In Memoriam

Tao Shou-chi

Michael F. O’Rourke, MD, DSc

Physicians, especially cardiologists and epidemiologists, the world over, were saddened to hear of the death on March 20, 2000, of Tao Shou-chi in Beijing. The formal notification from Professor R Gao, President of the Cardiovascular Institute, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences, read as follows:

We are informing you with great sadness that Dr. Tao Shou-chi, MD, Professor of Medicine, Honorary and Former President, Cardiovascular Institute and Fu Wai Hospital, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences passed away at 4:53 am on the Monday, March 20, 2000. Professor Tao’s funeral will be held on April 5, 2000 in Beijing Ba Bao Shan Cemetery.

Professor Tao was not only one of the best cardiologists but also one of the founders of the modern cardiovascular medicine in China. He contributed his whole life to our people’s health and saved innumerable lives with his remarkable medical services. He played a critical role in foundation and development of the cardiology and preventive cardiology in China, not only at the time he served as the chairman of the Chinese Society of Cardiology and the president of the Cardiovascular Institute and Fu Wai Hospital, but also through his whole career. He had been also actively involved in many international efforts for control and prevention of cardiovascular diseases, and promoted the scientific exchange as well as friendship between China and other countries. During his life, he had been elected as the Director of the WHO Collaborating Center for Training and Research in Cardiovascular Diseases, the Consultant for the WHO Advisory Panel on Cardiovascular Diseases, the Council Member of the Section on Epidemiology and Prevention of the International Society and Federation of Cardiology. He spent his last 20 years in leading the PRC-USA Collaborative Study of Cardiovascular and Cardiopulmonary Epidemiology, a milestone epidemiological research that produced many inputs to the knowledge of the cardiovascular diseases inside and outside of China.

Professor Tao’s passing is a great loss of the Cardiovascular Institute and Fu Wai Hospital, a great loss of the Chinese cardiovascular medicine society, as well as a great loss of international societies in control and prevention of cardiovascular diseases. He will be missed by all, as a remarkable human being, a distinguished physician, an outstanding scientist, as well as a kind friend.

This announcement captures, in part, the human spirit of this great man and the influence he had worldwide, as well as in China, as a result of his remarkable achievements during a turbulent period of history.

Tao was an unforgettable man. Outwardly he appeared frail and deferential, but this was the veneer of a man who was charismatic, highly intelligent, sensitive, practical, hard working, and visionary. He had indeed many of the qualities of his patient Zhou En-lai, the most popular leader in modern China.

Tao’s age was never revealed. He was educated in Shanghai and graduated from medical school during the Second World War when China was already enmeshed in hostilities with Japan. After the war, Tao did postgraduate work in Boston and came under the influence of Paul Dudley White, whose later travel through China was arranged by Tao and was crucial to cardiological initiatives in China and to the Asian Pacifc Society of Cardiology.

Tao’s professional life covered the enormous upheavals of the Sino-Japanese War, the Second World War, the civil war in China, and the establishment of the People’s Republic in the ravaged land in 1949. Medical initiatives began with the fundamentals of sanitation, inoculation, family planning, etc, which were relatively easy on account of the discipline of the Communist regime. Tao foresaw the emergence of Western diseases, especially of the cardiovascular system, and promoted studies on risk factors, especially hypertension throughout the nation. These studies were remarkable because of their sheer size (sample population of 2 million), the difficulties in communication and travel, and the further upheavals of the “Great Leap Forward” and “Cultural Revolution,” which occurred during this period. Tao also was influential in establishing the Fu Wai Hospital in Beijing as the national center for cardiovascular treatment, research, and training and the focal point for external international collaboration.

I first met Tao Shou-chi in Sydney 20 years ago where he presented results of his epidemiological studies that showed that the large regional differences in the prevalence of hypertension in China were related to salt intake. The consequences of hypertension were mainly stroke and heart failure, with atherosclerotic events very uncommon, which was attributed to the largely vegetarian diet and low cholesterol. Tao designed our studies that showed that increasing aortic stiffness with age is attributable to the aging process itself, independent of atherosclerosis, but is accelerated by hypertension and high-salt intake.

Tao’s influence is apparent everywhere in modern Chinese cardiology and epidemiology, but he preferred leading from the background. He knew that it could be counterproductive if he (or anyone) assumed too prominent a role. The American adage “you can achieve anything in Washington provided you don’t claim the credit” apparently applied even more in Beijing.
Tao was fiercely loyal to China and his diplomacy matched his charm. Yet he was surprisingly frank at times in his discussion of individuals and past mistakes. He had attended Mao Tse-tung and Deng Xiaoping as well as Zhou En-lai. Mao’s major problem was emphysema, caused by smoking, and led to his cor pulmonale. Tao explained Mao’s later “mistakes” as a consequence of illness, which prevented him from seeking advice from numerous experts, and thus being unduly influenced by the “gang of 4.” Zhou En-lai suffered from a myocardial infarction, an uncommon event in China, and required prolonged care by Tao. Tao was also credited with eventually having Deng discontinue smoking.

All who met Tao learned from him a degree of humility and how they might be better people. I asked how he as an obvious target had avoided exile to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution and suggested that it may have been due to patronage from influential patients. Not so, said Tao, referring to the utter chaos of the time and the inability of such patients to influence his life. “I always managed to communicate with young people,” said Tao. This too was Zhou En-lai’s skill and one of the most important lessons I learned.

To Tao, practicing medicine and advancing epidemiology was part of a broader life. He encouraged discussion on all sorts of issues, he insisted that his visitors “sight see” in the broadest sense, accompanied by local hosts who could help visitors appreciate the cultural values of ancient China that had been passed down, as well as the history and geography of the region. He was interested in family; and after visiting my home in Sydney and hosting my father in Beijing, he always enquired about my wife (by name) and my children. Dr Gao’s letter to me must have been taken from Tao’s personal mailing list and was addressed to “The O’Rourke Family” at my home address.

Tao is survived by his wife, children, and grandchildren, a number of whom live in the United States and Canada.
Tao Shou-chi
Michael F. O'Rourke

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