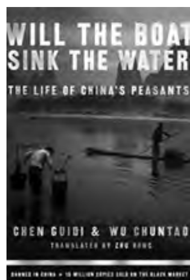
BOOK REVIEWS

Hope Floats

A Review of *Will the Boat Sink the Water? The Life of China's Peasants*



By Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao
(translated by Zhu Hong)
Public Affairs Books, 2006
229 pages, $15.95

By Charlie McAteer

Banning a book in China can achieve the contrary effects of suppressing its influence on the mainland while boosting its circulation in the West. But few contemporary books on China have had both the enduring domestic impact and the international reach of *Zhongguo Nongmin Diaocha*, published in English last year as *Will the Boat Sink the Water?* and released in paperback this spring. Originally published in 2003, the Chinese version sold 250,000 copies before it was banned by the Chinese authorities. But the book had already struck a deep chord throughout Chinese society, and through more unorthodox distribution methods, proceeded to sell more than eight million copies.

The authors, investigative journalists Chen Guidi and Wu Chuntao, were both born into peasant families, and the ease with which they relate to the struggles of peasant life emerges in these intimate stories of protest and courage. Set for the most part in Chen's native Anhui Province, these tales depict villagers challenging the burden of arbitrary taxes imposed by local governments rife with corruption. Zhu Hong's translation preserves Chen and Wu's captivating prose, which invites the reader to share in the hopes of these peasants, only to see them crushed by official arrogance and greed. Nearly four years after their original publication, these stories continue to resonate, thanks to the ever-expanding wealth gap between urban dwellers and rural peasants and the social unrest reverberating throughout China's countryside.

In one horrifying account, a local leader in Zhang Village, Tangnan Township, seeks revenge against a group of local villagers trying to audit the books and develop procedures for government oversight. The village deputy chief, enraged over the suggestion that villagers should have any say in official business, gathers his sons to join him in a murderous rampage in which four of the volunteer auditors are slaughtered. The gruesome incident prompted the author of a *Southern Weekend* article to comment, "We have a government that has signed international conventions regarding human rights, and after all we are in a civilized age. How could we tolerate such rampant evil among us?"

Chen and Wu acknowledge attempts by the central and provincial governments to restrain local cadres. They find, however, that even when Beijing designs policies aimed at reducing the poverty gap, these directives are imbued with a mixed message that prioritizes economic growth at all cost. As *Will the Boat Sink the Water?* illustrates, township governments have stifled or flat out ignored these reforms to the detriment of the largest segment of China's population. This disconnect must be apparent to China's top officials, who, while banning Chen and Wu's book, have reportedly passed it among themselves as a must-read. These stories also provide a stunning counterweight to the "China rising" narrative that dominates Western media coverage. Out of the spotlight of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, China's peasants continue to face limited opportunities and restrictions on personal mobility.

Chen and Wu came to the United States for the first time earlier this year and discussed their research at the PEN American Center's World Voices Festival in New York City. They promised to continue writing about China's villagers and farmers, perhaps focusing their next book on China's staggering environmental threats. If their new book generates the tremendous media cov-

erage and policy reforms that their first one did, they will be performing another invaluable service, not only to China's peasants, but to all who suffer the effects of China's environmental devastation.

After years of listening to stories of tragedy and perseverance, Chen and Wu remind us that, despite delirious odds, hope still flourishes in rural China.

Portrait of a Survivor

A Review of *Zhou Enlai: A Political Life*

By Barbara Barnouin and Yu Changgen
The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2006
397 pages, $52

By Rene Wadlow

In early April 1976, during the Qingming festival, when the Chinese traditionally mourn their dead and sweep their graves, millions of people flocked to Tiananmen Square to pay tribute to Zhou Enlai as a symbol of reason and rectitude after the chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Yet as this first-class biography of Zhou points out, Zhou was not a model of rectitude but a survivor:

> In China, it required toughness and ruthlessness to outlast, for more than half a century, the incessant infighting that was endemic in the Chinese Communist Party. To hold the post of prime minister for twenty-six years, working under the command of one of the most powerful, capricious, and distrustful emperors in Chinese history, called for adroitness, adaptability and the capacity for shaping his positions according to the political winds, notwithstanding his own convictions.

Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong in many ways became a single soul in two bodies after 1943, when the doctrine that "Mao Zedong Thought is Marxism-Leninism, Chinese Bolshevism and Chinese Communism" all at once was enshrined as the sacred creed and guiding principle in the conflicts against the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek and the Japanese. Mao knew that he needed a skilled administrator and a subtle diplomat to meet with foreigners—skills he himself did not have. Although Mao eliminated all others who had worked with him during the early years, Zhou Enlai was with him until the end. Both men died the same year, 1976, as if the soul of one could not exist without the other. It was a rare blending of destinies.

Stalin, with whom both Zhou and Mao had to deal before coming to power, and again once the Communist government took power in China, had no such agent of his will. Stalin ruled alone, destroying one after the other all those around him. Mao always had a faithful echo of his views in Zhou, even though Mao changed these views often, driven by myths rather than an overall view of facts.

All the same, Mao and Zhou were very different individuals. Zhou came from a mandarin family, highly educated though not wealthy or powerful. As Zhou's father was often away seeking government work, Zhou was raised by his aunt in his grandfather's book-filled home. Zhou learned to read early and became familiar with classical Chinese thought. As there were many children in Zhou's extended family, the clan had its own family school, which stressed Confucian values and the concept of self-cultivation. In the Confucian tradition, the first task of a learned person is to establish order and harmony and to serve his country and its people. The other Confucian value Zhou learned young was the golden mean—the avoidance of excess as expressed in a Confucian maxim "*to go beyond is as wrong as to fall short.*"

Although Zhou was party to all the excesses of his government, the ideal of Confucian moderation stayed with him. Thus, there is a certain irony in the fact that late in his life, during the attacks on Confucian thought that were a key policy of the Cultural Revolution, Zhou's enemies, unable to attack him directly, associated his name with the Duke of Zhou, a famous civil servant of an early emperor.

After his home schooling concluded when he was 12, Zhou began attending a public school, living with his uncle in Mukden, then the capital of Manchuria. As Manchuria was a meeting point of cultures, his teachers introduced him to the intellectual debates of the time concerning patriotism, democracy and reforms influenced by Japan or the West. When his uncle was transferred to Tianjin, Zhou attended one of China's most progressive schools, the Nankai Middle School, influenced by English education in the form of strict discipline, sports and intellectual debate. Zhou became the editor of the school journal, embarking on a life-long interest in writing as well as drama.

Zhou next attended Tianjin University, but political debate and agitation had already begun to take over from his studies. This was the time of the "May Fourth movement" of 1919. Among the student leaders was Deng Yingchao, Zhou's future wife. Zhou's student politics did not prevent him from getting a government scholarship to study in France, and he left China in 1920, visiting England on the way.

In France, he became caught up in the debates in French intellectual circles concerning socialism and the Russian Revolution. Zhou came to feel that Communism was "the wave of the future," and with a few Chinese students in France organized the Chinese Youth Communist Party in Europe even before a Communist Party was officially organized in China. Among these student leaders in France was Deng Xiaoping, as well as others who would eventually become important leaders of the Party in China. Thus, in Europe Zhou established a network of relationships upon which he would draw for the rest of his life. In addition, Zhou's four years in France provided him with knowledge of the Western world that would later serve him in his diplomatic activities.

The subtitle of Barbara Barnouin and Yu Changgen's deeply researched book is unnecessary. Zhou had only a political life if one considers war making and espionage as politics by other means. From his return to China in 1924 until his death, Zhou was engaged in an endless series of adventures: military, diplomatic, administrative and internal party politics. He had no children, and although his wife stayed with him to the end, there must have been little time for family life. Zhou had many co-workers, but apparently few friends. Those he had he was willing to sacrifice when the political winds changed. His charming personality, intelligence and eloquence allowed him to maintain contact with a wide range of people, and it is as a diplomat dealing with the Russians, Americans, French, Central Europeans, Indians, Koreans and Vietnamese that he made his mark.

From 1943 on, Zhou Enlai played an important role in many crucial activities—the war against the Japanese, the Chinese civil war and the establishment of the Peoples' Republic, the war in Korea, the break with post-Stalin Russia, the rise of the Non-aligned Movement, the war in Vietnam, the reestablishment of relations with the United States, and the Cultural Revolution. Yet whoever Zhou Enlai was before 1943, his personality and individual goals left no evident mark on his activities afterwards. All that is evident is the administrator of Mao Zedong Thought.

Zhou often had doubts about Mao's aims and especially his methods, particularly during the Cultural Revolution. Yet every time that speaking out might have made a difference in favor of a more rational policy, Zhou Enlai was silent. He was willing to write elegant self-criticism of himself, and he was willing to turn away from colleagues in political trouble. As the authors observe: "Political survival clearly required Zhou to faithfully execute Mao's arbitrary instructions. For this he had not much choice; any defiance by him would have unavoidably resulted in his downfall, since an array of radicals was closely watching him and waiting for him to take a false step to oust him from power."

Thus on his tomb in those poster-size characters of the Cultural Revolution there should be only one word—survivor.