

Posted on: Sunday, May 29, 2005

ISLAND VOICES

East/West reflections

By Al Castle

The East-West Philosophers' Conference, which brings to Hawai'i internationally respected thinkers on man's condition, reminds us of the University of Hawai'i's historic strengths in bringing Asia and the Pacific together with Western intellectual thought.

The University of Hawai'i is more than the intellectual driver of Hawai'i's economic development. It is a respected scholarly resource for those seeking to understand the human condition and how that condition has been manifested and reflected upon by some of the world's best thinkers.

One of the many sessions to be held starting today is hosted by the venerable Dr. Sun Yat-sen Hawai'i Foundation. Comprised of many leaders in Hawai'i's academic and business world, the society has done yeoman work preserving the important record of Sun Yat-sen, a founder of modern China.

The foundation has had a special interest in understanding how Sun Yat-sen's experiences and education in 19th- and early 20th-century Hawai'i helped shape the thought of one of the most important figures in Chinese history.

As Hawai'i begins to look to China for future tourism and possible economic investment, all scholars of Hawai'i's long relationship with that burgeoning country can profit by revisiting the more than 200 years of Chinese experience in our state.

One of the fascinating connections between Hawai'i and China is the influence the Hawaiian kingdom had on the young Sun Yat-sen in the 1880s. Born in 1866 to a farming family in southeast China, not far from Hong Kong, Sun received a few years of local schooling in traditional Chinese texts.

At 13, he was invited to join his brother in Hawai'i. His brother had migrated as a laborer but moved up quickly under the free-market economy of the constitutional monarchy headed by King David Kalakaua. By the time Ah Mi, Sun's brother, had established a successful rice farm near Ho-nolulu, Hawai'i was widely revered in southern China for the rapid upward mobility of Chinese immigrants, the lack of barriers to opportunity, and a stable constitutional democracy with strong property rights.

With a flood of Chinese labor to the sugar plantations after the passage of the 1875 Reciprocity Act with the United States, Ah Mi felt that the best chances for his brother lay in obtaining an intensive English instruction at an Anglican boarding school called Iolani. Enrolling in 1879, Iolani would provide him his first cultural, political and religious education and establish a basis for much of his later revolutionary activity in China.

With only seven Chinese students in 1879, Iolani was an Anglican school intended primarily for Hawaiian and part-Hawaiian boys. Kamehameha V (reigned 1863-1872), who was sympathetic to the Anglican Church because of his brother's (Kamehameha IV) devotion to it, named the school.

The school was then run by the Anglican bishop Alfred Willis. In the 1870s, Iolani was, like the rest of the Anglican Church in Hawai'i, a bastion of anti-American, anti-annexationist and pro-monarchy thinking. All teachers save one were British, and it was under their guidance that Sun received his first exposure to western literary and philosophical classics as well as a lesson in cultural resistance to imperialism.

Indeed, it is reasonable to speculate that at least some of Sun's anti-imperialism and sensitivity to foreign influence in China came from his awareness of foreign influence in Hawai'i and its sometimes untoward influence over the kingdom's domestic affairs.

Certainly his education had no hint of his later revolutionary activity.



Sun Yat-sen's Hawai'i years influenced him profoundly.

Advertiser library photo

What it's all about

What: Ninth East West Philosophers' Conference

When: May 29-June 10

Where: Imin Center, Jefferson Hall, East-West Center

Theme: Educations and their purposes: a philosophical dialogue among cultures

Cost: Free and open to the public. Seating is limited at some events.

If Iolani did not supply Sun with all his anti-monarchical views, it did expose him to English and American ideals of constitutional government, and to the history of the English people's long struggle against autocracy and arbitrary government. Certainly, in studying constitutional government, which Hawai'i had since 1839, he would have had practical and specific examples of how American and British governmental advisers had introduced limited government.

He also would have heard from his instructors, as well as his brother, of the administration of justice through a complex Western-style judiciary. Hawai'i's Chinese community benefited from a country where life and property were safe from arbitrary confiscation, and where the protection of the law extended, even if imperfectly, to those who questioned and challenged the existing political order.

At Iolani, he became bilingual, as immersion in English was required of all students. The Hawaiians who were Sun's fellow students studied English as a passport to employment in government service. Indeed, on July 27, 1882, Sun's English speaking and writing skills received second prize at Iolani.

He was awarded his prize by King Kalakaua, who was escorted by his sister, Princess Li-li'uokalani, and the dowager Queen Emma.

An important part of Sun's instruction at Iolani was his religious instruction in Christian principles. The boys at Iolani were obliged to attend daily and evening prayers in the school's chapel, and on Sundays, all students were taken to St. Andrew's Cathedral. Classes were taught in Christian doctrine by Bishop Willis, and Sun saw ample evidence of the kindness and fairness which Christian doctrine called for.

Through Sun's daily contact with Christianity, he came to believe that much of the backwardness of China was because of its traditional superstition and dread of evil spirits. In Christianity, he found a positive statement of man's redemption and God's love for each human, no matter how poor or disadvantaged.

In the eyes of Christ, all people were equal, and no ultimate difference was due any person because of birth of station. In Christ, further, he found a symbol of a revolutionary who dared to deny the authority of even the most established authoritarian government while upholding the equal dignity of all.

After graduation from Iolani in 1882, Sun decided to seek additional Western education before assisting in his brother's store. With Hawai'i lacking a full-scale college or university, he enrolled in O'ahu College (Punahou School), then the highest center of learning in the Islands.

O'ahu College was, unlike Iolani, a school influenced by the American Protestant missionaries. As an extension of Punahou School, it offered instruction on the college level but never became a full-fledged college. As a student at O'ahu College, Sun developed academic interest in both government and medicine while at the same time enriching his understanding of the Christian doctrine of the power of individuals to effect change in earthly institutions.

Most of the founders of Punahou had experienced conversions to Christianity during the Second Great Awakening. Begun in Connecticut during the 1790s, the broad movement set ablaze one section of the nation after another during the first half of the 19th century.

The important theological theme of this social and religious movement was the rejection of the Calvinist belief that humans have a natural and inevitable inclination to sin (the doctrine of human depravity). Rather, the leaders of the Awakening, such as Charles G. Finney, affirmed that sin was purely a voluntary act; no one was drawn irresistibly to sin and the consequent rejection of the Lord's will.

This theology, which had energized the early missionaries, gave Sun the empowering sense that human will could be changed for the better. Neither individuals nor societies were predestined to suffer under corruption.

Individuals, he was taught, were, with God's help, capable of self-rule, democracy, social justice and disinterested benevolence. Though there was reason to feel that perfect governmental institutions were impossible to achieve, he found a religious basis for social progressivism, which would last him a lifetime.

Furthermore, Punahou was co-educational and encouraged students to argue, challenge their teachers and to rely on themselves for answers to difficult social questions. The curriculum, with its emphasis on logic, speech, the liberal arts and rhetoric, gave Sun additional confidence in the efficacy of the liberal mind.

At Punahou, he thrilled to the social, political and economic thought of Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln and Henry George. There he would also be introduced to the early stirrings of pragmatism, the energizing notion that ideas were powerful institutions of change, rather than frozen in a Platonic timeless transcendence.

Program: An updated program, abstracts, and an introduction to the educators who will be in Hawai'i for the conference is a www.hawaii.edu/phil/conf

During the conference, up-to-date information is available at 944-7754.



Dragon dancers honored Sun Yat-sen alongside the Chinese Cultural Plaza in Honolulu in this March 1982 photo.

Advertiser library photo

Punahou also was alive with the breathtaking and intoxicating thought of Darwin, Lyell and Wallace, as the intellectual implications of evolution became apparent.

Asked to leave Punahou by Ah Mi, who feared Punahou's "radicalized" curriculum, he returned to China having absorbed enough learning to help formulate his "Three Principles of the People." First developed in 1905, these included nationalism, democracy and democratic socialism. These became his plan for ending the repressive Manchu dynasty and restoring economic and moral strength to China.

Thus, Sun Yat-sen's Hawai'i education would play a major role in shaping and defining his early faith in democratic institutions, social justice and his anti-imperialism.

These values would be further refined and qualified by his later experience in the United States, Europe, Japan and China. But the period 1879-1883, a period shaped by his Hawaii education, would be among the most important of his life. Hence, the history of China and some of the intellectual legacy of 19th-century Hawai'i are intertwined in the life of one of the great figures of 20th-century history.

Al Castle is executive director of the Samuel N. & Mary Castle Foundation and a speaker at the conference.

[Back](#)

© COPYRIGHT 2005 The Honolulu Advertiser, a division of [Gannett Co.](#) Inc.

All materials contained on this site are protected by United States copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, published or broadcast without the prior written permission of The Honolulu Advertiser. You may not alter or remove any trademark, copyright or other notice from copies of the content.