

Dedicated to a Medical Career in the “Heaven Below”: David Duncan Main’s Correspondence, 1914-1926

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Figure: Dr. David Duncan Main (1856-1934). Source:
<http://www.hzsct.org/sct/sct/info/listinfo.jsp?infoid=248>

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David Duncan Main was one of the most famous missionaries in China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at a time when China was experiencing tremendous social turmoil. He dedicated forty-five years of his life to medical service in China. He grew up in Scotland, where he was born at Kirkmichael in 1856, and where he studied medicine and

business at Glasgow and Edinburgh. He joined the evangelistic revival movement in 1873, and set out on the path of medical missionary work after meeting another missionary. In 1881, he and his wife, Florence Nightingale Smith, left for Hangzhou (or Hangchow), the capital city of Zhejiang Province in southeast China, under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society. Hangzhou is usually described as “Heaven Below” in China because of its great beauty and prosperity.¹

By the time Duncan Main went to Hangzhou, this city already featured a Western-style medical establishment, which had its origins in 1869, when Dr. Meadows of the Church Missionary Society rented three rooms in a house as a place to cure opium addicts of their addiction. Two years later, Dr. Meadows founded the “Central Hospital,” or “Guangji Hospital” in Chinese, which was the first western hospital in Zhejiang. The local residents called it the “British Hospital” because it was set up by the British. This hospital treated twenty in-patients and 200 out-patients per month.

When Duncan Main arrived in Hangzhou in 1881, he took over the hospital in his capacity as the superintendent of Hangzhou’s Church Missionary Society Medical Mission. The hospital expanded rapidly in the following years, and moved into a new building in 1884. In 1885, the hospital established the Hangzhou Medical Training College, with Duncan Main as the principal. In 1892, he set up the women’s hospital and sanatorium which was affiliated with the hospital. In 1889 and 1899, he established a men’s leprosarium and tuberculosis sanatorium respectively. In 1905, the hospital expanded once again, while the female wards, dermatosis

¹ Gerald Anderson, *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (The Gale Group, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998), <http://www.bdcconline.net/en/stories/m/main-david-duncan.php>.

wards and obstetrical wards emerged. In 1911, the hospital was equipped with electric lamps, running water and an X-ray machine.²

Duncan and Florence Main were credited with the establishment of at least thirty medical and welfare institutions in Hangzhou by the time they left China in 1926. Over the course of his career, he received a number of honors from the Chinese government; in 1901, the Chinese Emperor conferred upon him the rank of a Mandarin of the Fifth Class, and after the Revolution of 1911, the Republican government gave him several decorations. In addition to establishing medical institutions and providing treatment, he also provided medical training to hundreds of Chinese (both women and men) and prepared Chinese translations of a number of English-language medical books, such as Whittle's *Dictionary of Treatment*, Caird and Cathcart's *Surgical Handbook*, and Playfair's *Midwifery*.³ Because of Duncan Main's dedication, western medicine was fully implemented and kept abreast of Chinese medicine in Hangzhou, the provincial capital of Zhejiang Province.



Figure: The Main Gate of the Affiliated Trachoma Clinic of the Welfare Association for the Chinese Blind, Hangzhou Central Hospital.
Source: <http://www.hzsct.org/sct/sct/info/listinfo.jsp?infoid=248>

² Zhu Deming, "Zhejiang guangji yiyuan he shengli yiyao zhuanke xuexiao shilue" [Zhejiang guangji hospital and provincial medicine and pharmaceutical school], *Zhonghua yishi zazhi* [Chinese Journal of Medical History] 25, 1 (January 1995), pp. 25-6.

³ "Obituary of David Duncan Main," *The British Medical Journal* (September 1934), p. 495.

After leaving China, Duncan Main settled in Edinburgh, and he died at Buxton on August 30, 1934. Two biographies of Duncan Main were published during his lifetime: *Doctor Apricot of 'Heaven Below': The Story of the Hangchow Medical Mission* and *Dr. D. Duncan Main of Hangchow, Who is Known in China as Dr. Apricot of Heaven Below*, both written by Kingston de Gruchè. These books were published in London by Marshall Brothers in 1911, and Morgan & Scott, Ltd. in 1930, respectively. Another biography, *Duncan Main of Hangchow* by Alexander Gammie, was published two years after his death. These three books describe Duncan Main's medical services in China from the perspective of his biographers.

By contrast, Duncan Main's correspondence from 1914 to 1926, which is preserved by the China Medical Board, tells his story as a missionary doctor in China in his own words. The China Medical Board was established in 1913 as "an independent US foundation aiming to advance health in China and neighboring Asian countries through strengthening medical, nursing, and public health research and education."⁴ The first letter in this collection, which includes an overview of Duncan Main's medical career and the various hospitals, medical personnel and schools associated with him, was submitted to the China Medical Board on August 10, 1914. The next letter was written by Duncan Main on November 5, 1915, asking for a grant of 50,000 gold dollars for his hospital development plan. In this letter, he wrote: "I don't want to die yet and I think I am good for ten more years [of] hard work and by that time I hope western medicine in China will really have taken root and it will be easy for me to retire and give place to younger men and probably all Chinese. If you kindly make a grant for land, building, and equipment..."⁵ The last letter was written by the China Medical Board regarding the post of the Hangzhou

⁴ "The History of the China Medical Board," <http://www.chinamedicalboard.org/history.php>.

⁵ David Duncan's letter to the China Medical Board, the 5th November, 1915, CMB, RG. 4.1, Box 17.

Medical College principal after Duncan Main left China in 1926. It says: “We discussed the Hangchow Medical College in the light of recent action by the Executive Committee of CMB in granting provisional registration...Dr Thompson takes over his new duties with the explicit understanding that he will not begin to function until Dr. Main has actually left China and that he will have an entire free hand as regards the politics of school.”⁶

Beginning in June 1916, Duncan Main wrote one letter per week to his friends and the China Medical Board, including its director, Patrick Wallace, and Roger Greene. Thus, the collection of his letters written during this period reads like his weekly diary. By 1926, when Duncan Main left China, this collection of letters had already amounted to about 450 letters, including a total of 570 pages. In a few of his letters to the China Medical Board, he applied for funding for his hospital development plans, as mentioned above; but the majority of his correspondence shared his daily life with his friends. He also discussed various other topics, including the local political situation, the central government and its factions, politicians and incidents, Chinese medicine and patent medicine, Chinese health-seeking behaviors, a graduation ceremony for medical students, the treatment of Chinese patients, opium-smoking, Chinese language studies, a soldier who was his neighbor, his medical students, holidays, Chinese foods, relations with local politicians, Chinese diseases, social unrest, and the China Continuation Committee, among other topics.

Regarding China’s situations in the first decade of the twentieth century, he described: “At present China is like an immense mass of protoplasm, alive it is true, but without power of its own to determine how it should go, and it is at the mercy of the winds and waves and drifting

⁶ The letter to Dr. Balme, the 4th December 1926, RG.4, Series 1, Folder 1170.

with the tide in which it floats.”⁷ The complicated politics was also reflected in his hospitals’ relations with the local elites. He wrote: “On the 28th Dec. five of our students graduated from our school of pharmacy after a course of four years study and received their diplomas. The governor promised to be present and present them to graduates, but there were troubles among his subordinate officials which upset his plan and prevented his attendance.”⁸ It seems that he was quite confused with Chinese patients and the ways that the Chinese take medicines. In the letter of the 9th Dec. 1916, he wrote: “We find in dealing with Chinese patients that we have to be most minute with our directions as to the taking of medicine because if there is a wrong way of taking it that it is usually the first one chosen. One cannot be too careful and explicit in explaining matters although it takes a lot of time; but in the end it often saves time and a lot of bother and misunderstanding. In prescribing an External Medicine and an Internal Medicine they very often forget which is which, and swallow an ointment rub on a Rheumatic Mixture on the joint and with wonderfully effects too, -according to their faith.”⁹

Through these letters, Duncan Main recorded in detail his medical work, social and political changes in China, and culture and customs during this period, which included the 1911 Revolution, the founding of the Republic of China, the Second Revolution, the National Protection War, the Constitution Protection War, and the May Fourth Movement. Meanwhile, the local newspapers and tabloids also occasionally reported on Duncan Main’s activities. However, not all of these reports were positive. For example, one local newspaper, called *New Zhejiang*, described Duncan Main’s “misbehaviours” in its columns in 1924, two years before

⁷ David Duncan’s letter to Patrick Wallace, August 26, 1916, CMB, RG. 4.1, Box 17.

⁸ Duncan Main’s letter to his friend, the 6th January, 1917, CMB, RG. 4.1, Box 17.

⁹ Duncan Main’s letter to his friends, the 9th December, 1916, CMB, RG. 4.1, Box 17.

his departure. Even today, the portraits of Duncan Main in some of the local memories are quite negative, such as being arrogant and forcibly occupying residential houses to build the hospitals. But the contradictory fact is that the present-day descendant of Duncan Main's hospital is the one of the biggest hospitals in the province.

So far, the study of missionary doctors has made substantial progress in terms of understanding the work of individuals, as well as the transmission of western medicine, its institutionalization and professionalization, and its cultural impact and response. An exploration of Duncan Main's full correspondence collection, together with local Chinese materials and the biographies published in the early twentieth century, will help us to better understand the meaningful topics and perspectives of missionary doctor studies and the role of the Rockefeller Foundation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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