

Book Review

New scholarship on a long-standing debate in modern Chinese history: Review of the book *Victorious in Defeat: The Life and Times of Chiang Kai-shek, China, 1887–1975*, by Alexander V. Pantsov. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2023, 202pp. ISBN: 9780300260205 (HC)

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Some years ago, I was asked by an American scholar in Taiwan what I “thought of” Chiang Kai-shek. While I considered how to answer this question, and apparently frustrated by the time I was taking to frame a considered response, the same scholar replied for me: “If someone were to ask *me* that question”, he said, “I’d tell them – ‘*not much*’!”. Not long thereafter, while attending a modern Chinese history conference in North America, I witnessed a scholar from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) make an impromptu yet impassioned plea to embrace Chiang Kai-shek as a great patriot who had defended the “One China principle” throughout his life. Both these episodes occurred in an era when scholarly re-assessments of Chiang were still somewhat novel. While the emotion which characterised them may be less common today, mention of Chiang Kai-shek still elicits very different – and often heated – reactions. Despite three decades of attempts at countering the anti-Chiang scholarship of the Cold War (and the banal hagiographies of martial-law-era Taiwan), caricatures of Chiang still cast a long shadow over the field (as the overtly “pro-” and “anti-Chiang” reactions above suggest). As anyone who teaches modern Chinese history to undergraduate students will know, one-dimensional depictions of Chiang – some dating back to 1930s and 1940s – live on in the school curricula in many countries.

The publication of Pantsov’s *Victorious in Defeat*, translated from Russian into English by Steven I. Levine, marks an important contribution to the study of this enigmatic leader, and comes at an opportune moment. While Chiang Kai-shek studies in the Anglophone academy peaked in

the early 2010s, this book reminds us that there is still much work to be done in understanding this figure and his wider historical context. Pantsov's biography is revelatory and original, and while the author does not necessarily dismiss all earlier biographies of Chiang, he does remind us about certain elements of Chiang's own worldview – and Chiang's view of himself – that have often been overlooked. These include, most importantly, Chiang's role as a revolutionary (a term which is still used far too commonly as a synonym for "communist").

Victorious in Defeat is remarkable for its balance – a fact that is reflected even in the striking portrait of Chiang (neither flattering nor demeaning) that adorns the book's cover. To be sure, Pantsov can be scathing about Chiang. He does not forgive Chiang for his decision in 1938 to break the Yellow River dikes – an act which meant that "with his own hands Chiang killed many more peaceful Chinese than the Japanese 'dwarfs' had in Nanjing" (p. 293). While not accusing Chiang of corruption directly, Pantsov also notes that he tolerated the "corrupt deals and speculation" of his in-laws in wartime Chongqing (pp. 317-318). And on Taiwan in 1947, "he employed repressive measures against all opponents, just as he always had" (p. 420), the result being the February 28th Incident. Yet Chiang is also presented, often with evidence from his own diary entries, as a man who genuinely believed that he was acting in the best interests of China, and in accordance with his own interpretation of the Chinese revolution. Chiang is as much of an anti-imperialist as any of his opponents (Mao Zedong comes across in this book as a ruthless opportunist, while Wang Jingwei's 1939 decision to work against Chiang and with the Japanese is said to have "crashed on the rocks of crude reality" soon thereafter (p. 305). Indeed, readers may develop a sense of empathy for Chiang in earlier sections of the book, with Pantsov's narrative presenting a leader who slips increasingly into autocracy only with the crisis of the Civil War and with age: it is in 1950s Taiwan, "after reorganizing the party and consolidating his position, [that] Chiang for the first time could really enjoy dictatorial power" (p. 452).

Readers will inevitably compare *Victorious in Defeat* with Jay Taylor's *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek and the Struggle for Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2009). Both books reach similar conclusions about Chiang's legacy, and both could be said to be part of a broader "revisionist" scholarship which started in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and which includes other recent monographs, such as Grace C. Huang's, *Chiang Kai-shek's Politics of Shame: Leadership, Legacy and National Identity in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021). Pantsov certainly acknowledges this, referencing *The Generalissimo* and other recent secondary scholarship where necessary.

There are, however, significant differences between the two biographies in style and focus. While Taylor's account is based on Chiang's diaries as well as interviews with people who were familiar with him, Pantsov has produced a far more archive-heavy study, and one which may appeal more to scholars than to a general readership. While details of Chiang's life in Taiwan following

the defeat of 1949 make up almost a third of the main text of Taylor's biography, just over 50 of the 492 pages that represent the main text of *Victorious in Defeat* detail Chiang's career there. This is reflected in the rich detail which Pantsov provides about Chiang's early life in mainland China, particularly the vivid accounts of his upbringing in Fenghua, and his career as "Sun Yat-sen's obstinate pupil" and an aspiring "Chinese Napoleon" (p. 174), but there is a relative lack of comparable detail about Chiang as a Cold War leader in Taiwan. This goes against an emerging trend in the English-language scholarship which seeks to bring the Taipei-based Chiang into discussions of Cold War Asia (as evidenced in the work of Cold War historians such as Charles Kraus, for example) or attempts in Taiwan to justify the study of Chiang under the rubric of "Taiwan history". Pantsov studies Chiang as a *Chinese* leader – a fact that is underlined by the use of the word "China" in the book's subtitle (i.e., "The Life and Times of Chiang Kai-shek, China, 1887 – 1975"). The book's narrative reaches its climax in Chiang's war against Japan (a conflict defined largely by Chiang's relationship with the Soviet Union, Germany and, most importantly, the United States), and in the "catastrophic" mistakes made by Chiang in the Civil War of the 1940s – a topic which Parks Coble has also focused on in his recent book *The Collapse of Nationalist China: How Chiang Kai-shek Lost China's Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), suggesting a more generalised interest in the field in revisiting this conflict.

Pantsov is skilled at moving between Party intrigues, geopolitics and the minutiae of family life in the Chiang household. One of the strengths of the book is Pantsov's painstaking research into the complex relationships that Chiang maintained with those who were closest to him: his mother, his wives, his sons and his grandchildren. Here is a man who adopted the child (Chiang Wei-kuo) of a close confidante (i.e., Dai Jitao) and a prostitute as his own son (p. 55), who was genuinely besotted by his wife ("Olivia") Mei-ling Soong (pp. 131-132), and who, later in life, regularly cooked fried rice for his grandchildren (p. 469). This same man visited brothels in his youth, took on at least one mistress, and was "most likely" responsible for the murder of Zhang Yaruo – the mistress of his son Chiang Ching-kuo, in 1942 (p. 348). Such details may seem trivial, but by weaving them into a wider story, Pantsov succeeds in presenting Chiang as an entirely human figure with all manner of often contradictory characteristics. Pantsov is also honest about the limits of what can be known about certain aspects of Chiang's private life. For example, he offers no resolution to rumours about Chiang's supposed sterility (or the reasons for this), not because he has not looked into the topic, but because the evidence points to different explanations (pp. 98-99).

One of the key characteristics of Pantsov's biography is the wide range of archival sources on which it is based. Scholars of modern Chinese history will be familiar with the wave of diary-based scholarship (particularly that published in Chinese) which broke following the deposition of Chiang's diaries with the Hoover Institution in the mid 2000s (as well as the critical reflections on the very utility of diaries as historical sources which followed). Unlike such work, this book is

informed by the Chiang diaries without ever being *defined* by them. Pantsov relies on the diaries to paint a lively picture of Chiang's personality (including his life-long tendency for hysterics, the depths of his depression at various stages of his life – with Chiang considering suicide in the darkest moments of the war against Japan – and the strength of his Christian beliefs). He complements such accounts with other external sources, from correspondence and memoirs to Soviet and American intelligence reports.

It is the extensive use of the Soviet archives which sets this biography apart from all others. In this regard, Pantsov's book might also be read as part of a wider move towards re-instating the Soviets into the history of Republican China, as evidenced in recent publications such as Elizabeth McGuire's *Red at Heart: How Chinese Communists Fell in Love with the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Pantsov presents a convincing case for remembering the central role of the Soviet Union, and particularly Stalin, in shaping Chiang's China. The Soviets are a constant thread throughout this book, shaping a young Chiang's views of communism (which were permanently changed by his experiences of the Soviet Union during a visit there in 1923; p. 92) as well as his views on personal grooming (his appearance modelled on that of his Soviet advisor Vasilii Konstantinovich Bliukher; p. 100). The Soviets under Stalin are untrustworthy powerbrokers who expect fealty from Chiang even as they betray him in the 1940s. Yet they are also potential saviours in the late 1960s, when Chiang seriously explored the possibility of a joint Soviet-Nationalist Chinese invasion of the PRC (p. 478). This aspect of the book makes it unique in the canon of Chiang studies.

The book will not be welcomed by everyone in a Democratic Progressive Party-ruled Taiwan. Pantsov's argument that there would "not be a prosperous Taiwan..." without Chiang (p. 491) will be viewed as contentious by those who remember martial law in Taiwan as a period of repression, as will assertions that "Chiang Kai-shek will always remain in the history of China and Taiwan as a great national revolutionary" (p. 491). Critics may well argue that a prosperous and democratic Taiwan would have developed far earlier had it *not* been for Chiang. In this regard, it is telling that the account of a visit to Chiang's resting place in Cihu provided by Pantsov in the book's epilogue (p. 490) has already been over-taken by events: the site is no longer (at the time of writing this review) open to members of the general public, having been closed following an incident in 2018 when Taiwanese protestors splashed red paint on Chiang's sarcophagus. Clearly, Chiang's legacy is not seen in a universally positive light in Taiwan today.

Some readers might also find elements of Pantsov's prose unusual. Chiang's first military engagement "was what it was!" (p. 41). Chiang and Mei-ling Soong were in "seventh heaven" (p. 150) following their wedding. Both Chiang (p. 151) and Wang Jingwei (p. 119) were "lady killers". Kong Xiangxi was a "dumpy, fat man" (p. 371). Such colloquialisms do not sit comfortably alongside the sombre scholarship that underpins the book, and may indicate problems with translation or

copy-editing. There is also a tendency to “over translate” Chinese words or to use Romanised Chinese (and Japanese) words when it is not necessary to do so. A term such as “Hakka” does not need to be translated to “guest people”, regardless of the literal meaning of the term. Nor do cherry trees in Tokyo need to be called “*sakura*” in an English-language text.

Fortunately, such stylistic shortcomings do not undermine the impressive scholarship which underpins this book. Pantsov should be commended in particular for writing a biography which neither condemns nor idolises its subject, and which, for the most part, resists the presentism which seems to define so much historical writing in our current era. Pantsov himself seems to agree with the view put forward by Owen Lattimore in 1942: “He [i.e., Chiang] certainly was no saint, but neither was he a total villain” (cited on p. 332). At a time when debates on university campuses are, sadly, becoming more simplistic and dichotomous – and when calls to erase the very memory of dictatorial “strongmen” are becoming louder – Pantsov’s biography is refreshing for the complexity and nuance of its judgements. The next time I am asked what I think of Chiang Kai-shek, I will refer my interrogator to *Victorious in Defeat*.

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