21 19’N., 157 52’ W: “This is my Hawaii”: The Birthplace of Sun Yat-sen’s 1911 Chinese Revolution

Coco Heahlke 陳美麗

In 1910, a *Paradise of the Pacific* reporter interviewed Sun Yat-sen about his time in Hawaii, and Dr. Sun replied, “This is my Hawaii…here I was brought up and educated; and it was here that I came to know what modern, civilized governments are like and what they mean” (Lum and Lum viii). Dr. Sun’s time in Hawaii between 1879 and 1895 strongly influenced his revolutionary vision in China, where a Punahou education and the support of Hawaii’s Chinese community were pivotal.

Arriving in Hawai’i in 1879 at age 13, Dr. Sun mastered English in three years at 'Iolani School, an Anglican institution, where exposure to the ideas of revolution was not possible. He got his revolutionary ideas from his Punahou education. In this American Congregationalist missionary school, he studied the early history of the United States and the Principles of Republicanism that sparked the American Revolution. Inspired by Abraham Lincoln’s 1863 Gettysburg Address, Dr. Sun adapted Lincoln’s three-part vision of government of, by, and for the people into his own version, Three Principles of the People: Minzu (Nationalism), Minquan (Democracy), and Minsheng (People’s Livelihood) (Hao 253).

Two other pivotal factors may have had a profound effect on Dr. Sun: the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893 by the U.S. Both historical situations could have convinced him that once there is a revolution in China, China needs to be governed by the Chinese and not Western Imperialism. Punahou teacher Francis W. Damon was among Sun’s advocates and fostered his intellectual growth and the pursuit of

revolution. On February 8, 1912, two days before the last Emperor of China left the Forbidden City, Dr. Sun wrote a letter to Damon thanking him, “I must not be oblivious to the fact that you have all along cheered and assisted me in my efforts to bring this great movement to a success” (Lum and Lum 66).

The Chinese community in Hawai’i, especially Hawaiians with Chinese ancestry, wholeheartedly supported him financially and politically. His older brother, Sun Mei, the “King of Maui,” sold his Kula ranch and gave all he had to support the revolution. Dr. Sun founded the first revolutionary society, the Revive China Society, with 130 members in 1894, which also contributed to Dr. Sun’s revolutionary vision. Its founding mattered in modern Chinese history because the oath called for overthrowing the Manchus and “recover Chinese for the Chinese, and establish a republic” (Lum and Lum 7).

Dr. Sun came of age in Hawaii, where he received an education that shaped his enlightened ideology and founded a revolutionary society supported by the Chinese Hawaiian community, igniting the 1911 Chinese Revolution. During his first voyage to Hawaii, he wrote that “deep in my heart, I wish to learn from the rest and seek for the infinite truth.” Hawaii helped fulfill his wish. Dr. Sun’s lasting impact on China ended Imperial China and revolutionized the country into the modern age.

Works Cited

Haley, James L. *Captive Paradise: A History of Hawaii*. St. Martin's Publishing Group, 2015.

Hao, Ping. *Sun Yat-sen and America*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2012.

Latham, Mike. “Roots of a Revolution: Sun Yat-sen's Formative Time at Punahou - Punahou School.” *Punahou Bulletin*, https://bulletin.punahou.edu/roots-of-a-revolution-sun-yat-sen/. Accessed 19 September 2026.

Lum, Yansheng Ma, and Raymond Mun Kong Lum. *Sun Yat-sen in Hawaii: Activities and Supporters*. Hawaii Chinese History Center, 1999.