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[1–3]. 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 (谭富园, 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[7–12]; 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
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 father 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.

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.
Fan: You mentioned in an e-mail that Gim was a soldier in an army against the Japanese. After the war, he did some business for a short period of time and then moved to Hong Kong?

Ju: Gim Shek Ju fought in an underground army against the Japanese and tried to remove the Japanese army from his country. In many cases, these were just young men that people might have mistaken for street gangs. These were probably the last group of men in that generation that fought for a single purpose. To me personally, I am proudest of my father knowing that he did that, although he never spoke of it to me directly. We found out all about this a year before our father’s death, when he needed physical assistance from us. My brother (there are three sisters, one brother and me for a total of five living siblings in my family; three others passed away in China) saw five bullet wounds on his back while helping him get dressed. My father said that he was shot running from the Japanese and that single sentence was all he said. We pursued the bigger story from our stepmother, who remembered how he nearly died from those wounds, which took a year to heal. I think it is amazing that my father never spoke of those things, or the terror that took place during the Japanese occupation of China.

Fan: Is there any relationship between your father and Dr. Tin Yau So (苏天佑)? Were they colleagues or was Dr. So the teacher for Dr. Ju before Dr. Ju was in Hong Kong?

Ju: Tin Yau So was not my father’s teacher (however, the author notes here that one student recalled that Gim had mentioned that Dr. So was his Master[9]). They were friends probably from the same community of practitioners in Hong Kong, China. I know that Tin Yau So wanted to come to the U.S., especially after he converted to Christianity. I believe that he stayed in our home for a short time when he first arrived. This cannot be completely confirmed, but both my younger sister and I can recall something vague about this. During 1945 to 1950, Gim had a difficult time and Dr. So had helped him, making them good friends. In return, Gim wanted to help Dr. So when Dr. So mentioned that he wanted to move to the U.S. [for his career].

Dr. Fan notes: Gim and Dr. So were colleagues at the Hong Kong College of Acupuncture; Dr. So was the founder of this school. Gim strongly recommended Dr. So as the best teacher of ACM and let students resume learning ACM under Dr. So[9]. Gim 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 arrangement of a visa by the National Acupuncture Association (founded by Gim’s students Bill Prensky, Steven Rosenblatt, et al.), 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 for his role in bringing formal acupuncture education to the U.S. In 1975, he established the New England School of Acupuncture (Newton, Massachusetts), the first accredited school of acupuncture in the U.S., with the help of his (and Dr. Ju’s) students Steven Rosenblatt, Gene Bruno and others. From these facts, I could say that both Dr. Gim Shek Ju and Dr. Tin Yau So were the fathers of ACM education in the U.S.

Fan: When did Gim come to the U.S.? During what time did he begin his practice in the Chinatown district of LA?

Ju: My father arrived in the U.S. around the 1950s [Dr. Fan notes: Based on personal research, in the Acupuncture Hearing on Oct 19, 1972, Dr. Ju said he had been in this country for 15 years, so he may have arrived in 1957]. He did not settle in Chinatown, LA until the 1960s (probably around 1968). He was still traveling back and forth to Hong Kong at that time because his own family was there. My father’s practice in LA was funded and organized by my stepmother, his third wife, Helen Robertson. The clinic was in the apartment that they lived in. Helen was a veterinarian from Downey, California and a former patient of my father. 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 my father via word of mouth, she was able to drastically improve her condition. By the time I first met her in 1968 (I was four years old), she was walking mostly upright. This is the story that Helen repeatedly told me. Most of my father’s patients were Caucasian, not Chinese.

In fact, very few Chinese came to see him [Dr. Fan notes: This is opposite to most American’s perception—or that many people believed Chinese medicine had its market in the U.S. because Chinese people and the Asian community used it more than Western medicine]. Most of his patients were extremely ill, and suffering from debilitating pain. My father was able to treat patients with very little communication. His powers of intuition and understanding, or “hearing the body”, were probably daunting to many, even modern-day TCM practitioners. But it was the “old” way and, in my 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.

Fan: Please tell me your story of Gim’s acupuncture practice and teaching, especially during the time period of
1969–1970. Because different people may have different perspectives, your version of the story may be with your own personal feelings and perspective.

Ju: I lived with my grandparents in Fresno, California until after my grandmother died. I was seven years old when I moved to Chinatown, LA and it was 1971 (Dr. Fan notes: It should be after Gim had taught two classes of non-Asian students in a Tai Chi center during 1969–1970[7,10,11]). By then, my father already had a thriving acupuncture practice, treating patients inside our three-bedroom apartment. He used one of the bedrooms as his main office and treatment room. Our living room was the waiting room. There were people there from 8 AM until after 5 PM, but usually no later than 6 PM. He often worked six days a week and was always busy doing something. He rarely rested. My father kept a very strict schedule. He got up every morning before dawn and practiced Tai Chi. I don’t know when he learned Tai Chi. My father knew it before I was born. I have old pictures of him practicing Tai Chi in Taiwan in the 1960s, I believe. Then he started his [working] day at 8 AM. He took a lunch break exactly at noon, every day, and ate lunch in Chinatown with friends (probably with his students as well), and even sometimes with me on the weekends. My father was usually in bed by 8 PM unless he had other things to do. His students were not around regularly, or at least not around on a regular basis. My father never really grasped the English language. I often had to translate for patients who were trying to book appointments over the phone. I often had to schedule appointments for him when he was out. I was also his errand girl (my sister Alice might have helped him some before she got married at 19 years old) when I was not in school (i.e., after school and during the weekends), making trips to the herbal store to get formulas and helping him in the room with some of the female patients. I was not more than eight years old when I began performing these tasks. My father took on many patients, so the apartment was filled non-stop with people and he accepted patients outside of the clinic as well. It was not unusual for me to come home and find a limousine parked outside our apartment, either waiting to pick up my father or to drop him off. My father 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. I did not ask. I was simply too young to know what to ask.

When he was still involved with his American students, I remember accompanying my father to the UCLA, where he gave a lecture about meridian/channel theory and how acupuncture works. Another thing my father did that was rather record-breaking at the time was to perform anesthesia on a wisdom tooth removal 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 LA.

I continued helping my father with his practice on-and-off until I turned 14 (this was around 1978, when Gim was about 61 years old). At this time, my father’s local practice had really slowed down. He was traveling more than he was working at home. He was invited to many places, particularly to 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. I did not see him very often at this time because he was traveling so much.

Fan: Why did Gim not teach more students or establish a formal school? How was his practice later on? I have also heard that he got arrested due to “practicing medicine without a license” (which was mentioned in a recollection by one of his students, Steven Rosenblatt[12])?

Ju: My father was not your typical “healer”. He certainly was born with a gift for healing, but he liked to enjoy life, and he really did not want too much responsibility outside of his own practice. He was probably a very good teacher, because he taught me a few things when I was young and he was very clear and thorough. One of the first lessons my father taught me was that the very sick could not handle herbs, due to the energetic properties of the herbs. He said a body had to have the strength to give the herbs foundation. Once a person was stronger then, the healing could be emphasized through the use of herbs.

My father would not try to make commitments that he could not keep. I don’t think he realized how important TCM would become in the U.S., and what it would mean for the Western world. He was a man caught up in his own generation. He was Chinese in every sense of the word and, like his English, he would never embrace the Western world completely. To him, being Chinese was the most important thing. If the situation was different, and his students were Chinese, I think his commitments might have changed. My former brother-in-law, Howard Lee, was one of his students. I think he received a much different training than my father’s Western students, simply because there were no cultural barriers. Howard was Cantonese and had been raised in the same province as my father. Howard spoke the Chinese language, and he was Chinese as well. Howard was one of his very last students, and since he married my sister, he stayed very close to the family until my father died. Howard later divorced my sister and moved to Europe.

I learned later that my father had been a key person or major teacher at the Institute of Taoist Study in LA (Dr. Fan notes: It was located at the Crossroads of the World, in West Hollywood, California, on Sunset Boulevard, which is also Marshall Ho’o’s Tai Chi center). They held Tai Chi
My father was asked to testify before the legislature; from my understanding, the reasons for doing so were to provide a medical doctor’s supervision in a university research project(5). He was not dragged into jail like other practitioners. There was one case of a false arrest, where police mistook bear claws, which my father had bought for an herbal treatment, for human tissue. This was a misunderstanding and no charges were later filed. I still laugh about this sometimes. My stepmother actually called the police, because she was frightened by what she found in the freezer.

Fan: I have also heard that Gim moved to Nevada? If this is true, do you have any stories about that?

Ju: I know my father spent a lot of time in Nevada, and he might have lived there for a short time, but not more than for a year or two. He also did some work out there, and later had a lady-friend he was very fond of in Nevada. By the time I was sixteen, my father had semi-retired, moved back to Chinatown, LA and was living in a room in shared housing with other single men [at this point, Gim had already been divorced from his third wife Helen for a while]. This was around 1980–1981. After that, he moved to Fresno, California, where he kept a very small practice out of my grandparent’s house. I don’t think he was very successful, given the location. He continued to travel, but remained in a semi-retired state. My father died in Hong Kong in 1987, right after the birth of my eldest son. He was 70 years old.

Fan: Do you know about Gim’s activities or involvement in acupuncture legislation in California and Nevada?

Ju: My father was asked to testify before the legislature, to answer questions about acupuncture. This was during the acupuncture legislation hearings in 1970s, and he testified with his major students. He was never able to do this alone due to his language barrier, and I believe Marshall Ho’o had to accompany him. There are public records in California that document these events. However, I do not have any specifics of my own to recall. I am sure that my father contributed to part of the legislation that legitimized acupuncture in California. I don’t believe he was the only one. But he was perhaps the first. I remember that Jerry Brown, who was Governor at the time, came up with a temporary legislation that allowed acupuncture to be used in California without having the practitioners in jail (Dr. Fan notes: in 1974). Later that initial legislation turned into what it is today. I think it was Jerry Brown’s foresight that made it all possible. If there had been another Governor in office, I don’t know what TCM would be like here now. Jerry Brown is Governor again in California, and this is his final term. You should look into this, because it is a very important legal milestone for TCM.

My father was grandfathered into the practice, and that was probably a great relief. With his language issues, and the lack of a formal education, taking an exam would have been prohibitive for him. The grandfathering was pushed heavily by his students.

Dr Fan notes: From my understanding, the reasons Dr. Gim Shek Ju did not teach more students or become involved in establishing a formal TCM or acupuncture school were the following: (1) His main interest was his clinical practice, and at that time he had a thriving private practice. In fact, he had to ensure that he earned enough money for supporting his large family, so having a successful private practice was key. (2) He actually tried to help his former colleague Dr. Tin Yau So, and perhaps had the intention to give the opportunity of establishing the first formal school in the U.S. to Dr. So. (3) He might have not realized how important TCM education would become in the U.S. and what it would mean for the Western world. (4) His English was not great. (5) Perhaps he did not want to completely break with old traditions of teaching. Nevertheless his accomplishments and influences were and continue to be extremely influential to the practice of acupuncture in the U.S. He was the primary instructor and dean at the first school of acupuncture or TCM, the Institute for Taoist Studies[7,8,10–13], in the U.S. He was well known to people as a master acupuncturist during the 1970s in the West Coast. He, with his partner Marshall Ho’o, and his students William Prensky, Steven Rosenblatt, Lewis Prince, David Bresler, etc., was involved in many events and lectures[10,11], as well as in the establishment of legislation governing the practice of acupuncture and TCM in California and Nevada in the 1970s[13].

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Competing interests

The author is an independent researcher, and declares that he has no competing interests. Ms. Mamie Ju was referred to the author by Dr. Ju’s former students, Dr. William (Bill) Prensky and Dr. Gene Bruno, who have been key persons in acupuncture development in the U.S. Due to the limitation of the interviewee’s personal
experience and perspective, this article is not a full piece of the acupuncture history in that time and there may be some omissions and errors; comments or corrections are welcomed and appreciated.

REFERENCES


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