

1 Life and death in a Kunming teahouse

One fine Sunday in December 1921, He Yingqin sat at a table on the third floor of the Fenghua Teahouse in Kunming, chatting with his friend Wang Yongyu and enjoying some refreshments. The teahouse did a brisk business on such afternoons, with customers coming, going, and occupying tables on all three floors. At one point, He Yingqin excused himself and went down to the first floor where the owner operated a bath house, particularly popular on crisp winter days. After about half an hour, He Yingqin emerged from the relaxing hot bath, dressed in his uniform, and prepared to rejoin his friend at their table. Suddenly shots rang out, as assassins fired several rounds at He Yingqin, setting off a panic among the teahouse patrons. He Yingqin drew his pistol and returned fire. Chaos ensued as smoke from the gunfire filled the room, and dozens of people shouted and screamed as they scurried toward the exit. He Yingqin staggered up the stairs and collapsed on a couch, where Wang Yongyu found him ashen-faced and bleeding from wounds in his chest and leg.¹

He Yingqin survived the attack, but lost the position he had worked hard for years to achieve. The early years of his education and training had taken him to Guiyang, Wuchang, and Japan, and he had returned to his home province with a first-class military education and a desire to help modernize China. In attempting to do so, he found himself thrust into the complicated world of warlord politics and military conflict in Guizhou, which gave him additional experience, but also nearly ended his life in a Kunming teahouse. Ironically, though he almost died, the attack forced him to leave the relative backwater of Guizhou province and ended up launching his ascent to the highest levels of the Chinese military and government.

¹ This account of the attack comes from Zhu Guangting, an eyewitness. See Zhu Guangting, “He Yingqin zai Kunming beici jianwen” [An Account of the Shooting of He Yingqin in Kunming], in Tu Yueseng, ed., *Xingyi Liu, Wang, He sanda jiazhu* (Guizhou: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 1990), 152–53.

Early education and training

Born in 1890, He Yingqin grew up in a family with strong Confucian values and a tradition of military service at the local level. He spent his youth in the village of Nidang, near the town of Xingyi in southwestern Guizhou province, where his family operated a successful cloth-weaving and -dyeing business. The family had left its ancestral home in Jiangxi several generations before He Yingqin's birth, first raising cattle and then engaging in farming and trade. As the He family prospered, it occasionally used its resources to carry out public works projects in the area, to support and lead the local defense forces against bandits, and to educate its sons, making it a rather prominent family in the area. The patriarch, He Qimin, favored frugality and simplicity and made sure that He Yingqin and his four brothers and six sisters learned the value of hard work, laboring alongside hired hands in the family's business.²

After beginning his education with a village teacher, studying the *Three Character Classic* and other Confucian texts, at age thirteen He Yingqin saw an advertisement for a newly reformed Xingyi county primary school, which included a Western curriculum. By the first decade of the twentieth century, this had become a common trend in China, and opportunities to attend such schools appeared even in remote Guizhou. During this early period of educational reform, many older people regarded these modern schools with a healthy dose of suspicion, but like many youngsters He Yingqin and his brothers eagerly sought admission. He Qimin initially hesitated, perhaps worrying about tuition fees and living expenses as much as the potential impact of the newfangled learning, but eventually agreed to enroll He Yingqin and two of his brothers in the new school.³

According to one story, He Yingqin found a unique way to convince his father to allow him to attend this new school. Finding himself alone and otherwise unoccupied, young He Yingqin crept into his father's private room to look at one of his most prized possessions, an old hunting rifle that hung on the wall. When He Yingqin took the weapon down to examine and play with it, he accidentally pulled the trigger and discharged the weapon, filling the room with smoke and blowing a small hole in

² He Yingqin shangjiang jiuwu shouyan congshu bianji weiyuanhui, *He Yingqin jiangjun jiuwu jishi changbian* [A Record of General He Yingqin's Ninety-Five Years] (hereafter *HYQJ*), 2 vols. (Taipei: Liming wenhua shiye youxian gongsi, 1984), vol. I, 2; He Jiwu, *Guizhou zhengtian yiwang* [Recollections of Guizhou Politics] (Taipei: Zhongwai tushuguan chubanshe, 1982), 12.

³ Li Yuan, *Jiang Jieshi he He Yingqin* [Chiang Kai-shek and He Yingqin] (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 1996), 9; Xiong Zongren, *He Yingqin: xuanwozhong de lishi* [He Yingqin: History in the Vortex], 2 vols. (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 2001), vol. I, 16–17.

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the ceiling. Too terrified to face his father's wrath, he raced out the back door of the house and fled the scene. His family searched for him for several days with no luck, until a letter arrived in which He Yingqin announced that he had gone to Xingyi, the nearby county seat, and sat for the entrance examination to the new Xingyi County Primary School. He had won admission to the new "Western-style" school and asked for his father's blessing and support to enroll. Angry at his son's actions but also relieved to learn he had come to no harm, He Yingqin's father concluded that his third son had shown considerable aptitude in passing the examination. He not only provided He Yingqin with tuition and funds to support him in the county seat, but also enrolled his two elder sons as well.⁴

He Yingqin had a certain academic ability, but his initiation to formal schooling proved difficult. As a village boy, albeit from a rather prosperous family, who had grown up outside the county seat, he lacked the polish of some of his more urbane and affluent classmates. His clothes, both made and dyed at home, his traditional peasant grass sandals, and his rural accent led others to call him *xiang balao* or "country bumpkin."⁵ Moreover, the new subject matter at the school meant that He Yingqin lagged behind his classmates academically, forcing him to struggle to keep up. From an early age he displayed a stubborn willingness to work hard, perhaps drawing upon the lessons he had learned at home in the family business. In addition to his academic work, he also had a hard time with physical fitness and outdoor exercise, part of the new school's curriculum. As he was neither fluid nor natural in his physical movements, his classmates occasionally ridiculed him. He Yingqin accepted these challenges, practicing in his own time and patiently following the commands of his instructors. On one occasion, after correcting his movements several times, his physical education instructor criticized him in front of the other students and ordered him to stand at attention to the side. When the class period ended and the other students and the instructor had left, He Yingqin remained in place at rigid attention, as he had not been told to do otherwise.⁶

He Yingqin began his formal schooling at a time of transition in China's educational and military systems. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Qing government attempted to centralize and regulate military education as a part of its general plan for strengthening China's armed

⁴ Xiong Zongren, *He Yingqin: xuanwozhong de lishi*, I, 15–16; Li Yuan, *Jiang Jieshi he He Yingqin*, 9–10.

⁵ Li Yuan, *Jiang Jieshi he He Yingqin*, 10.

⁶ Xiong Zongren, *He Yingqin: xuanwozhong de lishi*, I, 18.

forces and ordered each province to establish a military primary school.⁷ The larger plan called for a three-tiered system of military education with primary schools in each provincial capital, three army middle schools, and creation of a formal military university at Baoding.⁸ Accordingly, in the fall of 1906 Guizhou provincial authorities established the Guiyang Army Primary School and organized entrance examinations for students from the surrounding area to form the first class.

A number of factors propelled He Yingqin toward a military education and career. First, the Qing government's abolition of the Confucian examination system in 1905 had removed the traditional route to power and prestige for ambitious and educated Chinese. This destroyed any hope that He Yingqin might become a traditional scholar-official. Second, Japan's military victory over Russia in 1905 stunned the world and caught the attention of countless young Chinese who now clearly saw Japan as a model for addressing China's own military weakness. Like others of his generation, He Yingqin came to believe that a revitalized China must begin with a strong and modern military, and Japan's military development deeply impressed those who sought to help China defend itself against foreign aggression. These two events lent new prestige to the military profession in China and attracted thousands of students to military schools. For He Yingqin, who had already showed both academic aptitude and a preference for discipline and hard work, the army primary school and a military career must have seemed a natural fit. In comparison to other options, such as returning home to work in the family business, he saw this as his most promising opportunity. Competition for admission, however, proved fierce as provincial army primary schools such as the one in Guiyang sometimes received thousands of applications for 200 to 300 openings. Regardless, He Yingqin passed the entrance examination and entered the first class of the Guiyang Army Primary School in February 1907, marking the beginning of his formal military education.⁹

Designed to strengthen the military forces of the Qing Dynasty, schools such as the Guiyang Army Primary School ironically produced many students who showed greater interest in changing China's traditional

⁷ Edward Dreyer, *China at War, 1901–1949* (New York: Longman, 1995), 21–22.

⁸ Chen-ya Tien, *Chinese Military Theory: Ancient and Modern* (Oakville, ON: Mosaic Press, 1992), 167. The first three army middle schools appeared in Qinghezhen (Hebei), Wuchang, and Nanjing. A fourth, in Xi'an, came later.

⁹ Anita O'Brien, "Military Academies in China, 1885–1915," in Joshua A. Fogel and William T. Rowe, eds., *Perspectives on a Changing China: Essays in Honor of Professor C. Martin Wilbur on the Occasion of His Retirement* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 171; *HYQ* 7, I, 7–8; Li Yuan, *Jiang jieshi he He Yingqin*, 11.

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political and social system, gravitating toward Sun Yat-sen's Tongmenghui (Revolutionary Alliance), a broad-based organization dedicated to the overthrow of Manchu rule and the establishment of a republic. Copies of the Tongmenghui periodical *Min Bao* circulated widely among the students, spreading ideas of revolution and republic. Qing authorities tried to squash this movement among cadets, and He Yingqin saw some thirty classmates expelled for revolutionary activity during his time.¹⁰ Discussion of revolutionary ideas on campus had little influence on him at this time as he did not see himself as a revolutionary, but simply as an obedient and dedicated student.

While He Yingqin worked hard at his studies, he adapted naturally to the discipline and order of the military school. Some who studied with him in Guiyang described him as a model cadet.¹¹ He found that the military environment suited his personality and temperament and reinforced his core values of traditional morality, hard work, and discipline. He graduated at the top of his class and in the winter of 1908 he passed the entrance exam for admission to the Wuchang Army Number Three Middle School. This meant leaving his native province for neighboring Hubei province, where he would meet students from all over China. Although he had to adjust to life away from home, complaining that he had to eat fish at every meal, the school was much larger, more prestigious, and well supported. In the fall of 1909, He Yingqin entered the second class of cadets at Wuchang.¹²

The Wuchang Army Number Three Middle School based its curriculum on the Japanese military school model, which presented He Yingqin with a new set of challenges such as an academic program that included algebra and analytical geometry. While other students spent their free time and vacations visiting some of Wuchang's historic and scenic locations, he preferred to stay on campus, studying for his classes and poring over maps to sharpen his knowledge of geography and terrain.¹³ Some no doubt considered him a dry and colorless young man, but he excelled at the Wuchang middle school, both academically and in terms of military training, which the new school emphasized far more than the Guiyang Army Primary School. In only his second semester in Wuchang, He Yingqin learned of an opportunity to sit for a competitive examination for a study-abroad program in Japan. Admission to a Japanese military

¹⁰ Xiong Zongren, *He Yingqin: xuanwozhong de lishi*, I, 21–22.

¹¹ See reference to fellow student Wang Jian'an, in Xiong Zongren, *He Yingqin: xuanwozhong de lishi*, I, 22–23.

¹² *HYQJ*, I, 9; Li Yuan, *Jiang Jieshi he He Yingqin*, 11–12. The Wuchang Army Middle School had approximately 1,000 cadets. See O'Brien, "Military Academies in China, 1885–1915," 174.

¹³ *HYQJ*, I, 9; Li Yuan, *Jiang Jieshi he He Yingqin*, 12.

academy represented a valuable training opportunity for a Chinese cadet in the early twentieth century and would all but assure him of a prominent position as an instructor upon his return to China. In a testimony to his hard work and academic success, the next semester, when the school posted the list of names of successful candidates, He Yingqin's name appeared at the top of the list, first among all who took the examination. As a result, in 1910, he joined a group of twenty Chinese students bound for study in Japan.¹⁴ Having succeeded in military schools in Guiyang and Wuchang and on his way to an elite Japanese military academy, He Yingqin had developed from a "country bumpkin" into a promising young military professional.¹⁵ He had now begun to excel in the classroom, to travel beyond the confines of his home county, province, and country, all in pursuit of a professional military education. His decision to enter the military profession had opened up a new world to He Yingqin that he had never envisioned.

At that time, when Chinese students arrived in Japan to study at a military academy, they first attended a special school for Chinese students called the Shimbu Gakko. In the spirit of pan-Asianism, the Japanese government established this school in 1903 near Tokyo in order to instruct Chinese students in the Japanese language and to provide basic military training in preparation for advanced study in a Japanese military academy.¹⁶ After preliminary study at the Shimbu Gakko, and a period of service and training in the Japanese Imperial Army, Chinese students took a test for admission to the elite Rikugun Shikan Gakko military academy.¹⁷ Perhaps the most prestigious of Japan's military academies, the Shikan Gakko produced an entire generation of officers for the Japanese Imperial Army. In 1900 it began accepting Chinese cadets, though they suffered a high attrition rate. According to some estimates, as many as 1,000 Chinese students went to study there between 1900 and 1908, but as few as 229 completed their program and graduated from the Shikan Gakko. Those who did graduate could expect to return to China and work in the best military academies, including the Baoding Academy, where they would train Chinese cadets according to the Japanese military educational model.¹⁸

¹⁴ Xiong Zongren, *He Yingqin: xuanwozhong de lishi*, I, 24–25; Li Yuan, *Jiang Jieshi he He Yingqin*, 13.

¹⁵ Li Yuan, *Jiang Jieshi he He Yingqin*, 12.

¹⁶ Chen Ningsheng and Zhang Guangyu, *Jiang Jieshi he huangpu xi* [Chiang Kai-shek and the Whampoa Clique] (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1994), 2.

¹⁷ *HYQJ*, I, 10.

¹⁸ Xu Ping, "Ribei shiguan xuexiao he jiu zhongguo lujun 'shiguanxi'" [Japan's Shikan Gakko and the "Shikan Gakko Faction" in the Military of Old China], *Minguo chunqiu*, 4 (2001), 57–60.

He Yingqin's time in Japan played a critical role in his development as an officer and had a significant impact on his career trajectory. First, it reinforced his belief in the importance of discipline, duty, and obedience. He admired the manner in which Japanese soldiers immediately and unquestioningly obeyed the orders of their superiors, believing that only this same discipline and dedication could reinvigorate and strengthen China after decades of weakness and imperialist exploitation. This inspired him to export to his homeland the military spirit, loyalty to superiors, and dedication to duty that he saw all around him in Japan.¹⁹ Second, he began to make important contacts that would have a decisive influence on his subsequent career. He made the acquaintance of Wang Boling, who would later recommend him for a position with Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary government in Guangzhou. He also met a young cadet one class ahead of him at the Shimbu Gakko who at the time used the name Jiang Zhiqing, later known in China and around the world as Chiang Kai-shek. Although the two had only a general acquaintance at the time, Chiang later offered He a position as a military instructor in part because of their common experience as cadets in Japan.²⁰ Third, his experience in Japan and contacts with other cadets from around China aroused a new type of nationalism in He Yingqin, leading to his first involvement in anti-Qing activities. Although the Japanese government had agreed to a Qing court request to restrict revolutionary activities among Chinese students in Japan, many Chinese cadets, including several from Xingyi county in Guizhou, had already joined Sun Yat-sen's Tongmenghui.²¹ Prior to his arrival in Japan, He Yingqin had shown no interest in such activity, but perhaps his first-hand view of Meiji Japan led him to see the inherent weakness of the Manchu government and the promise of Sun's revolutionary program. In 1910, Japan had already emerged as a modern industrial state with a powerful military, and He Yingqin could not help but see the stark contrast between Tokyo and the areas of China in which he had lived and studied. The Meiji government and Imperial Army, which had not only presided over the defeat of Russia but more

¹⁹ Xiong Zongren, *He Yingqin: xuanwozhong de lishi*, I, 26; Li Yuan, *Jiang Jieshi he He Yingqin*, 15. On Japanese military academies, see Theodore Failer Cook, "The Japanese Officer Corps: The Making of a Military Elite, 1872–1945" (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, 1987), 114.

²⁰ A list of Chinese students who graduated from the Shikan Gakko can be found in Shen Yunlong, ed., *Riben lujun shiguan xuexiao zhonghua minguo liuxuesheng mingbu* [Foreign Students from the Republic of China at Japan's Rikugun Shikan Gakko] (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1977). Chiang Kai-shek graduated from the Shimbu Gakko and served in a Japanese artillery regiment, but did not graduate from the Shikan Gakko and therefore is not listed.

²¹ See Marius Jansen, *The Japanese and Sun Yat-sen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 121–24.

recently also annexed Korea, must have seemed light years ahead of their Chinese counterparts. Similar feats, He Yingqin and other cadets concluded, could not be accomplished under the Manchu government. He tended to view political issues from a military vantage point, and not until his experience in Japan did he embrace the idea that political revolution might be a necessary precursor to military modernization. For the first time in his life, He Yingqin began to gravitate toward the politics and the principles of Sun Yat-sen, joining the Tongmenghui on the eve of the 1911 Revolution.²²

This new interest in revolutionary activity led him to return to China in the wake of the revolt in Wuchang in October 1911, which caused numerous provinces to secede and eventually toppled the Manchu government. Many Chinese students in Japan became so caught up in the excitement that they left school without authorization, Chiang Kai-shek among them.²³ He Yingqin now clearly saw himself as a supporter of Sun Yat-sen and wanted to return to China to fight with the revolutionaries, but his sense of discipline prevented him from doing so until the school authorities gave him official leave. The school granted him leave, perhaps realizing that denying authorization did not deter Chinese cadets from departing without authorization, but a shortage of funds delayed his return to China. He left for China only when a wealthy Japanese supporter of the Tongmenghui provided him with financial aid.²⁴

He Yingqin went to Shanghai to serve under the command of Chen Qimei, who had also studied in Japan and who served as head of the general affairs department of the Tongmenghui.²⁵ Chen had sent telegrams to Japan to call all cadets from the Shimbu Gakko and Shikan Gakko to serve in the Shanghai Army, one of several military forces that opposed the Qing government after the initial revolt in October 1911. As fate would have it, He Yingqin and Chiang Kai-shek both responded to the invitation and soon found themselves officers in the first division, Chiang in command of the fifth regiment and He Yingqin commanding a company in the third regiment.²⁶ He Yingqin served as a drill instructor helping to train the Shanghai Army, but also took part in the fighting around the city and quickly rose to the rank of

²² Li Yuan, *Jiang Jieshi he He Yingqin*, 15.

²³ Chiang applied for and received a 48-hour leave, but immediately left for China before receiving permission. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs expelled students who left without formal leave. See Li Yuan, *Jiang Jieshi he He Yingqin*, 16–17; Taylor, *Generalissimo*, 21.

²⁴ Xiong Zongren, *He Yingqin: xuanwozhong de lishi*, I, 27.

²⁵ Li Yuan, *Jiang Jieshi he He Yingqin*, 16.

²⁶ *HYQJ*, I, 11; Xiong Zongren, *He Yingqin: xuanwozhong de lishi*, I, 28–29.

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battalion commander. In the fall of 1912, he learned that his mother had passed away from illness. He took leave and rushed home to Xingyi county, but the funeral had already taken place and he could only visit her grave.²⁷

He Yingqin's participation in the fighting did not last long. Following the abdication of the last Manchu emperor in February 1912, the new president of the Republic of China, Yuan Shikai, proved uninterested in parliamentary government. In the summer of 1913, several southern provinces including Jiangsu rose in opposition to the government in what is known as the Second Revolution. Yuan controlled the most powerful remnant of the Qing military, the Beiyang Army, which crushed the poorly organized southern forces. In the wake of this defeat, Sun Yat-sen and others fled to Japan to regroup and continue the revolutionary movement. Likewise, many Chinese students who had returned from Japan to participate in the revolution went back to finish their studies. In December 1913, He Yingqin returned to the Shimbu Gakko where he quickly finished the remainder of his program and took an assignment in the fifty-ninth regiment of the Japanese Imperial Army at Utsunomiya, north of Tokyo. All Japanese military cadets served for a period of time in an infantry unit in order to put the officer candidate in close contact with enlisted men like those he would one day command. The training and discipline of the Japanese army proved rigorous, but again He Yingqin excelled in this environment, earning a promotion after six months.²⁸

Instruction and training in the Japanese military focused on the practical skills required of ordinary soldiers and squad leaders, with the aim of producing troops with a mastery of basic skills and exposure to all the things a soldier or lower-ranking officer might encounter in combat. It also emphasized the development of moral character, or what some call the *bushido* spirit, stressing absolute obedience, honor, courage, and loyalty to superiors.²⁹ Chinese cadets lived and trained exactly as Japanese soldiers, experiencing the same indoctrination in the “way of the warrior.” When he completed his studies at the Shimbu Gakko and his term of service in the fifty-ninth regiment, He Yingqin had acquired a solid educational and practical foundation for his military career. In the fall of 1914, he and five other students from Guizhou entered the Shikan Gakko at Ichigaya in central Tokyo, where their instruction in tactics and

²⁷ Li Yuan, *Jiang Jieshi he He Yingqin*, 17–18; *HYQJJ*, I, 11.

²⁸ Li Yuan, *Jiang Jieshi he He Yingqin*, 18–21; Cook, “The Japanese Officer Corps,” 113; *HYQJJ*, I, 15.

²⁹ Cook, “The Japanese Officer Corps,” 147, 159–60.

strategy continued, along with advanced training in swordsmanship and horsemanship.³⁰

Over the course of their time in Japan, Chinese students had to confront the reality of Japanese imperialism in China, especially after 1915 and the Twenty-One Demands imposed on Yuan Shikai's government. He Yingqin no doubt had conflicted feelings and, while he admired Japan for its imperial system and military spirit, he could not fail to see that Japan had predatory designs on China and may have seen that future conflict between the two nations was inevitable. This harsh reality motivated He to learn his craft to the best of his abilities in order to return to China so he could contribute to its military strength and revival. There is no doubt that he disapproved of Japan's brazen pursuit of economic and political advantages in China, as in the years after his return to China he often and openly criticized Japan's aggressive foreign policy *vis à vis* China. Ironically, the Shikan Gakko produced a number of prominent Japanese officers He Yingqin would later meet in China, including Umezu Yoshijiro, who would represent the Japanese in negotiations with He over north China in 1935. He also encountered Okamura Yasuji, who would command the China Expeditionary Force and play an important role in Operation Ichigo in 1944.³¹

Despite the fact that He Yingqin had joined the Tongmenghui and participated in the 1911 Revolution, his personality changed little, and he remained a rather sober and serious person. A 1916 photograph of several classmates from Guizhou studying at the Shikan Gakko reveals the essence of He's personality and character. The others around him are dressed in Western-style suits or fashionable "Sun Yat-sen" jackets and trousers. He Yingqin sits front and center, the only person in the group wearing his cadet's uniform. His classmates lean against each other, place a hand on each other's shoulders, cross their legs, or lean back in their chairs, yet He Yingqin sits ramrod straight, hands on his thighs, sword prominently displayed in front of him, the very picture of military formality.³²

As one might expect of young men far from home, many Chinese students went out with Japanese girls or visited brothels during their free time. He Yingqin, on the other hand, eschewed such activities and preferred to study or read newspapers from China. In the rare instance that he sought more frivolous entertainment, he might visit the theater. The rules at the Shikan Gakko prohibited cadets from "talking love"

³⁰ *HYQ*, I, 17–19. ³¹ Xiong Zongren, *He Yingqin: xuanwozhong de lishi*, I, 30.

³² The photograph is in Xiong Zongren, *He Yingqin zhuan* [Biography of He Yingqin] (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1993).