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# Kill the dwarf pirates

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Jay Taylor

THE GENERALISSIMO

Chiang Kai-shek and the struggle for modern China 736pp. Harvard University Press. £25.95 (US $35). 978 0 674 033382

Western observers have often been rather unkind to Chiang Kai-shek. He has been caricatured as corrupt, a loser, and a fascist. Jay Taylor's biography aims to rehabilitate Chiang, who led the Republic of China and the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT) for five decades, on the mainland from the 1920s to 1949 and then on the island of Taiwan until his death in 1975. Taylor succeeds in recovering a complicated man who was responsible for military and economic successes as well as stunning failures.

The Generalissimo may go some way to correcting Westerners' (mainly Americans') negative perceptions of Chiang. To the Chinese audience themselves, however, Chiang's reputation needs no rescuing. Chiang's popularity in mainland China has never been higher. After Mao Zedong and the Communists won the Chinese Civil War in 1949 and drove Chiang and the Nationalists into exile on Taiwan, propaganda and textbooks vilified the "Chiang bandits". Under Mao, anyone with ties to the KMT suffered persecution. But in recent years, mainland politicians have recast Chiang as a Chinese patriot who resisted Japanese occupation and pushed for state-managed modernization. Chiang's vision was to transform China into a prosperous, modern world power under authoritarian tutelage, with little attention to grand ideologies aside from vague statements about restoring the glory of traditional Chinese culture. China's current political climate would have suited Chiang quite well. Nowadays, many young people in China have a more favourable impression of Chiang than they do of Mao.

Taylor's engaging and sympathetic biography concentrates heavily on foreign relations and international politics. As Taylor sees it, Chiang's reputation was irrevocably sullied during the Second World War by American military officials and journalists who depicted him as an unreliable ally because he withheld his best troops from battle against the Japanese, saving them for use against the Communists (Chiang once said that the Japanese were a disease of the skin, while the Communists were a disease of the heart). The Western press also savaged Chiang's dalliance with fascism in the 1930s and his bungled military decisions during the Chinese Civil War, when rampant corruption and economic mismanagement practically handed victory to the Communists. Taylor challenges all of these assumptions and lays blame for Chiang's image problem at the feet of one man: General Joseph Stilwell.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941, Stilwell was appointed China Theater chief of staff, subordinate to Chiang Kai-shek. Stilwell and Chiang deeply disliked one another and clashed over military decisions. Stilwell openly referred to Chiang as "Peanut", and in reports to President Roosevelt disparaged Chiang and his commitment to the Allied war effort. In Taylor's account, Stilwell comes across as vindictive and unbalanced. The American tried to usurp command from Chiang, and he withheld US support during Japanese offensives. Chiang finally succeeded in having Stilwell recalled in 1944, but Taylor regards this as a pyrrhic victory, because Stilwell was a better manipulator of public opinion: "Stilwell had won the battle of words, a loss from which the Generalissimo and his regime would never fully recover".

It is strange to read a narrative of modern Chinese history in which the central villain is neither Mao nor Chiang, but an American general. Taylor is right that Stilwell's barbs may have unfairly detracted from Chiang's achievements in resisting the Japanese for eight years. When compared with the rapid surrenders of European colonial powers in Hong Kong, Singapore and Indonesia in 1941 and 1942, Chiang's refusal to submit to Japan after crushing defeats and brutal massacres such as the Rape of Nanjing in 1937 looks even more impressive. And Chiang's troops bore the brunt of direct engagements with the Japanese: Communist losses during the war against Japan pale in comparison to the millions of casualties suffered by Nationalist troops.

Taylor's overall assessment of Chiang's accomplishments in resisting Japan is admirably even-handed. But even if we accept that Western criticism distorts Chiang's record, Taylor's claim that one American general dealt the Nationalists a fatal blow gives "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell far too much credit. The mistakes leading to the KMT's loss of the mainland came after Stilwell had left. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, it was Chiang's decision alone to send the Nationalists' best troops to Manchuria, where they were defeated by the Communists. And Stilwell had nothing to do with KMT officials' confiscation of property and corrupt behaviour when they returned to coastal China after VJ Day, nor with the regime's assassination of intellectuals and suppression of students who called for peace between the Nationalists and Communists. By the end of the war against Japan, Chiang had earned popular support. The mainland was his to lose, but lose it he did, thanks to his own mistakes.

Taylor may dwell disproportionately on American perceptions of Chiang, but The Generalissimo is, nonetheless, 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, which the Chiang family deposited at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University in 2005. Taylor was able to view entries from 1917 to 1955, and the remaining volumes (to 1972) were made available to researchers earlier this year.

Taylor skilfully weaves Chiang's diary entries into the narrative. In 1928, Chiang publicly apologized to the Japanese after KMT troops clashed with Japanese soldiers in Shandong province. But in his diary he resolved to write down every day "a way to kill the Japanese". This entry, along with his regular references to the Japanese "dwarf pirates", suggests that Chiang's policy of appeasement during the late 1920s and early 30s was not based on a personal affinity for Japan, where he had studied and lived, but rather on his belief that his army was not prepared for battle.

Such nuggets appear throughout the book and enliven the story, but few of them are revelatory. The early writings from the 1920s are full of resolute but unsurprising self-criticism and calls for self-improvement. Entries from the 1930s touch on similar themes but with a more biblical flavour. More provocative is Taylor's assertion that Chiang was considering Taiwan as a refuge as early as autumn 1946, well before the KMT's loss of the mainland had become certain. In October 1946, Chiang first visited Taiwan, which had been a Japanese colony from 1905. He liked the politically "clean land", writing in his diary that he would develop the island into a model province.

Depending on one's perspective, Chiang's musings about escaping to Taiwan were either a sign of sober realism or profound cynicism. He may have thought that the KMT was beyond repair and in need of a sound defeat. Only then could he carry out on a small scale what he had failed to achieve in China as a whole. In the end, Chiang was pleased with the stable society he was able to build on Taiwan. But if he already had his mind on Taiwan in October 1946, what was the point of continuing to send hundreds of thousands of troops (many of whom were forcibly conscripted from poor farming families who could not afford to bribe KMT recruiters) into battle against the Communists? Was it simply for show?

The show was always part of Chiang Kaishek's decision-making process. During the war, in order to pressure the United States for more supplies, Chiang feigned being on the verge of collapse and implied that he might have to seek a separate peace with Japan. After his retreat to Taiwan, Chiang often declared that a counter-attack on the mainland was just around the corner. Western observers mocked Chiang for believing that he could defeat Mao's army, but Taylor convincingly argues that Chiang never thought that he had a chance to retake China. Chiang had privately accepted that he would probably never return to the mainland during his lifetime. His battle cries were a political ritual meant for domestic consumption.

Chiang's political choices made a huge difference in the lives of many people in China, sometimes disastrously so. Hundreds of thousands suffered because of Chiang. His greatest crime was ordering the destruction of dykes on the Yellow River in 1937 in an effort to slow Japanese advances. The explosions shifted the course of the river and flooded parts of three provinces. At least 800,000 Chinese villagers drowned in the floods, a figure that is more than double the highest estimated number of Chinese casualties during the Rape of Nanjing several months earlier.

Chiang also ordered a crackdown against anti-KMT protesters beginning on February 28, 1947, in Taipei. The suppression of the riots expanded into a brutal pogrom in which almost 28,000 Taiwanese were killed, or about 0.44 per cent of the island's population.

Thus, in relative terms the human cost of Chiang's "regime consolidation" was more intense even than Mao's Suppression of Counter-revolutionaries Campaign on the mainland in 1951, in which 712,000 were killed, constituting 0.12 per cent of mainland China's population. Taylor mentions and deplores the 1947 massacre as well as the deliberate flooding of the Yellow River, but he only devotes about a page to each event, far less space than he gives to disagreements between Chiang and Stilwell.

Chiang was directly responsible for calamity on a huge scale. But the even bigger catastrophes wrought by China's other "great man" of the twentieth century suggest that Chiang's greatest achievement resided in what he did not do. If there had been no Chiang Kai-shek, the Yellow River might still have been flooded and KMT troops might still have rounded up and executed thousands of Taiwanese in 1947. It is likely that other KMT leaders might have done things the same way if they had been in Chiang's rather conventional shoes. The same could not be said of Mao Zedong.

In a sense, Taiwan after 1949 is a test case for what might have been. Since 1949, both Taiwan and the People's Republic have experienced remarkable economic growth, coupled with political repression. But today, the two have strikingly different political cultures. While the mainland remains an authoritarian one-party state, Taiwan has become a rowdy democracy, with open elections, huge political rallies, and peaceful (albeit acrimonious) transitions between administrations. In 2000, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) took power and ended the KMT's half-century of single-party rule on Taiwan. At first, this looked like bad news for Chiang Kai-shek's legacy. Visitors who used to land at Chiang Kai-shek International Airport outside Taipei suddenly found themselves disembarking at the innocuously renamed Taoyuan International Airport. The imposing Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall became the "National Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall". But after a rough few years, Chiang's reputation in Taiwan has made an impressive comeback. In 2008, the KMT recaptured the presidency and began to roll back some of the DPP's "de-Chiangification" measures. Chiang's memorial hall regained its original name last year.

Taiwan's experience should negate claims that Chinese culture is inimical to democracy, free speech and the rule of law.

According to Taylor, Chiang Kai-shek deserves some of the credit for Taiwan's progress. Chiang's main contribution was to not obstruct his son Chiang Ching-kuo from gradually opening up the island's politics, though truly competitive elections only came after both men had died.

The People's Republic of China turned sixty in October, 2009. If the loss of the mainland turned out to have been the best thing that ever happened to Chiang Kai-shek, perhaps that is what he has to teach those mainland politicians who have approvingly reappraised him in recent years. Losing in a genuine political fight might also be just what today's Chinese Communist Party needs.