidbit...one among many. Another interesting tidbit: the use of the phrase "see the big picture and AGE GRACEFULLY" as applied to comrades being told not to make waves and to go along with the helmsman's latest insanity. Very Chinese. At least to my ears :)

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## **Thomas Clark says**

This is one of the best biographies that I've read; Zhou Enlai is one of the most fascinating and complex people in modern Chinese history.

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