

Umeya Shokichi, the Benefactor Who Continued to Support Sun Yat-sen by Neglecting His Personal Fortune

By Wang Min

THE ties between Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), “the father of the nation” who led the Chinese Revolution, and Japan are deep. One can probably agree fully with this based on the fact that Sun escaped to and visited Japan more than 10 times, and resided there for more than nine years, about a third of the latter part of his life of 58 years that was devoted to the revolution.

Many Japanese have been supporting Sun’s great deeds. After Sun died, there were also politicians like Inukai Tsuyoshi, who was gunned down in the “May 15 Incident,” the coup d’état while he was Prime Minister, but almost all were *tairiku ronin*, or pre-World War II Japanese adventurers in China who were advocates of Japan’s sovereign rights there. They sympathized with Sun’s great personality and thought, and cooperated with his revolutionary activities, while they undertook the secret task of the Japanese government, to penetrate the mainland. They maneuvered so that the Japanese government would accept Sun’s exile in Japan and protect him from pursuit by the Qing court, and they crossed the sea to participate at the time of the anti-Qing rising in China. Usually these activities differed from the policy of the Japanese government at that time, so in any event they did not appear on the center stage of history, but one might say that they played a key role in the private diplomacy between China and Japan.

I am referring here to Umeya Shokichi, one forgotten Japanese businessman who continued to help Sun as his life-long friend. He was one of the founders of Nikkatsu, a leading force in the Japanese film industry. He was bound to Sun by a pledge as adoptive brothers, and was invited as a guest of

honor to Sun’s state funeral and allowed to accompany Sun’s casket as though he were a family member. There were no other foreigners accorded such an honor.

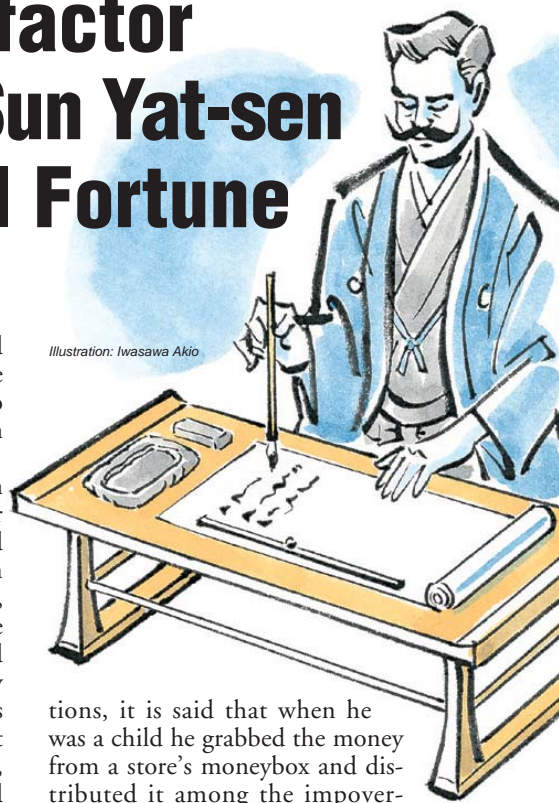
Umeya was two years younger than Sun. He was born in 1868, the year when the era of the Shogunate ended and the Meiji Period of westernization began. He was raised in Nagasaki, which was popularly called Japan’s sole “portal” to the world during the period of Tokugawa rule, owing to the policy of national seclusion, and this doubtless launched him on his travels abroad at an early age. On January 5, 1895, Sun, pretending to be a customer, visited Umeya at the “Umeya Shosokan,” which he was running in the British colony of Hong Kong, and this was the encounter at which the two became sworn friends.

When Umeya heard of Sun’s resolve to save China, he steadfastly said, “You raise the troops. I will raise the money to support them.” This was the oath between sworn allies. Later Umeya unsparingly committed the huge fortune he made from films to Sun, and there was no duplicity on his part.

It is said that Umeya used to admonish his children by saying, “Don’t expect that the money that you have lent will be returned to you.” There are many who testify that Umeya never pressed anyone to repay. Many IOUs held by the Japanese adventurers on the mainland remain unpaid. We have no idea how much money Umeya contributed to Sun. This is because even though Umeya left a memorandum-like diary, he did not record the amount of money in many cases.

As one episode in the life of Umeya, who was raised in the home of a wealthy merchant and knew no priva-

Illustration: Iwasawa Akio



tions, it is said that when he was a child he grabbed the money from a store’s moneybox and distributed it among the impoverished people in the neighborhood. One can see that he had a temperament not to ignore poverty when he saw it. He fled his family in his teens and went to China, and there is no room for doubting that he always retained his righteous indignation as an Easterner at the plight of Chinese people who were mistreated by the Western powers. Umeya was not a Japanese adventurer on the mainland, but was someone whose heart was full of the same spirit of generosity for the poor.

There were more than 10 major uprisings, chiefly all over southern China, before the armed uprising in Wuchang in 1911 finally succeeded, but all failed. For the revolutionary forces, the armed might of the Qing government was massive, even if it was called a “sleeping lion.” But even as the revolutionary forces were failing repeatedly, it is undeniable that sympathy for them was spreading among the Chinese masses. The number of troops in the government forces that sided with the masses was also increasing, then the Wuchang uprising succeeded, and the revolutionary movement finally bore its

fruit in the Xinhai or Republican Revolution.

The success of the armed uprising occurred when Umeya, who had returned to Japan, was expanding his movie business. He sent to China a camera crew, which left a record of those days. Sun Yat-sen was on a speaking tour among overseas Chinese in the United States at the time. It is said that he was deeply moved at the images of the revolution unfurling when the film was subsequently sent to him by Umeya. This was a movie that was recorded only for Sun and has never been made public.

Umeya got his initial experience in films in Singapore, where he had fled. After his encounter with Sun in Hong Kong, he turned his photography store into a precious gathering place for revolutionaries. Along with providing funds, Umeya himself was aiming at convenience in weapons shipments in the guise of photographic equipment and materials. However, the revolutionary bases were found by the government police due to an anonymous tip, and just when Umeya was about to be arrested he made a hasty escape. This misfortune, though, turned out to be Umeya's advantage, since he decided to open a business in Singapore, and his showing of films there became a huge success. This was a mere 10 years after Edison's invention, and Umeya was thus at the forefront of the flowering of the motion picture industry. It is said that he accumulated a fortune of ¥500,000 in assets of the day, equivalent to several billion yen today. He returned to Japan in high spirits in 1905, and embarked on the film business. He came up with one plan after another, such as dispatching film technicians with the Shirase expedition to the South Pole. He told Sun, "The money that I am earning from movies is rapidly being funneled into the revolution." He always exerted himself to procure weapons for the revolution, and there remain formal letters of proxy that were delivered from the revolutionary army.

Asylum appears to have been indispensable to the revolutionaries. For Sun Yat-sen, Japan could be a "refuge temple." He first stepped on Japanese soil in 1895, when the Guangzhou uprising that he had personally directed failed. Sun was compelled to flee China with a large bounty on his head, and he sought asylum in Japan on Umeya's advice. At that time, Sun cut his queue*, which symbolized Qing rule. He returned to Japan again after the Huizhou uprising in 1900.

Although the "Republic of China," the first republic in Asia, was born due to the overwhelming power of Yuan Shikai, who aimed at restoring the Qing Dynasty, and the revolution fell on hard times. Warlords ran rampant, particularly in the north, and the unity of China was endangered. Sun disguised himself and fled to Japan, where he spent more than three years. There he launched activities to continue the revolution, but his residence was an annex provided by Umeya. It was Umeya and his wife who served as the matchmakers for Sun in response to his request when Sun fell in love at first sight with Song Qingling. The wedding reception was held at the Umeya residence, and Sun pledged himself as Umeya's blood brother and his wife pledged herself as Song's blood sister.

Leaving the dying words, "The revolution has not yet succeeded," Sun died in 1925. The revolution was completed three years later in Nanjing. Umeya, who attended the funeral as a state guest, read an elegy to Sun, stating, "Even though Sun has passed away, his spirit has not died." It goes without saying that "his spirit" is the Three People's Principles of nationalism, democracy and the people's livelihood.

The telegrams between Umeya and Sun were endless. In his final telegram to Umeya, Sun wrote, "I am eagerly looking forward to your cooperation for the revival of all Asian peoples in the future." This was what Sun wrote when he was leaving Japan, where he had stopped in the year before his death.

This was because Sun knew that Umeya was concerned not only about the Chinese revolution but also the independence movements of the Philippines, which was under American rule, and of India, which was controlled by Britain, both of which he had supported financially.

However, for Umeya, supporting Sun was "a lifelong, vast undertaking." He had made a large bronze statue of Sun, and then had it transported from Japan to China. He attended its unveiling in Nanjing, and at the ceremony he gave a speech that confided his wishes with the bronze statue: "I will obey his dying instructions...and raise the fruits of unification and peace." Chinese newspapers praised Umeya as the "benefactor of China," at a time when the Chinese view of Japan was worsening with each passing day.

In his later years, Umeya continued to appeal to the major players in Japanese politics for a Sino-Japanese breakthrough. On the day when he collapsed in 1934, he was on his way to meet then Foreign Minister Hirota Koki. It is said that this was in order to give concrete shape to a proposal for diplomatic negotiations between Japan and China.

One thing that he left unfinished was the movie, *The Great Sun Yat-sen*. He had been pushing ahead with the preparations for the filming of the movie while ignoring his personal fortune. The plan was for the movie to be shot in China, and this would likely have involved Sino-Japanese cooperation that symbolized the triumph of private diplomacy. **J.S**

Wang Min is a professor of Hosei University and is a specialist in Japanese literature.

* Umeya Shokichi did not make public in his own writing the extent to which he had exerted himself on Sun's behalf. He stuck to the principle that "sworn brothers do not talk." In writing the above, I consulted the study by Kurumada Joji, *Kokufu Sonbun to Umeya Shokichi* ("Sun Yat-sen, Father of the Chinese Nation, and Umeya Shokichi"), published in 1975 by Rokko Publishing.

*Note : Originally Northern Asian custom that the Chinese people were forced to keep from 1644 until the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1912.