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Book Review: *Chiang Kai-shek's Interpersonal Relationships: Perspectives Across the Strait*

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Wang Chaoguang, ed. 蒋介石的人际网络 (*Chiang Kai-shek's Interpersonal Relationships: Perspectives Across the Strait*) Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2011. RMB 39.00

By Sherman Lai

This book brings together papers and panel discussions of a conference on Chiang Kai-shek held in Taipei in January 2011 with the joint participation of historians from both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan. It reflects new scholarship on Chiang Kai-shek in the Chinese-speaking world and showcases the approaches that historians in the PRC adopt in handling challenges that their Western colleagues do not encounter. While Chinese historians have enormous audiences, they do not share the academic freedom enjoyed by their colleagues in the West and Taiwan. Because their careers and livelihood are dependent on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), this poses certain dilemmas they must face as they address the important twentieth-century figure of Chiang Kai-shek. Therefore, historians across the Strait will benefit from collaboration, as those on each side have different perspectives and approaches.

Beijing leaders are hungry to consolidate cross-Strait ties at the same time that the numbers of mainland-born Taiwan-Chinese who share their vision are diminishing. On Taiwan, younger generations—including newer scholars—may identify themselves with Taiwan more than with the rest of China. In parallel trajectory to this social change, Taiwan's democratization project has resulted in the open political competition between the Guomindang (GMD), generally oriented toward unification with the PRC, and the independence-oriented Democratic Progressive Party (DDP), which regarded the GMD as an alien regime and accused Chiang Kai-shek of having been a dictator. Due to challenges to the goal of maintaining one-China identity in Taiwan, the CCP is increasingly willing to portray Chiang in a positive light, despite his anti-Communist stance, because he was an ardent nationalist and proponent of the one-China principle. Chiang is thus, somewhat oddly, becoming a shared cross-Strait figure. For Beijing, permitting the publication of a few works on Chiang seems a goodwill gesture. This, however, is a tricky balance, because positive appraisals of Chiang might encourage the mainland audience to suspect the legitimacy of the CCP party-state. Caught between this CCP leaders' dilemma and the growing desire of readers to learn more about pre-1949 China, PRC historians have responded by providing detailed studies of Chiang's life, but have not linked those studies to big issues such as modernity or the efforts and achievements of pre-1949 Chinese governments to modernize their country.

A chapter by Yang Kuisong (Huadong Teacher's University) about the historiography on Chiang Kai-shek in the PRC suggests a course for future research. Yang criticizes the pre-determinism that is dominant among the PRC historians when studying Chiang Kai-shek and Republican China. He points out that there was no academic study on Chiang in the PRC until the early 1980s; the flourishing of scholarly works on Chiang was in mainland China one of the outcomes of Chen Shui-bian's campaign of de-Chiang-ification in Taiwan during his presidential tenure from 2000-2008. Yang states that it is too early for PRC historians, who do not know fully the factual aspects of Chiang's life, to assess Chiang's historical significance. Perhaps out of coincidence or tacit understanding, the essays of the book are the outcome of authors' detailed research on specific aspects of Chiang's life, as suggested by Yang.

The essays of Wang Jisheng (Beijing University) and Lu Fangshang (Donghai University) focus on the formation of Chiang's personality, which they claim to be responsible for Chiang's rise and fall in mainland China. Wang explores Chiang's childhood and argues that Chiang's success came from his search for the patriarchal authority and love that was absent during his childhood. Chiang was only able to experience these when he worked with Chen Qimei and Sun Yat-sen, both of whom, Wang argues, appreciated Chiang's loyalty and talents and treated him as a son. Wang also explores the origin of violent aspects in Chiang's personality and attributes them to the overindulgence of his widowed mother as well as the brutal treatment he received from his teacher in the local private school, from his father when he was alive, and, occasionally, from his mother as well. Lu Fangshang argues that these extremes—overindulgence and violence—contributed to forming Chiang's strong will and his swift responses to any attempt to control him, such as those by Mikhail Borodin in 1926 and Joseph Stilwell in 1944 (p. 29). Lu further contends that it was Chiang's clash with Borodin that led to his violent strike against the CCP in 1927 and, consequently, to his assumption of a leadership position that same year. His rejection of Stilwell, on the other hand, fatally damaged his relations with the United States and ultimately resulted in his defeat at the hands of the CCP in 1949.

The second aspect of Chiang's life addressed in other essays in this book is, broadly defined, Chiang's *renpin* (人品), a term that might be translated as "morality" or "integrity." One issue of *renpin* concerns Chiang's marital relations, particularly polygamy. Although polygamy was common in Confucian patriarchal societies, divorce without good reason was regarded as an issue of *renpin* and frowned upon. Chiang, however, divorced his first wife and deserted his concubine and courtesan to marry Soong Mei-ling, a young girl from an elite Christian family in Shanghai who had been educated in the United States. Previous historiography had generally regarded Chiang's marriage to Soong as a political contract and viewed it as a reflection of his greed and heartlessness. Not surprisingly, this marriage became a topic of fiction in the PRC. Among the most popular of these fictional accounts was the voluminous *Jinling cunmeng* (*A Dream in Nanjing* 金陵春梦, 1958).

Luo Ming (Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, or CASS) has revised this oversimplified explanation of Chiang's marriages through her thorough research of related parts of Chiang's diaries. She presents a complicated picture of Chiang's encounters with his four spouses and argues that divorce and desertion of his concubine and courtesan were reflective of clashes between Confucian tradition and Western-oriented modernity, not indicative of a moral deficiency on Chiang's part.¹ She demonstrates that Chiang was a victim of custom,

which gave parents the power to arrange early-age marriage for their children without input from the future spouses. Chiang, therefore, had not consented to the marriage and his relationships with his three spouses had been in crisis for years before he decided to marry Soong Mei-ling. Luo argues that Chiang truly did love Soong. Although Chiang's diaries reveal his occasional frustration with Soong, Chiang also admired her: his diaries contain many words of praise and expressions of gratitude for his wife, words which he never used to describe previous relationships. Luo also points out that Chiang took care of his previous spouses to the end.

The third aspect of Chiang's life that emerges from some of the essays collected in this volume is the structure of his power and its deficiencies. Lu Fangshang argues that Chiang was an outstanding network-builder—a *quanzi* (圈子, circle), in Lu's terms—and that Chiang based his power on a series of exclusive networks. The core of these networks consisted of the family clans of Chiang, Soong, and Kong (banker and politician H.H. Kong being Soong Mei-ling's brother-in-law). The most important network, outside his family clan was that formed by his friends, followed by that of colleagues, birth-place and provincial natives (同乡 *tongxiang*), and schoolmates (同学 *tongxue*). The final network drew from the academic world (p. 32). In his essay, Yang Weizhen (National Chung Cheng University, Taiwan) demonstrates that Chiang had regional preferences in appointing and promoting GMD cadres. He defines the Yangzi Valley as Chiang's "core region," with the three "extension regions" of Guangdong, China's southwest (the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Hunan and Guangxi), and Taiwan. Despite such regional preferences to the peoples from his native Yangzi Valley, Chiang developed a sophisticated approach to bringing together regional warlords (pp. 245-246), as argued by Liu Weikai (National Chengchi University, Taiwan) in his essay on Chiang's networks in various Chinese armies before the Second Sino-Japanese War. Liu found that Chiang used his various networks during his military career, including his study in the Baoding Military Academy and in the Tokyo Military School, Japan (東京振武学校), a special school for Chinese students, to establish his relations with regional warlords. Liu's article examines the intellectual foundations of the modern Chinese armies—with the exception of the Communist one—as well as similarities, links, and continuities among them. Liu also points out that despite its name, the GMD's Chinese National Revolutionary Army (NRA), except its "Central Army," was actually a coalition of forces (p. 56). This was an army based on individual networks, rather than the united chain of command on which a modern military organization was built. Yang Weizhen (National Chung Cheng University) argues that the absence of such a united chain of command forced Chiang, the Chairman of the Military Council of the Nationalist government who was the commander-in-chief of the NRA, to control the troops directly, a practice that handicapped the formation of a nation-wide military institution and was directly responsible for his defeat on the mainland in 1949 (p. 91).

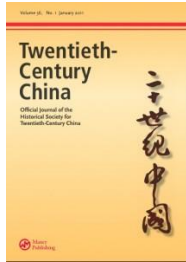
Building on Yang Weizhen's ideas regarding Chiang's problems with individual control of the troops, Wang Chaoguang (Institute of Modern History, CASS) and Lin Tongfa (Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan) analyze the link between Chiang's dependence on various kinds of exclusive networks and his defeat by the CCP. Both Yang and Wang agree that Chiang followed the Confucian tradition of providing his clan members with extra care and privileges. For example, it is unknown whether donations to the development projects in his native town were from his own private funds or from the public treasury (pp. 131-132, 139). Wang explains that Chiang was dependent on H. H. Kong, China's wartime Treasury Minister in fiscal affairs.

Frequently, however, Kong acted as Chiang's willing scapegoat for China's financial difficulties and for the worsening corruption in the government. Although this relationship between Chiang and Kong helped Chiang's regime in accessing financial resources before the war with Japan, it badly damaged Chiang's image domestically and internationally during and after the war. In contrast to Chiang's favoritism toward his clan, the Communists, adhering in principle to the Marxist ideas of class interests and class struggle, did not follow these traditional bonds of clan and regional identity, according to a number of contributors in this volume (pp. 93, 140, 142, 299). Yang Kuisong even attributes the defeat of the GMD on mainland China to this difference (p. 299).

Yang Kuisong cautions against scholars putting forth premature assessments of Chiang's historical role in modern China as a strategy to avoid potential political risks in mainland China. Lu Fangshang and Yang Weizhen (both from Taiwan), however, have an academic freedom that permits them to try to make just such an assessment of Chiang's contribution to twentieth-century Chinese history. They show that, in mainland China, Chiang Kai-shek was a transitional figure, contributing to the transformation of China from a feudal state based on personal dependency to a modern one founded on nationalistic and ideological appeals (pp. 253-254). Lu Fangshang uses the term "heritage-starter (继承性创业者 *jicheng xing chuanyezhe*)" to outline Chiang's role in the GMD. He claims that Chiang was dedicated to the ideas and agendas of Sun Yat-sen. While Chiang inherited the GMD hierarchy from Sun, he had to face the challenges of a newcomer to a system that had obvious organizational deficiencies (p. 23). Jin Yilin (Institute of Modern History, CASS) refines Lu's claim, saying that Chiang inherited Sun Yat-sen's unfinished mission and gave it a new start by establishing a GMD party-state (p. 253). Jin points out that Sun brought into China the concept and practice of party-state (一党独裁 *yidang ducai*), while the previous administration in Beijing remained simply a "dictatorship by an individual" (p. 253). Because the GMD party-state was based on nationalism, it could mobilize many more resources than the various warlords whose power was built on personal loyalty. The creation of the party-state became Chiang's source of power and brought about his success.

Jin's refinement of Lu's claim serves the purpose of the conference of encouraging cross-Strait academic exchanges. The minutes of the conference illustrate that this goal was achieved, even though a reader might find it difficult to identify arguments in individual essays if one loses sight of the broader context of the volume. The inclusion of the conference's minutes of discussion, marked by colloquial language with slang—in what the volume's editor comments is an experimental approach—was surprisingly informative and helpful in understanding the broader conversations across the Strait. They, however, also increased the length of the book and at times distract from its main theme. Nevertheless, this book is a valuable contribution to the field of the study of Republican China and post-1949 Taiwan. Although it is not always an easy read, it provides critical insights into a major figure in China's modern history while showing the changing historiographical landscape in China today. It deserves to be read.

¹ Chiang's four spouses were Mao Fumei (毛福梅, 1882-1939), Yao Yecheng (姚冶诚, 1887-1966), Chen Jieru (陈洁如, 1905-1971) and Soong Mei-ling (宋美龄, 1897-2003).



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