

Sharing Vision - Saving Skills, while Establishing Lifelong Friendships—In Celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the ORBIS Flying Eye Hospital's First Trip to Guangzhou, China

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Thirty years ago, the ORBIS Flying Eye Hospital (ORBIS FEH) first landed in Guangzhou on September 21st 1982, remaining in the city for 18 days. Not only was this the ORBIS FEH's first trip to China to provide training in sight-restoring techniques, but the visit also turned a whole new chapter in the history of friendship between the Chinese and American ophthalmic communities.

In the ensuing 30 years, the ORBIS FEH has visited China 22 times, landing in 25 different locations. The first DC-8 aircraft, retired formally in 1994, was subsequently presented by ORBIS to China as a token of the friendship between the Chinese and American people. This plane with its praiseworthy history is currently on display at the Chinese Aviation Museum in Beijing.

The ORBIS FEH, originally dedicated by the highly respected American ophthalmologist David Paton, has as its defining goal the teaching and spreading of advanced ophthalmic surgical technology throughout the world, particularly in those areas where resources are scarce. Training of local ophthalmic staff as well as treating patients is its priorities, and thus it has received a warm welcome wherever it goes. The ORBIS FEH generates a ripple effect which has led to further improvements in eye care ever.

The ORBIS FEH's First Visit to China: A Mark of the Deep Friendship between Chinese and American Ophthalmologists

In May 1980, Professors Yaozhen Chen (Eugene

Chan) and Wenshu (Winifred) Mao were invited to attend the annual Scientific Meeting hosted by the Wilmer Ophthalmological Institute (Wilmer Eye Institute) at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA. This represented their first visit to the United States since the founding of People's Republic of China thirty years earlier. It had been nearly 50 years since Professor Chen's 5 years as a researcher at Wilmer Ophthalmological Institute (1929–34). During the conference, he encountered many friends and acquaintances from the old days, among them Professor David Paton, son of the founder of the International Eye Bank Dr R. Townley Paton (a resident at the Wilmer Ophthalmological Institute 1930s). Professor Chen and Dr. Townley Paton had shared a deep friendship and common academic interests at Wilmer. After the 2nd world war Professor Chen sent a young ophthalmologist for further study at the New York Eye Bank. Professor David Paton recalled fondly in a letter sent to Dr. Chi Chao Chan (3rd daughter of Professors Chen and Mao) in 2009: "Your father used to tell me he remembered seeing me in short pants playing in the yard near the Hopkins medical campus which must have been about 1934, for we left Baltimore to go to NYC in 1935, I believe." In another letter sent to Professor Lezheng Wu, Dr Paton commented "my family and I loved and admired them (Professors Chen & Mao) very much." The lifelong friendship and meeting of the minds deeply influenced Dr Paton, and was instrumental in suggesting the idea of the ORBIS FEH visiting China 30 years ago. (Figure 1).

The ORBIS FEH's Visit to China: A Monument to China's Policy of Reform and Opening

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Figure 1 Professors Yaozhen Chen, Wenshu Mao and David Paton in front of the ORBIS Flying Eye Hospital at the Guangzhou Airport on September 21st, 1982

On March 3rd 1981, Professor Paton sent a letter to Professors Chen and Mao, proposing the idea of the ORBIS FEH's visit to China. A month later, Professor Bruce Spivey, Vice President of American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO), met with Professors Chen and Mao in Beijing while he was visiting China as a part of an AAO delegation. He then returned bearing a message of strong interest and deep excitement about the ORBIS FEH's potential visit. Professor Paton replied to Professors Chen and Mao on May 26th 1981. Detailed planning for the ORBIS FEH project was discussed, and formal arrangements were made. A team of renowned ophthalmic educators was put together, and a program of advanced ophthalmic surgical demonstrations was prepared. In his May letter, Professor Paton also expressed his wish that ORBIS FEH experts might learn from their Chinese colleagues as well.

On August 18th 1981, the Zhongshan Medical College, which reported directly to the Ministry of Health at the time, submitted a formal application. This was passed on to the State Council on September 22nd, 1981 and three days later, the proposal of the "American ORBIS Flying Plane and medical staff teaching in China" was approved by four vice premiers. The official document was rapidly reviewed by key personnel at the Ministry of Health, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Civil Aviation Administration of China, and so on. Dozens of different institutions and organizations were involved, including those responsible for foreign affairs, national security, public security, civil aviation, health and education, ra-

dio and television, the military, the government of Guangdong Province and Guangzhou City, a formidable array!

What amazed many observers was that the prompt and unanimous approval from the four vice premiers, who were all extremely busy with various affairs of state, for such an international academic exchange? How could Chinese airspace, a restricted zone in the early 1980s, be thrown open to a foreign civilian airplane and to remain the plane at the Guangzhou airport for as long as 18 days? How could be allowed academic meetings to proceed on the plane? ... All of these matters have remained a mystery in the ensuing 30 years since the first visit of the ORBIS FEH!

As a matter of fact, Professor Mao reported to the national leaders immediately after they received Professor Paton's proposal for ORBIS FEH's visit to China. The national leadership valued and promoted this program as symbolic of the new policy of "Reform and Opening," with its emphasis on the introduction of advanced scientific and medical technology to China. Guangzhou, as a symbol of the open regions in China's south, was selected for the first visit of the ORBIS FEH. The remarkable unanimity and coordination of the numerous state organizations who pulled together to make this trip a reality was a further illustration of the early impact of the new reform policy. A miracle of not only medical collaboration across borders but also of the friendship between the Chinese and American people was fostered by the joint action of organizations at all levels of government, from central to local authorities.

The ORBIS FEH's Visit to China: Vision Care and the Friendship

It was prepared carefully for the ORBIS FEH's first visit to China by organizing a group of renowned ophthalmic educators from America, Europe, Asia and Australia; Paton, L'Esperance and McIntyre from America, Dominquez from Spain, Crock from Australia and Lim from Singapore, among many others, were involved. The staff of the ORBIS FEH, which also concluded 3 ophthalmologists, 6 nurses, and experts on imaging and engineering, presented 8 lectures and performed 36 operations

during the 18 day visit.

This successful visit of ORBIS FEH to Guangzhou, China, was of great significance. It fostered a sense of a professional community and underscored the spirit of wholehearted dedication to patient service and a demand for excellence among the ophthalmologists. It also strengthened mutual friendship by learning from each other. (Figure. 2)



Figure 2 Part of trainees and staffs of ORBIS Flying Eye Hospital take together on October 8th, 1982

A total of 130 Chinese ophthalmologists took part in lectures and surgical demonstrations, leading to the widespread acknowledgment that the Era of Microsurgery in ophthalmology had been presented already. The treatment to complex ocular diseases using advanced medical equipment and high-level surgical skills, as manifest in operations such as combined corneal grafting, glaucoma and cataract surgery, could lead to outcomes far better than previously expected.

The ORBIS FEH experts always did their best for patients. They discussed potential complications frankly and sincerely before the operation, performed surgeries precisely and presided over all post-operative care themselves. The direct impact of the example set for doctors was incalculable.

The ORBIS FEH experts not only gave fascinating lectures but also were open-minded in their approach to learning themselves. They praised the skills of Chinese ophthalmologists in areas such as cataract extraction using silica gel, and showed a deep interest in traditional Chinese techniques such as acupuncture and so on. This interaction has led to an ever-growing sense of collaboration between Chinese and western ophthalmologists in the decades.

We hereby wish the ORBIS FEH the best success over the next years in its on-going mission to spread knowledge and lighten the global burden of blindness and vision impairment.

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Annotation

ORBIS Flying Eye Hospital (ORBIS FEH)

In the 1970s, Houston ophthalmologist Dr David Paton (USA) had a bold vision - to use aviation to deliver medical education to the eyes of the world. Motivated by the fact that 75% of the world's visual disability can be avoided through treatment or prevention, Dr Paton recruited a small group of philanthropists, doctors, and aviators - including Betsy Trippe DeVecchi (daughter of Juan Trippe, Founder of Pan American Airways) and A. L. Ueltschi (Founder and Chairman of Flight-Safety International) and established Project ORBIS in 1973. In 1980, Eddie Carison, former Chairman of United Airlines, agreed to donate United's oldest DC-8 aircraft to the project. With a grant from USAID and funds from private donors, extensive modifications were made to the plane to convert it into a fully functional teaching eye hospital. Staffed by a highly skilled team of ophthalmologists, anesthesiologists, nurses and biomedical technicians, the ORBIS DC-8 Flying Eye Hospital took off from Houston, Texas for its first program in Panama in the spring of 1982. By 1992 the DC-8 was more than 30 years old, and replacement parts were becoming more difficult and expensive to obtain. ORBIS program was also expanding in scope, and it became clear that a newer, larger aircraft was needed to replace the DC-8. In 1992, ORBIS received donations from three very generous individuals; A. L. Ueltschi, President of FlightSafety International and Chairman of the ORBIS Board of Directors, donated US \$ 6 million; Y. C. Ho, a Hong Kong businessman, donated \$ 7 million; and an anonymous donor donated the remaining \$ 1 million. As a result ORBIS was able to purchase a DC-10, which had more than twice the interior space of the original plane. In 1994, the ORBIS DC-8 was formally retired, and the ORBIS DC-10, which remains in service today, took over as the world's only Flying Eye Hospital and completed its inaugural mission to Beijing, China. The original ORBIS DC-8 Flying Eye Hospital is now on display at the Aerospace Museum in Beijing. The ORBIS Flying Eye Hospital has already visited more than 89 countries, saved the sight of millions of people and trained 288,000 local doctors and health-care workers.

(from the ORBIS website)