Biography of Wen Yingxing



West Point, Tsinghua, and a Laundry

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Chapter 1
A Young Man from an Official's Family in Taishan (1887–1904)



On 26 January 1887, a baby boy was born into a family of government officials in Luodong Township, Taishan County, Guangdong Province. His father, Wen Zongsheng, had passed the jinshi imperial examination during the Qing dynasty and had served as a seventh-rank county magistrate. His uncle, Wen Zongyao, was an even more prominent figure in Chinese politics during the late Qing and early Republican periods. The child was named Yingxing and given the courtesy name Hesun. He would eventually follow an unprecedented path through an era of profound transition between the old order and the new.

Located in the southwestern Pearl River Delta, Taishan was one of China's most famous ancestral hometowns of overseas

Chinese communities. Wen received his early education there before entering Nanyang Public School in Shanghai, the predecessor of today's Shanghai Jiao Tong University. He subsequently gained admission to the Tangshan Railway and Mining School. After graduating, he briefly worked as a trainee engineer on the Guangdong–Hankou Railway, a stable technical position that could have provided a secure livelihood in those years.

Yet the changing times did not allow an ambitious young man to remain content with a quiet life. His uncle, Wen Zongyao, encouraged him to study military affairs abroad “in order to modernise China's armed forces.” In 1904, Wen successfully passed the Qing government's competitive examination for publicly funded students to study in the United States. The young man from Taishan was about to board a ship bound for the other side of the Pacific.

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Chapter 2
From Virginia to West Point: The Making of the First Chinese Cadet (1904–1909)

In the autumn of 1904, Wen Yingxing arrived in the United States alongside Chen Tingjia and Wen Jizhong, enrolling at the Virginia Military Institute. However, after just one year of military school life, he received instructions from the Qing government to transfer immediately to the United States Military Academy at West Point.

On 15 June 1905, Wen formally entered the United States Military Academy, becoming the first Chinese international cadet and the first student of Chinese descent in West Point's history. Known as the “cradle of American generals,” the academy imposed requirements considerably more demanding than those at the Virginia Military Institute. Wen later recalled that West Point “had stricter requirements, a harder way of life, and was better at developing the qualities of a soldier.”

On 11 June 1909, Wen graduated from West Point. His language examination results affected his overall standing, placing him eighty-second among 103 cadets, but he ranked second in his class in Practical Military Engineering. His graduating class included future Generals Davis and George S. Patton. The academy described him as “one of the most popular students in the school, someone who could take a joke

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and get along well with his classmates." His fellow cadets affectionately nicknamed him "George Washington Sing Sing."

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Chapter 3
From Sun Yat-sen's Secretary to Police Chief in Northeast China (1909–1928)

After graduating from West Point in 1909, Wen Yingxing returned to China. He initially worked at the Liangguang Military Training Office and subsequently served as an instructor at the Guangdong Military Academy. Following the outbreak of the Xinhai Revolution, he travelled south to join Sun Yat-sen and was appointed his English-language secretary with the rank of colonel, assisting with foreign affairs and military matters. At the time, Chiang Kai-shek was still serving as a staff officer in the Second Section of the Generalissimo's Headquarters.

Over the following years, Wen moved between military and engineering assignments. He participated in construction projects associated with the Sichuan–Hankou Railway and the Daye iron mines, and returned to Sun Yat-sen's service as a secretary during the Constitutional Protection Movement. In 1921, an unexpected opportunity changed his career. Zhang Zuolin, the Fengtian warlord, intended to recruit a West Point graduate as a military adviser to help counterbalance Russian and Japanese influence. Major Feilin, an American Army officer sent for the assignment, happened to have been Wen's classmate at West Point. He posed a pointed question to Zhang: “You have West Point graduates in China too. Why

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spend so much money hiring us Americans?" Feilin recommended Wen, who subsequently travelled to Northeast China and held several senior police positions, including Chief of the Harbin Special Police Office and Director of Police Affairs in the Special Administrative Region of the Three Northeastern Provinces. He also oversaw security duties associated with the Chinese Eastern Railway.

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Chapter 4
President of Tsinghua: Two Months of Reform and a Hasty Departure (1928)

In April 1928, Tsinghua School was experiencing a period of considerable turmoil. President Cao Yunxiang had been driven from the campus by faculty members and students, while Acting President Yan Heling was unable to restore order. At this critical moment, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Zhang Zuolin's Anguojun Government approved Yan's resignation and appointed Wen Yingxing as President of Tsinghua School. Wen thus became the first and only president of Tsinghua University with a professional military background.

Upon taking office, Wen displayed the decisiveness characteristic of his military training. On his sixth day at the institution, he convened a meeting of the University Council in his capacity as president and proposed amendments to the Organisational Charter of Tsinghua School. His aim was to reduce the restrictions imposed upon presidential authority by the Faculty Council and University Council. In mid-May, he chaired another council meeting, appointing Yu Rixuan as Dean of Academic Affairs and reassigning Mei Yiqi as Superintendent of Chinese Students in the United States, an apparent attempt to remove Mei from Tsinghua. These reforms, however, achieved little. Mei promptly gathered Wu Mi, Ye

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Qisun, Zhao Yuanren, Chen Yinke and others to discuss a response.

Political upheaval overtook the internal struggle for power even more rapidly. In June 1928, Zhang Zuolin was killed when Japanese forces bombed his train at Huanggutun, and the Anguojun Government collapsed almost immediately. On the same day, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs approved Wen's resignation as president. His tenure at Tsinghua had lasted less than two months. Nevertheless, his name remained permanently recorded in the university's history.

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Chapter 5
Shanghai Police Commissioner and Commander of the Tax Police Corps: The Predicament of an Honest Official (1928–1936)

After leaving Tsinghua, Wen Yingxing travelled south and became Commissioner of the Shanghai Municipal Police Bureau. At the time, organised crime was rampant in Shanghai, and Lu Ying, the head of the bureau's Criminal Investigation Brigade, was himself a powerful underworld figure. Lu visited Wen and proposed replacing all residential house-number plates throughout Shanghai, charging each household sixty cents and profiting from the arrangement. Wen became furious and rebuked him: “The house numbers must not be changed, and I will absolutely never take that money. If I do, may my family line end with me.” From that moment, Lu bore a grudge against Wen and used every means available to oppose him, eventually forcing Wen to resign from office.

In 1930, T. V. Soong established the Tax Police Corps, one of China's most modern military formations at the time. Many of its senior officers had backgrounds at West Point or the Whampoa Military Academy. Wen became its first commander and returned to the position as its fourth commander in 1932. However, personnel appointments within the Tax Police Corps remained under Soong's direct control. In 1936, after Chiang Kai-shek placed Huang Peixi in charge, Wen, who had not graduated from Whampoa, was increasingly marginalised. He

was reassigned to the Senior Officers' Training Course in Nanjing and subsequently occupied largely nominal positions, never receiving an opportunity to command troops during the War of Resistance Against Japan.

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Chapter 6
Emigration to America in Later Life and Burial at West Point (1949–1968)

After China's victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan, Wen Yingxing was awarded the rank of lieutenant general and elected a member of the Legislative Yuan. Nevertheless, the outcome of the Chinese Civil War was becoming increasingly clear. In 1949, unwilling to accompany Chiang Kai-shek to Taiwan, Wen chose instead to immigrate to the United States.

The man who had been West Point's first Chinese graduate, President of Tsinghua, and a lieutenant general commanding the Tax Police Corps opened a laundry in Washington, D.C., to support himself. To others, the contrast between military general and laundry proprietor might have seemed difficult to comprehend. For Wen, however, it represented a peaceful final chapter in the life of a former soldier living in a foreign country.

On 28 May 1968, Wen died at his home in Washington at the age of eighty-one. Before his death, he expressed a final wish to his children: if possible, he wanted to be buried in his ancestral homeland; otherwise, he wished to be buried at West Point.

Wen's sons and daughters took their father's wishes and supporting documents to West Point on several occasions to

discuss the possibility with academy officials. Their argument was straightforward: their father had been the first Chinese graduate of the United States Military Academy. Their sincerity eventually moved the institution. Major General Koster, Superintendent of West Point, granted special permission for Lieutenant General Wen and his wife to be buried in the West Point Cemetery. His gravestone bears inscriptions in both Chinese and English, making it the only bilingual Chinese–English gravestone in the cemetery. He was also the first foreign general to be buried there.

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Chapter 7
Concluding Reflections: History Comes Full Circle

Wen Yingxing's life was a story of crossing boundaries: crossing the Pacific Ocean, moving between the military and education, and living through the final years of the Qing dynasty, the Republican era and life in the United States.

He was West Point's first Chinese graduate. When he received his diploma from the academy's superintendent in 1909, he could never have imagined that 108 years later, his great-grandson, Alexander Kozlowski, would receive his own degree at the same institution, becoming the second member of the family to graduate from West Point. On 27 May 2017, when Kozlowski received his diploma from Secretary of Defense James Mattis at the West Point graduation ceremony, “history had come full circle for the family and for the wider history of Chinese Americans at West Point.”

He was the only president of Tsinghua with a professional military background. Although his tenure lasted less than two months, his place in the university's historical records has never been erased. He was an incorruptible police commissioner who, when confronted with an underworld scheme to profit from replacing house-number plates, preferred to resign rather than accept a single cent of illicit

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money. He was the first commander of the Tax Police Corps. Although he was eventually marginalised, he left his mark on China's early efforts at military modernisation.

He was also the proprietor of a laundry in Washington, an elderly man earning his living through his own labour in a foreign land. Yet he was also remembered as the only foreign general buried at the West Point Cemetery. In one of America's most revered military resting places stands a gravestone bearing inscriptions in both Chinese and English, permanently preserving the name of a Chinese general.

From the son of an official's family in Luodong Township, Taishan, to West Point's “George Washington Sing Sing”; from Sun Yat-sen's English-language secretary to President of Tsinghua; from commander of the Tax Police Corps to the proprietor of a Washington laundry; and from his uncompromising declaration against corruption to his final resting place at West Point, Wen Yingxing devoted eighty-one years to a lifelong exploration of what military honour truly meant. The “Lieutenant General Wen Yingxing Memorial Scholarship,” established by West Point's Department of Foreign Languages, remains one of the most enduring tributes to his legacy.

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