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DEMYSTIFYING THE AMBIGUOUS HERO

The Xinhai Revolution, which brought about the demise in 1911 of the imperial system that had governed China for more than 2,000 years and ushered in the dawn of the Chinese Republican era in 1912, could not have been the single-handed achievement of any one individual. Yet the mainstream historical narratives of both the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the general understanding of the rest of the world as well, seem to accord most of the credit for the epoch-making events of 1911 to a single person. Sun Yat-sen was not even in China when the military uprising in Wuchang on October 10, 1911, unleashed a chain of events that would later become known as the Chinese Revolution. One direct outcome of that revolution was his ascension on January 1, 1912, to the presidency of the new republic, though he ceded the position barely three months later to General Yuan Shikai, the driving force behind the Xinhai Revolution. Sun Yat-sen spent most of the remainder of his life in exile, attempting unsuccessfully to regain power. Though the success of his political career during his lifetime was modest, Sun Yat-sen's influence after his death was much more widespread. Despite the painful political gulf that continues to divide the People's Republic on the Mainland from the Republic on Taiwan, Sun Yat-sen is today honored as a national hero on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. His mausoleum on the Mainland stands at the foot of Mount Zijin (Purple Mountain), a highly prestigious site shared only by the greatest Han Chinese icon of late imperial history, Zhu Yuanzhang, the Hongwu emperor who founded the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Across the strait, the Na-

tional Dr. Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall in Taipei City is known as “Guoli Guofu Jinianguan,” which translates literally as “National Memorial for the Father of the Nation.” Major universities bear his name on both sides of the Strait, and there is another in Moscow. In the persistent homage paid to his memory by Republicans and Communists alike, it would be fair to say that Sun Yat-sen succeeded where most prominent Chinese politicians of the twentieth century have failed miserably. Though Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek managed to rule and become national heroes in their respective realms, both suffer damning vilification in the other’s mainstream historiography. How is it possible that Sun Yat-sen, who never ruled more than a minor part of the Mainland, and that for barely three months, is so highly revered by both Communists and Guomindang (or Kuomintang, GMD or KMT) supporters? What were his true political ideals? And why do so many of Sun’s followers, each proclaiming to be the true ideological heir, fight so violently against one another, leaving China profoundly divided to this day?

FROM CHAMPION OF MODERNIZATION TO ANTIDYNASTIC REVOLUTIONARY

Among the numerous accolades accorded to Sun Yat-sen, one of the most popular is that of the great revolutionary of China. Considering his track record, Sun was indeed quite prolific in his revolutionary career. He had been causing unrest, instigating revolt, and masterminding revolution ever since his adolescence. His revolutionary activities varied greatly in kind and in their degree of success—ranging from vandalizing temples and mutilating sacred idols to instigating peasant revolts, organizing industrial strikes, and toppling the ruling dynasty. Nonetheless, even a brief assessment of Sun’s ideology and ideals shows them to be intriguingly mutable, prompting more questions about what sort of revolutionary the man was, and which revolution should be credited to him or to his inspiration.

Sun Yat-sen was born in the village of Cuiheng in Guangdong. Like many of his contemporaries from poor peasant families in South China, he was sent overseas to make a better living and remit money that would help to improve his family’s financial situation. Sun arrived in Hawai’i at the age of thirteen and lived with his brother, who had arrived several years earlier and managed to set up a small grocery store in Honolulu. The young migrant from Cuiheng had the opportunity to further his studies in the modern/Western education system of Hawai’i, and was deeply impressed by the enormous gulf between the modernity he experienced there and the backwardness of his home village in Guangdong.

So enthusiastic was he in this newly found path of modern learning that his brother sent him back to Guangdong after five years, fearing that he would convert to Christianity.

An astute politician who often changed his standpoint in order to gain support and political advantage, Sun Yat-sen nonetheless never wavered throughout his life in his fight for the modernization of China. It was a quest that drew him into a lifelong career as a revolutionary. In 1894, after spending a few years doing basic medical studies in Hong Kong, Sun traveled to Beijing to offer his services to Li Hongzhang. Li, the governor of Zhili, was well known as the modernizing mandarin of the Self-Strengthening Movement. In offering his services, Sun wrote his own elaborate letter of introduction, expounding some of his ideas about how to strengthen China through modernization. Unfortunately, he lacked the requisite classical Chinese education, and his family background was less than illustrious: the proposal was unceremoniously rejected. Henceforth, Sun's quest for modernization would become much more radical. Turning to the common folk for support in the late 1890s and early 1900s, Sun began lobbying overseas Chinese entrepreneurs and members of secret society gangs, preaching political goals aimed at nothing less than the complete overthrow of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of a Chinese Republic. Strangely enough, the traditions of Chinese secret societies, sworn brotherhoods steeped in superstition and racism, did not seem to hinder Sun's modernizing agenda. He formally became a member of the Hawai'ian chapter of the Heaven and Earth Society (*tian di hui*), and used anti-Manchu nationalist rhetoric to recruit support from Chinese secret societies in overseas Chinese communities across Southeast Asia, Europe, and America. Anti-Manchu sentiments were deeply entrenched in Sun's nationalist propaganda, and secret societies were profoundly involved in the revolution.

A NATION-BUILDER OF EVER-COMPROMISING PRINCIPLES

Despite the prominent role of secret societies in Sun's earlier political career and in the turn of events that became known as the Xinhai Revolution itself, supporters, historians and his most distinguished biographer¹ all agree that superstition and race-based nationalism were no more than means used by Sun in hopes of achieving a far greater end. Sun was a revolutionary who sought to overturn not only the Qing dynasty of the Manchus but the entire dynastic system that had ruled China for the past two millennia. His true vision, according to followers on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, was to found a modern nation that would be governed as a republic. As the first step in realizing this vision, Sun constructed a philosophical foundation for

the revolution that proved both ideologically flexible and politically useful. His “Three Principles of the People” is an eclectic collection of political and economic theories, mostly influenced by European/American schools of thought, but not without a touch of Confucianism. While the “Principles” were not particularly original, they captured the imagination not only of Sun’s followers, but also of the supporters of the Revolutionary Alliance² across China and in many overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and beyond. These principles later found their way into the fundamental state ideology of the Republic of China and comprise the cornerstone of homegrown Chinese communist ideology.

The three main components of Sun Yat-sen’s “Three Principles of the People” are nationalism (民族 *minzu*), democracy (民权 *minquan*), and socialism [or livelihood] (民生 *minsheng*). While the popular English translations may appear quite straightforward, there are numerous complications and inconsistencies in Sun’s explanation of this central terminology. These ambiguities left plenty of room for different interpretations by the various opposing groups among his followers.

First, the Chinese term Sun employed for “nationalism” denotes a strong racial component. *Minzu* translates as “the clan of the common people,” “the race.” Considering Sun’s close connection to secret societies earlier in his political career, it is not surprising that his brand of nationalism reflects anti-Manchu origins. Even after the Revolutionary Alliance was established in 1905, the part of its political platform first widely propagated was “expulsion of the northern barbarians.” Only after the republic was established and sovereignty claimed over all territories of the former Qing Empire did Sun find it necessary to acknowledge other ethnic groups, besides the Han, within the new Chinese nation. A fundamental concern for race and an important official nod to China’s five major ethnic groups is suggested in the Republic of China’s first flag in 1912. The five-color standard symbolized the Han, Mongol, Tibetan, Manchu, and Hui peoples.³ However, Sun’s brand of “nationalism” according to the “Three Principles of the People” did not end, for him, at the borders of the Chinese nation. His political career took a difficult turn in the 1910s when he found himself constantly in need of support from foreign allies. The concept of “nationalism” in the Three Principles had to be adjusted to pan-Asian ideas that were gaining influence in Japan in that period. The broader interpretation reflected the need to gain Japanese support, the drive to liberate China from the yoke of Western imperialism, and the promotion of unity among all Asians in the face of exploitation by European and American imperialists. All this makes more comprehensible the fateful decision by Wang Jingwei—one of Sun’s closest associates and a man viewed by many as his political heir—to cooperate with the Japanese by leading the Nanjing puppet regime during the Second World War.

The second of the "Three Principles of the People" is the one most often translated as "democracy." However, the meaning of the Chinese characters that represent this concept is slightly more complicated. *Minquan* could be translated as "the people's power," but this does not necessarily denote liberal democracy in the sense of Cold War American ideology. Although Sun's concept of "*minquan*" may, for many, bring to mind a Western idea of constitutional government where citizens exercise their rights through representatives in a national assembly, Sun strongly believed that China needed to proceed through a prior period of "guided democracy." The Guomindang—his political party—was to be the sole governing power, leading the nation through crucial stages of development before a fully liberated, fully functioning, democratic system of government could be achieved. In fact, from 1920 onward Sun adopted a Soviet-style, party-state system as the national policy of his regime. The *dangguo* or *yi dang zhi guo* (party-state)⁴ system essentially allowed the Guomindang not only to control all aspects of government, but also to effectively shepherd the activities of nongovernmental organizations and individuals alike in the Republic of China. Top state administrators were all Party personnel. The new educational system was aimed at training Party cadres as much as producing a skilled workforce for the nation. The authoritarian dictatorship of the GMD, though projected ideally as a mere temporary transition leading to a fully functioning democratic republic was, in fact, the fundamental government system of the Republic of China for the rest of Sun's biological lifetime. In fact, this regime extended far beyond the lifetime of Sun's successor, Chiang Kai-shek, and even of Chiang's successor, Chiang Ching-kuo. The *dangguo* system was not abandoned completely until the 1990s when the Republic of China, then fully established in Taiwan, entered an era of democratization. Considering the very limited extent to which constitutional democracy was actually implemented while Sun was in power, and how his immediate successors controlled the reins of government, one could not but wonder if "democracy" is really the correct translation of the second of Sun's "Three Principles of the People."

The last of Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles looks to be the most problematic. *Minsheng* is literally "the life of the people." There is a wide range of English translations for this concept—socialism, welfare state, livelihood of the people, and so on—depending greatly on the interpretation. The concept of "*minsheng*" was actually derived, in large part, from a proposal by the American political economist, Henry George, for a "Single Tax" reform in which the state would collect only one tax according to the amount of land owned by each citizen. This amounted to granting the state ownership of all land, with citizens paying rent according to the amount of land they wished to use. All other forms of taxation by the state would be abolished. Essentially, there is not a big difference between George's proposition and

what is popularly perceived as a communist land reform. However, Sun stated quite explicitly that he was against the abolition of private property as he did not believe in the Marxist idea of class struggle: he doubted that capitalism was the sole reason for the proletariat's misery.⁵ Furthermore, he had been garnering generous support from overseas Chinese capitalists since his early revolutionary days. To have equated "*minsheng*" with full-blown communism would not only have been an oversimplification; it would also have been quite detrimental to Sun's financial foundation and to his political career. Nonetheless, Sun's provisional government in Guangzhou received consistent support from the Comintern throughout the early 1920s in return for his willingness to accept members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) into the GMD. It is also noteworthy that in 1924, barely a year before his death, Sun began a policy of active cooperation with Chinese communists. The true meaning of "*minsheng*" indeed remains open for debate.

The comprehensive ambiguity of this crucial ideological term contributes greatly to Sun Yat-sen's enduring heroic status on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. To the present day, both the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party, while providing completely different interpretations, claim Sun's Three Principles of the People as an essential foundation of their political ideology. Both political parties also claim intimate historical and personal connections with Sun. The GMD was founded in part by Sun Yat-sen himself, and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek—the GMD wartime leader and successor of Sun as Party leader—was married to Sun's sister-in-law. Not surprisingly Sun Yat-sen has gained the most prestigious of all accolades. In the Republic of China on Taiwan he continues to be revered as the "Father of the Nation." On the mainland, Sun is also revered as "Forerunner of the Revolution." Close personal connections also helped to support the CCP's claim on Sun's political position, as his widow, Madame Soong Ching-ling, proved to be a staunch supporter of the Chinese Communists from the earliest years of the Chinese Civil War to the end of her life in 1981. Sun's name continues to mark major roads and academic institutions and his image remains at significant ceremonial locations on both sides of the Taiwan Strait to this day. More interestingly, in recent years the memory of Sun Yat-sen has become a sort of common ground for improving cross-strait relations. On the one hand, with the return of a GMD leader to the Taiwanese presidential office, Sun's legacy has enjoyed a new surge of public attention. On the other hand, the Communist leaders on the mainland have also decided to invoke the memory of Sun Yat-sen as a way to promote nationalism and economic reform as well as to underline their solidarity with the GMD, which by many strange twists of fate, has come to be viewed by the CCP as its chief ally against the Taiwanese independence movement.

DREAMER OF AN ERA LONG GONE OR LIVING INSPIRATION FOR A BRIGHTER TOMORROW

During his lifetime and even more since his death, Sun inspired others to pursue these dreams. Though he possessed neither the political power nor the advanced technical knowledge to achieve any practical development on his own, he aspired to modernize China. Though he had no real military training and hardly any skills in combat, he dreamed of toppling the mighty Qing Empire. Though his political philosophy pales in comparison to the great minds of his time, he was bent on being an ideologue. In the face of daunting obstacles and despite all his shortcomings, Sun did indeed contribute significantly to the immense transformations that took place in China through most of the twentieth century. He was definitely one of the greatest communicators of his time. His thoughts and ideals, though never very solid or straightforward, won many capable and devoted followers to his cause. The memory of Sun's life and aspirations and the interpretations of his ideology, probably even more than the man himself, have inspired the nation and the many varied and far-flung Chinese communities. From the Xinhai Revolution of 1911 to the "Four Modernizations" of Deng Xiaoping's regime in the 1980s, up to the present day, the legacy of Sun Yat-sen lives on, reflecting his characteristic and undaunted vitality.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Sun Yat-sen remains a popular figure for research in fields including modern history, political philosophy, and public policy, to mention only a few. Marie-Claire Bergère's *Sun Yat-sen* (Stanford University Press, 1998) is probably the most thorough study of Sun as an individual, striking a balance between the cult status afforded by nationalist Chinese historians and the fierce deconstructive rhetoric of postmodern historians of the Western Hemisphere. Bergère portrays Sun as a moderately successful politician with a kind heart and good intentions. He devoted himself to the cause of modernization with conviction though often without much originality. This is probably the most human image of Sun one could expect.

For a more complex reading of Sun's political thought, Audrey Wells's *The Political Thought of Sun Yat-sen* (Palgrave, 2001) analyzes the foundations of Sun's political theories as well as providing a broad survey of how his speeches and writings influenced the political development of newly emerging nations of the twentieth century in Asia, Africa, and beyond. It is a delightful exception to most critical works on Sun that tend to trivialize his theories while failing to first thoroughly understand them.

With the recent hundredth anniversary of the Xinhai Revolution in 2011, much has been published by way of reevaluating the revolution as well as those involved in it—with Sun Yat-sen frequently occupying center stage. *Sun Yat-sen, Nanyang and the 1911 Revolution* (ISEAS, 2011), edited by Lee Lai To and Lee Hock Guan, comprehensively surveys Sun Yat-sen's involvement as well as the revolution's impact upon Chinese both at home and in communities around the world, especially those in "Nanyang" or Southeast Asia who were the closest and most actively involved.

NOTES

1. Marie-Claire Bergère, *Sun Yat-sen* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
2. "The Revolutionary Alliance" (*tongmenghui*) was an umbrella organization of Chinese revolutionary movements founded in Japan on August 20, 1905. The two most prominent groups within this organization were the "Revive China Society" (*xingzhonghui*)—founded in 1894 and led by Sun Yat-sen—and the Zhejiang clique, "Restoration Society" (*guangfuhui*). Sun was the recognized leader of the Revolutionary Alliance from the beginning. This organization was the foundation for the Chinese Nationalist Party (*Guomindang*) after the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912.
3. Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
4. Chin-chin Chen, *Kangzhan qian Jiaoyü Zhengce zhi Yanjiu* (Taipei: Historical Commission, Central Committee of the Kuomintang, 1997).
5. W. Theodore De Bary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).