

## *Sun Yat-sen and Christianity*

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**S**un Yat-sen, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of whose Qing Dynasty toppling Wuchang uprising we commemorate this year, seems to have made a sincere conversion to Christianity in 1884, when he was baptized a Christian in Hong Kong by Dr. Charles Hager, an American Congregationalist missionary. But the path to his conversion was not easy.

Sun Yat-sen was born on November 12, 1866 in the poor Xiang Shan (Guangdong) village of Cuiheng in the Pearl River Delta. Because economic prospects were bleak, many poor peasants from this area emigrated abroad to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Sun's father, who tried to make a living as a farmer, a small trader, and even a tailor, allowed his eldest son, Sun Mei, to go to Hawaii to join an uncle, who was in business there. Sun Mei turned out to be quite successful in business, and he was soon sending remittances back home to support the family. In 1878, Sun Mei returned to his home village to get married, and his 12 year old younger brother, Sun Wen (Yat-sen was an honorific name given later), asked his father if he could accompany Sun Mei back to Hawaii. However, he had to wait until the following year, when his mother took him to Hawaii to live with his brother.<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1880's Sun Mei sent his brother to Iolani School, which was under the supervision of British Anglicans, and directed

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Z. Schiffrin, *Sun Yat-Sen And the Origins of the Chinese Revolution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), pp. 10-11. Most of the material for this article is taken from this book, hereafter referred to as *Origins*, and a companion volume: Harold Z. Schiffrin, *Sun Yat-sen, Reluctant Revolutionary* (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), hereafter referred to as *Reluctant*. In both books Schiffrin uses the Wade Giles system of romanization for the names of persons and places.

by an Anglican prelate called Bishop Willis. The language of instruction was English. Although Bishop Willis emphasized that no one was forced to accept Christianity, the students were required to attend chapel on Sunday. At Iolani School, young Sun Wen first came in contact with Christianity, and it made a deep impression on him. Schriffin writes that Christianity was to have a great influence on Sun's whole future political life.<sup>2</sup> Later, Sun Wen transferred to Oahu College (Punahou School), run by the American Congregationalists, and at this school, his attraction to Christianity became even stronger. In 1883, when Sun Mei discovered his brother's strong interest in Christianity, he bought him a one-way ticket back to Cuiheng, and sent him back home.<sup>3</sup> The older brother felt that overseas Chinese students should retain their traditional Chinese religion, and not embrace a Western religion.

However, the quiet life of the countryside could not long hold young Sun Wen, and he went to Hong Kong to further his education. He studied first at an Anglican school, the Diocesan Home, and later in 1884, at the Government Central School. It was in that year that young Sun met Dr. Hager, who baptized him and a friend from his home village, Lu Hao-tung. At that time also, two Chinese pastors, Ch'u Feng-ch'ih and Wang Yu-Ch'u, befriended him. It was Pastor Ch'u who gave him the name, Yat-sen, or Yixian, in Mandarin.<sup>4</sup>

In 1885, Sun Wen made another visit to Hawaii, where he gradually became reconciled with his elder brother over the matter of his conversion to Christianity. In 1886, back in Hong Kong, and uncertain about what profession he should take up, his American missionary friend, Dr. Hager introduced him as a student to the Canton Hospital Medical School, which was run by another American missionary, Dr. John Kerr. There Sun met a Hakka Christian student by the name of Cheng Shih-liang, who became his good friend, and later a fellow conspirator against the hated Manchu regime.

After spending one year in Canton, in 1887, Sun Wen transferred to the newly opened College of Medicine for Chinese in Hong Kong. The five years he spent at this institution were an eye-

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<sup>2</sup> *Origins*, op.cit., p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

opener for young Sun. He was there from his 21<sup>st</sup> year of age to his 26th. He expanded not only his intellectual knowledge, but also the number of his personal acquaintances, who would later become ardent sympathizers and followers in his future revolutionary endeavors.

Another friend from this period was a Cantonese Christian by the name of Ch'en Shao-pai. He had studied at the Canton Christian College, which later became known as Lingnan College. This school produced many sympathizers with the revolutionary cause. Ch'en would later serve as Sun's chief lieutenant for many years.<sup>5</sup>

Thus it was Christian pastors and friends in Hawaii and Hong Kong who supported Sun financially throughout his whole life. Frequently they were the only ones to do so. When other avenues were closed, Sun's Christian friends came through with the financial and spiritual support he needed.

### **The 1895 Canton Plot**

In 1895, Sun Yat-sen and his fellow conspirators considered that Canton was a suitable place to stage an uprising against the despised Manchu regime. The date set for the uprising was October 26, 1895. The plan called for assembling 3,000 Triad members from Hong Kong and Kowloon, and transporting them by ferry to Canton. Arms and ammunition were to be stored in barrels labeled "cement." Upon arrival in Canton, the force was to divide up into four groups to attack the governor-general's office and the headquarters of the military commandant. An additional force was to be recruited from among Triads in the interior of China.<sup>6</sup>

Christians also were involved in the plot. A devout Christian, Tso Tou-shan, ran a religious bookstore in the city. The rear premises of the bookstore contained a Presbyterian chapel, at which Pastor Wang Chih-fu held worship services. Both Tso and Wang were friends of Sun Yat-sen. In fact, the "cement" casks containing the ammunition for the plot were shipped to Pastor Wang in care of the bookshop.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-22.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 61-2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp.66-7.

However, the Manchu authorities came to know about the plot, and were waiting for the ship with a force of a least 1,500 heavily armed troops to arrive on the morning of October 28. The plot had to be aborted. Sun Yat-sen hid at first in the home of another Protestant Pastor, Wang Yu-ch'u, and then escaped to Macao. Sun's boyhood friend, Lu Hao-tung, was not so lucky. He could have escaped too, but he returned to the bookstore to retrieve the revolutionary party's membership list to prevent it from falling into the hands of the authorities. There the police captured him. After undergoing interrogation, Lu was executed. The American consul in Canton, who intervened at first on behalf of Lu Hao-tung, was successful later in securing the release of the bookstore owner, the Protestant Christian Tso Tou-shan. Warned in time by a foreign missionary, Pastor Wang Chih-fu, who conducted services in the chapel at the rear of bookstore, was also able to escape. The involvement of so many Christians in the abortive plot alarmed the authorities because it reminded them of Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping Rebellion, which had taken place a short 30 to 40 years previously (1850-1864)<sup>8</sup>

### **The Kidnap of Sun in London, 1896**

Another time that Sun Yat-sen's faith came to the fore was in 1896, when officials at the Chinese embassy in London kidnapped Sun, and held him for 12 days with the intention of sending him back to China for imprisonment and certain execution. However, Sun was able to get a message out to Dr. James Cantlie, whom Sun knew from Cantlie's days as Dean of the Hong Kong College of Medicine. Cantlie notified the British Foreign Office and the press, claiming that the Chinese Legation was overstepping its bounds by kidnapping a Chinese citizen on British soil and trying to send him back to China for criminal prosecution. With the Foreign Office and the press alerted to the Sun's kidnap, the terrified prisoner was soon released. Ever afterward, Sun Yat-sen credited God with bringing about his release and preserving him from harm so that he might be able to carry out some higher purpose, namely the overthrow of the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 86-90.



Qing Dynasty, and the establishing of a republic in China. In fact, in a letter at that time to his teacher and friend, the Christian minister in Hong Kong, Ch'u Feng-ch'ih, Sun wrote: "I am like the prodigal son and the lost sheep: I owe everything to the great favor of God. Through the way of God I hope to enter into the Political Way. I hope you will not cease to write to me about the Way of God...."<sup>9</sup>

### **The Waichow Uprising, 1900**

Perhaps now convinced that God was with him, in 1900, Sun and his revolutionary colleagues resurrected their plan to attack Canton, and overthrow the political and military forces there. However, they first decided to set up a base in Waichow. Cheng Shih-liang, an old friend of Sun's, was a Hakka, and a native of that place. He had leadership ability and could organize Hakkas and the Triads there into a formidable fighting force. Unlike in 1895, when the rebels attempted to attack Canton from the sea, the idea now was to invade the city overland from their base in Waichow. With the diversion created from Waichow keeping the Qing forces busy, it was thought that rebels within Canton could successfully launch an attack on government offices and army strongholds.

Again, as in 1895, Christians were active in the rebel campaign in the city. The Canton Christian College contained many sympathizers, as did its fellow institution, the Peiying College. Harold Schiffrin lists other prominent Christian leaders: 2 Chinese Catholic priests surnamed Hu, a Chinese Presbyterian minister, a gentry Chinese convert, Tso Tou-shan, the Presbyterian whose bookstore was used as gathering place in 1895, Su Fu-sheng, a convert and manager of another of Tso's bookstores, Lien Ta-ch'eng, a boatman, who graduated from a mission school and became a fervent Christian, and Li Chih-sheng, a chemistry teacher and a convert of the Basel mission, who did a lot of work among the Hakkas in eastern Guangdong.<sup>10</sup>

Again, this uprising failed for lack of coordination and funding, which was a perennial problem for Sun Yat-sen. Schiffrin also notes, however, that unlike the Boxers who considered missionaries

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 128-9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 227-9.

and Christians as their enemies, in the case of the Waichow uprising, Christians and Triads found that they could work together for the sake of a revolutionary cause.<sup>11</sup>

On October 10, 1911, Sun Yat-sen's revolution finally met with success. A group of rebel soldiers overthrew their Manchu commanders in the Wuchang garrison. This year celebrates the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Xinhai Geming, as this coup was called. Sun Yat-sen became the first president of the newly founded Republic of China. Unfortunately, Sun only held the office for about 3 months, when he abdicated in favor of Yuan Shih-kai, considered a stronger military leader in Peking. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek became Sun's heir apparent as leader of the Nationalist Party (Guomingdang).

Diagnosed with liver cancer, Sun Yat-sen died on March 12, 1925. At the insistence of his widow and son, a private Christian funeral service was held. Officials of the Guomingdang Party and some Russian friends presided over a public ceremony at a later date.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

With Sun's conversion to Christianity, and with all the support he had from Christian missionaries and Chinese converts alike, in the last analysis, what influence did Sun's Christian faith have on his revolutionary activity? Harold Schiffrin, who has done the definitive study of Sun, perhaps captures Sun's personality best when he calls him a "reluctant revolutionary." Schiffrin continues:

"While dedicated to the aims of revolution, Sun preferred the least forceful measures for achieving them....For all his audacity, Sun lacked the ruthlessness that marks the true revolutionary. Put simply, he preferred negotiating to killing, and compromise to prolonged struggle. These were qualities that made him seem quixotic and strangely unrevolutionary, but more genuinely human."<sup>13</sup> I would like to think that it was Sun's Christian faith shining through his revolutionary exterior.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>12</sup> Harold Z. Schiffrin, *Sun Yat-sen Reluctant Revolutionary* (Boston, Toronto, Little, Brown and Company: 1980), pp. 267-8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 269-70.