



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

*Hannah Pakula*

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With the beautiful, powerful, and sexy Madame Chiang Kai-shek at the center of one of the great dramas of the twentieth century, this is the story of the founding of modern China, starting with a revolution that swept away more than 2,000 years of monarchy, followed by World War II, and ending in the eventual loss to the Communists and exile in Taiwan.

An epic historical tapestry, this wonderfully wrought narrative brings to life what Americans should know about China -- the superpower we are inextricably linked with -- the way its people think and their code of behavior, both vastly different from our own.

The story revolves around this fascinating woman and her family: her father, a peasant who raised himself into Shanghai society and sent his daughters to college in America in a day when Chinese women were kept purposefully uneducated; her mother, an unlikely Methodist from the Mandarin class; her husband, a military leader and dogmatic warlord; her sisters, one married to Sun Yat-sen, the George Washington of China, the other to a seventy-fifth lineal descendant of Confucius; and her older brother, a financial genius.

This was the Soong family, which, along with their partners in marriage, was largely responsible for dragging China into the twentieth century. Brilliantly narrated, this fierce and bloody drama also includes U.S. Army General Joseph Stilwell; Claire Chennault, head of the Flying Tigers; Communist leaders Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai; murderous warlords; journalists Henry Luce, Theodore White, and Edgar Snow; and the unfortunate State Department officials who would be purged for predicting (correctly) the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War.

As the representative of an Eastern ally in the West, Madame Chiang was befriended -- before being rejected -- by the Roosevelts, stayed in the White House for long periods during World War II, and charmed the U.S. Congress into giving China billions of dollars. Although she was dubbed the Dragon Lady in some quarters, she was an icon to her people and is certainly one of the most remarkable women of the twentieth century.

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