

WOMAN IN WORLD HISTORY

Soong Ching Ling

(Mme. Sun Yatsen)



Israel Epstein
NEW WORLD PRESS

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Life and Times of Soong Ching Ling (Mme. Sun Yatsen)

By Israel Epstein

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Soong Ching Ling (Mme. Sun Yatsen) was an outstanding woman in China's history, and the world's, in the 20th century. Most of it was spanned by her long life—born in 1893, she died in 1981.

She was linked with many of the century's key events. In China they included three revolutions and their attendant civil wars plus national wars against foreign invasion and intervention. Globally, they embraced World War I and II and the great Russian and Chinese revolutions that followed in their wake—and the subsequent universal surge of independence struggles in the former colonies and semi-colonies of imperialism.

She herself was, first and foremost, a revolutionary patriot of China, though international in her culture and contacts. Strength, faithfulness to principle, caring gentleness, high courage, self-effacing modesty and striking womanly beauty combined in her to a rare degree. Few people have exercised so much public magnetism without any desire for, or use of, wealth or power.

Wife of Sun Yatsen, founder of the Chinese Republic, for a decade up to his death, she survived him by 56 years, always faithful to his revolutionary cause. She bitterly opposed Chiang Kaishek, her brother-in-law, who violated Sun Yatsen's key precepts while pretending to revere him. From the 1920s on she knew Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and other leaders-to-be of the Chinese Communist Party. Increasingly cooperating with this party, she became one of the founders of the People's Republic and died as its honorary head of state.

In foreign affairs, in ties with the Soviet Union, the first country to appreciate and assist China's new forces, she helped Sun Yatsen correspond with Lenin, twice met with Stalin, and knew well Mikhail Borodin and other Soviet advisers to the Guomindang in its revolutionary period in the mid-1920s. The two revolutions, the Soviet and Chinese, in her view, were interconnected. Like Sun Yatsen, she held the relations of the two countries to be in the best interest of both. But they developed in a zig-zag way, with deep dips first when Chiang Kaishek turned

on the revolution, and again much later when the equality of China as a socialist country was not respected by Moscow.

In the United States, where she studied, she had a host of friends some kept from her girlhood. Later, she helped the pioneering journalists Anna Louise Strong and Edgar Snow to travel to key areas of the Chinese revolution, and write their influential books. In the course of the anti-Japanese war she impressed, and won the admiration of, prominent Americans like General Joseph Stilwell and Gen. Evans F. Carlson of the U.S. Marines. When the U.S. government armed China's reactionaries and obstructed China's revolution, she denounced those actions. But Americans who showed understanding of China and its revolution were at all times among her friends and colleagues. When normal relations between the People's Republic and the U.S.A. finally began to take shape, few were happier, but in this framework too she was ever-alert for China's equality.

In countries of what is now called the Third World, she already had many contacts when they were struggling against colonial masters. From those times, she knew Jawaharlal Nehru of India and Ho Chi-minh of Vietnam, both of whom she was to meet again as leaders after independence.

While living in exile with Sun Yatsen, she made friends with some early Japanese supporters of his cause. Against Japan's invasion of China she fought relentlessly. After the founding of the People's Republic some of her old friends helped towards establishing normal and equal ties between the two neighbor countries—possible only after the defeat of Japanese militarism and the rise of a truly independent China.

In the worldwide struggle against reaction and fascism, she joined, from early pre-war days, a galaxy of international notables of the time.

Whatever the country, throughout her long life she resisted attempts to dominate others, and urged cooperation in equality. Towards all peoples, she was friendly and hopeful.

Awareness of the Chinese and world history of her time is indispensable to understanding this remarkable woman. But this is a biography, not a history. Paying due attention to the second I have guarded against letting it drown the first. Actually, the two were inseparable. Such was Soong Ching Ling's (Mme. Sun

Yatsen's) relevance to wider problems, and her combination of personal qualities, that many people in China, in confused and troubled times, looked to see where she stood and took their own position accordingly.

Abroad, many people of her generation saw her as a figure both gentle and indomitable. "China's conscience," some called her. Chinese or foreign, those fortunate enough to know her were inspired and warmed.

Naturally, all this made her more of a thorn in the sides of foes. Threats were made against her life. Plans were hatched to destroy her. Friend after friend was felled by assassins and executioners, sometimes with the express purpose of frightening her, but nothing did.

The aim of this biography is to have the reader meet her face to face. Wherever possible, her story is told in her own words—drawn from her available writings, including numerous letters. Some 200 were addressed to this author and his late wife, Elsie Cholmeley, between 1939 and 1981. Hundreds, some dating back to 1913, were supplied from other sources. But her extant letters, despite their abundance, do not reflect the full content of her correspondence. Habits acquired in long years of the revolutionary underground made her wary of committing details of activity to paper, and when she had to she would ask the recipients to burn them. Those that have survived cover relatively limited ground, though they do express her character and moods.

Wider context is provided from contemporary history, the testimony of participants and eyewitnesses in scores of interviews and memoirs, and from my own recollections of Soong Ching Ling over more than four decades. In 1938-41 and 1942-44, I saw and worked with her regularly—sometimes daily. At other periods, up to her death in 1981, the contact was more sporadic.

In her last years, she expressed several times the hope that, after her death, I would write her biography. She first did so in 1975.* In September 1980, in two letters, she wrote, "I request you to write my biography when I die,"** and, "Ego dictates all autobiographies. So let it be my biography by my trusted friend."***

*, ** and *** SCL, letters to author dated respectively May 28, 1975, and September 17 and September 25, 1980.

Although mentioning death, she did not see it as something close. In view of her long resilience in the face of bodily ills, and the vigor of her mind, neither she nor I could have expected the end to come so soon. Tragically it did—before we could have the systematic consultations we had planned, and so often put off because other work seemed more urgent. Giving priority to what needed doing in the present, she was less prone to falling back into reminiscences than many younger than she. I have worked hard to fulfill the responsibility with which she honored me, with what success it is for the reader to judge.

A word about method. There will not be found, in these pages, any quotation marks around words by Soong Ching Ling which she did not actually say or write, or which were not put down by the hearers. Some biographies are “enlivened” by imagined conversations or episodes, but these are permissible only in historical fiction. In this book, conjectures or interpretations, at times necessary, are identified as such.

On the other hand, an effort has been made to avoid academic language and over-studding with footnotes that might impede the average reader. For those who want them, sources for all data and statements beyond what has long been common knowledge are to be found at the back of the book.

Because Soong Ching Ling died so abruptly, even some minor questions, which she could have cleared up within minutes, were left unanswered. For some, answers were found only after months of research, for others none. This has added to the difficulty of the work, and of course to its shortcomings. Moreover, it is my first attempt at biographical writing, and seventy-plus is not a good age for a beginner. But I have done my best.

May this book help people who never knew this great woman to better know and understand her, her times, her country and people. Hopefully, it will ease the way for more and better books to come—as they are bound to do, not in our generation alone. If it impedes superficiality, misinformation or misinterpretation, that too will be useful.

Written in English and appearing simultaneously in Chinese, this account aims at two audiences. So it may sometimes give one or the other a feeling of redundancy—since historical and personal references familiar to Chinese readers may require

explaining for foreign ones, and vice-versa.

Foreign readers will have the advantage of finding here many of her original words, in English, the language in which she expressed herself most easily on paper — though of course the same writings, were usually published and quickly seen, or even at first seen, in Chinese. But only a tiny few of the letters she wrote in English to foreigners or sometimes to Chinese — for instance to Liao Mengxing — have ever been printed before, in either language, so most will be new to readers. This biography's wide use of both Chinese and foreign sources may round out the picture of Soong Ching Ling in her international and bi-cultural aspects. By this I do not mean dualism. Though she was bilingual, and well-informed in many directions, everything she wrote for publication, from her teens to her eighties, at home or abroad, was concerned with China.

Hers was a life with patriotism — love and respect for her own country and people — as its innermost core. At the same time, she was free of assumptions of either superiority — glorification of everything Chinese as opposed to everything foreign, or inferiority—admiration of the foreign while despising one's own. As a Chinese, she stood on an equal plane—never doubting her country's ability to climb the heights of achievement and knowledge. Current lags and defects she recognized clearly and referred to plainly. But she saw such recognition as a spur to improve, not a damper to discourage. Moreover, her patriotism was democratic. To her the country meant its people, not just some upper layer (though she herself was born in one) but its entire toiling mass.

Long experience and much thought gave her the firm belief that the future in China, as in the world, lay in socialism, and that in China the core force for progress was the Chinese Communist Party. This was not sloganizing, but a conviction she acted on, through thick and thin, over many decades.

She never wavered in the value she attached to knowledge and education, and trust in a future powered not only by revolutionary spirit and but by the most advanced science.

From youth to old age, she fought for the right and duty of women to participate as full equals in all fields of the nation's advance, and for recognition by society of its duty to facilitate

this. Her utmost love and concern was for the children, for their physical and moral health, for their education as worthy heirs of progress in the past and confident builders of the socialist future. Many things could wait, she said, but work for the children could not.

China is modernizing. Soong Ching Ling was a truly modern Chinese—this was true in her girlhood and her whole life, and I daresay will continue to appear true for the present generation, and many to come.

All the above are questions of our time. They are also reasons for getting to know Soong Ching Ling—for Chinese readers since she was their countrywoman, for the foreign readers because China is a fifth of the human race. Understanding of this great woman will help towards understanding of much else in our contemporary world.

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In the collection of material over several years, many institutions and individuals have given generous help, for which I am thankful. In this preface, to keep it from undue length, only some can be named. In the notes, however, all sources are acknowledged. The Soong Ching Ling Foundation Research Department and Soong Ching Ling Memorial Residence in Beijing not only helped with data but enabled me to use that residence, in her environment and ambience, as a place to do my writing. Warmly helpful, too, were the China Welfare Institute, the Sun Yatsen and Soong Ching Ling Memorial Residences and Municipal Archive in Shanghai, the Cultural Section of the Guangzhou City Government, the Sun Yatsen Memorial Museum in his native place in Zhongshan County in Guangdong Province, and the Soong Ching Ling Foundation of Wenchang County, the home of her ancestors in Hainan Island (now a province in its own right).

Among friends in China, who gave interviews and other assistance were the late Liao Mengxing (Cynthia Liao)—an old fellow-worker in the wartime China Defense League, Zhang Yan—former first deputy editor-in-chief of *China Reconstructs* and correspondent of the *Beijing People's Daily* in Washington who shared with me the fruits of his visit to Wesleyan College for Women, Macon, Georgia, and Mme. Fu Wuyi and Ms. Zhang Airong of the SCL Foundation who also made available much research material they brought back. The late Zhang Ke, of Zibo, Shandong, shared with me his invaluable memories of working with Soong Ching Ling in Wuhan, Moscow and Berlin in 1927-29 (Mme. Gu Jinxing of the Chinese Red Cross brought us together). Dr. Chen Hansheng, now in his middle 90s, supplied recollections going back to the 1920s. For the 1930s, the same was done by Li Yan—once Soong Ching Ling's contact with the Communist Party, the veteran journalist Lu Yi, and Yang Xiaobo, son of Soong Ching Ling's assassinated colleague in the China League for Civil Rights. For later times there were Shen Cuizhen

—venerable long-time head of the China Welfare Institute, her colleagues Chen, Weibo and others, and Zhang Jue, for several years Soong Ching Ling's English secretary.

In Japan my sincere appreciation is due to the Soong Ching Ling Fund of Japan, Mrs. Hiroko Kubota—who has done research on Soong Ching Ling for many years and is translating this book into Japanese, and the heirs of Sun Yatsen's faithful friends Miyazaki Toten and of Sokichi Umeya—Tetsuro and Suwako (Mr. and Mrs.) Kosaka. Both families generously opened to me their extensive collections of letters and other memorabilia of Sun Yatsen and Soong Ching Ling. The meticulous, almost miraculous, preservation of these items through our wartorn century is itself testimony to the devoted friendship between the Japanese and Chinese peoples.

In the United States, thanks are due to: the late Max Granich (helped by Bertha Taub) for letters from Soong Ching Ling over a long period, Richard Young for the large number he made available, Chen Jikun (Walter Chen) and his wife Shouzheng and Harrison Salisbury and Abraham Pivowitz for others, Prof. A. Tom Grunfeld of Empire State College of New York University for taking time from his own research to locate and reproduce many items valuable for this work, Prof. Jonathan Goldstein of West Georgia College who added to material on her college days in Macon, Prof. Robert Farnsworth of the University of Missouri in Kansas City who sent me material from the Edgar Snow archive in that city. Mrs. Nancy Stilwell Easterbrook gave me the benefit of family memories and access to the diaries of her late father General Joseph W. Stilwell deposited in the Hoover Institution Library at Stanford University, Hugh Deane acquainted me with the letters Colonel (later General) Evans C. Carlson wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt concerning Soong Ching Ling.

Finally, I am grateful to *China Reconstructs* (now *China Today*) for giving me much time off from my magazine duties, and Chen Xiuzhen, Zheng Mouda, Li Zhenguo, Zhang Xiaojang, Lin Liming and others of the *New World Press* which undertook to publish the book, tolerated my repeated corrections, and waited patiently for its completion. Also to Foster Stockwell who copy-read the manuscript. This is a very partial list.

VIII

For work on the Chinese edition, I want to thank the translator, my old colleague Shen Suru, who made valuable editorial suggestions and caught some of my errors and clumsinesses "above and beyond the call of duty," and the editor, Ye Jianhua of the People's Publishing House which brought it out, with the other workers concerned. In my own family, during the decade spent on the book, I have had the forbearing cooperation and unstinted help of Elsie Fairfax-Cholmeley, my late wife of forty years and who like me worked with Soong Ching Ling, and Huang Wanbi, my present wife and co-worker on *China Reconstructs*, which Soong Ching Ling founded. Without them, too, I could not have completed this book. Acknowledgment of authors and works cited is made in the text or the notes.

A NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION

In general, in rendering Chinese names, the standard *pin yin* system of transcription, now used in China and by most foreign students of China, is employed in this book.

An exception is made for some transcriptions in (or close to) the Wade-Giles system formerly used in English-speaking countries, which have become habitual there. For instance, Soong Ching Ling (her own spelling) if given in *pin yin* would be Song Qingling, Chiang Kai-shek (transcribed from Cantonese dialect) would be Jiang Jieshi, which many people would not recognize. In a few such cases I have stuck to the familiar. Personal and place names within citations from earlier writings in English have also been left as they were but followed, where necessary, by the *pin yin* version in square brackets. In the alphabetical order of the index, in general, except for familiar forms used throughout the book, the name is placed according to the initial letter in *pin yin*, but with a cross reference where other versions appear in text. For example, "Beijing" appears under "B," but "Peking" is given under "P" followed by "see Beijing."

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CHAPTER I

STUDENT IN AMERICA

(1908—13)

The face of the young woman in the graduation photo on our first picture page is strong and determined. Her eyes are steady and thoughtful. The picture, taken in 1913, was of Soong Ching Ling. Later she would be Mme. Sun Yatsen, wife and working helpmate of the inspirer of the revolution in China that, in 1911, had put an end to China's 2,000-year-old monarchy. Towards the century's end, she would die, aged almost 90, as Honorary President of the People's Republic of China, fruit of another and much deeper revolution.

Soong Ching Ling (in Chinese the surname comes first so Ching Ling was her given name) had come to the United States to study more than five years before, in 1907¹ when not yet 15. She came from Shanghai, China, where she was born in 1893. After briefly attending a high school in Summit, New Jersey, she went south to Wesleyan College for Women in Macon, Georgia. There she was known as Rosamonde Soong, and to her intimates as Suzie, an affectionate contraction of her surname. The romantic "Rosamonde" would lapse with time, but she would continue often to sign her letters in English to close friends with the plain "Suzie" (or "Suzi") till her life's end.

This portrait, commemorating her graduation at 20, appears different from many later ones, which leave an impression of gentle, at times fragile, beauty. Yet on looking closer one can see in them, too, the underlying strength. Hence, the choice of this image, which shows it so early and clearly, to introduce her.

Of course young faces, however revealing, are no guide to a lifetime. Character may change, sometimes entirely. But the strength in Soong Ching Ling was her enduring core.

Strength can be different, especially in its results. No less resolute were her sisters, the younger Meiling, who was to marry the Guomindang dictator Chiang Kaishek, and the elder Ailing, future wife of H. H. Kung (Kong Xiangxi), Chiang's self-enriching Minister of Finance. But, as was popularly said of the three women by their compatriots in the 1930s, one loved power, one loved money, and one loved the people. This last referred to Ching Ling. China's common people were her love. Her reputation stemmed from standing for them, and with them, through all storms and perils. Of wealth, she had none.

At the time of the photograph, Soong Ching Ling already showed signs of her future qualities and personality. Clues to her interests and skills were given in the college annual. The usual list of a graduate's extracurricular activities and honors referred to her as: "Literary editor of *The Wesleyan*, 1912-13; Thespian Dramatic Club; Corresponding Secretary of the Harris Literary Society." More striking was the inscription, "Radiance streaming from within around her eyes and forehead." A person who could evoke such lyrical wording from her classmates must have been extraordinary, not only impressive but warm and loved. She was all those things, and would remain so.

Her own writing in the college paper, *The Wesleyan*, reflected much of her outlook at the time.

Salient in it was patriotism.

In a 1911 piece, "The Influence of Foreign Educated Students in China³," she wrote that the purpose of Chinese studying abroad, like herself, should be to "acquire whatever is worthy and good" to take back to "grapple with the great problems of China of today." True, she still voiced illusions about possible positive change under the existing monarchic government, then belatedly posing as a convert to modernization. And she thought that national revival and progress could come simply through the increased numbers and informed efforts of western-educated "better class" youth. They would become the carriers of administrative and technical reform. They would teach it to others. They would give a lead towards the abolition of

footbinding, queues, and other unenlightened customs. And they would help to alleviate the worst slum conditions, as a preliminary to further advance.

Yet, even at the time of this first teen-age political comment, despite her education in the West and praise of its institutions and ways, Soong Ching Ling's feet were firmly planted in her own land and people. China's renovation, she believed, must be the work of Chinese. They could accomplish it by their own talents and efforts.

Indignant at the backward state of China, she showed no trace of national self-depreciation, or of thinking foreign guidance or supervision necessary for learning from others (the learning itself she was in favor of). Nor did she express, either then or later, any desire to make her home abroad.

Throughout the almost seventy years of her life after returning to China, she never left the country except when politically compelled to do so, or in the service of her political ideals. And whenever she did leave, it was for as brief a time as possible. Before 1949, some such visits were planned but never made owing to obstruction by the Chiang Kaishek regime. After the People's Republic was established, a government in which she held high office, she made several official journeys. But never did she go abroad for recreation or pleasure. When, at last, at a great age she mentioned wanting to revisit some scenes of her girlhood and see her early friends still living, she was already too old and ill.

Yet, though national self-respect was rooted in Soong Ching Ling, she would remain free of all exclusivism. Throughout her life she read widely in English and other languages, and had many foreign contacts, friends and correspondents.

Her adolescent expectation that the Qing Dynasty government might be reformed is strange in the light of the already long commitment of her father, Soong Yaoru, known as "Charles Jones Soong," to the republicanism of Sun Yatsen. But perhaps such ideas and associations were too perilous, then, for him to talk about with his children. Or her temporary illusions may have been linked with influence from her maternal uncle Wen Bingchang (B. C. Wen), who brought her to America, and held a post in the monarchical government's educational commission in the U.S.A.