

Bean Award Proposal Submission

Title: The Chinese Apotheosis of Dr. Norman Bethune: the Making of a Medical Folk Hero

Abstract:

Mention the name “Norman Bethune” to North American medical students today, and you will likely receive many blank stares in return. However, mention 白求恩 (Bai Qiu En, or Bethune in Chinese) to anyone over the age of twelve in China, and they will most likely immediately know who you are talking about.

Norman Bethune, a Canadian surgeon, trained at the University of Toronto and practiced at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal before moving abroad in 1936 to work in Spain and China as a field doctor with communist sympathies.¹ On November 12, 1939, at the age of 49, he died of sepsis while working with the Chinese Communist Party’s 8th Route Army in Hebei Province, China.² Revered as a loyal foreign friend and physician allied with the Red Army in their resistance against the Japanese, Mao Zedong canonized Dr. Bethune as an eternal martyr to communism through his essay *In Memory of Norman Bethune*. “Dr. Bethune”, or “白求恩大夫” in Chinese, eventually became a household name as Mao’s final homage to him was placed in Chinese textbooks and became required reading for elementary school children.

Over the years, Bethune’s legacy has become checkered as biographers have detailed the contentious sides of his personality. Disliked by many colleagues and accused of being a womanizer and man of questionable character, Dr. Bethune’s memory has received more critical treatment in Canada.³ But in China, along with far greater name recognition, his towering legacy remains sacred. His name 白求恩 directly transliterates to “White Seeking Grace”.

The Osier Library, through its rich collection of Bethune’s writings and memorabilia (and its associated Bethune Foundation Collection and Bethune biographer Roderick Stewart’s book notes) lays bare the memory of Norman Bethune in expansive detail. While much of the focus in Canada has been on Bethune’s medical legacy and his reputation as a physician, I am equally interested in exploring how Norman Bethune remains remembered in China by the Chinese. In examining boxes from the collection, I discovered a treasure trove of iconography: Chinese stamps and pins of Dr. Bethune, pamphlet booklets that tell Dr. Bethune’s story, photographs of statues and hospitals built in his honor, propaganda posters, paper cutouts, photo albums gifted from the Chinese communist friendship league, and many other pieces.

Through this research project, I plan to explore these resources in greater detail to help answer several questions: how did the Chinese Communist Party memorialize Dr. Bethune and what was the intention of their extensive propaganda? Given Dr. Bethune’s complicated legacy, how

¹ Stewart, Roderick; Stewart, Sharon. *Phoenix: The Life of Norman Bethune*. McGill-Queen’s University Press. p7.

² Russell, Hilary. (August 8, 2010). “Norman Bethune”. *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (online ed.). Retrieved February 6, 2020. <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/norman-bethune>

³ Killan, Crawford. (September 27, 2011). “The Redemption of Norman Bethune”. *The Tyee* (online ed.). Retrieved February 6, 2020. <https://thetyee.ca/Books/2011/09/27/Norman-Bethune/>

are we supposed to interpret or consider the veneration of Dr. Bethune in China? Perhaps Dr. Bethune was fortunate; before his death and martyrdom, he could have fallen out of favor with Mao, as many collaborators with the Chinese leader often did. Yet I doubt his early death can fully explain China's motivations for continuing to burnish his legacy. Did Dr. Bethune have specific qualities as a doctor or a communist that resonated with Mao Zedong and the Chinese people? Given the opportunity, I would also like to contact Chinese doctors and librarians—in Shijiazhuang, Hebei, an entire military hospital is named after Dr. Bethune. How do the Chinese tell this part of his story?

Goals:

With the support of my proposed academic mentor for this project, Dr. Del Maestro, I plan to analyze the Bethune Collection materials, biographies, and outside Chinese primary and secondary sources and write a research paper that explores Dr. Bethune's legacy in the context of the iconography found in the collection. I look forward to comparing the image offered by English-language biographies of Bethune with the available Chinese biographical material and the memorabilia in the Osier collection.⁴ I am curious to see how the two images overlap or create competing understandings of the same person. Through this research, I also hope to explore Chinese sources that may address the impulse behind his continued remembrance by the communist party back in China.

To provide access to this material for a wider audience, I also plan to collaborate with Osier Library staff to create a digital exhibition of the Bethune archives, with a focus on the collection's colorful and varied collection of images, posters, artwork, and Chinese materials. Given his name recognition in China, I believe that a bilingual edition of the proposed online exhibition could attract significant attention internationally as well, particularly from Chinese students and doctors.

Background and relevance of the project:

I believe that I have the background and skills necessary to undertake this research project. As an East Asian Studies major at Yale, I explored the social impact of propaganda posters and Communist popular art from the 1960s and 1970s. Having collaborated with Chinese doctors on medical research in Hunan as a McGill student, I have the additional perspective of understanding what is involved in working with Chinese doctors on their terms and how to confront language and cultural barriers. To pursue this project, I plan to take a research elective early in my third year. I hope to complete my research in the early fall and plan to finish a draft of the research paper by November for presentation at the American Osier Society meeting next year.

Given the current attention on China and the challenges facing its healthcare system, I believe that it is a very relevant time to better understand the people and stories driving history. One Chinese document in the Bethune collection recalls how Dr. Bethune remarked in his journal while in China: "A physician should live for his patients."⁵ Through this project, I hope to explore how Norman Bethune's legacy continues to resonate—his memory seems to have a life of its own as well.

⁴ Biographies such as Roderick Stewart and Sharon Stewart's *Phoenix: The Life of Norman Bethune* and Ted Allan's *The Scalpel, The Sword: The Story of Dr. Norman Bethune* (along with the Stewart's biographical notes in the collection).

⁵ The Norman Bethune Collection – pi 56, The Osier Library Collection, McGill University.