The closing days of 1936 were a fateful period for China, which had only just come out of the crisis of the Xi’an Incident. Within a few weeks of the incident, a limited cooperation began between the Nationalist government and the Communists. Paradoxically, this was possible only after Chiang Kai-shek was released from rebel captivity and had his dignity restored. Now he could take the steps proposed to him during his imprisonment by Zhang Xueliang.

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As the news of the rebellion that had taken place in the early morning spread throughout Xi’an, a tense quiet fell over the city. Martial law was proclaimed, businesses remained closed and there was a prevailing sense of insecurity. By the same afternoon, however, traffic began to move again in the city and the feeling was that order had been restored.

On this same eventful day, Zhang sent a telegram to Song Meiling (known outside of China as Soong Meiling or Madame Chiang), the wife of Chiang Kai-shek, explaining the motives behind his rebellion against his teacher and guide. Zhang made it clear that Chiang would remain in Xi’an on a temporary basis so that he could consider his overall policy. He promised that the plotters had no desire to harm or abuse him. ‘My conscience is clear’, Zhang wrote, ‘and I can show it in broad daylight. Madam, you may feel calm, and if you wish to come to Xi’an you are welcome to do so.’ Zhang also sent a message in a similar spirit to Dr Kong Xiangxi (also known as H. H. Kung), a member of the government and of the National Economic Council, who was serving as acting leader at the time.

Soong Meiling, Chiang Kai-shek’s third wife, was the daughter of one of the wealthiest and most influential families in China. Her sister was married to the father of the modern Chinese nation, Sun Yatsen. Soong
was renowned both for her alluring appearance and for her sharp intellect. She had been educated in the United States and, after returning to China, became a dominant figure wielding power and influence in China’s political arena. She was a worldly and charismatic woman and a formidable power in her own right. As the wife of the Chinese leader, Soong was considered someone who did not shy away from pulling the strings in her husband’s actions. *Time Magazine* would later dub her ‘the Dragon Lady’ – an epithet that accompanied her for the rest of her life. Soong shrewdly exploited her position as the prominent lady of the family and became intricately involved in political life, the army and at all levels of Chinese society. She soon emerged as the strongest and most dominant figure within the Chinese Nationalist camp.

It is impossible to describe and analyze the history of the Chinese Republic without a detailed examination of Soong Meiling’s personality, and it is impossible to appreciate the life and works of Chiang Kai-shek without considering his wife’s presence. Zhang Xueliang maintained a unique relationship with Soong throughout his life, as we shall see below.

A full discussion of the status of women in China is beyond the scope of the present work. It is important to note, however, that although Confucian tradition imposed an inferior status on women, who were subject first to their fathers and then, after marriage, to their husbands, in practical terms, and particularly in the twentieth century, women were among the leading figures and decision-makers in diverse sections of society.

The Dowager Empress Cixi, for example, who died in 1908, played a key role in Chinese history during the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the new century. Soong Meiling, the wife of Chiang Kai-shek, left her mark on Chinese national affairs over a period of more than half a century. Moreover, many of the radical transformations seen in the People’s Republic of China in the mainland may be attributed to the revolutionary zeal of Jiang Qing, the third wife of Mao Zedong. As one of the leaders of the Cultural Revolution, Jiang was instrumental in pushing its radical policies. And, one can argue that, paradoxically, in dialectical terms, following Mao’s death in 1976, the popular criticism of the radical policies detesting the notion of a market economy led years later to China’s entry into the ‘Open Door’ era and its policy that resulted in its flourishing entrepreneurship-oriented market economy.

Deng Yingchao, the wife of Zhou Enlai, China’s charismatic prime minister, was also among the grey eminence. In her youth, she joined