

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

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, 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 laparoscopies (婦科腹腔鏡), was lecturing in South 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 video and audio tapes, and pathology slides.

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.

Although he did not become the Nobel Peace Prize laureate---that honor went to the United Nations Peace-keeping Forces---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.

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

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).

APPENDIX

Medical Books for China International

OBGYN.net Conference Coverage from American Association of Gynecological Laparoscopists, Atlanta, Georgia, November, 1998

Roberta Speyer:

“This is Roberta Speyer reporting for OBGYN.net, and I’m talking to Dr. Jordan Phillips and his wife Mary Zoe. I think, Dr. Phillips, you’re best known for being the founder of the American Association of Gynecological Laparoscopists but that’s not what we’re here to talk about today. We’re here to talk about something else that’s very exciting that you and your wife have been involved in, and I think the OBGYN.net readers and listeners would like to hear more about it and hear how they could perhaps participate and get involved. We have 30,000 visits a month as of this time from obstetrical and gynecological medical professionals around the world to the site, and your project, Medical Books for China International - could you tell us a little bit about this and maybe how our OBGYN.netters could get involved?”

Mary Zo Phillips:

“Medical Books for China International was founded in 1981 when we visited China and discovered their libraries were empty. They had a period called the ‘Cultural Revolution’ where everything was destroyed and this is from artifacts to books, everything. So we put a call to the Medical Library Association and said - please send us the mail listing of your libraries. My husband wrote a letter asking for any of their excess books. We were inundated; we got books and more books until finally we had to purchase a warehouse. Then we spoke with the Ministry of Health in China and brought suitcases full of books and said – this is what we have, we have a mountain of knowledge, and if you would like this information and knowledge we will ship them to you.”

Roberta Speyer: “How did they respond to that?”

Mary Zo Phillips:

“They were very positive, they knew what the need was in all of their medical institutions and hospitals. So we started shipping twenty tons at a time, and we have now completed our fifty-third shipment.”

Roberta Speyer:

“That sounds wonderful. This is not just restricted to books concerning women’s health?”

Mary Zo Phillips:

“No, it isn’t. It’s concerning everything whether it’s dental, nursing, animal laboratory science, research and biomedicine, pharmaceuticals, and of course, all the allied professions.”

Roberta Speyer: “So this is really recycling the paper but recycling the knowledge too.”

Mary Zo Phillips:

“Correct, we give the information, it’s an exchange of knowledge and then the doctors, the researchers, and the professors can extract what they need from the literature.”

Roberta Speyer: “Now the people who make these donations, you are 501C?”

Mary Zo Phillips: “501C3 non-profit.”

Roberta Speyer:

“Am I correct in assuming this is not just women’s health issues that these books are about?”

Mary Zo Phillips:

“No, it’s every discipline, pharmaceutical, animal laboratory science, veterinary medicine, dentistry, psychology, anything that the doctors need.”

Roberta Speyer: “And you’ve sent a lot of books?”

Mary Zo Phillips:

“We have sent many, many books, millions of books - 53 twenty-ton containers full.”

Roberta Speyer: “Have you sent all you need to send?”

Mary Zo Phillips:

“Never, it’s a bottomless well. If you have one-quarter of the population of the world and they have doctors who are eager to learn the new technology because they were limited for so long - they’re hungry. They’ve gone from seeing so many carts and bicycles and now they have automobiles, and they even have the problem of traffic jams.”

Roberta Speyer: “We all know about that.”

Mary Zo Phillips: “Correct.”

Roberta Speyer:

“For the OBGYN.net physicians and medical professionals, how can they get involved; how can they participate? Is this tax deductible? How do they make contact with you? Tell us a little bit more, if they have some books or journals, the types of things you’re looking for and how they would get them to you.”

Mary Zo Phillips:

“We have a limit of no older than ten years. We send them journals, we accept books, audio tapes, video tapes, CD-ROM’s - new technology. All of this material goes to the medical libraries not to individuals because we want every student, professor, and researcher to be able to have the knowledge at their fingertips.”

Roberta Speyer:

“Do you accept donations from industry of different types of tapes and learning aids?”

Mary Zo Phillips:

“Yes, because there’s demonstrations on the video tapes so they can see different techniques, just as a doctor would have his own video tapes showing his techniques and the same way with the audio tapes. Audio tapes have two different ways of being used, not only for the knowledge that’s in the tape but also for the language. So they learn English because about 70% of their classes are instructed in English.”

Roberta Speyer: “So there’s really a shift going on in that culture at this time.”

Mary Zo Phillips: “Correct.”

Roberta Speyer:

“Now does it make a difference about the videos whether or not they’re PAL or different types of formats, is that something people should consider?”

Mary Zo Phillips:

“PAL is their system but we send all of the video tapes to the Academy of Medical Science where they have the facility of converting the tapes.”

Roberta Speyer: “Wonderful.”

Mary Zo Phillips:

“When they find something that is quite pertinent and quite up-to-date, then they will make multiple copies and dub in the Chinese.”

Roberta Speyer:

“Wonderful, if you have books or tapes and you would like to contact the Medical Books for China International organization, you can reach them at their 800 number 1-800-554-2245 or you can check out their website at www.aagl.com/mbcifrm.htm, and you can find out more about how you can participate in this very worthy cause. Thank you, doctor and thank you, Mary.”

Mary Zo Phillips: “You’re welcome.”

