

CHARLES DEVOL: MISSIONARY PROFESSOR

by

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The late Dr. Charles DeVol was my school mate and best friend, although we did not meet during our years at Indiana University. His life was devoted to serving the Chinese, not only as a Quaker missionary to China but as a professor of botany at the National Taiwan University.

Charles was the eldest of three children born to medical missionary parents in Liou-He, China. His parents died when he was still young, and he and his brother and sister returned to the United States, where an elderly couple in their church in Marion, Ohio adopted them. Charles completed his high school and college education in the U.S. and returned to China to teach high school in the place where he was born.

During World War II, he was arrested by the Japanese and put in a concentration camp in Shanghai. After the war ended, he returned to the United States to enter graduate school at Indiana University, where he earned his Ph.D. in botany. He married and had two daughters, both of whom became nurses. Charles taught for several years at a Christian college in Ohio before coming to Taiwan, where our paths eventually crossed.

One day in 1958, I received a letter from one of my professors at Indiana University—Dr. Weatherwax—indicating that he had a former graduate student named Charles DeVol who was coming to Taiwan as a Christian missionary. Unfortunately, Dr. Weatherwax did not tell me how I could get hold of Charles. Luckily though, not too long after I received the letter, Charles himself came to the University to look at our plant specimens and I had a chance to talk to him; that was the first time we met in the Herbarium.

At the time, I was head of the botany department at National Taiwan University. Our department had plenty of graduate students but we were short of teaching faculty. Thus I tried to persuade Charles to teach a course for us. He told me that he gave up teaching to come to Taiwan as a full time Christian missionary, trying to establish a church at Jia-Yi. We had a long talk. I explained that because he held a doctorate in botany, we desperately needed him to teach, and giving up all of his scientific knowledge would be a great loss. I did not think God would like that. Furthermore, National Taiwan University was the most prestigious university in Taiwan, and its professors were respected by everyone. If he taught at the university, it could further his missionary work. I did not press him to make a decision but asked him to keep this in mind. The

next time he visited me, he indicated that he would bring the matter up with his church. At last, he accepted my offer, but insisted that he would live in Jia-Yi because his main job was in Jia-Yi. But he came to Taipei once every two weeks to teach pteridophytes to the graduate students.

The next year, I suggested he establish a church in Taipei because Taipei was the capitol city and had the largest population; it was an ideal place for missionary work. So Charles, church bought property in Chin-Mai and built a church there. After Charles moved to Taipei, I asked him to teach more courses. Eventually he became a full time professor in the botany department, donating his salary to form a scholarship for needy students and to buy books for the department.

Although I had originally invited Charles to join our faculty because of his scientific background and teaching credentials, as he and I became closer friends, I realized what a treasure I inadvertently had found. Charles will long be remembered not only as a devoted Christian missionary but as a dedicated professor serving the Chinese people.

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