An Education Beyond the Classroom: Sun Yat-sen's Growth in Hawai‘i and His Influence on China's Republican Future

Sun Yat-sen Hawai‘i Essay Contest

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Against the backdrop of Hawai‘i’s constitutional monarchy, Sun Yat-sen’s education helped him emerge as one of the most prominent figures in modern Chinese history. He was born into a farming family in 1866 in Tsuiheng Village, Guangdong, China, and began a life away from political power and revolutionary passion (National Dr. Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall). Having a robust connection and development in Hawai‘i, Sun Yat-sen gained principles that motivated his scrutiny of authority and understanding the weaknesses of the Qing government. He was also supported by Hawai‘i’s Chinese community in bringing his convictions into transformative efforts to make the Republic of China a better place.

Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary career began with the help of his established intellectual connections in Honolulu. In 1879, he arrived with his mother after his brother Sun Mei’s business gained much success. Despite having only an education in China and speaking no English, Sun Yat-sen entered ‘Iolani School and improved rapidly, graduating in 1882 alongside a grammar award presented to him by King Kalākaua (Dr. Sun Yat-sen). He also continued his studies at Oahu College, now Punahou School, in 1883. (Soong). Around then, Hawai‘i was a constitutional monarchy supported by the Anglican leadership at ‘Iolani School. Historian Alfred L. Castle argues that studying the constitutional government in Hawai‘i introduced Sun to the downsides of arbitrary authority (Castle). Sun Yat-sen was able to understand how to judge rulers without directly rejecting the monarchy. Another historian, Irma Tam Soong, recounts that Sun’s hope to be baptised, influenced by Christian instruction, had caused Sun Mei to send him back to China in 1883 (Soong) due to divisions in religious beliefs.

Back in China, there were growing vulnerabilities to foreign power during the Sino-French War of 1884-1885 which deeply troubled Sun Yat-sen. In 1894, he appealed to Li Hongzhang, a Qing official, for modernization but was turned down (National Dr. Sun Yat-sen

Memorial Hall). This moment showed Sun that in order to change the progression of China, he needed to seek change to the imperial government. After returning to Hawai‘i once again, on November 24, 1894, Sun and other Chinese supporters founded the Revive China Society in Honolulu (Hoover Institution Library and Archives Staff). Chung Kun Ai, a former ‘Iolani classmate and his brother, Sun Mei both supported him.

Despite multiple failures including a planned uprising in 1895, Sun continued persevering and frequently traveled overseas. Eventually in 1911, the Revolution ended the Qing rule and Sun Yat-sen became a provisional president in January 1912. However, later Yuan Shikai succeeded Sun Yat-sen and dissolved the Parliament which showed that ending imperial rule did not mean a perfect stable government (National Dr. Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall). Sun Yat-sen’s vision for China remained unfinished but his efforts and background helped contribute to a lasting change to hereditary rule. In the process, Hawai‘i contributed to building his foundations and community which helped him imagine a better future and carry the influence of his studies to the path of a nation’s future.

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