



China Perspectives

2011/3 | 2011

Chinese Medicine: The Global Influence of an Evolving Heritage

Philippe Paquet, Madame Chiang Kai-shek – Un siècle d'histoire de la Chine (Madame Chiang Kai-shek – A century of Chinese history)

Paris, Gallimard, 2010, 776 pp. + 35 pages of illustrations.

David Bartel

Translator: N. Jayaram



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5677>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.5677

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 October 2011

Number of pages: 91-92

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

David Bartel, « Philippe Paquet, Madame Chiang Kai-shek – Un siècle d'histoire de la Chine (Madame Chiang Kai-shek – A century of Chinese history) », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2011/3 | 2011, Online since 30 September 2011, connection on 21 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5677> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.5677>

This text was automatically generated on 21 September 2020.

© All rights reserved

Philippe Paquet, Madame Chiang Kai-shek – Un siècle d'histoire de la Chine (Madame Chiang Kai-shek – A century of Chinese history)

Paris, Gallimard, 2010, 776 pp. + 35 pages of illustrations.

David Bartel

Translation : N. Jayaram

- ¹ As Simon Leys rightly says in his preface (p. 16), this monumental work of nearly 700 pages is a welcome arrival on the life and long career of Soong Mayling,¹ youngest of the Soong Sisters and doubtless one of the most influential and controversial women of the twentieth century. Narrating the life of this grand personage, Philippe Paquet offers an especially well-documented portrait of a complex and often brutal era – that of the construction of Asia's first republic. The Sinologist imbues a dramatic dimension to the peak period of an epoch. He uses the life of Chiang Kai-shek's wife to offer a novel perspective on some major events that marked the rise and then gradual seclusion of what used to be called "Free China." The Belgian journalist takes a non-partisan approach, relying on an impressive collection of documents and



interviews with numerous witnesses to history in Taiwan, China, and the United States, as well as his thorough knowledge of writings on the subject. This is quite rare with regard to a personality regarded as a “courageous, opinionated, and crafty” woman of conviction as well as an “egoistical, mean-spirited, and capricious” *prima donna* (p. 253). He thus manages to draw up a subtle portrait of a contested heroine without sparing the ambiguities, failings, and doubts of a woman confronting war, power, and the possible disappearance of a country to which she had decided to devote her life. Despite the difficulty inherent in a biographical exercise flitting between major and minor events, the author succeeds in offering as exhaustive a portrait as possible. He has done so without minimising the legend and mystery that still surrounds a unique personality whose life straddled three centuries.

- 2 Mayling was born to a prosperous merchant family, the success of which stemmed largely from her ambitious Hainan-born father, Charlie Soong, who very much personified a precocious success in diaspora. Paquet dwells on the career of Charlie Soong, who quickly grasped the leverage that lay in frequenting evangelical schools that were looking for recruits to train and dispatch as young missionaries to carry the Good Book into China. It was said the Soong clan's fortune was made with one hand on the Bible (p. 42). The Methodist Church, with its very simple conversion rites, was an ideal means of integration, and served Charlie Soong as a key to entering America, which greatly benefited all his children (p. 34). A keen attention to personal relations and a none-too-scrupulous nose for business did the rest.
- 3 Mayling spent her adolescence in US religious establishments. These elite schools not only prepared young girls for “good marriages,” but also served as arenas of modernity (p. 67) where young high-society girls were trained to think for themselves. It was there that Mayling decided to choose “career over marriage” (p. 87) and learned to deal with two obstacles that dogged her throughout her career: being a woman in China and an Asian in America (note 3, p. 640). Was this proto-feminism in the early twentieth century? In any case, Mayling clearly played a major role in changing Western attitudes – especially American – as regards Chinese women (p. 365). Seen in this light, she played a decisive role in the abolition of the Exclusion Acts targeting her immigrant compatriots in the United States (p. 363).² She gave Americans the first modern vision of China and Chinese men and women – Christian, educated... and Anglophone. Mayling thus played a not insignificant role in changing Western views of a country that was still widely ill-judged.
- 4 The Soong clan's political fortunes really took off after the eldest daughter, Ching-Ling,³ married Dr. Sun Yat-sen (25 October 1915). Then came Chiang Kai-shek's rise to power within the Kuomintang, and this very well explains how the Soong Mayling-Chiang union (1 December 1927) served the couple's mutual aspirations. The author expertly shows the ambivalence of a union necessary for their respective ambitions and one in which a respectful love quickly flowered, albeit weighed down by extramarital adventures, as enduring legends have it. Be that as it may, Mayling remained extremely aware of her need to be recognised as a woman, not a wife (p. 168), and the book seeks to present all available information without taking definite sides. Paquet's aim was not to come up with revelations but to offer readers what can be known – or not – on the controversial moments in Mayling's life that even now fuel far from objective approaches as well as attempts at rather more glamour-filled biographies.⁴

- 5 What is certain is that by marrying Chiang, she lent a soldier who might have remained a taciturn and ascetic “warlord” the elements that eventually turned him into a credible representative of a possible “Christian, capitalist, and democratic” China against the alternative “atheist, communist, and totalitarian” model (p. 681). In fact, she brought to the Generalissimo the political ideological legitimacy that came with being allied to Sun Yat-sen. She opened the Soong family chest for him and ensured the commercial bourgeoisie’s trust, so essential in the anti-communist struggle. Finally, using religious networks, she introduced him to an international community that was to play a key role in garnering the support of foreign powers (p. 681). Mayling made Chiang into a credible politician, nothing less.
- 6 A series of developments in the intense lobbying by the first lady in the diplomatic arena during the Second World War shed much light on her effort to gain international recognition for a China that was still militarily and economically weak and partially colonised (p. 395). From the Cairo conference (p. 404) to the acquisition of a United Nations Security Council permanent seat for China (p. 438), the symbolic victory that put China alongside the great powers for the first time, Mayling’s talents and pugnacity were greatly to be credited.⁵
- 7 The book recounts how the Korean War again plunged the Nationalist island into US strategic considerations in Asia (p. 499). The links that henceforth tied Taiwan to the United States were complex. The two sides’ professed anticommunism bound their relationship, which seems rather absurd in retrospect. Again, the book skilfully shows how after the 1949 retreat to the island, the presidential couple gradually withdrew into an anachronistically narrow vision totally disconnected from changes in the contemporary world. While the Generalissimo was asking Washington to give him nothing short of the nuclear bomb (p. 542), his wife continued to hawk “Free China” with a misplaced over-refinement, the sometimes esoteric flavour of which confirmed that the couple remained shut in the myth of a “return” to the mainland, an absurdity clear to everyone except themselves (p. 583).
- 8 The book’s last part holds special interest for everyone interested in Taiwan’s democratisation. Discussing Mayling’s death in 2003, the book explains the complex links that bind the Taiwanese to the personalities of Chiang and Mayling – so much so that then-president Chen Shuibian, a victim of the dictatorship who launched his career by fighting the Kuomintang’s Sinocentric policies, went to pay homage and render a funereal tribute to the “most respected Mayling Soong” (p. 674). Paradoxically, while Taiwan has been in the throes of “de-Chiang-kai-shekisation” (p. 659), the Generalissimo has undergone positive re-evaluation in Beijing in view of his actions in the anti-Japanese resistance. Mayling likewise came in for praise for her role in mobilising international support during the war, as well as her unflinching support for Chinese unity, a cornerstone of Beijing’s policy. She has thus been made into an objective ally of a regime she regularly cursed (p. 660). While the island’s pro-independence press used the occasion of her death to spew venom and rejoice over the end of the corrupt and “deeply feudal” Chiang dynasty, such views remained exceptional. Worldwide, stress was laid on the complexity and ambiguity that surrounded her (p. 671).
- 9 Before concluding, it should be stressed that apart from its main subject, Paquet’s book touches on some contemporary historiographical points worth noting here and which merit developing further. First, the book is part of recent moves towards re-evaluating

the Kuomintang army's role in the anti-Japanese resistance between 1937 and 1945. In fact, Communist historiography succeeded early on in burying the major exploits of Nationalist soldiers. This was so with the Battle of Tai'ierzhuang on the Grand Canal in April 1938. The author considers it to have been emblematic of the Second World War, and of the same magnitude as Stalingrad or Dunkirk (note 5 p. 264). The book then glides quickly – as it is not the main subject – over the loss of a certain American expertise on China during the McCarthy witch-hunt in the mid-1950s (p. 537). Owen Lattimore, John Stewart Service, John Carter Vincent, and John Paton Davies – the “old China hands” – who were condemned for alleged sympathies towards the new communist regime, deserve to be rediscovered. Right from the 1940s, they had understood that the Nationalist regime would not hold against the Communists. The United States was to miss their expertise when it began renewing links with the People's Republic (p. 499).⁶

- 10 To conclude, it may well be said that the book accounts for a century and its personalities. They include Jacques Guillerma, Lucien Bodard, and the incredible adventures of Gregory “Pappy” Boyington's “Flying Tigers” (p. 325) amid the din of battle, the soft-focus society events, and the *realpolitik* treacheries. It is a brilliant book lending a shoulder to the wheel of Francophone Belgian Sinology. While it deals sometimes at length with the health problems of the fragile Mayling, the book has achieved something that is a major concern in academic scholarship – its accessibility to the widest readership.

NOTES

1. Or Song Meiling (宋美齡), also called Madame Chiang Kai-shek, or simply Madame. She was also given to using the Westernised version of her name: Mayling Soong. The author prefers this version in the book. It is, moreover, the one Mayling used to the exclusion of all others (p. 23).
2. A series of laws banning immigration of Chinese citizens, especially their access to citizenship since the late nineteenth century: Franklin D. Roosevelt revoked them on 17 December 1943 (*Magnusson Act*), after Mayling's sojourn.
3. The author goes with established usage for the rest of Soong family members' names as well as for names of other people linked to the Nationalist regime and to Taiwan (p. 23).
4. In this regard, the few pages on the supposed relationship with Wendell Willkie exemplify the meticulous research that puts an end to hearsay and speculation (pp. 338-43). Hannah Pakula's 2009 biography, for instance, comes in for sharp rebuke over its errors and... its length.
5. The November 1943 conference was held in the Egyptian capital to decide Japan's post-war fate. Mayling imposed her husband into it. He was seated between US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The victory was no less remarkable for being largely symbolic.
6. Apart from Ely Jacques Kahn's classic, *China Hands: America's Foreign Service Officers and What Befell Them* (Viking, 1975), many new works came out in the early 2000s: *China Hands: Nine Decades of Adventure, Espionage and Diplomacy in Asia* (James R. Lilley, Public Affairs, 2005), and more

recently, *Honorable Survivor: Mao's China, McCarthy's America, and the Persecution of John S. Service* (Lynne Joiner, Naval Institute Press, 2009).

AUTHORS

DAVID BARTEL

Doctoral student at CECMC (EHESS – School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences, Paris),
associate researcher at CEFC.