

**Document 9.10: “The Rebellion in Xi’an,” a report in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, July 16, 1937**

The rebellion of the Chinese army at Xi’an in December of last year and the imprisonment of General Chiang Kai-shek, the head of the Nanjing Government<sup>1</sup>, are no longer new and no longer even a mystery. Yet the story of that fortnight is so curious that it has lost little of its interest, especially when retold by two of the principles concerned. General Chiang Kai-shek and his wife, Meiling Soong Chiang, have now published their own account of the Xi’an rebellion,<sup>2</sup> of which the first half consists of a straightforward account by Mme. Chiang and the second half of the Generalissimo’s own diary during that period. Neither, of course, is impartial; both, one may suspect, were written, or at least revised, after the event. But when one has allowed for this natural bias the book remains a document of absorbing interest and surprising honesty.

On December 4 General Chiang Kai-shek arrived at Xi’an, the headquarters of the army of Zhang Xueliang in the North-west of China, on a visit of inspection. He had long suspected that this army, which had been driven out of Manchuria by the Japanese, was not fulfilling its appointed task of suppressing the Communist armies in the North-western Provinces. Instead it had shown a strong inclination to co-operate with the Communists and their policy of a “united front” against Japan. Confident, however that his presence would alone be enough to bring the wayward commanders to heel, General Chiang only took with him a small personal bodyguard. And indeed, the first few days of his stay in Xi’an seemed to justify this confidence.

But on the night of December 11 the first symptoms of trouble became apparent. General Chiang had invited three of the highest commanders to dinner to discuss the situation, and the two of them did not come. The General went to bed in a state of some anxiety. At 5:30 the following morning, “when I was dressing after my exercise,” the General heard the sound of rifle shots outside his headquarters. He sent one of his

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<sup>1</sup> The Guomindang Nationalist government used Nanjing as their capital.

<sup>2</sup> Soong Meiling, *Xi’an: A Coup D’Etat* (Shanghai: The China Publishing Company) 119.

bodyguard to see what was happening, but the man did not return. He sent back two more, but they did not come back either. Instead there were more rifle shots and, “thereupon I felt the ‘Northeastern’ troops [the name of Zhang Xueliang’s army] had revolted.” This suspicion was soon confirmed, and at once the General decided to fly. Accompanied by two officers of his bodyguard he left the house by the back door and escaped on to the snow-covered mountain behind. At the time, General Chiang believed the mutiny was only local and that if he could cross the mountain all would be well.

Unfortunately, they had first to cross a ten-foot wall with a deep moat on the other side, and in doing so the General fell and strained his leg. For some minutes he could not even stand and could only walk with great difficulty and pain. They managed, however, to find some more of his bodyguard, who helped the General to reach the top of the mountain. There they waited, only to hear firing on all sides and to realize that they were surrounded. Some of the bodyguard were actually hit, and seeing that escape was useless General Chiang started to walk down the hillside again alone, but fell exhausted into a small space in the rocks and lay there. It was still dark and bitterly cold.

When daylight came the rebel troops began to search the mountain for the General.

I heard one of the mutinous soldiers above the cave saying, “Here is a man in civilian dress; probably he is the Generalissimo.” Another soldier said, “Let’s fire first.” Still another said, “Don’t do that.” I raised my voice and said, “I am the Generalissimo. Don’t be disrespectful. If you regard me as your prisoner, kill me, but don’t subject me to indignities.” The mutineers said, “We don’t dare.” They fired three shots into the air and shouted, “The Generalissimo is here!”

An officer came up and “knelt before me with tears in his eyes”; and at his request the General agreed to go down the mountain. The General does not mention the story of another eye-witness that in answer to his demand for a horse the officer said: “We have no horses, but I will carry you down on my back,” and that the Generalissimo of the Chinese army was forced to climb onto the shoulders of his captor.

At first the General, his courage stiffened by righteous wrath, refused to speak with the rebel commanders. There was a stormy scene with Zhang Xueliang who tried to explain what they wanted, but the General would not negotiate under the threat of force. (In fact, the rebels had chosen this way because the General had always refused to listen up to their proposals, but they were undoubtedly impressed by his resolution.) During the next fortnight many such interviews took place, sometimes as many as four a day, but the General (according to his diary) maintained his position. If they were rebels they could kill him. If not they must obey him as their superior officer. Some of these conversations make curious reading.

Zhang remained silent for a long time and then said: "You, the Generalissimo, certainly have a very high character, but there is one defect—namely, that your thought is out of date and too much inclined to the Right." I asked him what he meant by "out of date" and "inclined to the Right." He seemed unable to reply, but after awhile he said that the books I read were certainly out of date. "I don't know how many new books you have read," said I, "nor what you consider as modern. If you consider Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* or books on Communism modern, then you may ask me questions about them and I will discuss them with you in detail."

But the General refused to discuss the rebel's proposals for an agreement with the Communists against Japan.

As time went on it became clear that the attempt to persuade the General by force had failed. Either they must kill him or release him, and there were advocates for both courses. That the General was allowed to go free was partly due to the loyalty of Zhang Xueliang, whose strangely attractive personality stands out from the diary, but largely to the courage and skill of Mme. Chiang, who had managed to reach Xi'an with Mr. Donald, the General's Australian adviser, after persuading the hotheads (and the ambitious) in the Nanjing Government not to start a civil war. Aeroplanes had actually

been sent to bomb Xi'an, and only bad weather prevented their success and the certain death of the General.

Mme. Chiang arrived on December 22, and in his entry for that day the General wrote:

When I read the Old Testament this morning I happened to come across the saying that "Jehovah will now do a new thing, and that is, He will make a woman protect a man." When my wife arrived in the afternoon it seemed that the word of God was to be carried out.

Nevertheless his first words to her were: "Why have you come? You have walked into a tiger's lair." He was agitated and worn out by the strain of waiting, and to calm him Mme. Chiang opened the Psalms and read to him until he drifted off into a quiet sleep.

But although the General had made up his mind that he would be killed, the advice of the moderates won the day. When at last the rebel commanders told him he could go, the General lectured them, sitting on his bed, on the importance of national unity, while his wife took notes. On December 26 they left Xi'an by aeroplane, accompanied by Zhang Xueliang, who insisted on coming with them. And thus, in an atmosphere of comedy, ended the fortnight during which the destiny of China had hung in the balance.

Source: "The Rebellion in Xi'an," *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, July 16, 1937.