Biography of Mary Stone



A Heart of Stone, Hands of Healing

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Chapter 1
A Daughter of Jiujiang (1873–1880)



On 1 May 1873, a baby girl was born into the family of a Methodist Episcopal Church pastor in Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province. Her father, Shi Zhaiyu, was among the earliest Methodist Episcopal ministers in central China, while her mother, Madam Wu, was a Christian evangelist who served as principal of a missionary girls' school. They named their daughter Meiyu, meaning “beautiful jade.”

At that time, most Chinese girls were subjected to the painful practice of foot binding. Mary Stone's parents, however, made a decision considered extraordinary and even shocking by the standards of their society: they refused to bind their daughter's feet. This decision made her “the first native Chinese girl in central and western China whose feet were not bound.” Deeply inspired by the example of medical missionaries, her father developed an ambition that seemed almost inconceivable at the time: he wanted his daughter to become a physician.

At the age of eight, Mary Stone was enrolled in a missionary girls' school, where she met Kang Aide, also known as Ida Kahn, who would become her lifelong friend. The two studied together for ten years and were virtually inseparable. Their friendship would endure throughout the following decades of their lives.

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Chapter 2
Ten Years Across the Ocean (1880–1892)

In 1880, American Methodist missionary Gertrude Howe recognised the intelligence and promise of the young Mary Stone in Jiujiang. With her parents' consent, Howe adopted her as a daughter and took her, together with Ida Kahn, to the United States.

During her ten years in America, Mary Stone demonstrated extraordinary academic abilities. She became proficient in several languages, including English, Japanese and German, and excelled in mathematics, physics, chemistry, painting, music and numerous other subjects. In 1892, at the age of nineteen, she gained admission to the University of Michigan Medical School with outstanding academic results.

At the University of Michigan, she experienced an amusing incident. Her professors repeatedly struggled to pronounce her Chinese name, Shih Mai-yu. One morning, as a professor was preparing to call the roll, she stood up and announced, “Professor, I have decided to change my name.” The entire class burst into laughter. Initially puzzled, she soon understood the humour and joined in. From that moment onward, she used the name “Mary Stone.” Later, even members of her family adopted the surname “Stone” when communicating with foreigners.

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Chapter 3
The First Chinese Woman to Earn an American Medical Doctorate (1896)

In 1896, Mary Stone and Ida Kahn graduated from the University of Michigan Medical School with outstanding results, both receiving Doctor of Medicine degrees. They became among the earliest Asian women to obtain medical degrees in the United States.

At the graduation ceremony, Mary Stone, dressed in traditional Chinese clothing, walked calmly onto the stage to receive her medical degree. Nearly a thousand international students and officials in attendance were astonished, and the auditorium erupted in applause. Local American newspapers prominently reported the occasion and published a small photograph of her.

After graduation, several hospitals in Chicago offered her well-paid positions, while the university repeatedly encouraged her to remain in America. Mary Stone declined every invitation. In the autumn of 1896, she boarded a ship with Ida Kahn and returned to China.

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Chapter 4
Danforth Hospital in Jiujiang: From a Small Clinic to a Modern Hospital (1896–1920)

Upon returning to China, Mary Stone and Ida Kahn opened a small clinic in Jiujiang to provide medical care for women and children. They had expected that earning the community's trust would take several months, but patients began arriving on the third day, and their numbers continued to increase. During their first year, the two physicians treated more than 2,000 outpatients and made several hundred medical visits.

A turning point came through the assistance of Dr. I. N. Danforth, a physician from Chicago. He provided funds to construct a hospital in Jiujiang in memory of his late wife, Elizabeth. In 1900, the Boxer Rebellion erupted, and Mary Stone's father was killed during the violence. She and Ida Kahn fled to Japan but returned to Jiujiang several months later to continue their work establishing the hospital.

On 7 December 1901, the Elizabeth Skelton Danforth Memorial Hospital officially opened, equipped with ninety-five beds and comprehensive medical facilities. Mary Stone became its first director. The opening ceremony was attended by local officials, including the Prefect of Jiujiang, the Deputy Prefect and the County Magistrate. Those present sang the hymn “God Save the Emperor.”

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Mary Stone was not only an accomplished surgeon but also a pioneer in nursing education. She personally translated medical textbooks, developed nursing curricula and introduced an integrated model of hospital-based education. Nurses worked during the day and studied theory in the evenings, acquiring practical skills in surgical procedures, managing difficult childbirths, treating fractures and other aspects of medical care. She frequently led her students on home visits to assist with deliveries and travelled into rural communities to provide medical services.

During her twenty years at Danforth Hospital, she trained more than 500 nurses. Some subsequently gained admission to American medical institutions, including Johns Hopkins Hospital, for further professional training.

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Chapter 5
Bethel: A “House of God” Rises in Shanghai (1920–1937)

In 1920, Mary Stone's life reached another major turning point. Following disagreements with the American missionary organisation over theological positions, she and her lifelong colleague Jennie V. Hughes resigned from their work with the Methodist Episcopal Church.

They moved to Shanghai and rented a supposedly haunted house that no one else wished to occupy, naming it “Bethel,” meaning “the House of God and the Gate of Heaven.” Mary Stone made a resolute declaration: “My surname is Stone, and I too shall establish a stone. I myself shall be that stone.”

Over the following decade and more, Bethel developed from an abandoned residence into one of the largest evangelical institutions in China at the time. They established Bethel Hospital, Bethel Middle School, Bethel Theological Seminary, a nursing school, an orphanage, a printing establishment and other facilities, occupying sixteen buildings in total. Mary Stone personally adopted thirty-six impoverished Chinese children into her household.

During the 1930s, the Bethel Church organised the Bethel Evangelistic Band, whose preachers included John Sung and

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Andrew Gih. Their evangelistic activities exerted considerable influence throughout China. Mary Stone herself became a distinguished female evangelist within the Chinese church and was the first Chinese Christian woman to be ordained in central China.

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Chapter 6
Perseverance Amid the Flames of War (1937–1951)

In 1937, the Battle of Shanghai broke out. Bethel Hospital, which Mary Stone had personally helped to establish, was forcibly occupied by Japanese troops. Its equipment was damaged, and its buildings were converted into military barracks.

Confronted with this devastating setback, Mary Stone demonstrated remarkable composure and resilience. Rather than allow the institution and its work to be destroyed, she initiated a relocation plan resembling a modern-day Noah's Ark. The theological seminary was moved to Hong Kong, the orphanage was transferred inland to Guizhou, and Mary Stone herself remained in the isolated city of Shanghai. Within the French Concession, she established another hospital branch and continued providing medical care to the sick and wounded.

During those darkest days, she insisted on sending medical teams every week to serve voluntarily at refugee shelters and military hospitals. The atmosphere was filled with bloodshed and despair, yet she and her colleagues, predominantly women working in medicine, deliberately entered these places of suffering to provide treatment and comfort.

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After victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan, Mary Stone actively raised funds to rebuild Bethel Hospital from the ruins. In May 1951, she requested that the Shanghai Municipal Government take over the hospital. In December 1952, Bethel Hospital was renamed Shanghai Ninth People's Hospital. This hospital, which continues to operate today, remains one of Mary Stone's most enduring contributions to the city.

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Chapter 7
The Final Years of a Steadfast Stone (1951–1954)

After 1951, Mary Stone, by then advanced in age, moved to Pasadena, California, in the United States. She never married, but together with Jennie V. Hughes, she raised dozens of children.

On 30 December 1954, although some sources give the date as 29 December, Mary Stone passed away peacefully at her home in Pasadena at the age of eighty-one. In its obituary, The New York Times described her as “the first Chinese woman to receive an American medical degree” and specifically noted that she had “personally trained more than 500 Chinese nurses.”

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Chapter 8
Concluding Reflections: The Mission of a Stone

Mary Stone's life can be summarised through her own words. When she acquired the supposedly haunted house in Shanghai and named it Bethel, she declared: “My surname is Stone, and I too shall establish a stone. I myself shall be that stone.”

Throughout her life, that stone became a foundation stone. She established Danforth Hospital and Bethel Hospital, helping lay some of the early foundations of China's modern medical system. That stone was also a supporting pillar. She trained more than 500 nurses who subsequently served across China and in places as distant as Vietnam, Burma, Singapore and Honolulu, becoming essential contributors to medical services in their respective communities. Above all, that stone was a living stone. Through her own life, she demonstrated that a Chinese woman could achieve extraordinary distinction simultaneously in medicine, education and faith.

From a small clinic measuring twenty-one by twenty-eight feet in Jiujiang to the vast Bethel institution comprising sixteen buildings in Shanghai; from an eight-year-old girl spared the traditional practice of foot binding to an internationally recognised physician; and from a daughter who lost her father during the Boxer Rebellion to a doctor who remained steadfast

in an isolated city amid wartime destruction, Mary Stone devoted eighty-one years to fulfilling the entire mission embodied in her name.

Her Chinese name, Meiyu, meant “beautiful jade,” yet she chose to become a foundation stone. Precious jade is carefully treasured, while foundation stones are trodden upon. Nevertheless, it is precisely those stones beneath our feet that support the entire structure above them. Such was the life of Mary Stone.

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