

Chapter Two

Born in a dark era (1866-1897)

Called Wing Kwong as his given name, his family name was Chung. His literary name was Xingke. He was a native of Zhongshan, then called the Xiangshan District. He was born on September 7, 1866 (the fifth year of the Tongzhi era of the Qing dynasty), at Chung lane in Xiaolan township. His grandfather's name was Sik-lum and his father was Yuk-lung (literary name Lin-fong). His mother's family name was Ho and his stepmother's name was Tse. He was his father's wife's son, the third child in the family. His elder brother and sister both died in childhood. His stepmother Ms Tse gave birth to his five younger brothers and sisters. Chung was a clever child, possessing an extraordinary memory compared to his peers. During his youth, he studied at a private academy. He had a photographic memory of the books he read, and was favoured by his parents as a result. He was also filial and was admired by the local people.

Xiaolan was a prosperous township; the people lived harmoniously. Mulberry groves and fishponds were everywhere. Because they had plenty, the people had a spirit of independence. They were proud to belong to Xiaolan and never mentioned the Xiangshan district. Early on, Chung's father became prosperous as a farmer. Later, he went into business and enjoyed success. At this time there were business opportunities in foreign trade, so Chung's father went to Hong Kong where he established a firm. Chung was still young at that time and went to stay with his father. Thus he had a chance to experience the modern world. Because Hong Kong was close to the provincial capital, his horizons were broadened as he experienced new things that he would not have seen in the village.

At that time the imperial examinations were popular. Young men all wished to participate in the hope of achieving fame and honouring their parents. Chung Wing Kwong went to Guangzhou and enrolled in the private academies run by Lui Chan-sun and Ho Chai-wan. Someone commented that Chung already followed Ng To-yung. He also studied with Kong Hung-yan and Kwei Chen as his fellow students. By that time, Kang Youwei had set up a school in the Yang Gao Temple, calling it the "Ten-thousand wood and grass hall." His students included Liang Qichao, Chan Wing-kwan (literary name Tsz-bo), and Lo Hsieng-fu. They were all gathered in the one area and as a result there was a strong academic atmosphere. Chung was very clever and diligent. At

the age of seventeen, he took the youth-level examination and passed. He then passed the special examination held in the fifteenth year of the Guangxu era, coming in seventh. At age twenty-nine, he passed the *juven* examination of the year 1895, holding the ninety-fifth place. Consequently his future seemed bright, but Chung Wing Kwong's interests lay elsewhere.

The period was a time of national weakness for China. The Qing dynasty was in decline and the government had become corrupt. Morality had decayed and was in a state of collapse. With domestic problems coinciding with external threats in events such as the Opium War of 1840, the joint Anglo-French invasion of 1857, and the Taiping Rebellion of 1850 to 1864, the country was entirely at a loss. Those in the intellectual circles were unable to overturn tyranny, and thus drowned their spirits in opium, alcohol, and visits to brothels. They were unable even to extricate themselves, let alone save the world.

Later China was defeated in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895. Dr Sun Yat-sen promoted a national revolutionary movement, founding the Revive China Society (Hsing-chung Hui) overseas. He tried to arouse patriotic feelings to expel the foreign rulers, raising his arm to rally comrades. Kang Youwei first promoted the reform movement in 1898, and then founded the Protect the Emperor Society (Baohuanghui). But the new policies were only short-lived before the Empress Dowager Cixi reversed them.

During that period political and social conditions were in a state of utter gloom. Bad customs and poor moral behaviour had become too frequent to be mentioned. Hostility between the Manchus and the Han Chinese was intense, corruption was open, and there was strict censorship. Illiteracy was widespread, and the patriarchal family system was the norm, accepted along with slavery and concubinage, footbinding, and opium-smoking. Dens of vice were everywhere, knowledge was hidden and superstitions and *fengshui* practices abounded. Learning was in a weak state, with a general attitude of fear of the foreign and prejudice against the new in which one would just assume a servile demeanour and kneel like a maidservant. Westerners called China the “ancient Empire,” and the “sick man of the Orient.” Who could say this was not true?

When wind blows over grass it must be pulled up from the roots, and in these dire circumstances it was thus difficult for Chung Wing Kwong, young and full of energy, not to fall in with bad company and become dissolute. By mixing with this crowd, he began to lose his good-natured temperament and gradually become cynical. His behaviour became undisciplined, just like a temporary eclipse of the sun and moon. By this time Chung became a well-known scholar, specializing in the eight-legged essay and well-versed in the classics. His essays were both wide-ranging and coherent. He always had a profound point and solid composition. He would use unique ideas to make his points. Famous

scholars and learned men all wished to make his acquaintance as a result. But Chung was not interested in fame or official service. He despised such slavery under the Manchu government, was unhappy with autocracy, and hated to be confined. Therefore he established an academy in Weibian Road in Guangzhou, supporting himself by teaching. Students of the locality flocked to him like wild ducks. In addition to giving lessons, he also worked as a ghost-writer, meaning that he served a substitute examination candidate or sat next to examinees to complete their answers for them. This practice was flourishing at the time. There were even firms openly offering such services in a well-organized system and in strict confidence. It was simply a profit-making venture.

In 1895, Dr Sun Yat-sen secretly organized uprisings in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, establishing a so-called “Agricultural Knowledge Society” in Guangzhou and often discussed revolution with Chan Shiu-paak (later a student at Lingnan) , Yeung Hok-ling (whose literary name was Mau-choi) and others. Having taken a political stand, from then on Chung Wing Kwong no longer degraded himself, as he gained new ideas in the forum of discussion of national affairs. He thus became deeply interested in the publishing business, as a means of widening the popular intellect, and to save the people from destructive currents. At first he wrote articles in the popular journal *Science and arts daily innovation review*, and in the *Literature Forum*, aiming to promote a

new literature. He then established the *Kebao*, the *Bowenbao*, and the *Anyabao*, to publicize current affairs. At that time the news business was just beginning in China. The newspapers were just a few pages long and their content was rudimentary. To accompany reports from the official news, all that would be added would be some common sense commentary. In 1897, less than two years later, his publications were banned by the authorities. At the same time, the publication of the *National Daily* of Kang Youwei's faction and another group's *China-Western Daily* suffered the same fate. All were banned and it was impossible to continue.

The Canton Hospital in Changti was established in 1898 by a foreign medical specialist together with a foreign missionary and Chinese Christians. Also, the Christian College in China was set up in Sipailou and its classes first began in 1892. The call was for scientific learning and the propagation of Christian truth. From groundwork to advanced levels, these ventures formed a kind of new force. Chung Wing Kwong gradually became acquainted with the men in this circle, and realized that if he wished to save himself in order to save others and save his country, he should become part of the new movement. Consequently he went to the Christian College in China to register as a student. The Christian College in China was the name of Lingnan University's earliest predecessor.