**Chinese Democracy: The Silencing of Song
From Hi*story Today* Magazine**

Jonathan Fenby looks at a brief experiment in Chinese democracy, brought to an end by political assassination one hundred years ago this month.

Face of Chinese democracy: Song Jiaoren, c. 1910On the night of March 20th, 1913 China’s most successful politician was driven to Shanghai railway station to travel to Beijing (or Peking, as it was then transliterated). As he waited to board the train, Song Jiaoren, a slim 30-year-old with a thin moustache and wearing a western suit, was shot by a black-shirted assassin. He died two days later.

With Song’s death ended China’s brief flirtation with electoral democracy, in which he had led the Kuomintang Party to victory in polls held over the previous months. The country has never again had contested elections of the kind tried in 1913, which had seemed to optimists at the time to point the way towards the nation’s political evolution after the ending of two millennia of imperial rule in the revolution of 1911-12.

The republic proclaimed at the beginning of 1912 was a ramshackle affair and the first president, Sun Yat-sen, soon stepped down in favour of a military strongman, Yuan Shikai, who had been an imperial general but then turned against the old regime for his own purposes. Though no democrat, Yuan was obliged to bow to the call for a national election to pick a new government.

Sun’s long revolutionary career should have made him the natural democratic electoral standard bearer, but he preferred to place himself above the fray; he was always a theoretician and dreamer rather than a practical politician and expected automatic obedience from those around him. He found a new enthusiasm as director for railways and it was the pragmatic, self-assured Song who ran the campaign at the head of the Kuomintang, formed in the summer of 1912 to replace earlier revolutionary groups.

As a youth Song had been a revolutionary in central China, who then fled the imperial authorities to Japan for six years, where he met Sun and joined his Revolutionary Alliance, soon showing capabilities as an organiser and a constitutional thinker who sought to marry foreign ideas to Chinese realities.

In place of Sun’s vague if wide-ranging thoughts on nationalism, democracy and improving the people’s livelihood, Song crafted an election platform to appeal to the gentry, landowners and middle-class merchants who made up the bulk of the 10 per cent of the population entitled to vote: around 40 million men. Finding many of the voters equated Sun’s principle of the ‘people’s livelihood’ with socialism, he dropped it along with a call for gender equality; one suffragette slapped him in the face at an election rally.

The campaign was marked by intimidation, bribery and fraud but in February, 1913 the results gave the Kuomintang 269 of the 596 seats in the lower house of the legislature and 123 of 274 in the upper house. Song was said to have turned down a big bribe offered by Yuan and was bent on concluding alliances with smaller parties to form a majority, enabling him to become prime minister and rein in his opponent.

To eliminate that challenge the general and his henchmen used a contact in Shanghai, Ying Guixin, who combined revolutionary and underworld activities. He was sent a coded telegram from the capital promising him rewards if he destroyed Song. He enlisted a young man called Wu in a teahouse and offered him a trip to Europe if he would ‘lighten the labours of Yuan Shikai and smooth his path’.

At the station on the night of March 20th Wu shot at Song with a Browning revolver. The politician was rushed to a hospital where the doctors were told to wait for official permission from Peking to operate. By the time this came, peritonitis had set in. Song died the following morning. A western woman doctor said he could have been saved if she had been able to act immediately. From his death bed Song sent Yuan a telegram saying: ‘I die with deep regret. I humbly hope that your Excellency will champion honesty, propagate justice and promote democracy.’ Ying also sent telegrams to the capital. One read: ‘The urgent order was executed’; the other: ‘The insurgent leader is already annihilated.’

The Yuan administration tried to blame the assassination on internal Kuomintang feuds, conjuring up an unknown organisation called the Women’s Assassination Group. But Ying was an immediate suspect and was arrested as he was smoking opium in a brothel. Police found the exchange of telegrams with Peking in his house, together with the murder weapon. There was also an incriminating letter from the prime minister, who soon stepped down on the grounds that he was suffering from toothache; he died of poisoning the next year. Wu was arrested and also died of poisoning while awaiting trial. Ying escaped to Peking but was stabbed to death soon afterwards in a railway compartment.

As Yuan clamped down, Sun joined the opposition. The general surrounded parliament with troops and sacked three provincial governors who sympathised with the nationalist cause. Seven provinces declared independence from Peking, but were defeated. Yuan ordered the dissolution of the Kuomintang, meaning parliament could not meet for lack of a quorum.

A constitutional conference in the spring of 1914 confirmed Yuan as dictator for life. Egged on by an American adviser, F.J.Goodnow, who thought empire the most appropriate form of government for China, Yuan elevated himself to the throne. But China wanted a new leader and he was forced to step down, dying of blood poisoning in 1916. This opened the door to the ten years of warlord anarchy that gripped the country until Sun’s self-made heir, Chiang Kai-shek, used a mixture of military force, politics and bribery to establish a wobbly supremacy over the warlords and proclaim the Nationalist Republic in 1927.

What would have happened had Song made the trip to Beijing is one of the great questions of modern Chinese history. If he had formed a government he would have found himself in conflict with Yuan and the military winners of the revolution, none of whom had much time for democracy and who were building up their regional power.

Chinese society remained rooted in its traditions; modern ideas about politics did spread among the intellectual elite but had a limited influence. The 1913 election had been an experiment on which much building would have been needed, not least in evolving the rule of law. It would have been a major task for a young man but he had shown his abilities and that brief moment before he died still represents China’s clearest glimpse of democracy.

Jonathan Fenby is the author of Tiger Head, Snake Tails: China Today, How it Got There and Where it is Heading (Simon and Schuster, 2012).