Sun Yat-sen’s Life

Sun Yat-sen is known as the founder of the Republic of China in 1912, the “Father of the Modern Chinese Nation”, a forerunner of Chinese nationalism and democracy, and a revolutionary who overthrew the Manchu Qing government and ended the two-millennia-long imperial rule in China.

Sun Yat-sen was born in 1866 in a village in Guangdong province, in southern China. As a Hakka, an ethnic minority in Guangdong, after receiving primary education, he moved to Honolulu in Hawaii, where he studied English, science and Christianity. Later, he returned to his motherland and studied medicine in Guangzhou.

In 1894-95, China was defeated by Japan in the first Sino-Japanese war. This military debacle frustrated many Chinese. While some Chinese proposed political reform of the imperial institution, Sun Yat-sen and others advocated revolution to overthrow the dynastic system and replace it with a republic to transform China into a modern nation-state.
Sun’s Revolutionary Activities

From 1895, revolutionary groups led by Sun Yat-sen planned and launched revolts in Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and other Chinese cities. The Qing regime cracked down on these uprisings, but they spread revolutionary ideas and weakened Manchu rule. Meanwhile, Sun traveled extensively in Southeast Asia, Europe, Japan, and America to promulgate revolutionary ideas and raise funds among overseas Chinese while seeking refuge in these countries.
In 1905, in Tokyo, Japan, Sun Yat-sen established the United League (Tongmenghui), uniting various revolutionary groups in China. He put forward the slogan “expelling the barbarians [the Manchus] and reviving China”. He also advocated the Three Principles of the People, in which he reiterated the appeals of nationalism (creating a Chinese nation-state), of democracy (asserting people’s rights through democratic means), and of promoting the welfare of the people.

The 1911 Revolution

On Oct. 10, 1911, an uprising broke out in Wuchang, triggering a chain reaction of independence movements in many provinces in China. Although not directly involved in this uprising, Sun Yat-sen returned to China from overseas and took the post of provisional president of the Republic of China. In Nanjing, on Jan. 1, 1912, Sun declared the creation of the Republic and the Provisional Constitution that ended China’s imperial rule.
In Beijing, Yuan Shikai, the military leader of the Qing Beiyang Army, controlled the court politics. On behalf of the Qing court, Yuan negotiated with the Republican government in the south. To avoid a bloody civil war, Sun agreed to pass the presidency to Yuan provided that the latter honor the Provisional Constitution. Having forced the last emperor of China, Puyi, to abdicate the throne, Yuan became the president. A National Assembly was also created and moved to Beijing in May 1912. In the same year, the first parliamentary election was carried out. Song Jiaoren reorganized the United League into the Nationalist Party, known as the KMT, and was successful in the election, winning roughly half of the seats in both the lower and upper houses. However, Yuan Shikai used military forces loyal to him to intervene in the working of the parliament. Song Jiaoren was assassinated and the parliamentary movement thwarted. Sun Yat-sen was forced to start a “Second Revolution” to mobilize military force against Yuan Shikai in 1913.
Setbacks

In 1915, Yuan Shikai proclaimed himself the Emperor of China, abolishing the Provisional Constitution. Sun, allied with southern warlords, waged war against Yuan but failed. During the political chaos in China, Sun developed an interest in the international socialist movement and redefined his Principle of Welfare as socialism.

After Yuan Shikai’s demise, several warlords ruled in the provinces—the central government ruled only in name. In 1921, Sun established a military government in Guangzhou and was proclaimed Grand Marshal. The newly founded USSR supported Sun and sent agents to Guangzhou to assist Sun’s revolutionary project. With the endorsement of the Soviet Union, Sun resurrected the KMT and united with the Chinese Communist Party, created in 1921. The alliance, known as the First United Front, was established between the two parties and aimed at a military re-unification of China and the creation of a revolutionary government over the whole of China. A military academy was founded in Whampoa near Guangzhou, with Chiang Kai-shek as its principal. Chiang was also appointed by Sun as the commander of the National Revolutionary Army in preparation for a northern expedition.
Legacy

On the eve of the Northern Expedition, Sun Yat-sen travelled to Beijing to engage in a talk with the northern government, where he fell ill and died at the age of 58. The Northern Expedition was carried out in 1927 and led to the re-unification of China under Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government. A mausoleum was completed on Mt. Zhong in Nanjing and Sun was buried there in 1929.

Sun Yat-sen was remembered by both the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party as the “Father of modern China”. His writings, images, and statues can be found in Chinese communities throughout the world as symbols of the lasting pursuit of a strong, united, wealthy, and democratic China.