

The Story of Homer Lea



Homer Lea was the white American Chief of Staff and Military Advisor to Dr. Sun Yat-sen. He was born in 1876 in Denver, Colorado. As a baby, only a few days old, he was accidentally dropped and suffered severe back and head injuries. He grew up as a hunchback who stood just short of five feet tall with periodic bouts of crippling headaches and blindness. It was in Los Angeles that Lea developed his lifelong love of China when his family's Chinese servant told him stories about Chinese folk heroes and taught him to read and write in the language. Lea was especially inspired by tales about the Hongwu Emperor, the former monk who'd led the revolt against the Mongol Yuan Dynasty and founded the Ming Dynasty. Lea became determined that a hero would appear to save China from being divided by foreign powers and from its own internal weaknesses, not necessarily a Chinese hero either. He also predicted that China would become a Great Power able to compete with the United States and Europe, something that many people thought ludicrous in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries but take much more seriously today.

He was a devoted military scholar that read every book he could about military leadership and military history including Sun Zi's "Art of War." His backyard was filled with miniature soldiers that he used to recreate historical battles and to work out tactical situations. He studied with missionary students from China as a freshman at Occidental College in 1896-97, becoming even more familiar with Chinese culture, language, and history. Rejected by West Point Military Academy in 1898 due to his bad health and prevented from going to Harvard Law School because of his family's finances, he went to Stanford University but dropped out in his junior year because of his health problems.

He then devoted himself completely to the Chinese Revolution, becoming the only white man to ever join the Chinese Empire Reform Association. This group was dedicated to the restoration to power of the Guangxu Emperor, who'd led the "Hundred Days Reform" movement for a constitutional monarchy before being overthrown and imprisoned by the ultra-conservative Empress Dowager Cixi.

Lea became so trusted by the association that he delivered \$60,000 in cash raised by Chinese communities across the US to Guangzhou in 1900 to help finance the reform movement. He became acquainted with the surviving reform leaders, Kang Yu-wei, and his disciple, Liang Qi-chao, Qing Dynasty officials who'd fled under the death penalty after the overthrow of their Emperor. Lea's journey across the Pacific came at a time of growing chaos during the Boxer Rebellion when several revolutionary movements took action across China. The main publicity was generated by the Boxers, anti-foreigner rebels that besieged the Western diplomatic delegations in Beijing.

Kang's movement of Imperial reformers were located in Southern China along with the smaller and relatively unknown revolutionary movement of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, who wanted to get rid of the Qing Dynasty altogether. Lea met with both groups and tried unsuccessfully to unite the reformers and revolutionaries forces together. Kang made Lea a lieutenant general hoping to gain foreign support through him but the reformist soldiers were crushed by the Qing government even before Lea could make it to his command. He then joined with Sun's revolutionary army and fought with them in several winning battles, capturing an Imperial officer's sword as a trophy. Starved of supplies and outgunned the revolutionaries soon dissolved under Imperial attack and Lea was reported to have fled to Hong Kong disguised as a French missionary.

Back in the US, Lea continued to publicize the Chinese cause wherever he could, writing newspaper articles, making speeches, and generally making a nuisance of himself to Qing diplomats in the country. A group of financiers, military men, and revolutionaries soon centered around Lea, forming the secret conspiracy group, "Red Dragon." The financiers saw advantages in supporting both the reformers and revolutionaries and gaining lucrative trade concessions in China in the event of either side's victory. The military men saw an American advantage in having a strong China to ally with and compete with Imperial Japan. The members of this group eventually included Homer Lea, Harrison Gray Otis, former US Army general and publisher of the Los Angeles Times, Charles Beach Boothe, wealthy lawyer and former mayor of South Pasadena, his schoolmate W.W. Allen, a wealthy New York businessman, General Adna R. Chaffee, US Army Chief of Staff, and Yung Wing, the first Chinese graduate of an American college, (Yale University, 1854.)

By 1910 the group had raised \$9 million for the cause, about \$150 to \$200 million in 2008 dollars. By 1902, Lea had begun training Chinese soldiers at his Western Military Academy in Los Angeles with the professional help of retired Sergeant Ansel O'Banion, formerly of the 4th US Cavalry Regiment in the Philippines and other retired US military men. The Chinese Imperial Army (C.I.A.) he formed was similar to Cuban paramilitary groups of the mid to late 20th Century, sometimes receiving covert support from the US Government and sometimes being investigated by the government for giving illegal military training to foreign nationals. O'Banion himself had been influenced to join Lee by his regimental colonel, who'd shown him a letter from the War Department,

undoubtedly under the influence of sympathizers within the US military, advising him to send retiring military men to meet with Lea. The retired military men were paid better than they had been in the US military. The only officer who didn't take any money at all was Lea, who said he'd only take a salary once the revolution had succeeded. The military training program soon expanded to cities across the US and Canada with major Chinese populations.

In 1905, an armed unit of 120 of these neatly uniformed Chinese marched in the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, the first time foreign troops had ever done so in any American parade. Because they lacked the characteristic Qing queues associated with the Chinese at the time the crowds thought they were Japanese and some yelled, "Banzai!" Government investigations into their activities and finances suddenly increased. In that year, Kang, the reformist leader, was finally allowed to come to the United States and inspect the new military units in person. He also had the opportunity to bring Lea and Yung Wing with him to meet with President Theodore Roosevelt and talk about repealing the Chinese Exclusion Act and allay government concerns about Lea's military units. Roosevelt is reported to have said his characteristic, "Bully" and the government investigations stopped. Lea also gained the support of the US Secretary of State and later Senator Elihu Root. Nevertheless, the Chinese soldiers disappeared and trained in secret rather than make more public appearances. In 1908, the Guangxu Emperor mysteriously died, perhaps poisoned, a day or two before the Dowager Empress who'd overthrown him died herself. Kang immediately threw his support to the five year old Xuantong Emperor, Pu Yi, despite Lea's advice to support Sun Yat-sen. Kang soon became estranged from many overseas Chinese and their Western supporters because of his continued pro-Qing stance.

In 1909, Lea came out with his book, "The Valor of Ignorance." In it he first examined the nature of war and human society, saying that wars were inevitable due to differences between countries such as population, geography, and economics among other reasons. "Instead of disarmament of nations becoming possible through increased civilization, it becomes more and more impossible as science increases the number of inventions." The only way to stop wars he argued would be through diligent military preparedness and greater awareness of threatening countries. In the second part he warned about the specific threat posed by Imperial Japan and the danger that the United States faced by ignoring it. Most military experts scoffed at or ignored Lea's suggested military strategies, preferring instead to concentrate on the first part of his book. His idea that Japanese forces would attack the then new American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii in a surprise attack was considered ridiculous as well as his idea that the Philippines would be conquered within a month in the event of a Japanese attack. Lea even predicted the exact Philippine coastal area in Luzon where the Japanese troops would first land in 1941 to take Manila on their way to conquering the Philippines in just three weeks. He was condemned as a warmonger by pacifists and as a racist by Japanese Americans but his book was eagerly bought in Germany, Britain, and Japan, where it sold 84,000 copies in a month. A young

Japanese naval officer, Isoroku Yamamoto, later admiral and commander of the Imperial Japanese Combined Fleet, was inspired by it. Another man who found inspiration in the book was Vladimir Lenin, who said, "This book will someday be studied by thousands of people. Lea understood more about world politics than all the cabinet ministers now in office." General Douglas MacArthur even tried to make the book compulsory reading as commandant of West Point. Lea donated all the proceeds to Dr. Sun even though he wasn't a rich man.

In 1910, Dr. Sun came to LA at Lea's invitation to discuss strategy and financing with the "Red Dragon" conspirators at Boothe's mansion. O'Banion acted as Sun's bodyguard. During Sun's visit he foiled an assassination attempt at an honorary dinner by two Qing assassins armed with knives by knocking them in the head with his pistol. O'Banion had been appointed by the Los Angeles Police Department to "special police office" with the title of captain of Los Angeles Chinatown in 1905 with the political and financial backing of the "Red Dragons." This position made it easier for him to smuggle Chinese into the US for military training and break the Chinese Exclusion Act. He was then smuggling trained soldiers back into China to infiltrate the Qing Imperial Army. Many of these soldiers were then promoted to officer ranks thanks to their superior military training. Captain O'Banion was convicted and sent to prison for alien smuggling in 1912.

British supporters urged Lea to write a book examining the strategic problems of the British Empire. He began work on "The Day of the Saxon" that was finally published in 1912 that among other things detailed the threat of the German Reich conquering Continental Europe, a threat that most people, including most military men, dismissed as overblown nonsense until Hitler proved it could be done in 1940. Ironically, Lea was in Germany in October 1911 to treat his failing eyesight when he received word that the Chinese Revolution had unexpectedly broken out. As Lea had predicted would happen the coup was nearly bloodless, perhaps indicating just how much influence the over 2000 graduates of his military academy had had within the Qing military. Dr. Sun immediately contacted him and asked him to go to London to seek British financial and political help. Lea was unsuccessful because his harping on military preparedness had won him no friends in the governing British Liberal Party. Sun joined him there from the US before sailing back to China together despite the doctors telling Lea not to go. Lea became the only white man present when Dr. Sun was inaugurated as the first President of the Republic of China in Nanjing on the first day of 1912.

Lea immediately began negotiations with the American consulate in Hong Kong for recognition of the new government along with financial support. His immense influence in the new Chinese government was recognized by the State Department but there is no record of Washington ever having sent any reply. Mere months later, unable to win any foreign financial or political backing, Sun abdicated and gave up power to the warlord, Yuan Shikai, despite Lea's vehement protests that the man was not to be trusted. Yuan eventually drove Sun out of

China and back into exile in 1913, declaring himself emperor for three months in 1916 before dropping dead, letting China fall apart into warlordism. Sun had to admit that the abdication had been his greatest mistake in life. Homer Lea collapsed with a stroke the day before the abdication and was in a coma for five days, waking up partially paralyzed. He suffered another stroke back home in Santa Monica, California and died November 1, 1912 at the age of 36. His planned third political book was “March of the Slavs” predicting the rise of a strong Russian state that would compete against the US and Western Europe, another thing that seemed impossible until the advent of the Soviet Union in 1917 and its growth into a nuclear armed superpower.

In 1969, Lea’s ashes and those of his wife, who’d served as the English speaking secretary of Dr. Sun's revolutionary movement, were sent to Wuchih Mountain Military Cemetery in Taiwan, the most prestigious military cemetery on the island, where both were honored by Taiwanese government and military officials. Taiwanese participants vowed that the ashes would one day be transferred to Dr. Sun’s mausoleum on the mainland, something that still awaits a response from the mainland government. Dr. Sun himself paid tribute to Lea in the China Press days after his death, “Mr. Lea was physically deformed but he possessed a wonderful brain. Although not a military man, he was a great military philosopher. He was a thoroughly sincere man and devoted his whole energy to the Chinese Revolution.”

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