

Lei-Shi Li: a giant in international nephrology

Kidney International (2010) **77**, 1051–1052. doi:10.1038/ki.2010.133



Lei-Shi Li
1926–2010

China and the world of nephrology lost one of their most distinguished clinicians and physician-scientists on 16 March 2010. Dr. Lei-Shi Li passed away in Nanjing, China, at the age of 84. He was chair of the Research Institute of Nephrology, Jinling Hospital, Nanjing University School of Medicine, Nanjing, China. He was a clinician, physician-scientist, and educator, full of humanity, energy, and ideas. He lived through a dramatic period in China's history and participated in a major way in the growth of nephrology as a specialty not only in China but also throughout the world. His legacy of science, clinical care, leadership, and education will remain a testimony to his uniqueness.

Dr. Li was born in 1926 in Changsha City, Hunan Province, China. After graduating in 1949 from the National Zhong Zheng Medical College in Nanjing, he interned from 1948 to 1949 at the National Central Hospital in Nanjing (now called Jinling Hospital), the largest medical center and university hospital administered directly under the Ministry of Health of the Chinese Nationalist government. After that, he remained at the National Central Hospital to receive three more years of residency training, after which he dedicated himself to tropical medicine. During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, he had to discontinue all his work. During this difficult period of political turmoil, he never surrendered his compassion for his patients, his faithfulness to the mission, his core values as a physician, or his commitment to society. In 1975, he was reinstated in his former post in Jinling Hospital. In 1978, he separated kidney disease from general medicine as a new clinical discipline, and founded the Research Institute of Nephrology at Jinling Hospital, launching the era of modern nephrology in China. He was one of the founders of the Chinese Society of Nephrology and was its vice president for ten years (1980–1990). He was the first nephrologist to be elected to the Chinese Academy of Science and Engineering (1994). As a pioneer, he started the training program of nephrology at Jinling Hospital. As a key

mentor, he edited the *Primer on Kidney Disease in China*, created a practical approach to percutaneous renal biopsy, published a diagnostic atlas of renal pathology, introduced peritoneal dialysis into clinical practice, and established hemodialysis under very difficult conditions using simple and crude machines. He integrated kidney transplantation into clinical renal practice, and the Institute started kidney transplantation in 1993. He trained the first generation of nephrologists in China. Hundreds of trainees and fellows trained, inspired, and nurtured by Dr. Li have devoted themselves to renal practice and research, not only in China but also around the world, and many are today's leaders of nephrology in China.

It is impossible to fully describe Dr. Li's many contributions, which established him as a foremost pioneer in investigative and clinical nephrology. It was Lei-Shi Li who first used the Chinese herb *Tripterygium wilfordii* to treat patients with glomerular disease in the late 1970s. Following his original description, numerous studies have explored the potent immunosuppressive and anti-inflammatory properties of this drug, which is now used extensively in the treatment of glomerulonephritis and lupus nephritis and in organ transplantation. It was he who used rhubarb to treat chronic renal failure. He was first to introduce mycophenolate mofetil (MMF) for the treatment of lupus nephritis, as well as innovative multiple-target therapy (steroid in combination with MMF and tacrolimus) for patients with lupus nephritis. Moreover, it was he who introduced and developed the technique of continuous blood purification in China. He was honored with China's National Science and Technology Progress Award six times and was recognized as one of the top 100 doctors in China. He published 13 books, including the major textbook of nephrology in Chinese, and over 700 papers. He was the founder and, from 1992, the editor in chief of the *Chinese Journal of Nephrology, Dialysis and Transplantation*, which has become one of the leading nephrology journals in China. Under his tireless and inspired

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leadership, the Research Institute of Nephrology has carried out cutting-edge research and developed many novel therapies for patients with renal disease. It is one of the leading clinical and research centers in the world devoted to the study of the kidney.

Lei-Shi Li was central not only in developing nephrology as a modern clinical discipline in China, but also in encouraging the interaction of the Chinese nephrology community with the international renal world. He was one of the key founders of the Asian Pacific Society of Nephrology, and a council member (1985–1990). He was the first Chinese Councilor of the International Society of Nephrology (ISN) (1990–1997) and became an honorary member of the ISN. He was a member of the organizing committee of an international conference on continuous renal replacement therapies organized by Dr. Ravindra L. Mehta, and Honorary Fellow of the Hong Kong College of Physicians. He transcended national boundaries and political disparities to bring China into the larger global community and, more importantly, to bring many international leaders of nephrology and medicine to China. In 1983 Dr. Li organized the first visit of Western nephrologists (Drs. Schrier, Becker, and Atkins) to lecture at multiple renal centers throughout China. After a breakthrough in hosting an International Workshop of Renal Disease in Nanjing in 1988, with great courage, he successfully organized and chaired the 4th Conference of the Asian Pacific Society of Nephrology in 1990 in Beijing. This meeting has been recognized as a symbol of the exposure of the Chinese Society of Nephrology to the international renal community. Many leaders in international nephrology still vividly remember the stimulating scientific activities in the international symposium on

diabetic nephropathy in Nanjing in 1993, and the conference hall crowded with participants of the ISN continuing medical education course in Nanjing in 1997. Dr. Li fostered a very active and successful ISN Sister Renal Center program together with Dr. Lance Dworkin between the Research Institute of Nephrology of Jinling Hospital and the Division of Kidney Diseases and Hypertension at the Alpert Medical School of Brown University. For more than ten years, these two institutions have exchanged faculty, trained a large number of clinicians and physician-scientists, jointly hosted international conferences, and conducted collaborative clinical and bench research. In recognition of his important contributions to academic medicine at Brown, Lei-Shi Li was appointed Adjunct Professor of Medicine at Brown University. Since 2003, he annually organized a continuing medical education meeting called Forefronts in Glomerular Disease—Nanjing Forum, which has been endorsed as an ISN Commission for the Global Advancement of Nephrology program and has become an important event for international nephrology.

Lei-Shi Li was a man of culture, wisdom, and true humanitarianism, understanding Western philosophy and mastering traditional Chinese values. His contribution and achievements affected the lives of millions of people in China, as well as around the world. He was respected by his colleagues and friends, admired by all who worked with him, and beloved by his patients. He will be sorely missed. The Research Institute of Nephrology at Jinling Hospital in Nanjing, China, the real legacy of Dr. Lei-Shi Li, will extend his distinguished influence far beyond professional scientific circles.

DISCLOSURE

The authors declared no competing interests.