Chiang Kai-Shek's Diaries
and the Study of Republican Chinese History
Interpreting the Personas of “Chiang Kai-shek” in the Diaries

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Introduction

An important question any researcher faces when approaching Chiang Kai-shek’s diaries is whether one is reading about Chiang’s true feelings or whether one is reading about what Chiang desires us to know. Researchers hope for the former, believing that if true, the diaries would then provide a more complete and meaningful picture of the leader by linking “backstage” preparations to “front stage” actions of what the audience sees. The researcher presumably can then answer questions as to whether Chiang’s professions of Christianity were genuine rather than make conjectures based on what is happening on the front stage. Nevertheless, a possibility still exists that what Chiang wrote in his diaries is yet another front stage—that is, the diaries were just another vehicle by which Chiang continued to project a public face. In that case, what the researcher desires from the diary—the person or the “real” Chiang—eludes yet again.

1 The formulation of this puzzle was put forward by Paul Cohen and Keith Schoppa at a 2009 conference entitled, “Reassessing Chiang Kai-shek: An International Dialogue,” organized by Emily Hill, Grace Huang, and Jeremy Taylor and held at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. Although Schoppa again put forward a version of this puzzle in his review of Jay Taylor’s biography (see “Diaries as a Historical Source: Goldmines and/or Slippery Slopes,” Roundtable on Chiang Kai-shek and Modern China in The Chinese Historical Review, 17(1) (Spring 2010)), his main emphasis was on critiquing how Taylor approached the diaries rather than on trying to resolve this puzzle. As a side note, although I have yet to visit the Hoover Archives, I have spent extensive time poring over Chiang’s shilüe manuscripts, which contain excerpts from Chiang’s diary on almost a daily basis. My comments are thus based on analyzing these excerpts over time.
The question, then, is whether one can distinguish between Chiang’s person versus his persona. This task is likely impossible (even for Chiang himself!) because each individual, it seems, possesses several personas. As such, which of these personas is the “real” person? One way to resolve this conundrum is to assume that all personas, to differing degrees, reflect the real person—that is, the person is the sum of his or her personas. Working with this assumption, the task then is to differentiate among the many personas of “Chiang Kai-shek” in the diaries. In doing so, this paper ultimately comes to three conclusions. First, one can still claim that a “backstage” persona exists, one that is less shaped and altered for public consumption. Second, the fact that Chiang was constructing his own “front stage” persona marks a distinct break from how traditional Chinese historiography portrayed imperial leaders and thus has consequences for how researchers should think about the text. Finally, by juxtaposing the various personas in the diaries, one is able to interpret Chiang’s leadership with more nuance and sophistication.

When is Chiang’s “Backstage” Persona Evident?

In thinking about a “backstage” persona, one must keep in mind that Chiang’s diaries were never meant for public consumption. Had Taiwan remained authoritarian and continued forbidding the public’s viewing of archival materials, the diaries would have served as the foundational materials from which future Guomindang secretaries, party historians, or entrusted historians would draw from to create a Standard History (shilu). The latter was a genre of historical writing that aimed to establish the legitimacy of the imperial leaders and their regimes. Given the strict requirements of Chinese historiography, which emphasized objectivity (and hence stressing details that could be verified) and “promot[ing] good and suppress[ing] evil,” the untidiness of Chiang’s backstage persona likely would have been effaced over.

Instead, Taiwan’s democratization made possible the public’s access to a relatively

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2 This conception, put forward by the discussant for my paper, Peter Zarrow, has been instrumental towards revising this paper.
"raw" version of the diaries rather than a "cooked" one; I use "relatively raw" because family members, Chiang Kai-shek, or his son redacted more than a hundred passages from Chiang’s diary between the years of 1918 and 1922, before these diaries were released to the Hoover Institution. Despite these redactions, there is still an element of truth in Yang Tianshi’s observation that Chiang wrote the diaries mainly for himself. Chiang cursed often and provided confessional materials such as giving himself demerits for looking lustily after women. He likely would have avoided writing such words if he knew that the public would have direct access to his diaries.

Nevertheless, a notion that posterity would view some version of his diary suggests that Chiang, to varying degrees, might have purposely hidden or embellished elements in his retelling of events, creating more of a front rather than a backstage persona. Hence, delineating the areas in which Chiang’s backstage persona is more evident could serve as an initial exercise in distinguishing among the personae. One potential area relates to his trajectory of leadership: in essence, the more publicly known Chiang became, the more a front stage persona would occupy his mind. One might even venture forth that 1933 serves as the “tipping point” year in which Chiang systematically had the front stage persona in mind.

To elaborate, after the 1930 Battle of the Central Plains, which pitted Chiang against northern and southern warlords, Chiang emerged victorious, consolidating his leadership more substantively than he had two years earlier during the Northern Expedition. The idea that his words and actions might leave a legacy thus became a possibility for Chiang and others. When Chiang created the Office of Personal Attendants (si congshi) in 1933, this idea finally became reality. During this time, secretaries began to record his actions and words, thus institutionalizing the construction of his legacy. Even during the war against Japan, secretaries not only continued the production of Chiang’s legacy undisturbed in Chongqing, but they also expanded their work by collating his telegrams, speeches, and even excerpts from his diaries to create the shilüe

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(or "draft") manuscripts. Modeling their efforts after the above-mentioned Standard Histories, they aimed to produce a "Standard History" in which future generations could evaluate Chiang's regime. Thus, the creation of the Office of Personal Attendants in 1933, and certainly with the secretaries' expanded duties of incorporating diary excerpts into a "Standard History" during the War, likely indicated that Chiang was becoming more mindful of his public persona when writing in his diaries. Unsurprisingly, redactions from the diary occurred in the years prior to 1933, indicating that Chiang was perhaps more "free" to write down his thoughts and feelings, having yet to be concerned about a national public persona and legacy.

A second area in which one might hypothesize that Chiang's backstage persona is more evident is when he wrote about moral self-cultivation. Chiang's particular strand of neo-Confucian self-cultivation revealed that he was particularly sensitive to humiliation and that he drew inspiration from leaders who endured it, such as Goujian, Yue Fei, and even Jesus. His personality is thus revealed in the method he chose to practice self-cultivation. One would be hard-pressed to imagine another Republican era leader, such as Yuan Shikai or Mao Zedong, appealing to Chiang's choice of leaders as models to emulate in their self-cultivation.

Finally, the third and most important area in which the backstage persona of Chiang comes to the fore is when he confronted stressful events. In these situations, one is better able to observe Chiang's agency, or the process by which he made decisions. For instance, although Chiang pursued a three-pronged approach of non-direct negotiations,

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7 For more on the Office of Personal Attendants, see ibid., 619–622.
8 For Goujian and Yue Fei, see Yuan Huichang, *Jiang Zhongzheng Zongtong Dang'an Shilüe Gaoben*, (The Chiang Kai-shek Collections: The Chronological Events), February 11 and 17, 1934, Archives of President Chiang Kai-shek, Academia Historica, Xindian, Taiwan; *Jiang Zhongzheng Zongtong Dang’an: Shilüe Gaoben* [President Chiang Kai-shek’s archives: the shilüe manuscripts] 2006: 25/237–318. For Jesus, see Yuan, May 4, 1934; Jiang Zhongzheng, 2006: 26/24. When referring to the manuscript, I will provide both the archival and published reference.
9 My understanding of agency is drawn from Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische who note that agency can be divided into three components: there is the *iterational* component that selectively reactivates past experiences, patterns of behavior, or competencies to condition present actions. There is the *projectional* component that imagines future goals and projects, and even fantasies that may condition present actions. Finally, there is the *practical-evaluative* component that makes decisions based on the contingencies of the moment. Moreover, in any empirical example of action, all three components can be found to varying degrees. See "What is Agency?" *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(4), (January, 1988): 971.
non-cooperation, and non-military resistance in response to the Mukden Incident in 1931,\(^{10}\) he nevertheless considered back-up plans. Eight days after the Incident, infuriated that the Japanese wanted to bypass the League of Nations to negotiate directly with the Chinese, and knowing that this would yield bad results, Chiang stated: “Currently, I am determined to move the capital to northwest China to concentrate the army’s strength along the Longhai Railroad (stretching from Lanzhou in interior Gansu Province to Lianyonggang in coastal Jiangsu); I will put my army in formation to await [the Japanese].”\(^{11}\) Two weeks after the incident, Chiang further stated that whether they were at peace or war with the Japanese, he would make northwest China a second base for the central government with Luoyang as a capital and Xi’an as an accompanying capital.\(^{12}\) Although he ultimately avoided this course of action, one gets a sense for how Chiang made decisions.

In addition to observing Chiang’s agency, crises also bring out the emotional linkages between leader and political environment. The crises-filled latter half of 1931 might serve as an example. Chiang was in the middle of his third “extermination” campaign against the Chinese Communists; a potential battle was brewing with the southern warlords; and likely because of all of this, the Japanese invaded Mukden in September.\(^{13}\) Chiang was hardly subtle in his efforts to signal a bad structural situation. He portrayed his surroundings in the hues of hopelessness and despair: China had hit rock bottom; it could be humiliated no more. The people’s spirit of patriotism lasted only as long as a firecracker. His staff workers could barely compose a telegram without his having to perform major revisions.\(^{14}\) The Japanese were evil, barbarous, and deceitful.

Chiang also recorded many sleepless nights during this period. On July 18, for instance, after receiving the Japanese demands concerning the Wanbaoshan Incident, Chiang was so angry that he was unable to sleep, and this was after already accumulating


\(^{11}\) Wang Yugao, Shilüe goaben (Shilüe manuscripts), Archives of President Chiang Kai-shek, Academia Historica, Xindian, Taiwan, September 26, 1931; Jiang Zhongzheng, 2004: 12/102.

\(^{12}\) Wang, October 3, 1931; Jiang Zhongzheng, 2004: 12/129.


\(^{14}\) Wang, December 8, 1931; Jiang Zhongzheng, 2004: 12/447.
three sleepless nights. Later, in response to the Japanese war games in Korea on September 1, he stated, “I am in the midst of a bad environment. How shall I handle it? I worry and cannot sleep.” After the Mukden Incident, Chiang again recorded a spate of sleepless nights.

The shilüe diary excerpts from the latter half of 1931 indicate that Chiang became increasingly convinced that he alone was responsible for the fate of the country. Three days after the Mukden Incident, on September 21, and after another sleepless night, Chiang stated, “For the sake of avenging national humiliation, there is no other who can help me carry heaven’s duty.” Six days later, on September 27 and after yet another bout of insomnia, Chiang felt that even though “the danger and urgency of the situation had never surpassed this day, the responsibility of the difficulties and danger of the Japanese is something that I only can take on.” After tendering his resignation on December 15, he felt that his attendance at a December 21 meeting commemorated the beginning of the country’s death because he was no longer China’s leader. Reinforcing his sense of exceptionalism was his feeling of being farsighted. On September 22, he stated, “The Japanese invasion is already happening. The Second World War has already started. I don’t know if people in other countries can see this or not.”

To further encourage his adherence to his self-assigned mission of rescuing China, he connected his mission to the duties of being a filial son and loyal disciple to Sun Yatsen. On September 28, after invoking Zhuge Liang’s motto of devoting one’s self to the task until one’s death, he stated, “Today, I am pressed close to a dangerous environment. In case of something unpredictable, when I see the danger, I will accept responsibility. In the end, I will not be a child that shames his mother and father and a disciple [that shames] Sun Yatsen.” In this extended example, one sees how Chiang’s response to crises in the diaries provides a more complete picture of his emotional state, but more importantly, of how he encouraged himself to sustain his vision of leadership in

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16 Wang, September 1, 1931; Jiang Zhongzheng, 2004: 12/10.
17 Wang, September 21, 1931; Jiang Zhongzheng, 2004: 12/83.
18 Wang, September 27, 1931; Jiang Zhongzheng, 2004: 12/105.
the midst of such crisis.

This section thus notes that Chiang’s earlier writings (pre-1933), his drawing of inspiration from neo-Confucian self-cultivation, and his responses to “big” events bring out more of Chiang’s backstage persona rather than his front stage one. On the one hand, one could argue that any of the above-mentioned factors also might have worked as front stage personas. After all, Chiang certainly had gained national stature by 1928. In addition, how does one know whether Chiang was expressing his feelings in a new-Confucian manner or whether he was signaling to others that he was a virtuous and moral leader? Finally, his penning down of alternative strategies might have been another way of justifying the strategy he eventually took. The possibility that an element of a front stage persona exists in these entries cannot be denied. In some cases, the back and front stages might have worked in tandem; for instance, Chiang felt truly inspired by Goujian, and he hoped that his modeling after Goujian would inspire others. In other cases, however, Chiang might have purposely omitted the backstage persona; for example, Chiang was silent about some important things, such as, perhaps, having a hand in a secret assassination, to conceivably maintain an overall persona of being a virtuous leader. This section only posits the idea that one can see more of the backstage persona in the scenarios just mentioned.

On the other hand, one might argue that the back stage persona is more prevalent in the diaries than I give credit. The 1933 dividing line, for instance, seems too sharp a split even though I make the case that crises and Chiang’s self-cultivation are important exceptions. Chang Su-ya, for instance, remarks how sections of Chiang’s diaries in the 1950s appear to be all back stage; his writing, in fact, was quite rambled.22 Certainly, the public or posterity was hardly his muse during these times. One might note, however, that Chiang was no longer at the center of important events and was considered by many to be a spent force. Thus he may have thought that his legacy was less important during this time.

One might finally point out that the backstage persona is often absent altogether from the diary and that Chiang did not do this on purpose. In observing Chiang’s avenging humiliation column over time, one notes that the column is much more

22 Comment on my paper shared during the question and answer period at the conference.
substantive in response to crises than at other times. Spikes in substantive methods to avenge humiliation can be found, for instance, after the Jinan Incident in 1928 and the Mukden Incident in 1931. Otherwise, the entry, during this period, either feels like a placeholder or Chiang chides himself for having forgotten a humiliation.

Ultimately, how much the front stage persona enhances, constrains, or represses the backstage and the relative significance of this effect is for to the researcher to discern for him or herself.

Chiang’s “Front Stage” Persona and How it Differs from that of Imperial Leaders of the Past

If Chiang’s backstage persona is more evident 1) prior to his having achieved national significance, 2) in his examples of self-cultivation, and 3) in times of crisis, does this imply that all else in the diaries should be ignored? Here, one might turn one’s attention to the construction of Chiang’s front stage persona and its potential significance (or insignificance) to researchers. To return to an earlier point, the ultimate purpose of Chiang’s diaries was that they would anchor the “Standard History.” Hence, this section evaluates this aspect of the front stage persona of the diary in the context of how personas of imperial leaders were constructed in the past.

One striking difference between the constructions of Chiang’s persona versus that of the past imperial leaders was the move from an objective persona to the inclusion of a subjective one. In traditional Chinese historiography, the question of the leader helping to construct his own persona was moot. Given the strict adherence to objectivity, the “voice” of the emperor was never heard. Imperial recorders were responsible for compiling the emperors’ diary, and even more importantly, the emperor was prohibited from reading the diary during his reign. These scribes noted down “in minute detail all the public doings and sayings of each emperor, together with all business, governmental or other in which

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23 One example of the content of avenging humiliation column performing as a placeholder can be found in the entries comprising the first half of 1931. Apparently more focused on domestic disunity than foreign aggression, Chiang filled the column with stock four-character phrases such as, “Man will overcome nature (rending shengtian)” (Wang, July 29, 1931; Jiang Zhongzheng, 2004: 11/454). For further elaboration, see Huang, “Constructing a Public Face,” 637.
he shared." In essence, the imperial recorders objectively constructed the emperor’s persona in the “Diary of Activity and Repose” (*qijuzhu*).

Just as the “Diary of Activity and Repose” would figure prominently into the Standard Histories, Chiang’s diaries were meant to figure centrally in a future version of the “Standard History” for posterity’s evaluation of his leadership and regime. The crucial difference was that Chiang wrote his own diary. On the one hand, this difference points to a potential limit in using the diary as a source. The researcher should rightly be suspicious that the end result of Chiang’s “Standard History” would necessarily be biased towards portraying Chiang favorably. He had remained silent, for instance, on “his 1938 decision to blast open (without warning to people in the area) the Yellow River dikes—producing a flood that drowned from three hundred thousand to eight hundred thousand or more of his countrymen and left over two million homeless.” One might point out, however, that these conspicuous omissions are part and parcel to other genres of writing such as the political memoir. Harry Truman, for instance, was silent “on the most consequential of all his decisions as President—sanctioning the use of atomic bombs—despite his prolixity on almost every other subject.”

On the other hand, some factors mitigate this bias. First, researchers must read the diaries in conjunction with other source materials to garner a more complete picture. Second, the democratization of, and thus open access to, the materials has given researchers the opportunity to observe the process by which Chiang and his secretaries would revise the diaries for public consumption. Hence many of the things that might have been slated for elimination had yet to occur. Third, as I explain in detail elsewhere, Chiang and his secretaries were adhering to the standards of historical writing when putting together a draft version of their “Standard History” in the form of the shiliué manuscripts. Diary entries, for example, were put in quotations.

But ultimately, Chiang’s deep personal imprint in the shiliué marks a distinct break from traditional historiography, reflecting a new world order where the leader appeals to

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25 Schoppa, “Diaries as a Historical Source,” 32.
27 Huang, “Constructing a Public Face”.
the masses in the name of nationalism, and in doing so, reveals more of his own person—no matter how elusive this concept might be. It indicates a change from the relationship between emperor and subject to that between national leader and citizen. Hence, the kind of “front stage” persona that comes through is qualitatively different from that of the imperial rulers in the past.\(^{28}\)

For one thing, Chiang comes across as human and as someone with whom one could sympathize rather than as a super human or extraordinary leader put on a pedestal. At the same time, he was able to convey how an ordinary person is supposed to cope with an extraordinary situation. Certainly, to read his words, one can hardly compare him to the ranks of Augustus Caesar in his penning of the *res gestae* or Alexis de Tocqueville who compared America and France, or Lloyd George who wrote as an encompassing historian.\(^{29}\)

In sum, researchers need to be aware of all the biases inherent in Chiang’s projected public persona in the diaries. Omitting details, such as the blasting of the Yellow River dikes, certainly presents a more “cleaned up” version of Chiang. At the very least, Chiang comes across more empathetic and less violent, making this a troubling and inaccurate picture if researchers base their work solely on the diaries. At the same time, these omissions can tell us something about the leader. In reference to the Yellow River dikes omission, Keith Schoppa mused over the possible underlying reasons: “the diarist does not want himself to be identified with [such important events]; that the diarist did not think them worthy of comment; or that the diarist was intimately bound to the event, but wants that connection unknown.”\(^{30}\) Hence the front stage persona is not something to be avoided at all costs or denigrated because it might deny or distort reality. Instead this persona, in concert with surrounding materials, can suggest to the researcher the particular insecurities, regrets, or even Machiavellian calculations for why a leader, such as Chiang, constructs a public face in such a way.

**What Can Researchers Learn from these Personas?**

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 625.

\(^{29}\) Contrasting examples drawn from Egerton, “Politics and Biography,” 239.

\(^{30}\) Schoppa, “Diaries as a Historical Source,” 32.
Chiang’s diaries provide readers with a privileged perspective on events, and as such, a glimpse into “the inner springs of power.” Thus, one purpose of his diaries is to bestow lessons in statecraft for future leaders.\(^{31}\) As alluded to previously, Chiang comes across as an “ordinary bloke,” and one “who was likely less smart than many people in this room.”\(^ {32}\) Chiang often listed his shortcomings, such as losing his temper, and encouraged himself to overcome these flaws only to commit them again and again. Therefore, in following one persona of the diary, one statecraft lesson might be that an ordinary bloke could become a leader just as long as s/he possessed perseverance and followed Chiang’s various prescriptions such as “enduring extraordinary humiliation will hone one’s extraordinary skill” and “reading ten pages a day,” to gain knowledge, etc.\(^ {33}\) Chiang certainly encouraged himself to follow such prescriptions, as was the case when he decided to start an avenging humiliation column in 1928. He adhered to this task, forgetting only a few times, for almost three decades until the end of World War II. In addition, just as Chiang alluded to Goujian, Yue Fei, and Jesus as his models, one could imagine that Chiang himself might be a model for future leaders.

And yet, a closer reading of the diary suggests tension between Chiang’s various personas. As a result, Chiang also seems to convey a Machiavellian persona where rhetoric is an important cloak for legitimacy even when the actions go contrary to that rhetoric. For example, on a consistent basis Chiang told himself to withstand humiliation (renchi). The diary entries in the latter half of 1931 reflect a sense of Chiang’s Goujian-like stoicism. In the midst of party divisiveness, he remained silent as party members attacked him: “I am willing to take on the responsibilities for all of these calamities. Otherwise, other than myself, there is no one who can carry this responsibility. Therefore, concerning this, I can only endure the humiliation, carrying this responsibility to death. I encourage myself.”\(^ {34}\) A month later, with no signs of rapprochement, Chiang again noted that he had “the misfortune of accepting all this dirtiness; I now feel even

\(^{31}\) Egerton, “Politics and Biography,” 234.
\(^{32}\) Remark made by Steve Tsang and referring to participants at the Queen’s University Conference on Chiang Kai-shek, August 10, 2009.
\(^{33}\) Wang, April 2, 1931; Jiang Zhongzheng, 2004: 10/380; Wang Yugao and Wang Yuzheng, May 9, 1928, Reflections and Overcoming (Difficulties), Archives of President Chiang Kai-shek, Academia Historica, Xindian, Taiwan.
\(^{34}\) Wang, October 10, 1931; Jiang Zhongzheng, 2004: 12/149.
more sympathy for the wise men of the past.\textsuperscript{35}

The problem with taking his call to withstand humiliation at face value was that Chiang was only selectively enduring the humiliation. Chiang had been the main cause of the intra-party disunity in the first place when he imprisoned party elder, Hu Hanmin, earlier in the year for protesting Chiang's promulgation of a new constitution calling for increased centralization. This action subsequently led to the creation of an anti-Chiang bloc in Guangdong. Hence, one could also interpret Chiang's munitions to endure their attacks and insults as politically motivated to appear noble and above the factional infighting, when, in reality, Chiang had played a major role in causing the infighting. Hence, one might construe the following message: do what is needed to consolidate power, but when possible, cloak shady actions in virtuous, moral language. In Chiang's case, his method seemed to work. He resigned from power in December of 1931 but regained his position forty-five days later.\textsuperscript{36}

In addition to drawing lessons of statecraft from the diaries, one might further argue that through exploring Chiang's various personas, researchers can gain a specific entryway into the life and times of the period. Although leaders are no different from ordinary individuals, they are nevertheless more energetic in articulating or embodying the story of their times. Drawing on Erik Erikson's psychoanalytic work, one finds that the making of a national leader often occurs when "the conflicts and uncertainties that beset the individual intersect with those of the polity—and, especially, when the putative solutions also coincide."\textsuperscript{37} In embodying such a story, a leader can articulate a sense of identity for the group by telling it where it came from, where it is going, and as such, provides direction for the collective.\textsuperscript{38}

Here, one might again remark on the "self-cultivation" persona Chiang put forward that was sensitive to humiliation and which seemed particularly unique to his leadership when compared to other Republican leaders such as Sun Yatsen, Yuan Shikai, or Mao Zedong. In Chiang's case, one might argue that his experience of being ridiculed as an

\textsuperscript{35} Wang, November 10, 1931; Jiang Zhongzheng, 2004: 12/263.
\textsuperscript{36} Grace Huang, "Constructing Chiang Kai-shek's Use of Shame and Humiliation for Posterity, 1928–1934," under review at Twentieth Century China, 20.
\textsuperscript{38} Gardner, Leading Minds, 9.
orphan (children without fathers were considered as such) affected him deeply, but rather than feeling paralyzed by the humiliation, or choosing to ignore it, Chiang created an agentic self based on the premise that one’s humiliation was an opportunity to develop one’s talents and capabilities. This particular persona, shaped by an ascetic ideology, seemed to inspire Chiang forward, and one might also argue, his followers, too.

One might also suggest that even the contradictions within this persona (to endure or not to endure humiliation) represented an important response to China’s problems and thus resonated with certain segments of the population, because they, too, would understand and feel the contradictions inherent in the times: that of resisting versus enduring imperial aggression, that of unity versus disunity (e.g., unity against Japan was good, but why submit to the rule of another competing domestic group?), and finally, that of improving infrastructure and the people’s talents versus lacking the resources to do so. Hence, selective endurance for China and for Chiang, while detracting from an integrated understanding of humiliation, could be interpreted as a necessary (if Machiavellian) tactic for survival. 39

**Conclusion**

Although scholars would like to conceptually separate Chiang’s “true feelings” from the deliberate construction of a public image, in reality, the two are hard to distinguish. Even if one were to peel away Chiang’s persona, there are no guarantees that one could magically reveal his “true” person. Whether there is a “true” core self within each of us or whether nothing remains after one peels away all the layers like an onion is a philosophical question beyond the purview of this paper.

Nevertheless, even if one remains in the realm of Chiang’s many personas, one can still make the claim that underlying personas are less deliberately constructed than outer lying personas, and this distinction leads to potentially interesting avenues for interpreting Chiang Kai-shek’s writings. First, and much care must be exercised in the process, one might consider underlying personas as proxies for getting at Chiang’s true feelings. Although the diaries had undergone some revisions by Chiang and his son, Chiang Ching-kuo, the fact that Taiwan’s democratization interrupted the revision process

39 Huang, “Constructing Chiang Kai-shek’s Use of Shame and Humiliation,” 38–39.
indicates that secretaries and party historians had yet to complete a fully burnished image of Chiang’s public persona. Furthermore, unlike autobiographies or memoirs, the genre of the diary contains the temporal quality of moving forward day by day as opposed to being written retrospectively where the public persona is constructed through (purposeful?) lapses of memory or through overemphasizing certain elements of an event over others. In these regards, the researchers can approximately draw out Chiang’s “true” feelings in the diaries and hence feel that their access to Chiang’s agency is genuine.

Second, even the outer layers of Chiang’s persona should not be dismissed as unhelpful or sub-par evidence for the scholar. In examining the construction of these layers, one can get a sense for how Chiang wanted to appear to the public and to posterity; what virtues and values he thought were important; and to understand Chiang’s rationale for his actions. Finally, and perhaps what is most interesting, the researcher can juxtapose these various personas, along with complementary historical sources, to tease out tensions and to add nuance to the understanding of Chiang’s leadership and to the times in which he ruled.

Researchers, however, should rightfully be alert that the diaries might also have been a vehicle for Chiang to tell posterity what he wanted them to know, which in essence distorts the researcher’s task of discerning the processes by which Chiang made decisions and of evaluating his leadership. This danger is especially difficult to escape. In conveying an ordinary bloke-like quality, the diaries make sympathizing and identifying with Chiang’s trials and tribulations easier, so much so, that one’s objectivity is easily compromised. In a review of a recent biography of Chiang that relied heavily on the diaries, Jonathan Spence suggests just this possibility:

In such a reading [of the evidence], Chiang’s harsh though erratic censorship, the mass political rallies held at his behest, the ruthless intelligence services, paramilitary and elitist secret societies, assassinations of political and human rights antagonists appear to fit within the span of acceptable government techniques.40

Although the draft nature of diaries allows researchers an entryway into understanding how a persona might be constructed, researchers must nevertheless be attentive to what Chiang consciously omitted or misrepresented in his diaries. If each generation of scholars had their biases regarding Chiang, the Achilles’ heel of the current generation of Chiang scholars with access to the diaries is to present an overly sympathetic interpretation of the leader.\footnote{In an article submitted for review in \textit{Comparative Studies in Society and History} entitled, ‘Deep Changes in Interpretive Currents?’ Chiang Kai-shek: A State of the Field Review,’ Jeremy Taylor and Grace Huang trace the biases in the scholarship on Chiang up to the release of Chiang’s diaries in 2003 in the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan, and global academia.}