

SARS, Chinese Ministry of Health, Peking Union Medical College (PUMC)
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Da Hsuan Feng
Vice President for Research and Graduate Education and
Professor of Physics
The University of Texas at Dallas

In March of 2003, a group of us, primarily in Texas, responding to the pandemic which gripped the Pacific Rim (North America, especially Toronto, Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) formed an Ad Hoc Southern United States Action Committee to Assist Chinese People to Fight Against SARS (<http://www.sarssars.org/en/index.html>). The cumbersome of the name of this group meant the situation was developing so rapidly that we essentially had no time to properly name the group.

Members of the group came from UT Dallas, UT Houston School of Public Health, UT Medical Branch in Galveston, University of North Texas Health Science Center, University of Houston and Genesis Campus Venture Funds. Last but not least, two members of the United States House of Representatives, Congressman Curt Weldon of Pennsylvania and a member of UTD's Research Advisory Board and Vice Chair of the House Armed Services Committee and Congressman Solomon Ortiz, a ranking Democratic member from Texas on the House Armed Services committee. During this trying time, colleagues from Nanjing University (which I am a proud honorary member of its Board of Trustees) also collaborated closely with us. The Committee members were very active in working on this issue and a summary of the activities can be found in <http://www.sarssars.org>

On November 27 and 28 2003, Scott Lillibridge, the director of the UT Houston's Center for Biosecurity and Public Health Preparedness and a nationally known Homeland Security expert, myself and others, representing this committee, was in Beijing to meet with the Chinese Vice Minister of Health, the Honorable Zhu Qinsheng, other senior members of the Chinese Ministry of Health and Dr. Yang Xiaoguang, the Deputy Director of China's Center for Disease Control, to brief them about our activities. It was indeed an exciting meeting, and much of our discussions centered on how we could continue to collaborate with Chinese colleagues on healthcare preparedness on a national and global scale. Indeed, it was heartening to learn that China leadership, both in public and in private, regards this not only a "Chinese problem," but a problem for mankind in the 21st century.

At the meeting with Vice Minister Zhu, Scott Lillibridge and I also had the great honor of meeting with President Liu Depei, president of Peking Union Medical College, or PUMC, as it is known. PUMC is located 2 blocks from Tiananmen Square. The campus is an admixture of beautiful tradition Chinese architecture and ultramodern research (and alas more utilitarian) buildings.

It is a massive place.

PUMC deserves a few words of description. It was founded in 1917 in Beijing (or Peking as it is known then) by none other than the Rockefeller Foundation. One needs to remember that in 1917, the Republic of China, which was created by the “father of China” Sun Yatsen, was merely 6 years old. China was barely emerging from its 5000 years of feudalism. Indeed, it was not even obvious, with all the instabilities built into the system from overturning such a profound tradition of feudalism that the nation would not reverse back to the old habits. Indeed, some of the so-called “Presidents” of that era had dreams of becoming emperors and form “new dynasties.” Thus for Rockefeller Foundation to have such foresights was heart warming.

It is interesting also to note that despite the enormous upheaval of China in the past century, despite the numerous occasions when PUMC had to change its name, and despite the fact that today Peking is known as Beijing and not Peking, the legacy of PUMC was so deep rooted that it is still called Peking Union Medical College and not Beijing Union Medical College.

Unquestionably, PUMC is now the premier medical university in China. Its reputation is known not only in China and Asia, but throughout the world. In fact, walking across campus, and in many of its buildings, one can sense the presence of many of the world’s premier medical colleges collaborating with PUMC, colleges such as Johns Hopkins University, Harvard Medical College and so on.

In a dinner meeting with President Liu, two of his deputies, and the Dean of Graduate Studies (who spent quite a bit of time in Denmark and that experience of his allowed him to have great conversations with my wife and me since we too spend a significant amount of our time there as well) also discussed at lengths about collaboration between PUMC and various campuses of the University of Texas. For example, we told our colleagues in PUMC of the exciting p4-biocontainment laboratory of UTMB, the school of public health of UTH and the multitude activities on emergency preparedness in UTD (info security, digital records, etc.).

The dinner ended with a grand finale which startled both Scott and me. We were both bestowed the accolade of “Honorary Professorships” of PUMC. For me, who is merely a Ph.D., this is an unforgettable experience and high honor.

Unquestionably, health and security are two fundamental issues confronting mankind in the 21st century. I believe that the awareness brought to humanity since the attacks of 9-11, SARS, West Nile Virus and other events have awakened peoples and governments of the world. What happened to us in Peking was but a microcosm of this great awakening.