

# From surgeon-apothecary to statesman: Sun Yat-sen at the Hong Kong College of Medicine

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**ABSTRACT** Despite being of peasant stock from a small village on the southern coast of China, Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the founder and first provisional president of the Republic of China, was exposed to Western education early in life. Educated first in Hawaii and then in the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong, he was influenced by Christianity, democracy and liberalism. It was the years of his tertiary education at the Hong Kong College of Medicine that moulded his ultimate destiny as the healer of a nation. This article examines the importance of this medical college and its two stalwarts, Sir Patrick Manson and Sir James Cantlie, in the transformation that shaped China's modern history.

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The top physician heals a nation,  
The middle physician heals patients,  
The mediocre physician heals diseases.  
– Kuo Yu [Narratives of the ancient feudal states],  
attributed to Tso Chiu-ming (fourth century BC)

There has been a tradition among Chinese academics to dabble in the healing arts, either out of interest, as a charitable exercise or for the benefits of themselves and their families. The Sung dynasty (960–1269) prime minister Fan Chung-yen once said: 'One could be a good physician even if one failed to be a good minister.' Sun Yat-sen is unique in Chinese history in that he reversed the process by beginning his career as a physician but later founded the Republic of China.

## MEDICAL SERVICES IN EARLY HONG KONG

The British occupation of Hong Kong Island began on 25 January 1841, when British troops under Commodore Sir Gordon Bremer landed and claimed sovereignty for Great Britain.<sup>1–3</sup> Hong Kong was formally proclaimed a British colony on 29 August 1842 on board the *HMS Cornwallis* by virtue of the Treaty of Nanking.<sup>2–4</sup> The official transfer of sovereignty took place in Hong Kong on 26 June 1843, when Her Britannic Majesty's Sole Plenipotentiary and Minister Extraordinary to China, Sir Henry Pottinger, became the first governor.<sup>3,4</sup> This colony was, in the words of Britain's foreign minister Lord Palmerston, 'a barren rock with hardly a house on it', but with its deep natural harbour sheltered from tropical storms, it was also just what the British needed.<sup>1,4</sup>

What medical care the British could provide was naturally limited. In the unhealthy and obnoxious subtropical climate, all sorts of infectious diseases were rampant. Particularly feared was the so-called 'Hong

Kong fever' (malignant malaria), earning Hong Kong the unsavoury title of the 'white man's graveyard'.<sup>5</sup> Medical missionaries soon arrived from Macao: the first to come was Dr William Lockhart, who supervised the building of a hospital planned by the London Missionary Society.<sup>6,7</sup> On 1 June 1843 the Medical Missionary Hospital was opened with Dr Benjamin Hobson in charge.<sup>8</sup> In August of that year a Seaman's Hospital, financed by the Scottish firm of William Jardine, James Matheson and Company, opened on Morrison Hill, caring for sailors, civil servants and other British nationals.<sup>6</sup>

It was not until 1860 that a Government Civil Hospital was established, but the local Chinese had no faith in this Western, 'barbarian' medicine. Moreover, the daily fee of one dollar (roughly equivalent to \$1,000 today) was enough to deter the Chinese who preferred to die rather than enter the Government Civil Hospital.<sup>5</sup> Besides being associated with colonial occupation, the Government Civil Hospital was too rigidly foreign in its ways to suit the great majority of sick Chinese.<sup>9</sup>

## SUN YAT-SEN'S EARLY YEARS IN HONG KONG

Sun Yat-sen (literally 'fairy of tranquillity', his baptised name chosen in 1883 by Rev. Charles Hagar of the American Congregational Mission) holds a unique position in the history of modern China because he was at the watershed where Western values merged with Chinese traditions.<sup>10,11</sup> A native from Chung-shan Province, 50 miles from Hong Kong, he received a Western education first in Hawaii, then at the Central School of Hong Kong. In 1886 Sun returned to China and began medical studies at the Canton Hospital. Founded in 1835 by the first medical missionary to China, Rev. Dr Peter Parker, and Dr Thomas Richardson Colledge, a ship's surgeon with the British East India

Company, this institute was famous for its surgery and treatment of eye diseases. It introduced the use of surgical anaesthesia, laparotomy and excision of tumours into China.<sup>12</sup> A medical school for male students attached to this hospital had been established in 1855 under Parker's successor, Dr John Glasgow Kerr.<sup>13</sup>

Shortly after Sun began his studies at the Central School of Hong Kong, plans for a charity hospital along Western lines were announced in the *Hong Kong Daily Express*, which reported on 26 February 1884 that 'a scheme for a charitable hospital for Chinese and Europeans' was under way. The attention of a young student interested in Western science would have been attracted to the discussions regarding the proposed hospital and its medical classes.<sup>14</sup> Preferring the more liberal climate of Hong Kong to the conservative atmosphere of Canton, where traditional feudalistic ideas prevailed, Sun decided to transfer to this new medical school when it opened in 1887, becoming its most famous alumnus.<sup>15</sup>

## THE HONG KONG COLLEGE OF MEDICINE FOR CHINESE

Among the few European medical practitioners in Hong Kong was Dr Patrick Manson, a graduate of Aberdeen University who had spent 24 years in China, first in Formosa and then in Amoy with the Chinese Imperial Maritime Authority.<sup>5,16</sup> In 1883 Manson had sailed for Hong Kong, where his practice attracted most of the European residents and the more prominent Chinese merchants. Within two years his practice doubled.<sup>17</sup> Another Aberdeen graduate, Dr James Cantlie, formerly senior surgeon at London's Charing Cross Hospital, joined Manson's practice from July 1887. Together with another private practitioner, Dr Gregory Paul Jordan, Manson proposed to establish a public hospital for the Hong Kong's poor.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, a pastor with the London Missionary Society, Rev. Ho Fuk-tong, had sent his fourth son, Ho Kai, to study medicine at the University of Aberdeen in 1872. Ho graduated in 1879, was called to the Bar in 1881 after studying law at Lincoln's Inn in London, and married Alice Walkden of Blackheath and Greenwich.<sup>18</sup> In 1882 the couple returned to Hong Kong, only to find that the Chinese had no faith in Western medicine. Dr Ho therefore forsook medicine for the law, where he prospered. In June 1884, Alice Ho tragically died of typhoid fever. In memory of his wife, Ho undertook to bear the entire cost of building the Alice Memorial Hospital, which officially opened on 17 February 1887.<sup>18</sup>

Manson, Jordan and Dr William Hartigan formed the Hong Kong Medical Society in September 1886,<sup>9</sup> with Manson as president and Jordan as secretary: an ambitious project was in the planning. Cantlie announced a meeting at the Alice Memorial Hospital on 30 August

1887 to obtain opinions of those engaged in medical practices in Hong Kong. After some discussions this '1887 Preparatory Committee' unanimously resolved 'to establish a College of Medicine for Chinese to be established in Hong Kong... for the purpose of teaching the Science of Medicine in all its branches and to grant licenses to practice in its name to Chinese and to such others as may wish to avail themselves of the privilege of the College. The license granted by the College certifies the ability of the Holder thereof to practise Medicine, Surgery and Midwifery.'<sup>18</sup> Professors and lecturers would give their tuition for free, as at Charing Cross Hospital, and the Alice Memorial Hospital offered free accommodation to the College for lectures and demonstrations. The College was formally inaugurated at the Hong Kong City Hall on 1 October 1887, when Manson as its first dean delivered his inaugural address:

There has risen the idea of forming a school of medicine within this Hospital, with these medical men and these students or dressers for a nucleus... The object of it is the spread of medical science in China, the relief of suffering, the prolongation of life, and as far as hygiene can effect this, the increase of comfort during life. Although Hong Kong has been a British Crown Colony since 1841, and its population and prosperity have steadily and rapidly increased and although hospitals for the treatment of Chinese have been for years established in nearly all of the Treaty Ports and in many other towns of the Empire, yet in Hong Kong, which ought to be a centre of light and guidance to Chinese in all matters pertaining to civilisation, it was not until this year that a hospital devoted to the treatment of Chinese on European principles was opened...

As soon as the Alice Memorial Hospital was opened, its erection received its justification: the beds were at once filled and crowds of outpatients came for treatment. Its success was established within a month of its being opened. We think that the present is the opportunity for Hong Kong to take up a manifest and long-neglected duty; to become a centre and distributor, not for merchandise only, but also for science...

Our little contribution looks small in contrast to what has to be done. We make it humbly but hopefully. I do not doubt our ultimate success, and when we succeed we shall not only confer a boon on China, but at the same time add to the material prosperity of the Colony.<sup>18</sup>

In the audience was the young Sun Yat-sen. Two days later, the first batch of 13 medical students assembled at the Alice Memorial Hospital. They were graduates from Christian missionary schools in Hong Kong and nearby Foochow and included two 'returned students' from the

**TABLE 1** Curriculum of the Hong Kong College of Medicine for Chinese, 1891 (adapted from Paterson<sup>9</sup>)

SESSION: 2 MARCH TO 31 JULY 1891								
	Subject	Lecturer	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
<b>Seniors</b>	Medicine	Dr Jordan	7 pm		7 pm		7 pm	
	Medical jurisprudence	Dr Ho Kai		7 pm		7 pm		
	Midwifery	Dr Hartigan		3 pm				3 pm
	Public health	MacCallum Esq.				8 pm		
	Pathology	Dr Thomson		2 pm		2 pm		2 pm
	Surgery	Dr Cantlie		1 pm		1 pm		1 pm
<b>All</b>	Clinical medicine	Dr Cowie				noon	noon	
	Clinical surgery	Dr Bell	noon		noon			
	Dentistry	Dr Noble				5.30pm		
	Materia medica	Dr Carvalho	2 pm		2 pm		2 pm	
<b>Juniors</b>	Anatomy	Dr Cantlie	1 pm		1 pm		1 pm	
	Chemistry	W Watson Esq.			8.30 pm			8.30 pm
	Physics	Dr Chalmers		8 pm				
	Physiology	Dr Blackburn		8.30 am		8.30 am		8.30 am

United States. Thus they had been well groomed in English with a Christian background.<sup>19</sup> The College had no endowment fund of its own; students paid an annual fee of \$60. English was the medium of teaching. There were no permanent classrooms, students lived in their own homes or other lodgings and moved around Hong Kong to attend lectures and clinical teachings in the lecturer's private clinics or hospitals. All teachers offered their services on a voluntary basis.<sup>5,20</sup> Nevertheless it was an impressive curriculum (see Table 1): physics, chemistry, botany, materia medica, anatomy, physiology and clinical observation in the first year; anatomy, physiology, pathology, principles of medicine, surgery, diseases of women and midwifery in the second and third years; medical jurisprudence, public health and practical minor surgery in the fourth year; and internal medicine, surgery, diseases of women and midwifery in the final year.<sup>20</sup> Students had to pass four examinations before obtaining the 'Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery of the College of Medicine for Chinese, Hong Kong'.

As Cantlie was the only member of the teaching staff who had experience of running a hospital school, the extracurricular activities resembled that of Charing Cross. There was cricket, tennis and rowing, and Cantlie instructed Sun in croquet.<sup>21</sup> There were also first aid classes for the St John's Ambulance Association and the Volunteers.<sup>19,21</sup>

Sun was the best of Cantlie's recruits – he was a brilliant student. The academic standards of the new college's medical students were comparable to those in Britain. This was mainly due to Cantlie's teaching – all of his students were very happy to study under him. He not only taught them medical science but science in general,

providing students with a wide knowledge of Western science, particularly the works of William Harvey, John Hunter, Edward Jenner, Charles Darwin and Joseph Lister. Cantlie's profound influence on Sun was the teaching of Darwin's theories of natural selection, as a result of which Sun was the first Chinese to accept the teachings of Darwin and believe in the survival of the fittest where there was competition in the animal and human world. Sun modified Darwin's theories by what he called the 'theory of mutual aid', believing that there is a natural bond that draws men together and that teaching can draw out their desire. Besides Darwin's work on evolution, Sun was especially interested in the history of the French Revolution. These two subjects were to have a profound influence on his ideology.<sup>19</sup>

At the final examination in July 1892, only two of the four candidates, Sun Yat-sen and Kong Ying-wa, graduated, with the results shown in Table 2.<sup>20</sup> A duplicate copy of Sun's diploma was on display at the University of Hong Kong until the Second World War, when it vanished.

At the first graduation ceremony, held on 23 July 1892, Cantlie, as dean of the College, addressed the audience as follows:

At this moment we remember the words of the Chinese proverbs that the gem cannot be polished without friction nor men perfected without adversity... Therefore in presenting these Licentiates to you today we come not humbly in an apologetic way asking to be forgiven for lack of opportunity in that we have not done better; but we present them to you and to the world with our heads erect and with no apologies. We have taught them without

**TABLE 2** Final examination results of the Hong Kong College of Medicine in 1892 (adapted from Lo<sup>20</sup>)

Subject	Sun Yat-sen	Kong Ying-wa
Botany	Honours	Pass
Chemistry	Honours	Pass
Anatomy	Honours	Honours
Physiology	Honours	Honours
Materia medica	Honours	Pass
Pathology	Honours	Honours
Medical jurisprudence	Honours	Honours
Public health	Honours	Pass
Medicine	Pass	Pass
Surgery	Pass	Honours
Midwifery	Honours	Pass
Year of entry	1887 January [sic]	1887 November
Year of graduation	1892 July	1892 July
Honour category	I	8

pecuniary reward or extraneous help and freely we hand our offering to the great Empire of China, where science is yet unknown, where ignorance of our own medieval times is current, where the astrologer stalks abroad with the belief that he is a physician, where the art of surgery has never been attempted, and where thousands of women suffer and die by the charmed potions of the witchcraft practices of so called obstetricians... Our Licentiates therefore go forth with the knowledge that the heart of China has been probed. With that fact before them let us hope that they will not fall by their way but carry their profession of which they may well be proud...<sup>18</sup>

After the celebrations came the reality of life. The position of Sun and Kong was difficult because neither had a British diploma and, although allowed to practise medicine, surgery and midwifery in Hong Kong, they could not issue birth or death certificates or legal medical documents of any kind, nor did they have the same protection in law as British doctors.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the Licentiates could obtain only a limited right of practice in the colony because the diploma was not fully recognised by the Medical Council of Hong Kong.

As an ethnic Chinese, Sun could, however, practise as a Chinese herbalist.<sup>22</sup> He was faced with the dilemma of either returning to China to practise Western medicine which his native country did not recognise or staying in Hong Kong with a license that did not receive full recognition by the issuing authority. The '1887 Preparatory Committee' of devoted medical practitioners and missionaries may have been too well intentioned in their efforts to take into account the legal and political consequence of establishing their medical college. Was

this an example of discrimination in the colonial era? As the qualification granted was not a university degree, this explanation is most likely.

Sun's fellow graduate, Kong, emigrated to Borneo, where he practised for the rest of his life. He recalled the following in an interview that appeared in Borneo's *Overseas Chinese Daily News* on 26 January 1940:

After graduation, there being no vacancies in Hong Kong, Governor Sir William Robinson wrote to the British Ambassador in Peking, requesting an introduction to Senior Minister Li Hung-chang. We were recommended as diligent, intelligent, and hard-working young men for employment in the Chinese Government. Li replied asking us to proceed to Peking and wait for future vacancies. Together with Dr Cantlie we went as far as Canton. However, the Viceroy there made things difficult by requesting us to fill in details of three generations of our ancestors, for scrutiny before further processing. The Premier [Sun] was angry and returned to Hong Kong. I also asked him against putting himself in peril by proceeding to the Capital. Henceforth he became more disenchanted with the Chinese Government and the more committed to revolution. This incident is unknown to outsiders and seldom mentioned.<sup>23</sup>

On his return to Hong Kong, Sun considered operating a pharmacy and began to seek investors, but Cantlie was strongly against this idea since in Great Britain medical practitioners occupied a higher social status than merchants. 'You must not do this. Never associate your name with a commercial enterprise,' he advised. 'Remember, being the first graduate from the Hong Kong College of Medicine, you must cherish your reputation!'<sup>24</sup> In the end Sun compromised by going to Macao, which was closer to his home village and where he knew many clansmen.

Macao's Chinese residents welcomed his expertise and offered him an office in Kiang Hu Hospital. Sun practised there for around a year from his 'Chinese-Western Dispensary', seeing patients from all walks of life from morning until evening.<sup>24</sup> He offered his services for free from ten to noon. Cantlie sometimes went over to assist in major surgical operations and recalled:

In a large well-built hospital Chinese patients were treated according to native methods. Sun impressed upon the Chinese governors of the hospital 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. With a largeness of mind characteristic of Chinamen, the governor said, 'Certainly, we will devote this wing of the hospital to European methods, and the other to Chinese practice, and we will judge the result.' Sun



commenced practice and I encouraged him, especially in his surgical work. When major operations had to be done I went on several occasions to Macao to assist him, and there in the presence of the governors of the hospital he performed important operations requiring skill, coolness of judgement and dexterity. It was a goodly journey to Macao by sea, and took me away a considerable time from my daily routine of work. Why did I go on this journey to Macao to help this man? For the reason that others have fought for and died for him, because I loved and respected him. His is a nature that draws men's regard towards him and makes them ready to serve him at the operating table or in the battlefield; an unexplainable influence, a magnetism which prevails and finds its expression in attracting men to his side.<sup>11</sup>

In spite of Sun's efforts, he aroused the professional jealousy of the Portuguese doctors, who saw him as a threat and persuaded the Macao government to bar him from practising in Macao. Sun had no choice but to return to Canton and combine his Western medical knowledge with traditional Chinese herbalism.<sup>15</sup> Back home he operated from an 'East-West Dispensary', where he came into contact with other young men to discuss political reform and revolution.<sup>25</sup>

In February 1896 Cantlie resigned from the Hong Kong College of Medicine due to ill health and returned to England,<sup>19</sup> but the association between him and Sun did not end there. Fate would soon draw them together again when Sun was kidnapped in London by the Chinese Legation in October 1896 and then rescued by Cantlie.<sup>19,26</sup>

The Hong Kong College of Medicine existed until 1912 when it was incorporated as the faculty of medicine into the University of Hong Kong, the brainchild of the 14th Governor, Sir Frederick John Dealtry Lugard.<sup>16</sup> During the 25 years of its existence (1887–1912), 128 students enrolled, resulting in 51 Licentiates.<sup>15</sup> Because of Sun's influence, one may say that the College was a breeding ground for young Chinese revolutionaries.<sup>25</sup>

### REVOLUTIONARY ROOTS: THE HONG KONG CONNECTION

Within two years of Sun's arrival in Hong Kong as a medical student he met three other young men with similar ideals.<sup>25</sup> They became a closely knit group and openly discussed revolutionary views. The first of these comrades was Yeung Hok-ling, a childhood friend from Sun's village in China. At the Yeung family's trading company in Hong Kong, the second floor was reserved as a secret meeting place for Sun, Yeung and their two other comrades: Yao Lit and Chen Shiu-pak, another medical student. This foursome became known as the 'Four Big Outlaws' (Figure 1).<sup>23,25</sup>



**FIGURE 1** The famous 'Four Big Outlaws' photographed on 10 October 1888 at the Alice Memorial Hospital. Seated from left: Yeung Hok-ling, Sun Yat-sen, Chen Shiu-Pak and Yao Lit. Standing behind them is another junior medical student, Kwan King-leung. (Courtesy of the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences.)

Sun had been infuriated by the humiliating terms of the Treaty of Tientsin that ended the Sino-French War of 1885, ceding Vietnam to France as a result. He reflected: 'A physician can only save a limited number of lives. Overthrowing the Ch'ing dynasty can save innumerable people. Thus I pledge to dedicate my life to this cause.' Further events of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, with humiliating defeats of the Imperial Manchu army, raised nationalistic sentiment in China. It was then in Hong Kong that Sun founded the Hsin-chung Hui (Society to Revitalise China), the precursor of subsequent Chinese revolutionary societies.<sup>23,24</sup>

Sun returned to his alma mater after China had become a republic. On 20 February 1923, en route to Shanghai from Canton, he addressed students in the Great Hall of the University of Hong Kong.<sup>27</sup> Its pro-chancellor, Claude Severn, remarked that Sun had come because he was not only one of the first pupils of the College of Medicine from which the university had sprung, but he was also the first to study under Manson and Cantlie, who had done a great deal for medical science in the colony.<sup>10</sup> Writing about this address, Sun reminisced:

I felt as though I had returned home, because Hong Kong and this University were my intellectual birthplace. I had not prepared a speech but thought I would answer certain questions which had been put to me many times and which, no doubt, many present would also like to put to me. I had never before been able to answer it properly, but I felt today that I could. The question was 'where and how did I get my revolutionary and modern ideas?' I got these ideas in the Colony of Hong Kong!<sup>28,29</sup>

Sun magnanimously admitted that he obtained his inspiration for a new China from the able, efficient and incorruptible British administration of Hong Kong:

More than 30 years ago I was studying in Hong Kong and spent a great deal of my spare time in walking the streets of the colony. Hong Kong impressed me a great deal, because there was orderly calm and there was artistic work being done without interruption. I returned to my home in Heung Shan twice a year and immediately I noticed the difference. There was disorder instead of order, insecurity instead of security. I even had to be my own policeman, and I have had to see that my rifle was in order. I compared Heung Shan with Hong Kong, and although they were only 50 miles apart, the difference impressed me so much that I began to wonder why it was that foreigners had done such marvellous things with this barren rock within 70 or 80 years while China with 4,000 years of civilisation had not even one place like Hong Kong...

And I found that among the government officers corruption was the exception and purity the rule. It was the contrary in China, where corruption among officials was the rule... I was told by elders that good government in England and Europe was not natural to those places, but that men had brought changes in themselves. In England years ago there was just the same corruption, just the same forgeries in the courts, and the same cruelty, but that Englishmen loved liberty and said, 'We shall no longer stand these things, we shall change them.' Thus I had the idea in my head, 'Why can we not change it in China?' [We] in China could imitate what had been done elsewhere, and the first thing to do was to get a change in government so as to make everything possible... So immediately after I had graduated from College I decided it was necessary for me to give up the profession of curing men's bodies and take up the task of curing my own country.<sup>28,29</sup>

In the case of Sun, medicine's loss was China's gain, for he eventually overthrew the Imperial Chinese Government to found the Republic of China.<sup>24</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although the ultimate career of President Sun Yat-sen (Figure 2) was not destined to be medical but political, it was during his formative years as a medical student in Hong Kong that his revolutionary ideas developed and his political thoughts matured. To do revolutionary work Sun realised he must have a professional vocation to



**FIGURE 2** Portrait of President Sun Yat-sen in his famous *chung-shan* suit. (A print in the author's collection.)

begin with. In becoming a Western medical practitioner, he felt that he could be of use in developing modern medical practice in China against the evils of traditional Chinese practice. At the same time, this profession could offer a cloak of security for his reform work.<sup>23,30</sup> In his memoirs Sun wrote that he regarded 'medical science as the kindly aunt who brought me out to the high road of politics'.<sup>21</sup>

The most significant event in Sun's early life was the establishment of the Hong Kong College of Medicine for Chinese. It was here that the father of modern China completed his education.<sup>14</sup> Sun applied the knowledge he gained and the social status he attained for the welfare of his countrymen. He was primarily a reformer by nature, and his ambitions were not personal.<sup>31</sup> His medical training was an important link in the chain of events that transformed him from a healer of the sick to the saviour of a nation.<sup>15,31</sup>

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