

## **Chiang Kai-shek and His Time**

New Historical and Historiographical Perspectives

edited by Laura De Giorgi and Guido Samarani

### **Foreword**

Laura De Giorgi, Guido Samarani  
(Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy)

The essays collected in this book were originally presented at the international workshop *Chiang Kai-shek and His Time. New Historical and Historiographical Perspectives*, held at the Department of Asian and African Studies of Ca' Foscari University of Venice on October 18th, 2013. The workshop was jointly funded by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of China at Taiwan (Taiwan Spotlight Project) and Ca' Foscari University. It gathered scholars from Europe, Mainland China, Taiwan and Japan, and the scope was to offer an opportunity for debate and reflection among historians of different scholarly and intellectual backgrounds on one of the most important protagonists of twentieth century history.

It is true that there are quite a number of studies of Chiang Kai-shek as one of the most controversial and elusive figures of Chinese contemporary history (for an introduction to historiography on Chiang see Taylor 2015). Nevertheless, for a long time this field of study was more or less frozen by political and ideological prejudice (Taylor, Huang 2012). Cold War alignments affected historical judgement of Chiang and his contribution. In mainland China and in Taiwan he had been considered as either the worst of villains or the anti-Communist patriotic champion, since along both sides of the Taiwan Straits scholarly work on him reflected – and partially still does – the influence politics and ideology can bring to bear on historical studies. These positions were also echoed in Western historiography. Western studies concerning Chiang have been affected by several assumptions following on from the victory of the Communist Party in 1949. In most cases, where the Communist victory is considered as the necessary outcome of the social and economic structural dynamics at play in China since the late nineteenth century, Chiang has often been seen mainly as an authoritarian, incapable military dictator at the head of a weak, corrupt government, doomed to defeat.

Moreover, scholarly perspectives on his political and military capacities have also been affected by sources' bias, not only in China but also in the West. The most well-known example is the influence on the historical evaluations of Chiang of General Stilwell's negative opinion regarding

the Chinese leader's political and military capacities, as highlighted by Stilwell's writings on his experience with Chiang in Chongqing during the second world war.

This state of things is gradually changing. In the last ten years, the study of Chiang Kai-shek has flourished, producing a better understanding and a more nuanced assessment of his personality and role. A reflection on recent scholarly production of Chiang is beyond the scope of this introduction (for a critical overview see Huang 2011; Taylor, Huang 2012), but it is worth reminding the reader that reassessment of Chiang Kai-shek has also been the consequence of broader shifts in the historiography of twentieth century China in the post Cold War era.

Historical revisionism of Chiang has benefited from the appreciation of the importance of the Republican era in the understanding of twentieth-century China as well as of the development of new studies on post-1949 Taiwan. The issues concerning historical continuity across the 1949 divide in Chinese State-building, the relevance attributed to the war against Japan as the fundamental turning point in twentieth century China, the centrality acknowledged to mass nationalism as a fundamental issue in shaping Chinese political culture and ideology, a new appreciation of China's world outlook and active role in international politics in the last century and, last but not least, the need to investigate and better understand the roots of the political and economic development of Taiwan in the post-1949 era are all factors that contributed to raising renewed scholarly attention for Chiang Kai-shek.

Moreover, one of the main factors which are currently supporting a deeper understanding of Chiang is the availability of new sources. From Chiang Kai-shek's diaries to the journals and personal papers of several Guomindang military, political and cultural figures, to the opening of local archives, new documentation has given scholars world-wide the opportunity to better understand Chiang Kai-shek's political and military role and his connections with other leading figures of his age. At any rate, the particular features of these new sources have significantly influenced the historical approach, which has often focused on assessing Chiang's personality behind his public image, and his relationships with his family, political and military entourage. The outcome has certainly been a more sophisticated appreciation not only of Chiang's inner psychology and of his political and military strategic views, but also of the complicated personal dynamics which lay behind his bonds with collaborators and adversaries as well.

The first three essays in this book illustrate this interpretative trend, offering new insights into Chiang's personality and thinking, and his personal relations within the Guomindang.

The contribution by Professor Yamada Tatsuo, Emeritus at Keio University and one of the most well-known Japanese historians on Chiang Kai-shek, entitled "Chiang Kai-shek's Study in Japan in His Memories"

offers a perceptive analysis of the significance of Chiang's experience as a student in Japan, between April 1906 and October 1911, in the context of his later political leadership and political thought. Comparing what is known about Chiang's actual studies in Japan and how the Chinese leader later remembered and elaborated on these memories in order to develop his own discourse about China's problems, future prospects and identity, Yamada argues that the understanding of Chiang's experience in Japan cannot be separated from the analysis of the context of the political history of twentieth century China and of Chiang's political thought and ideology. Chiang drew from his rather limited stay in Japan political ideas and concepts which cannot simply be considered as the direct consequence of that contact, but rather as the outcome of a personal re-elaboration in the light of his subsequent experiences and attitudes.

Yamada's problematisation of Chiang's memories as a historical source about his stay in Japan is significant considering the centrality in Chiang's studies currently of his diaries, deposited at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University in 2004. Though the diaries were not written by Chiang for publication, they cannot be considered simply a mirror of Chiang's real personality, feelings and thoughts, but rather allowance must be made for the influence of Chiang's self-representation in his account of events, thoughts and deeds (see on this point Nathan 2011; Taylor, Huang 2012). Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that Chiang's diaries have shed new light not only on his personality, thinking and attitudes, but also on his role in several political and military turning points in Chinese history.

One of these key moments is certainly the second world war and consequently Chiang's role in the military development of the conflict against Japan. An analysis of the way Chiang Kai-shek dealt with the tragic events of the Japanese military offensive in 1944 is at the focal point of the contribution of Professor Chen Yung-fa, distinguished Research Fellow at the Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica in Taipei, Taiwan and Professor of History at the National Taiwan University. Chen's essay "Chiang Kai-shek and the Japanese Ichigo Offensive, 1944" offers an assessment of Chiang's handling of the main battles during the 1944 great Japanese military campaigns codenamed Ichigo (Number One). Relying on a close reading of Chiang's personal diaries, Chen further weakens the once prevailing view regarding Chiang Kai-shek's scant willingness to fight the Japanese invaders. In actual fact, Chiang's diaries reveal that the Chinese Nationalist Army's difficulties and failures when defending the Chinese cities during the Japanese offensive, were mainly due to some objective limitations in Chiang's strategic choices, such as bad intelligence, the difficulties of several of Chiang's best generals to accomplish their military mission and, lastly, the impossibility for Chiang to carry on his planned military reform. The defeats suffered by the Chinese army during the Ichigo offensive greatly

endangered the financial and military stability of the Guomintang State, in spite of Chiang's will to resist and fight the Japanese.

Chiang's diaries are an important source also for Professor Chen Hongmin's essay "The Relationship between Chiang Kai-shek and Chen Cheng in Taiwan as appears from Chen Cheng's Diary". Professor Chen is Director of the Centre for Chiang Kai-shek and Modern History Studies at the University of Zhejiang University. His contribution to the workshop and to this book consists in a detailed analysis of the relationship between Chiang Kai-shek and one of his most important supporters, Chen Cheng, after the Guomintang's retreat to Taiwan. Using the diaries of Chiang Kai-shek and those of Chen Cheng, recently deposited at the Archive of the Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica in Taiwan, Chen offers a study of the interaction between Chiang and Chen, highlighting the differences between their political views on some key moments in Taiwan history, but also between their personalities and their attitudes towards their reciprocal relationship. Chen Hongmin's essay deepens our understanding of the complex personal dynamics within the Guomintang in Taiwan, but also helps to better understand the moral code which determined the behaviour of both in several important passages of Taiwan's history.

The other four essays in the volume have a different perspective on the topic, focusing less on Chiang himself or on his close entourage and more on the international context in which the political role of Chiang and his China developed.

In her essay, "Chiang Kai-shek's Diplomats Abroad: Ambassador Fu Bingchang's perspective at the first United Nations Peace Conference in 1946 with reference to the 'Iran Crisis'", Dr. Yee-Wah Foo, Senior Lecturer at Lincoln University, makes use of both diplomatic documents and the personal diary of the Chinese delegate to the 1946 conference, Fu Bingchang, in order to reconstruct in detail the Chinese perspectives and position in the first diplomatic crisis of the Cold War. She demonstrates how Chinese diplomats such as Fu Bingchang were able to play an important negotiating role between the USSR and the USA, defending at the same time, after all, the national interests of the Republic of China in its strategically vital relations with both powers at the end of the second world war.

The renewed importance of China in the international dynamics in post war years is also highlighted by Professor Guido Samarani's contribution. In his "Difficult Years: Italy's policy on Chiang Kai-shek's China, 1945-49", Samarani, Professor of Chinese History at Ca' Foscari University, analyses Italy's policy regarding Chiang Kai-shek's China from the end of the second world war to Chiang's defeat in 1949. As a defeated country, Italy was in a weak international position, and its policy where China was concerned was characterized by the need to avoid being subjected to excessively penalizing conditions in the 1947 Peace Treaty and possibly to gain his support, or at least, not to incur Chiang's opposition to Italy's aspiration

to enter the United Nations. After 1947, in spite of Italian diplomats' perception of a future victory for the Chinese Communist Party, Italy's policy concerning China was further influenced by the wish to not damage its relations with the United States.

Finally, the essays of Dr. Andrea Revelant and Professor Laura De Giorgi, both of Ca' Foscari University of Venice, offer insight, from different viewpoints, into the public image of Chiang Kai-shek, studying the role of the media and of public opinion in international politics concerning China in the twentieth century.

Andrea Revelant's "Revolution Deconstructed: Chiang Kai-shek and the Northern Expedition in the Japanese Press, 1926-28" is an accurate study of the Japanese Press' coverage of a turning point in the rise to power of the Nationalist Party in China, an event which was instrumental in Chiang Kai-shek's own rise from the position of military commander to top political leader. Making use of a great number of articles from leading Japanese newspapers and magazines on the Northern Expedition, the analysis reveals the articulate response of Japanese public opinion concerning Chiang Kai-shek during those years. If on the one hand the Expedition gave cause for anxiety because of the threat it posed to Japanese interests, on the other, it raised the hope that a stable government would emerge after years of civil war. While some commentators expressed cautious optimism, however, other observers held strong reservations about Nationalist leadership. Furthermore, coverage of the Jinan Incident shows that even the advocates of a policy of conciliation could assume a hardline stance when the Japanese military took the initiative on the ground. Actually, the understanding of Japanese policies involving Chiang's China should not be limited to the study of State relations, but should also be seen from the perspective of educated public opinion and their perception of Chiang's personality, ideology and power in the context of the cross-national flow of news and images produced by the media.

Conversely, Laura De Giorgi's essay, "The *Alter Ego* of China. Westernized Chinese Intellectuals and the Building of Chiang's Image in the Wartime West" considers the efforts of the Guomindang international propaganda machine to shape Chiang's image in the eyes of Western educated élites during the war years. Focusing first of all on the contribution of Chinese intellectuals and diplomats and offering a reading of some biographies of Chiang Kai-shek in foreign languages, De Giorgi argues that, presenting the leader as the personification of the new, modern, national identity of the Chinese Republic, these works were connected to a broader cultural Guomindang agenda, which envisaged shaping Western discourse on China's civilization and place in world history and culture.

Together, the essays in this volume offer an overview of the major trends in recent studies on Chiang Kai-shek, reflecting also different cultural sensitivity and educational backgrounds. While scholars in East Asia have

mainly poured their efforts into deepening the understanding of Chiang's personality and relations, scholars from Western backgrounds have mainly looked at Chiang and his China from the broader perspective of international dynamics and events. Both approaches enrich our understanding of Chiang and of his age.

As we move further away in time from Chiang's life and times, and new historical sources become available to scholars, a better understanding of his place in Chinese history will hopefully be acquired. But this will be possible only if international scholarly dialogue and exchange develops fully. As the organisers of the workshop and the editors of this volume, we hope to have contributed to this end.

## **Bibliography**

- Huang, Kou-wu (2011). "Retrospect and Prospects of Overseas Studies on Chiang Kai-shek and Related Topics". *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, 5(2), 233-46.
- Nathan, Andrew (2011). "The Counter-Revolutionaries". *New Republic*, 2011-03-31.
- Taylor, Jeremy (2015). "Chiang Kai-shek" [online]. *Oxford Bibliography Online*. DOI 10.1093/obo/9780199920082-0119.
- Taylor, Jeremy; Huang, Grace (2012). "'Deep Changes in Interpretive Currents'? Chiang Kai-shek Studies in the Post-Cold War Era". *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 9(1), 99-121.

---

Except for names of personalities internationally known differently, as Chiang Kai-shek and Sun-Yat-sen, all the Chinese names are transliterated in pinyin.