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Chou En-lai

CHOU EN-LAI, dead at 78, moved at the center of China's intellectual and then political reawakening for more than half a century. Well-born and trained in Westernized schools and Western lands, he adopted Communism early on as an ideology suited to both the liberation and the modernization of the world's most populous and perhaps most tradition-ridden country. As political organizer, policy maker and administrator, second in historical importance only to Mao Tse-tung, Mr. Chou saw China become free of foreign control, unify all its broken parts but one (Taiwan), address its mass poverty with a rigor and success scarcely approximated elsewhere, assert its predominance in Asia, and assume a broad—and nuclear—role on the international stage. Mr. Chou played his giant's part in China, moreover, while retaining a level of personal culture which dazzled foreigners who came to know him. He moved with history, and he moved history, and yet more than any other contemporary Chinese leader he remained, with his memorably square eyebrows and his careful smile, a particular individual through it all.

In terms of the issues which have dominated Chinese politics in the last decade, Mr. Chou was a moderate. He stood for continuity and order in the period of purification-through-upheaval known as the Cultural Revolution, his emphasis being on economic growth and political stability. Meanwhile, principally to offset the ever-growing pressures of the Soviet Union, he shaped a policy of accommodation with the United States. At his

death, however, neither of these policy lines could be said to be irreversible. Rumbles are heard from time to time of a return to the fierce ways of the Cultural Revolution: Mr. Mao (or others of his ideological bent) apparently still fears that a focus on growth will corrupt the Chinese revolution. And Mr. Chou himself seems to be the author of the careful gestures made in the last year or two to the Soviet Union—the latest was the turnabout release of the Soviet helicopter crew held for 20 months as “spies.” With the infirm Mr. Mao acting more like a living legend than a day-to-day leader, Mr. Chou had already devolved much of the authority for running China upon a protegee, Teng Hsiao-peng. But now that his death has made the long-awaited succession period a reality, it remains to be seen whether either the moderate policies associated with Mr. Chou, or the moderate leadership conducted by Mr. Teng, will endure.

That being so, it is evident that the United States, not alone, is entering a period of unusual international delicacy. For despite the rise of the oil oligarchs and much else, the triangular relationship of Washington-Peking-Moscow remains the basic geopolitical framework of world affairs. And all three of those nations on the triangle face imminent leadership crises of one sort or another: an election in the United States, a party congress in the Soviet Union, and now a major change in the People's Republic of China. Chou En-lai performed prodigious services in his country. But he did not leave either China or the Washington-Peking-Moscow triangle in an unsettled state.