

## Father of the Chinese Republic - Sun Yat-sen or.....??

It's extraordinary what one finds out in conversation with one's friends. We have been playing badminton for some years with a Chinese friend from Hong Kong and over coffee, a few weeks ago, the subject of Sun Yat-sen and the revolution came up. Then, without saying a word, he drew out of his pocket an ageing photo and began to describe his family's connection with Sun Yat-sen and his uncle, Yeung Ku-wan (Yang Quyun in Mandarin) or Yeung Kūwan as he signed himself. This is how the story unfolded.

Our friend told us that his family had had in their possession this somewhat controversial photograph of a group of Chinese and Japanese, in Japan in 1898 to discuss ways of overthrowing the Qing dynasty - the last Imperial court. The photo shows, Yeung Ku-wan in a prominent position with Sun Yat-sen in a minor role. Apparently, Chiang Kai-shek was willing to pay 1 million dollars for it and its negative! But more of that story later.



The leaders of the 'Foo Yan Man Ser party' (Furen Literary Society), 1890.  
Yeung Ku-wan in 3rd from right in front row.

Yeung Ku-wan was born in Dongguan, Canton (now Guangzhou) in 1861 but followed his father at a young age to Hong Kong and was educated and worked there. He eventually became a teacher of English and had access to Western literature on revolutionary theory. He was quick with his fists when foreigners took advantage of Chinese people and he began to formulate ideas on how to overthrow the Manchu dynasty, who were weak and refused to learn more modern forms of government from Westerners. In 1890, Yeung, along with Tse Tsan-tai (who was born in Sydney, Australia, and who later founded the *South China Morning Post*) and others, started the **Furen Literary Society** in Hong Kong.

Their guiding principals were: "Open up the People's Minds", and "Love your Country with all your heart". The Society released books concerning the future of China and advocating the overthrow of the Qing government and the establishment of a Republic. They also worked secretly on a plan to capture Canton. In March 1892, they moved to Pak Tsz Lane.



Leaders of the **Hong Kong Revive China Society**  
L to R: Tse Tsan-tai, Yeung Ku-wan, and Sun Yat-sen

When Sun Yat-sen returned to Hong Kong from Hawaii in 1895, he met up with Yeung and they merged the Furen Literary Society with the newly-formed Hong Kong chapter of Sun Yat-sen's "**Revive China Society**" (Sun had formed the Revive China Society in Honolulu the previous year). Yeung was

elected president due to his being the elder of the two by 5 years and because the majority of the members came from the Furen Literary Society. Sun Yat-sen was the secretary.

They immediately started building on the plan already prepared by the Furen Literary Society to capture Canton. The attempt won the support of several influential people including Ho Kai, a Chinese barrister-at-law and a member of the Hong Kong Legislative Council, Thomas H. Reid of the China Mail and Chesney Duncan of the Hong Kong Telegraph. While a revolt was being prepared, the revolutionaries in Hong Kong selected the President-to-be of the Provisional Government, if the revolt should succeed. The struggle for supremacy was keen - while those who had been in the **Furen Literary Society** supported Yeung, Cheng Shih-liang and Ch'en Shao-pao sided with Sun. It seems that Sun was elected future president but was forced to withdraw in favour of Yeung. This fight almost split the movement.

The rebellion was due to take place on the tomb-sweeping festival of 1896, October 26th. At the last moment, the revolt was postponed for two days to allow preparations in Hong Kong to be completed by Yeung. But plans had leaked out and about 50 of the rebels were arrested in Canton and 205 revolvers and ammunition confiscated. Sun Yat-sen sent a warning to Yeung in Hong Kong but it failed to reach him. The British Colonial authorities were now under pressure to ban Yeung and Sun from Hong Kong. Sun escaped to Hong Kong but then fled to Japan, with a 1,000 Chinese silver dollars Qing bounty on his head. Yeung, with the same price on his head, left Hong Kong for Saigon and then Singapore, eventually arriving in South Africa, where he founded another 'Revive China' branch. Then later, he went to Japan.

Yeung's relationship with Sun was complicated although they both came from the middle class - Yeung was a teacher and Sun was a doctor. Neither Yeung, Sun nor Tse had had the traditional Chinese education but had gained new ideas from foreign schooling and in their travels had seen the efficient administration of countries such as Honolulu, Australia and Hong Kong. They had seen the discontent of the Chinese peasants with incompetent rulers and knew that a change was needed. Sun, however, believed that a form of monarchy could still exist, but Yeung was adamant that they fight for a new republic.

In 1900, Yeung returned to Hong Kong, now a middle-aged man with a family to support, and he had to make a living by teaching. But he and Sun Yat-sen then began planning another uprising in Huizhou, in North-East Guangdong. It started October 8, 1900, and this time the object was to capture the coastal area and then advance north-east towards Fujian province - nearer to Formosa (Taiwan) - Sun had gone to Japan to try to persuade the Japanese to supply arms from Taiwan - while Yeung remained in Hong Kong to organise support from there. But Japanese arms did not come and after several skirmishes with Qing forces, the commander, Cheng Shih-liang, disbanded his troops. On October 28, an attempt was made to kill the governor of Canton and Guangxi provinces, to support belatedly the Huizhou rebellion (it had been meant to occur at the beginning of the Huizhou action...). The bomb went off but the governor was unhurt. The perpetrator, Shih Chien-ju, was caught and he named Yeung as the inspiration for the attempt.

Although Yeung was warned to leave by friends, he did not flee!

The end came at 6 o'clock in the afternoon of January 10, 1901. Three Qing assassins arrived at Yeung's house. One stood guard, one broke down the door and the third one shot Yeung in the head. Yeung had been waiting for students to arrive and was holding his young son, Georgie (Zhozhi), on his lap. He tried to open the desk drawer, which contained his own gun, but it was impossible because of the child on his lap. He picked up a large English dictionary and protected his head. One bullet penetrated the book but drove past his forehead and hit the wall. Georgie scrambled under the desk and more bullets were fired into Yeung's head and chest. Seeing they had been successful, the assassins shot out the electric light and left. Meanwhile, his wife was in the back room putting their daughter to sleep and hearing the noise, suspected that an electric bulb had crashed to the floor. She sent their eldest daughter in and she found her father on the floor bleeding from his wounds. Her father asked her for a scarf to bind up his wounds.

According to the Hong Kong police report, Yeung was removed to the Government Civil Hospital.

#### MURDER.

4.—(1.) On the 10th January, LEUNG HIN, 49, shopkeeper, 17 Station Street, Yaumati, was sent to Government Civil Hospital suffering from cuts on his body inflicted with a chopper by one of his shopmen and another man. He died shortly after his admission. The two men were convicted and hanged.

(2.) On the 11th January, YEUNG KU WAN, 84, teacher, 52 Gage Street, was shot in his room by a man unknown. He was removed to Government Civil Hospital, where he shortly afterwards died. He belonged to the Chinese Reform Party. No arrest was made.

He told hospital officials that he had no enemies, only political ones...! He died from his wounds the following day and was buried in the Hong Kong Happy Valley cemetery in an unnamed tomb (his dying request), which was known only as 'Tomb 6348'.



Yeung Ku-wan's unnamed tomb in Happy Valley Cemetary,

It was agreed between his friends that, if and when the revolution succeeded, his body would be reburied back in China. (Later, during the Chinese Republic, a request for this was refused). Sun Yat-sen was overseas when Yeung was assassinated, but in a letter of condolence, he called for donations to help and support Yeung's family. The donations came from all over, in particular from South Africa where Yeung had set up a 'Revive China' branch.

On the internet (ie: unverified), there are some suggestions that Sun Yat-sen may have known of the plan to assassinate Yeung but did nothing about it. We will never know the truth...

After the death of Sun Yat-sen in 1925, Ch'en Chie Jiu, Chiang Kai-shek's second wife, wrote in her autobiography, that she had always been taught that Yang Ch'ü-yün (Yeung Ku-wan) was "**the patron saint of our republic**". Chiang (in 1927, when he was setting up the Nationalist government in Nanjing) said that he wanted Sun Yat-sen to be celebrated as the Father of China and not Yeung. And when he

found that there was a photo of Yeung seated in the most important position and Sun in a minor position at the back, he immediately asked that the photo and its negative be recovered and he was willing to pay 1million Chinese dollars for it.

However, Tse Tsan-tai's family carefully concealed it and now it is available today for anyone to see.

Following a visit to Yeung's ancestral home (Hai Cang Qu, Xiamen, Fujian Province) by Yeung Ku-wan's cousin, Yeung Bat-fan, in 1988, the people started a collection to pay for a statue to Yeung Ku-wan. The local government erected the statue at the entrance to the village, on Xia Yang Lu, in 1998.

More recently, Yeung Ku-wan's nephew, Yeung Hing-on (our friend's brother) has worked for the last 20 years in Hong Kong, writing articles and giving TV and magazine interviews, and even writing a play, all to get official recognition of his uncle and the part he played in the beginning of the Republic. He has collected as many personal reports from Yeung's associates as possible. As part of this campaign, the beginning of the 2009 kung fu movie **Bodyguards and Assassins** features the assassination of Yeung Ku-wan (who is played by Jacky Cheung).





Due to Yeung Hing-on's efforts, the Hong Kong authorities placed a commemorative plaque next to the house where Yeung was assassinated and, in September 2012, erected an explanatory plaque near his grave, Tomb 6348.

The authorities also have developed **Pak Tsz Lane Memorial Park** close to the old address where the Furen Literary Society met, in memory of the activities of Yeung Ku-wan and his revolutionary colleagues. The Park is located behind Yeung's house in Gage Street, where he was assassinated.



Commemorative marker of the site where Yeung Ku-wan was assassinated. Located at 52 Gage Street, corner of Aberdeen Street, Hong Kong, the marker is part of the [Dr Sun Yat-sen](#)



Yeung's unnamed tomb with explanatory plaque (for detail, see below)



楊衢雲 Yeung Ku-wan  
(1861-1901)

江蘇福建海澄，生於廣東東莞。晚清革命家。在香港接受教育及工作。1892年，與好友謝纘泰等在上環百子裏創辦輔仁文社。1895年，輔仁文社與孫中山先生創立的興中會合併；楊衢雲獲推舉為香港興中會會長，同年發動廣州起義，事敗後出洋暫避；其後參與1900年的惠州起義，事敗後返回香港。1901年1月10日於結志街52號2樓遭清廷派人暗殺，中彈身亡；同月12日下葬香港墳場；為免墳墓遭破壞，碑上未刻名字。

Yeung Ku-wan was a revolutionary in the late Qing period. A native of Haicheng in Fujian Province, he was born in Dongguan, Guangdong Province. He studied and worked in Hong Kong. Together with Ye Tzan-tai and other friends, he founded Foo Yan Man Sei (Literary Society for the Promotion of Benevolence) in Pak Tsz Lane, Sheung Wan in 1892. In 1895, when the Literary Society merged with the Hsing Chung Hui (Revive China Society) founded by Dr Sun Yat-sen, Yeung was elected president of the Hong Kong Hsing Chung Hui. In the same year, an uprising in Guangzhou was organised, but when it failed, Yeung fled overseas. He took part in another uprising in Huizhou in 1900, which was also unsuccessful, and then returned to Hong Kong. He was assassinated at the first floor of 52 Gage Street on 10 January 1901 and killed by gunshots fired by agents sent by the Qing authorities. He was buried in Hong Kong Cemetery on 12 January 1901, but the tombstone was left uninscribed for fear of desecration.

Yeung spent 10 years of his life in his fight for the Chinese Republic without any thought of self-aggrandisement. His family life was disrupted, his own life threatened and he sacrificed any prospects he might have had for a better position - all in the hope of a better China. 110 years have passed since Yeung was assassinated and he has slept in a nameless grave until recently when recognition came just in time for the 100th anniversary celebrations, October, 2012, of the Xinhai Revolution which resulted in the Chinese Republic that Yeung fought and died for.

In a book written about Yeung's life, '*Story of Yeung Ku-wan*', Youlie, who introduced Sun to Yeung, describes Yeung as:

**"A man who made something difficult, easy;  
who made something bad, good; and who made something silly, clever.  
He had courage, benevolence and wisdom. Something that very few leaders had."**

**"He is bright as the sun on the equator and pure as the ice on the North Pole!  
The foundation of the republic was built on Yeung."**

Who knows what changes the future might have brought had such a remarkable man not been assassinated on that fateful day long ago and had gone on to greater things!

### **Addendum to the Yeung Ku-wan story**

Life throws up many fascinating co-incidences and your reporter received another recently, concerning the Yeung Ku-wan story. In recent months it has excited many side issues including Duncan writing an article on Wikipedia which has had thousands of hits, recent protests in Hong Kong with protestors carrying banners of Yeung and further details from Yeung's great-nephew in Hong Kong, and his brother (our badminton friend), of movements afoot to recognise Yeung more as the first revolutionary before Sun Yat Sen.

Now yet another interesting aspect has turned up after we received an email from a journalist writing for the *South China Morning Post*, Stuart Heaver, stating that our article on the Society website re Yeung was the only fully detailed one that he could find and he asked for introductions to the two descendants to discuss another much larger article for the S.C.M.P. that he was researching.

We willingly agreed to help but requested that we contact the two brothers first for their approval and, lo and behold, Stuart's article appeared on Sunday, 18 August 2013. Heaver began the article by comparing Yeung's story with that of modern-day protester, [Edward Snowden](#). He then interviewed Yeung's great-nephew in Hong Kong and Dr Joseph Ting (a well-known Hong Kong historian). He extracted more interesting facts about Yeung such as his relationship with Sun and Dr Ting's theory that Yeung may have been British as he was buried in the European cemetery in Happy Valley!

It is a fascinating article, well worth reading and we hope to meet Stuart when we visit Hong Kong after the Society's [Diverse China Tour](#) with Dave Bromwich in October.

Click [HERE](#) to access Stuart Heaver's *South China Morning Post* article.

#### **Some useful links:**

[Wikipedia article on Yeung Ku-wan](#)

[Youtube video of news report on Yeung's tomb and plaque](#) In English

[Another Youtube video of Yeung's tomb with plaque.](#) No words - pleasant background music.  
Note: The Mandarin version of YKW's name, Yang Quyun

[Video of TV Programme \(21 minutes\) on Yeung Ku-wan](#) In Chinese

*Teri France, September, 2013*