

Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities Studies

Received: 27 June 2026 Revised: -

Original Article

Accepted: 14 August 2026

## CRITIQUING NORMAN D. PALMER's *THE GENERALISSIMO: CHIANG KAI-SHEK*

Juan Miguel U. Palero<sup>1</sup>

*A balanced portrait of China's  
most controversial figure*

### Makers of Modern China

#### V. The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek

By NORMAN D. PALMER

Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania

Author: Norman D. Palmer

Title of Journal Article: The Generalissimo:  
Chiang Kai-shek

Journal Title: *Current History*

Volume and Issue No.: Volume 15, No. 88

Publication Date: December 1948

Pages: 338-341 (4 pages)

URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45307430>

**G**ENERALISSIMO CHIANG KAI-SHEK is one of the most controversial figures in contemporary history. He is regarded by some as the savior of China and one of the greatest sons of that ancient land, by others as the greatest obstructionist of true democracy in China and an arch-reactionary.<sup>1</sup> General Stilwell called him "a stubborn, ignorant, prejudiced, conceited despot," and stated bluntly that "the cure for China's troubles is the elimination of Chiang Kai-shek." General Chennault stated in 1943 at a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, which both President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill attended, "that I considered him a great man—the only leader capable of holding China together."

The Chiang Kai-shek who is portrayed in most flattering terms in H. H. Chang's biography and Lin Yu-tang's recent writings is a very different person from the leader who is bitterly criticized in the pages of Theodore H. White and Annalee Jacoby's *Thunder out of China* or Harold Isaacs' *No Peace for Asia*. The original version of a recent report by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on aid to China referred to the "inefficiency, corruption, and bureaucratic malady," "ineptitude in military leadership," and "lack of popular confidence in the Chinese Government" headed by Chiang Kai-shek. An amended report, hastily substituted for the original, omitted all of these statements, and hailed "the self-

less patriotism of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek."

In 1947 two English translations of Chiang Kai-shek's important book, *China's Destiny*, were published almost simultaneously. Lin Yu-tang contributed an introduction to the authorized edition, and Philip Jaffe supplied notes and commentaries for the unofficial version. The two men gave fundamentally different interpretations of the book and its author. Lin Yu-tang praised the work as a great democratic document, and declared that Chiang Kai-shek had but "one single goal and purpose, that of unification of China and making her into a modern and democratic nation." Jaffe, on the other hand, described China's *Destiny* as "the Mein Kampf of China" and insisted that Chiang advocated a "feudal-fascist" program and headed "one of the most corrupt governments of modern times."

Contradictory views of this sort could be multiplied indefinitely. They suggest the virtual impossibility of painting a fair and objective picture of the man who has been the outstanding leader of China since the death of Sun Yat-sen in 1925. A few years ago, he was widely hailed in this country as the great democratic symbol of Chinese resistance to the Japanese; today he is frequently pictured as "a corrupt despot" who is largely responsible for China's present ills. It would be logical to assume that the truth lies somewhere between the two extremes. Clearly Chiang Kai-shek has been one of the major architects of modern

<sup>1</sup> Paul H. H. The Far East since 1900, p. 308.

<sup>1</sup> Independent Scholar, Philippine

## ABSTRACT

As we assess, or reassess, the life of Chiang Kai-shek, it can be certainly regarded as one of the controversial and polemical topics modern history has to offer. However, subscribing to a very polarized perspective about his life is rather a prevalent yet equally perilous intellectual practice. Consequently, this article review dissects the 1948 journal article of American political scientist Norman D. Palmer entitled *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek*. Chiang's early life and his rise to power, as Palmer has expressed, demands a thorough re-reading in an attempt to move the usual optics about him and view Chiang's thirst for power and political prestige from the lens of his formative years as a person and as a member of the Kuomintang Party under Dr. Sun Yat-sen. Palmer also intended to make the study of Chiang's life as neutral as possible, devoid of anything extremely prejudicial to one side. The article, on the other hand, has suffered from numerous methodological, conceptual, and semantic flaws, which casts a cloud of doubt over the veracity of the presented information. But despite such shortcomings, Palmer's article presented a proper, relatively impartial, re-narration of the early life of Chiang Kai-shek, which ultimately determined his life and decisions after claiming the mantle of the Kuomintang's leader in 1927.

**Keywords:** Chiang Kai-shek, Kuomintang, Norman D. Palmer, Sun Yat-Sen, Whangpoa Military Academy

## I. INTRODUCTION

“Immovable stone” – it is the literal English translation of the name of one of the most riveting and equally significant figures in modern Chinese history, Chiang Kai-shek. History, as seen in both contemporaneous narratives and analysis as well as subsequent scholarly assessments done by political scientists and historians, has painted a complex and dynamic historical canvass to depict the controversial figure. It argues that the life of Chiang Kai-shek, specifically fine-tuned in terms of his military career, has always been revolving in this precognition that he was the supposed “savior of the Chinese nation” after the centuries of foreign ruling (Qing Dynasty) and intervention that restricted autochthonous progress within China. But as ironic it might seem, history has shown that as he played a messianic duty for his homeland, he *himself* became the primary architect of the programs which eventually resulted in drastic structural shifts within the Chinese society, that made things bad to worse.

Like a normal fair coin, every man has two sides, depending on what the viewer tends to look at. The problem arising from that is that scholars or interested researchers tend to test the limits of fairness and subjectivity by being overly prejudiced to the figure being discussed; hence, their work either becomes hagiographical or hypercritical. The case of Chiang Kai-shek is no different. Hereupon, the journal article being reviewed here is a 1948 appraisal of the Generalissimo made by Professor Norman D. Palmer of the University of Pennsylvania. His work attempts to offer a balanced viewpoint of the Generalissimo and, at the same time, assails any impressions of authorial references or even the contributions or achievements of Chiang Kai-shek himself (Palmer 1948, 338-339). After all, stereotypes about Chiang, no matter how well-researched or how they were framed or intellectually packaged, do not help the readers paint him evenhandedly not only as a historical figure but also as a person.

## II. SUMMARY

Palmer’s appraisal of Chiang Kai-shek begins with the discussion of reading contemporary polarizing viewpoints and presumptions of people about him. Drawing on the accounts of Lin Yu-tang, H.H. Chang, and American journalists Theodore H. White and Annalee Jacoby to ground historically how different people viewed Chiang as a military and political leader, Palmer succinctly and sufficiently presented both sides of the narrative. On one hand, for many of the Chinese people who had experienced hardships and clung to the vain hope of a figure who will save them, Chiang was evidently the one whom they looked up to as their “savior” (Palmer 1948, 338). During the Second Sino-Japanese War, his devotees hailed Chiang as the “great unifier of Chinese resistance” against the Japanese invaders. On the other hand, many Americans, such as General Joseph Stilwell, George C. Marshall, then President Harry S. Truman, and subsequently many of his devotees, have lukewarm regard and standpoints about the Generalissimo. The end of the Second World War immediately provoked a reassessment of the very figure of Chiang. He became frequently pictured as a “corrupt despot” responsible for the ills China has been experiencing (Palmer 1948, 338). In short, Palmer implied that Chiang quickly turned from being the most beloved to being the most despised.

Thereafter, in the second part of the article, Palmer traced the early life of Chiang Kai-shek, which he believed was an implicit and crucial ingredient to revisit to have a proper rationalization and establish how he attained the position and achievements he had attained (Palmer 1948, 339). Born in 1887, the same year the great Yellow River flood struck, which resulted in the deaths of one to two million people, Chiang was born to a family living in a small village in Chekiang (Zhejiang) province. His father inherited the ancestral business of a salt shop but died in 1896, while his mother, Wang Caiyu, was his father's third wife and the most influential person during his childhood years (Palmer 1948, 339). Palmer, then, dwelt upon the two visits of the young Chiang to Japan: First, in 1906, was an unsuccessful admission to the military academy in Tokyo but, he became acquainted with the *Tung Meng Hui* of Dr. Sun Yat-sen.<sup>2</sup> Chiang returned the following year, where he successfully enrolled in the military academy in Tokyo and gained first-hand military experience as part of a field artillery regiment. It is also in this time period that he personally met Dr. Sun Yat-sen, through the help of his friend, Chen Chi-mei (Palmer 1948, 339).

Palmer, then, skimmed through the involvement of Chiang in the Xinhai Revolution in 1911; the dispute of the Kuomintang against General Yuan Shi-kai; his third stay in Japan, together with Dr. Sun Yat-sen and other revolutionaries who were denounced by General Yuan as traitors to the revolutionary principle; his sojourn to Moscow in 1923 upon the behest of Dr. Sun who was "increasingly Pro-Russian" in orientation, to observe Soviet military methods and propaganda techniques; and, becoming the principal of the Whampoa Military Academy in 1924.

In the concluding part, Palmer narrated the events after the death of Dr. Sun Yat-sen in March 1925, which simultaneously impacted the life of Chiang Kai-shek and how the entire country of China was to be governed. He noted that this specific period in Chiang's life marked the beginning of his uphill battle to gain power, first within the Kuomintang (KMT) party and later as a statesman, jockeying for power to maintain political prestige against the rising influence of the Chinese Communist Party (Palmer 1948, 341).

### III. ANALYSIS

In coping with the responsibility arising from the pursuit of having a balanced treatment of an already controversial figure in that of Chiang Kai-shek, it is but expected that this reviewer must also thoroughly and cautiously dissect the journal article written by Professor Norman Palmer, more so as it was written in 1948—a period in which Chiang is still alive, to gauge if the information laid out is indeed historically and factually grounded and accurate. The analysis that would be provided is not some sorts

---

<sup>2</sup> The Teng Mung Hui (*Zhōngguó Tóngméng huì*) was the covert organization founded by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, Song Jiaoren, and other young Chinese intelligentsia who were in Tokyo, Japan on August 20, 1905, with the primary goal of overthrowing the reigning Manchus (Qing Dynasty) and restore the administration of China back to the local Han people. The organization was governed by Dr. Sun's *San-Min-Chu-I* principle, or more commonly called as the Three Principles of the People. For a balanced account of the formation and early stages of the organization, see Tijo Kayloe, 2017, *Sun Yat-Sen and the Struggle for Modern China*, (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions), pp. 128-130.

of an activity whose goal was pricking out propositions that would undermine the argumentation of the author, but in the historical discipline, there is no substitution for factual and source corroboration and frankness when it comes to exposing the shortcomings of the author in presenting details about a historical figure. The reviewer, therefore, must guard against the pitfall of a lack of understanding of the life and contributions of the historical figure, especially if the author offers a fragmented account.

From the outset, it may not be appropriate to restate the established fact that Palmer's account of Chiang's early life and political ascendancy as the leader of the Kuomintang was born out of the necessity to balance the contentious discourse about the works about the man, rather than from an itch or an emotional impulse to either flatter or strongly condemn the actions and performance of Chiang at that time period. He stayed true to his word as he became "impartial" in his discussion, which was the work's primary strength. Palmer had this conviction that studying controversial figures, such as Chiang Kai-shek, normally takes into account the risk of encountering partiality or prejudicial viewpoints of their contemporaries that could ultimately make the figure inherently good or bad to the next generations. This is seen in his scathing remark on the journalistic works about Chiang such as that of H.H. Chang and Theodore H. White and Annalee Jacoby, implying a lack of enthusiasm for factuality within these work, as it prioritizes emotional appeal and selective interpretation. Admittedly, even if that were the case, it is implied that the readers are indeed knowledgeable of all of the versions of the figure's life and contributions to simply judge whether the author was either candid in his duty or just became another victim of propagandistic writing.

Moreover, a careful re-reading and evaluation of Palmer's attempt to objectively narrate the life and contributions of Chiang Kai-shek will lead to a different conclusion on what Palmer intends to do. Palmer explicitly stated in the article that the "truth [about Chiang Kai-shek] lies somewhere between the extremes" (Palmer 1948, 338). As a consequence, it is not surprising to the reviewer that this statement alone constitutes the primary weakness of Palmer's journal article. It is not convincing to the reviewer that to address an extremely polarizing viewpoint of Chiang Kai-shek, the solution is to simply find the middle ground of the two sides and picked up the ripe details to construe the now objective account. It is required to any serious scholar to adjudicate conflicting statements to set information straight for their intended audience. In fact, Palmer's phrasing "lies somewhere between the extremes" is interpreted to be as a loose statement—an intellectually-packaged attempt to objectively present the life of Chiang, devoid of authorial biases, which invites the sin of fence sitting.

It was also presumed that to explore the "extremes," the positive and negative background of the person, the supposed author will labor and endure numerous references and will be the one to quality control the information presented so as for the truth to be "somewhere between the extremes." In short, if we were to take Palmer's word seriously, he advocates a plain, objective, even-handed reading of a figure, nothing more, nothing less. He must not have discerned that historical references are "inherently unequal," and to make it sound objective is inherently erroneous.

As a historian and as a human being, it is quite a daunting task to separate personal prejudices and beliefs for one to be objective in discussing a certain topic, since there is always a predilection to choose a side. But in the field of political science during the 1940s, when Professor Palmer became known, neutrality, to a certain extent, was the default preference for any research work. Yet, beneath these supposed “neutral” accounts, there are hints of subjectivity in terms of interpretation and analysis, which Palmer tends to overlook.

The second weakness of the article lies in Palmer’s assertion that Dr. Sun Yat-sen was increasingly “pro-Russian” in orientation. At first glance, the reader might not sense what was erroneously conveyed because it was written in a well-packed statement, and the writer is an expert in the field. In a literal and restrictive interpretation of his statement, it meant to literally state that Dr. Sun was becoming fond and amenable to the ideology and way of living of then-Soviet Russia as they were reaping the fruits of the Bolshevik Revolution. Historically speaking, Dr. Sun and the Kuomintang forged a cordial relationship with the Soviets in the early part of the 1920s. However, just by plainly looking at the statement given by Palmer, it was deprived of having a reasonable explanation as to how and why that is the case. The 1920s in Chinese history were termed the “warlord era,” wherein the existence of warlords presented an exceptional challenge to Dr. Sun’s idea of the unification of China: how to consolidate the bailiwicks of prominent warlords and other cliques into a singular territory. To execute his Northern Expedition goal, Dr. Sun needed military assistance in the form of equipment and strategy, which the Soviets provided. But what Sun had in mind was military assistance, not Soviet ideology (Kayloe 2017, 256). It took Dr. Sun and a handful of Soviet officials namely: Hendrick Sneevliet (Maring), Serge Dalin, and Adolf Jaffe, roughly five years of riveting back-and-forth discussion (from 1918 until 1923) to agree on cooperation between Soviet Russia and Dr. Sun’s Kuomintang in its struggle to unify China.<sup>3</sup>

But what Palmer didn’t know was that Sun had toyed with the idea of requesting assistance from the Germans. Still, his request was declined due to the ambiguity of his political power and military prowess at his Guangzhou outpost (Kayloe 2017, 266-267). In addition, upon a careful reading of the agreement signed, there were provisions slated to protect the Kuomintang leadership from being destabilized or, in other ways being compromised and, more importantly, that the communist ideology must not be entertained as “suitable as a means of solving China’s problems” (Wu 1991, 21). As a matter of fact, it needs to be emphasized that Palmer’s injudicious statement veers towards the direction of Sun Yat-sen as a Communist enabler, rather than a pragmatic strategy born out of the exigencies of the time.

In like manner, Palmer has remarked that upon securing Soviet commitment in attaining Dr. Sun’s ambitious plan in that of the Northern Expedition, he sent forth Chiang in Moscow for a few months of

---

<sup>3</sup> This agreement was called the Sun-Jaffe Manifesto, which was signed on January 26, 1923, by Dr. Sun Yat-sen and Soviet Ambassador to China Adolph Jaffe.

“study and first-hand observations of Soviet military methods and propaganda techniques.” To the eyes of both seasoned scholars and informed laymen, there is nothing erroneous in what Palmer has stated. Chiang was indeed sent forth by Dr. Sun as part of a four-man delegation to Moscow (Palmer 1948, 340; Pantsov 2023, 86-90). But what Palmer did have created a dangerous precedent in terms of serious scholarship: oversimplification – the third weakness or shortcoming of his journal article. Palmer did not at all bother to answer related questions that could build a more coherent arguments: What did Sun Yat-sen exactly hope to achieve by sending Chiang to Moscow? To what extent did Chiang have learned the Soviet military method that he plausibly integrated into his tactical strategy against the Communist forces later in his life? If Chiang himself was entertaining the idea of communism, what was the turning point that turned him into its devoted nemesis? The significance of these questions is not only to be measured as merely missed opportunities to better comprehend the early years of Chiang Kai-shek, but rather constitutes a deliberate limitation set by Palmer himself, which hindered his reading of the figure more holistically.

The fourth weakness or shortcoming of his article was the silence of Palmer in terms of how Chiang was as he became “commandant” of the Whangpoa Military Academy. In the article, Palmer listed several routines that Chiang has followed during his time in the academy, but the issue is that, all of them are indeed positive (Palmer 1948, 340). He did not bother to dwell further on dissecting whether Chiang’s authoritative and stubborn demeanor as the Kuomintang’s leader was actually planted here, in his first-time presiding undertaking. It is to be understood that with this example, Palmer *himself* fell for the trap of being confined by the biases of the sources he had utilized while writing this narrative, which is the very thing he tried to condemn.

In addition, Palmer’s designation of Chiang as “principal” of the Whangpoa Military Academy is problematic. The word “principal,” as Merriam-Webster Dictionary will define it, is “[a] controlling authority over an educational institution” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Hence, the word was only to denote a “central authority” over an institution, presumably a *civilian* institution, which provides a vague responsibility of daily supervision of all of the things happening. Moreover, Alexander Pantsov, in his 2023 monograph about the life of Chiang Kai-shek, did not call Chiang “principal,” but rather a “commandant” of the military academy (Pantsov 2023, 95-96). Partly, the intent of Pantsov was to acclimate to the proper term for this setting. But in a much larger picture, the term “commandant” signifies the *military* authority of the figure (Chiang) to impose strict military discipline upon the cadets, revise the existing curriculum as he deemed fit, and direct all trainings that would be appropriate for the future endeavors of the cadets.

The last shortcoming of Palmer’s journal article, albeit to a relative extent, was his inability to connect the effects of the 1927 Shanghai Massacre reasonably and historically to the irruption of the Chinese Civil War between the Kuomintang (Nationalists) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). On page 391, Palmer argued that, as Chiang set up a rival faction in Nanjing, he used this as a fitting

veil to cover up his aspiration to purge out all the Communists residing in the nearby city of Shanghai. By this time, he is now firm in his conviction that it was those who are zealots of Communism and those who are connected to them in any possible manner, even if they do not believe in it, must be purged to stop its proliferation. Due to the massacre, it forced Mikhail Borodin and other Russians who are in China, in addition to the forces under Wang Chi-Wei (leader of the Wuhan government,) to abandon the country or to uphold Chiang's influence as the undisputed leader of the Kuomintang, effectively ending a united front between the Nationalists and the Communists.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The matter of a careful study of the life and achievements of Chiang Kai-shek, especially in his early military career and his rise to power, emerges as just as controversial if one were to appraise Chiang's entire life. In line with this, Norman D. Palmer's *The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek* is a perfect reminder to anyone interested in reading and understanding his life better that him being as "controversial", as many scholars would argue, is worthy of critically inspecting and interrogating prudently how he became controversial in the first place. The contribution of Palmer's brief article to future researchers and scholars is indubitably the intellectual tenacity to question every act of Chiang, which must be extended to all the phases of Chiang's life. It must not only microscope on his eventual blunders, such as when he attempted to stabilize the post-Second World War landscape of China from 1945 or his period as the undisputed leader of Taiwan after his flight in 1949, which continued up until his eventual death in 1975. It bears emphasizing that to the present-day and future readers of Palmer's journal article, it might not be an immaculate attempt to present an objective viewing of the life of Chiang Kai-shek because in 1948, Chiang was still very much alive, but rather viewing it from a panoramic viewpoint, it must be conceded that whichever works about Chiang one will read are allowed considerable elbow room to navigate as long as the sources permit.

Thus, Palmer's journal article is an insightful account that makes a meaningful contribution not only to the study of the life of Chiang Kai-shek, but also to the wider field of appraising hagiographic and heroic figures of various countries. Even more, we are living in a period where the construing and divisiveness between the black-and-white view of what is "good" and what is "evil" in terms of the reception of human actions are stretched even thinner. Stated simply, the primary takeaway is that before these historical figures became who they are now, they were *first* human beings. Accordingly, it is befitting to assess every action of every person in a rigorous, unbiased, and all-encompassing manner.

## V. REFERENCES

Kayloe, T. (2017). Sun Yat-Sen and the Struggle for Modern China. Marshall Cavendish Editions.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary. (n.d.) Principal. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/principal#dictionary-entry-2>.

Palmer, N.D. (1948). The Generalissimo: Chiang Kai-shek. Current History 15(88): 338-341. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45307430>.

Pantsov, A.V. (2023). Victorious in Defeat: The Life and Times of Chiang Kai-Shek, China, 1887-1975. Yale University Press.

Wu, E.W. (1991). Divergence in Strategic Planning: Chian Kai-shek's Mission to Moscow, 1923. Republican China 16(1), 18-33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08932344.1991.11720164>.