

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States provided immigrants from troubled nations around the world with safe havens for revolutionary movements aimed at their homelands. Clan Na Gael, an organization seeking Irish independence from Great Britain, began in Philadelphia in 1870 and retained its base in the US. The Cuban Revolutionary Party, aiming at the island's independence from Spain, was founded in 1892 among Cuban expatriates living in Florida. A bit later, in 1913, the Ghadar Party was established on the West Coast among Punjabi Indians in a bid for Indian independence from Britain. The career of renowned



On January 1, 1912, Sun Yat-sen proclaimed the establishment of the Republic of China. Source: <http://tinyurl.com/3vaq8pc>.

AMERICAN Influences on Sun Yat-sen

By David B. Gordon

Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) followed this same general pattern. In the course of his life, he converted to Christianity under American auspices, organized a revolutionary movement among ethnic Chinese in American-influenced Hawai'i, canvassed American Chinatowns for funds for his movement, and absorbed elements of the American political model into his famed Three People's Principles. Along with Great Britain and Japan, the US helped shape Sun Yat-sen's sense of what being modern meant and of how China could reshape itself as a major modern power.

Sun Yat-sen has come to be known among many Chinese as “the father of modern China” for the roles he played in overthrowing China's last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1912), and subsequently leading the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, founded in 1912) while allying it with the then-fledgling Chinese Communist Party (founded in 1921). Today, the governments of the Republic of China on Taiwan and of the Communist-led People's Republic of China on the Chinese mainland regard Sun's ideas as a resource for a possible future reunification of China—leading Sun to serve once again as a bridge between contrary forces. During his lifetime, Sun operated within an exceedingly complex environment that featured ever-widening contacts between China and the larger world. To highlight the American component of his twists and turns, I will divide his life into three major periods, corresponding to his youth (1866–1894), his revolutionary activities (1895–1911), and his efforts to complete the revolution he helped begin (1912–1925).

1866–1894: Hawai'i and Christianity

In the world in which Sun Yat-sen was born, China had already fought and lost two Opium Wars (1839–42, 1856–60) with Great Britain, leading to “unequal treaties” that gave Westerners privileges in designated treaty ports along China's Pacific coast. During the same period, a southern Chinese insurgent had led the Christian-influenced, virtually nationwide Taiping Rebellion against the Manchu-led Qing dynasty, an effort that the government finally quashed in 1864. Clearly, the West and its ideas were already leaving their mark on China.

Sun Yat-sen was born in the village of Cuiheng in the Pearl River Delta, a region with a lengthy history of connections with foreign countries. Indeed, his own elder brother, Sun Mei, immigrated to the Hawai'iian islands in 1871, gradually building up his wealth to the point where he could open a store and, eventually, manage a rice plantation on the island of Mau'i. The young Sun eagerly read Sun Mei's letters describing Hawai'i—then independent but increasingly shaped by Americans—as a prosperous land with a liberal government. Following Sun Mei's triumphant visit to Cuiheng in 1879, Sun followed him back to Hawai'i and spent the core of his teen years there.

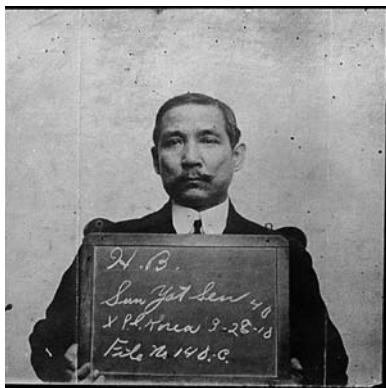
Educationally, this became Sun's second start. His first start had been at Cuiheng's elementary school with its emphasis on memorization of the Confucian classics. Now, he boarded at Iolani School, which was run by British Anglicans and featured a strong component of prayer services and Bible study.

Sun steadily absorbed the school's message that identified Christianity with progress. Following his graduation from Iolani in 1882, he proceeded to Oahu College, a school with a reputation as the watering hole for the islands' most ambitious youth. (Interestingly, American President Barack Obama attended this school, renamed Punahou, in the 1970s.) Oahu College was controlled by American Congregationalists who deepened Sun's interest in Christianity while spurring his curiosity about political science and medicine. Sun Mei, disapproving of Christianity, sent his brother back to Cuiheng the following year.

While it is difficult to separate the British and American influences in Sun's teenage education, it is clear that he emerged with an attraction to Christianity, a respect for republican government, and an appreciation for entrepreneurial self-strengthening. In short, he was smitten with the Anglo-American West as Hawai'i's upper crust had packaged it.

Not long after Sun returned to Cuiheng, his new value system emerged. He and a childhood friend damaged several religious icons in the village, leading the village to expel them temporarily. Sun responded by moving to nearby Hong Kong, then a British colony, and continuing his education there. Before long, he formally converted to Christianity at the hands of Dr. Charles Hager, a young American Congregationalist missionary who subsequently had Sun accompany him on an evangelizing tour. Historian Paul A. Cohen has pointed out that Christianity in nineteenth-century China functioned somewhat like a secret society—viewed by the government as heterodox, it became a semi-underground support network for its members.¹ This is certainly how Sun saw it. While his commitment to Christian doctrine and ritual would vary in later years, he consistently turned to Chinese Christians—like himself, marginal figures in Chinese society—whenever he needed immediate assistance.

Following a traditional Chinese arranged marriage and further activity in the Pearl River Delta and Hawai'i, in 1887 Sun entered the College of Medicine for Chinese, a Hong Kong institution established by the London Missionary Society. The next several years were dominated by British Protestant contacts. After graduating from this college with distinction in 1892, he sought to establish himself as a doctor successively in Hong Kong, Macao, and Guangzhou (Canton). While in Guangzhou, he decided to appeal to one of the most powerful figures in the Qing government, Viceroy Li Hongzhang. He wrote a lengthy letter seeking Li's support for his reformist plans for China and traveled north with a friend in hopes of obtaining a personal interview with Li. On their way toward Li's office in Tianjin, Sun and his friend stopped in Shanghai, where Sun attended church services and became acquainted with Charlie Soong, a Chinese Christian comprador who had spent his teenage years in the American South. As Sun would later marry one of Charlie's daughters, and his successor Chiang Kai-shek would marry another, the importance of this link is difficult to overstate. As to Sun's travels northward, his attempt to meet Li was rebuffed, leading him to embrace a revolutionary path as his solution to China's deteriorating circumstances.



National Archives immigration photo of Sun Yatsen, dated March 28, 1910. Source: <http://tiny.cc/pdydh>.

By 1904, his followers controlled community newspapers both in Honolulu and San Francisco. In that same year, Sun published an English-language pamphlet in New York City titled “The True Solution of the Chinese Problem.”

At this juncture, America’s influence on Sun was multiform, consisting of such elements as the example of Hawai`i, the teachings of Christianity, and the accumulation of friends with American connections. This influence would continue and even deepen during the next phase of Sun’s life.

1895–1911: Organizing in American Chinatowns

In 1894–95, the Qing dynasty unsuccessfully prosecuted a war with Japan over influence in Korea. As the war began, Sun traveled to Hawai`i—now an American-led republic—and founded an organization called the Revive China Society. This organization began with roughly twenty young men, many of whom Sun Mei had recruited. Members swore on a Bible to accept the organization’s message and rules and paid a five-dollar membership fee. While most Chinese in Hawai`i and elsewhere opposed a revolution against the Qing dynasty, the Revive China Society enabled those who supported one to pool their money to help fund a Guangzhou-centered rebellion against the regime. When additional branches were formed—two more in Hawai`i and one in Hong Kong—the organization became an effectual bank for a major uprising planned for October 1895. Unfortunately for Sun, plans for the uprising leaked, enabling the government to crush it and execute several of its leaders. Sun himself escaped to Japan, commencing what would become his sixteen-year exile from China.

Sun Yatsen’s next destinations were American. First, he returned to Hawai`i, which had become his family’s long-term home now that China was too dangerous for them. Next, he sailed on to the mainland United States, disembarking in San Francisco. Sun tried to recruit supporters in the city’s Chinatown; however, he was almost entirely unsuccessful among the ethnic Chinese he met there or, for that matter, in cities he visited subsequently as he crossed the country by rail. Regardless, Sun’s practice of visiting American Chinatowns to hawk his plans for revolution became a regular part of his *modus operandi* in the years to come, endowing him over time with an aura of experience in revolutionary agitation that would impress later converts to the cause.

The final years of the nineteenth century brought massive change to both China and Sun Yatsen. Japan’s defeat of China in the first Sino-Japanese War was followed by Western nations demanding coastal spheres of influence approaching the status of colonies. Dissatisfaction with these arrangements helped prompt the 1900 Boxer catastrophe that convinced the Qing government that it needed to modernize China’s governmental structure, educational system, and military. While the government was entering a defensive crouch, Sun, abroad, was beginning to take the offensive. In 1896, Qing authorities had kidnapped him in London, reluctantly releasing him after considerable negative publicity. The kidnapping greatly heightened Sun’s profile among Chinese around the world. In effect, it made him famous—while the Qing government’s botched handling of the Boxer episode four years later made many Chinese more receptive to anti-government views. In this transformed context, Sun felt encouraged to seek out every possibility of assistance, including a number that appeared in the US.

Sun visited the US several times in the first decade of the twentieth century, giving special attention to the large ethnic Chinese communities in Hawai`i

and along the Pacific coast. By 1904, his followers controlled community newspapers both in Honolulu and San Francisco. In that same year, Sun published an English-language pamphlet in New York City titled “The True Solution of the Chinese Problem.” Intended for a general American audience, it presented Sun’s case against the Manchus and asserted that with trade between the US and a China under new leadership, “the yellow peril may after all be changed into the yellow blessing.” Typical of Sun’s skill in honing his appeals, he concluded with the wish that Chinese might find “many Lafayettes” among Americans.²

In the following year, Sun and a large coterie of young Chinese met in Tokyo to establish the Revolutionary Alliance (Tongmenghui), an umbrella organization seeking the overthrow of the Qing dynasty. Henceforth, revolutionaries and reformists competed fiercely for influence in overseas Chinese communities the world over, including in the US. Sun played other angles as well. For example, late in the decade, Sun began to plot with Homer Lea, a noted American author and adventurer who had previously helped organize pro-reformist militias on the West Coast. Lea proposed to have well-connected retired banker Charles Boothe raise ten million dollars for weapons to be shipped into south China for an uprising. While the plot never materialized, Sun’s relationship with Lea typifies the links he would form with shadowy figures in the US and elsewhere. They kept him supplied with options during a period when his uncompromisingly anti-Qing stance led a growing number of countries in East and Southeast Asia to expel him from their borders.

On October 10, 1911, the revolution that Sun Yatsen had continually sought began among the Qing dynasty’s own soldiers in the city of Wuchang along the Yangzi River. Although the revolutionaries acted independently of the Alliance, they had made contact with it, and Sun’s deputy sent him an urgent telegraph message requesting financial support for their plans. Sun, however, did not read the message until October 11, a day after the Wuchang Uprising commenced. He was in Denver, Colorado, at the time, having spent much of the year crisscrossing the US in search of support from ethnic Chinese. The next day, Sun boarded a train for Kansas City and read in the morning newspaper that the revolt was already underway. Moreover, as he continued to travel by rail toward Chicago, he passed through St. Louis on October 14, where he read in the paper that if the emerging revolution succeeded, there were plans to have him serve as the republic’s new president! His long-cherished dream of seeing the Qing dynasty collapse was coming true—and instead of leading the revolution in person, he was on the road in America, as he often was.

1912–1925: America as Model and Obstacle

As developments in China proceeded rapidly, Sun traveled to Washington, DC, London, and Paris, in hope of obtaining support for the new Chinese government that was taking shape. Instead, he received merely promises of neutrality—and not even so much as a meeting with America’s secretary of state. Nevertheless, he returned to China at the end of the year, taking the position of provisional president of the Republic of China on January 1, 1912. Soon after assuming office, Sun struck a deal with Yuan Shikai, the strongman who had amassed the most military power during the fighting that followed the Wuchang Uprising. According to the deal, Yuan would become president after the emperor abdicated, Yuan declared his support for a republic, Sun resigned, and a newly formed parliament elected him. After these events took place, Yuan indeed became president, and he appointed Sun to be his director of railways. Sun, enthusiastic as ever, drew up plans for a comprehensive rail system for China that took the American system that he was so familiar with as a primary

model. Although these plans were not implemented at the time, they testify to Sun's near-obsession with mobility in all its forms.

Yuan proceeded to become a dictator, and Sun opposed him. When Yuan tried to have himself crowned as emperor of a new dynasty, others opposed him as well and forced him to abandon his plan. For a time, however, it was dangerous to live in China as an open critic of Yuan, leading Sun, along with comprador Charlie Soong and his family, to escape to Japan. Soong's daughters had received their college education at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia, rendering them the first Chinese women to attend college in the US. One daughter, Soong Qingling, was particularly excited by the republican revolution when she received news of it at Wesleyan and was eager to meet Sun in Japan after she graduated. Qingling soon became Sun's secretary and then his fiancée. They married in 1915 (over Charlie's vehement objections), and Qingling henceforth became a major advisor for Sun politically. Qingling drew fascinated attention from Chinese at the time because she was often the only woman present at her husband's political meetings. Sun's public reliance on Qingling thus displayed his acceptance of controversial ideas of gender parity that some Americans strongly held.

Yuan Shikai died in 1916, discredited by his power grab. The next leader—to the extent that China had a leader at all during the chaotic period it now entered—was Duan Qirui, an erstwhile follower of Yuan's. When the US entered World War I in 1917 on the Allied side, Duan joined it. Sun Yatsen loudly objected. For him, the main Chinese interest in the war was in restraining the power of Great Britain, which had backed Yuan Shikai. This—along with Sun's apparent receptivity to German offers of assistance—put Sun at loggerheads with the US. When Sun established his own independent state in the far south of China, the US, along with other nations, refused to recognize it, and the American government refused to acknowledge Sun's political ambitions from this point forward. Despite this, Sun increased his appeals to the US in subsequent years.

When Sun's first state ended in failure in 1918, he moved to Shanghai and turned to writing. In 1920, he established a second state, again based in Guangzhou, that lasted until 1922. This state, too, became mired in the warlord politics of its region and had little effect on China as a whole. In 1923, however, he established a third state in the same area—and this time he had substantial Russian assistance backing him up. Russians previously had their Communist revolution in 1917 and sought to ally the tiny Chinese Communist Party with Sun's Nationalist Party. Essentially, each side aimed to use the other. From the standpoint of the United States government, however, Sun was too close to—and indeed was a part of—a potentially global Red menace. His sharpened anti-colonialist rhetoric, too, gave powerful Americans a negative impression. While Sun may have wanted assistance from various directions, including the US, his embrace of the Soviets limited his options in that regard.

In 1924, Sun gave a series of lectures at the Huangpu (Whampoa) Military Academy on his famous Three People's Principles that summarized his sense of where China stood and what it needed to do. Sun explained these principles—nationalism, democracy, and people's livelihood—in some depth. In earlier statements, he had already compared the principles to Abraham Lincoln's famous reference to government of the people, by the people, and for the people.³ Now, he drew on American ideas in some of the specifics he presented with regard to democracy and people's livelihood, respectively.

Sun expressed concern that Western-style democracy sometimes encouraged an attitude of reflexive “opposition to government.”⁴ Despite this, he saw the need to maintain checks on government officials, and to this end, he recommended elections, initiatives, referenda, and recalls—all mechanisms that he claimed were used in some states in the northwestern US. Sun also held that dividing government into branches helped the government maintain checks on itself. He appreciated the American division of government into legislative, executive, and judicial branches and recommended that China adopt this as well. He amended the system, however, by adding two additional

branches from imperial China: examinational (i.e., civil service) and censorial (i.e., impeachment). In short, while Sun did not seek to precisely replicate the American governmental structure in China, he was very willing to incorporate aspects of it into his vision for China's future.

It was in his views on people's livelihood that Sun displayed most fully the influence of the US. Specifically, he advocated the “single tax” proposal that nineteenth-century American progressive Henry George had set forth. George was especially worried about skyrocketing land prices in the American West, leading him to argue that the government should collect the entire price increase on unimproved land as tax. This, he held, could solve the problem of unreasonable land price increases even as it would remove the need for other taxes. Coastal China had been rocked by rampant land speculation similar to that of the western US, prompting Sun to argue enthusiastically for George's proposal. Sun did revise the proposal in a more moderate direction; nevertheless, his attraction to George's ideas was clear through his lengthy and admiring exposition of them.⁵

Conclusion

Sun Yatsen died in 1925, the year after he provided his definitive exposition of his Three People's Principles. The impact that the US had on him is evident: He saw in America a model of success that was achieved through vigor and tempered with restraint. Americans did not always reciprocate. For example, after Sun died, *The New York Times* editorialized that “reunification [of China] may be hastened by the disappearance of his militant personality.”⁶ Nevertheless, it is clear that without America's example, Sun would have lacked a model for his future China that would celebrate the power of opportunity—individual and national—over the weight of monarchical tradition. ■

NOTES

1. See Paul A. Cohen, “Christian Missions and Their Impact to 1900,” in *The Cambridge History of China* 10, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 545–46.
2. The pamphlet's contents appear in the English original in Zhongguo Guomindang dangshi weiyuanhui (The Chinese Nationalist Party Committee of Party History), *Guofu quanji* (*Complete Works of the Father of the Nation*), 5 (Taipei: Zhongyang wenwu gongyingshe, 1974), 111–21. My quotes appear on pages 119 and 121.
3. See the discussion of this in Sidney H. Chang and Leonard H.D. Gordon, *All Under Heaven: Sun Yat-sen and His Revolutionary Thought* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1991), 110–11.
4. Dr. Sun Yat-sen, *San Min Chu I: The Three Principles of the People* (Taipei: Government Information Office, 1990), 114.
5. For an overview on the subject of Henry George's influence on Sun Yatsen, see Herbert H. Rosenthal, “Sun Yat-sen and Henry George: A Reassessment,” *Meiguo yanjiu* (*American Studies* 13), no. 3 (1983): 10–13.
6. Editorial, *The New York Times*, March 13, 1925.

RESOURCES

Several biographies of Sun Yatsen proved especially helpful for considering the issue of American influence on his ideas and actions. Harold Z. Schiffrin's *Sun Yat-sen and the Origins of the Chinese Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970) and *Sun Yat-sen: Reluctant Revolutionary* (Boston: Little Brown, 1980) are both classics, with the former providing detailed coverage of Sun's early revolutionary career. My description of Sun learning about the Wuchang Uprising relies on C. Martin Wilbur's *Sun Yat-sen: Frustrated Patriot* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), chapter three. A somewhat more recent biography, and one that particularly emphasizes Sun's marginality and his national and international context, is Marie-Claire Bergère's *Sun Yat-sen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

DAVID B. GORDON is Professor of Asian History at Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. His *Sun Yatsen: Seeking a Newer China* was published by Pearson Prentice Hall in 2010 as part of its *Library of World Biography* series. He is currently conducting research to compare Sun with two other nationalists of the same era, Theodor Herzl (Israel) and José Martí (Cuba).