

• Global Views

The legendary life of Dr. Gim Shek Ju, the founding father of the education of acupuncture and Chinese medicine in the United States

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Several stories of various pioneers establishing acupuncture and Chinese medicine (ACM) practices in the United States (U.S.) have been documented^[1–5]. However, the establishment of schools for ACM signaled the establishment of ACM as an established profession in the U.S. One of the first persons who wanted to set-up a school for Chinese medicine in the U.S. was Dr. Tom Foo Yuen (譚 富 园 , August 7, 1858 – July 10, 1947) during the late 1800s in Los Angeles (LA), California^[6]. However, it was not until 1969 or 1970 that the first informal ACM school was actually established in the U.S. This school was called the Institute for Taoist Study, and was located in LA. However, this school was not registered with the local government and Dr. Gim Shek Ju was the sole teacher at that time^[7–9].

Based on the recollection of some of his students^[7–12], Dr. Gim Shek Ju (Gim, for short) was impressed by a group of students who were studying Tai Chi with his friend, Marshall Ho'o. In 1969 Dr. Ju used acupuncture to treat these students, most of whom were studying at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) at the time, and some of their relatives, during a Chinese New Year celebration. It was after these acupuncture treatments that these same students became interested in ACM and convinced Master Ho'o to persuade Gim to teach them ACM. Gim broke the old Chinese tradition

of only teaching to those within his family and taught two classes of ACM to these non-Asian students during 1969 and 1970. These two classes of students later went on to become key players in the development of ACM in the U.S. Their impacts can be seen in the practice of acupuncture and Chinese medicine, both through development of legislation as well as academic training and clinical practice^[7–12]. The classes taught by Gim covered acupuncture and Chinese or Oriental medicine (for licensed acupuncturists or Oriental medicine doctors), medical acupuncture (for MD acupuncturists) and animal or veterinary acupuncture (for DVM acupuncturists, etc.) in the U.S.^[7–12].

In order to get a clearer picture of who Gim was, the author, Dr. Arthur Fan, interviewed Mamie Ju, Gim's youngest daughter, and an ACM practitioner herself, living in California.

Fan: *Hi, Mamie. It is nice to get a chance to speak with you. Let's talk about your father, Gim Shek Ju. What is his real name? His non-Asian students called him Kim^[7,8]; is this correct or not?*

Ju: My father's original name was 赵金石 (Zhao Jin Shi), but when he immigrated into the U.S., he used the name "Ju Gim Shek" based on Cantonese spelling [putting the family name before the first name is the

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traditional Chinese order of names]. The “Kim” you hear him referred to by his students was a misspelling of “Gim”; my father’s English was not great. He was born in October of 1917 and died in the summer of 1987. Much of my father’s history is not well known because he remained, to the end, a very private man.

Dr. Fan notes: His name should be spelled as “Gim Shek Ju” based on the American spelling order of names; Gim had a Cantonese accent, which might be the reason others misspelled or pronounced “Gim” as “Kim”. However, whichever way his name was pronounced or spelled, the meaning is correct as both “Gim” and “Kim” represent the character 金, which means “Gold”.

Fan: *One of Gim’s students said that Gim’s father died when Gim was a young child, and that he was accepted as a student in a Buddhist temple, where his uncle was one of the lead monks. During that time he supposedly learned some acupuncture or traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). I have heard this story, but I am unsure if this is true; is this how Gim learned acupuncture and other aspects of Chinese medicine?*

Ju: My grandfather was named Jim Ju, a very American name translated from his Chinese name. He was born in the U.S. in 1900, and was the first legal U.S. citizen in our family. It was through Jim Ju that my father and the rest of us were able to immigrate to the U.S. I believe my great-grandfather arrived in the U.S. as a migrant worker in the late 1800s. The first Chinese immigrants were documented in California around 1848, but I think there were many more Chinese that had gone undocumented prior to that time. Many arrived as slaves and indentured servants, locked in pig cages. It was a terrible time for the Chinese back then. I don’t know much about my great-grandfather, except that he had five sons when he was here and my grandfather was the eldest. But if I were to make an educated guess, and based on historical documents, I think my great-grandfather arrived here in the U.S. either with his wife, or he was able to go back to China to get a wife before the Exclusion Act took place.

This makes sense because the Chinese Exclusion Act was not enacted until 1882, so my great-grandfather must have already been here. The Act was heavily enforced for two decades, and did not lighten up until after the 1920s. My father was born after the Exclusion Act.

My grandfather Jim was not able to bring his wife to the U.S. until she was already in her 50s. By the time she came over, my father was grown-up and married. The closest thing to the truth here is not that my grandfather died when my father was young but that my grandfather was never able to return to China after my grandmother became pregnant with Gim, my father. So you could say that my grandfather was never around.

My father might have studied with some monks in Taiwan later on in his life (Dr. Ju with a monk, Figure 1). But I doubt he studied acupuncture in mainland China. He was already married by time he was 18 years old. We need to remember that my father did not begin studying TCM full-time until he was in his 30s. I know that during the time he lived in China, he was very poor, and that my grandmother (his mother) had to go to Singapore to look for work. I am sure this was a difficult time for him, being the only child. What he might have studied during this period, again, is uncertain. Could he have lived in a monastery? Sure, that is a possibility, but I don’t think the story circulating about his time in a monastery would be as idealized as the story paints it to be, if it did indeed happen.



Figure 1 Dr. Gim Shek Ju (left) with a Monk in Taiwan, China in the early of 1970s

Dr. Ju was one of the greatest teachers of acupuncture, and a well-known acupuncturist in the beginning of the acupuncture profession in the U.S. He might have studied acupuncture and Chinese medicine with monks at some time, however it is known that he had studied with a teacher in mainland China. The photo was provided by Mamie Ju.

My father did not study in a university or college, but he learned TCM formally. He studied under a Master TCM practitioner, and was a “disciple” or “student” which is the traditional way to learn TCM. He was part of a lineage, or family, in which the teacher was a “Master” and this was passed down to my father. It was one particular man that taught my father the majority of what he knew, so this person was his “master teacher” and, to this day, no one knows his name. This kind of instruction or teaching style does not exist anymore, but it was the way TCM was taught before they moved it into a university setting. Before, every family or lineage had their own techniques and formulas. You can see some history of TCM families in the legacy formulas today. What I do know is that my father’s specialty was acupuncture and that it was learned in Hong Kong, China.

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