The story that follows has been told over and over in Wesleyan circles—embroidered in mystery, obscured in fiction and conflicting news accounts, endowed with the golden hue of legend. But the story is not as well known by the present generation, as the last of the three Soong sisters has lived a quiet and private life in recent years, much different from the days when she and her siblings made headlines around the world. So here, we will tell the story again.

How, in the first decades of the twentieth century, did the young girls who would later become China’s most powerful women come to Wesleyan College—where they spent some of their most formative years?

The young girl seemed even smaller, standing next to the hulking steamship at the Shanghai docks. She was only fourteen, and she had just bid a brave farewell to her parents. Ai-ling Soong was off to spend the next four years of her life at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia. In an age when college was still a relatively rare experience even for Western women, Ai-ling would be the first Chinese woman to be educated in the United States.

The first “Soong” in America

A quarter of a century earlier, her father, Charlie Soong, had also left China for America—but under vastly different circumstances. Then a Hainan merchant’s son known as Han Chiao-shun, Charlie left an apprenticeship in the East Indies to join his uncle on a voyage to the West. During a few months in Boston, employed in his uncle’s tea-shop, Charlie set his sights on obtaining an education in America.

The shopkeeper’s life did not appeal to Charlie, and in January 1879 he shipped aboard a Coast Guard cutter plying the Eastern seaboard. The ship’s captain, a staunch Methodist, took the boy under his tutelage, and Charlie learned the precepts of Christianity. It was also under Captain Gabrielson’s influence, Sterling Seagrave surmises, that “Chiao-shun” was transmuted to “Charles Sun.”

Charlie found a new life and a new identity; upon baptism, his name was anglicized to Charles Jones Soon (the “g” was added later). He announced his wish to be trained in the Christian tradition so that he could return to his native country as a missionary. Both Charlie and the church could see the advantages: Charlie would get an American education, and the Methodists would gain a powerful wit-
ness among the Chinese people they were fervently seeking to convert.

The Wilmington Methodists helped Charlie gain admission to Trinity College (later Duke University) and introduced him to tobacco and textile magnate Julian S. Carr. “General” Carr underwrote Charlie’s education at Duke and Vanderbilt. He remained a lifelong friend and supporter even after Charlie’s return to China.

In 1886, Charlie returned to China to begin missionary work, spending some time in Shanghai and rural Kunshan under the direction of pioneer Methodist missionary Dr. Young J. Allen. It was during Charlie Soong’s days of missionary service and teaching that he met Ni Kwei-tseng, the daughter of a Chinese Episcopalian family. Miss Ni herself was educated in the Western tradition in Shanghai. Unlike many Chinese women, by chance she escaped the limitations of having her feet bound. She was an excellent counterpart to Charlie, whose Americanized speech and mannerisms made him an anomaly in his native country. Her marriage to Soong brought him status within the community and opened up to him new possibilities for accomplishing his dreams for the “new China.”

During the late 1880s, Charlie grew more influential in his ministerial role as well as more prosperous in a business sideline he had launched: the selling and printing of Bibles in Chinese. Charlie devised ways of publishing Bibles, using local materials, at an even lower cost than they could be supplied by the American Bible Society. Before long, he was taking on job printing as well, and was amassing a good profit.

And none too soon—for Charlie and Kwei-tseng had started their family. Their first child was born in 1890. They named her Ai-ling (“pleasant mood”), but she was also known by the Christian name Nancy, after General Carr’s wife. A second daughter, Ching-ling (“happy mood”) was born in 1892 and was called Rosamond—after the daughter of the Wilmington minister.

Charlie’s business ventures prospered as his family grew. Son Tse-ven (styled T.V. in the Western form) was born in 1894; third daughter May-ling (“beautiful mood”) was born in 1897. Two more boys followed, Tse-liang (T.L.) and Tse-an (T.A.). The daughters began their education at Shanghai’s exclusive McTyeire School for Girls, founded in 1892 by Dr. Allen and an 1864 Wesleyan alumna, Laura Haygood. Ai-ling started school at age five and Ching-ling at seven.

By the turn of the century, Charlie had become extremely wealthy. He had also begun a surreptitious involvement with the revolutionary movement spurred by Dr. Sun Yat-sen. Revolutionary sentiment was growing against the old dynastic rule, and Charlie was right in the midst of it.

A ten-thousand-mile journey to school
The political climate in China became increasingly dangerous following the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. Charlie foresaw the need to send his children to safety as well as to provide for their higher education. He asked the advice of his missionary friend William Burke for an appropriate college for Ai-ling. Burke, whose family had connections to Macon’s Mulberry Street United Methodist Church, highly recommend- ed Wesleyan College, where his friend Judge DuPont Guerry was then president. Charlie arranged for Ai-ling to enroll as a sub-freshman in 1904.

That summer, Ai-ling, for safety reasons traveling under a Portuguese passport, undertook the long Pacific crossing under the protection of William and Addie Burke. But Mrs. Burke became fatally ill with typhoid, and the couple left Ai-ling in the care of another missionary, Anna Lanius, to see her safely to America. When the ship arrived in San Francisco, Ai-ling was detained for nineteen days until she could obtain clearance to make the rest of the trip by train to Georgia. (For more on this adventure, see Seagrave, pp. 104–6).

Ai-ling was described as precocious, a serious and determined student who was clever with finances and business. Ching-ling and May-ling joined their older sister at Wesleyan in the fall of 1908—Ching-ling because she was college-age, and May-ling because, the story has it, she insisted she have her way and be allowed to accompany her older sister, though she was only ten. (Mounting tension in China, too, probably had a good deal to do with Charlie’s decision to allow her wish.) During the summer before their arrival at Wesleyan, Ching-ling and May-ling spent time being tutored in missionary families in Summit, New Jersey, and Demorest, Georgia (at Piedmont College).

Upon coming to Macon, May-ling was entrusted to the care of President W. N. Ainsworth’s household, while Ching-ling enrolled as a regular college student. The 1908 school term marked the only year that all
three sisters were at Wesleyan at the same time. Their signatures—in Chinese and English—appear together in the college’s Matriculation Book for 1908–09.

May-ling was privately tutored by two older Wesleyan students: “Miss Margie” Burks, daughter of Wesleyan’s professor of English, and “Miss Lucy” Lester. Whereas Ching-ling was quiet and profound, May-ling had the reputation for being mischievous and sharp-witted.

May-ling’s quick quips are often recounted, as in this Seagrave passage:

“In a day when lipstick and rouge were regarded as shameful, [May-ling] was once caught wearing Chinese flour makeup and lip rouge.

‘Why, May-ling,’ exclaimed an older student, ‘I believe your face is painted!’

‘Yes,’ snapped May-ling, ‘China painted.’”

(114).

On another occasion, one of May-ling’s tutors asked her to recount a history lesson on Sherman’s march through Georgia. The teacher was quite unprepared for her response: “Pardon me, I am a southerner, and that subject is very painful to me. May I omit it?”

May-ling’s repartee was undimmed upon her visit to campus in 1943. Miss Jennie Loyall, it is said, told Madame Chiang that the college was keeping a Soong scrapbook.


Ching-ling, however, is remembered for her wholehearted devotion to her country. When dynastic control of China was finally overthrown in 1911, Ching-ling tore down the old banner of the Chinese dragon from her wall and vehemently replaced it with the new flag her father had sent her. Ching-ling wrote several impassioned essays for the student magazine on the subject of the Chinese Revolution.

Ai-ling received her A.B. in the Wesleyan class of 1909 and promptly returned to Shanghai, where she secured a post as secretary to Sun Yat-sen. Ching-ling graduated in 1913 and returned to China as well. When Ai-ling resigned her position with Sun in 1914 to marry future finance minister H. H. Kung, Ching-ling took over Ai-ling’s job. “Ching-ling believed as did no one else in [Sun’s] revolution,” wrote Seagrave (136). Defying her father’s orders, Ching-ling eloped with Sun in October 1915. Charlie Soong viewed the marriage between his old friend and his young daughter as a betrayal, and the union remained a source of contention in the Soong family.

May-ling’s only remaining sibling in the United States after Ching-ling’s departure was her brother T.V. at Harvard. After spending her freshman year, 1912-13, at Wesleyan, May-ling transferred to Wellesley College, to be closer to T.V. She earned her bachelor’s degree from Wellesley in 1917.

Upon May-ling’s return to China, she met Chiang Kai-shek, a rising star in China’s military. Though already married, Chiang proposed marriage to May-ling. He persisted in his suit, eventually winning Mrs. Soong’s blessing for marriage to her daughter, on the conditions that he divorce his present wife—and that he convert to Christianity.

One loved money, one loved power, and one loved China

Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, the three Soong sisters exerted increasing influence alongside their husbands or, in Ching-ling’s case, carrying on her late husband’s work. Ai-ling and May-ling supported the right-wing politics that emerged with the leadership of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, while Ching-ling continued to serve as the voice of the left. Their differing political views kept them estranged throughout most of their lives.

Soong Ai-ling is best remembered for her shrewdness in financial matters. Ching-ling was, and still is, revered as “the mother of China”; Jay Chang writes that “she was the first consort of a political leader anywhere in the world to act as ‘first lady’” (37). May-ling is best known as ambassador for China (and later, Taiwan) to the Western world. May-ling, who celebrated her 100th birthday in March 1997, is the only one of the Soong sisters still living.

**Continuing ties with Wesleyan**

Over the years, Wesleyan and its most famous alumnae have kept in contact. The Soong sisters corresponded with many of their Wesleyan friends, including Margie Burks, Jenny Daughtry, Jennie Loyall (Manget), Mary Gray Munroe Cobey, and Freda Nadler. One letter from Ching-ling to Professor of English Margaret Hall Hazard survives in Wesleyan’s archives because Hazard just happened to have the letter in her purse at the time her Macon home burned!

Many Wesleyan alumnae have memories of their famous sisters. Wesleyan assistant dean and registrar Pat Hardeman ’68 is one of many to have traveled to the Shanghai home of Madame Sun (now maintained as a historic site). “I felt a thrill—a chill down my spine—to see the photographs of old Wesleyan there in Ching-ling’s Shanghai house,” said Hardeman.
Ann Maria Domingos ’39, a cousin of Margie Burks, has very special memories of the Soong sisters—including one she wears on occasion. “May-ling gave Miss Margie two imperial jade rings,” explained Domingos as she pointed out the one she inherited from her cousin. “Margie [pronounced with a hard “g”] was a particular friend of May-ling’s, and they corresponded and visited often after Margie went to teach Spanish at the University of Florida.”

The college has hosted scores of visitors wishing to see the Soong memorabilia in the Willet Library’s Georgia Room. Wesleyan staff have also provided background information, documents, and photos for such projects as NHK (Japan Broadcasting Company)’s 1994 special The Soong Sisters: The Glamorous Family that Dominated China and a 1996 TV Ontario documentary.


On June 26, 1943, close to the end of a three-month diplomatic tour of the United States, May-ling visited Wesleyan after a long hiatus. The college presented the honorary Doctor of Laws to Madame Chiang and to her two absent sisters. On that exciting occasion, Linda Anderson Lane, Annie Gantt Anderson, and Alice Burden Domingos all assisted with arrangements; Octavia Burden Stewart handled the flowers. Eugenia Rawls ’34 was among the alumnae present.

Madame Chiang had a rare opportunity to visit with her teachers Margie Burks, Lucy Lester, Newell Mason, and Margaret Hall Hazard. President Ainsworth was no longer living, but his widow had the honor of bestowing the doctoral hood on Madame Chiang. Not least among May-ling’s activities on the visit, according to the Wesleyan Alumnae Magazine of August 1943, was an impromptu trip to “the Pharm” on College Hill.

The sisters have directly or indirectly been responsible for the establishment of several scholarship funds at Wesleyan. The DuPont Guerry Scholarship, which is still awarded by Wesleyan today, was established by a gift from Ai-ling Soong herself. The May-ling Soong Chiang Scholarship, to be awarded to Chinese students, was established at Wesleyan in March 1944 by the Methodist Laymen of the South Georgia Conference. This fund has continued to the present, with scholarships being awarded to Chinese students from time to time. At the time of Madame Chiang’s 1943 visit, short-term scholarships were also given in honor of the other two sisters, but these funds do not survive to the present. And, most recently, an anonymous $6 million gift to the college in honor and memory of the sisters will be used largely for endowed scholarship support, building a stronger future for the college as well as an enduring memorial to the Soong family.

A neverending story
The three sisters have played influential roles in the politics, economy, and history of modern China. Their education at Wesleyan prepared each of them for an important destiny. The legacy of the Soong sisters is still felt the world over—and the memories of this trio of sisters live on, at Wesleyan and around the globe.

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In addition to information from Wesleyan’s own archives, much of this detail is taken from Sterling Seagrave’s The Soong Dynasty (Harper & Row, 1985). Though Seagrave’s book has been highly controversial, especially in its analysis of later activities of the Soong family, it is generally regarded as the most thoroughgoing source for background information. Readers may also want to consult Emily Hahn’s classic, The Soong Sisters (Doubleday, 1942), Elmer T. Clark’s The Chiangs of China (Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1943), Jung Chang’s Mme Sun Yat-sen (Penguin, 1986), and Cornelia Spencer’s Three Sisters (John Day, 1939)—though these are but a few of the many works, fanciful and factual, about the Soongs.