

# Gladys Aylward



## "I Wasn't First Choice For What I've Done In China"

Gladys Aylward was born short in size and short in worldly status but what was lacking in height and social standing she made up for in determination and spirit.

Born in London, in 1902, to a working-class family Gladys became a wealthy family's parlor maid at the age of 14. She trudged through this life of routine until one day after attending a church service a stranger confronted her with the message of salvation.

Gladys, newly reconciled with God, began attending Young Life services and reading about the far-away land of China from books in the vast library of her employer. This birthed an unstoppable desire to go to China herself. Gladys applied with CIM as a candidate for China. After reviewing her advanced age and test results it was determined that she was too old and unfit to learn the difficult Chinese language. At the age of 28, Gladys dreams were momentarily crushed; she decided if she couldn't go with CIM she would go on her own. Every month, Gladys would save all the money she could from the small paycheck she received to buy a one-way train ticket to China.

On Oct. 15, 1932, Gladys left Liverpool Street Station by train to travel across Russia and eventually into Northern China. She carried two suitcases, a bedroll and wore a bright orange jacket. At one point on her journey she was asked to get off the train as it was being used to carry only Russian soldiers. She insisted on staying and was dropped off later in the middle of nowhere to eventually retrace her steps on foot and take another train through Siberia. After a brief journey to Japan to confirm with the British counsel, Gladys finally set foot in her beloved China.

Gladys begin her missionary career in Yangcheng working with veteran missionary Jeannie Lawson. She helped operate an inn for mule drivers where she learned Chinese from daily interaction with these travelers. After Jeannie's death, Gladys was unable to financially sustain the Inn. The local officials approached her and asked if she would be willing to be a "foot inspector." The tradition of binding Chinese women's feet had recently been outlawed, but due to cultural perceptions of beauty it was still being practiced in many places. Gladys began traveling around inspecting the bones in women's feet. As she traveled she would tell stories from the Bible and many looked forward to the days they could hear these strange new stories.

The people's esteem and respect for Gladys also continued to grow throughout the region. What was even more remarkable was the ability she had to take on Chinese culture and language. By 1937, when the Japanese begin bombing nearby mountain villages, Gladys had so identified herself with the Chinese people that she refused to leave even as artillery shells begin to fall. She even became a spy for the Chinese army using her foreign appearance to travel across battle lines and also bring food to trapped villagers. She was so effective that the Japanese even put a price on her head.

During this time Gladys also adopted war orphans and eventually had over 100 children in her care. In 1940, the war had escalated and she was forced to leave Northern China and head south to Sian through the thickening battle, over mountains and across the Yellow River. When Gladys climbed over the mountains to Sian, she had

100 children with her, that she was taking to a refugee area. The journey took 12 days and they left with inadequate clothing or food supplies – but God looked after Gladys and the children throughout the entire journey. This experience left her mentally and emotionally drained. After recovery in 1943 she moved to Chengdu to begin work in a local Church as a Bible woman. This work was usually reserved for only Chinese women and involved travel, evangelism and Bible teaching. Gladys had taken on so much of the Chinese culture that it was unquestioned whether she would fit in the role.

After 20 years in China, Gladys returned to England in 1940. She was embarrassed to find that she quickly became a celebrity. A book, movie and TV documentary were all made about her life. To many, Gladys became known by many as "The Small Women," the title of her biography. She continued to travel and speak about her beloved China, returning to Taiwan in 1957.

Humble in spirit, Gladys once made this comment to a friend, "I wasn't God's first choice for what I've done for China. There was somebody else. I don't know who it was --- God's first choice. It must have been a man --- a wonderful man, a well-educated man. I don't know what happened. Perhaps he died. Perhaps he wasn't willing. And God looked down and saw Gladys Aylward."