

## Impact Statement

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***Wept Together, Lived Together and Died Together***, 2021.

Sumi ink on traditional Korean paper, 22 x 31 Inches.

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Unsung Hero: Elizabeth Shepping

While researching for the National History Day project, I came across Elizabeth Shepping, also known as Seo-pyeong Seo, a lesser-known female nurse that Southern Presbyterian Church in the US commissioned to Chosun--a Korean dynastic kingdom. Arrived in Korea in February 1912, what this 32-year-old lay nurse saw was devastation because it was soon after Imperialist Japan had assassinated the Empress Myeongsong and occupied the country by force. Amidst this social turmoil, Shepping exhibited exceptional altruism as she consumed every drop of her energy for the Korean people whose rights were utterly stripped.

Shepping was a German American and an intelligent woman educated at the Columbia University. Her biological mother abandoned her at the age of three and left little Shepping with her grandmother. When her grandmother passed away just after Shepping entered elementary school, she immigrated to America to reunite with her biological mother. But Shepping's conversion to Christianity infuriated her mother, so Shepping was disowned by her mother once again for this religious difference. Having heard the news that many Korean people were dying of epidemics, she dedicated her life to people she knew little about. Though she was deserted by her biological mother twice, she became a mother to thousands of motherless children and a friend to the sick and the homeless.

Unlike other foreign missionaries, who carried the ideals of social Darwinism, a.k.a. the white man's burden, she never flaunted her American privilege, not to mention the ethnic superiority prevalent during the era. Instead, she humbly identified herself with the people of Chosun, dressed like the people she loved, and ate the local food that most westerners found disgusting.

After working in hospitals (Chejungwon in Gwangju, Guam Hospital in Gunsan, and Severance Medical Center in Seoul), she felt compelled to reach out to patients whose access to medical help was limited to their geographical and social boundaries. So every year, she traveled across the country on foot--public transportation was virtually non-existent--to provide medical help for disadvantaged people in the outback.

During her journey, she encountered hundreds of women who were abused and mistreated. After a journey, she said, "I've met more than 500 women over the last trip, and only about 10 of them had names. The rest were called by strange aliases like 'a piggy woman, a dogshit mother, a big woman, and a tiny woman.'"

Of course, her altruistic work was not limited to a single gender, but Korean women's sufferings were greater than that of men on account of stifling Confucianist social norms. So, she founded a school dedicated to education for women--the Neel Bible School. Throughout her selfless life,

she saved thousands of women who were sold to prostitution by paying for their debts, took care of widows, and women that her ex-husband deserted.

Risking her safety, Shepping secretly aided Korea's independence from Imperialist Japan. Unfortunately, she died less than a year before the country saw liberation from tyranny. The day she died in a tiny Korean shed; a wailing cry reverberated across the Yangniam homeless camp. Because she would lavishly give out her food, clothes, and other essentials, the only thing found in her house after her death was a pair of ragged Jeogori, an upper garment of Hanbok.

To honor her legacy, I blended the Korean folk painting Minhwa technique, which low borns had used during the Chosun dynasty. The black and white cotton Hanbok that Shepping wears in the painting represents her determination to acclimatize and embrace the foreign culture, much like incarnation in the Bible. Though it may not be readily recognizable, I painted this work on hanji, the traditional Korean paper handmade from mulberry trees. Besides, I used Sumi ink used in Korean folk paintings to display her non-possessive lifestyle. I sought to illuminate Shepping's love for the people in the lowest social hierarchy through this particular medium. Shepping's images are painted with murky colors to show her travail. The rest is painted with bright colors to demonstrate how she vivified the country and the underprivileged people.

Shepping's life is the perfect representation of genuine compassion and humanitarianism. Rather than patching up her patients' wounds and sickness, she let them know that they are precious just as they are. So I shared Shepping's story within our school community. I am currently working to finalize a history article to reach a broader audience to make her legacy known.

If one were to contemptuously ask, "what could one woman do to make a difference?" I could say with clarity, "look at Shepping and the country she helped rebuild." One woman could do innumerable things, making a giant ripple across society and beyond.