REVIEW ESSAY

RISING CHINA'S FORGOTTEN FATHER

Charles Horner

Taylor, Jay. *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China*. Boston: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011. 736pp. $35

Jay Taylor's masterful biography of Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975), first published in 2009, is now available in paperback, with a new postscript that assesses documentation unavailable when Taylor completed his manuscript in 2008. However, nothing that has appeared since then dilutes Taylor's original, powerful reassessment of Chiang's appropriate place in twentieth-century history.

Over the decades Chiang Kai-shek had become a textbook example of politically corrupted writing of biography and history. After the so-called "loss of China" in 1949, Chiang's well documented failings were conscripted to camouflage the many failings of American policy makers. Later, during the Vietnam War, the fate of the anti-Communist cause in China as led by Chiang Kai-shek became a metaphor for those who argued against American involvement. Thus a large and consequential figure was rendered irrelevant and a statesman of considerable acumen and foresight was unceremoniously dumped into History's dustbin.

Still, Chiang's dominance of China's politics from 1925 to 1949 did indeed end in his defeat in China's civil war and his subsequent flight to the island of Taiwan. What more do we need to know than this? Why accompany Jay Taylor on his long march through mountains of documentation and read the hefty book that resulted from it?

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The appearance of *The Generalissimo* is for students of modern China another important milestone in an ongoing and thorough reevaluation of the achievements of "Republican China" (that is, the period between the collapse of the last dynasty in 1912 and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949). A generation ago we were taught to regard this era as nothing but an exercise in futility, a series of false starts, an opera buffa, albeit with a cast of millions in misery. It was but an interlude on the way to the People's Republic, the best and final form of Modern China, which, presumably, would last forever. Over the past thirty years, however, as China has been remade and has reopened itself to the world, many scholars have come to see the years of 1913 through the 1930s as a fertile seedtime, with advances in politics, commerce, and culture that prefigure not only today's China but also Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan.

Yet Taylor's magisterial book stands on its own as a well lighted pathway into China's modern history, illuminating the connections between China's own violent and tumultuous situation and a larger world assaulted by murderous ideologies. As Taylor explicates Chiang's complicated view of these things, we see the eclectic confusion that is the modern Chinese mind, and we are witnesses to China's still ongoing struggle to somehow marry its inherited tradition to the needs of contemporary life. Chiang Kai-shek was, at one and the same time, deeply Confucian, piously Christian, and thoroughly committed to China's modernization. His political creed derived from Sun Yat-sen's (1866–1925) "Three Principles," a racially based Han nationalism; a one-party and elite-managed constitutionalism; and a vague amalgam of both state socialism and state capitalism that was meant to avoid any virulent variant of either.

Chiang's life and times also remind us that China was not, and still is not, isolated from world events. As a military cadet in Japan when China's final dynasty, the Qing, was collapsing, Chiang saw in Japan what his mentor Sun Yat-sen had seen—a model and a potential ally. Frustrated by the West's dismissal of China's claims after World War I and staggered by the seeming collapse of Western civilization in Europe, Sun then led his part of the republican movement into a close alliance with the new Soviet Union—the "First United Front" with the Communists. Chiang followed him there, but as Sun's successor and as a partial unifier of the country. He then turned on the Communists, but later agreed, under duress, to a "Second United Front" with them.

Meanwhile, looking for other ways to counter the military pressure from Japan in the 1930s and 1940s, Chiang skillfully played a very weak diplomatic hand, maneuvering among the Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States. He did this not only to build a powerful anti-Japan coalition but also to persuade the allies to pursue a grand strategy against Japan that would work to his political advantage in the postwar era. This is an underappreciated aspect of China's

twentieth-century experience; it reminds us of the emphasis that traditional Chinese statecraft has long placed on appearing strong when it is actually weak. Chiang's performance on the world stage was at one with that of his longtime friend and rival Zhou Enlai, who, in negotiating in the 1970s on behalf of the China that Mao Zedong (1893–1976) had ruined, nonetheless always managed to convey the impression that he was speaking for a great power. Finally, as much as Chiang himself was a master operator within the Chinese political system, he and his formidable wife Song Meiling (1898–2003)—Madame Chiang Kai-shek—together were a powerful force for decades within the very different American political system.

Taylor deftly succeeds in tying all these threads together into a highly readable and cogently presented story. As he helps the reader to understand, the strands of the tale cannot be untangled, and so our own understanding of the history of this maddening era is abetted by watching Chiang himself think it through. In this, Chiang's daily diaries (kept 1918–72), which have gradually been made public, are a great resource. Taylor knows how to properly exploit them by weighing them against a trove of other contemporaneous documentation.

Taylor's work is also a major advance in that it pays close attention to what happened after Chiang repaired to Taiwan and implemented economic and social reforms there. Through Taylor's convincing account of those years it becomes apparent that the "Rise of Taiwan" prefigures the "Rise of China." In China, after the destructive decades of Mao Zedong's ascendancy, Beijing has been tracing the design for "Modern China" that Taiwan first drew, and as Beijing moves out into the world economy, it relies substantially on Taiwan's capital and managerial expertise. Chiang Kai-shek's son, Chiang Ching-kuo (1910–88), carried out the political reforms that will also be the template for China's political modernization. In 1987, he ended his father's regime of martial law, and today Taiwan's competitive multiparty electoral democracy is admired throughout the Chinese world.

If the Chiang family's vision of economics and politics is indeed increasingly influential in China, Chiang Kai-shek's once-far-fetched project of reestablishing his sway in China now seems less fanciful. Still, Chiang (and his Republic of China) and Mao (and his People's Republic of China), no matter their mortal rivalry, were as one in their support of a "One China" that includes Taiwan. Today, Taiwan's democratic institutions mean that unification requires the assent of Taiwan's people. This constrains both those within Chiang's Kuomintang (Nationalist) Party who still seek unification and China's Communist Party, which would like to fashion yet another Communist-Nationalist rapprochement, a "Third United Front," that would mimic the previous two. But unlike those two "fronts," mere "nationalism" will not now suffice. Just as the economic systems

of Taiwan and China have begun to converge on Taiwan's model, the political systems will also have to converge on Taiwan's success as a democracy. It is in this way that Taiwan may yet in the end come to the rescue of the mainland.