Celebrating 100+ Years of Chinese Sisterhood

The three Soong sisters once were China’s most powerful women, making headlines as pioneers and leaders of the twentieth century. Each was educated at Wesleyan College, and we are proud of the enduring connections we share.

Soong Ai-ling, the first of the sisters to attend Wesleyan, became a member of the Class of 1909 when she was only fourteen. In an age when college was still a relatively rare experience even for Western women, Ai-ling would be the first Chinese woman to be educated in the United States. Soong Ching-ling and Soong May-ling joined their older sister at Wesleyan in the fall of 1908 – Ching-ling because she was college-age, and May-ling because, the story goes, she insisted on being allowed to accompany her older sisters even though she was only ten years old.

Ai-ling received her bachelor of arts degree from Wesleyan in 1909 and returned to Shanghai, where she secured a post as secretary to Sun Yat-sen, founder of the Chinese Nationalist movement. In 1914, she married H.H. Kung – a prominent figure in the Chinese financial world and the Nationalist party – and became Madame Kung, matron of the legendary Kung family.

Soong Ching-ling is remembered by both Wesleyan and China for her wholehearted devotion to her home country. In 1913, she graduated from Wesleyan College and returned to her beloved China. Upon her return, Ching-ling followed in her sister’s footsteps to become secretary to Sun Yat-sen. They married in 1915, thus beginning Ching-ling’s support of her husband’s work and causes, as well as social justice for women and children. This year marks the 100th anniversary of Ching-ling’s graduation from Wesleyan College.

The youngest sister, Soong May-ling, remained at Wesleyan from 1908-1913, first being privately tutored and then enrolling as a regular student. Although she moved to Boston to be near her brother and did not graduate from the College, she generously remembered Wesleyan and fellow students throughout her life.

The Soong sisters played influential roles in the politics, economy, and history of modern China, and Soong Ching-ling (“happy mood”) in particular is remembered and treasured for her wholehearted devotion to her country. At Wesleyan, Ching-ling was known to be quiet and profound. At the age of eighteen she began to speak out in a non-violent manner against the conditions endured by women in her country. When dynastic control of China was finally overthrown in 1911, Ching-ling tore down the old banner of the Chinese dragon from the wall of her Wesleyan room and vehemently replaced it with the new flag her father had sent. Expressing her ideals of liberty and equality, she wrote several impassioned essays about the Chinese Revolution for Wesleyan’s student magazine.

Ching-ling and Sun Yat-sen struggled to bring social and economic order to the chaos of post-Imperial China. Widowed just ten years after her wedding, Ching-ling devoted the rest of her life to upholding her husband’s ideals including becoming an opponent of Chinese political and military leader Chiang Kai-shek, who was also her brother-in-law, having married Ching-ling’s younger sister May-ling.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the Soong sisters exerted increasing influence alongside their husbands or, in Ching-ling’s case, carrying on her late husband’s work. Ai-ling and May-ling supported the right-wing politics that emerged with the leadership of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, while Ching-ling continued to serve as the voice of the left. Their differing political views kept them estranged throughout most of their lives. While Ai-ling is best remembered for her shrewdness in financial matters and May-ling as ambassador for Taiwan to the Western world, Ching-ling is revered as “the mother of China.”

Always an advocate for human rights, Ching-ling founded the China League for Civil Rights in 1932. In 1939, she founded the China Defense League, which in 1950 became the distinguished China Welfare Institute that continues to provide for the health and well-being of women and children today. Through the China Welfare Institute, Ching-ling created the China Reconstrukts magazine, which is still published monthly as China Today. In 1949, she was named vice-president of the Central People’s Government Council as well as the honorary president of the All-China Women’s Federation. Ching-ling devoted her life to helping women, children, the poor, and laboring people and to building a strong China. Two weeks prior to her death in 1981, Ching-ling was named honorary president of the People’s Republic of China.

A beloved leader and tireless proponent of human rights, Ching-ling dedicated herself entirely to her country, world peace, development, and child welfare. She was unwavering in her principles, and Wesleyan is honored to count her as one of our own.

Year after year, Wesleyan College welcomes scholars and visitors who wish to see the Soong memorabilia on display in the China Room and now, too, in the Confucius Institute at Wesleyan College. Wesleyan is dedicated to keeping alive the legacy of Soong Ching-ling and her sisters. Their memories live on – at Wesleyan College and around the world.