1 Introduction

The first legal acupuncture center established in the United States (US) of America was on the east coast in Washington, D.C. in 1972.[1-4] However, the most important state in the acupuncture profession is on the west coast — in the state of California, which has the longest history of acupuncture practice[5,6] and the largest number of licensed acupuncturists in the US[7]. While I was planning to document the history of acupuncture in the US, Dr. William Prensky, one of the pioneers in the US acupuncture profession[5,6], recommended that I should take a look at the career of Dr. Miriam Lee (Figure 1). Indeed, Dr. Lee was a very famous and influential acupuncturist, to such an extent that people call her “the George Washington of American acupuncture”[8]. Dr. Lee was “the first acupuncturist in California”[9], and because of her inspirational legend, many young people in the US have become acupuncturists[8,10,11].

2 A brave acupuncturist arrested in 1974

In 2009, I started to collect information on Dr. Miriam Lee. The information was from articles in local newspapers[9,12], articles written by her students[8,10,11], online videos[13], as well as information from her own book, entitled Insights of a Senior Acupuncturist[14].

Miriam Lee (Dec 8, 1926-Jun 24, 2009), originally named Lee Chuan Djin (李传真), was born in Shandong Province, China. Lee studied in her late teenage years to become a nurse and midwife. She left mainland China in 1949[14] and then, at 27 years old, moved to Singapore in 1953 where she worked as a bank teller[12]. During the same time, she started to learn acupuncture. She graduated from the Chinese Acupuncture Medicine General College, Class No. 23 (中国针灸医学总院，第 23 期) in 1966[13] and then became an acupuncturist there.

Lee immigrated to the US in 1969, at 43 years old, where she settled in Palo Alto, California, and worked on an assembly line in a Hewlett-Packard factory[12]. Although California was the first state in which acupuncturists and Oriental medicine or traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) practitioners settled[5,6], it was not the first state which allowed acupuncturists or Oriental/Chinese medicine practitioners to legally practice acupuncture. Instead, it...
probably was the first state which had legislation actually blocking the practice of acupuncture\(^\text{14}\). On August 14, 1972, the state legislature passed Assembly Bill 1500 brought about by California Medical Association, which limited unlicensed practitioners — at that time, the acupuncturists — to perform acupuncture only under the direct supervision of a licensed physician in an approved medical school in California, for the sole purposes of scientific investigation and research (at that time, actually there was few possibility to get fund to do such investigation or research, due to that most of Western trained doctors were lack of interest in acupuncture study, Dr. Fan notes). The bill also required medical schools that conducted research on acupuncture to report their research findings to the legislature annually\(^\text{15}\).

While Lee arrived in California at a time in which acupuncturists were not allowed to see patients, as a trained acupuncturist and Christian, Lee could not stand to sit by and watch patients suffering from intractable diseases that Western medicine did not effectively address. Miriam Lee took on the challenge of helping these people and her motto was, “If you don’t press the olive seed, there will be no oil”\(^\text{14}\). The first patient she helped was her friend’s son, a young PhD student at Stanford University who was paralyzed after an operation to remove a tumor from the lumbar area. After Lee’s acupuncture treatments with him, he began to walk and was able to get a job. Then Lee treated her co-workers who had shoulder or neck pain with acupuncture at her home. As word of her in-home acupuncture practice spread, she attracted a growing number of patients. In 1973, Dr. Harry Oxenhandler, a sympathetic medical doctor, offered to share his medical office during his off-hours with Lee. Dr. Lee worked extremely hard: five days a week, 7 hours a day (usually from 5 or 6 am to 1 pm), and saw about 80 patients per day. However, authorities soon caught wind of her popular acupuncture practice. On April 16, 1974, to the disbelief of her patients Lee was arrested by agents of the Department of Consumer Affairs. Lee was arrested on charges of practicing acupuncture in California without a medical license at her Palo Alto office at 555 Middlefield Road. She was later freed on a five-hundred dollar bail (about five thousand dollars in present time, Dr. Fan notes), facing an additional fine and six months in jail if convicted at the hearing\(^\text{15}\). Meanwhile, Dr. Oxenhandler’s license was suspended because he shared his office with Dr. Lee.

When Lee appeared at her hearing, over a hundred of her patients (which even included the residing judge’s wife) showed up as well, leaving the court officials not knowing how to deal with them. Although she was not the only acupuncturist arrested in California, she was definitely the most well-known\(^\text{16}\). Patients came day after day to protest Lee’s arrest, and to claim their right to continue receiving the only medicine that had truly helped them. News of the widespread support she received drew attention from the state legislature, convincing many that the subject of acupuncture was an urgent social and cultural issue as well as a medical one.

Responding to pressure from the public outcry and actions by the state’s acupuncture society\(^\text{16}\), within a few days acupuncture was legally made an “experimental procedure” by the Governor Reagan. Lee was granted the right to see patients at San Francisco University; the court refunded her fine; and Dr. Oxenhandler’s license was recovered.

In 1976, Governor Jerry Brown signed the legislation that once and for all formally legalized the practice of acupuncture (Figure 2). Lee became one of the first groups of licensed acupuncturists. Due to her impact on the history of acupuncture legislation, many people, especially non-Asian acupuncturists, have treated her as the “first acupuncturist”. Though there were acupuncturists who practiced in California before Lee\(^\text{5,6}\), she might be the most influential one with regard to the beginning stages of the American acupuncture profession, especially in California. Thus the word the “first” actually means “the most influential” in this context.

![Figure 2](https://www.jcimjournal.com/jim) Governor Jerry Brown signed a bill legalizing acupuncture in 1976 (picture was provided by Dr. Arthur Fan)

Soon after, Lee founded an acupuncture practice on Cambridge Avenue where she treated a variety of illnesses, from thyroid problems to migraine headaches. Jean Leong, who observed Lee’s treatments as an adolescent while her mother worked as Lee’s assistant, said that Lee could treat ten patients every hour. In 1998, after suffering her first
stroke at 71 years of age, Lee retired and moved to the Los Angeles area.

3 A pioneer in acupuncture legalization in California

According to Susan Johnson, one of Lee’s closest students and eventual successor, Lee played an important part in acupuncture legislation in California, above and beyond her role during the 1974 and 1976 incidents described above.

The Acupuncture Association of America (AAA) was founded by Lee in July of 1980, to promote public education about acupuncture, provide continuing education classes for licensed practitioners, to guide and support legislative advocacy, and to promote research in the field of acupuncture. Lee continued to lead the organization until her retirement in 1998, and then Ms. Johnson took over the AAA’s leadership.

For about a decade, the AAA single-handedly supported Art Krause, a California lobbyist whose primary work has been on behalf of acupuncturists. Lee offered classes on acupuncture and Chinese medicine in order to raise funds needed to support this legislative work. Mr. Krause, well respected in Sacramento, California, was able to negotiate agreements with influential politicians. Among the friends of the AAA and acupuncture were Dr. Bill Filante and Senators Art Torres and Herschel Rosenthal, all of whom were instrumental in getting many acupuncture bills passed into law. It is because of the monumental efforts of Lee, Krause and the other California acupuncturists are now licensed, have a very comprehensive scope of practice, primary insurance coverage and have been able to accept Medi-Cal (Medi-Cal is California’s medicaid program. This is a public health insurance program which provides needed health care services for low-income individuals including families with children, seniors, persons with disabilities, foster care, pregnant women, and low-income people with specific diseases such as tuberculosis, breast cancer or HIV/AIDS. Medi-Cal is financed equally by the state and federal governments. Dr. Fan notes). “We should all remember the work that Miriam (Lee) and Art (Krause) did together, for our profession, for more than 30 years”, Johnson said.

In 1989, the Council of Acupuncture Organizations (CAO) was formed to unite the profession statewide in the legislative process and share lobbyist financial support. This group was composed of nine different acupuncture communities throughout California, including three Chinese, two Japanese, two Korean and two general, non-Asian groups. This was the first attempt to bring together these different acupuncture communities. Although the group met for only two years, during that time CAO was able to procure acupuncture coverage through Worker’s Compensation. During the 1990’s and thereafter, various new acupuncture or Oriental medicine organizations were established, both in California and nationwide. The AAA, having played a significant role in the early formation and legalization of acupuncture in California, was then able to focus on providing continuing education classes.

“I just think Miriam was the pioneer”, Leong, another one of Lee’s closest students, said, “if it wasn’t for her, I don’t know if acupuncture would have been introduced to the U.S. — and certainly not to California — at the time it happened.”

4 A great teacher, and a spreader of acupuncture and TCM knowledge

Throughout her career, Lee studied with acupuncture masters in China, learning new skills that she took back to the US. These included unusual techniques not taught in American acupuncture or Oriental medicine (AOM) schools. Lee and the AAA sponsored many of these Chinese acupuncture masters to come to her clinic in Palo Alto, California, in order to teach different courses that covered a variety of topics, such as “Master Tung’s Magic Points (董氏奇穴）”, scalp acupuncture, wrist and ankle points, bleeding techniques, herbal formulations, and TCM gynecology and oncology. In the 1970s and early 1980s, an estimated 70% of AOM practitioners working in northern California (currently there are more than 5 000 licensed acupuncturists living in that area; at that time there were not so many, but still a big amount, Dr. Fan notes) attended such events, which made Lee become a best-known acupuncture teacher. She was very famous for using a special set of points, the “Master Tung’s Magic Points”, based on the work of one of her teachers, Dr. Tung Ching Chang (董景昌). This attracted many practitioners to study with her in her clinic as either interns or clinical researchers, besides attending the lectures she gave. Lee’s popular book, entitled Master Tong’s Acupuncture: An Ancient Alternative Style in Modern Clinical Practice, was published in 1992 by Blue Poppy Press.

Tung Ching Chang, widely viewed as one of the greatest acupuncturists who ever lived, practiced a method of acupuncture that was passed down to him through his family from Shandong, China, for more than 300 years. This system is renowned for the spontaneous and miraculous results obtained using just a few needles. This method is unique in that points are located opposite the affected area, and patients tend to notice effects immediately upon needle insertion. Master Tung broke convention of old Chinese culture and began teaching this amazing system of points to those outside of his immediate family. Lee visited Taiwan to learn Master Tung’s points and technique...
in 1973 under the tutelage of Dr. Tung and his close student Dr. Young Wei-Chieh (杨维杰). Lee and Young have served the important teaching role of introducing Tung’s work to the Western world and promoted the progress of acupuncture\[11,18\]. Master Tung had 73 close disciples, most of them in Taiwan, China; however, Lee was not one of them because her study under Master Tung was shorter than that of the other disciples, very few of whom lived in Europe and America. Some of them questioned Lee’s background as Master Tung’s student, believing that only the close disciples were qualified to teach and publish Master Tung’s work. This claim influenced Lee’s plan to spread Master Tung’s acupuncture style in the US and actually blocked publication of a second edition of her book on the teachings from Master Tung. Despite these setbacks, however, many current acupuncture and Oriental medicine programs in the US have started to teach Master Tung’s acupuncture technique. And in some schools, Master Tung’s acupuncture is studied as a doctoral level research topic.

Lee and Frank He, a close student of Lee, were invited to Germany to lecture on Tung’s points in 1997 and He continued doing so until 2005.

Another of Lee’s contributions to American acupuncture is her 10-point protocol, called “One Combination of Points Can Treat Many Diseases,” which is documented in her book entitled Insights of a Senior Acupuncturist[14]. Lee advanced this bilateral combination of 10 points as a valuable tool for the less experienced acupuncturist. They served her well during those years when she had no time for diagnosis beyond recognizing a patient ‘whose middle burner has been attacked’. Lee detailed how these points can be used to treat specific illnesses. The protocol consists of Zusanli (ST36, the best point to move stagnant qi in the middle burner), Sanyinjiao (SP6, supports the liver, kidneys and spleen), Quchi (LI11, moves the colon thus cleansing the body), Hegu (LI4, replenishes qi in the body), and Lieque (LU7, cleans the kidneys, enabling oxygen flow to the brain). Lee found the theoretical basis for this combination in the Huangdi Neijing (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classics). She explains, “When the stomach and spleen, the central jiao, are attached by emotion, pure qi cannot ascend to the brain, and the evil qi, the waste, cannot descend”. These 10 points can facilitate the free flowing of qi into the central jiao, to benefit the liver as well as the kidneys and spleen, to force the evil qi to descend, and to improve brain function. Many acupuncturists think of Lee’s protocol as a secret to success, and attribute it to helping them establish busy acupuncture practices.

After Lee retired, her students such as Susan Johnson, Esther Su, and Frank He, have stepped forward to carry on Lee’s work of spreading the teachings of Dr. Tung’s points and Dr. Lee’s own style of acupuncture in the US and Western countries.

These acupuncture techniques are unique not only because they are so immediately effective, but they are also very simple to learn and apply. As Miriam always said: “the important thing is to learn which key opens which lock.”

Dr. Miriam Lee peacefully passed away on June 24, 2009 in her home in southern California. On December 9, 2009, recognized as the second day of her 83rd birthday, many acupuncture clinics — especially in the northern California — Bay area, offered one day of free acupuncture treatments to patients in order to honor Miriam Lee, the kind-hearted AOM pioneer who made great contributions in the movement to legalize acupuncture in California, and in the teaching of AOM knowledge and business skills.

5 Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Ms. Sarah Faggert for editing support; and Dr. Frank He for providing the photo and reviewing the draft.

6 Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Submission Guide

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