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Gim Shek Ju: A Pioneer in Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Education in the United States

Arthur Yin Fan

McLean Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, PLC. Vienna, VA 22182, USA

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Correspondence: Arthur Yin Fan; Tel: +1-(703) 499-4428; E-mail: ArthurFan@ChineseMedicineDoctor.US

Several stories of pioneers establishing acupuncture and Chinese medicine (ACM) practices in the United States (U.S.) have been documented. However, the establishment of actual schools for acupuncture and Chinese medicine is one of the key signs that ACM has become an established profession. One of the first people who wanted to set-up a school for Chinese medicine in the United States was Dr. Tom Foo Yuen (谭富园, 89, Aug 7, 1858 - Jul 10, 1947) during the late 1800s in Los Angeles, California. However, it was not until the time period of 1969-1970 that the first ACM school was established in the U.S. The school was called the Institute for Taoist Study in LA, with Dr. Gim Shek Ju as the only teacher.

Based on the recollection from some of his students, Dr. Gim Shek Ju (Gim, in short; 赵金石) was impressed by a group of Tai Chi students, most of them students at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA). At the urging of his friend's Tai Chi students, he used acupuncture to treat these students and some of their relatives during a Chinese New Year celebration in Chinatown, LA in 1969. It was after these acupuncture treatments that these students became interested in ACM and had their Tai Chi teacher, Master Marshall Hoo, a close friend of Gim, persuade Gim to teach them ACM. Gim broke the old Chinese tradition (that means only teaching to those within the family) and taught two classes of non-Asian students ACM during 1969 to 1970. These two classes of students became the key people in ACM development in the U.S., both in acupuncture or Chinese medicine legislation and professional development of Chinese medicine in the U.S. The classes taught by Gim were the origin of three professions: acupuncture and Chinese or Oriental medicine (for licensed acupuncturists, LAc or Oriental medicine doctors, OMD), medical acupuncture (for MD acupuncturists) and animal or veterinary acupuncture (for DVM acupuncturists) in the U.S.



Figure 1. Dr. Gim Shek Ju with a Shaolin Monk.

Dr. Ju arrived in the U.S. around the 1950s (Dr. Fan notes: based on personal research, he should arrive in 1957). He did not settle in Chinatown, LA until the 1960s (around 1968). He was still traveling back and forth to Hong Kong at that time because his own family was there. He practice in LA was funded and organized by his third wife, Helen Robertson. The clinic was in the apartment that they lived in. Helen was a veterinarian from Downey, CA and a former patient of Dr.Ju. She had suffered a debilitating trauma from a car accident that damaged her spine to the point that she could not stand up, but remained bent at a 90 degree angle. After finding Dr. Ju via word of mouth, she was able to improve her condition. Most of Dr.Ju's patients were Caucasian, and not Chinese. In fact, very few Chinese came to see him (the author notes: it is opposite to our "common sense"—many people believe Chinese medicine had its market because Chinese people, or say, Asian community uses it more). Most of his patients were extremely ill, and suffering with debilitating pain. Dr. Ju was able to treat

patients with very little communication. According to his daughter, Mamie Ju, Dr. Ju's powers of intuition and understanding or hearing the body was probably daunting to many...even modern-day TCM practitioners. But it was the "old" way, and in Mamie opinion, the right way to practice. "Ancient TCM practitioners were most likely practicing Shamans, and I believe my father was a Shaman by birth". This is what made him very special. But it is difficult to explain this, even to other TCM practitioners.



Figure 2. Dr. Gim Shek Ju practice Tai Chi with a friend.



Figure 3. Dr. Tin Yau So in classroom of New England School of Acupuncture.

Dr. Ju and Dr. Tin Yau So (苏天佑) were colleagues at the Hong Kong College of Acupuncture; Dr. So was the founder. Dr. Ju strongly recommended Dr. So as the best teacher in ACM and let his students resume ACM under Dr. So; he flew with his student Steven Rosenblatt, as well as Steven's wife Kathleen, to Hong Kong to meet Dr. So, where these two American students actually studied there for one year in 1972. Per the invitation and handling of a visa by the National Acupuncture Association (founded by Dr. Ju's students Bill Prensky, Steven Rosenblatt, etc.), Dr. So arrived in LA in October, 1973 as an acupuncturist in the UCLA acupuncture clinic.

Dr. So was one of the most influential individuals of the 20th century by formally bringing acupuncture education to the United States. He established the first acupuncture school in the U.S., the New England School of Acupuncture in Newton, Massachusetts in 1975 with the help of his (also Dr. Ju's) students Steven Rosenblatt, Gene Bruno, Bill Prensky, etc. after overcoming great difficulties. To some extent, I could say that it was Dr. Gim Shek Ju who brought Dr. So to the U.S. that allowed him to become the father of Acupuncture and Chinese medicine education in the U.S.

Dr. Ju had a very thriving acupuncture practice treating patients inside his three bedroom apartment. He used one of the bedrooms as his main office and treatment room. His living room was the waiting room. There were people there from 8AM until after 5PM, but usually no later than 6PM. He often worked six days a week and was always busy doing something. He rarely rested. He kept a very strict schedule. He got up every morning before dawn and practiced Tai Chi. No-one knows when he learned Tai Chi. Then he started his working day at 8AM. He took a lunch break exactly at noon every day, and ate lunch in Chinatown with friends, probably his students too, and sometimes with his children on the weekends. Dr. Ju was usually in bed by 8PM unless he had other things to do. His students were not around regularly... or at least not on a regular basis. Dr. Ju never really grasped the English language. His daughter often had to translate for patients who were trying to book appointments over the phone. Mamie often had to schedule appointments for him when he was out. His daughter...making trips to the herbal store to get formulas, and helping him in the room with some of the female patients. Dr. Ju took many patients, the apartment was filled with people non-stop, and he accepted treatments outside of the clinic as well. It was not unusual for his daughter to come home and find a limousine parked outside our apartment either waiting to pick up Dr. Ju or to drop him off. Dr. Ju never spoke about who his patients were. He kept many of those things very, very private. He would not discuss many cases or anything in great detail.

His daughter remembers, when he was still involved with his American students, "I remember accompanying my father to UCLA where he gave a lecture about meridian/channel theory and how acupuncture worked. Another thing my father did that was rather record-breaking at the time was perform anesthesia on a wisdom tooth patient using acupuncture. I was maybe about

11 years-old at the time (1975) and I remember watching him do this on our old black and white television". It was all over the news in Los Angeles.

His daughter continued helping Dr. Ju with his practice on-and-off until age 14 (this was around 1978, when Gim was about 61 years-old). At that time, Dr. Ju's local practice had really slowed down. He was traveling more than he was working at home. He was invited to many places...particularly Mexico to perform acupuncture, and he had relationships with high officials and wealthy people there. He often stayed in Mexico for weeks at a time.

Dr. Ju died in Hong Kong in 1987, when he was 70 years old.

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Reference

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