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• Global Views

The earliest acupuncture school of the United States incubated in a Tai Chi Center in Los Angeles

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Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) arrived in the United States (U.S.) in 1854^[1]. Initially, most TCM providers were herbalists^[1,2], with very few being acupuncturists. Based on my research, the earliest acupuncturist to practice in the U.S. was Dr. Fu Xing Fang (方复兴), who immigrated to the U.S. in the early 1930s and practiced acupuncture in the Los Angeles (LA) area. He was among the first of a few students of the well-known Dr. Dan An Cheng (承淡安), who established the first acupuncture school (Jiangsu, China) in modern China in 1929. Dr. Fang was also a member of the first acupuncture association, the Wuxi Chinese Acupuncture Research Association (无锡中国针灸研究社), which was also directed by Dr. Cheng^[3]. Although most U.S. acupuncture or TCM practitioners have practiced in California^[4-6] and New York, with these states having the largest Asian populations, the first legal acupuncture clinic was actually established in Washington, D.C. in 1972^[6-9]. Also, the first state that passed the comprehensive acupuncture and Oriental medicine (AOM) practice law was Nevada in 1973^[10]. Today acupuncture (and Oriental medicine; henceforth we will only use the term “acupuncture” below) is one of the fastest growing professions in the U.S.^[11,12]. Its professional development cannot be separated from the establishment and development of the educational institutions dedicated to that field. The history of acupuncture educational institutions in the U.S. is indeed very interesting.

To learn more about this history, Dr. Arthur Yin Fan, the author, interviewed Mr. Lawrence Karol, who witnessed

the birth of acupuncture education in the U.S.

Karol is one of the earliest, non-Asian Tai Chi Chuan (Taichi or Tijiquan) masters in the U.S., and one of the earliest non-Asian licensed acupuncturists in California. He lives in the LA area and is the head of Master Karol’s Tai Chi Chuan Academy of the Global Internet. Tai Chi Chuan has been treated as one of the many important components of TCM, along with acupuncture, Chinese herbology, and TCM dietary therapy. Interestingly, acupuncture or AOM education in U.S. actually was started in a Tai Chi Center in LA in 1969.

Fan: *Dr. Karol, could you share with me how you started to learn Tai Chi and acupuncture?*

Karol: On my sixteenth birthday, which would be June 15, 1966, I was involved in an automobile accident that broke both of my femur bones. After my recovery [from the fracture and for more functional improvement], I was led to the Tai Chi program of the National Tai Chi Chuan Association in Bronson Park, at West Hollywood, LA, by friends at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). I was inspired after my first class with Master Marshall Hoo and continued my studies because I wanted to benefit my [further] recovery, improve my overall health and well-being, and was also interested in learning the martial art discipline of Tai Chi Chuan. I quickly progressed during the next two to three years. I was also training in acupuncture, herbology, etc., besides the Tai Chi Chuan. Master Hoo formally introduced me

to Grandmaster Tung Kai-Ying shortly after Master Tung opened his academy in the Silverlake area of LA. After a few more years of study and assisting Master Tung's program, as well as creating the first Tai Chi Chuan program at UCLA (through the Experimental College, the original model for the UCLA Extension Program), I envisioned my own career development in that field. In 1971 my Tai Chi Masters of the National Tai Chi Chuan Association declared that I was the designated California Regional Director of the National Tai Chi Chuan Association; thereafter, I opened my Tai Chi Chuan Academy in Isla Vista, CA, next to the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) campus. After obtaining certification as a California State licensed acupuncturist in 1976, I added my acupuncture clinic. I have been the California Regional Director of the National TCC Association for the last 45 years, and continue to offer both online Tai Chi Chuan Training and outdoor classes in parks, on campus at UCLA in West LA, and on campus at UCSB. At the same time, I practice acupuncture and herbology in my clinic.

Fan: *Let's talk about the earliest acupuncture studies that you were involved in.*

Karol: The earliest acupuncture classes in the U.S. were taught by Dr. Gim Shek Ju in 1969 to 1970. (**Dr. Fan** notes that his original name was Zhao Jin Shi (赵金石), but he was called Ju Gim Shek according to the Cantonese dialect, which pronounces his last name as "Ju". Someone called him "Kim"^[4,5] as a nickname and now there may be a mistranslation and misspelling of "Gim" due to his Cantonese accent and the nickname given to him.) Dr. Ju practiced in LA's Chinatown. His acupuncture classes were called "Taoist Studies in Los Angeles" which were later documented by his students William (Bill) Prensky, Steven Rosenblatt and David Bresler.

In 1962, Tai Chi Master Marshall Hoo, along with Professor Wen Xin Huang, started the National Tai Chi Chuan Association. Master Hoo taught Tai Chi in LA and the facility was called the Crossroads of the World, located in West Hollywood, CA, on Sunset Boulevard. It was used for Tai Chi lectures and organizational events, with classes held outdoors in Bronson Park in the West Hollywood foothills every Saturday morning. Such classes continue today under the direction of Prof. Daniel Lee and other staff members. In 1969, a few students of Master Hoo's Tai Chi classes became interested in acupuncture. After being introduced by Master Hoo, Dr. Gim Shek Ju, a practicing acupuncturist and a close friend of Master Hoo, broke old Chinese convention and accepted interested non-Asian students, to start teaching acupuncture classes to these individuals. The students included Steven Rosenblatt, Bill Prensky, David Bresler, and Louis Prince, etc., who were the first class. I was part of the second class, which included ten students and began three months after the first one. The teaching location was in Master Hoo's Tai Chi center. After these two classes of students, Dr. Ju did not accept

other students, so these classes did not go on to become a formal school. (**Dr. Fan** notes: This school did not register with the state government, but it did exist for about two years.) Dr. Ju had about twenty students in his acupuncture teaching project. (**Dr. Fan** notes: Some students left without completing the lessons, and others enrolled in the middle of the lessons.) At the beginning, Dr. Ju's English was not very fluent, so Master Hoo served as an interpreter. A few months later, Dr. Ju could lecture alone without Master Hoo's help. Our acupuncture classes focused primarily on detailed lectures of Oriental medicine theory and point locations and needle technique with moxibustion, cupping, and herbology for approximately one year. Further clinical training took place in LA's Chinatown at Dr. Ju's small clinic that he operated from his apartment.

Besides training with Dr. Ju in his home clinic in LA's Chinatown, my [clinical] training was at my grandmother's apartment, as she had a stroke and had some paralysis on her right arm and hand (which had curled under and would not open) and I would watch Dr. Ju or Steven or another student from the first class, David Barton, perform the treatments. My aunt also had many individual treatments with Dr. Ju.

Then Dr. Ju moved to Nevada to practice acupuncture; this was one of the reasons he did not continue teaching.

Fan: *How about the story of the first formal acupuncture school in the U.S.?*

Karol: Dr. James Tin Yau So (苏天佑, Dr. Fan notes) was the founder of the first acupuncture school in the U.S., the New England School of Acupuncture (NESA). Steven [Rosenblatt] learned from Dr. Ju that Dr. So was the best teacher [in the acupuncture profession at that time], so he and his wife Kathleen went to [Hong Kong] China for a year [to study under Dr. So] and brought Dr. So to America [to teach acupuncture].

Another school, the California Acupuncture College, was the first formal acupuncture school on the West coast. At the beginning, classes were held at a home in West LA, and later at established business locations around southern California. Steven Rosenblatt was the founder and president, and Gene Bruno and Louis Prince were two major helpers. The college began operating a few months later, during the same year as NESA's start. At the peak of its operation, it had four campuses in California. Steven Rosenblatt used his teacher Dr. So's NESA lecture notes as the teaching material. I was its student there from the very beginning, [learning Chinese] herbology and [getting additional] clinical training. I also referred my own students of Tai Chi classes to attend that college. At that time, per Steven's invitation, Dr. So was the signer of the graduation certificate for the California College of Acupuncture. I had a lunch and a dinner with Dr. So and other students in our group, but did not work much directly with him. The school maybe existed for 5 years or more before it closed.

(**Dr. Fan** notes that Dr. So graduated from Dr. Zeng

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