

# Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925): Physician revolutionist

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Throughout history, physicians such as Paul Marat, Frantz Fanon and Ernesto Guevara are known to have mixed medicine with politics, transcending their profession to work for greater causes in society. Sun Yat-sen, venerated as one of the great leaders of China, was such a medic whose short career in medicine yielded to his dedication toward reforming societal ills during the latter part of the Manchu (Qing) dynasty.

**SEEDS OF CHANGE** Sun Yat-sen, the son of poor peasant farmers, was born on November 12, 1866 in a village near Canton. His humble beginnings included four years of village schooling. His elder brother, Sun Mei, a successful farmer and shopkeeper in Hawaii, sent for him when he was 13 to continue his education at Iolani, a prestigious missionary school. Western culture and Christianity so impressed the young Chinese student that his elder brother decided it best for him to return to China. However, this did not diminish his religious zeal. In 1884, Sun was banished to Hong Kong from his hometown of Cuiheng for vandalising the village temple. He had deliberately broken off an arm of one of the statues to prove that they were not living beings. In Hong Kong, he attended Queen's College, where he met Charles Hager, an American Congregationalist, who baptised him and took him along on several missionary trips, including one that returned him to his hometown of Cuiheng. On one of these trips, Sun married Lu Muzhen in a ceremony arranged by their families.

Outraged by Sun Yat-sen's conversion to Christianity, Sun Mei once again sent for his brother, but he did not stay long after he successfully raised enough funds through his acquaintances in the Congregationalist churches of Hawaii to return to Hong Kong. However, his diploma from Queen's College was delayed for several months because of his travels, but his benefactor, Charles Hager, was nonetheless able to get him into the Medical School of the Canton Hospital. Sun Yat-sen had wanted to become a preacher, but no satisfactory theological seminary existed in Hong Kong or Canton. Some have suggested that as a young altruist, Sun desired to help abolish the suffering in China and

since ministry was not an option, medicine was his next best choice. Others believed he became a physician as a cover for his increasingly revolutionary activities.

Dr John Kerr, an American medical missionary, directed the medical school in Canton and became a surgical role model for Sun. After one year in Canton, Sun left to attend the College of Medicine for the Chinese in Hong Kong, and there, became a favourite student of the college dean, Dr James Cantlie, who would later play a pivotal role in Sun Yat-sen's political life. Graduating in 1892, Sun opened a surgical practice in Macao, where he was said to have performed operations with *"skill, coolness of judgement and dexterity"*. Within a year of practice, a new law

that required all surgeons to have a Portuguese diploma meant that he would be relegated to practising only herbal medicine. This was a turning point in his life. After a brief interlude in Canton, Sun started down the path that would turn him into a revolutionary leader and hero of China.

**THE REVOLUTIONIST** Although Sun's family initially disapproved of his Western ideas and his conversion to Christianity, they eventually supported him in his political endeavours. Sun Mei became a successful propagandist in the Chinese community of

Hawaii, and also took care of his brother's filial responsibilities, moving his wife, children and their widowed mother to Maui.

In early childhood, Sun Yat-sen had learnt about the Taiping Rebellion, which cost 20–30 million lives, and he found inspiration in the rebels who were considered revolutionary heroes in their failed attempts to overthrow the Manchu-led Qing forces. The working class, especially in southern China, generally regarded the Manchus as corrupt, divisive and incompetent. Amidst the economic chaos, Western forces exploited the Chinese people, as exemplified by the first Opium War in 1842. Sun's initial foray into politics involved forming a secret society in Honolulu, named the Revive China Society. The following year, he established members of this society in Hong Kong and attempted to take over the office of the Guangdong provincial government in Guangzhou. He would continue to stage uprisings, which met with meagre success but did slowly weaken the rule



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of the Qing lords. At one point, he fled to London to escape those who were bent on curtailing his revolutionary plans. There, embassy officials kidnapped him, but he was fortunately able to convince a young English servant to send a note to his former dean, Dr James Cantlie, whose powerful friends in the community managed to mount a campaign to successfully free him.

Sun Yat-sen eventually moved to Japan, formed the China Revolutionary League and continued his activities from that country. For brief periods in his struggle, he successfully led areas of southern China, and in 1911, was elected the Provisional President of the Republic of China, after the overthrow of the Manchus and 17 provinces declared their independence from Qing dynastic rule. However, his ultimate goal of unifying all of China under one command eluded him. In 1918, after another failed attempt at unification, he left for Shanghai where he took to the pen to stir his countrymen to revolt. He remarried, this time to Soong Ching Ling, a graduate from Wesleyan College in the United States and his English secretary in Japan. They lived together in Shanghai, where Sun plotted his attempts to free China from its various warlords and to unify the country. In his free time, he enjoyed his gardens, listened to radio music and played weiqi ("Go").

Sun's writings included *The Doctrine of Sun Yat-sen*, *A Plan for Economic Construction*, *The Rudiments of Democracy*, and *The International Development of China*. One of his best-known works dealt with *The Three Principles of the People*, which embraced the notions of *Min Tsu* (People's Race or Tribe), *Min Ch'uan* (People's Rights) and *Min Sheng* (People's Livelihood). These principles are roughly translated to mean Nationalism, Democracy and Livelihood. Aware that these basic principles could not be established overnight, he hoped to lay the foundation by implementing a three-stage process: unified leadership would initially be under a military dictatorship, then one-party rule under the Kuomintang, and finally a liberal Western-style democracy.

**JUSTICE, FREEDOM AND UNITY** Sun Yat-sen understood and valued justice, and was possessed of a fighting spirit even as a young boy. The story is told that while playing with a friend one day, Sun heard a bean curd street peddler shouting out loudly to the public. When they peeked through a bamboo divide to see what the commotion was about, the peddler threw hot oil at them, injuring his friend. Sun responded by throwing a stone at the peddler, breaking his earthenware pan and ending his business for the day.

In 1924, Sun travelled to northern China to negotiate with warlords. It was to be his last but futile voyage. When he finally arrived in Beijing on December 31st, a northern warlord by the name of Duan Qirui had already formed a provisional government. Sun struggled throughout the trip with ill health due to terminal cancer of the liver, and courageously lived the painful last months in a private house in Beijing. The English nurse who cared for him in the hospital said that he was the most selfless patient she had ever nursed. Sun Yat-sen died on March 12, 1925, his last words being, "*Peace . . . struggle . . . save China.*" Although he did not succeed in unifying all of China during his lifetime, Sun Yat-sen paved the way for those who would follow him.

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