



From Agencies

Feature: Like a phoenix, humanitarian hero rises from the ash -- New biography offers insights into Bethune's life

Xinhua

Updated: 2011-06-14 04:40:00

TORONTO, June 13 (Xinhua) -- Perhaps it comes as little surprise that 72 years after his death, Dr. Norman Bethune remains a household name in China, where he spent the last 17 months of his life, while few in his native land of Canada have heard of his name, let alone his life story. After all, despite his many achievements, for most of his life, Bethune had felt like an outsider.

A new biography of Bethune chronicling his remarkable, sometime dramatic, life journey from the first-born child of devout Christian parents in mostly small-town Ontario to a committed Communist who died on the battlefield of Northern China, may re-ignite interest among his countrymen and English speakers around the world in the complex character and story of Bethune.

Exhaustively researched and cogently written with a measured and balanced tone, *Phoenix - The Life Story of Norman Bethune*, by historian Roderick Stewart and his wife, Sharon Stewart, portrays a man of great intelligence, talent, idealism and courage who at the same time was marked by his violent temper, impulsiveness and irascibility, and a controlling nature, which led to difficult relationships with those closest to him, from his father, his wife, his lovers, to his mentors and colleagues.

In contrast to the near sainthood in which he is revered in China, the Bethune in *Phoenix* comes across as a genuine human being who despite his many talents and great humanitarianism had been plagued by personal failings that almost derailed his career and life at various points until he found redemption in China.

Having traveled to all the sites in China where Bethune worked and interviewed hundreds of people, Roderick Stewart said he knew how Bethune has been historically viewed in China.

"They've always seen Bethune only from one angle: he was (perceived) as never doing anything negative," Stewart said at the book's launch in Toronto recently.

In reality, Bethune's life was full of dramatic highs and lows, and he elicited strong feelings in both his admirers and detractors.

Rebelling against his parents' evangelicalism at a young age, he left home when a teenager and put himself through medical school by working in construction, part-time teaching, and military services. After a career as a thoracic surgeon in Montreal, where he was admired for his dexterity at the operating table and at innovating surgical instruments but also criticized for his operating style as well as his abrasive personality that sometimes bordered on cruelty, Bethune volunteered his service in 1936 to aid the Spanish Loyalists in their fight against Franco's Fascists. He established a mobile blood transfusion unit on the battlefields of Spain, but his stint in Spain turned out to be short-lived. In less than a year Bethune returned to Canada after a fall-out with the Spaniards.

Despite holding a successful tour that whipped up support among Canadians for the Loyalists after his return, the 47-year-old Bethune was hitting a new low in his life.

His personal life was just as turbulent as his professional one, having drawn many women with his charisma but failed at any long-term relationship, including marrying and divorcing the same woman, Frances Campbell Penney, twice.

"Before coming to China, Bethune had feared that he would never achieve more than second best, never reach the goals he set for himself. Now he was at last receiving respect, reverence and unquestioning support than he so deeply craved," the authors wrote.

"Now physical and cultural isolation had become his monastery walls, his fortress against himself, shielding him from the temptations of sex and alcohol that previously had undermined his high idealism... In the mountain fastnesses of Shanxi and the plains of Hebei, Bethune had entered his kingdom."

Indeed, the authors chose *Phoenix* as the book's title to symbolize Bethune's life as that of a phoenix, reborn time and again in the fire of destruction, often brought upon by Bethune's own egotism and eccentricity.

Phoenix is the culmination of four decades of fascination with an extraordinary character and dedicated research into his life and death.

In 1969, Roderick Stewart, then a history teacher in Toronto, came upon the documentary film Bethune when searching for materials to teach his secondary school students about the 1930s. He became mesmerized by the doctor who found his destiny in fighting the fascists first in Spain, then in China, where he saved countless lives by greatly improving the efficiency and quality of battlefield surgeries and post-operative care before succumbing to septicemia himself.

In the 42 years since he discovered Bethune's story, Stewart has visited China four times. His research also took him to the United States, Mexico, England and Spain. Stewart interviewed hundreds in these countries whose life paths had crossed with Bethune's, dove into letters and professional articles written by his subject, and published two briefer biographies and a compilation of Bethune's writings and photographs prior to the latest book.

Stewart first went to China in 1972, at the invitation of then Chinese Ambassador to Canada Huang Hua, to interview those who knew Bethune and visit the sites where Bethune worked. In 1975 and 1983, he visited China again, both times teaching English. While back at home, in 1975 Stewart became an advisor to Parks Canada, which in 1976 purchased the house where Bethune was born along with the house next door and turned them into Bethune Memorial House in Gravenhurst, Ontario.

In 2005, at the invitation of the Norman Bethune International Peace Hospital in Shijiazhuang, the Stewarts had a two-week tour of the Jin-Cha-Ji area, the border region between Hebei and Shanxi provinces where Bethune did most of his work in China. During this most recent trip to China, the Stewarts met with Zhang Yesheng, a student of Bethune's in the last six months of his life and the pre-eminent Chinese expert on Bethune, who provided much of the new information in the 479-page biography, including 76 pages of research notes.

Asked about the relevance of Bethune's story to a young generation whose lives are far removed from Bethune's time, Sharon Stewart cited Bethune's support for "socialized medicine" long before Canada established universal healthcare in the 1960s - before returning to the "phoenix" theme.

"Bethune's life was like the life of a phoenix," said Stewart. "He rose high, he crashed to burn; he rose again, he crashed to burn again."

"He tried and tried and tried... and in China he finally got to do what he wanted to do," she noted. "That's what made Bethune a hero."

After recounting his death and burial, Phoenix - The Life Story of Norman Bethune quoted a letter Bethune wrote to Marian Scott, with whom he had a passionate but platonic relationship, some years earlier: "You need an altar to immolate yourself upon - a glad, burning sacrifice to a living God - you ask to be consumed - to rise again like a phoenix from the ashes of your own glad destruction - clean and pure & free - with wings."

"In China he had found that altar and made that sacrifice," the authors concluded.

Copyright By chinadaily.com.cn. All rights reserved