Beyond the Sandalwood Mountains: Cradle of the Republic, Transpacific Knowledge Exchanges, and the Legacy of Dr. Sun Yat-sen

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The Transpacific Crucible

In the Chinese context, Honolulu—the capital and largest city of Hawai‘i—is historically known as the Sandalwood Mountains (檀香山). The origin of this name dates to the international trade of sandalwood between the United States and China, especially Canton, in the early 19th century. As the most critical overseas base for Dr. Sun Yat-sen's early education and the subsequent development of the republican revolution, the Sandalwood Mountains became a well-known geographical and political term in China following the 1911 Revolution. Both Chinese and Western academics agree that Dr. Sun Yat-sen and the 1911 Revolution introduced new political and intellectual concepts to China, fundamentally transforming the state from an imperial dynasty into a republic. This undoubtedly marks a critical turning point for China's modernity. Scholars such as Xiaowei Zheng[1] and Ping Hao[2] argue that Dr. Sun Yat-sen's early education at the ‘Iolani and Punahou schools in Hawai‘i formed his early intellectual baseline of Americanized concepts of modernity. Thus, Hawai‘i played a significant historical role in China's acquisition of

[1] Xiaowei Zheng, *The Politics of Rights and the 1911 Revolution in China*, 1st ed. (Stanford University Press, 2018).
[2] Ping Hao, *Sun Yat-sen and America*,, 1st ed. (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2012).

intellectual knowledge regarding modern governance. However, a series of globally collected archives and material items from the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University, the British Museum, Hamilton Library at the University of Hawai‘i, the Hawai‘i State Archive, ‘Iolani Palace, the Harvard-Yenching Library, the Shanghai Library, and the First Historical Archive of China demonstrate that this exchange was much broader. Knowledge communication between China and Hawai‘i was not limited to political or ideological spheres alone, nor did it flow solely through Dr. Sun Yat-sen. Instead, multi-directional knowledge exchanges in various fields flourished during the late 19th century and early 20th century.

Imperial Inertia, Grassroots Awakening

The divergence between high-level imperial diplomacy and grassroots transpacific transformation is nowhere more visible than in the archival intersection between King David Kalākaua and the young Sun Yat-sen. In March 1881, Kalākaua arrived in Qing China as the first sovereign monarch[3] to visit the empire as an equal rather than a tributary vassal[4]. Chinese archival records—filling the curious silence of the King's travel diary preserved in the Bishop Museum[5]—reveal that Viceroy of Zhili Li Hongzhang accorded him high diplomatic protocol in Tianjin, dispatching his official sedan chair and hosting a multi-course Western-style banquet at the Astor Hotel. However, Li repeatedly deflected the King's requests to travel to Beijing for an audience

[3] Liu, Dongze, 刘冬泽, "Yizhuang Wanqing Wangshi de Faxian: Li Hongzhang yu Xiaweiyi Guowang de Tianjin Huiwu 一桩晚清往事的发现----李鸿章与夏威夷国王的天津会晤," sec. 17, Zhonghua Dushu Bao, 中华读书报 (Beijing), June 6, 2012, Sec.17.
[4] Grand Council, 军机处, "Document of Memorial to the Throne from the Grand Minister of State," Manuscript, February 16, 1881, Vol.14.
[5] MS MC Kalakaua, "A List of Works Relating to Japan, China and the Far East," Kelly & Co.---Yokohama; Kelly & Walsh---Shanghai; Kelly & Walsh ----Hong Kong, 1924, Bernice P. Bishop Museum Archive, Honolulu, 49.

with the Guangxu Emperor, citing strict mourning customs and bureaucratic delays. Kalākaua's mission to formalize bilateral labor migration and secure a Pacific alliance collapsed against the Qing court's inward-looking attachment to traditional suzerainty. The establishment of Zongli Yamen (Office for the General Management of Affairs Concerning the Various Countries, 总理各国事务衙门) was a great attempt to learn modern diplomatic affairs from the West. However, a deeply rooted idea of suzerainty rather than colonialism remained in the minds of the Chinese. Rooted in classical ideals of imperial benevolence and "cherishing men from afar (怀柔远人)," Beijing's diplomacy remained captive to a tributary logic that failed to comprehend the sovereign, treaty-port global order of the late nineteenth century. Yet while imperial Beijing closed its doors to the Sandalwood Mountains, Honolulu was quietly nurturing the seeds of China's transformation. In 1879, a thirteen-year-old Cantonese boy named Sun Tai Chu (孙太初) had arrived on O'ahu, entering 'Iolani School to immerse himself in British-American constitutional principles, Christian ethics, and modern sciences[6]. In July 1882, just months after returning from Tianjin, King Kalākaua attended 'Iolani's commencement ceremony and personally presented young Sun with a second-place award in English grammar.[7] The contrast was profound: the same imperial establishment that treated the Hawaiian monarch with passive indifference would soon be challenged by this very schoolboy. Through the cosmopolitan classrooms of Honolulu, Hawai'i gave Sun the intellectual vocabulary to dismantle the imperial dynasty Li Hongzhang strove to preserve.

[6] 'Iolani School, "Sun of 'Iolani," *'Iolani Bulletin* (Honolulu, Hawai'i), 2007.
[7] 'Iolani School, "Sun of 'Iolani."

From Reform to Revolution

After his graduation from ‘Iolani, Tai Chu went to O‘ahu College (Punahou School)[8] for another semester of studying and then returned to China. Twelve years later, in 1894, Tai Chu wrote a letter to Viceroy of Zhili Li Hongzhang to implement modernization reforms in China[9]. Tai Chu didn’t receive any response from Viceroy Li. Tai Chu then abandoned his moderate reformist idea and transformed into a staunch advocate of republicanism, committed to establishing a modern political organization to overthrow imperial despotism and build a constitutional republic. Thus, Tai Chu decided to return to Hawai‘i. On November 24th, twenty more diasporic Chinese who supported Tai Chu’s ideas were getting together for meetings in Sandalwood Mountains. On the same day, they voted to pass the *Constitution of Revive China Society* (兴中会章程)[10]. The first modern Chinese political party was established in Hawai‘i. Later, this boy became the leader of the Chinese revolution in 1911 and the father of China’s republic. Today, every Chinese in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and even Southeastern Asia know his name: Dr. Sun Yat-sen. Thanks to Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the name of Hawai‘i as Sandalwood Mountains in Chinese context has also become widely known.

The Sequel to Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Legacy

Thus, The Sandalwood Mountains hold a special place in the hearts of the Chinese people. However, the Chinese still didn’t send any political influence on Hawai‘i. By contrast, the Chinese never ceased contributing to the civic, educational, and cultural fabric of Hawai‘i. An American

[8] Herbert Allen Giles, *A Chinese Biographical Dictionary, 古今姓氏族谱,* (Bernard Quaritch, 1898), 696-697.
[9] Yat-sen Sun, *Sun Zhongshan Xuanji, 孙中山选集*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (Renmin Press, 人民出版社, 1956); Sun, *Sun Zhongshan Xuanji, 孙中山选集*, vol. 1, 7-18.
[10] Sun, *Sun Zhongshan Xuanji, 孙中山选集*, vol. 1,19-20.

Chinese who was Dr. Sun Yat-sen's good friend, William Kwai Fong Yap (叶桂芳) launched an initiative to reframe the college of agriculture and mechanic arts to a college.[11] In 1912, the new college was renamed College of Hawai'i. William Kwai Fong Yap was also called the founding father of the University of Hawai'i. In the 1920s, the college became the University of Hawai'i. In 1923, the newly formed university set up the fifth Center of Chinese Studies in the United States. Even during China's most turbulent 1930s, Chinese people didn't forget their academic support for Hawai'i. In 1936, Dr. Sun Yat-sen's son, Sun Fo (孙科), who was the President of the Legislative Yuan of China (立法院长) at that time, donated a substantial collection of classical Chinese volumes to the University of Hawai'i. At the same period, Wang Yunwu (王云五) selected the highest quality of printed books of Complete Collection of Books from Various Collectanea, First Set (丛书集成初编) as gift to University of Hawai'i. It was the newest collection of books for both classic and modern Chinese books in multiple subjects.[12]

The intellectual soil of Hawai'i and its institutions left an indelible imprint on modern global governance. Decades later, Punahou School would again become an incubator of historic leadership when it educated Barack Obama, who in 2008 was elected the 44th President of the United States. Yet long before the world witnessed this modern American political milestone, it was a young Cantonese student named Sun Tai Chu whose formative encounters in these very classrooms first set in motion the transformation of East Asia's oldest empire into a modern republic. Honolulu was never a peripheral island outpost; it was a vibrant transpacific crucible of modern political consciousness. In celebrating Dr. Sun Yat-sen's 160th birthday today, we honor

[11] "William K. F. Yap, 61, Dies; Active Here as Educator," *Honolulu Star* (Honolulu), February 26, 1935, Advertiser Archive, 2.
[12] "China100 @ UH Mānoa - Origins of Some Early Donations," accessed September 29, 2026, https://sites.google.com/Hawai'i.edu/100years-chinesestudies-uhm/building-a-strong-library-collection/origins-of-some-early-donations.

not only the founding father of modern China, but also the enduring legacy of the Sandalwood Mountains—a landscape whose educational ideals and diasporic networks helped birth a new era of global republicanism.

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