

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 225

“We Dream of the Future”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“We live in the present, we dream of the future, but we learn eternal truths from the past.”

Soong Mei-ling, known in the West as Madame Chiang Kai-shek.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 225. We Dream of the Future.

We return to China today, to pick up the story from episode 202. You’ll recall that in that episode, rule over China had devolved into cliques of warlords. Each of these cliques controlled a region of the country, a province or a few provinces, and fought ongoing wars against each other to the detriment of Chinese people and the development of the nation. The official Chinese government in Beijing was in fact the puppet of whatever clique controlled the capital.

Two political groups in China stood against the warlords. One was the Communist Party of China. The other was the Kuomintang, the Nationalist Party of Sun Yat-sen, based in Guangdong, in southern China.

The Communist Party of China, or CPC, was an outgrowth of the New Culture Movement. But it took until 1920, following the May Fourth Movement and outreach from Comintern, before the Party really got going. One of the first projects of the CPC was to organize industrial workers, since these are presumed to be the proletariat that will one day lead the revolution. There had been little union activity in China in earlier days, but the May Fourth Movement kickstarted labor organization among Chinese factory workers. You might at first wonder why, since the May Fourth Movement was a reaction against Japanese control of the Shandong Peninsula and the Paris Peace Conference’s endorsement of that Japanese claim. These are nationalist political issues, not labor issues.

But in fact, labor rights and nationalism go hand in hand in China, because most Chinese factories were owned by foreigners. Even worse, Chinese-owned factories struggled to compete because of all those special concessions the Chinese government has been forced to grant to foreign interests. Foreign-owned factories got tax breaks and special access to raw materials, railroads, and ports. Chinese industry boomed during the Great War, but the foreign owners saw most of the profits, while Chinese workers saw rising food prices gobbling up ever larger shares of their pay packets. This is a familiar story by now; it was happening worldwide.

But the lot of the Chinese workers was a particularly unhappy one. Pay was low. Their foreign bosses treated them badly, none more so than the Japanese, who were known to beat their Chinese employees. Chinese workers were forced to submit to body searches when they left work, lest they steal even some small bit of company property. It was one further example of how Chinese got second-class treatment in their own country. So when the May Fourth Movement came along, condemning foreigners in general and Japanese in particular, when it called for a boycott of Japanese goods, these same factory workers got right on board with the protests. Chinese Communists, with support from Moscow, began organizing these unhappy, disgruntled workers.

Labor unrest grew rapidly in the aftermath of the May Fourth Movement, and because the bosses were so often foreigners, it grew with a much larger nationalist component than you would see in other countries. An example is the Hong Kong Seamen's Strike of 1922. Chinese seamen in Hong Kong had grievances against their British employers that were typical of the period. Chinese sailors got paid less than British sailors for the same work. If you wanted one of these jobs, you first had to pay a fee to a recruiter, who would also claim a share of your salary over the first few months of your new job. And wages hadn't increased since the war, in spite of ever higher food prices.

In January 1922, some 30,000 Hong Kong seamen went on strike. Negotiations went nowhere. Then dock workers and other laborers in Hong Kong began striking in support of the seamen. The Hong Kong government cracked down on the unions, raiding their offices and arresting their leaders, but the strikes merely spread further. By the end of February, hardly anyone in Hong Kong was working. Factories, offices, hotels, and restaurants were all closed. Even domestic servants refused to work for their British employers.

One of the most remarkable developments of this strike occurred when British ships which could no longer buy supplies in Hong Kong tried sailing up the Pearl River to Guangzhou, to discover that merchants there wouldn't sell to them either. These were not laborers or union members; these were middle-class shopkeepers in a whole other city, yet they stood with the Hong Kong strikers against foreign businesses. This was not class solidarity; this was national solidarity.

British ship-owners had no choice but to agree to the strikers' demands, a dramatic victory that jumpstarted the labor movement across China. But when labor unions tried to assert themselves

in areas ruled by the warlords, some of the more ruthless were willing to resort to violence. On February 7, 1923, a year after the Hong Kong strike, one of the most powerful of the northern warlords, the one who controlled the government in Beijing, answered a railway workers' strike with an armed assault on the strikers, killing 35 of them and crushing the strike.

This violence shocked and frightened people across China and tamped down the labor movement for the time being. You'll recall from episode 202 that at this time, in 1923, Comintern, the Communist International based in Moscow, was in discussions with both Sun Yat-sen and his Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang, and with the Communist Party in China, urging them to combine forces into a united front. Chinese Communists were skeptical. In their view, the Nationalist Party was hopelessly bourgeois, and they were quite right about that. Business, commercial, and financial interests in Guangzhou were the base of Nationalist Party support. These were people who were never going to be the vanguard of the proletarian revolution.

The opinion in Moscow was a little different. While they didn't exactly dispute the Chinese Communists' view of the Nationalists, the Communist International believed that China was at least a generation or two away from socialist revolution. The Chinese proletariat just wasn't big enough. China needed a more numerous proletariat, which meant more factories, which meant more capitalism, which meant bourgeois democracy. Therefore, the Nationalist Party cause is also the Communist Party cause, at least for the time being. Remember that the February Revolution comes before the October Revolution. That's Marxism 101.

But the Chinese Communists saw things differently. Many of them hoped China could find a way to leapfrog over capitalism and advance straight into socialism. If that were going to happen, it would entail organizing China's rural peasant farmers, who accounted for about 80% of the population. Chinese farmers labored long, using traditional farming methods largely unaffected by twentieth-century innovations like tractors, but they were also highly productive, and the introduction of railroads was gradually opening up new markets. Left to themselves, these peasant farmers could do very well. Indeed, some Communists dismissed them as petit bourgeoisie, more likely to resist the Revolution than fight for it.

But in reality, they were not left to themselves. They were saddled with debts and onerous taxes and land rents, and left defenseless against bandits and warlord armies that were only half a step above bandits.

Some CPC leaders worked on organizing these peasant farmers, notably the 27-year old Peng Pai, a socialist who was also a member of a very wealthy landowning family in Guangdong Province. As the child of a family of hated landlords, Peng struggled to gain acceptance with the peasants. He cultivated relationships with the peasants by dressing like them, living among them, and spending more time listening than talking, which was more than you could say of many of his CPC comrades. The peasants began to warm to him, especially once he talked his family into lowering their rents. By 1924, he had successfully organized tens of thousands of families in

Haifeng County, an isolated region previously known primarily as bandit country. That same year, as the Nationalists and the Communists formed their United Front, Peng joined the Nationalist Party. He and Mao Zedong helped organize a program to train other organizers to do similar rural outreach on behalf of the United Front.

Within the Nationalist Party, emissaries from Comintern helped organize and centralize the KMT around Sun Yat-sen and his teachings. Sun had actually had to flee Guangzhou for Shanghai for a time after a falling out with the provincial governor. But with the support of the Communists, at home and internationally, Sun's position was restored and by 1923, the party was fully under his control once again. He became a powerful leader within the KMT; he likely had more control over them than Lenin had ever had over the Bolsheviks. The Nationalists, having become disillusioned by the quick collapse of their first attempt to create a democratic China, now sought to seize power by military means. This time, after the warlords were dispensed with, China would be ruled by a military dictatorship that would maintain order while democratic procedures would be introduced gradually as China became ready for them.

Comintern was in agreement with Sun that this was the best way to proceed. They also agreed that socialism for China was a long way off, and democracy a middling way off. Okay then, first order, then democracy, then socialism. Sun was quite happy with this arrangement, and he was especially happy with the aid. Besides helping to reorganize the Kuomintang, the Soviet Communists advanced funds, which the KMT used to establish a university in Guangzhou that would provide students with both an education and an introduction to the political philosophy of Sun Yat-sen. This new university was called Canton National University back then; it's still operating today as Sun Yat-sen University and is one of the top universities in China.

Soviet financing also paid for a Nationalist Party military academy, known at first as the Whampoa Military Academy, after the district of Guangzhou city where it was located. Later it would be renamed the Republic of China Military Academy. The warlord armies were poorly trained, scarcely more than outlaw bands. If the KMT was going to overthrow the warlords and retake China by force of arms, it would need a trained military that could outfight the warlords, and Whampoa was established to fill that need. Initially, it provided only basic military training, but soon added more advanced and specialized subjects like engineering and logistics. Like the University, the curriculum at Whampoa also included a heavy dose of politics. Soldiers need to understand what they're fighting for.

Two of the Academy's early political instructors were a high-ranking Nationalist, Wang Jingwei, who had risen to become one of Sun's favorites, and an important Communist leader, Zhou Enlai. You can expect to hear both of those names again in future episodes. Overall command of the Academy was assigned to another Nationalist who was becoming even more of a favorite than Wang. His name was Chiang Kai-shek, and you will hear more of that name as well. In fact, I might as well go ahead and introduce him to you now, but first, allow me to introduce you to his in-laws.

[music: 醉漁唱晚 (*The Evening Song of the Drunken Fisherman*)]

Han Jiaozhun was born on the Chinese island of Hainan sometime in the early 1860s. No one knows the exact date. In 1878, when he was sixteen years old, give or take, he got a job as a cabin boy aboard a ship bound for Boston, Massachusetts. His goal was to work for his uncle, who owned a shop in that city's Chinatown, where he sold tea and silk and other goods imported from China. When Jiaozhun learned that teenagers could get a free education in the United States, he began to yearn to go to school himself. But his uncle refused to allow him time off from the shop.

So Jiaozhun ran away from his uncle, down to Boston Harbor, where he stowed away aboard a ship, the US Revenue Cutter *Albert Gallatin*. These revenue cutters were ships that policed the coast against smuggling. In 1915, the US Revenue Cutter Service and the US Life-Saving Service would be combined into the US Coast Guard.

But this is 1879, and right now it's still the Revenue Cutter Service. (You might remember all the way back to episode 5, when I mentioned one of these revenue cutters was part of Commodore Dewey's squadron at the Battle of Manila Bay.) The crew of this particular ship did not discover that Jiaozhun was aboard until they were already under way. The crew took him to their commander, a man named Eric Gabrielson. When Jiaozhun told the commander his story, Gabrielson, who was an immigrant himself, from Norway, took pity on the young man and pulled strings to get him a job as a cabin boy aboard the *Gallatin*, even though Jiaozhun was underage. Each one of these cutters carried a crew of ten, which included two cabin boys.

Gabrielson was also an enthusiastic Methodist and he took Jiaozhun to church with him whenever they were ashore. In May 1880, Gabrielson was transferred to a new cutter based in Wilmington, North Carolina. Jiaozhun followed him there, where Gabrielson introduced him to the pastor and congregation of the Fifth Street Methodist Church in Wilmington, where he was baptized. He took the name Charles Soon. It's not clear why. Possibly because it sounded similar to Jiaozhun? I don't know. Later he would tweak this name to Charles Soong, and that's what I'll call him from now on.

Charlie, as he was known, expressed a desire to gain an education and return to China as a Methodist missionary. The church supported him, including a tobacco magnate and philanthropist named Julian Carr who offered to finance Charlie's education. The church pastor was able to get Charlie placed at Trinity College, a Methodist school in North Carolina known today as Duke University. Charlie Soong studied at Trinity for two years as the school's first and only foreign student, then transferred to Vanderbilt College in Nashville, another Methodist school, where he graduated in 1885 with a degree in theology. He wanted to continue his studies and earn a medical degree, always useful in missionary work, but the chancellor at Vanderbilt opposed this and sent Charlie to a Methodist mission in Shanghai in 1886.

Charles Soong worked as a Methodist missionary in Shanghai for six years, but it seems this was not a happy time. Shanghai was not Hainan. The people of Shanghai spoke a different dialect and had different customs and looked down on this poor boy, half a rustic from Hainan, half an Americanized whatever who hardly seemed to be Chinese at all.

But at least he found love. He married Ni Guizhen, the daughter of a wealthy Christian family in 1887, and by 1900, they had three daughters and three sons. Soong left missionary work in 1892 and set up a printing shop, the main business of which was printing Bibles, so if not exactly missionary work, you could call it missionary-adjacent. His business interests expanded from there, and he would go on to become quite successful and quite wealthy. He also got involved in politics, joining a secret anti-Qing and pro-republican underground movement called the Red Gang.

In 1894, Soong met Sun Yat-sen at a Methodist church service, and they got on like a house on fire. Sun, like Soong, was from southern China, spoke a similar dialect, and the two shared a southern worldview and an antipathy toward the Qing dynasty. They would develop a close relationship, and Soong would become one of those business and merchant types that I keep telling you were the backbone of Sun's support and an important constituency of the Kuomintang.

Soong wanted all of his children to be educated in America. His three sons grew up to become bankers, important figures in the Chinese financial world, and key supporters of the KMT. But I want to focus on his three daughters, Ai-ling, Ching-ling, and Mei-ling. All three of them attended Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia. Ai-ling, the eldest, graduated in 1909 and returned to China where she took up a position as personal secretary to Sun Yat-sen. The second daughter, Ching-ling returned to China in 1912, which was unfortunate timing, as that was just before Yuan Shikai seized control and outlawed the KMT, forcing Sun to return to exile in Japan. By this time, Charles Soong and his family were so closely associated with Sun and the Nationalists that they felt it necessary to follow him into exile in Japan.

During their Japanese exile, Ai-ling met and married a banker named Kong Xiangxi, though he's usually referred to in English history books as H. H. Kung. He was another wealthy supporter of the Nationalist Party, perhaps the richest person in China.

When Ai-ling married, she left her position as Sun Yat-sen's secretary, to be replaced by her next youngest sister, Ching-ling. A year later, in 1915, the 22-year old Ching-ling married the 48-year old Sun Yat-sen. Despite his close relationship with Sun, Charles Soong was furious when he found out about the impending marriage. Apart from the age difference, Sun Yat-sen had married two other women, had had children with both, but had never gotten around to divorcing either one, which Charles saw as a profound contradiction of Sun's professed Christian faith. It led to a falling-out between the two men, and they never reconciled before Charles Soong died in 1918, at the age of 56-ish, from kidney failure.

The following year, Sun Yat-sen returned to China and the surviving members of the Soong family followed him, including the youngest daughter, Mei-ling. Mei-ling had followed in her older sisters' footsteps by traveling to the US and going to school at Wesleyan College, but she then transferred to Wellesley College because her older brother was attending Harvard. She graduated from Wellesley in 1917. In 1920, two years after the family had returned to China, Mei-ling met Chiang Kai-shek, the commandant of Whampoa Military Academy.

And now that I've introduced you to the general's in-laws, let's talk about the general.

Jiang Jieshi was born in 1887 in Zhejiang province, which lies on the central coast of China. The name I just gave you is his name in Mandarin (more or less), but he was and is universally known in the English-speaking world by the Anglicized pronunciation of the Cantonese form of his name, Chiang Kai-shek, and that's what we'll call him in the podcast. His father was a well-to-do salt merchant. His mother was his father's third wife; he was their first child together. His father died when Chiang was just eight years old, leaving his mother and him alone in a harsh world. She was a devout Buddhist; her son inherited her faith. He said later that "I felt throughout my childhood that Mother and I were fighting a helpless lone war. We were alone in a desert, no available or possible assistance could we look forward to. But our determination was never shaken, nor hope abandoned."

Life was a war to young Kai-shek and he took an interest in the military while he was still a boy. In 1906, the year after Japan had won the Russo-Japanese War—and also won the admiration of many Chinese for being the first Asian nation in modern times to stand up to the Westerners and make it stick—19-year-old Chiang Kai-shek went to Japan for military training. By this time, Chiang was already ardently anti-Qing and joined the Tongmenhui, the revolutionary group of expatriate Chinese living in Japan founded by Sun Yat-sen. Chiang served two years in the Japanese Army, but left to return to China in 1911 when the revolution broke out there. He became an officer in the Republican Army. When Yuan Shikai seized power, Chiang also followed Sun Yat-sen into exile in Japan, then returned to China when Sun did.

In 1922, when Sun Yat-sen was losing control and had to flee Guangzhou for a time, Chiang was there to help Sun and his family evacuate and stayed with them for their protection. Sun was very impressed with Chiang's loyalty, at a time when many of his supporters seemed to be abandoning him. The fact that Soong Mei-ling, Sun's sister-in-law, had by this time already caught Chiang's eye may have had something to do with it.

After Sun resumed his position as leader of a newly centralized Kuomintang, he tapped Chiang for the job of commandant of the newly created Whampoa Military Academy. Chiang spent some time in the Soviet Union in 1924, to receive instruction on Red Army organization and training. The Russians were impressed with Chiang, and conveyed this to Sun, further enhancing Chiang's position in the KMT.

By this time, Chiang was expressing a wish to marry Mei-ling, but her mother opposed the marriage for reasons similar to her late father's opposition to her sister marrying Sun Yat-sen, namely that Chiang was not a Christian and was already married. But Chiang was different. When faced with these objections, he agreed to divorce his first wife and convert to Christianity. But this conversion would not happen overnight. As Chiang explained to his future mother-in-law, religion was not like a pill you could just swallow. It was something one needed to absorb, gradually, over time.

[music: 二泉映月 (*The Moon Reflecting in the Second Spring*)]

So that brings us around to where we were before, with Chiang Kai-shek a rising figure in the Kuomintang, commandant of the Whampoa Military Academy, and soon-to-be brother-in-law to Sun Yat-sen.

Chiang was an adept leader for the Academy. His military and ideological zeal inspired the cadets. He taught patriotism toward China and loyalty to Sun Yat-sen, the Kuomintang, and their goal of a united and democratic China. Sun's and the Soviets' faith in him was paying off.

Sun himself, meanwhile, was on a speaking tour of China, decrying corruption and warlordism and presenting his three principles as an alternative. He called for a national convention to draft a constitution for a democratic China and an end to the special treaty concessions for the European powers.

But his health was declining. In January 1925, while he was in Beijing attempting to broker a deal with some of the northern warlords, he underwent exploratory surgery. The doctors discovered advanced and very cancerous tumors in his liver and gave him ten days to live. He was treated with radium, a new and untested treatment at the time, and also with traditional Chinese medicine. He lived five weeks longer than the ten days the doctors gave him, before passing away on March 12, 1925, at the age of 58.

The timing of Sun's death could scarcely have been worse for the cause he was fighting for. The tensions between China's warlords and the country's rising and very nationalistic labor movement had already erupted into violence. The killings of the railroad workers two years ago had cowed the unions for a time, but hard feelings between workers and employers was about to explode into violence once again, this time in Shanghai, which at this time was one of the most industrialized cities in China. Most of the factories in Shanghai were foreign owned, including 27 Japanese-owned textile mills. On May 15, an uprising inside one of these mills led to the Japanese opening fire on the workers, killing one and wounding several.

This led to a rash of strikes and protest marches in Shanghai. On May 22, a procession of student demonstrators headed for the murdered worker's funeral tried to march through the section of the city reserved for foreigners and were arrested by the British-controlled police. On May 30, the day the trials of the arrested demonstrators were to begin, a further demonstration, numbering

about 2,000, outside a police station on Nanjing Road led to the British police commander, a man named Edward Everson, and his police firing into the crowd, killing ten people and injuring about fifty. These killings became known to history as the Nanjing Road Incident or, more provocatively, as the Shanghai Massacre.

Chinese in Shanghai and across the nation were outraged by these killings and the country was hit by waves of strikes, demonstrations, and boycotts of foreign goods. The protestors demanded labor reforms and an end to those special concessions for the foreigners. In Shanghai, these protests, that came to be known as the May Thirtieth Movement, led to some improvements for workers in pay and living conditions, but the strikers' political demands went unanswered. Notably, during the period of the May Thirtieth Movement, the membership of the Communist Party of China rose from 1000 to 10,000. Two years later, membership was at 57,000.

Meanwhile, armed conflict had broken out between three of the most powerful warlords in northern China in autumn of 1924. By the time the May Thirtieth Movement built up a head of steam, the northern warlords were weakened from fighting among themselves, and the national government in Beijing was paralyzed and discredited. Now was an excellent time to strike.

Only, the untimely death of Sun Yat-sen left the Nationalists suddenly leaderless at this critical moment. With the Communists growing ever stronger, an idle or passive Kuomintang would run the risk of fading into irrelevance. On his deathbed, Sun had signed a "political testament," reaffirming his Three Principles and calling on the Nationalists to continue the struggle after he was gone. This statement had been drafted for him by Wang Jinwei. After Sun's death, Wang, the party chairman, made a bid to become Sun's successor.

Only, the Nationalist Party was developing a split between its left and right wings. On the left there were the Communists. You'll recall that under the United Front agreement, Communists could join the KMT without giving up membership in their own party. Wang was not a Communist himself, but was perceived by the right wing of the party to be too accommodating to them. Remember that bankers and merchants and businesspeople were an important KMT constituency, and they took to Communists like Anakin Skywalker takes to sand. Before Sun's body was cold, leaders of the KMT's right wing were already discussing among themselves strategies to purge the party of its Communists.

And then there was Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang had no affiliation with either wing of the party. A good soldier is supposed to stay out of politics and take orders from the civilian leadership, and Chiang was nothing if not a good soldier. Still, he made both party factions uneasy. The left didn't trust him because of his military background; the right didn't trust him because of his close contacts with the Soviets and the Red Army. Chiang only had one biological child, a son by his first wife named Ching-kuo, born in 1910. The father and the son were not close. By the time Ching-kuo was a teenager, he was full of revolutionary zeal. (Like that never happened to a teenager before.) So much revolutionary zeal that in 1925, when he was just 15 years old, Ching-

kuo moved to the Soviet Union to attend a school set up by Comintern to train Chinese Communist revolutionaries. Deng Xiaoping was one of his classmates there. His father did not approve of this decision, though how hard he tried to stop his son from going is unclear. But Ching-kuo got his way. Teenagers, you know what I'm saying? But this was another mark against the elder Chiang as far as the right-wing Nationalists were concerned.

Still, Chiang was the leader who had organized and trained the army. If now was the time for the United Front to put its plans into motion and move against the warlords, Chiang Kai-shek seemed the logical choice to lead the offensive.

As it happened, Chiang Kai-shek did in fact have very strong views about the left versus right debate within the Nationalist Party. It's just that he was keeping them to himself. But it won't be long now before the whole world finds out exactly how Chiang Kai-shek feels about Communism.

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Carol for her kind donation, and thank you to Kenneth for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Carol and Kenneth help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to everyone else who has pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

The podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. Sometimes it's my own work, sometimes it's licensed, but many times, the music you hear here is free and downloadable. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take up a very special subject: jazz. This is a topic I've been itching to talk about for some time, but I've also been nervous about whether I can do it justice. Cross your fingers and wish me luck. Our Native Music, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Now that Sun Yat-sen has died, I would be remiss if I didn't say a word about his legacy. It is remarkable, almost unique, in that he was and is held in high esteem both by the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party. In the Republic of China, he is known as the "Father of the Nation," and his image is ubiquitous. In the People's Republic of China, he is known as the "Forerunner of the Revolution," and hailed as a nationalist and a socialist. Statues and memorials to Sun Yat-sen can be found throughout China, including Taiwan and Hong Kong, and most Chinese cities have a Sun Yat-sen Street.

Many foreign cities that have significant ethnic Chinese populations also have statues and memorials to Sun, including Singapore, Penang in Malaysia, Melbourne, Honolulu, Vancouver, Toronto, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City.

[music: Closing Theme]

© 2021 by Mark Painter. All rights reserved.