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Women in Politics; The Soong Sisters and Chinese History in the 20th Century

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Alamy, The Soong Sisters 1917 in Shanghai

Women in Politics

The Soong Sisters and Chinese History in the 20th Century

Cera Linnell



Qing-ling Soong at a conference Circa the 1950s

Abstract:

This research focuses on the Soong sisters in the twentieth century in order to analyze women's impact on politics in China. Women's contributions are often overlooked, leading to a lack of women's stories in historical narratives. It identifies that to produce a less biased historical narrative there needs to be more diversity within the historiographers and the narratives portrayed. The research provides solutions to combating the existing biases present in historical narratives and an attempt to apply them through an analysis of the lives of the Soong sisters. The sisters Ai-ling, Qing-ling, and Mei-ling were the wives of powerful men such as Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and H.H. Kung. Furthermore, Qing-ling after the passing of her husband became a trustee of Mao Zedong. The sisters had opposing political ideologies that had significant influence over the development of China in the Twentieth century, however, for all of their contributions more often than not it is the men they interacted with that are remembered. Upon further research, it can be concluded that these women had an equal impact on Chinese politics as the men they were close to, but their stories are often forgotten. This phenomenon is what the research tries to combat.



Charlie and Mamie Soong. From the Rubenstein Library Picture File.

Context:

- The Soong Sisters were born during "the century of humiliation"(1839-1949) in China. This was after the loss of the Opium Wars when China had to submit to the West and agree to numerous treaties that put them at a disadvantage
 - During this time period, there was a desire in society to bring China back to the glory it had before the Opium Wars
- The father of the sisters known as Charlie Soong grew up in a poor family, and it was through his relationship with Christianity and education in the United States that allowed him to climb the social ladder
- The mother of the Soong sisters known as Ni Kwei-tseng was the daughter of a prominent Christian family in China. She grew up at the beginning of the era of reforms, where women were starting to get increased rights to education and the practice of footbinding was coming to an end.

Ai-ling Soong (1889-1973):

- She was the oldest sister out of the three, and due to this she took on the role of matriarch of the Soong family in later years.
 - Ai-ling attended college in the United States
 - This is where she developed her political passion, that upon returning to China she used to aid Sun Yat-sen as his English secretary
 - She married H.H.Kung who was from a famous banking family. Together they built up his fortune, and with Ai-ling's connections he became a politician focused on finance in China
- In her role of the matriarch of the family she helped to facilitate the marriage of her youngest sister Mei-ling to Chiang Kai-shek
 - After the marriage Ai-ling convinced Chiang Kai-shek to convert to Christianity
 - Ai-ling was one of the few people the Chaing trusted and he often came to her for political advice and help if needed



Ai-ling in Chongqing in 1940



Ai-ling with her husband H.H.Kung.

Qing-ling Soong (1893-1981):

- She was the middle sister of the three, and from a young age she was different from her other siblings because she was not as flashy with her wealth as her siblings
 - "She recalled, 'As a child, I was taken to church on Sundays by my mother who was a devout Christian. When we arrived at church the pastor and his assistants used to drive away the poorly clad women in the front pew to give up their places to us!' This put her off missionaries, and planted the seeds for her conversion to Communism." (Chang, pg 45)
- She married Sun Yat-sen and earned the title Mme Sun Yat-sen due to her aid in his political campaigns
 - After his death she helped memorialize him, creating the Cult of Sun Yat-sen



Qing-ling Soong and Sun Yat-sen Wedding photo 1915



Qing-ling Soong circa 1950s with Mao Zedong

Life for Qing-ling After Sun Yat-sen:

- While Sun Yat-sen had close ties to Russia he was not a communist, but Qing-ling was
 - After his Death she made him appear to be a communist
- After Chiang Kai-shek took over she exiled herself to Moscow, and throughout his career she constantly worked against him, even though it meant going against her family.
- When the Communist party took over China in 1949, Ai-ling and Mei-ling had to flee China, and Qing-ling moved to Beijing where she became the Vice Chairman to Mao Zedong
- Qing-ling was used as an ambassador of China and often sent abroad
 - She asked many times to be inducted as an official member of the CCP, but she was refused because Mao thought her value was more outside of the CCP
 - She was finally inducted into the CCP as she was dying in 1981



Qing-ling Soong at a conference Circa the 1950s

Mei-ling Soong (1898-2003):

- She was the youngest sister of the family, and in her younger years was considered scandalous by society
 - She like her other sisters went to college in the United States, however, she was never concerned with politics while attending
 - She was more of a peoples person
 - She did not reject Christianity like Qing-ling, but was not as devoted as her oldest sister Ai-ling
- After college, she returned to China with a strong desire to give back to her nation
 - She started numerous charity events but it never felt like enough
 - She married Chiang Kai-shek in an effort to help China on a bigger scale
- Mei-ling went on tours in the United States giving speeches that helped raise support for China
- In 1943, she attended the Cairo Conference with her husband to translate for him
 - She was the only woman present at the conference



The Wedding of Mei-ling and Chiang Kai-shek, December 1927



China / USA: President Franklin D. Roosevelt welcomes Soong Mei-ling (Madame Chiang Kai-shek), in his car at Union Station, Washington DC, February 17, 1943

Conclusions:

- The three Soong sisters had their own unique impact on the development of China during the twentieth-century
 - Each of them had different relationships with the West and used western ideals such as capitalism and communism to help bring China back to its former glory
- Upon changing the focus of the historical narrative of twentieth-century China from a male centered to a female centered view, the way that the history of China is viewed changes
 - This allows observers to recognize that there is bias in the telling of the history
- Bias is impossible to get rid of completely, however, through analyzing the bias present in history, and flipping the narrative to focus on underrepresented groups, the bias can be challenged
- Furthermore, in order to prevent extreme forms of bias in the future historical narratives, it is not only crucial to have a diverse group of people recording the history, but to have a diverse range of perspectives of history recorded.



Wesleyan College Archives and Special Collections: Soong Sisters, Macon, GA West Australian

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