

Obituary

GEORGE HATEM (DR MA HAIDE)

1910–1988

George Hatem was an American physician in the Chinese Communist Army during the revolution and the founder of public health in the People's Republic. The first foreigner to become a Chinese citizen under the Communist regime, Hatem was described by Mao's biographer, Edward Snow, as 'knowing more about Red China and its leaders than any foreigner alive'.

Hatem will be remembered in China as one of its handful of best 'old foreign friends', second only to Edgar Snow himself and Norman Bethune, the Canadian doctor who died during the revolutionary war. He devised, mounted and oversaw the campaigns which virtually eliminated venereal diseases (they have only recently begun to reappear), leprosy, smallpox and other endemic diseases which afflicted millions of Chinese. He was universally known in China as Ma Haide, the Virtuous Foreigner.

Born in the USA of immigrant Lebanese parents, Hatem grew up in Buffalo, New York, and after pre-medical training at the University of North Carolina he studied medicine at the American University of Beirut and then in Geneva, to which he travelled from the Lebanon on a bicycle.

In 1933 Hatem and two other young Americans decided to try doctoring in Shanghai where they set up a venereal disease practice. Before long Hatem became the staff doctor for the police in the Shanghai International Settlement. Years later he remembered 'examining girls from the brothels and cleaning them up until the next dose. A lot of cops were in the same clinic. They wanted *their* whores clean.'

It was Agnes Smedley, the radical American journalist, then writing in Shanghai, who brought Hatem into contact with the Communist underground. Although planning to return to the USA in 1936 he and Edgar Snow travelled secretly to Siam in Central China, then into the 'red areas'. Years later it emerged that Mao Tse-tung had brought Snow to the guerrilla area to tell the Communist story to the world and Hatem to save the lives of the wounded.

It was a great turning point for Hatem who was to devote the next 52 years to the Chinese Communists and the people of China. Snow wrote, 'Dr Hatem was acting on his own conscience alone. He was not a Communist, he spoke no Chinese, he really knew nothing of what faced him and for a young doctor just beginning life he seemed to be burning a lot of bridges behind him.' Snow described Hatem as the only American missionary who volunteered for service with the Communists—'on the other side of the river'.

He soon became invaluable to the Reds, whom he had first taken to be a new sort of bandit. After Norman Bethune's death, Hatem was one of only two Western-trained doctors in the army (the other was a Chinese) and he travelled by mule throughout the 'liberated areas' in danger from both the Japanese forces and those of Chiang Kaishek. In Yanan, Mao's guerrilla capital, he met his Chinese wife, who had refused him until she saw him deliver a baby; 'I didn't think any foreigner could be that gentle,' she recalled.

Hatem witnessed the tumultuous meeting between the two streams of the guerrilla armies at the

end of the Long March. 'What a reunion. Men threw their arms about each other laughing and weeping at the same time or walking arm in arm and pouring out questions about other comrades.' He saw the legendary commander Chu Teh, who, with Mao, had led the March. 'Thin as a ghost, but strong and tough with a full growth of beard and clad in a lousy skin coat. He looks like the father of the Red Army.' Hatem himself attracted much attention among the guerrilla soldiers who at first assumed he was Stalin's representative.

Almost 50 years later when asked whether he had known the young commissar Deng Xiaoping at the guerrilla headquarters, and whether he thought that some day he would lead China, Hatem replied, 'Never. But I never thought Mao would either. We weren't thinking of the revolution coming in our lifetime. We thought it would be in the next generation—the one after Mao.'

Once the new People's Republic had come to power in 1949 Hatem returned to Shanghai and set about conquering venereal diseases, which in some areas afflicted up to 10% of the population. His medical teams fanned out across the country, his propagandists urged people to seek treatment and brothels were closed. Ninety per cent of all disease carriers were identified and by 1966 Hatem could write, 'syphilis is now under full control through the country'. Not a single new case was found until about 5 years ago. Using the same methods, Hatem claimed, smallpox was eradicated in China 25 years before the World Health Organization stated it was no longer a global problem.

All his life Hatem believed that many diseases arose from political and social origins. After traditionally dying off in their late twenties, Chinese now live into their seventies, a tribute to Hatem's view that 'the old axiom of public health depending on affluence and income and gross national product is not the only road to a healthy population.'

JONATHAN MIRSKY

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I cannot recall the exact dates, but it must have been either late 1980 or early 1981 that Dr Huan-Ying Li of the Beijing Tropical Medicine Research Institute, Friendship Hospital, Beijing, visited Oxford. She encouraged me to contact George Hatem and to correspond with him about leprosy control and research in China. Late in 1981, my wife Josephine and I had the opportunity to visit the People's Republic in China. She planned to travel with some friends on the Trans-Siberian Railway; I would fly out to Beijing after completing some work in Africa. These were difficult days for 'individual' tourists and we would never have obtained permission to enter without George Hatem's help and influence. On arrival in Beijing, we seemed to become firm friends almost at once. In the quiet of his courtyard house, once the formalities were over, he made it clear that there was work for me to do (although I had intended the whole trip as a holiday) and after some brief but memorable sight-seeing in Beijing, he sent me to Shanghai, where I had the pleasure of meeting Dr Ji Baohong and talking, with Dr Li Futian as interpreter, to many groups of people interested in leprosy control. In May 1982, George Hatem came to Oxford with Dr Ye Ganyun and Dr Su Junrui, as part of a world trip to contact people who might be able to help with their plan of 'basic eradication by the year 2000'. Later still, on his way home from one of his trips to the USA, he came to stay with us in Lower Radley and I have a vivid memory of him talking at length to our daughters, Alice and Hannah, over a breakfast which lasted 2 hours. Children delighted him. He met many people in Oxford working in dermatology, venereal disease and epidemiology and he impressed them all—as he did me—with his quiet confidence and professional knowledge, so obviously based on great experience. From time-to-time, he was kind enough to ask for my advice on the training of doctors and the control of leprosy in China, but in fact he himself saw the most important aspects of these (and many other) subjects with exceptional clarity, and he combined this with ability, determination and compassion, the like of which I have never known.

A COLIN McDOUGALL

It was indeed very shocking to learn that Dr Ma Haide passed away on 3 October 1988 at the age of 78. His passing has been a tremendous loss to the national efforts to eradicate leprosy in the People's Republic of China, and also a personal loss to numerous leprologist and leprosy workers the world over.

Dr Ma Haide obtained his medical degree from the University of Geneva and went to China in 1933 on a short visit which was extended to a period of 55 years of dedicated service to that nation.

Years of service, in medical and health fields in China were recognized by the award of the 'Pioneer in medical and health service of New China' by the Central Government in 1983. A year earlier (1982), he received the Damien-Dutton Award. This was followed with recognition by the 'K W Kellog Foundation for outstanding international contribution to the field of Public Health' (1985), 'Order de Order—Commander' from the President of the Lebanon (USA, 1986). His last award was the International Gandhi Award (GMLF, India, 1988).

Dr Ma Haide had a special relationship with India and had worked with Dr Dwarkanath Kotnis, leader of a 5-member team of doctors deputed by India to China during the years of China's war with Japan. His visit to India to receive the International Gandhi Award was probably his last trip abroad. Accompanied by his wife, Mrs Su Fei, he visited the GMLF headquarters and endeared himself to everyone by his politeness, soft-spoken manners, sharp understanding and his grasp and fresh perspective on all aspects of leprosy.

Friends, colleagues and admirers of Dr Ma Haide will miss him during the XV International Leprosy Congress which is scheduled to be held in Beijing in 1996—the date by which they hope to eradicate leprosy in China. But, nevertheless, he will be remembered for his sweetness of disposition, dedication and determination as a scientist and politeness as a humanitarian.

S P TARE