

Sun Yat-sen in Hong Kong: The Western Impact*

John D. Young†

* An earlier draft of his paper has been superseded by this revised summary because of the author's recent discovery of other source-materials and the knowledge of a new book on Sun Yat-sen written by H. Schiffrin. The author is now preparing a more up-to-date paper on the same subject based on this summary.

† The author is Staff-Tutor in Chinese Studies, Department of Extra-Mural Studies, University of Hong Kong; Honorary Lecturer, Department of History; and Centre Fellow, Centre of Asian Studies.

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Sun Yat-sen in Hong Kong: The Western Impact (a summary)

Of all the major Chinese leaders in Modern Chinese History, Sun Yat-sen stands out as the one most closely identified with foreigners. His ability to make friends with Japanese, Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Americans is striking even by today's standards. In the heyday of imperialism and colonialism, it is truly remarkable that Sun's foreign friends were all at his disposal, ready to help him in his revolutionary cause. Indeed, there is a strain of internationalism and cosmopolitanism both in his mind and behaviour.

Sun Yat-sen's "Ta-tung" spirit, however, has been generally mis-interpreted by Western as well as Chinese historians. At times he has been charged with opportunism, that he would befriend anyone for his own cause. A more serious charge is that he lacked a good understanding of the real intentions of the West; his bourgeois background affected his "ruthlessness" in searching for personal glory. All these explanations, however, ignore to investigate the rather unique character of Sun's educational upbringing.

In fact, Sun never really wanted to join any reformist groups, as suggested by Professor Schiffrin. Sun had always been a "loner" in his search for the salvation of China. One clear example is his lack of having a permanent relationship with one of his mentors, Sir Ho Kai (1859-1914). Sun's single-mindedness in searching for solutions to China's ills comes basically from his own personality, and even more important, his education in Hong Kong at the College of Medicine for Chinese, Hong Kong.

As a child, we are told that Sun was constantly in and out of troubles. His nickname at his native village was "Little foreign devil" (hsiao yang-kuei-tzu), which reflects Sun's curiosity about the outside world. He was also a person with certain public inclinations, always hoping to reform others. According to Professor Jen Yu-wen's research, Sun was once beaten unconscious when he tried to persuade a gambler from his bad habit. Even more interesting is Sun's iconoclastic behaviour. Twice he damaged the statues of gods in village temples, and his parents had to pay a heavy sum to appease villages as well as gentry members. Sun was not exactly a popular boy in his native home.

Rather than glorifying Sun's youth, these stories actually reflect the rebellious tendency of Sun's peasant origin; thus they should be accepted as bona fide anecdotes. The significance of these tales lies in their suggestiveness of Sun's open-mindedness and individual character, and his hostile attitude towards the Chinese tradition. Perhaps these early signs genuinely prepared his easiness in accepting Western ideas and teachings when he left China as a little boy of thirteen. Because of the lack of source-materials, we know very little about Sun's sojourn in Hawaii, except that his penchant for Christianity alarmed his brother, who sent him back to China in 1883. But once again a rebellious act at a village temple forced him to Hong Kong, where he was baptized later in the year.

Therefore, Hong Kong did not only become his haven for accepting the Western faith, but the place where he spent the most five important years of his life. From 1887-1892, under the guidance of Sir James Cantlie and other prominent scientists, Sun studied a wide variety of science subjects. We know that Sun was a most dedicated student, and in fact finished first of his class. We also know that he was exposed to other learning. In 1923, he told a group of University of Hong Kong students that he got most of his revolutionary ideas from Hong Kong. An often repeated, but also mis-understood episode. What exactly did Sun mean by "revolutionary ideas"? How was he affected by the Hong Kong environment? What other knowledge was he exposed to other than those from the medical texts?

Sun's open announcement of his intellectual debt to Hong Kong in 1923 was actually his second time. In 1884, Sun said in plain language in his petition to Li Hung-chang that he received his scientific training in Hong Kong.

Sun's "Shang Li Hung-chang Shu" is one of the most important documents in understanding Sun's early thoughts, and especially the influence of Hong Kong on his formative mind. Unfortunately, this piece of document is seldom understood in terms of the context from which it was written: the Hong Kong setting. What Sun meant by revolutionary ideas was actually a composite of Darwinism, Republicanism, progress, individualism, institutional changes and nationalism. His ideas were hazy, and perhaps even unclear, but perhaps by the standards of late nineteenth-century China, they were rather revolutionary.

In this petition which Li Hung-chang never saw, Sun had basically four major themes. The one he listed first hitherto has never been noticed properly by historians, who only pick out his suggestions on professionalism. It is true that Sun's jen-ts'ai (men of talents) were not the same as the traditional Confucian ideal. Sun was calling for institutionalization of specialized posts in every segment of society. Even more significant, however, is Sun's emphasis on the individual's responsibility to respect his own task, no matter how small. Sun's emphasis on the individual's worth is most likely borrowed from Christian and Darwinian ideas; it is also rather unprecedented at the time.

The individual is useful because of his specialized knowledge, but he should also be given power when necessary. Sun used the example of the floods of rivers in Kwangtung caused by reckless deforestation, and called for the establishment of an agricultural officer with actual power to attack the problem scientifically and from the perspective of law. All individuals should contribute to the welfare of the state.

Sun also proposed the mechanization of agriculture and the general modernization of China, such as in weaponry and other technologies. This has been discussed in length by other scholars. A point not emphasized is Sun's proposal that business and commerce are vital in China's search for nationhood. Clearly this is a influence of Hong Kong's when Sun argued for the creation of insurance and embassies to protect China's business interests. Here Sun's iconoclastic tendency is vividly demonstrated. For the sake of national salvation, even anti-Confucian plans must be given top priority.

Young Sun Yat-sen is truly remarkable student of Western affairs. Western matter (Hsi-wu) would not help China if there were no institutional changes-- and most important, these changes must be accompanied by the change of individual worth in society. Such was Sun's revolutionary ideas in the period before he decided on the road to military revolutionary activities. But the main tenets of these early thoughts remained with him throughout his life. Hong Kong was the genesis of Sun Yat-sen's Western impact.