From Ideas to Action: Hawai‘i’s Role in Sun Yat-sen’s Revolutionary Movement

On November 24, 1894, a small group of Chinese residents gathered in Honolulu to establish the Revive China Society (*Xingzhonghui*), an organization dedicated to transforming China’s political future. Thousands of miles from China, they helped lay the foundations for a revolutionary movement that would contribute to the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911 (Damon, 1991; Lum & Lum, 2008). Why did Hawai‘i, seemingly distant from China’s political struggles, become such an important site of revolutionary activity? The answer lies not simply in Sun Yat-sen’s early education or the financial support he later received, but in the relationship between intellectual development and political mobilization. Hawai‘i broadened the perspectives through which Sun could imagine China’s political future, while its overseas Chinese community provided the relationships and resources through which revolutionary ideas could become collective action. Together, these influences reveal how a revolutionary movement could take shape beyond the borders of the society it sought to transform.

Beyond the Classroom: Hawai‘i as an Intellectual Environment

Sun arrived in Hawai‘i in 1879 to join his elder brother, Sun Mei, and attended ‘Iolani College from 1879 to 1882 before briefly studying at Oahu College, now Punahou School, in 1883. At ‘Iolani, an Anglican boarding school, he encountered English-language instruction, Western academic subjects, and Christian religious practices. His achievement was recognized in July 1882, when King Kalākaua presented him with second prize in English grammar (Soong, 1997).

The significance of this education extended beyond acquiring a foreign language. Coming from a society where traditional Chinese learning shaped much of formal education, Sun encountered alternative approaches to knowledge, religion, and social organization. Hawai‘i thus

mattered not because its schools supplied Sun with a complete revolutionary ideology, but because they expanded the intellectual possibilities through which he could eventually question established authority.

Christianity illustrates this process. Soong (1997) documents the influence of Sun's religious education, while Damon (1991) recounts tensions between his Christian outlook and the religious traditions of his home village after his return to China (p. 164). These encounters exposed Sun to competing systems of belief and authority, providing an intellectual context in which inherited assumptions could be reconsidered. They did not, however, predetermine his later revolutionary commitments. His subsequent experiences in Hong Kong, China, and elsewhere continued to shape his political thought. Hawai'i's influence was therefore formative rather than determinative.

These educational experiences also created lasting personal connections. Soong (1997) notes that Chung Kun Ai, one of Sun's former 'Iolani classmates, was among the founders of the Revive China Society. His participation offers a concrete link between Sun's early years in Hawai'i and his later revolutionary activities.

Importantly, Western education was not the only political influence available to Sun. During his school years, Hawai'i was an independent kingdom ruled by King Kalākaua, not an American territory. Its institutions combined Native Hawaiian political traditions with Christian and foreign influences while confronting modernization and international political pressures.

Gonschor (2017) argues that the Hawaiian Kingdom itself provided an early conceptual model for Sun's vision of a modern yet politically independent China (pp. 59–60). Supporting this interpretation, Gonschor cites Sun's recollection, recorded in an interview published in 1928, that Hawai'i was where he first came to understand modern government (p. 60). Rather than simply

transmitting Western values, Hawai‘i offered an example of a non-Western society pursuing modernization while maintaining sovereignty. Although this does not establish that Sun’s later republican ideology emerged directly from the Hawaiian monarchy, it suggests that his political imagination developed through encounters with different political institutions, not merely through the adoption of Western ideas.

From Intellectual Exploration to Political Organization

A revealing historical contrast emerges when Sun’s school years are considered alongside his return to Honolulu in 1894. The Hawaiian Kingdom in which he had studied had been overthrown in 1893, and the Republic of Hawai‘i was established in July 1894. That November, Sun founded an organization committed to transforming China’s own political order.

This juxtaposition requires caution. Gonschor (2017) challenges the interpretation that the establishment of the Republic of Hawai‘i directly inspired Sun’s republican ambitions, emphasizing the new regime’s exclusionary political character (pp. 63–64). Sun’s political development had also continued elsewhere, including his unsuccessful attempt to present reform proposals to Qing official Li Hongzhang in 1894 (Damon, 1991, p. 165).

Nevertheless, this contrast highlights a transformation in Hawai‘i’s role in Sun’s life. The islands first offered opportunities for intellectual exploration; later, they became a place for political organization. Explaining this shift requires examining the Chinese community that helped make revolutionary action possible.

The Overseas Chinese Community: Turning Ideas into Action

According to Lum and Lum (2008), slightly more than twenty men attended the Revive China Society’s founding meeting at Ho Fon’s Honolulu home on November 24, 1894.

Membership subsequently expanded, with branches established in Kahului and Pāʻia on Maui. Revolutionary mobilization required persuading individuals, building trust, and creating structures capable of sustaining collective commitments.

The political significance of these relationships extended beyond fundraising. Gonschor (2017) notes that Ho Fon had also participated in an 1889 uprising in Hawaiʻi aimed at restoring political rights curtailed after the 1887 coup (p. 64). Five years later, his home became the meeting place for a movement seeking political change in China. His involvement in both events does not establish a direct ideological connection between them, but it places a participant in Hawaiʻi's own political struggles at the center of Sun's earliest revolutionary organization.

Financial support was equally essential. Damon (1991) reports that the society initially raised approximately $2,000 through membership dues and donations, supplemented by contributions from Sun's brother, Sun Mei, who sold land and cattle to support the cause (p. 165). These resources helped finance the attempted uprising in Guangzhou in 1895. Such contributions were more than expressions of sympathy: they enabled the transition from political opposition to organized revolutionary activity.

The relationship between political ideas and material support became visible during Sun's later visits. On December 13, 1903, he addressed an audience at a Chinese theater on Hotel Street in Honolulu. According to Damon (1991), Sun criticized Qing rule, emphasized China's political weakness, and appealed for financial contributions (pp. 161–163). By linking China's political problems to the immediate need for funds, Sun presented financial support as a way for overseas Chinese to participate directly in the revolutionary movement.

Such persuasion was particularly important because overseas Chinese communities were politically diverse. While Lum and Lum (2008) describe Sun as successfully regaining many

former supporters during his 1903 visit, Ma (1990) presents a more qualified account, emphasizing his difficulties in Honolulu and the importance of local assistance in recruiting new members in Hilo (pp. 93–95). Despite their different assessments, both accounts reveal that revolutionary support required active persuasion and organization rather than emerging automatically from shared Chinese identity.

These activities made Hawai‘i part of a wider transnational revolutionary network connecting overseas Chinese communities with political developments in China. The islands' significance lay not only in their distance from Qing political institutions, but also in the relationships that enabled activists to organize across that distance. Hawai‘i demonstrates that political movements can depend on communities far removed from the territory in which their goals are to be realized.

Conclusion

Hawai‘i shaped Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary career in ways that extended beyond his formal education. As a student, he encountered not simply Western ideas but an independent Hawaiian Kingdom whose political institutions offered a point of comparison with Qing China. When he returned as a revolutionary, he found a Chinese community with the resources and experience to support political action, but not necessarily a shared commitment to his cause.

The experiences of Ho Fon and the competing accounts of Sun's 1903 recruitment efforts reveal how much depended on local individuals and their political choices. Support for revolution had to be cultivated, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. Hawai‘i's importance, therefore, lies in both the possibilities it opened for Sun's political thinking and the practical challenges of building a movement across the Pacific. The history of the Chinese revolution becomes more

complete when the people and political circumstances of Hawai‘i are treated as part of that history, rather than merely as the background to Sun's achievements.

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