Communist China nominated an American Rotarian for the 1988 Nobel Peace Prize

By Herbert K. Lau (劉敬恒) (Rotary China Historian)

11 July 2017



Dr. Jordan M. Phillips, M.D.

The title of this article sounds somewhat fantastic. But, it is a true story in history.

Since the late 1970s, Dr. Jordan M. Phillips, M.D., a member of the Rotary Club of Downey, California, U.S.A., had been sending medical books to the People's Republic of China (中華人民共和國), for almost a decade, to replenish those burned and destroyed by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution (無產階級文化大革命). To acknowledge Dr. Phillips' work, the Chinese Ministry of Public Health nominated him for the 1988 Nobel Peace Prize, a rare honor for a private citizen of any country.

Medical Books for China

It all started in January 1979. Dr. Phillips, a specialist in gynecological laparoscopics (婦科腹腔鏡), was lecturing in the Republic of Korea when he heard the news that China had just "normalized" relations with the United States. That was the years when China's top leader Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) repudiated the Cultural Revolution and, in 1977, launched the "Beijing Spring" (北京之春), which allowed open criticism of the excesses and suffering that had occurred during the period. "Why not be one of the first Americans to visit China?" Dr. Phillips asked himself, then proceeded to do just that.

When he arrived on the Chinese Mainland, he told the officials who greeted him that he still had all his lecture notes and slides with him. When he reached the next city on his tour, 30 physicians were waiting to meet him. Before the first trip was over, Dr. Phillips had performed the first laparostomy (剖腹術) ever in China. His method and equipment were the talk of the Chinese medical world. Dr. Phillips was among the first U.S. physicians to visit China. He later taught modern advance in gynecology and laparoscopistry to Chinese physicians in over 70 cities.

Laparoscopistry is the insertion of a tiny tube through which a doctor sees. It often takes the place of long and complicated exploratory operations. Dr. Phillips pioneered the technique in the field of gynecology. Although laparoscopistry has been applied to many fields of medicine, the technique was unknown to the Chinese.

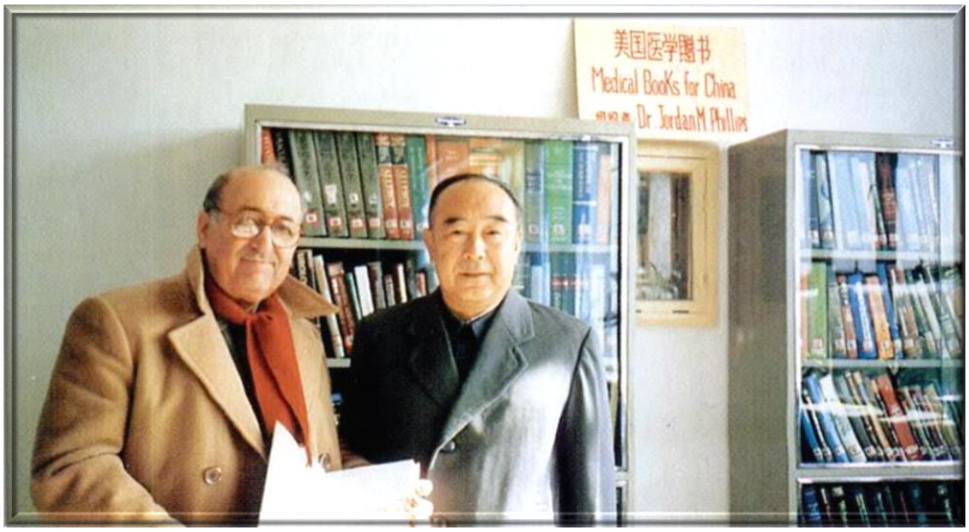
Like the wandering scholars who carried their wisdom to the Orient, Dr. Phillips found himself the bearer of great knowledge to a new land.

He quickly learned how much damage the Cultural Revolution had caused. "I'd ask to see the library of the medical school I was visiting, only to be told that it had been burned down." He said. It got him thinking.

Soon, Dr. Phillips was sending medical books by the thousand kilos to China. In 1981, he founded the non-profit corporation called "Medical Books for China", and sent a letter to 1,200 United States medical libraries, asking them to contribute any books they could spare. In 1988, Dr. Phillips---with the help of many friends and the Downey Rotary Club---had shipped more than 1.2 million books to China. He had also collected and sent hundreds of journals, video and audio tapes, and pathology slides, enough to stock 10-20 libraries

Not content to act as a mere "postman", he and his wife Mary made 35 trips to China to oversee the vast project he began in 1979. He had also organized an international medical team to travel and teach at hospitals and medical schools throughout China.

While Dr. Phillips was an official nominee put forward by a qualified entity, the 1988 Nobel Peace Prize was ultimately awarded to the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces. Although he did not become the Novel Peace Prize laureate, Dr. Phillips continued his pursuit of international understanding. He was a true Rotarian who exemplified the Rotary ideal of Vocational Service. And he is still a hero of China.



Dr. Jordan M. Phillips (left) presented medical textbooks to President Wu Xianzhong, Tianjin Medical College (天津醫學院吳咸中院長)

Doctor championed use of laparoscopy

Dr. Jordan M. Phillips, a doctor of obstetrics and gynecology who championed the use of laparoscopy for gynecological diagnosis and surgery when it was still a new procedure in the United States, died in 2008 at the age of 85 due to the cause of cancer.

Jordan became interested in laparoscopy in the 1960s when the surgical procedure was being developed by several doctors in Europe. Minimally invasive, it allows a tiny camera to see inside the abdomen through a small incision.

Inspired by the possible applications for gynecology, Jordan founded the American Association of Gynecologic Laparoscoptics in 1971, to teach the fundamentals of the procedure to practicing doctors. He invited three other gynecologists to join him as founding members.



Dr. Jordan Phillips examines a book from one of the hundreds of cartons donated to his medical library project.

Tianjin Medical College (天津醫學院)

China's government paid for the shipping and distribution of the materials donated by Dr. Phillips. One of the beneficiary institutions was Tianjin Medical College (the forerunner of Tianjin Medical University 天津醫科大學) which was established in 1951. It was the first medical institution approved by the State Council after the founding of The People's Republic of China. In 1993 Tianjin Medical College and Tianjin No. 2 Medical College were merged to form Tianjin Medical University, one of the national "211 Project" key universities in China (中國「211 工程」重點建設大學).

Los Angeles Times

Downey doctor has shipped more than a million medical books to China

By Richard Holguin / 11 February 1988

Dr. Jordan M. Phillips moved through the stacks and boxes of books in his small warehouse--"Inhalation Therapy," "Spores VI," "Vertebrate Physiology" and "Medical Virology."

They "come by mail from all over the country," the retired gynecologist said. "Local people also deliver the books here."

The piles of medical books and journals eventually will find their way from the Florence Avenue warehouse in Santa Fe Springs to the City of Tianjin on the eastern coast of the People's Republic of China. Some of the books are new, recently published with the latest information. Others are used and more than a decade old but still valuable references, Phillips said.

Phillips, 64, runs a CARE-package operation, of sorts, for Chinese doctors, medical students and researchers. He figures he has sent more than 1 million free medical texts, journals and audio and videotapes to China since 1981, when he founded the nonprofit Medical Books for China with his wife, Mary.

Now Phillips is expanding his operation by establishing collection points for Asian and European medical books in Tokyo and Antwerp, Belgium.

Soon books such as the "Pathology Annual" and "Progress in Cardiology" in French, German and Japanese will be shipped to China in addition to English texts, Phillips said in a recent interview.

Because of the centuries of foreign occupation and presence in China, many doctors and medical students read English and the other languages. Phillips said he and his wife speak a little Chinese.

"The ultimate winner in this sequence is the Chinese patient. By sending them the latest technology, they're getting better treatment," said Phillips, sitting in an office decorated with Chinese art and furniture. "I think it's the most significant thing I've done in my life."

Phillips' efforts have drawn scores of thank-you notes.

"Respectable Mr. Phillips," wrote Xu Guo-guanf, director of the Ji-ling Provincial Hospital. "We are so glad to receive those precious medical books on surgery. . . . "

"You're so kind and thank you very much," wrote Zhe Wo Xin, head of the Taishan People's Hospital. "Those books will help us in medical works."

Officials at the Tianjin Medical College, which receives and helps distribute the books, were so thankful they suggested that Phillips be nominated for this year's Nobel Peace Prize.

Phillips is careful to stress that even though China needs the medical books, the country is well versed in sophisticated medical techniques from the West and from traditional Chinese medicine, which includes the use of acupuncture and herbs.

"In microsurgery they're very advanced," Phillips said. "They're No. 1 in the world."

During a visit to China in 1979, Phillips discovered that books of all types---Chinese and Western---were destroyed during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution launched in 1966 under Mao Tse-tung.

"Every hospital I'd visit, I'd say 'Now let me see your library,' " Phillips said. "I'd soon find all the libraries were destroyed."

The retired doctor said he was moved to send out letters to almost every medical library in the United States---about 1,200---requesting donations. The response eventually forced Phillips to relocate his operation from his Downey office to the larger Santa Fe Springs warehouse in 1984.

"We started a flood. Next thing you know, we had books in the hall. . . . We were bulging at the seams," Phillips said.

He practiced in Downey for nearly 30 years before retiring in 1975. Phillips, who is the founder and chairman of the board of the American Assn. of Gynecologic Laparoscopists, still lives in Downey. (Laparoscopy is a surgical procedure.)

Medical Books for China runs on an annual budget of $50,000 to $80,000, most of which comes out of Phillips' pocket, he said. He also receives some cash donations.

On a recent day, a worker packed volumes into boxes that would be piled onto pallets for transport to Long Beach Harbor. Once there, they will be put in a 20-ton container and loaded onto a Chinese freighter bound for Tianjin, about 80 miles southeast of Beijing.

From Tianjin, the Chinese Ministry of Health distributes the books by rail to medical schools throughout the country.

Since the first shipment in 1982, Phillips estimates he has sent China 260 tons of books, or about 1 million volumes.

At first, Phillips would send every medical book he received. Now, the Chinese want books published in 1975 or later, and medical journals published since 1980, he said.

"Originally we asked for all books since there was an absolute void," Phillips said.

In 1987, one of the largest donors was the Chicago-based American College of Surgeons, Phillips said. The ACS donated 2,500 six-book sets on surgical care, diagnosis and treatment. Each set is worth about $300, he said.

In addition, Phillips recently began sending books on ancillary fields, such as dentistry and veterinary.

Phillips said Tianjin officials went so far as to build a separate facility on the medical college campus in 1986 to receive and distribute the thousands of books he has sent their way.

"They call them 'mountains of books,' " Phillips said with pride.

Rotary Service Above Self

