

## Book review

Walton Look Lai, *West Meets East: The Life of Eugene Chen (1875-1944)*. Trinidad and Tobago 2021. 445 pages. ISBN 9789768308306.

Hans Hägerdal

The Chinese Republic that was founded in 1911 does not have the best reputation in the history books. While it started with some promise, the new creation quickly fell into a vicious cycle of authoritarianism, warlordism, corruption, foreign intervention, world war, and finally a full-scale civil war that ushered into the People's Republic in 1949. A man in the centre of this sombre history was a Trinidad-born former solicitor who did not even speak fluent Chinese. Strangely enough the story of Eugene Chen (Chen Youren) has never been described in any detail although he was a prominent figure in his day, as a politician and diplomat. Friend and confidant of Sun Yat-sen, a personal inspiration for Asian leaders such as Zhou Enlai and the Malaysian Tunjku Abdul Rahman, a person who met Stalin as well as Chiang Kai-shek, he is still relatively unknown to the Chinese and Western readership. Major histories of modern China by Jonathan Fenby and John King Fairbank do not mention him at all. A biographic study of his dramatic life is therefore long overdue, and in this detailed volume, Walton Look Lai has pieced together his career from official records, personal letters, diaries, memoirs written by his near kin, and so on.

During the first 36 years of his life, nothing suggested that he would rise to prominence in politics. He came from a thousand-headed community of Chinese that had migrated to Trinidad from mainly southern China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; his father came from Guangdong while his mother belonged to a Francophone Chinese family. He made a reasonably successful career in law in Trinidad, married and sired four children, and later moved to London. There he abruptly decided to move to China when he became aware of the revolutionary movement that was unfolding. Working as an editor for a journal in Beijing, he witnessed the successive withering of the high hopes that many initially felt for the new republic with Yuan Shikai at the helm. Later, he befriended the father figure of the revolution, Sun Yat-sen, and gained an important role in Sun's inclusive nationalist party, Guomindang. Chen's true rise to prominence, however briefly, came after the untimely demise of Sun, as the Canton-based Guomindang carried out its Northern Expedition with the aim of reunify China in 1926-28. As the foreign minister of the Guomindang, he cooperated closely with the Soviet advisors and was a leading figure in the ill-fated left-leaning Hankou government that rivalled

the new Guomindang strongman Chiang Kai-shek. Chen was eventually forced to flee the increasingly insecure situation in China together with Sun Yat-sen's widow, and spent the next four years in Moscow and Paris. During a later sojourn in China in 1931-34 he advocated against the strict militarist rule by Chiang Kai-shek, however unsuccessfully. Chen's last years were traumatic; he was arrested by the Japanese when they overran Hong Kong in 1941 and was forced into a mild confinement in Shanghai where he passed away in 1944, with the war still raging. Interestingly, he is seen in a positive light in the People's Republic, as an inveterate opponent of foreign concessions, Japanese intervention, and Chiang Kai-shek's policies.

This brief sketch of his career hides a very intricate story that unfolds in Lai's book over several hundred pages. The title of his biography is apt: Eugene Chen was indeed a figure of the West who embraced the East. He was widely read in Western history, culture and society, and wrote skilful polemics against the internal and foreign ills that threatened the Chinese nation. His major drawback was that he did not learn satisfactory Chinese, although he knew some Guoyu (the national spoken language), which somewhat limited his insights in internal affairs. Although a major spokesperson for China, he always had to rely on interpreters. His foreignness in fact made his Chinese critics use racist slurs (his wife was an Afro-French creole). In spite of his thoroughly British-colonial upbringing (or, perhaps, thanks to it), he developed a vocal anti-colonial and anti-British stance during the 1920s, similar to his friend Sun Yat-sen. British imperialist policies vis-à-vis China left him disillusioned, and he showed his skills as a diplomat when Guomindang confronted the British concessions through a boycott in 1925-26. However respected, his life as an outspoken political figure was fraught with physical danger. He was arrested by irritated warlords in 1917 and again in 1925; on the last-mentioned occasion, he just barely escaped execution. His eventual demise in Japanese captivity had by all appearances natural causes, although some of his relatives claim that he was murdered.

Lai's book is a treasure-trove of information on the intricate politics of Republican China. Sometimes it reads like a narrative of the period, where Eugene Chen's own life has a subordinated role. This is also presumably a consequence of the patchy sources; while Chen stands out as an imposing figure with high principles, we hardly get a full psychological portrait of the man. His family was truly cosmopolitan, and his sons and daughters had interesting careers in various corners of the world, as barrister, writer, dancer, and cinematographer. To sum up, the book reminds us that China's modern history is selectively written, and that there are significant figures who might be sympathetic losers but are well worth saving from oblivion.