



The Last Empress: Madame Chiang Kai-shek and the Birth of Modern China

Hannah Pakula

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THE LAST EMPRESS revolves around a fascinating, manipulative woman and her family who were largely responsible for dragging China into the modern world. Soong May-ling, or Madame Chiang as she was known, is uniquely positioned at the heart of this story. As her husband came to represent the hopes of the West in the East, she acted as his adviser, English translator, secretary, and most loyal champion, finding herself on the world stage with Franklin D Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. A savvy politician, she remained a popular if controversial figure both at home and abroad. Hannah Pakula brilliantly narrates the life of this extraordinary woman - how she charmed the United States out of billions of dollars while remaining dedicated to her China, and how she managed to influence if not change the history of the twentieth century.

The Last Empress: Madame Chiang Kai-shek and the Birth of Modern China Details

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Carol says

For a 681-page tome, it's amazing that this biography does not fail to fascinate. Perhaps my interest comes from my personal memories of the positive spin, sometimes hagiographic, on Madame Chiang Kai-Shek during the 1940's and especially 1950's. Then and into the 60's, she was running around the USA giving speeches, full of piety and fine slogans, raising money. During the great era of fear of Communism, she was "one of the ten most admired women in the world". Henry Luce, for years the publisher of "Time", was a champion of the Chiangs. Supportive articles also appeared in other mass media. The highly intelligent, American-educated Madame was charming and seductive, and few men resisted her wiles. Among the notable resisters were FDR and Churchill who were wary and Truman who detested the Chiangs. They were aware that once the Japanese struck China, Chiang, the big general, no longer fought any battles, he just hunkered down. He was such an inept administrator that assassination would have been a blessing, and the USA considered it. Additionally, the Chiangs and their relatives make Bernie Madoff look like a petty thief. American aid to China went mainly into the coffers of the Chiang family and friends, probably in off-shore accounts and South American investments, while Madame and other ladies lived in be-furred and be-jeweled luxury, spending a lot of time in upscale accommodations in the USA. (Madame lived to 105 in a tony New York apartment after Chiang's death in Taiwan.) So why did the USA give so much aid to China in the 30's to 50's? Early, because they hoped that Chiang would fight the Japanese. Later, because Taiwan was anti-Communist. Anyone in favor of foreign aid should read this book. I suppose we all know that financial aid winds up in dictators' pockets more often than not.

I also was reminded of our progress in attitudes towards the ordinary man, the peasant, the individual poor nobody. Revolutions, over the past 200+ years, have pitted the poor against the aristocracy and plutocracy. We're still ranting today, about the bloated earnings of bankers and their sense of entitlement. China of the mid-20th-century still used peasants as cannon fodder with no thought (at least on the part of the Chiangs) as to whether a decently-fed and clad soldier was better able to fight than a starving one. In the 40's, the Communists in China offered better consideration to the common man and thus engendered a great deal more loyalty; they deserved to win China.

Of the three privileged Soong sisters, the youngest was Madame, the eldest married a wealthy man who got a lot wealthier through American aid, and the middle sister, Ching-Ling, married Sun-Yat Sen and cast her lot with the Communists, while maintaining that she was not herself a Communist. She lived a modest life and is the most admirable character in the whole disgusting story.

Jessica says

A book that forces you to commit to the long haul of reading, you have to be a history buff to get through this.

This biography is not only a bio of the women in question, but an in depth account of China from the overthrow of the Imperial Government (if you want to call it that) to the rule of the Warlords in the various

provinces to the rise of Chiang Kai-shek (her husband) to the occupation and war with the Imperial Japanese to finally, the war with Mao Tse-tung and the Communists with the eventual exile to Taiwan.

If you are interested in history and international affairs, then I would absolutely recommend this book to you. This book not only discusses the woman who influence so much of what happened in China prior to the start of the Communist era, but the state of mind of her husband and the truth behind the Kuomintang Government. Unfortunately, the Chinese people have suffered for generations and the Kuomintang Government was of not much help during the height of their rein. Sure, Madame Chiang Kai-shek did do some good deeds such as her orphanage, but in the grand scheme of things, she facilitated the transfer of million upon millions of dollars from the United States for a War that Chiang Kai-shek was inept or willing to fight (even though he has top American Advisors).

Kim Luu says

I learned quite a lot about China's history from reading this book. It was a random pick up because Madame Chiang Kai-shek went to my college. It turned out to be a fascinating family especially her father and how he treated his daughters. I even did a review on Money and Risk.

The freedom and education that this man gave his daughters at the turn of the century was incredible.

Steve Bolduc says

It's like a giant chunk of 20th century China's History in one book. Hanna Pakula's work is gigantic and riveting! It is truly a five star piece of work.

Mikey B. says

A wonderful and intriguing account of the Madame. And it is more than that – it is a story of the Soong family and modern China until the advent of Communism (Mao) in 1949.

The Soong family is quite a collection as is amply demonstrated in this book. They and Chiang Kai-shek are really a sorry lot, with the possible exception of Ching-Ling. They had the money and the power to do so much for their downtrodden and exploited country and in the end they did very, very little for the masses of impoverished and illiterate Chinese. Instead they just kept adding to their wealth by channelling the vast amount of American aid into numerous overseas bank accounts around the world. After her husband died in 1975, Madame Chiang Kai-shek lived at a prestigious address in Manhattan with several servants.

There is no doubt that the Madame was a formidable person. She spoke fluent English having spent her formative years from the age of ten at schools and colleges in the U.S. Her parents saw to it that their children (both male and female – unusual in China) were to have a cultivated upbringing in order to perpetuate the Soong dynasty. As the author suggests May Lings' (the Madame) marriage to Chiang Kai-shek was power oriented. For May-Ling, Chiang was to become the new leader of the KMT; for Chiang, May-Ling was his bridge to the Anglo-Saxon world and all that it encompassed – he spoke no English and had little foreign experience. She provided new meaning to the phrase of: 'behind every great man is a great woman' – in fact after reading this book she was not behind him, but actually front-row and center. It was

the Madame who traversed the U.S. and pushed the Chinese cause to the power-brokers of Lend-Lease. She 'translated' for her husband at the summit meeting in Cairo with Roosevelt and Churchill. 'Translated' is deliberately in quotes because as Ms. Pakula points out it was really the Madame who was the prime motivator in the meetings with the English-speaking world.

This is a most thorough biography and because of all the political overtones of the era Ms. Pakula paints a wide scope. We get a comprehensive view of the historical pushes and pulls in China. The Nationalist Chinese versus the Communist Chinese civil war. The Russian, Japanese, American and British were all unashamedly grasping for their piece of the vast Chinese landmass. The precedents for World War II started early in China with the brutal Japanese invasion in the 1930's.

Ms. Pakula introduces us to the many individuals – Sun Yat-sen who married one of the Soong sisters, the Russian Borodin, the Americans Chennault and the forthright Stilwell. It is a kaleidoscope of clashing history and personalities in a sad and exploited country. Again the fact that the Soong's did so little to help their country, when it needed so much is a dismal reflection on the legacy of Madame Chiang Kai-shek.

A complex portrayal of the Madame emerges from the pages of the book. She spoke persuasively to Americans of the plight of China in the U.S. Congress. She made many friends in the U.S. – but her behaviour could alienate potential allies as well. In China, she set up an orphanage for children – but one wonders how much of this was just for show. She was often treated for months at a time in U.S. hospitals, where she would occupy an entire floor, for various and assumed ailments (but lived to over 100). But in China, Chinese Nationalist soldiers were ill-fed, ill-clothed and paid very little. The peasants in the areas under Chiang's control were exploited ruthlessly by landlords – the Nationalist government did nothing to alleviate the absurd taxation collected by the landlords from the peasants. Corruption was widespread. Anyone who opposed Chiang and the Madame faced execution.

As Eleanor Roosevelt said aptly of the Madame – she could "talk beautifully of democracy, but she does not know how to live democracy".

Kristine Novero says

The book not only focused on biography, but more so, about Chinese history. It showed how USA had been intertwined with the superpower that's been in China for ages now. Never a history buff so I focused more on personalities. Madame Chiang Kai-Shek had struck me as controversial yet interesting. She is the youngest of the Soong sisters, who were known to be privileged, beautiful and chose to marry rich men. She made her husband even wealthier because of the financial aids she raised from her speeches. Soong Mayling was ahead of her time-influential, educated, manipulative, social climber or maybe a hero. It's either you love her or hate her but you can never ignore such a quintessential woman. She wouldn't be named one of the ten most outstanding women in the time when fear interpolated communism for nothing.

Sandra says

I really wanted to like this book but ended up being incredibly disappointed. Obviously, Hannah Pakula has

no understanding of the Chinese culture, traditions, and customs. She is biased in her presentation of historical events as well as the various important historical figures. Pakula barely used any Chinese sources & limited herself to English-language archives and secondary materials. The end result is the very one-sided story we get here.

The author is quick to make judgment calls on traditions and behaviors that are not consistent with her own beliefs. There are also incorrect definitions and descriptions of some subject matters. Here's one example – on page 31, Pakula wrote that “Nothing in Peking was allowed to be built higher than its walls for fear of offending the feng shui, the spirits of wind and water...” Anyone with a basic understanding of feng shui knows that feng shui is the study of the environment and the art of positioning objects to bring about a positive flow of energy – it does not involve spirits that one can offend.

While Soong May-Ling (Madame Chiang) was far from being a saint, neither was she the villainess that Pakula made her out to be – rivaling that of the evil queen in Snow White. We deserve a more accurate and unprejudiced portrayal of a woman who was at the epicenter of a tumultuous time in modern Chinese history.

Instead of being objective, giving both sides of the story, and constructing a book that centers on May-Ling, Pakula wrote a history book on a history that she is not an expert in.

Meg Marie says

Ugh. I give up. I got about halfway through this books after two weeks of slogging, and realized I was never going to finish. The early chapters that discuss Madame's life, her time in America, and her series of letter with her friend Emma are fascinating. The following 200+ pages, which detail every military move, every battle and every interaction with the KMT, the Communists, the Americans and the Japanese are super boring, AND Madame barely figures in. The book should be relabeled as what it really is - a history of modern China - as the author often turns the spotlight away from the alleged title character.

Clayton Brannon says

Great book about a truly remarkable woman.

Jane says

This was fascinating. I knew nothing about May-Ling before reading this book and I found her life story intriguing.

Jonnell says

This was a fascinating portrayal of Madame Chiang Kai-shek, but also a great overview of the political history of China.

David Marxer says

A balanced, objective view of the life and times of Madame Chiang Kai-shek. At the beginning of the book Ms. Pakula writes a lot about Madame Chiang's older sisters and the rest of the Soong family, then tapers off and focuses on Madame and Chiang...this is too bad for a general reader not acquainted with 20th century Chinese history for Madame's sister and brothers were equal with her in power and fame. But for an old 'China hand' like myself it was great fun and filled with tears, laughs and quaffs...

Christina says

I didn't finish this thick book but I got far enough to review it. It's a very interesting look at China and especially Madame Chiang Kai-shek's family. The amount of corruption and chaos even before the communists took over is mind-blowing. Part of the reason I didn't finish, though, (got to page 355 though, about halfway) is that I just disliked Madame and her husband so much. They seemed very conniving and Machiavellian in their politics.

I did enjoy reading some of the historical sections and understanding more about China's governmental history. There is WAY too much detail about the harem habits of former rulers, however.

Raevene says

What I am so hyped about this book is how Hannah Pakula was able to provide such a colorful tapestry of the Chinese people's narrative through various sources, genres of literature etc. in order to come up with such a spicy collection of relevant takes on China's story. and to think, all these rants while i'm just currently in chapter 9.:)) a MUST-READ!!!xD

Peggy says

Fascinating and very well-written, thoroughly researched biography. While Madame is central to the telling, this is an excellent book for plugging gaps in your knowledge of the years between the final emperor of China and the death of Chiang Kai-Shek and the Kuomintang dictatorship on Taiwan. I've read much more about the civil war and the rise of the Communists than I have about the Nationalists so this balanced my knowledge significantly.
