



Madame Chiang Kai-shek: China's Eternal First Lady

By Laura Tyson Li

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Madame Chiang Kai-shek — a Booklist Editors' Choice for 2006 — is the first biography of one of the most controversial and fascinating women of the twentieth century. Raised in a powerful Chinese family, the beautiful, brilliant, and captivating Soong Mayling married Nationalist leader Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, and went on to become his chief adviser, interpreter, and propagandist. When the Communists broke with Chiang's Nationalist Party, Mayling and her sister, the widow of Sun Yat-Sen, found themselves on opposing sides of a civil war. A relentless crusader speaking out against Communism well into her nineties, she sparred with international leaders and impressed Westerners and Chinese alike with her acumen, charm, and glamour. But she was also decried as a manipulative "Dragon Lady" and was despised for living in Western-style splendor while Chinese citizens suffered under her husband's brutal oppression. The result of years of extensive research in the United States and abroad and access to previously classified CIA and diplomatic files, here at last is the story of an extraordinary woman who has become a symbol of America's long, vexed love affair with China and China's own struggle to define itself as a world power.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

To admirers, the wife of the Nationalist dictator of China and later Taiwan was a symbol of resistance to Communist tyranny; to detractors, she was a crafty "Dragon Lady" or a quisling of American imperialism. In this absorbing biography, Li, a former Taiwan correspondent for the *Financial Times*, manages a balanced portrait that situates Madame Chiang in an uneasy borderland between East and West. In her charm offensives to the United States seeking military aid during WWII, the author writes, the glamorous, Wellesley-educated Madame Chiang embodied a modern, Westernizing China that made her "a perfect focus for America's rescue complex." But Li also finds her "quintessentially Chinese" in her submissiveness to her husband's authority and "loyalty to clan and personality over principle." Amply conveying her subject's charisma without falling under its spell, Li diagnoses Madame Chiang as a classic "narcissistic personality" and critiques her complicity in the Nationalist regime's brutality and corruption and her lavish lifestyle, which alienated China's impoverished masses. Li is barely adequate at sketching the 105 years of Chinese history Chiang's life spanned, but she offers a well-researched, fluently written assessment of the life and impact of one of the 20th century's iconic figures. Photos, map. (Sept.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Petite, elegant, and mighty, Madame Chiang Kai-shek lived to be 105, but when she died in 2003, many Americans had no idea of how powerful a woman she was or of how much she suffered. First-time biographer Li is the first to tell Madame Chiang's dramatic life story. Mayling Soong was one of three sisters in an ambitious Christian Chinese family who altered the course of Chinese history. Educated in the U.S and fiercely intelligent, Mayling married Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and became his interpreter and advisor. Besieged by the invading Japanese and embroiled in a horrific civil war with the Communists, Chiang Kai-shek depended on his glamorous, eloquent wife to petition the Allied leaders for aid. In 1943, Madame Chiang galvanized America as she became the first Asian and only the second woman to address the U.S. Congress. Sensational and indomitable, she infuriated Churchill; put Franklin Roosevelt on his guard; disappointed Eleanor Roosevelt with her narcissism, grandiosity, and insensitivity; and, Li theorizes, helped jump-start Washington's anti-Communist witch hunts. With access to newly opened files, fluent insights into China's convulsive transformation, and a phenomenal gift for elucidating intricate politics and complicated psyches, Li brilliantly analyzes a fearless and profoundly conflicted woman of extraordinary force. *Donna Seaman*

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Review

"She can talk beautifully about democracy. But she does not know how to live democracy."

Users Review

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