



# UNIT 6 - SPOTLIGHT ON THREE WOMEN OF DESTINY

## *ABOUT THIS UNIT*

- *Jiang Qing (Madame Mao)*
- *Ching-ling Soong (Madame Sun Yat-sen)*
- *Mei-ling Soong (Madame Chiang Kai-shek)*

## **Introduction**

There have been few women in China's history who have wielded what could be described as absolute power; under Confucian doctrine, women should be in a subordinate role. A notable exception to this was the concubine Wu Chao, a Buddhist, who deposed her own son in 690 and proclaimed herself emperor – the only female in Chinese history to do so – and started the Zhou dynasty. It was not until the late 1800s that we saw the next all-powerful Chinese woman, the Empress Dowager Cixi, whose acquaintance we made in Unit 2.

Another three women, although not all-powerful, were nevertheless destined to play a significant part in shaping China's social and political future throughout the 20th century. All married powerful leaders - Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong – and each woman assisted her partner in imposing his individual political and social ideology on the Chinese people. Let us now look at these three women of destiny and see to what extent each of them succeeded in their respective areas of influence.

## **Jiang Qing (Madame Mao) (1914-1991)**

Jiang Qing hanged herself in a Beijing prison cell in 1991. How did it all come to this for the longtime powerful wife of Chairman Mao, who aspired to succeed him after his death?

Born into a poor family in Shandong Province in 1914, her mother a concubine and part-time prostitute and her father an alcoholic innkeeper, she certainly had a most inauspicious start in life.



Figure 6.1

Jiang Qing with Mao in 1947

Her wilfulness and rebellious nature became evident at an early age when she refused to wear the traditional foot bindings imposed on her. After running away from home in her teens to join a traveling opera troupe, she continued her rather tenuous career by studying traditional Chinese opera and modern drama at Qingdao University.

In the 1930s, she finally achieved her aim, adopting the stage name Lan Ping (meaning Blue Apple), and became a popular actress in Shanghai. She appeared in several films and dramas and played the demanding role of Nora in Ibsen's *The Doll's House*.

After two failed marriages, Jiang was attracted to communism through one of her lovers and became a registered member of the CCP in 1933. She was imprisoned for eight months by the Nationalists for her suspected communist sympathies, but she gained her release by signing a document renouncing her belief in communism and, reportedly, sleeping with her jailers. The existence of this potentially damaging document, and her alleged indiscretions, continued to concern her. These affairs also became a matter of considerable concern for the CCP hierarchy when Mao began to take more than a passing interest in the young actress.

The thought of joining the heroes of the Long March excited Jiang; she travelled to Yanan in 1937 to the CCP headquarters where the communists had ended their Long March. Mao, then 46, was fascinated with this attractive 23-year-old actress and eventually married her in 1939. (The union produced one daughter, Li Na, who subsequently endured a miserable life – cast off by Mao and unloved by her mother. Following periods of severe depression and temporary insanity, Li Na recovered fully and is reported to be leading a normal life today.)

During the Civil War with the Nationalists, Mao recognised his wife's talents and appointed her to head the film office of the CCP Propaganda Department with the aim of bolstering support for the Red Army. Following the Communist Party victory and proclamation of Mao as Chairman of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Jiang steadfastly continued her political support for Mao, even though their physical relationship by then had all but ended. (Mao's well-known penchant for young idol-worshipping country girls was to continue until his death.)

Jiang sought to establish her own power base. The opportunity arose when Mao initiated his Cultural Revolution in the mid 1960s and sought her assistance. Together with three radical colleagues, she formed a power circle, dubbed by Mao "The Gang of Four", and they set out to promote Mao's revolutionary ideas by launching a student-led army – the Red Guards (see Unit

4). Mao put her in charge of "the ideology side of the business" where she wielded enormous power, attending student revolutionary meetings and producing propaganda films, plays and ballets promoting the CCP revolutionary theme; all "traditional" productions were banned.

Jiang's spiteful character is well described by Chang Jung and Jon Halliday, in their book *Mao: The Unknown Story*: "Jiang, in middle age, had become shallow, vindictive, and totally self-centred; and many of those who had been kind to her in her career were now hunted down and imprisoned to ensure their silence about her past. Critics were ruthlessly incarcerated or executed, and she took her revenge on those who had previously offended or criticised her".

In the early seventies, when Mao's health was failing and his power waning, Jiang nurtured aspirations of becoming the new chairman of the party. All failed, after Mao thwarted her ambitions by nominating a more moderate colleague, Hua Guofeng, to succeed him.

Shortly after Mao's death in 1976, Jiang and the other members of the Gang of Four were arrested, charged with being primarily responsible for the disastrous outcomes of the Cultural Revolution, and imprisoned for life. Mao's culpability was selectively minimised by the faithful party hierarchy, and historians still debate whether Jiang was made a convenient scapegoat for "The Great Helmsman" As she commented ruefully, before taking her own life 15 years later, "I was Chairman Mao's dog; whomever he told me to bite, I bit."

Nevertheless, Jiang Qing continues to be regarded, for better or worse, as one of the most controversial women in the history of modern-day China.

## **Ching-ling Soong (Madame Sun Yat-sen) (1892–1981)**

Unlike Jiang Qing, Ching-ling Soong came from a wealthy and privileged background. Born in Shanghai in 1892, she was one of three remarkable daughters of Charles Jones Soong (who Anglicised his name), an American-educated Chinese businessman, who had accumulated considerable wealth through publishing inexpensive vernacular Christian Bibles in Chinese. Charles Soong was also a close friend of Dr Sun Yat-sen (whom we looked at in some detail in Unit 2) and became treasurer of Sun's Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) following the fall of the last (Qing) dynasty.



**Figure 6.2**  
Accompanied her husband

All three daughters were well educated, attending the Wesleyan College for Women in Georgia, U.S.A., and became fluent in English – a significant advantage in later years. The eldest Soong sister, Ay-ling, joined her father in Shanghai, married into a wealthy Chinese banking family, and successfully managed their vast business ventures. It has been said of the three Soong sisters, that one loved money, one loved power and the other loved her country.

When Ching-ling returned to Shanghai from her American studies in 1912, she was employed as a secretary to Sun Yat-sen, who was then the first provisional president of the newly formed republic. Sun was replaced as president shortly after by Yuan Shikai and moved to Japan to promote his Revolutionary Alliance Party in opposition to Yuan. Ching-ling followed and married him there in 1915 against her family's wishes – Sun was 26 years her senior. After his death in 1925, she became increasingly active in the political affairs of the Nationalist Party, which had been founded by her husband.

By 1927, Ching-ling had become concerned by the party's extreme right-wing tendencies under the leadership of her brother-in-law, Chiang Kai-shek (sister Mei-ling's husband); in particular, she considered that his brutal purging of left-wing communist Koumintang members in Shanghai had betrayed the ideals of her husband. She decided to move to the Soviet Union for two years, where exposure to communist ideology strengthened her anti-Nationalist views.

After her return, Ching-ling was actively involved in medical relief and child welfare programs in the communist-controlled areas during the Civil War. In 1948, she became chairman of the Kuomintang Revolutionary Committee, a splinter group organised to oppose the Nationalists. By now a committed communist and loyal Mao supporter, Ching-ling found herself at the other end of the political spectrum from her two sisters.

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Ching-ling was regarded as a symbol of the link between the new republic and the older revolutionary movement of Sun Yat-sen. She was accorded considerable deference by the ruling Communist hierarchy, was appointed a member of the Politburo, and in 1981 was named honorary Chairman of the People's Republic – a symbolic gesture, but a long way from her life as a young secretary to the founder of the Nationalist Party, Sun Yat-sen, almost 70 years before. The marriage had produced no children.

## **Mei-ling Soong (Madame Chiang Kai-shek) (1897–2003)**

Of the three Soong sisters, the youngest one, Mei-ling, achieved the greatest fame – or, as some say, notoriety. Born in Shanghai in 1897, she moved to the United States to complete her education, graduating with a B.A. from Wellesley College, Massachusetts, in 1917. Mei-ling returned to China, where she first met her future husband, Chiang Kai-shek, then a military officer serving Sun Yat-sen. Like her sister Ching-ling, Mei-ling's marriage was opposed by her family, since Chiang was eleven years older, a Buddhist, and already married with two sons. This opposition was eventually overcome on the understanding that Chiang obtain a divorce and promise to convert to Christianity.

They married in 1927, by which time Sun had died and Chiang had become a general and leader of the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang).



Figure 6.3  
With Eleanor Roosevelt during  
a 1943 visit to the U.S.

During the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), Mei-ling, familiar as she was with both western and Chinese culture, provided invaluable assistance to her husband as his English translator, secretary and advisor. In 1943, she swept through the United States rallying support and raising funds for the Nationalist's fight against the Japanese. Her speech before a joint session of the U.S. Congress, only the second ever made by a woman, was delivered in her quaint southern U.S. accent and was a turning point in convincing members to continue aid to China.

She became extremely friendly with Eleanor Roosevelt and twice made the cover of Time magazine, first with her husband as "Man and Wife of the Year" and second under the title of "The Dragon Lady". It is recorded that she once shocked Mrs Roosevelt during a dinner at the White House when, asked how the Chinese Government intended to handle a coal miners' strike, she drew her finger – probably adorned with a crimson, manicured, long and sharp fingernail – across her neck. If true, the term "dragon lady" may have been well earned.

After Chiang Kai-shek's defeat in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 by Mao's Communist Party, Mei-ling followed her husband to Taiwan where he and his supporters had fled to set up the Republic of China (ROC). From there she continued to oppose the Chinese Communist regime and bolster the position of the ROC in the eyes of the United Nations.

To support these patriotic efforts, she also became Patron of the International Red Cross Committee and Honorary Chair of the British United Aid to China Fund. In the late 1960s, she made the list of America's 10 most admired women.

After her husband's death in 1975, Mei-ling kept a low profile. She moved to America with a retinue of bodyguards, to reside at the family's large estate in Long Island, New York, and later to a stylish Manhattan apartment. She died in 2003 at the age of 106 after a fascinating life of international involvement and political intrigue. Mei-ling had no children, although Chiang Kai-shek's eldest son by a previous marriage succeeded him as President of Taiwan.

## Activity 6

1. Which of these three women do you consider has the best claim to being a "woman of destiny"?
2. Can you nominate two other Asian women of destiny and why did you select these?

*Share your thoughts on the **Course Discussion Forum***

**Next - The land and its people**

*In Unit 7, we will look at some of the demographic and sociological features of Chinese society.*

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