

Dr Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925): medical doctor and China's founding president

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Sun Yat-sen, founding president of the Republic of China, started his career as a medical doctor. His early years of medical studies and practice helped to shape his political vision of a new China. He studied under two eminent professors from whom he came to understand the value of Western knowledge to the modernisation of China. Indeed, as Wang Gungwu pointed out, Sun was the first to offer a “dedicated political leadership that set China on its own path to modernity”.⁽¹⁾

SUN STUDIES MEDICINE

Sun was born in 1866 to a peasant family in Xiangshan, now known as Zhongshan district. At age 13, Sun joined his elder brother, Sun Mei, in Hawaii. There, he studied in the Anglican-run Iolani School and then in Oahu College. However, Sun Mei, dismayed that his younger brother was being influenced by Christianity, sent Sun back to China. Sun then completed his studies at the Central School in Hong Kong.

In 1886, Sun enrolled in the Canton Hospital Medical School, which was attached to Boji Hospital, renamed Canton Hospital in the 1860s – China's first modern hospital.^(2,3) It was said that Sun persuaded the authorities to allow male and female students to study together in the same classroom, and for male students to treat gynaecological cases. These were major breakthroughs in a society that was still largely conservative. The hospital, later affiliated to the Sun Yat-sen University, has since been renamed Dr Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hospital in honour of its most illustrious student.

After a year, Sun transferred to the newly opened College of Medicine for Chinese in Hong Kong. The college, which was associated with the Alice Memorial Hospital, saw its role as one to train young Chinese in Western medicine to complement and support, rather than replace, Chinese traditional knowledge. Dr Patrick Manson, the first dean of the college, and Dr James Cantlie, who succeeded him, both carried out important medical research, underlining the fact that Sun studied under two great medical scholars.

Sun was among the first batch of 18 students, and in July 1892, was one of only two students to graduate with a Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery. College records showed that he excelled

in four examinations that were said to be of a comparable curriculum to that of medical colleges in Britain then.⁽⁴⁾

PRACTISING MEDICINE IN MACAU AND GUANGZHOU

Even so, the colony did not recognise the college's degrees. Sun therefore could not issue birth or death certificates, or related legal documents. Neither did he have the same legal protection as doctors with British qualifications. With the first two graduates of the colony's College of Medicine unable to get a medical position, the Hong Kong governor thereupon wrote to the Chinese senior minister, Li Hongzhang, to take them into the Chinese service. However, as the Chinese government required details of their ancestry, the two refused to comply.

Consequently, Sun left for Macau, which was close to his family home and clansmen in Guangdong, but his qualification was likewise not recognised there. In late 1892, Sun joined the Kiang Wu Hospital, which offered only traditional Chinese treatment, which the Macau authorities allowed him to practise. It is not clear when Sun learned Chinese traditional medicine, but at Kiang Wu Hospital, he combined such treatment with Western medicine.⁽⁵⁾

Dr Cantlie recorded Sun's medical experience in Macau: “In a large, well-built hospital, Chinese patients were treated according to native methods. Sun impressed upon the Chinese governors of the importance and benefits of Western medicine... He persuaded them to open the portals of the hospital to admit him with his newly acquired knowledge.”⁽⁶⁾

Other accounts described Sun as a very competent doctor, as Dr Cantlie later recorded on occasions when he travelled to Macau to assist Sun: “Sun commenced practice, and I encouraged him especially in surgical work. When major operations had to be done, I went on several occasions to Macau to assist him, and there, in the presence of the governors of the hospital, he performed important operations, requiring skill, coolness of judgment and dexterity.”⁽⁶⁾

In 1893, Sun moved to Guangzhou and opened a combined Western and traditional Chinese clinic. He also set up an ‘East-West Apothecary’ and a branch in the city. According to Sun, at the East-West Apothecary, he “helped to distribute western

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Fig. 1 Republic of China postage stamp bearing the portrait of Dr Sun Yat-sen.

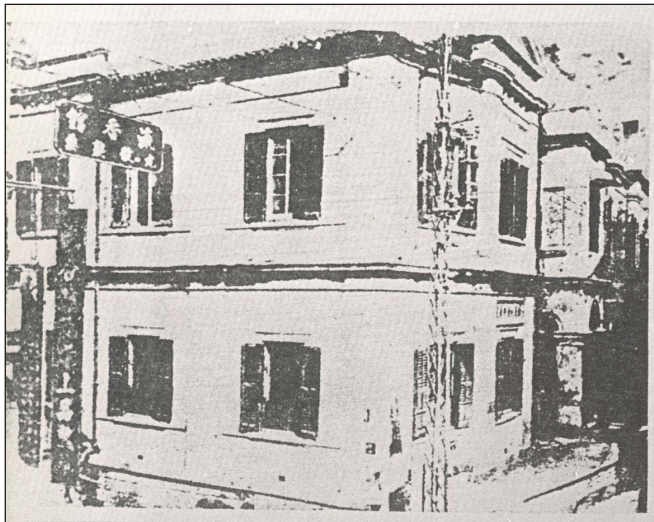


Fig. 2 Original building of the Alice Memorial Hospital and Hong Kong College of Medicine for Chinese [Source: Public Records Office, Hong Kong].

medicine... (and) volunteered to provide free consultation without expecting payment."⁽⁷⁾

GIVING UP MEDICINE FOR REVOLUTION

Sun Yat-sen soon gave up his practice in Guangzhou. Perhaps he was unhappy that his medical qualification had still not been recognised. Furthermore, Sun was frustrated with a community that still preferred traditional medical treatment. Modern medical care was then scarce and limited to a few major cities. Hospitals were mostly started or run by Christian missions. The six years of medical training under very brilliant teachers offered no fulfilling career for Sun, as he could not practise what he was trained for.

Guangzhou at that time was a centre of political ferment. There, Sun reconnected with friends who shared the vision of a political transformation in China. Earlier in Macau, he had joined the Young China Party, the precursor of the Kuomintang. Increasingly, Sun's heart was on the larger political cause. He eventually embarked on a revolutionary course in order to "heal a nation" rather than "heal the sick". While in Tokyo in

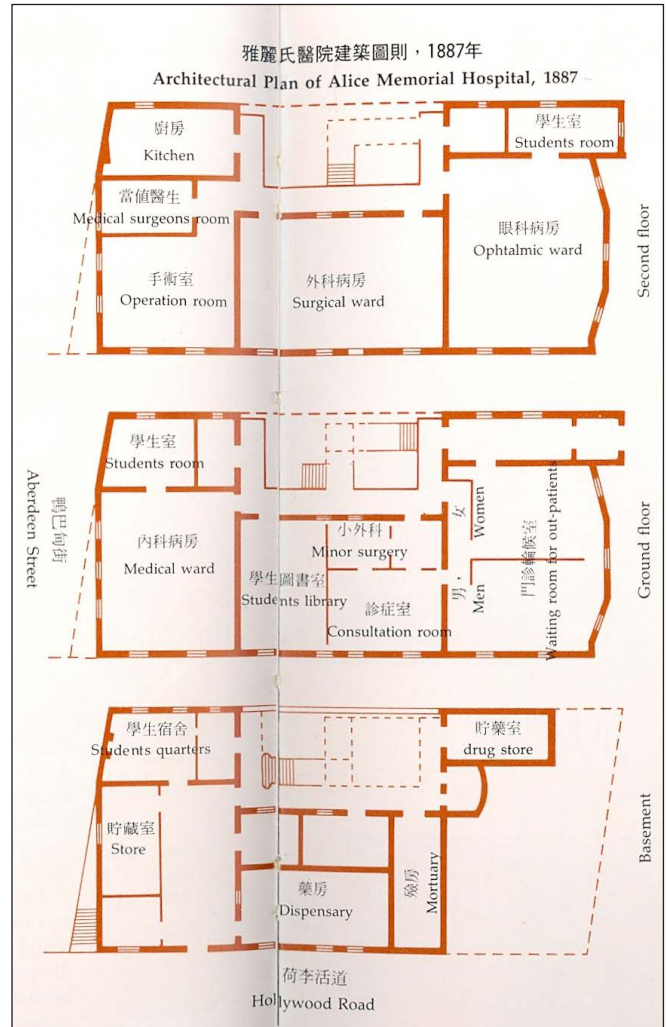


Fig. 3 Architectural plan of the Alice Memorial Hospital, 1887 [Source: Public Records Office, Hong Kong].

1905, Sun started the Tong Meng Hui (League of Revolutionary Union), where the idea of a Chinese Republic was conceived. One of Sun's last direct involvements with medicine was the translation of six chapters of a first aid manual in 1897, which was widely used for the training of first-aid in the army of the Northern Expedition.⁽⁸⁾

Did Sun's medical training and experience have some part in influencing his decision to take up a political role? Sun was always a medical man and he understood China's problems from that perspective. In 1913, Sun declared that "medical affairs and hygiene are truly the roots of the affairs of men". China then was 'the sick man of Asia', both literally and metaphorically. Yet in choosing a political course, Sun showed that he believed that a physician can only save a limited number of lives, but overthrowing the Qing dynasty could save innumerable people.⁽⁹⁾

Certainly, it was as a medical student in Guangzhou and Hong Kong that Sun first encountered revolutionary politics. China's acceptance of the humiliating terms of the Treaty of Tientsin following the 1885 Sino-French War, and the Chinese defeat in the 1894–1895 Sino-Japanese war angered Sun. In Hong Kong, he met young Chinese who were similarly fired

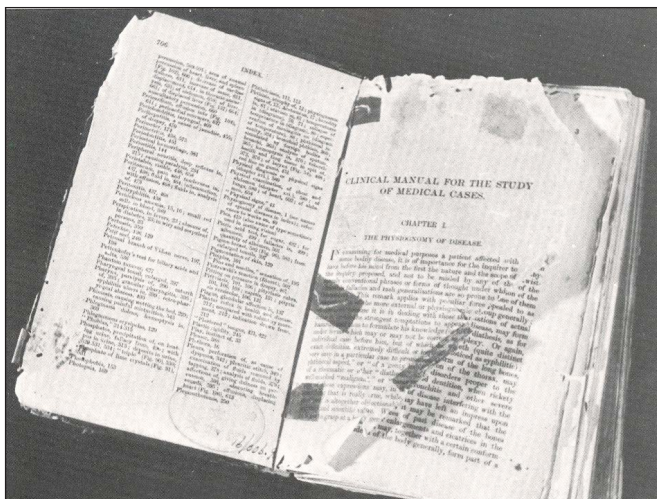


Fig. 4 Photograph of a book believed to have belonged to and used by Sun Yat-sen when he studied at the Hong Kong College of Medicine [Source: Public Records Office, Hong Kong].

up with nationalist sentiments. Sun was impressed by the orderly development in Hong Kong in contrast to the social and economic backwardness of China, which was then ruled by weak and corrupt Manchu leaders. However, Sun was conscious of the fact that under British administration in Hong Kong and Portuguese rule in Macau, the Chinese suffered discrimination. Being a member of a subject people, Sun had learnt this lesson first hand when he was prevented from fully pursuing his medical profession.⁽⁹⁾

Both Dr Manson and Dr Cantlie must have been disappointed that their first, and probably brightest, student did not persevere in the profession for which he had been trained. In fact, on learning that the young Chinese had planned to start a pharmacy following the failure to get an appointment in China, Dr Cantlie had urged Sun to concentrate on his medical practice instead.⁽¹⁰⁾

The paths of Sun and his former professors were to cross again. While trying to mobilise support for the revolutionary cause in London, Sun was seized on 11 October 1896 by the staff of the Chinese legation in London, and was due to be sent back to China and tried. On receiving a message from Sun, Dr Cantlie and Dr Manson alerted the police and secured the release of Sun. News of his seizure and 'heroic escape' made news around the world, and this publicity thrust Sun forward as the most recognisable leader of the Chinese revolution.^(11,12)

CONCLUSION

One may question whether Sun's medical training was evident in his planning and leadership of the revolution. Did his medical experience temper the revolution toward a less violent course? These are intriguing but not easy questions to answer. Some scholars have argued that Sun was willing to pursue a reformist

rather than a revolutionary course because he had sent a petition in 1894 to Li Hongzhang, the imperial viceroy and patron of the College of Medicine where Sun had studied. Perhaps, as Schiffrin suggested, Sun had hoped to join a 'modernising' viceroy and be admitted into the traditional scholar-gentry class.⁽¹³⁾ Consequently, even though Sun's 1911 revolution ended the monarchy institution, the deposed emperor was allowed to retain his ceremonial trapping and modest privileges.

Sun Yat-sen was associated with major landmarks in Chinese medical history. He studied in a medical school affiliated to China's first modern hospital, and under two renowned professors. In Macau, he introduced modern medicine to the Kiang Wu hospital. Although Sun might have continued to be a very successful doctor, he saw the healing of a nation as a greater calling. It was a healing that required Western ideas and knowledge to complement the traditions of the Chinese. Sun embodied both, thereby succeeding in offering a modern vision at a time when China needed it most. Fittingly, he was elected as China's founding President in December 1911.

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