Two courageous women physicians, one an American missionary, the other a daughter of Korean peasants, devoted their lives to the desperately poor people of Korea in the late 1890s and early 1900s.

Rosetta Sherwood Hall (1865–1951), a physician and Methodist Episcopalian from upstate New York, was among the first medical missionaries in Korea.

Nine-year-old Kim Jeom-dong (1876–1910) was brought to the mission infirmary after being found near Seoul’s city gate caring for her sick mother. There she gained a Western education and converted to Christianity. In 1894, at age eighteen, she traveled to the United States with Dr. Hall, where she attended medical school and became the first Korean woman physician.
The remarkable story of Rosetta Hall and Esther Pak comes from the memoirs of Dr. Rosetta Hall and her son Dr. Sherwood Hall (1893–1991), also a missionary physician, who established Korea’s first tuberculosis sanatorium.\textsuperscript{1–3} Dr. Pak’s only words on record are summaries of her work to the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) of the Methodist Episcopal Church.\textsuperscript{4–5} Reports by missionaries of the era provide firsthand accounts of health practices in the country at that time and the link between medical service and evangelism.\textsuperscript{6–8}

**Korea**

Korea in the late nineteenth century had a strict caste system based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Confucian social concepts. Interaction across social strata was barely tolerated; intermarriage was unthinkable. Women were especially constrained. Their sole duties were to provide for men and rear children. Most of their lives were in the interior rooms of their homes. Contact with outsiders was taboo. When they ventured outside they wore hoods and gowns that covered their heads and bodies completely, a netted opening for their eyes and nose. Medical care for women was especially affected. A man could not touch an unrelated woman; male physicians could therefore not perform physical examinations on female patients.\textsuperscript{6,9–10}

Korea at the time was untouched by Western medicine and the basic concepts of hygiene and public health. In villages, sewage and
human waste collected in a ditch in the street and drained into areas that tainted water supplies. No one washed hands or bathed. Vegetables, fertilized by human excrement—"night soil"—were eaten unwashed. Animals roamed the streets and slept in homes. Healings were attempted using nostrums, prayer, and offerings made by family elders, traditional healers, and shamans such as a mundang ("sorceress"), who would beat drums, sing songs, play cymbals, and dance to cure the sick. A form of acupuncture performed with filthy needles introduced deep joint infections. One belief was that because cholera was considered the "rat disease," hanging a picture of a cat on a patient's front door would help bring recovery. Bread would be stuffed in ears to correct deafness. Mission physicians in later years battled rumors that children treated at the dispensary were killed so that their blood and eyes could be used to concoct medications.

A Chinese client state for centuries, by the nineteenth century Korea sought to protect itself by shunning contact with all other countries, earning it the moniker, "the hermit kingdom." The country's policy of isolation became tragically ineffective in the latter half of the century when Korea, like China and Japan, became a helpless prize of gunboat diplomacy by Western powers. The archers, swordsmen, and boatmen in junks of the Chinese and Japanese forces were no match for the Western Great Powers with their industrialized militaries. China never recovered its stature and influence after its devastating defeats in the Opium Wars of 1832–1842 and 1856–1860, and the years of famine and rebellion resulting from the Great Taiping Rebellion of 1854–1864, which left tens of millions dead. Japan also suffered rebellion after Commodore Perry steamed into Edo Harbor in 1853, with samurai insurgents toppling the Tokugawa regime in 1868. Forewarned by China's disintegration, the new Meiji government vigorously asserted authority over Japan's ports and commerce, and set about to recreate itself as a modern industrial power, including a Western-style military.

It was Korea's misfortune that Japan's ambition to take its place among the Great Powers included the acquisition of colonies. In an action worthy of Commodore Perry, Japan in 1875 sent six warships and 800 men to Korea's west coast to provoke an incident. Korea's King Kojong (1852–1919, r. 1863–1907) had two years earlier assumed rule from his xenophobic and pro-Chinese uncle, who as regent had battled and lost to the Americans in isolated episodes in 1866 and 1871 (the latter lasting only fifteen minutes and ending in total defeat). Kojong, less bellicose than his uncle, signed a treaty in 1876 giving the Japanese unequal trade advantages and a presence on the peninsula.

Kojong hoped to maintain his sovereignty by playing each power vying for his country—China, Japan, the United States, and later, Russia—against the others. The Qing dynasty still held its traditional but much diminished role of protector. The king viewed the United States as a power with no territorial interests in Korea (despite the two earlier skirmishes years before),

Dr. Rosetta Hall in the operating room of the New Woman's Hospital of Extended Grace, completed in 1908.
but one that could neutralize the Japanese. He gave the United States the same trade rights as Japan in the 1882 Shufeldt Treaty. The king named Americans to important advisory posts in his government and handed them valuable franchises to develop mining, rail, and telegraph services. Aware of his country’s woeful state of hygiene and medicine, he welcomed American and Canadian missionaries who would provide modern medical services,16–17 a radically unprecedented act for a country whose xenophobia in 1866 had led to the murder of nine French Catholic missionaries and thousands of their Korean converts.18

Once established in Korea, Japan began to exert its control with increasing force. In 1885 it secretly supported a group of young Korean officers, all graduates of Japanese military schools, in an unsuccessful four-day coup d’etat. Chinese forces restored order, freeing the king, who had been taken hostage, and crushing the small band of cadets. Disarray, famine, and poverty led to a populist rebellion that gave Japan an excuse to send troops onto the Korean peninsula in 1894. The Chinese opposed the Japanese incursion and began the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), which ended months later in a complete rout of the Chinese. The Japanese control of the peninsula became complete with its victory over Russia in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War, the first modern victory of a Far Eastern country over a Western power. After orchestrating the king’s abdication in 1910, the Japanese then controlled the country until the end of World War II.13

The missionary

Rosetta Sherwood was born on her parents’ farm near the town of Liberty in upstate New York in 1865. She received her license to teach elementary school from the State Normal School in Oswego, then returned to her elementary school near her parents and taught for a year. She entered the Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1886, where she became inspired to enter missionary work.3

After graduating, she joined the Methodist Deaconess Home. Her first assignment was at a dispensary in the New York City slums, where she met William James Hall, a young Canadian physician who shared her religious zeal. They became engaged shortly after they received their assignments to Korea. They arrived separately; she in 1890, he one year later. There they were married in 1891 in ceremonies at the offices of both the British and American legations.3

The peasant

Americans William B. Scranton, a physician, and the Reverend Henry G. Appenzeller began their mission in early 1885 in a country with unrelenting poverty and filth, under a government in political disarray on the brink of rebellion. In September 1885 Scranton opened a dispensary in a converted house adjacent to the U.S. legation in Seoul. One year later he expanded the facility into a hospital of five wards, the king showing royal favor by giving it a formal name, Si Pyung Won, the “universal relief hospital.”15

Native Koreans were reluctant to accept treatment.17 Dr. Scranton, searching the city streets to find patients, found nine-year-old Kim Jeom-dong near the city wall caring for her mother who was incapacitated by typhus. He brought them to his clinic where the mother recovered. Eventually the entire family settled in the dispensary, the father working for Appenzeller and the mother for Dr. Scranton’s widowed mother Mary F. Scranton, also there as a missionary sponsored by the WFMS.9,17

The tiny infirmary became a success. In its first year it treated more than 2,000 patients, many of whom traveled miles by foot to be seen there. Treating women, however, was a problem for Dr. Scranton because they refused to be seen by a male doctor. Mrs. Scranton, writing in the WFMS journal, *Heathen Woman’s Friend*, sent an urgent request for a female physician: “The doctor continues to have calls for medicine for women whom he has not seen and whom he cannot see; and he desires to place all such cases in the hands of someone who can come in contact with the patient.”16 WFMS assigned Dr. Meta Howard to the task. In 1887 she opened Bogu Yeogwan, an infirmary for women staffed by women physicians.16

American and Canadian women missionaries with organizations like WFMS were prominent in early Korean interactions with the West. Hyaeewol Choi describes their undertaking as “a moral and spiritual obligation that would elevate the subhuman condition of heathen women”9,23 subjugated by centuries of Confucian strictures. Mrs. Scranton was convinced that advancement of the country depended on the education of girls and young women. In 1886 she opened a school for girls in Seoul, Ewha Haktang (literally, “Pear Blossom Academy”). The king bestowed the name as a sign of his favor, on the condition that the school exclude girls from the upper classes in adherence to the tradition of seclusion.9

The school today is Ewha Womans University, one of the leading private women’s schools in Asia.

Mrs. Scranton had a difficult time finding students. Her first student, a concubine of a local official, quit within three months. She had to convince the mother of her second student that her daughter would not be kidnapped and taken to America or that her blood or eyes would not be taken for medicinal use. The next candidate was Kim Jeom-dong. Her father gladly gave her up to the school, relieving himself of the burden of feeding her.1,9

At Ewha the girl had formal classes in reading, arithmetic, English, Chinese, and, of course, Bible study. She converted to Christianity in 1891 at age fourteen, and took the biblical name Esther. Mrs. Scranton, familiar with her studiousness and facility with English, recommended her as translator to Rosetta Hall, who had just arrived to relieve Dr. Howard at the Bogu Yeogwan women’s infirmary.1

Young Esther spent hours translating for the new doctor.
When she showed an aptitude for medicine, Dr. Hall tutored her and two or three other girls in physiology and materia medica. The girls began to serve as infirmary assistants, taking care of patients and putting up drugs in the dispensary. Her husband’s travel to Pyongyang, 120 miles away, left Dr. Hall and Esther alone together for weeks. The girl was of inestimable help. She compounded prescriptions and learned to administer ether. On occasion she held the ether cone with one hand and sponged the field clear with the other. At Dr. Hall’s side treating more than 6,000 cases a year, Esther became familiar with the names, appearances, and treatments of most of the diseases that they encountered. After she assisted in an operation for cleft lip, the girl resolved to be able to perform such an operation herself. Barely a teenager, a peasant orphan abandoned by her family, she resolved to become a physician.¹

**Pyongyang**

In 1893 the king gave Dr. William Hall permission to build a permanent hospital and dispensary in Pyongyang with funds already raised by the mission. Dr. Rosetta Hall planned to join her husband in Pyongyang with their newborn son, Sherwood. She asked Esther “if she would be willing to go to Pyongyang to work for Jesus.”³p112

“I will go wherever Lord open the door for me,” the girl answered. “If He open door in Pyongyang I will go.”³p205

But there was one problem: travel in the interior and acceptance by Koreans in Pyongyang required that Esther be married. At sixteen she had diminishing prospects for a husband in a society in which most girls were married by age fourteen—the only unmarried women in Korean society being those deformed, blind, deaf, diseased, or “dancing girls.”³p202 Esther had resisted suggestions that she consider matrimony, having spent all her time in the women’s infirmary where she had little contact with single men. But her father was now dead, and her mother held the traditional view that her daughter needed a husband to provide for her. Dr. Hall was afraid that Esther’s mother would engage a “go-between” marriage broker, forcing her into marriage with “a heathen.”³p202 Eventually, her resistance worn away, Esther made a single requirement: her husband must be a Christian. She reluctantly agreed to an arranged marriage to Pak Yu-San, an assistant to Dr. William Hall in his missionary work. Esther took his family name Pak.¹

The young Hall family and the Pak newlyweds boarded a steamer bound for Pyongyang in May 1894. A typhoon caught their boat and made the trip miserable. The adults were hopelessly seasick and baby Sherwood was cared for by one the ship’s crew.¹ Known as “the Sodom of Korea,”³p207 Pyongyang presented a series of dispiriting challenges. The two families spent their first night in an inn with prostitutes and thugs. In their first residence, two rooms were set aside as makeshift treatment rooms. A crowd of 1,500 assembled immediately, and the house and its courtyard became packed with patients, including many women and children.³ A soldier promised by the magistrate to help maintain order never showed up. The city had no wells, and the water carriers refused to supply the infirmary with potable water. Korean Christians who had come to help establish the...
mission were singled out, beaten and stoned, jailed and their feet pinned in stocks. They barely escaped with their lives. In late May 1894, with the modest mission in Pyongyang only a few weeks old, the Halls were recalled. Unrest in Seoul threatened the ability of the British legation to protect them. The decades-long Tonghak peasant nativist uprising reached its zenith and threatened to overrun the country. Rebels overcame royal forces southwest of Seoul. The panicked king asked the Chinese to intervene in June, but the Japanese took advantage of the unstable situation and entered the country in force.

In June the Halls and Paks caught a steamer back to Seoul. They entered an Inchon harbor filled with Japanese troop transports. The Japanese entered the city, occupied the royal Palace, and took the king hostage. By July, the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) was in full swing. Fighting took place only blocks away from the Si Pyung Won infirmary, where families, co-workers, and neighbors took refuge from the battle and stray bullets. Dr. William Hall and Dr. Scranton alternated shifts for days attending to casualties.

Dr. William Hall resumed his circuit to Pyongyang in October. He knew that the fighting shifted northward, with the decisive Battle of Pyongyang fought just a few weeks before on September 15. The Chinese, routed in Seoul, had retreated to Pyongyang, where they rebuilt fortifications and walls surrounding the city. While Chinese soldiers had some modern rifles and artillery, many carried only swords and bamboo pikes and were no match for the fully industrialized, mechanized Japanese army. The Japanese drove them from Korea.

Rotting corpses of men, horses, and cattle remained on the battlefield after the rout. The injured starved in abandoned buildings. Overworked and exhausted attending to the throngs of the injured and sick, Dr. William Hall and his colleagues fell victim to malaria and dysentery. A local official arranged for their return to Seoul on a Japanese troop transport, along with 600 Japanese infirm being sent to the rear. Upon his arrival in Seoul after a journey during which his river transport nearly capsized, he was near death from typhus. After only three years in Korea he died on November 24, 1894, under the care of his wife, who was seven months pregnant with their second child.

**Medical school**

Dr. Rosetta Hall planned to return to America after her bereavement. Esther Pak begged to go with her. The two women had often considered having Esther travel to the United States to train in medicine. This was her opportunity. Dr. Hall raised contributions to supplement the Paks’ meager savings to fund their trip. In December 1894 Dr. Rosetta Hall, her one-year-old son, his nursemaid, and the Pak couple made their way by ship and rail to the young widow’s hometown in upstate New York in time for the birth of baby Edith Margaret. Rough seas during the crossing from Korea to Japan caused all the adults to become seasick once again, with baby Sherwood this time cared for by the ship captain’s wife.

When they arrived in Dr. Hall’s hometown, Esther entered a public school to learn English; her husband found farm work outside of town. In the fall, they moved to New York City where she worked at the Nursery and Child’s Hospital by day and studied Latin, physics, and mathematics by night. In spite of the financial hardship and still-formidable language and cultural barriers, she persevered, supported by her faith and her husband’s encouragement. She entered the Women’s Medical College of Baltimore in October 1896, the first Korean woman to matriculate in a U.S. medical school.

Esther’s unswerving faith and dedication impressed her peers and the faculty. But tragedy struck in her final year in school—her husband became severely ill with tuberculosis. She cared for him at home but he died just three weeks before her mandatory graduation examinations. She took the exams in spite of her grief and passed with high marks. Now Dr. Esther Pak, she became Korea’s first native Western-trained woman physician.
The devotion and skill of Dr. Hall and Dr. Pak became legendary. Many patients regarded Dr. Pak’s surgical skill as the work of magic. The two women developed treatments for conditions specific to women, including a surgical device that addressed anovaginal fistulas. Grateful women with the condition, until then previously completely ignored, felt they came under the skill of “God’s hands.” The doctors also provided care to the blind and deaf, two groups long neglected and shunned by Korean society. Dr. Hall opened the first school for the blind in the country using funds donated through the WFMS. In 1909 a special banquet of nearly 8,000 guests honored Dr. Pak and two other women who had studied abroad.

Dr. Pak developed tuberculosis later that year. Unable to practice she continued her social and mission work. Her condition soon worsened, however, and in 1910 she died at age thirty-four.

Dr. Hall continued her work after the Japanese annexation of the country in 1910. She and two others in 1928 founded a medical school for women, the Woman’s Medical Training Institute, which evolved into today’s Korea University College of Medicine. That year she laid the cornerstone for Korea’s first tuberculosis sanatorium, founded by her son Dr. Sherwood Hall. In 1933 a chapel named in her honor was built on the sanatorium grounds. On the occasion of its dedication...
the former editor of the Seoul Press wrote, “However beautiful that chapel may be, it does not . . . symbolize one-hundredth part of the great merit of her service.”

She retired as a missionary and returned to the United States in 1933. During and after World War II, conditions in Korea became intolerable to the foreigners still living there, leading to an exodus of missionaries from the country, including her son, that bewildered her. She died in 1951, living to see the start of the Korean War, the fourth involving the country during her lifetime.

The lives of Dr. Rosetta Hall and Dr. Esther Pak spanned Korea’s tumultuous transformation from “the hermit kingdom” to an international tinderbox. Two women motivated and inspired by Christianity and a truly extraordinary set of happenstances helped to bring about unfathomable change in Korea. Today the stories of Rosetta Hall and Esther Pak and the institutions with which they were associated are part of the legacy that continues to educate, train, and inspire generations of Koreans.

References


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