Dr Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925): medical doctor and China’s founding president

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Sun Yat-sen, founding president of the Republic of China, started his career as a medical doctor. His early years of medical studies and practice helped to shape his political vision of a new China. He studied under two eminent professors from whom he came to understand the value of Western knowledge to the modernisation of China. Indeed, as Wang Gungwu pointed out, Sun was the first to offer a “dedicated political leadership that set China on its own path to modernity”.

SUN STUDIES MEDICINE

Sun was born in 1866 to a peasant family in Xiangshan, now known as Zhongshan district. At age 13, Sun joined his elder brother, Sun Mei, in Hawaii. There, he studied in the Anglican-run Iolani School and then in Oahu College. However, Sun Mei, dismayed that his younger brother was being influenced by Christianity, sent Sun back to China. Sun then completed his studies at the Central School in Hong Kong.

In 1886, Sun enrolled in the Canton Hospital Medical School, which was attached to Boji Hospital, renamed Canton Hospital in the 1860s – China’s first modern hospital. It was said that Sun persuaded the authorities to allow male and female students to study together in the same classroom, and for male students to treat gynaecological cases. These were major breakthroughs in a society that was still largely conservative. The hospital, later affiliated to the Sun Yat-sen University, has since been renamed Dr Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hospital in honour of its most illustrious student.

After a year, Sun transferred to the newly opened College of Medicine for Chinese in Hong Kong. The college, which was associated with the Alice Memorial Hospital, saw its role as one to train young Chinese in Western medicine to complement and support, rather than replace, Chinese traditional knowledge. Dr Patrick Manson, the first dean of the college, and Dr James Cantlie, who succeeded him, both carried out important medical research, underlining the fact that Sun studied under two great medical scholars.

Sun was among the first batch of 18 students, and in July 1892, was one of only two students to graduate with a Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery. College records showed that he excelled in four examinations that were said to be of a comparable curriculum to that of medical colleges in Britain then.

PRACTISING MEDICINE IN MACAU AND GUANGZHOU

Even so, the colony did not recognise the college’s degrees. Sun therefore could not issue birth or death certificates, or related legal documents. Neither did he have the same legal protection as doctors with British qualifications. With the first two graduates of the colony’s College of Medicine unable to get a medical position, the Hong Kong governor thereupon wrote to the Chinese senior minister, Li Hongzhang, to take them to China. Sun Mei, disapproved of his brother’s actions, refused to go. Consequently, Sun left for Macau, which was close to his family home and clansmen in Guangdong, but his qualification was likewise not recognised there. In late 1892, Sun joined the Kiang Wu Hospital, which offered only traditional Chinese treatment, which the Macau authorities allowed him to practise. It is not clear when Sun learned Chinese traditional medicine, but at Kiang Wu Hospital, he combined such treatment with Western medicine.

Dr Cantlie recorded Sun’s medical experience in Macau: “In a large, well-built hospital, Chinese patients were treated according to native methods. Sun impressed upon the Chinese governors of 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.”

Other accounts described Sun as a very competent doctor, as Dr Cantlie later recorded on occasions when he travelled to Macau to assist Sun: “Sun commenced practice, and I encouraged him especially in surgical work. When major operations had to be done, I went on several occasions to Macau to assist him, and there, in the presence of the governors of the hospital, he performed important operations, requiring skill, coolness of judgment and dexterity.”

In 1893, Sun moved to Guangzhou and opened a combined Western and traditional Chinese clinic. He also set up an ‘East-West Apothecary’ and a branch in the city. According to Sun, at the East-West Apothecary, he “*helped to distribute western