



2009.08.07

Jay Taylor, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009. Pp. xii, 722. ISBN 978-0-674-03338-2.

Reviewed by Jiu-Hwa Lo Upshur, Eastern Michigan University (jupshur@emich.edu).

This comprehensive biography of Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975) will not soon be superseded. Chiang and his antagonist Mao Zedong are seminal figures in twentieth-century China; Taylor argues persuasively that Chiang is the more important. Appointed commander-in-chief of the National Revolutionary Army of the Kuomintang or Nationalist Party in 1926, Chiang defeated warlord coalitions deploying over ten times his own forces. Between 1928 and 1937, he fought, negotiated, and compromised with remnant warlords and political rivals within the KMT to forge a more unified and effective government than any in China since 1911. He also campaigned against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that finally had success in sight by 1936. Chiang's government built a modern infrastructure, expanded education, promulgated modern law codes, and created the industries and modern army that allowed China to survive a total war against Japan. From 1937, China fought that war alone and against overwhelming odds, then, after 1941, as an important member of the Grand Alliance against the Axis Powers. Victory brought new crises for Chiang's government, in the form of Soviet ambitions in parts of China and a civil war against a revitalized CCP that ended in defeat in 1949. Forced to retreat to Taiwan, Chiang oversaw reforms in the Nationalist Party and enacted economic measures he had been unwilling or unable to undertake on the mainland. Thus he laid the foundations for a democratic society and government that made Taiwan a beacon and model alternative to Mao's China.

Jay Taylor, formerly a specialist on Asia in the U.S. Foreign Service, is a Research Associate at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University and author of several books on China and Southeast Asia.¹ He has now produced the definitive biography of Chiang Kai-shek, basing his account on solid facts and unassailable sources, many recently released, including Chiang's voluminous diaries and the papers of members of his extended family, party and government officials, his rivals, and opponents; he has also interviewed Chiang's surviving subordinates and associates.

Taylor also debunks much that is wrong or misinformed in previous studies of Chiang and his government. For example, many anti-Chiang works charge him with not fighting Japan and make out Mao's forces to be anti-Japanese heroes. Taylor refutes such oft-repeated claims with facts: between October 1938 and December 1941 the Chinese army suffered 1.3 million casualties; up to January 1940, the Communist share was only 3 percent of that total (169).

In what follows, I will outline the life of Chiang so richly documented in Jay Taylor's remarkable book.

* * *

Chiang was born to a family of moderate means in Xikou, a small town in Zhejiang province; his father died when Chiang was eight. He was brought up by his mother and educated along neo-Confucian lines. At fourteen, in dutiful obedience to his mother's wishes, he married a young woman several years his senior. Like many young men concerned about China's fate, he sought a modern education, enrolled in both Chinese and Japanese military academies, and joined Dr. Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary party. After the successful 1911 revolution that overthrew the ineffective Qing dynasty, Sun's party became known as the Kuomintang (KMT). Years in a political wilderness ensued for Sun and his followers, because the Nationalists lacked a military force to counter the warlords who ruled China. Chiang spent most of that time in Shanghai, conferring with Sun and his comrades while making a living in business.

1. See, e.g., *China and Southeast Asia: Peking's Relations with Revolutionary Movements*, rev. ed. (NY: Praeger, 1976) and esp. *The Generalissimo's Son: Chiang Ching-kuo and the Revolution in China and Taiwan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2000).

Inspired by the rapid success of the Bolsheviks in Russia after the 1917 revolution, Sun Yat-sen met with Comintern agent Adolf Joffe in Shanghai in 1922. They forged an alliance whereby, in return for Russian economic support and political advice, Sun would admit members of the infant CCP to the KMT. A lucky turn of political events in 1922 allowed Sun to establish a government in Canton in opposition to the warlord government in Peking. He sent Chiang to the Soviet Union to study the Red Army's organization and the tactics that had allowed the Bolsheviks to win the civil war. After a three-month tour that included several conversations with the father of the Red Army, Leon Trotsky, Chiang returned to Canton. Sun then ordered him to organize a military academy, which he headed to the end of his life. Chiang was impressed with the Soviet system of political commissars in the military and ideological indoctrination in the military curriculum, but retained a lifelong suspicion of Soviet goals concerning China and an antipathy to Marxist ideology.

After Sun's death in 1925, several KMT leaders, all Chiang's seniors in the party, vied for his mantle; the pro-Communist left wing of the KMT, aided by Soviet advisors, won control. Chiang for his part kept a low profile, devoting his time to training an officer corps and small army. In 1926, he was appointed commander-in-chief of the Northern Expedition with a mission to oust the warlords and unify China. Taylor points out that during the Northern Expedition, as so often in his career, Chiang held the weaker hand, but through strategic compromises, perseverance, and strategy, he generally came out the winner. For example, during the march to the Yangtze River valley, he faced warlord armies many times stronger than his own. Yet within a year he had defeated all of them and gained control of the three key cities Wuhan, Nanking, and Shanghai through superior tactics, the better training and fighting spirit of his men, and the nationalistic fervor his movement inspired among the Chinese people.

Chiang concealed his anti-Communist attitude, because the civilian government leaders he served were members either of the pro-Communist faction in the KMT or of the CCP itself. After capturing the financial capital Shanghai and the symbolically important city Nanking, Chiang no longer needed Soviet support and moved decisively to purge the CCP and Soviet advisors in areas under his control. His actions left the pro-Communist KMT civilian government in Wuhan without significant military backing; when its leaders learned they had been duped by Stalin and were about to be purged by the Soviet advisors in their midst, they dissolved the government and the once dominant left wing of the KMT collapsed.

Chiang's forces, bolstered by warlords who jumped on his winning band-wagon, finished the Northern Expedition in 1928, nominally unifying China. However, accepting the support of warlords and allowing them to retain their forces only postponed serious trouble: one after another, the "KMT warlords" revolted against the central government during the next decade. In the post-1928 civil wars, Chiang's forces controlled fewer troops and far less territory than his opponents. But, yet again, combining better finances, weapons, and strategy with shrewd concessions and compromises, Chiang generally emerged stronger after each encounter.

A patriot and nationalist, Chiang made deals with his domestic rivals (later including the CCP) to strengthen and modernize China against its ultimate mortal enemy, Japan. That he was willing to endure humiliation to achieve a greater goal first became apparent during the second phase of the Northern Expedition in 1927, when Japan landed a large force at Jinan, a key city along the north-south railway line, to block his advance to Peking. Chiang sent a diplomatic negotiating team to Jinan, but the Japanese military tortured and killed them, then shelled the civilian quarters of the city, killing thousands. Chinese demonstrated throughout the country demanding resistance. But Chiang refused, rerouted his troops, and continued his march north, because he understood that instigating hostilities against Japan with a weaker Chinese army was no way to thwart Japanese efforts to block the unification of China. By bearing the brunt of public anger, Chiang achieved a higher goal.

A realist, Chiang also made deals with foreign foes and allies, but as Taylor points out, never for personal reasons. For example, during the era of the KMT-Soviet alliance, many young Chinese were sent to Russia to study, among them Chiang's only natural son, Ching-kuo, then fifteen years old. When Chiang broke with Soviet Russia in 1927, Stalin retaliated by keeping Ching-kuo as a hostage. In 1931, Stalin made it

known that he would release him in exchange for two Comintern agents that Chiang had imprisoned. Chiang refused, writing “in his diary that over 300,000 of his men and officers, who were all ‘like his sons,’ had died in the cause; thus he could not put personal need above the nation’s interest. Releasing an enemy of the people in order to free his son was simply not an option” (96). Ching-kuo remained in the Soviet Union until 1937, when Stalin sent him home with his Russian wife and their son as a friendly gesture toward China in an impending war against their mutual enemy Japan.

Chiang’s government pursued nation building during the Nanking decade (1928–37), avoiding war with Japan as it repeatedly attacked and seized Chinese territory and created puppet governments. He ignored angry public demands for immediate war, because China was not ready. On bad terms with the Soviet Union and with Western powers uninterested in helping China, he hired German military advisors to arm and train his army, calculating that China would be ready to resist Japan by 1939.

As Japan accelerated and widened its aggression against China, Chiang was forced cooperate with the CCP to form a united front. From the outbreak of war in July 1937 until December 1941, China fought alone except for Soviet aid, and suffered horrific human and material losses. Chiang and his wife Mayling (whom he married in 1927 after divorcing his first wife) symbolized China’s heroic will to sacrifice and fight against heavy odds. Madame Chiang, glamorous, American educated (she was a graduate of Wellesley College), and a member of the politically and financially influential Soong family, became China’s spokesperson to the Western world and garnered enormous public sympathy for her country’s struggle.

The expansion of World War II to Asia brought China both blessings and problems. On the plus side were U.S. Lend-Lease aid, Chiang’s appointment as Supreme Commander of the China Theater, his participation at a summit conference in Cairo with Roosevelt and Churchill, and a new treaty with Britain and the United States ending the unequal treatment that had humbled and hobbled China for a century. But once again Chiang and China held a weak hand. Roosevelt appointed Joseph Stilwell commander of U.S. forces in the China Theater and put him in charge of Lend-Lease disbursements. This was a disastrous choice that both soured U.S.-China relations and adversely affected the conduct of the war in Burma and China. For example, in early 1944, when Japan launched its largest offensive of the war, Operation Ichigo, to open a supply line from Korea through China to Southeast Asia, Stilwell refused to release gasoline stored in China needed by U.S. Air Force planes under his rival General Claire Chennault to assist the Chinese defenders with air strikes. He even demanded that both Chiang and Admiral Louis Mountbatten, commander-in-chief of Allied forces in Burma, be replaced by himself (264–83). Because Chiang needed U.S. aid, he put up with Stilwell’s bad decisions until September 1944 when Secretary of War (and Stilwell’s patron) General George Marshall finally acceded to Roosevelt’s demand and dismissed him. While much of this is well known, Taylor carefully documents the change of U.S. government and public opinion from pro- to anti-Chiang owing to false or slanted accounts disseminated by Stilwell supporters both within and outside the U.S. government.

Japan’s unconditional surrender vindicated China’s sacrifices in its war of resistance, but did not strengthen Chiang’s position in regard to postwar arrangements. For example, at the 1945 Yalta Conference (where China was not represented), Roosevelt and Churchill had given Stalin important rights in Manchuria and Outer Mongolia to ensure a Soviet declaration of war against Japan. China had no option but to accept such concessions at its own expense. Thus Soviet troops occupied Manchuria (and northern Korea), stripped it of important industrial installations, and left captured weapons to the CCP, significantly helping it in this and other ways in the ensuing civil war.

President Truman appointed Marshall ambassador to China with a mandate to help the KMT and CCP avoid renewed civil war by merging their armies and forming a democratic coalition government. Ever the astute manipulator, “Mao ... sent word to Marshall that his arrangement of the cease-fire was ‘fair.’ ‘Chinese democracy,’ the Chairman solemnly declared, ‘must follow the American path.’ Zhou [Enlai] reported to Mao that Marshall told him that he trusted the sincerity of the Chinese Communists but was having difficulty persuading the Kuomintang leaders. Zhou told his secretary that Marshall ‘reminded him of Stilwell’”

(343). The Marshall mission failed, and the United States withdrew aid to the KMT government and washed its hands of events in China.

Foreseeing defeat on the mainland, Chiang and his supporters moved to Taiwan. Disillusioned with Chiang and the KMT, the U.S. government predicted and hoped for a speedy collapse of his government there and the installation of an alternative leader or a United Nations trusteeship of the island to save it from conquest by the People's Republic of China (PRC) as Communist, mainland China was now known. By early 1950, 700,000 men of the People's Liberation Army had massed on the coast facing Taiwan in preparation for an invasion. Just as the fall of Taiwan seemed certain, Communist North Korea invaded South Korea in June 1950. China redeployed the army intended for invading Taiwan to instead aid the North Koreans.

On Taiwan, Chiang began sweeping political and economic reforms that realized Sun Yat-sen's principle of the People's Livelihood, but also took stern measures to shut down potential political enemies. Internationally, the Cold War reoriented U.S. strategic and foreign policies in East Asia. Once again Chiang skillfully capitalized and obtained U.S. economic and military aid. A Mutual Defense Treaty between the two governments safeguarded Taiwan (now the Republic of China [ROC]) from conquest by the PRC. In his last years, though Chiang recognized that he would never return to power on the mainland, he remained a patriot committed to the ideal of "one China" shared by his old nemesis Mao. These two giants who had fought to rule China died with a year of each other.

During twenty-five years on Taiwan ... Chiang had his chance at nation-building, and in terms of social and economic indices he laid the groundwork for Taiwan's leap into modernity.... He would be especially pleased about the Peking regime's replacement of class struggle and world revolution with the ancient teachings of Confucius, once again drawing on China's great history as the cultural and moral center of Chinese civilization.... But most of all, if the Chiangs could see modern Shanghai and Beijing, they might well believe that their long-planned "counterattack" had succeeded and their successors had recovered the mainland. Truly, it is their vision of modern China, not Mao's, that guides the People's Republic in the twenty-first century (591-92).

* * *

Taylor's authoritative, balanced, and well-written biography is the result of meticulous research in a vast array of primary and secondary sources, carefully cited in 100 pages of footnotes. It also includes interesting photos and useful maps. This is a book for serious students, requiring a good deal of background knowledge of modern Chinese history and its large cast of characters.