Norman Bethune (1890-1939), a Canadian physician is best known for his services in wartime medical units during the Spanish Civil War, and as a hero in People’s Republic of China and his impact on Sino-Canadian relations.

A gifted surgeon, an inventor, a political activist, and an early proponent of Universal healthcare system, he was virtually unknown in his homeland during his lifetime. He received international recognition when Chairman Mao Zedong of People’s Republic of China published his essay entitled Memory of Norman Bethune documenting the final months of his life in China. It was a part of reading curriculum in China’s elementary schools, during its cultural revolution.

Bethune was born in Ontario in 1890 and completed his medical degree from University of Toronto’s faculty of medicine in 1916. The famous Frederick Banting was his classmate. In a flourish of patriotism, Bethune joined the Field Ambulance to serve as a stretcher bearer in France during WW-I. He was wounded by shrapnel and spent three months recovering in a hospital in England.

With the war still raging, he felt compelled to return to service, so he joined the Royal Navy as Lieutenant-Surgeon. At war’s end he took on a six month internship at the prestigious Hospital for Sick Children in London. After earning his FRCS qualification in 1923, he married the beautiful Frances Penny. However, the marriage failed largely due to his lavish spending and flamboyant lifestyle.

Bethune felt the crisis in his life when he contracted tuberculosis in 1926 due to overwork and close contact with the sick. He insisted that his wife divorce him and returns to Scotland. He then sought treatment at the Trudeau Sanatorium at Saranac Lake, America. This was a turning point in his life. It was tuberculosis which gave him direction. He had been disabled by it and took the, “cure” with artificial pneumothorax introduced by Forlarni. He became interested in and insistent on the use of new compression treatment of tuberculosis, either by artificial pneumothorax or thoracoplasty, in either case resting it. He went to Montreal to learn and practice chest surgery under the pioneer Dr. Edward Archibald, of the Royal Victoria Hospital. He perfected his skills in thoracic surgery and developed new surgical tools. Bethune Rib Shear is still used today.

Bethune was strange and idealistic. He was a ruthless man, in having his own merciful way, as one who devoted to left wing causes and to a radical cure of the incurable, letting his politics imitate his practice. When Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, he left for Spain to head the Canadian Medical Unit in Madrid. There he conceived the idea of administering blood transfusion on the spot on the battlefield and developed the world’s first mobile transfusion unit (1936), saving countless lives. He emerged from that Civil war as a convinned Communist.

In 1938, Bethune joined the guerrilla communist armies in China, in their struggle against Japanese invaders. He established their medical service and set an example that communist and non-communist armies followed. He performed emergency battlefield
surgical operations on war casualties and started training for doctors and nurses. He did not distinguish between casualties, treating Japanese prisoners as well as Chinese.

Stationed with China’s Eight Route Army in the midst of Second Sino-Japanese War, Bethune cut his finger while operating on a soldier. Due to his weakened state, he contracted septicemia and died in November 1939.

Bethune is one of the few foreigners to whom China has dedicated statues, of which many in his honour have been erected throughout the country. He is buried in “Revolutionary Martyrs’” Cemetery, in Shijiazhuang City, where lies his tomb and memorial. In Canada, Bethune College at York University, and Bethune Collegiate Institute in Scarborough, are named after him.

Opposite the tomb of Bethune is the tomb of our doctor Dwarkanath Kotnis, who is also honoured for his humanitarian contribution to China. Dwarkanath Kotnis succeeded Bethune in the same Eight Route Army. It is unlikely that the two heroes of modern China met each other in person. Biographers refer to his anxiously waiting for the arrival of Kotnis, which was inordinately delayed due to Japanese blockade.

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