

Taylor, Jay, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China*

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The life of Chiang Kai-shek has been defined by the idea that China was lost to communist forces while under his rule. Despite being a major world leader for over three decades and standing alongside Mao Zedong as one of the most critical figures in recent Chinese history, for the rest of his life after the communist victory Chiang labored under the judgment that he was a brutal dictator and a failure. In the end Mao won and Chiang lost. This notion has served to fundamentally shape the historiography around Chiang. In *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China*, Jay Taylor attempts to deliver a new and balanced portrait of the life and times of a highly contradictory and still controversial individual who Taylor argues was motivated less by power than by a persistent vision of a strong, unified China.

Following up on his biography of Chiang's son Chiang Ching-kuo and utilizing new information from documents recently released by the Taiwanese government and Chiang's own personal diaries, Taylor's *The Generalissimo* is a massive undertaking, weaving the story of Chiang's life with the turbulent and often chaotic history of China throughout the span of nearly ninety years. At the beginning of his work Taylor describes the traditional negative historiography surrounding Chiang and his desire to delve deeper into the Generalissimo's life armed with new material and an open mind. The result is

a detailed account of a man who faced dilemmas beyond his control and was often besieged by enemy and ally alike yet managed to achieve the “the best of the all-bad possible outcomes” (p. 584).

A recurring theme that runs throughout Taylor’s work is the idea that the accomplishments and abilities of Chiang the man are often obscured by Chiang the legend, usually for the worse. Taylor argues that many of the pivotal insights and incidents in Chiang’s life that have negatively defined the Generalissimo to this day have been the result of misunderstandings, misinterpretations or even outright fabrications. (p. 358) One example given is when historian Barbara Tuchman was told that Chiang had no concept of monsoons, an important factor to consider when planning operations in Burma (p. 248). The result was a depiction of a leader out of touch with certain realities. Taylor heavily relies on Chiang’s personal diaries in an attempt to refute this and other stories. While many of the legends Taylor targets are seemingly inconsequential, the combined weight of such stories and statements has formed over time a convincing unflattering portrait of Chiang. As Taylor argues, “in such a manner do seemingly revealing but totally misunderstood statements become part of a historic legend if they fit a preconceived stereotype” (p. 248).

Within *The Generalissimo*’s grand scope of battles and political maneuvering, personal relationships form a substantial part of the books narrative. Chiang’s tenure as ruler of China and then Taiwan was characterized by a remarkable association with many major historical figures of the twentieth century. Taylor

uses these relationships to explore Chiang's motivations and mentality. A great deal of time is devoted to examining the troubled and unequal relationship between Chiang and his American allies, in particular the deep seated animosity between Chiang and General Stillwell, who was sent to advise him during World War II. Through Chiang's dealings with Stillwell and a succession of later American leaders and diplomats, America's China policy is portrayed as compromised, conciliatory towards the Chinese Communist Party and intent on chasing "chimeric" and ultimately unattainable goals (p. 392). While not absolving Chiang of culpability, Taylor asserts that there was plenty of blame to go around regarding the communist victory in China.

While giving the one-time leader of China more than his due, Taylor does not shy away from critically judging Chiang's mistakes and notes Chiang's capacity for casual brutality (p. 416). Through out his life Chiang's errors in judgment compound his problems. *The Generalissimo* portrays Chiang as often being forced into untenable situations without removing responsibility or agency. Chiang's decisions still mattered and still changed the course of history (p. 147). Taylor often remarks on Chiang's political savvy and his grand strategy, which worked with varying degrees of success throughout his life. Yet due to the massive scope of his work, Taylor is less successful at humanizing his subject and Chiang often remains a distant figure at the center of the storm. Aside from early insights into his character and minor revelations such as the fact that tears came easily to the Generalissimo, Chiang continues to come off as a remote and austere man. The problem may be that

at times the mantle of legend can never be completely stripped away nor can the man underneath be completely revealed.

The Generalissimo is an eminently readable account of a still divisive figure in world history. Taylor presents a case for Chiang being more of an effective leader than is generally acknowledged, albeit at times a greatly flawed one. The insights within *The Generalissimo* go beyond China and Chiang and are valuable to anyone with an interest in the Cold War, World War II or the early history of the Republic of China in Taiwan. Finally, Taylor's comment that no Western historian had yet been able to work with the new material on Chiang appearing in Taiwan illustrates the continuing difficulty of scholarly work across two different languages.

A frequent criticism that has been leveled against Chiang was his tendency to trade space for time. The moment never seemed quite right for Chiang to take definitive action and he often appeared to be buffeted by forces outside his control, all the while clinging to his singular vision for China. Taylor ends his work with speculation as to how the Generalissimo might view modern day China and Taiwan and offers the intriguing suggestion that the vision that will guide China's path to the future may be that of Chiang Kai-shek after all. Perhaps, decades after the Generalissimo's death, his time has finally come.

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