Biography of Situ Meitang



A Veteran Leader of the Hongmen, a Lifelong Patriot

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Chapter 1
A Young Man from Kaiping Seeking a Livelihood Across the Ocean (1868–1882)



On 3 April 1868, a baby boy was born into an impoverished farming family that had fallen into financial ruin in Chikan Town, Kaiping, Guangdong Province. His parents named him Situ Xianyi and gave him the courtesy name Jizan. He lost his father at an early age and was raised by his widowed mother. After only four years of education at a traditional private school, he left school at the age of ten to become an apprentice in a small workshop in the county town of Xinhui.

In 1882, fourteen-year-old Situ Xianyi borrowed more than fifty silver dollars from his mother, who had obtained the money

through loans, to pay for passage to the United States in search of fortune in the “Gold Mountain.” Upon arriving at the San Francisco docks, he was immediately subjected to humiliation when a group of thugs threw horse manure over him and verbally abused him. The incident remained deeply engraved in his memory throughout his life. He later adopted the name Situ Meitang, by which he would be known during more than seventy years of life overseas.

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Chapter 2
The Hongmen Years and the On Leong Tong (1885–1905)

When Situ Meitang first arrived in the United States, he worked as a kitchen assistant at a Chinese chop suey restaurant called Huixianlou. He laboured as long as sixteen hours a day for a monthly wage of only twelve dollars. During this period of widespread anti-Chinese discrimination, Chinese immigrants were frequently subjected to harassment and violence by American mobs. Situ possessed a strong sense of justice, readily intervened to defend those who were mistreated, and had practised martial arts since childhood. At the age of twenty, he killed an American troublemaker during a confrontation and was sentenced to death. Only through the determined efforts of his friends was he spared execution.

In 1885, at the age of seventeen, Situ formally took the oath of membership and joined the Hongmen's Chee Kung Tong. In 1894, he established the On Leong Merchants Association in Boston, commonly known as the On Leong Tong, under the guiding principle of “restraining the powerful, assisting the weak, suppressing violence and protecting the innocent.” Because Situ ranked fifth among his associates, members of the Hongmen respectfully addressed him as “Fifth Uncle.” In 1905, he established the On Leong General Headquarters in New York and appointed himself its president. He

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subsequently served as president of the organisation for more than forty years.

A man who would later become President of the United States also developed connections with the On Leong Tong. Franklin D. Roosevelt was then a recently graduated trainee lawyer. After thoroughly investigating Situ Meitang's case, he decided to undertake his defence and ultimately secured his acquittal and release. Roosevelt subsequently served as legal adviser to the On Leong Tong for approximately ten years. After Roosevelt became President, Situ wrote him two letters expressing the hope that the Chinese Exclusion Act would be repealed during his administration.

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Chapter 3
Following Sun Yat-sen and Joining the Revolutionary Cause (1904–1925)

In 1904, Sun Yat-sen travelled from Honolulu to the Americas to promote revolutionary activities, identifying himself as an elder brother of the Hongmen. Situ Meitang met Sun in Boston and served as both his bodyguard and cook, learning extensively about revolutionary principles from him. Sun greatly appreciated Situ's organisational abilities and sought to reorganise the Hongmen associations by giving them a stronger revolutionary character. In 1905, Situ moved from Boston to New York, where he continued supporting Sun's revolutionary activities through financial contributions and the mobilisation of personnel.

On 10 October 1925, the Fourth Worldwide Hongmen Convention was held in San Francisco, where the establishment of the China Zhi Gong Party was formally announced. Situ Meitang was among the party's founders. From the Xinhai Revolution to the Northern Expedition, Situ consistently remained at the forefront of overseas Chinese support for democratic revolution in his homeland.

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Chapter 4
The New York Fundraising Association: Raising US$14 Million for China's Resistance Against Japan (1937–1945)

Following the outbreak of full-scale war between China and Japan in 1937, Situ Meitang recognised that his homeland faced a struggle for national survival. He joined representatives of fifty-four overseas Chinese organisations in establishing the New York Chinese Association for Raising Funds to Resist Japan and Save the Nation, serving as a member of its Standing Committee.

Determined to concentrate his efforts on mobilising donations from overseas Chinese communities, he resolutely resigned from all his public and private positions and devoted himself full-time to the fundraising association for five years. During that period, he began work at ten o'clock every morning and often continued until midnight, working thirteen or fourteen hours a day. He travelled extensively between the United States, Canada, Cuba, Brazil, Peru and other countries, promoting resistance against Japanese aggression and encouraging financial contributions.

Under his leadership, Chinese communities throughout the Americas donated generously. During the war, individual Chinese residents of New York contributed an average of between US$670 and US$1,000 in special donations. Over five

years, the fundraising association collected more than US$54 million, all of which was donated to support China's resistance efforts. According to another set of statistics, special donations alone amounted to US$14 million. The On Leong Tong, under Situ's leadership, was among the New York Chinese community organisations that contributed the largest sums to the national cause.

Beyond fundraising, Situ also directed the association's international publicity campaigns in support of China. By the summer of 1941, it had organised more than 180 public outreach activities, reaching audiences totalling over 100,000 people. An editorial in the Chinese Commercial News observed: “Ever since the September 18 Incident, Situ Meitang has been among the most determined advocates of resistance against Japan.”

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Chapter 5
Escaping from Hong Kong and Refusing a Collaborationist Appointment (1941–1942)

In the winter of 1941, Situ Meitang was selected as a member of the National Political Council and returned from the United States to attend its meetings. However, while travelling through Hong Kong, the Pacific War broke out unexpectedly. Hong Kong fell to Japanese forces, and Situ was placed under house arrest.

The Japanese intelligence chief, aware of Situ's background and influence, attempted through threats and inducements to force him to serve as chairman of a local collaborationist maintenance committee. Although Situ was already approximately seventy-five years old, he firmly rejected the Japanese demands, demonstrating an unwavering sense of national dignity. He subsequently escaped in disguise to the Chinese mainland with the assistance of underground Communist organisations and patriotic Hong Kong residents. Upon reaching Chongqing, Chiang Kai-shek offered him a position as a member of the National Government. However, having witnessed corruption within the Kuomintang and the suffering of civilians in China's wartime rear areas, Situ had become profoundly disillusioned with the Nationalist government and declined the offer.

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Chapter 6
From the “Middle Road” to Supporting the Chinese Communist Party (1946–1949)

After victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan, Situ Meitang led a delegation of the China Zhi Gong Party, rooted in the Hongmen movement, back to China, hoping to secure a place for overseas Chinese in the country's political affairs. In early 1946, he separately sent telegrams to the Chinese Communist Party, the China Democratic League and Chiang Kai-shek's government, expressing his intention to return and participate in discussions of national affairs. The Communist Party and the Democratic League immediately welcomed his proposal, but Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang government firmly rejected it.

This rejection became a critical turning point in Situ's political outlook. In 1948, he publicly declared his support for the Chinese Communist Party's proposal to convene a new Political Consultative Conference and establish a people's democratic government.

On 20 January 1949, Mao Zedong wrote to Situ Meitang, warmly inviting him to return to China to participate in the new Political Consultative Conference. The letter stated: “The Chinese people's struggle for liberation is approaching nationwide victory. Convening a new Political Consultative

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Conference, establishing a democratic coalition government, uniting the strength of the entire Chinese people and our compatriots overseas, and fully accomplishing the independence and liberation of the Chinese people have become matters of the utmost urgency."

Before returning to the United States, Situ personally wrote a letter entitled A Salute to Chairman Mao, expressing his wholehearted acceptance of the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and his support for convening the new Political Consultative Conference. He solemnly declared: "Whenever the new Political Consultative Conference opens, upon receiving a telegram of invitation, I shall immediately return to China to participate."

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Chapter 7
The Founding Ceremony and His Final Years (1949–1955)

On 1 October 1949, Situ Meitang, then more than eighty years old, stood atop the Tiananmen Gate Tower beneath the second large lantern on the eastern side and witnessed the founding of the People's Republic of China. His granddaughter, Situ Yuegui, later recalled: “When Grandfather saw the Five-Star Red Flag being raised, I could sense that he was crying, because he finally had his own country.”

Following the founding ceremony, Situ intended to retire from public life, believing that his mission had been accomplished. However, after earnest persuasion from Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, he ultimately decided to remain in China. He was elected a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a member of the Central People's Government, and a member of the Central Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission, among other positions. After nearly seventy years of living in the United States, he had finally returned to his homeland.

On 8 May 1955, Situ Meitang died in Beijing following a cerebral haemorrhage, at the age of eighty-seven. Premier Zhou Enlai personally helped carry his coffin, and Situ was laid to rest at the Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery.

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Chapter 8
Concluding Reflections: A Veteran Hongmen Leader and Lifelong Patriot

Situ Meitang's life was an extraordinary journey spanning two continents and two centuries. From an impoverished young man in Kaiping, Guangdong, he rose to become one of the most influential leaders of the overseas Chinese community in the Americas. From the Hongmen's respected “Fifth Uncle,” he became one of the founders of the China Zhi Gong Party. From an overseas Chinese community leader supporting Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary movement, he became a patriot standing atop Tiananmen Gate Tower to witness the founding of the People's Republic of China.

In his later years, he made a heartfelt declaration: “Although I lived in America for more than sixty years, I never developed any particularly deep affection for America.” He explained that he was Chinese through and through and that his deepest attachment was to China alone. In the epitaph she wrote for him, He Xiangning observed: “Mr. Situ Meitang lived in the United States for sixty-nine years and consistently maintained a patriotic position in all his activities. Generous, chivalrous and always ready to assist those in difficulty, he devoted himself enthusiastically to public welfare among overseas Chinese communities. He was a patriotic leader of the Chinese community in the Americas.”

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“A veteran leader of the Hongmen, a lifelong patriot.” These eight Chinese characters offer a fitting summary of Situ Meitang's life. From Kaiping to San Francisco, from Boston to New York, and from Hong Kong to Beijing, he devoted eighty-seven years to maintaining a profound attachment to his homeland while living overseas. His legacy encompasses not only the founding history of the China Zhi Gong Party but also the enduring spirit of a generation of overseas Chinese who remained devoted to their homeland and joined together to support it during times of national crisis.

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