



## The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China (Belknap Press)

By Jay Taylor

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One of the most momentous stories of the last century is China's rise from a self-satisfied, anti-modern, decaying society into a global power that promises to one day rival the United States. Chiang Kai-shek, an autocratic, larger-than-life figure, dominates this story. A modernist as well as a neo-Confucianist, Chiang was a man of war who led the most ancient and populous country in the world through a quarter century of bloody revolutions, civil conflict, and wars of resistance against Japanese aggression.

In 1949, when he was defeated by Mao Zedong—his archrival for leadership of China—he fled to Taiwan, where he ruled for another twenty-five years. Playing a key role in the cold war with China, Chiang suppressed opposition with his “white terror,” controlled inflation and corruption, carried out land reform, and raised personal income, health, and educational levels on the island. Consciously or not, he set the stage for Taiwan's evolution of a Chinese model of democratic modernization.

Drawing heavily on Chinese sources including Chiang's diaries, *The Generalissimo* provides the most lively, sweeping, and objective biography yet of a man whose length of uninterrupted, active engagement at the highest levels in the march of history is excelled by few, if any, in modern history. Jay Taylor shows a man who was exceedingly ruthless and temperamental but who was also courageous and conscientious in matters of state. Revealing fascinating aspects of Chiang's life, Taylor provides penetrating insight into the dynamics of the past that lie behind the struggle for modernity of mainland China and its relationship with Taiwan.

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. American historians tend to portray Chiang Kai-Shek (1887–1975) as an inept dictator who mismanaged China until Mao Zedong expelled him in 1949 and he finished his life ruling Taiwan under the protection of the U.S. military. But this thick, heavily researched but lucid biography by Taylor, a research associate at Harvard's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, describes an impressive figure who left China a greater legacy than he has been given credit for. An ambitious officer, Chiang took power when Sun Yat-sen died in 1925. Attempting to unify a chaotic nation, he fought warlords and rival Communists and then spent nine even bloodier years fighting the Japanese. Those expecting the traditional account of how Chiang hoarded American military aid in preparation for a postwar showdown with the Communists will read instead of the massive losses his troops suffered fighting the Japanese while Mao husbanded his forces. Taylor does not conceal Chiang's brutality and diplomatic failures, but he is an admirer who makes a good case that Chiang governed an almost ungovernable country with reasonable skill and understood his enemies better than American advisers did. 41 b&w illus., 4 maps. (Apr.)

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Chiang Kai-shek has long been viewed as a failure for having lost mainland China to Mao's People's Liberation Army in a stunningly short span of time. This richly detailed biography argues that Chiang's neo-Confucian vision for a modern China may yet win. Chiang saw himself as central to China's destiny, yet his years in exile were some of his happiest; as he once wrote, "Trouble is an excellent tonic." While Mao was inflicting the Great Leap Forward on mainland China, Chiang was instituting a widely admired program of land reform on Taiwan, and today the raucously democratic island is often looked to in the People's Republic as a model of prosperity. Drawing on a revelatory cache of newly available diaries and records, Taylor reveals the complexities of the soldier and statesman, showing him to be shockingly brutal at times, oddly passive at others, naïvely earnest, quick to tears, and always surrounded by intrigue.

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Review

The story of Chiang Kai-shek is so big, so interwoven with the story of modern China, and so complex, that it has defied a good biographical treatment. Now, Jay Taylor has provided us with a strong, vivid, and eminently readable biography of this major twentieth-century leader that captures his 'life and times' better than any previous work in English.

--William C. Kirby (*Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, Harvard University*)

This splendid biography far surpasses previous scholarship on Chiang Kai-shek, providing new insights into the savage international and civil wars in China that raged for almost thirty years as well as Chiang's quarter century on Taiwan where he laid the predicate for democratic governance on the besieged island.

--David Lampton, Hyman Professor and Director of China Studies, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies

Following his masterful account *The Generalissimo's Son*, Taylor has fully tapped Chiang Kai-shek's personal diaries and a comprehensive range of sources to provide the most authoritative assessment of this towering figure in the Chinese revolution and global politics of the 20th century.

--Robert Sutter, Visiting Professor of Asian Studies, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University.

Chiang Kai-shek rivaled Mao as a dominant figure in the history of modern China. Taylor has taken a fresh look at his long, eventful life based on new sources, and suggests a controversial but persuasive new reading of Chiang's motives and actions. This vividly realized account will be the authoritative work for a long time to come.

--Andrew J. Nathan, author of *China's Transition*

American historians tend to portray Chiang Kai-Shek (1887–1975) as an inept dictator who mismanaged China until Mao Zedong expelled him in 1949 and he finished his life ruling Taiwan under the protection of the U.S. military. But this...lucid biography by Taylor, a research associate at Harvard's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, describes an impressive figure who left China a greater legacy than he has been given credit for...Taylor does not conceal Chiang's brutality and diplomatic failures, but he is an admirer who makes a good case that Chiang governed an almost ungovernable country with reasonable skill and understood his enemies better than American advisers did. (*Publishers Weekly* (starred review) 2009-02-02)

Jay Taylor's new biography, *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China*, challenges the catechism on which generations of Americans have been weaned. Marshaling archival materials made newly available to researchers, including about four decades' worth of Chiang's daily diaries and documents from the Soviet era, it torpedoes many of that catechism's cherished tenets. This is an important, controversial book... Chiang emerges as a flesh-and-blood man rather than the buffoonish cardboard-cutout figure he has generally been portrayed as.

--Laura Tyson Li (*Washington Post Book World* 2009-04-26)

This enthralling book by Jay Taylor of Harvard University shows that [the] conventional views of both Chiang and the Chinese civil war are caricatures. It is the first biography to make full use of the Chiang family archive. This includes Chiang's own diary, in which he wrote at least a page of classical Chinese daily from 1918 to 1972. The picture that emerges is of a far more subtle and prescient thinker than the man America's General Joseph Stilwell used to refer to as "peanut," and Britain's chief of staff, Field-Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, dismissed in Cairo as "a cross between a pine marten and a ferret." (*The Economist* 2009-05-09)

Even in the rapidly widening field of modern Chinese history, it is unusual and gratifying to read a book that upsets not only the reader's previous views but even those of the author himself...Now a different Chiang stands before us. Drawing on new material, years of interviews with the dwindling number of those with first-hand memories of the Chiang family, and scrutiny of Chiang's voluminous diaries, Taylor reveals a much more interesting and despite his stiff exterior, frequently adaptable Chiang...The book is a huge advance on our knowledge of what happened in China from the early twentieth century to the present day, when an updated version of Chiang's Kuomintang is again in power in Taipei...There will be no oblivion [for Chiang]. Jay Taylor has seen to that...A substantial and comprehensive contribution to our knowledge of China.

--Jonathan Mirsky (*Literary Review* 2009-06-01)

Chiang Kai-shek has long been viewed as a failure for having lost mainland China to Mao's People's Liberation Army in a stunningly short span of time. This richly detailed biography argues that Chiang's neo-Confucian vision for a modern China may yet win...Drawing on a revelatory cache of newly available diaries and records, Taylor reveals the complexities of the soldier and statesman, showing him to be shockingly brutal at times, oddly passive at others, naïvely earnest, quick to tears, and always surrounded by intrigue. (*New Yorker* 2009-07-20)

Master of his material, [Taylor] provides excellent in-depth accounts of episodes such as Chiang's

kidnapping by Zhang Xueliang, the Manchurian exiled warlord, at Christmas 1936, the negotiations over the years between Nationalists and Communists and the old man's later years in Taiwan...This is the most thorough inquest on the Generalissimo so far.

--Jonathan Fenby (*Times Higher Education* 2009-07-30)

Taylor shows in great detail that Chiang and his often-maligned troops fought more effectively against Japan's heavily armed and well trained war machine than is generally realized. He also depicts in a mostly positive light Chiang's performance during a quarter of a century in exile at the head of the Nationalist government on Taiwan, where he set the stage for the island's shift from dictatorship to democracy...*Generalissimo* is well-written, and takes on an epic quality as Taylor guides us through many turning points in modern Chinese history. He draws on new materials, but his greatest strength is the fairness of his approach.

--Dan Southerland (*Christian Science Monitor* 2009-08-06)

A new and apparently exhaustive biography...This could well be one of the more important non-fiction books of the year.

--Tyler Cowen (*marginalrevolution.com* 2009-07-23)

This careful culling and quoting of Chiang's diaries is a device Taylor uses effectively to show Chiang's personal qualities. Taylor rejects the commonly held notion that these diaries deserve to be ignored, as being devoid of historical interest; instead, by juxtaposing quotations from Chiang's diaries with vivid and detailed descriptions of the major political and military events unfolding in the wider world, he gives a kind of intimacy to what otherwise might be merely inchoate reflections. Thus, to some extent, Taylor has been able to construct a series of more emotional linkages between Chiang and the world within which he worked.

--Jonathan D. Spence (*New York Review of Books* 2009-10-22)

More than three decades after his death, Chiang is still the most controversial and polarizing figure in Taiwanese politics. In his new biography, Jay Taylor attempts to weave a life out of historical fact and rescue one of the central figures of modern Chinese history from the emotional effervescence of both supporters and detractors...Taylor does much to overturn the popular reading of [Chiang] and to illustrate Chiang's contributions to the Allied war effort. While his scholarship presents a more nuanced view of Chiang, it also uncovers a darker narrative for the Allies, who repeatedly failed to honor their commitments to Chiang...Judging by his stated goal of challenging assumptions and rounding out cardboard characterizations of Chiang, Taylor succeeds admirably. He uncovers a man devoted to reversing a century of humiliation in China.

--Robert Green (*Far Eastern Economic Review* 2009-05-01)

The traditional view of "General Cash-My-Check" as a corrupt and incompetent bit-part player in the story of modern Chinese history is overturned here. Taylor suggests that far from being an incompetent dictator he was actually a shrewd and even noble man, making the best out of a bad hand.

--George Pendle (*Financial Times* 2009-11-28)

Now that Jay Taylor has written his comprehensive book *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China*, we are able to see Chiang as a man of considerable cunning, brutality and patience who skillfully played a weak hand against the Japanese and Mao's forces while extracting huge sums from the Americans.

--Jonathan Mirsky (*New York Times Book Review* 2009-11-29)

Taylor succeeds in recovering a complicated man who was responsible for military and economic success as

well as stunning failures...*The Generalissimo* is now the best English--language biography available. Taylor has considerable narrative skills, and is the first Western biographer to have drawn on Chiang Kai--shek's handwritten diaries.

--Jeremy Brown (*Times Literary Supplement* 2010-01-29)

Reading [Taylor's] excellent, scholarly work, the fruit of five years' research, one does not warm to Chiang but comes to appreciate the emotional complexity of his character, and to admire his fortitude in the face of colossal odds.

--Simon Scott Plummer (*The Tablet*)

Through using newly available archival materials dating back some 40 years, including Chiang's daily diaries, Kuomintang and ROC government documents, Russian records and interviews with key figures, the [Taylor] has produced a deeply researched book that follows the generalissimo from his days on the mainland until his death in Taiwan. But what makes Taylor's work so special are the numerous in-depth and eminently readable accounts of Chiang's life. For the first time, the grandiose layers of appearance and reality that the generalissimo built up around him are stripped back to reveal the man behind the myth. Taylor's epic book is a landmark tome in Chinese studies because it shows that the generalissimo, far from being a sham Caesar who lost the mainland to Mao Zedong and communism in a surprisingly short period of time, gave the nation its best government in the 20th century. This revisionist take, which is told with a flair befitting the subject, shows Chiang to be an honorable and talented man who was subject to ungovernable fits of temper that often led to impetuous decisions...[This] excellent biography...should be mandatory reading for those seeking to garner a better understanding of the mainland and its political and social direction in the 21st century.

--Jean Brisebois (*Taiwan Today* 2010-03-12)

What makes Taylor's biography unique is his use of documents from the Guomintang Party's archive and Chiang's recently released diaries, which span the entirety of Chiang's adult life and offer intimate insight into his inner world, particularly his relationships with his sons and his struggle to reconcile Confucianism and Christianity...In describing each period, Taylor is always careful to situate Chiang in the context of domestic and international politics, thus making this book an accessible introduction to modern Chinese politics.

--L. Teh (*Choice* 2010-02-01)

[An] important book...Coming closer to Chiang than previous biographers, Taylor provides new insight on his character--a combination of unwavering physical bravery and discipline with a sense of martyrdom and shame...Taylor's long section on Chiang's years in Taiwan is one of the most masterful parts of his book, opening up a subject that no one else had seriously investigated.

--Andrew J. Nathan (*New Republic online* 2011-03-31)

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### **From reader reviews:**

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