

Dr. Norman Bethune: inspiration for a modern China

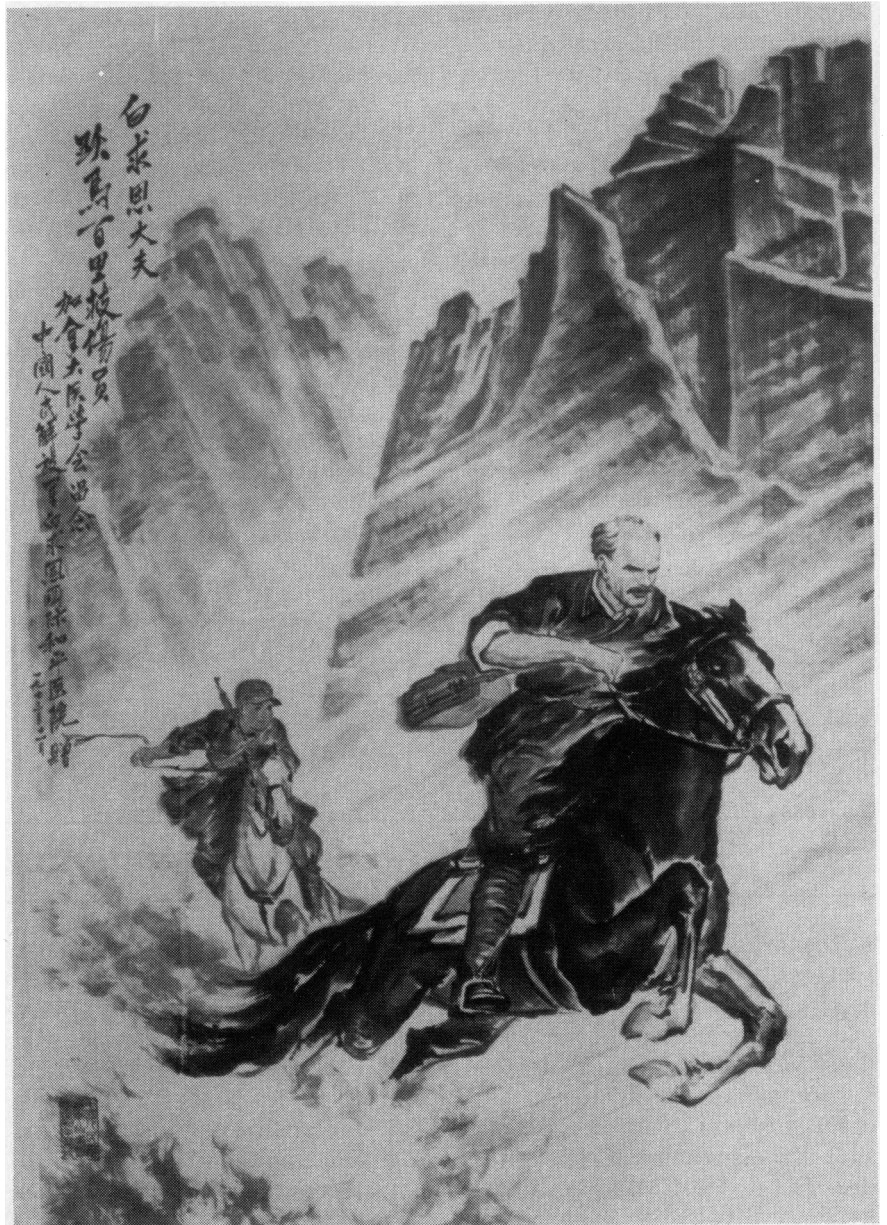
E.W. BAROOTES, MD

In November 1979, I was invited to visit the People's Republic of China, leading an eight-person Canadian delegation to the 40th anniversary commemoration of the death of Dr. Norman Bethune.

The Chinese found this anniversary particularly significant and their many officials had spent over a year preparing for it. There was national, provincial and local involvement and people in the highest levels of government, the Communist Party, the military, various institutions, villages and peasant organizations actively took part.

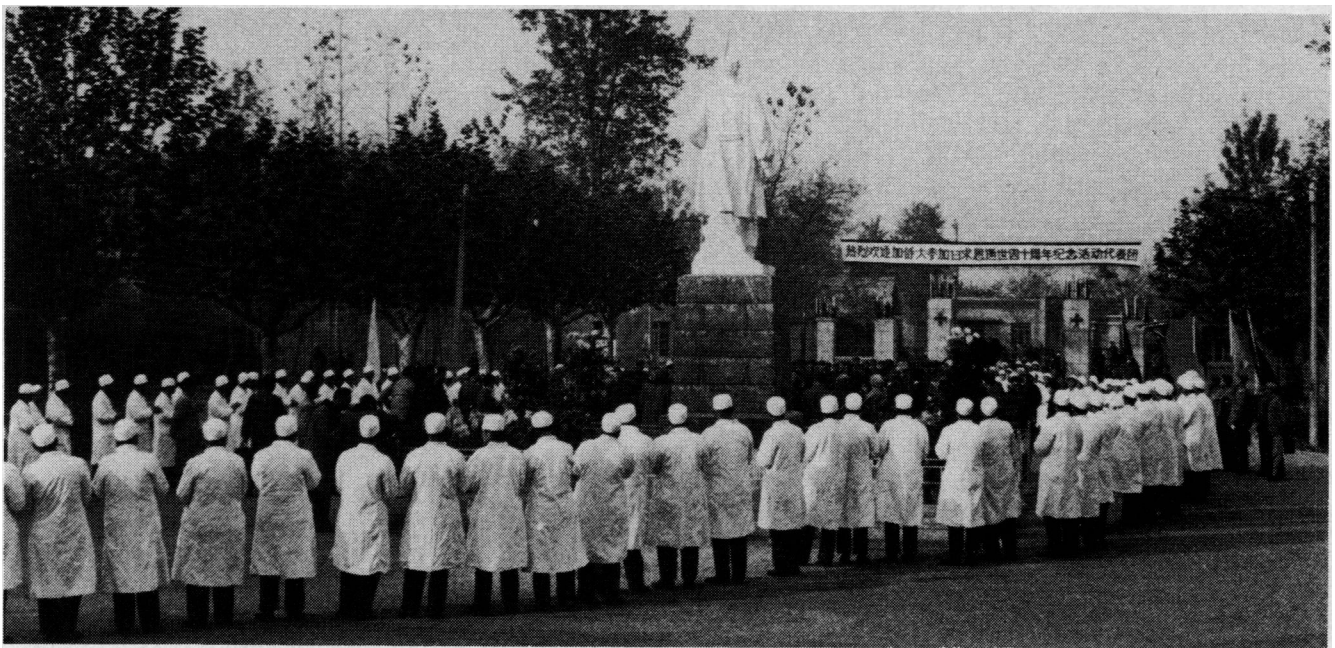
Accompanied by high-ranking officials of these groups and a flock of journalists and photographers, the Canadian delegation — the only foreign one participating — toured Peking, Shanghai and Canton, as well as visiting the interior of China in the area where Bethune worked and died.

The former minister of the Canadian Department of National Health and Welfare, David Crombie, was originally appointed to head the delegation, but he was unable to go and I was asked to replace him. The deputy leader was Canada's ambassador to China, Arthur Menzies, who was born in China and spent his early life there. Other members were: Dr. Francis L. McNaughton, a Montreal neurologist and a personal friend of Bethune; Dr. Jean Ro-



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The Chinese silk painting, "The 100 Li mercy mission", depicts Dr. Bethune on his way to treat a wounded patient. It was presented to the CMA by the Chinese Medical Association in 1973.



Doctors from the Norman Bethune Military Hospital welcome the Canadian delegation.

chon, dean of the faculty of medicine at Laval University; Roderick Stewart, author of a biography of Bethune; Janet Cornell, Ruth Reilly and Joan Lindley, Dr. Bethune's three nieces. John Blackstone, a CBC science and medicine journalist, accompanied the delegation.

This small Canadian group was treated with the gracious hospitality characteristic of the Chinese, and with full state honours and impeccable protocol. Our motorcades were led down the wide streets of Peking and elsewhere, flanked by welcoming banners; we lodged in state-owned houses where accommodation, attention and hospitality were superb.

Formality melts

The Chinese are polite, respectful, proper, but slightly reserved and with little outward show of feelings or affection. Public demonstration of emotions is seldom seen; on the other hand, with their Canadian friends, they extended a warm and cordial welcome at all times and, as we won their confidence and trust, their cool formality and any underlying suspicions melted and they voiced their thoughts and feelings to us quite easily. Both the officials with whom we had contact and the people we met on the street demonstrated sincere friendship and affection for

Canadians as a people. The mere mention of Canadian or Bethune (Pai Chiu-en — Bethune's Chinese name) resulted in applause, friendly bows and small mob scenes, especially for the nieces of Bethune.

For our part, we participated fully, from early morning and often into late evening, in the programmed activities commemorating Bethune's life. And, in addition, we were gratified to be permitted to see those aspects of social, communal and medical life that we requested. Our activity included several mass rallies in large halls with packed audiences, where we responded with speeches to major addresses of leading Chinese officials in praise of the life and sacrifice of Dr. Bethune. We toured, visited or opened numerous new exhibitions depicting Bethune's life in Canada, Spain and China. We paid respect to, placed wreaths, and planted new trees at two large and beautiful cemeteries devoted chiefly to the honour of Dr. Bethune as well as other martyrs of their war of emancipation. We visited martyrs' tombs and the remarkable Chrysanthemum Show in Canton; we were honoured to see the premières of two new plays, one a dance-and-music drama and the other a war drama exalting the activities of Bethune. Most striking in these new plays, which will be touring China for months to come,

were the beautiful and elaborate stage and stage effects, especially in the war drama, which were far more striking than anything I have seen in North America or Europe.

Bethune on a postage stamp

A new movie was released. We attended and were honoured at numerous, almost nightly, formal and informal dinners with innumerable speeches, toasts and words of praise bilaterally by hosts and visitors. New Bethune commemorative stamps were issued and I was told that these stamps sold out at the post office centres in 2 days. We visited the interior of China where Bethune lived, worked and died; and where the two cemeteries with their beautiful tombs are dedicated to his life. We visited the major military hospital and medical school "founded" by Bethune and dedicated to his honour. In the interior and mountainous area, we travelled a 50-km road, which had just been completed "in our honour" as visitors, to visit the original burial site and tomb of Bethune, and through a mountain snowstorm to the very small village where he died. We met, talked with, and witnessed the adulation of groups who knew and worked with Bethune in these mountainous areas and who protected him from the "invaders". We visited the family in the small cot-

tage where Bethune died and that is now preserved as a shrine. This hard-top road to these sites in the mountains, we were told, was built entirely by the hand labour of 1200 persons this past summer to accommodate our visit. Apparently, trucks were used only to transport the workers. At Tang-Xien a new guest house of the same model and proportions as those in which we resided in the major cities had been especially built in 80 days to house our delegation and in which we were honoured to be the first visitors. To see the friendship and affection exhibited toward the Canadians, and especially to Bethune's nieces, by the families in the small village where Bethune died was indeed a revelation. The manifestation of appreciation, love for Canadians, and repeated witness of the "legends" of Bethune were truly incredible. Additionally, our medical men, frequently accompanied by other members of the delegation, visited many hospitals, public health and research institutions, cancer centres, clinics, agricultural communes, workers' centres, medical schools, and did clinical ward rounds with Chinese doctors and gave scientific papers and clinical instruction, both in French and English. The enthusiasm, the thirst for scientific knowledge and the recognition that they must press forward with modernization of their science, their industry and their agriculture was patently obvious during these tours, some of which we purposely requested. The Chinese are aware of those areas in which they must hastily make progress and are most anxious for cooperation and assistance from outside sources, particularly Canada, which they regard as their closest foreign friend.

Fighter spirit wins praise

At each visit to each new site, if even for a short time, we would begin with a formal "briefing" by the "responsible person" at that locale over a cup of warm, refreshing tea. Praise for the sacrificial devotion and work of Bethune would be followed by tales of his heroism, his dedication and his "in-

ternational fighter" spirit, which all Chinese are now urged to emulate for the sake of the modernization and progress of their country. A response from us was always required and this, indeed, kept us on our toes, bringing friendly greetings to China, recognition of their cordial hospitality and reinforcement of the friendship between our two countries that was forged by the deeds of Dr. Bethune.

China on display

Our delegation visited huge trade and industrial fairs in the major cities, and as good tourists, many of our delegation visited the wondrous sites of China including the Great Wall, the Ming tombs, the Summer Palace in Peking, the Forbidden City, shops, restaurants, hotels, factories, homes of retired and active workers, an antique store loaded with beautiful Chinese art and rare treasures, the Great Hall of the People, the huge square in Peking where a million people could gather, and paid due homage and respect to Mao's tomb. One highlight of the visit was to have

a banquet with Marshal Nieh Rhongen, who had been Bethune's commander-in-chief of the Eighth Route Army and a close personal friend and who, at the age of over 80, as vice chairman of the People's National Congress, rose from a sick bed to greet us at a dinner honouring our visit. He insisted on being helped from his chair to have his picture taken first with the three nieces, whom he greeted lovingly, and then with our entire delegation.

The Canadian delegation was transported through Peking to the Great Northern Plain and agricultural area of Hebei (Hopei), through the battle area where Bethune lived and died, back to Peking, up to the Great Wall of China, back to Peking, on to Shanghai, then to Canton and out of China via Hong Kong. In Hebei Province we visited at Shi Jia Zhuang, the site of the Norman Bethune Military Hospital and Medical College, to Tang Xien County, and to the city of Tang Xien, as well as to the mountain town of Huang Shi Kou, which is the original location of the cemetery, tomb and monument to Beth-



Arthur Menzies and Dr. Barootes visit the room in the home of a peasant worker where Bethune died.

une, and finally by a further 24 km on the new road to the small village of 900 people where Bethune died in the small home of a peasant worker. We arrived in Peking on Nov. 11, just as the weather turned from quite warm fall weather to freezing winter weather. The visit to the Great Wall was extremely cold despite our own winter overcoats covered by huge padded army overcoats.

In Shi Jia Zhuang our doctors participated in clinical instruction seminars and made clinical ward rounds observing cases from the various departments. We also saw unusual demonstrations of traditional Chinese medicine and of surgery under acupuncture, as well as touring a herbal medicine production centre.

Everywhere we were greeted with great friendship and remarkable enthusiasm as Canadians bearing relationship to Bethune. For these commemorative services six leading Chinese national figures, including Chairman and Premier Hua Guo Feng, had written special inscriptions commending Dr. Bethune as an example to be emulated

in China's modernization program. In the Chinese context this represents a very significant decision since its socialist society is supposed to be motivated by emulation campaigns.

During our tour we were accompanied by many representatives of the Chinese news media, and activities during these 2 weeks were given prominence in the daily press and news broadcasts.

It was our understanding that the observances commemorating the death of Bethune would continue for weeks and months beyond our 2-week visit.

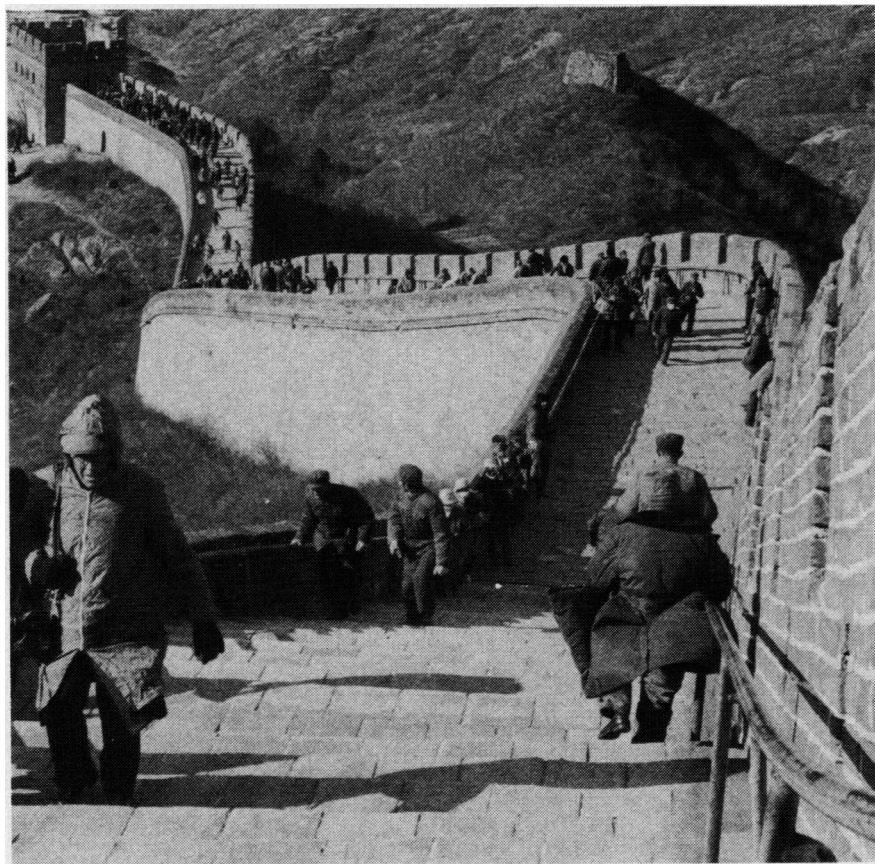
Why Bethune, not Mao?

But why this program of such heavy activity on this occasion? The planning and preparation were elaborate and meticulous. The activities will continue. Why choose to honour the 40th anniversary of the death of Dr. Norman Bethune rather than concentrating on the 30th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, which dates back to the first of May, 1949?

Perhaps an answer can be found in the present needs of the People's Republic of China. About 2 years ago, after the death of Mao, after the 10 years of chaos accompanying his cultural revolution (1966-76) and after the disposal of the Gang of Four, a new political equilibrium was reached under Chairman Hua Guo Feng. He was reappointed Premier as well as Chairman. By 1978 the People's National Congress had confirmed with its leaders a broad agreement known as the Four Modernizations Program (agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defence). It was recognized by the Chinese leadership that they would have to turn to the West for scientific and technical knowledge and methodology. This includes the United States (hence the new diplomacy), Europe, Japan, Australia and, perhaps first and foremost, Canada. The revolutionary Chairman Mao had supported peasant and agricultural revolution rather than urban industrialization and modernization, always suspecting the West.

Suspicion of the Occident

The Chinese have been taught to distrust "western imperialists" who had for centuries exploited (or developed) China. Therefore, bureaucrats and the Chinese peasants alike were suspicious of occidental methods and cultures, their civilization having been superior in age and development by centuries. How then to turn to the West for scientific and technical help in their modernization program and to get the huge army of bureaucrats and the population behind it? Certainly the 30th anniversary victory of establishing the Communist Republic and Chairman Mao would not do as an example for western-style modernization. Thence one noticed the visible but subtle de-emphasis of the cult of Mao, although nothing of a disparaging nature was openly observed. He remains the father figure and founder, but not the springboard, of modernization. The new leaders, however, do not depend so highly on the cult of the individual. They look to a figure who might fit their needs of bor-



The Great Wall: a reminder of China's isolation



Chinese medicine is characterized by a mixture of their traditional medicine and modern, western techniques

rowing from the West for its scientific and technical assistance but who would not impose the shortcomings of western culture and civilization as they perceive them.

Years ago some observers had predicted that the Bethune legend would fade with the death of Chairman Mao.

On a soldier's ration

However, the Chinese leaders now at the Politburo level concluded that the example of the Eighth Route Army turning to a foreign surgeon to raise their standards of medical and scientific treatment of the wounded would serve as a useful precedent in turning to the West for the technical knowledge needed for modernization. Thence the special inscriptions written by the leaders in respect to Dr. Bethune, who now served as an excellent example for emulation by the Chinese peasants and the bureaucrats in accomplishing their modernization program. Bethune, when he came to China, brought with him modern scientific and medical methods, which he taught and instituted, but he did *not* bring occidental culture to the Chinese

and did not try to impose that aspect of his former life upon them. Indeed, he lived the life of a Chinese peasant soldier, dwelling among them, eating their fare and receiving the pay of a common soldier.

In this way Bethune became a perfect symbol and an example that could be easily sold and emulated by the people, as their leaders urged them to accomplish the Four Modernizations. Bethune, in his textbook writings and teachings, spoke of a search for truth through a scientific approach. These are the important attributes for those who would contribute to the Four Modernizations. In this sense the Chinese leaders have taken the Bethune legend a step further; they appear to be saying to the Chinese people that modernization now will require the use of western experts, just as in the dark period of their history a Canadian doctor proved so invaluable.

Bridging the Pacific

The theme used by officials, and by spokesmen everywhere we went, was the characterization of Bethune as a communist motivated by so-

cialist internationalism and, secondly, as an important link between the Chinese and Canadian people. Speeches promoted this Sino-Canadian friendship everywhere, and we referred to Bethune as the person who built the bridge between our two countries across the Pacific Ocean.

Favoured nation

The usefulness of the symbol of Bethune at this time results not only from his re-elevation (for he has always stood very high in the minds of the Chinese people), but from reincarnation, if one may use that term in a non-Christian nation. There is no doubt that as long as the Four Modernizations Program exists Bethune will be used as the number one symbol with which to achieve Chinese objectives. One must recognize the favoured position that Canada holds in this program, because of Dr. Norman Bethune, and the opportunities that exist in the medium and long term for this country. Should we fail to take advantage of, and to assist in, the development of the Four Modernizations other nations will certainly be most grateful to do so in our place. ■