

The Little Girl with Big Feet: Dr. Shi Meiyue

Mr. and Mrs. Shi knew that their daughter would never marry because of her big feet. Friends and neighbors commented on them constantly, and the other children teased little Meiyue whenever she ventured outside. Shi Meiyue was a descendent of one of the most aristocratic families in China, and the first little girl in centuries whose parents rejected the family and cultural custom of foot-binding.

It was because of the Gospel. Meiyue's father was a Chinese pastor. Her mother converted to Christianity under the influence of Gertrude Howe, an American missionary. But even Miss Howe was surprised to find that Mr. and Mrs. Shi did not plan to bind Meiyue's feet to achieve the coveted 3" foot that women of the aristocracy found so desirable. The Shi's dedicated their little daughter to God, and did not want to hamper her ability to serve Him by crippling her feet. It was a stunning break with a centuries-old cultural tradition, and a logical outworking of their new faith.

But the decision cost something. Mr. and Mrs. Shi could not count on Meiyue having a husband of her own someday to care for her, because men would find her feet embarrassing and unattractive. Something needed to be done to insure her future. Mr. Shi was impressed by the work of a lady doctor, a missionary from America named Dr. Kate Bushnell. When little Meiyue was eight years old, he took her to Dr. Bushnell and presented her to be trained as a physician.

Dr. Bushnell, astounded by the offer, explained the need for a general education first, and then schooling in Western medicine in the United States. So little Meiyue was sent back to Miss Howe, who took her in and trained her in the mission school. There, Meiyue met the only other Chinese girl in the city with big feet, Kang Cheng, the adopted daughter of Miss Howe.

Meiyue and Cheng studied hard for the next ten years and became fast friends. After graduation, Miss Howe took both girls to the University of Michigan and supported them there as they trained as doctors. They graduated at the top of the class of 1896—the first Chinese women to earn medical degrees in the United States.



The young doctors and Miss Howe returned to China and immediately women needing help began knocking on their door. Even before the doctors could set up a clinic, dozens of women were looking to them for treatment. A Chinese peasant told them, “We are afraid of foreigners, but you can understand our nature.” As the only Chinese practitioners of Western medicine, their big feet didn't matter any longer.

With the help of an American benefactor, the doctors built a new women's clinic with the latest advances in medical care and hygiene. Just as it was ready to open, Meiyue's father was martyred in the Boxer Rebellion and the other believers in KiuKiang fled for their lives to Japan. Several months later they were able to return, and in December 1901 the Danforth Memorial Hospital finally opened.

The hospital staff included the two doctors, Christian nurses they trained themselves and Bible women (including Meiyue's mother) who were dedicated to talk to the patients and their families about the Gospel. Every patient was treated as a whole person, assuring that both physical and spiritual needs were met. The doctors treated about 1,700 patients a month in the clinic, and every one of them heard the good news of the Great Physician who cares for the soul.

As the years passed, Dr. Cheng and Miss Howe left Danforth to open a clinic in Nanchang. Dr. Meiyue's sister, Phoebe, also trained as a physician in the United States and took over the work at Danforth.

Dr. Meiyue was required to take another hard stand for the sake of the Gospel. Gradually she found that the missionary society that supported her was more interested in social change than in spiritual transformation. She called it the “rice gospel” and knew that providing for only physical needs would not meet the greatest need of her people. She broke ties with the mission, moved to Shanghai and began a new work with missionary Jennie Hughes. The result was the Bethel Mission, a cluster of ministries including a hospital, home churches and a missionary society that sent evangelists deep into rural China. Historians credit the Bethel Evangelical Mission with building up the Chinese church to sustain them through the coming decades of war, communism and revolution.

And it all started with one little girl with two big feet.

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