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**Sun Yatsen**  
*Seeking a Newer China*

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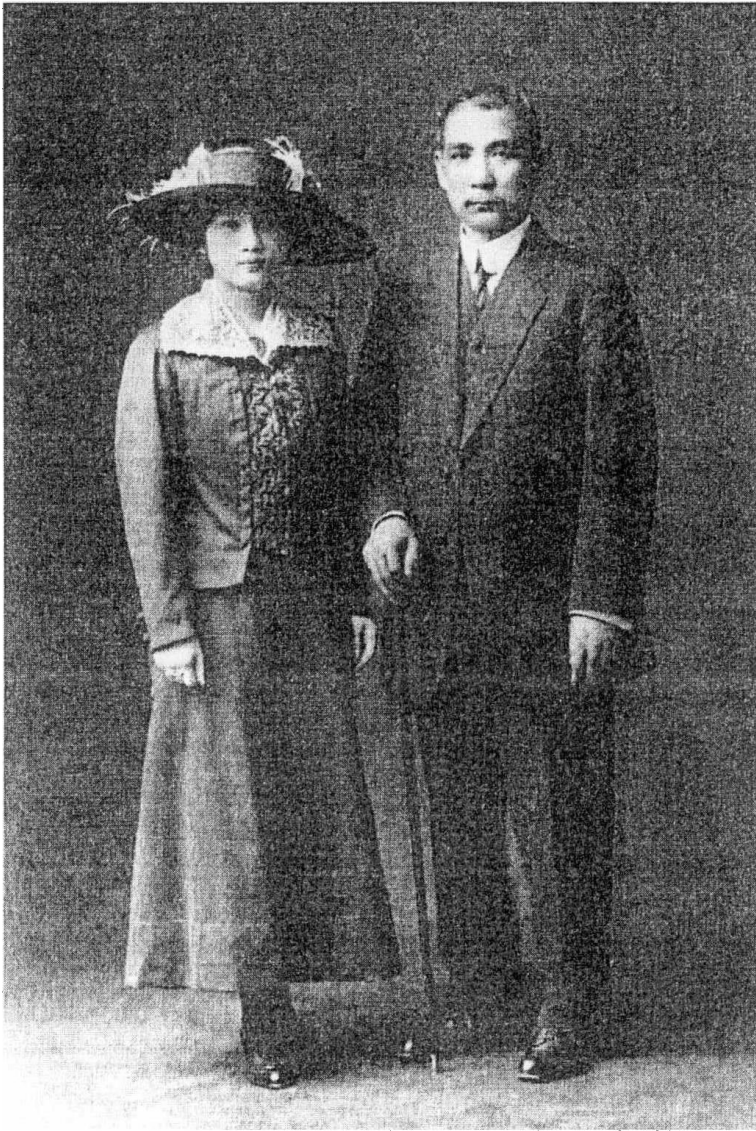
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Sun Yatsen's international connections: Chinese revolutionary Sun Yatsen, right, poses with his final wife Soong Qingling on the occasion of their wedding in Tokyo, Japan in 1915.  
*(Courtesy of the Library of Congress)*



## Editor's Preface

*"Biography is history seen through the prism of a person."*

—LOUIS FISCHER

**I**t is often challenging to identify the roles and experiences of individuals in world history. Larger forces predominate. Yet biography provides important access to world history. It shows how individuals helped shape the society around them. Biography also offers concrete illustrations of larger patterns in political and intellectual life, in family life, and in the economy.

The Longman Library of World Biography series seeks to capture the individuality and drama that mark human character. It deals with individuals operating in one of the main periods of world history, while also reflecting issues in the particular society around them. Here, the individual illustrates larger themes of time and place. The interplay between the personal and general is always the key to using biography in history, and world history is no exception. Always, too, there is the question of personal agency: How much do individuals, even great ones, shape their own lives and environment, and how much are they shaped by the world around them?

PETER N. STEARNS



## Author's Preface

I like to define history as the story of human beings on the move.

By this standard, Sun Yatsen (1866–1925) is an excellent subject for a historical biography. Sun was ceaselessly dynamic, leading a movement among Chinese to overthrow the last traditional dynasty of China's history and replace it with a modern-style republic. When this republic became a reality, he briefly served as its president, afterward continuing to influence his country for decades to come through the political party he created, the controversial foreign assistance he accepted, and the many writings he left behind. As one of his biographers has stated, while most people fail to live up to their full potential, Sun “tried to go way beyond his.”

Sun was also on the move in a more literal sense. Living before the inception of commercial air travel, he took more than a dozen long ocean voyages—not to mention innumerable shorter boat trips between countries within East and Southeast Asia. He made these trips in order to chat, plot, and plead with a tremendous variety of people worldwide. As another of his biographers has phrased it, he was the “traveling salesman of the revolution” against the Qing government—the dynasty he opposed. Among the Chinese, groups with a potential interest in overthrowing that increasingly inept government included peasants, merchants, scholars, soldiers, Christian converts, and ethnic Chinese living overseas. And Sun's contacts extended still further, to sympathizers in Japan, Europe, and the United States. This strong international dimension of Sun's activities makes his life story particularly appropriate for the Library of World Biography series.

Moreover, the very era in which Sun Yatsen lived was exceptionally filled with change, leading American author Mark Twain to characterize it as the “raging, tearing, booming nineteenth century.” Twain was not exaggerating: The nineteenth century was the period in which the world as we know it today first took shape. It was the age in which industrial factories, trains, steamships, telegraphs, professional sports, bacteriological medicine, and modern advertising all helped to create a new and faster way of life. At the center of many of these changes was the steam engine, which by the nineteenth century gave enterprises that employed it huge advantages over competitors near and far.

With the benefits accruing from steam and mass production, nations like Britain, France, Germany, and the United States steadily developed modern consumer economies. And especially in the later nineteenth century, they became eager to expand their territorial control to faraway places. By expanding, they could find new sources of raw materials, establish new markets, and gain prestige at the expense of their national rivals. Historians usually call this effort at expansion “imperialism”—the pursuit of empire—and it strongly affected the entire world, including the China in which Sun Yatsen lived.

Sun's China was clearly on the receiving end of Western imperialism. It lost several wars to Western countries, and before the nineteenth century was over it lost one to its modernizing neighbor Japan as well. Sun and an increasing number of other Chinese felt that their government was incompetent to deal with the new challenges it faced. Accordingly, they aimed to overthrow that government and replace it with one that could hold its own in the modern world. This is what led Sun to abandon his initial career as a British-trained medical doctor to become China's first professional revolutionary.

To overthrow the Chinese government of his day, Sun created organizations that brought together the widely disparate groups with which he had contact. He also met with a variety of foreigners, including the very imperialists who were seeking economic advantages in his country. At whatever cost, he wanted to see China's emperor-centered government replaced with a modern republic that could lead China into a new era of prosperity.

Sun succeeded in part of this effort in 1911, the year that revolution broke out against the Qing dynasty. From this point onward, his aim was to establish a stable republic that would both spur economic growth and spread the benefits of that growth broadly among its citizens. He failed on this score: Following the 1911 revolution, China was ruled for several years by a corrupt general and then by regional warlords who typically placed their own military strength above the needs of China as a whole. Sun died in 1925 while the warlords were still in charge.

He did, however, establish a tight-knit political party called the Guomindang. With assistance from Soviet Russia, this party prepared to reunite all of China beneath a single modern government. It also temporarily allied itself with the Chinese Communist Party, which sought a still more radical transformation of China. After Sun's death, his Guomindang led a campaign to reunite China by force. Its new leader, a political conservative named Chiang Kaishek, broke violently with the Chinese Communists and established a military rule over China that was centered on himself. This led to roughly 20 years of intermittent fighting between Guomindang armies and Communist rebels within an ever-changing world context.

In 1949, the Chinese Communists were able to defeat the Guomindang and establish an especially firm rule over China. While the Guomindang withdrew to the coastal island of Taiwan, the Communists under their leader Mao Zedong led massive, sometimes disastrous, efforts to modernize China's countryside. Accordingly, China since the mid-twentieth century has been split in two: The Communist Party has ruled over China's vast mainland, while the Guomindang has almost invariably held power over Taiwan.

The unifying theme within all of this confusion has been the effort to replace China's traditional dynastic government with something better suited to the modern world. Virtually, all Chinese today regard Sun Yatsen as extremely central to this effort. Sun espoused what he called the Three People's Principles: nationalism, democracy, and people's livelihood. Both Communist and Guomindang leaders today claim to promote these principles in the way they actually govern and they never tire of crediting Sun with having guided them in the correct direction.

The life and deeds of Sun Yatsen have been subjected to intense scrutiny by Asian and Western historians alike. My understanding of his life as presented in this biography draws on this continuing academic "conversation"—the articles, books, and book reviews that take Sun as their theme—as well as on direct evidence of Sun's words and activities. Essentially, my perspective is as follows: I regard Sun as having persistently—and, often, courageously—labored to strengthen China as a whole for the challenges it would face in a modern world comprised of nation-states. At the same time, I recognize his many errors, deceptions, and personal shortcomings as underscored by Western historians. China was not always well served by the leadership he offered it. Moreover, I am well aware that Sun as a political actor was willing to sacrifice much of what is usually meant by democracy in order to achieve his nationalistic ends. I do not rashly condemn Sun's aggressive expansion of the Guomindang in the last several years of his life, however; rather, that expansion strikes me as a realistic—if sometimes extreme—response to China's chronic warlordism and limited options at the time.

All of these positions are contestable. Historians' sense of the past—an individual's, a group's, or the world's—is continually subject to reinterpretation based on new information and new frameworks for understanding that information. If I were to make different intellectual choices as to how to assess Sun's lifework, this biography would possess a different flavor and would draw the reader toward different conclusions. Please keep this in mind as you proceed through this book.

In my research on Sun Yatsen, I have encountered three major interpretative frameworks, which I can broadly distinguish as (1) mainstream Chinese, (2) Western, and (3) Western revisionist. Naturally, there are numerous variations within each of these categories and the views of many researchers reflect the influence of more than one of them. Painting with admittedly broad strokes, then, let us briefly acquaint ourselves with how these perspectives look.

Sun's sheer importance to twentieth-century Asian history has earned him the attention of a host of authors, many of them Chinese. Chinese authors have typically assumed that if Sun was widely respected at the end of his life, he must have earned such respect at an early point as the result of a principled and forthright character. Consequently, they often portray him as a born leader of men, rebuking Qing officials and foreign imperialists to their faces for their failure to do what is right for China and its people. Naturally, there is a major split within Chinese interpretations of Sun between writings in Communist China and writers in Taiwan: The former invariably present Sun as sympathetic to the Communist cause, while the latter treat his alliance with the Communists as strictly tactical. Nevertheless, the overall impression left by both sets of writers

is that Sun was a respected leader with influence over large numbers of Chinese from virtually the moment he decided to seek the overthrow of the Qing dynasty.

In contrast, the principal view of Sun for decades among American and European historians of China has been based on the assumption that heroes usually have feet of clay. As a result, Western biographers, notably Harold Z. Schiffrin, Marius B. Jansen, C. Martin Wilbur, and Marie-Claire Bergère, have sought to debunk the idealized images prevailing in Chinese sources. Sun in their depictions appears to have been far less influential—and far less sensible—than most Chinese authors have claimed. Indeed, their image of him stresses desperation and deceit: Sun, they contend, outlandishly exaggerated his power to a wide range of interlocutors in the hopes of attracting their support to his cause. In a similar vein, they highlight Sun's self-abasing offers to representatives of foreign governments as a counterpoint to his public identification with Chinese pride. In short, Sun comes across in many Western biographies primarily as a hustler rather than as the dignified statesman that Chinese biographers have presented him as being.

During the past decade, a new revisionist trend has emerged in Western historiography on Sun, and as one might expect, it is based on new assumptions. This trend is principally associated with historians John Fitzgerald, Michael Tsin, and Michael G. Murdock. It appears not in biographies of Sun but in academic studies of the rise of the Guomindang in the 1920s—a story in which Sun plays a central role. The new assumption that these authors bring to their subject is that modern nationalism is a primarily negative force that manipulates individuals and communities into committing their energies to unnecessary national purposes. This assumption leads the authors to a view of Sun that departs from both the mainstream Chinese perspective *and* the earlier assessment of Western biographers. In contrast to the dominant Chinese perspective, the new approach does not celebrate Sun for his contributions to Chinese nationalism; on the contrary, it censures him for these contributions. Moreover, in contrast to earlier Western biographical assessments, the new approach does not disparage Sun for having pretended to possess far more power than he actually did; rather, it criticizes him for having extended the power of his party—the Guomindang—all too adeptly. Most importantly, the approach takes Sun to task for having restructured his mid-1920s government in the city of Guangzhou as a “party state” —a government and (he hoped) nation entirely identified with a single political party. In place of earlier images of Sun as commendable or foolish, this reading presents him as frighteningly shrewd.

As we have seen, my outlook on Sun Yatsen draws on all three of these interpretative tendencies: As an individual he was complex enough to be principled or craven, ardent or calculating, depending on the circumstances he faced. At heart, however, my interest in Sun lies less in judging him—stamping him as a hero or a villain—than in utilizing his life story to explore the fascinating, complicated world he faced. Indeed, I have written this book primarily for use in world history courses, where Asian history is sometimes neglected owing to the tight schedule under which such courses operate. Accordingly, I have accentuated Sun's international connections to facilitate the use of his story as a bridge between global trends and East Asian developments. I have also configured the



first chapter of the biography to provide world history students with a brief refresher on China's overall characteristics and position within world history.

The reverse side of modern China's participation in global trends is that it has helped shape some of those trends. This is especially true today, as China rapidly transforms itself into the international powerhouse that Sun dreamed of. In this respect, Sun's life story—occurring as it did on the dividing line between traditional dynastic rule and the search for what would replace it—enables us to understand a broad swath of China's road to contemporary prominence.

## A Note on Chinese Spellings

Chinese is a tone language, as English is not, with the result that it is not possible to capture completely the sound of a Chinese word by spelling it out in English letters. For example, the Chinese word *mai*, pronounced with a tone that first falls and then rises, means "buy." On the other hand, the word *mai*, pronounced with a tone that simply falls, means "sell." Short of placing a diacritical mark over each syllable, there is no way to indicate this sort of distinction alphabetically. As a result, systems of transliterating Chinese words in English should always be regarded as approximate.

The two major systems that are nevertheless used to transliterate Chinese are Wade-Giles and *pinyin*. *Pinyin*, the newer system, is the one in use in China today and it has also been adopted by most scholars and journalists worldwide. I have used *pinyin* for most of the Chinese terms, proper names, and place names that appear in this book. It is generally not very difficult, but it has a few eccentricities that the reader must be aware of. Specifically, the pinyin "c" is pronounced like *ts*, the pinyin "q" is pronounced like *ch*, the pinyin "x" is pronounced like *sh*, and the pinyin "zh" is pronounced like *j*. As an example of how this works in practice, "Qing"—as in Qing dynasty—is pronounced like "ching."

I have refrained from using *pinyin* for several terms. For example, I have spelled out two important names—"Sun Yatsen" and "Chiang Kaishek"—with the older spellings by which Americans first learned of these figures many decades ago. For better or worse, these spellings have become standard for English writing on these figures (though I follow the practice of recent writers in eliminating the hyphen that used to be placed between the first and second syllables of their personal names, e.g., "Yat-sen"). The spellings of Sun Yatsen and Chiang Kaishek, respectively, display an additional peculiarity, in that they actually represent pronunciations used in *Cantonese*, a highly distinctive dialect of Chinese utilized in southern Guangdong province. This is because the Chinese who immigrated to the United States typically came from Guangdong and nearby areas, and it was they who spread their pronunciations among other Americans.

As further exceptions to my preference for *pinyin*, I refer to several locations by names long used in the West: these include Hong Kong and Tibet. In most cases, however, I utilize *pinyin* spellings and standard Chinese pronunciations for both people and places. When in doubt regarding the pronunciation of a Chinese term that is highlighted in the text, please refer to the Glossary, where I provide rough English approximations.



# Acknowledgments

The first seeds of the book you hold in your hands were planted on a trip that I took to Beijing, China, in December 2003. In Beijing, my Chinese fiancée and I paid a visit to the palatial former residence of Soong Qingling, Sun Yatsen's last wife. Within the residence, we entered a large hall that served as a museum housing artifacts from Qingling's life. I was already well aware of Sun Yatsen because my father had cowritten an academic monograph on his thought some years earlier. I knew about the glamorous Soong sisters as well, but sometimes found it difficult to keep straight in my mind which of the three of them had married which historical figure! Now, however, I was visiting a grand house that belonged to a single Soong sister, Qingling, who had married Sun early in her life and had later allied herself with the Communist cause. With this as my starting point, I was soon able to grasp the relations among the leading figures in the period.

The exhibit itself contained a number of unusual items, including a life-sized embroidery reproducing a famous photograph taken at the time of Qingling's and Sun's 1915 wedding in Tokyo, Japan. As modern Japanese history is my academic specialty, this especially piqued my interest. All in all, I grew captivated by the displays presenting Qingling's life and her linkages with Sun Yatsen, Japan, and the United States (where she received part of her education). In tandem with this, I also began to view Sun differently, as a human being with a complex life history rather than simply as a politician whose actions set the stage for other, more famous figures.

The following spring, I received a routine mailing for Pearson Longman's Library of World Biography series. Upon reading it, I decided that I would like to write a biography of Sun Yatsen for the series as a way of combining two of my strongest passions, namely, East Asian history and world history. Soon after my proposal to do this was accepted, my debts to colleagues and institutions began to accumulate.

I quickly set out to read everything I could about Sun and his world. Pearson Longman generously provided me with an advance on my projected royalties that helped defray the cost of traveling to China for further research. As a result, in December 2004, I returned to China, this time to visit sites in the Yangzi River

delta associated with Sun's life and work. I have had several fine editors in the course of this project: Erika Gutierrez and Janet Lanphier at Pearson Longman and Charles Cavaliere at Pearson Prentice Hall once responsibility for the series shifted there in the wake of corporate restructuring. All have provided excellent advice and encouragement. In addition, Peter N. Stearns, academic editor for the series, has furnished suggestions along the way that were all the more effective for their haiku-like concision.

The Shepherd University Professional Development Committee generously permitted me a sabbatical leave of absence for the spring of 2007 for the purpose of completing the manuscript. This same committee also provided a substantial grant that enabled me to travel to China during the course of the sabbatical, for which I am especially grateful. On this third trip, I visited sites associated with Sun in the far-southern Pearl River delta, where Sun spent both the first and the last years of his life. With this additional experience under my belt, I completed the manuscript several short months later.

Any book is ultimately a collaborative effort. Accordingly, I owe thanks to numerous people for their assistance and encouragement as I composed this biography. My wife, Christina Lu, has contributed immeasurably to my understanding of modern China and enthusiastically supported my efforts to explore Sun and his times. I dedicate this book to her. My friend Nick Schenkel read each chapter immediately after I completed it and provided steady encouragement. Michael Austin (Newman University), another friend and a specialist in seventeenth-century English literature, made recommendations that have greatly increased the clarity of the work. My father, Leonard H. D. Gordon, generously opened his files to me and cheered on my rival effort to make sense of Sun's life story. Theresa Smith, the inter-library loan coordinator at Shepherd University's Scarborough Library, tirelessly tracked down innumerable Sun-related books that I requested at various stages of the project. Finally, I wish to extend a hearty thanks to all of the reviewers who participated in in-house reviews of part or all of the manuscript of this book: Ling Z. Arenson (Depaul University), Jean K. Berger (University of Wisconsin-Fox Valley), Liping Bu (Alma College), Thomas D. Curran (Sacred Heart University), James Gao (University of Maryland), Andrew Goss (University of New Orleans), David Kenley (Elizabethtown College), Alan Lamm (Mount Olive College), Xi Lian (Hanover College), Paul Lococo Jr. (Leeward Community College), Paul J. Morton (Covenant College), Denis Paz (University of North Texas), Harold M. Tanner (University of North Texas), and Lisa Tran (Cal State Fullerton)

Their various suggestions and corrections have brought the text to its present level of accuracy and readability.

Naturally, I am solely responsible for any factual errors that remain in this work.

# **Sun Yatsen**

# Sun Yatsen

When there is a general change of conditions, it is as if the entire creation had changed and the whole world been altered, as if it were a new and repeated creation, a world brought into existence anew.

—IBN KHALDUN

*Fourteenth-century Arab historian*



# Contents

<i>Editor's Preface</i>	ix
<i>Author's Preface</i>	xi
<i>A Note on Chinese Spellings</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
<b>1 High and Dry</b>	1
The Rome of the East	3
The Confucian Heritage	4
Manchu Rule	4
The Frightening Nineteenth Century	5
<b>2 A Marginal Youth</b>	8
Growing Up Marginal	8
Sun Becomes a Doctor	12
The Failure of Self-Strengthening	13
Sun and China at the Crossroads	15
The Sino-Japanese War	16
Reviving China by Force	17
<b>3 Kidnapped in London</b>	20
Kidnapped at the Chinese Legation	21
Effects of the Kidnapping	23
The New Imperialism Comes to China	25
The Hundred Days of Reform	27
<b>4 Sun in Meiji Japan</b>	28
The Japanese Model	29
Sun Meets Miyazaki	30
The Huizhou Uprising	33
Sun's Japan Connection	34
<b>5 Creating the Revolutionary Alliance</b>	36
Chinese Students in Tokyo	36
The New Climate of Opinion	37

	The Russo-Japanese War	40
	The Birth of the Revolutionary Alliance	40
6	Planning China's Future	43
	The Principle of Nationalism	44
	The Principle of Democracy	46
	The Principle of People's Livelihood	48
	The Principles in Historical Perspective	50
7	In Pursuit of Revolution	52
	Revolutionaries versus Reformists	53
	The French Connection	55
	Qing Efforts at Reform	57
	Sun Yatsen's Second Wind	58
8	The News in Denver	61
	Running Off the Track	62
	Where Was Sun?	64
	Sun as Provisional President	66
	The Revolution in Hindsight	68
9	The Dream Goes Awry	69
	Sun and Railways	70
	Yuan Shikai Becomes a Dictator	72
	Sun's Opportunism, Yuan's Fall	74
	The Turn to Warlordism	76
10	Interlude: Sun's Marriages	78
	Sun's Relationships Before the Revolution	79
	Sun and Soong Qingling	81
11	The South Secedes	86
	World War I, China, and Sun	86
	Sun and the May Fourth Movement	89
	Sun's Writings at the Rue Molière	92
12	The South Gains Soviet Help	95
	Sun's Second Guangzhou Government	96
	The Russian Connection	98
	The "United Front" Alliance	101
	Sun's Underlying Impatience	105
13	Sun's Death and Beatification	107
	Sun's Beatification, Pre-1949	110
	Sun's Beatification, Post-1949	113
	Sun as Nationalistic Dreamer	116

<i>Study Questions</i>	118
<i>Chronology</i>	121
<i>Glossary</i>	124
<i>A Note on the Sources</i>	131
<i>Index</i>	141



## High and Dry

The year was 1894. Sun Yatsen was a 27-year-old physician in charge of the East-West Apothecary, a bustling clinic in the southern Chinese metropolis of Guangzhou. However, Sun had left Guangzhou (also called Canton) and had traveled some two thousand miles because he had something beyond medical practice on his mind: He wanted to reform his country. He had arrived in the northern port city of Tianjin, where Li Hongzhang, the most powerful official in the Chinese government beneath the emperor, had his offices. Sun fondly imagined that Li might grant him an interview, pay him to travel to France to study ways to produce silk, and put him in charge of efforts to mechanize Chinese farming. However, it all had to start with a letter.

To attract Li's favorable attention, Sun had written a lengthy document explaining who he was, what worried him, and what he wanted to do about it. He began with who he was, that is, a native of south China who had studied abroad in his youth and had earned a British medical degree. He presented himself as someone who had been observing Western countries for a number of years, continually analyzing what made them rich and strong.

What was the secret to the success of the modern West? According to Sun, it was simply that their countries methodically used what they had: "[T]heir people can fully employ their talents, their land can be fully utilized, their natural resources can be fully tapped, and their goods can freely flow." So long as the Chinese government missed this larger picture and continued to focus narrowly on building stronger ships and more powerful guns, it was, in his words, "ignoring the root and seeking the flower." In short, China needed to change—quickly.

Sun pointed out that merchants in China faced giant obstacles. For example, they had to pay taxes on their goods every time they entered a new province—taxes that corrupt officials would raise sharply to line their own pockets. It was as though "the skies are full of storms and the ground full of thorns wherever one goes." This was especially harmful because harassing merchants prevented China from realizing its nearly limitless potential.

As Sun saw matters, commerce created national power: "In the West the interests of state and those of commerce flourish together . . . The reason why Britain can conquer India, control Southeast Asia, seize Africa, and annex Australia is because