

# The New Women of China

Even more than a century ago, medicine at Michigan had a global impact

BY JAMES TOBIN

WHEN TWO YOUNG CHINESE women crossed the stage at University Hall in 1896 to receive their diplomas as doctors of medicine, the audience erupted in cheers and applause. One of the women was known to her fellow students as Ida Kahn, the other as Mary Stone. They were not only the first Asians to earn degrees at the University of Michigan, but they were also among the very first Chinese women ever to become Western-trained physicians.

The two had made many friends and compiled excellent academic records. (This surprised some who doubted that Chinese students could succeed at an American university, though not the officials who had given them their entrance exams — the women outscored nearly all other applicants.) In class and around campus they spoke excellent English and wore Western clothes, but for Commencement they appeared in Chinese gowns, a symbol of their intent to practice medicine among their own countrywomen.

“Their future career,” said U-M President James B. Angell, “will be watched with every expectation of their eminent success.”

For Angell himself, for the University, and even for China, it was a moment of historic significance.

THE CHINESE WOMEN WHO called themselves Ida Kahn (born Kang Cheng, also called Kang Aide, 1873-1931) and Mary Stone (born Shi Meiyu, 1873-1954) came to Michigan largely because of Gertrude Howe (1847-1928), a native New Yorker educated at the Ypsilanti Normal School (now Eastern Michigan University) who had crossed the Pacific to spend most of her life as a missionary and teacher in Asia.

The daughter of an abolitionist, Howe and other Methodist women missionaries of the late 1800s were harbingers of liberation for Chinese women, who for centuries had lived in a profoundly patriarchal society. In a China torn by conflict between Confucian tradition and the intruding forces of colonialism and modernism, they fought such practices as female

infanticide, child betrothal, concubinage and foot-binding.

Howe and many of her colleagues devoted themselves to the education of women, but they fought over the purpose and extent of that cause. When, at a conference, Chinese Christians asked, “How much education shall we give the girls?” the missionary Elizabeth Fisher, a contemporary of Howe’s, gave a famously radical reply: “Give your girls just as much education as you do your boys.” That was farther than many missionaries, especially men, were prepared to go. They believed Chinese girls should be taught only skills of everyday use in their lives as wives and mothers.

But in the early 1880s, Gertrude Howe scandalized colleagues by adopting Kang Cheng, an unwanted sixth daughter, and three Chinese

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Ida Kahn



Mary Stone

boys. To prepare them and several of the best students in the mission school she ran, including Shi Meiyu, for professional training in the West, she tutored them in English and the sciences. In 1892, she accompanied the two girls to Ann Arbor, where she lived with them as they pursued their medical degrees.

Michigan was especially welcoming because of the ties Angell had established with the Orient. An expert in international law, he had served as U.S. minister to China from 1880-81, negotiating new terms for Chinese immigration to the U.S. as well as laying a foundation for the education of Chinese students at American universities.

But even Angell hardly could have imagined the impact that university training would have through the lives and careers of these early and illustrious Chinese students.

WHEN KAHN AND STONE ARRIVED in their home city of Jiujiang (Kiukiang), according to a contemporary account, crowds gathered to see them. Within days they were treating patients. As representatives of the Women's Foreign Missionary

Society of the Methodist Church, the two gradually gained the confidence of the community and opened a small hospital for women and children. With funding from a wealthy Chicago patron, they built a larger facility, closed it during the Boxer Rebellion against colonial influence, reopened it — and soon were among the best known women of China's tumultuous era of modernization.

Chinese reformers and western missionaries alike were pointing to the subjugation of women as inarguable evidence of the need for social change. So the two young physicians (especially Kahn, since her family was reputed to be descended from Confucius) were cited as symbols of the emerging "new woman" of China — not only literate but well-educated, and a force for higher standards of health, for social reform, and for the liberation of women from male tyranny. They were constantly held up as models for the next generation of female students.

"When our schoolgirls learn of anything 'the doctors' did when they were pupils," Gertrude Howe herself reported, "they seem to think they have found solid ground on which to set their feet."

Eventually the two women went their separate ways — Stone remaining as head of the hospital in Jiujiang, Kahn to found and lead a new hospital in Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi province. Kahn returned to the U.S. to earn a master's degree in English literature at Northwestern University, then resumed her medical career in China. After further training at Johns Hopkins on a Rockefeller fellowship, Stone largely abandoned medicine to become a Methodist minister, a popular evangelist and head of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in China. She also helped to found the Chinese Red Cross.

The careers of Ida Kahn and Mary Stone also left a lasting legacy at the U-M. Some years after they left Ann Arbor, the two encountered U-M Regent Levi Barbour in China. He was so impressed by their work that he endowed a fund to support Asian women studying at Michigan. Since 1918, the Barbour Scholarships not only have helped hundreds of women to earn advanced degrees, but have bolstered a cosmopolitan tradition that continues to define Michigan. [M]

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