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Roots of Revolution/Sun Yat-Sen's Experience in Hawai‘i

Revolutions are often told as national stories. We imagine a journey leading to people rising against their government purely within the borders of their own country. Yet political ideas, people, and movements often cross borders. The Chinese republican movement with the eventual Xinhai Revolution (辛亥革命) was no exception. In 1894, Sun Yat-sen founded the Revive China Society (興中會) in Honolulu, far from the imperial government he sought to overthrow. Hawai‘i was more than just a place he stayed in for some years. It helped shape his political outlook and provided the community and resources that made revolutionary organizing possible. Understanding Sun Yat-Sen's time in Hawai‘i helps reveal how political change in one country can be shaped by the wider world. Through his education, his exposure to the Hawaiian Kingdom's struggle to maintain its independence, and his organizing among Hawai‘i's Chinese community, Sun's experience in Hawai‘i helped him envision a modern China while providing some of the intellectual and material foundations for his revolutionary movement.

Sun's years in Hawai‘i broadened his understanding of what China could become. In 1879, he began attending ‘Iolani School, where he studied for three years and received second prize in English grammar at graduation in 1882. He then attended Oahu College, now Punahou School, for one semester in 1883. These schools exposed him to English-language education and Christianity. Soong recounts that Sun heard stories of the Taiping Rebellion from a veteran who had returned from war. Sun was "entranced by his accounts, which stirred his imagination as the old classical rote studies he abhorred could not" (152). His years in Hawai‘i gave him an opportunity to pursue this interest through study in Christian schools. His education helped shape

his religious outlook and introduced him to ideas beyond the classical learning he had disliked. He was also encountering a political system different from the Qing government. Hawai‘i was an independent kingdom under Kalākaua, and Sun later recalled that “it was here that I came to know what modern civilized governments are and what they mean” (qtd. in Gonschor 60). This was a significant point of comparison for a young man who would come to see the Qing government as corrupt and incapable of protecting China from foreign pressure. Chen Shaobai, one of Sun’s fellow anti-Qing revolutionaries, later attributed to him the complaint that “a huge country like China is weaker than a small country” (qtd. in Gonschor 59). Sun Yat-Sen realized that China’s size and history had not protected it from humiliation by foreign powers. Gonschor argues that Hawai‘i offered Sun an early example of a modern state that maintained its political independence. Sun’s ideas would continue to develop after he left the islands, but Hawai‘i helped him imagine a China that could adopt modern institutions while remaining in control of its own future.

That idea of independent modernization became more complicated when Sun returned to Honolulu in late 1894. The Hawaiian Kingdom he had known as a student had been overthrown. In 1887, a militia forced King Kalākaua to sign the bayonet constitution — a constitution that crippled Hawaiian monarchical ruling power. The National Archives describes the result as a constitution “stripping him of his power and many native Hawaiians of their rights” (National Archives). Six years later, Queen Lili‘uokalani yielded her authority after American troops landed in Honolulu. In her own account, she explained that “a minority of the foreign population made my action the pretext for overthrowing the Monarchy” (Lili‘uokalani). Sun had left the islands before these events, but when he returned, he witnessed Hawai‘i’s resulting political setting and how the independent modern state he knew was replaced with an almost semi-puppet

state. Gonschor argues that the new regime also curtailed rights Chinese residents had enjoyed under the Kingdom (64–65). The connection between Chinese revolutionary activity and Hawaiian resistance was personal as well as political. Ho Fon, a prominent member of Honolulu's Chinese community and the owner of the house where Sun founded the Revive China Society, had participated in the 1889 rebellion against the political restrictions introduced after the Bayonet Constitution. He helped supply arms to Hawaiian patriots and was later fined by the regime that emerged from the coup (Gonschor 65). Ho Fon's activity shows that some members of Honolulu's Chinese community were involved in Hawai‘i's own struggle over political rights. Their lives connected Hawai‘i's and Sun Yat Sen's two political causes, in a way. Hawai‘i's history showed Sun the possibilities of an independent modern state and how vulnerable such a state remained to foreign intervention. Chen Shaobai later described Hawai‘i's political climate by observing that "the people of the Hawaiian archipelago were fighting against the USA every day" (qtd. in Gonschor 64). This retrospective account suggests why the islands might have sharpened Sun's sensitivity to foreign intervention. Gonschor also suggests this context may have contributed to Sun's later anti-imperialism (65).

Hawai‘i's Chinese community also gave Sun a place to turn political ambitions into concrete organized action. On November 24, 1894, he and a small group of supporters founded the Revive China Society in Honolulu. It began with about a dozen members and raised roughly $2,000 through dues and donations. Sun Yat Sen's brother, Sun Mei, contributed the proceeds from land and cattle sales. The funds helped support the Canton uprising of October 1895, which failed and led to the execution of many of Sun's supporters (Damon 165). These events show both the limits and the importance of the Hawaiian base. The society was small, and its first major operation failed, but Honolulu gave Sun a place to gather members, collect money, and

establish an organization outside Qing control. Hawai‘i was not the sole source of support. Damon explains that from 1894 to 1911 Sun relied on family, supporters, and overseas Chinese communities in Hawai‘i, North America, Southeast Asia, and Japan, while also seeking relationships with other nationalist movements, including the Philippines' struggle against American imperialism (Damon 161–63). Thus, the Revive China Society can be seen as a sort of early part of a wider network. What made Honolulu significant was not that it could supply everything the revolution needed, but that it gave Sun access to people and resources that could be connected to a larger movement.

Sun’s time in Hawai‘i expanded his understanding of what China could become, while Hawai‘i’s later history showed how fragile such possibilities could be. The Hawaiian Kingdom had schools, constitutional institutions, and an international presence, yet foreign intervention still brought independence to an end and infringed on local peoples’ rights. Sun’s movement also adds a further complication — some of the resources that could help China achieve sovereignty came from a diaspora spanning the Pacific and from allies with interests of their own. Independence is not simply the opposite of international dependence. It had to be built through transnational relationships while simultaneously resisting the unequal power those relationships could potentially bring. That tension gives Hawai‘i’s place in Sun Yat Sen’s story deeper significance. His revolution sought to make China the author of their own future, but his example and Hawai‘i’s history show that sovereignty isn’t something that can be attained once and for all. It often must be continually negotiated in a world where countries influence one another in asymmetrical power balances.

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