

DR. MICHAEL E. DEBAKEY WAS A LOYAL FRIEND OF CHINA

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Although U.S. President Richard Nixon was widely known as the first VIP from the United States to set foot on the Chinese mainland after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, much less well known was the fact that the world renowned cardiologist Paul D. White's visit preceded Nixon's by 5 months.¹ White's China visit actually could have taken place much earlier. In 1962 at the VIII International Cancer Congress in Moscow, White was invited to visit China by the president of the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences, but the invitation was cancelled owing to the "reactionary attitude of the U.S. government toward new China."² But White was not daunted by this rejection; from 1962 on, he sought advice and efforts involving many of his contacts and friends including me.³ His long sought journey to China finally came in the autumn of 1971.

Similarly, Michael E. DeBakey's visit to China was also delayed 10 years.¹ According to Y. K. Wu, the president of Fu Wai Hospital in Beijing, the largest cardiovascular institute in China, "We almost had him here ten years ago but something came up. We have a great deal of respect for him."⁴ DeBakey, as one of the very first visitors to China from the United States, was finally invited by the Chinese Medical Association and the Ministry of Health to visit China in February/March 1973 (Figure 1).

In his *A Surgeon's Diary of a Visit to China*⁴, DeBakey recounted how his visit finally came about. "This was a long-awaited opportunity to visit China. I had previously received two official invitations along with visas to visit China, the first being in 1961, during a visit in India as Visiting Professor at King Edwards Hospital in Bombay, and the other, the next year. At that time,

however, the policy of our State Department would not allow me to accept the invitation, despite my efforts to persuade them to let me make the trip. It was, therefore, with eager anticipation that I accepted this invitation.⁴

"My visit to China, albeit brief, was truly one of the most memorable and exciting experiences I have ever had in my extensive travels to foreign lands around the world. The organization of the Chinese health care system, the way in which it was implemented within a short time despite the shattering social upheaval that occurred during the Cultural Revolution, and the extraordinary results they have achieved with limited resources are indeed a magnificent tribute to the dedication of the Chinese medical leaders and to the altruism and industry of the health workers. It is an inspiration to see the devotion and compassion with which all levels of medical personnel attend to the health needs of the masses. To what extent this is the result of the deification of Chairman Mao and the dissemination of his idealistic "thoughts" in order to instill in the people a feeling of self-reliance and inspire them to serve the masses, and to what extent this can be attributed to the disciplined sense of national purpose that has apparently been engendered in the populace is difficult to assess.

"I was deeply impressed with the warmth, friendliness, and forthrightness of all the people whom I met. Everywhere we went we were accorded a genuinely cordial and hospitable reception. The people were honest in their explanations to us about what they were trying to do and the progress they had made, as well as the problems they have yet to solve. Their great desire to improve the welfare of all people was reflected by their frequent requests that



Figure 1. DeBakey on the frontsteps of the Fu Wai Hospital and Cardiovascular Institute, Beijing, China in 1973. Next to him was Dr. George Hatem, another Lebanese-American like DeBakey, who was responsible for China's remarkable success in eradicating syphilis soon after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Next to Hatem was Y.K. Wu, president of Fu Wai Hospital, who kindly provided me with the photograph.

we make constructive criticisms and suggest means of improving their methods and procedures.

"The Chinese are a fascinating study in quiet dignity, obedience, self-discipline, and purposive self-confidence. They go about their duties with a fanatic fervor and apparent genuine pleasure. Their morals are puritanical. Not only do they manifest no overt interest in sex, but they are shocked when the word is mentioned. We were told that there is little if any premarital or extramarital sex. The women have nice figures and pretty hair, but they exhibit little or no interest in fashions. Rather, like the men most of them wear the inexpensive, drab, loose blouses and trousers, and they either braid their hair or wear it in a simple short bob. In this connection, I could not help recalling my observations in Russia during my periodic visits during the past 15 years. In contrast with my earlier visits when I observed a similar lack of interest in fashion among the women, in recent years they have shown an increasing interest in fashion, wearing more attractive dresses, shoes, and make-up. Hair dressing establishments for women have become common, and even mini-skirts are worn by young girls. I could not help wondering if this same change in women's fashionability would not also ultimately take place in China.*

"Basically an agrarian people, the Chinese are extremely industrious, the men and women working side by side in the fields and factories, toward a common purpose — to build a better country for themselves. You do not see beggars on the streets, and no one will accept a tip. They live simple, Spartan lives. The homes we visited contained only the bare essentials, but they were immaculate. There are no privately owned automobiles.** On the streets one sees mostly buses, trucks, and horse-drawn carts. But during the early morning and late afternoon hours the streets are crowded with bicycles. In Peking we were told that there are 2 million bicycles. They are not only used for individual locomotion but also for a variety of transport including, with certain modifications, carrying children and members of the family, as small trucks carrying huge loads of sacks of grain, pigs, fresh cut grass, and tree branches, and sometimes carrying trailers loaded with a wide variety of material.

"The people in general appeared healthy, happy, well fed, and satisfied. Their basic economic security probably accounts for their cheerfulness and willingness to become involved in whatever they are asked to do...

"I was particularly proud to hear of the highly favorable impression that President and Mrs. Richard Nixon had made on them during their unprecedented trip to China in 1972. Unquestionably, this truly historic event initiated the new climate of warm friendship with America that we encountered, and their sincere desire to improve and strengthen our interchange. My observations augur well for President Nixon's hope that a new era has been inaugurated for a 'generation of peace and constructive development for mankind.'

"As my plane lifted its wings to take off from the Peking Airport, I could not help thinking that probably in no other country in the world would a large delegation of physicians come to the airport late at night to meet a plane, bid a friend farewell, and wish him a safe journey home. This parting gesture of genuine friendliness tells more about the character of these remarkable people than any verbal description I can give."⁴

DeBakey was truly a great man.⁵ Despite hundreds and thousands of articles, book chapters and books he had written, he paid meticulous attention to details. I would never forget the superb chapter on "Diseases of the Aorta and Its Branches"⁶ which he contributed to my book *The International Textbook of Cardiology*.⁷ He proofed the galleys personally, and made corrections in his own handwriting. When I suggested a better print be made for one of

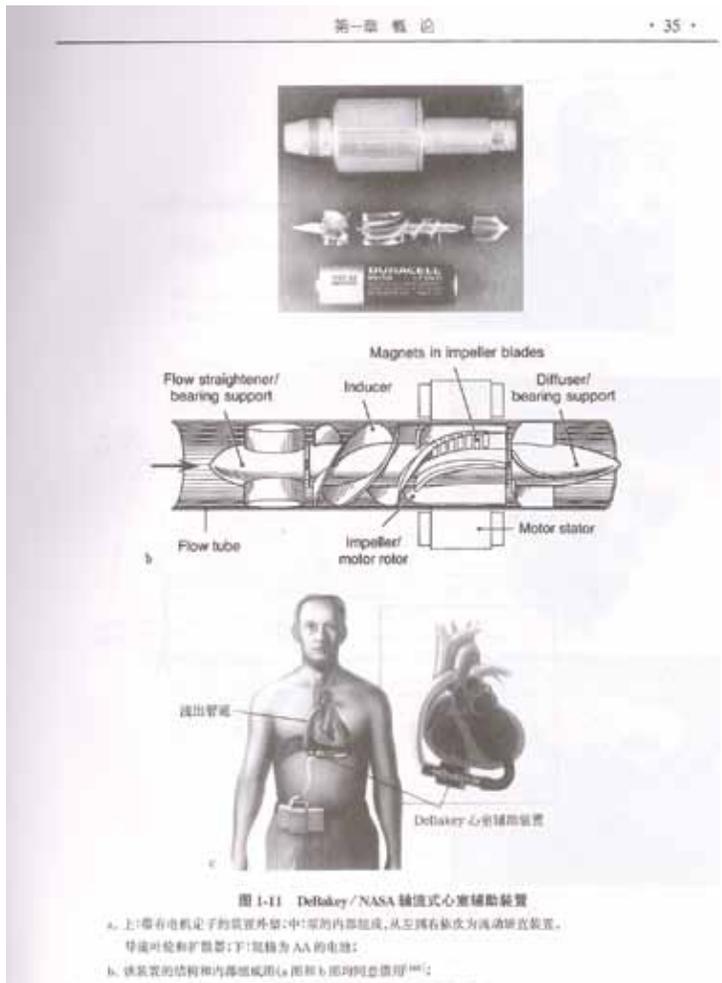


Figure 2. DeBakey/NASA Axial Flow Ventricular Assist Device as illustrated in my book, in Chinese, entitled *Congestive Heart Failure*.

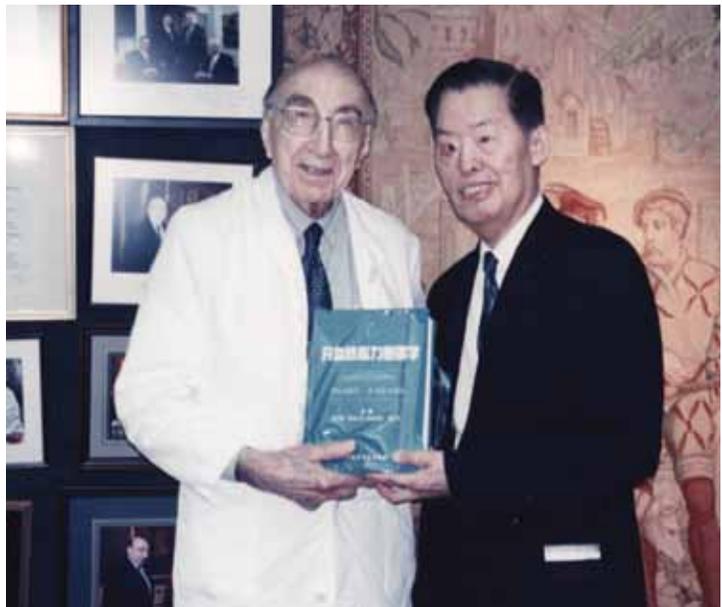


Figure 3. DeBakey being presented a copy of my book *Congestive Heart Failure* at his Houston office in 2003.

*DeBakey's prediction was correct, because nowadays with abandonment of the Mao suit and refeminization of Chinese women in sartorial terms, they are just fashion-conscious as women in the Western world.

**China has now surpassed the United States as the world's largest market for automobiles, most of which are privately owned.



Figure 4. DeBakey welcomed the first Chinese Cardiolgist Delegation to the United States during its visit in Houston. Note DeBakey still in his operating room scrub suit underneath his white coat. (Many will recognize Drs. Miguel Quinones at the left margin, William Winters to his left, Antonio Gotto behind DeBakey's left shoulder and Mr. Ted Bowen, CEO of TMH to his left.)

the illustrations in his chapter, he promptly dispatched one to me within 72 hours by express mail. He also generously contributed several illustrations of his new small LVAD, the DeBakey/NASA Axial Flow Ventricular Assist Device (Figure 2), to my new edition of the textbook on congestive heart failure that was published in 2003.⁸ He was pleased to receive a copy of my book, containing these illustrations, which I presented to him in person the same year. He insisted that we had a photograph taken together along with the book to show how he cherished deeply his friendship with his medical and surgical colleagues in China (Figure 3). More recently, after reading my article on the current state of cardiology in China,⁹ he wrote to me in 2005 to say that he was greatly impressed by how advanced cardiology in China had become since his 1973 visit.

The First Cardiolgist Delegation from China to visit the United States took place in November 1978.¹ The delegation visited six cities across the United States. In Houston, the delegation was met by DeBakey. Despite his very busy operating schedule, DeBakey took time off in between cases to greet the Chinese cardiologists. He graciously had a photograph taken together with the Chinese cardiologists, even though he was still wearing the operating room scrub suit underneath his white coat (Figure 4).

In 2007, despite his numerous writing commitments at the age of 98, he graciously accepted my invitation to write a foreword for the book "Cardiothoracic Surgery in China: Past, Present and Future" (Figure 5). The book, edited by my surgical colleagues at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, is the first ever published in the English language to provide



Figure 5. DeBakey's Foreword in the book *Cardiothoracic Surgery in China: Past, Present and Future* published in 2007.

a comprehensive review of the history of cardiothoracic surgery in China. It highlighted the remarkable surgical heritage of which the younger generation of Chinese surgeons should be proud. DeBakey in the concluding sentence of his touching foreword praised the editors and contributors “for their efforts to demonstrate that no borders exist in medicine”¹⁰.

His deep-seated fondness of China and things Chinese was further reflected in many of his correspondences I received from him over the years; he loved Chinese wall calendars. In May 2007, he wrote to me and asked me to read his greetings to the attendees at the annual meeting of the Asian Society for Cardiovascular Surgery that was held in Beijing. Of note was his last statement that he hoped to see all of the attendees again sometime soon.

Unfortunately DeBakey passed away on July 11, 2008 — 58 days shy of his 100th birthday. On that day, the world lost a superb cardiovascular surgeon, lifelong innovator, pioneering scientist, focused researcher, devoted medical educator, and seasoned international medical statesman. But the loss was even greater for China, of which DeBakey was truly a dear, longlasting and loyal friend.

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