Dr. Wu: A beautiful, moving and meditative song
— In memory of Dr. Jing Nuan Wu, a pioneer of acupuncture and a Chinese medicine doctor in the United States

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KEYWORDS: acupuncture; United States; history of medicine

Few popular songs are titled a doctor’s name and even fewer are sung directly by the doctor’s patients. However, the song Dr. Wu might be the exception. After sung by Steely Dan[1], a well-known American jazz-rock band, Dr. Wu has been loved by many Americans for over 35 years. The beautiful, moving, and meditative song was written in 1975 after Steely Dan had abandoned touring and reconvened in Los Angeles, the United State[2]. As one of the best Steely Dan songs, Dr. Wu literally describes the love between Katy and a young Cuban man, and because of Dr. Wu, the girl leaves the young man. Actually, the song writer and singer Donald Fagen, wrote the song as a metaphor commemorating one of the band members’ recovery (probably himself) from drugs with the help of Dr. Wu[3]. Hence, the song is a cryptic lyrical tribute.

1 Who is Dr. Wu?

In the Steely Dan Dictionary[4], the titular doctor is identified as: “Doctor Jing Nuan Wu (1933-2002), an acupuncturist and artist based in Washington, D.C., emigrated from China to the United State at a young age and graduated from Harvard to become a Wall Street venture capitalist, finally setting up a Taoist clinic in Washington, D.C. in 1973.”

I met Dr. Jing Nuan Wu (胡振南) in 2002, just one month before his death. At the time, I had only lived in the United State for one year. I had just received my acupuncture license and planned to practice Chinese medicine in Washington, D.C., so I called Dr. Wu’s office to ask for some advice from him, and he agreed to see me. I did not know he was very ill. We met in one of his offices in Georgetown, located on the beautiful north bank of the Potomac River. He was very thin and wore a black traditional Chinese silk shirt. Because he could not speak Mandarin and I could not speak Cantonese, we used English to communicate. His voice was very soft due to his illness. Dr. Wu described the history of Chinese medicine in Washington, D.C. and he hoped that Chinese medicine could prosper from generation to generation. He said that he was aware that I was a young Chinese medicine doctor with several achievements and expressed that I could work with him should he recover from kidney cancer. It was a pity that the arrangement was never fulfilled.
Dr. Wu passed away on December 3, 2002.

Dr. Wu was a legendary person. He was born in Guangdong, China, a province near Hong Kong, but was raised in Greenwich, Connecticut, in the United States. According to the recall of a friend of his[3], Dr. Wu came to the United States with his parents when he was five years old. His parents were laundry workers and worked hard to raise him. Their work paid off as he later graduated from Harvard University with a degree in language and history. He moved to Middleburg, Virginia in the 1960s and caused a stir in Virginia hunt country when he bought the Rattlesnake Ridge retreat from Jacqueline Kennedy[6]. He had an “extreme crisis” in early 1970s before becoming a Chinese medicine doctor[6-7].

Dr. Wu was aventure capitalist in the 1960s and had interest in a firm that was developing Apollo space capsules. He had trouble with the authorities in that period; the immigration officials accused him for faking papers and the Securities and Exchange Commission suspected him of investment improprieties (he denied both wrongdoings). He was involved in a series of tiring law suits and became bankrupt. His United States citizenship was maintained, but he could no longer be a venture capitalist. During this crisis period, he visited his family in Hong Kong. During this visit, an elder relative gave him some life-changing advice — “It’s time for you to do service.” he said. It was then that Dr. Wu learned Chinese medicine from his uncle and was commissioned to write a book on Chinese medicine in English. When he realized that Chinese medicine was effective, he made a decision — instead of writing about Chinese medicine, he began to practice it.

He returned to the Washington D. C. to establish the Taoist Health Institute in 1973, and developed a stable stream of high-profile clients. Under the supervision of a medical doctor, he became one of the earliest acupuncturists/Chinese medicine doctors in the United States. At that time, Washington, D. C. was the first local authority that allowed acupuncturists to legally practice. Dr. Wu was most successful during the late 1970s to early 2000s[6-7]. At the time, when people in Washington, D. C. thought of acupuncture and Chinese medicine, the first name that came to mind was Dr. Jing Nuan Wu[13]. As his friend wrote in a book, “a Chinese idiom says, ‘death is not terrible; two decades later, he will become a hero again.’ Dr. Wu actually became a hero in Chinese medicine only several years after his ‘death in Wall Street’”[13].

2 Dr. Wu’s achievements

Dr. Wu established an acupuncture detoxification center, which is the first notable work of him in 1980s. Due to his deep concern for young American addicted to drugs and being encouraged by the initial success of his acupuncture detoxification test, Dr. Wu established a drug recovery center in 1983 or 1984 called the Green Cross Center for Traditional Medicine, located at 1510 U Street NW, Washington, D. C. This center was well-known because it was probably the second most successful acupuncture detoxification center in the United States. The first was established by Dr. Michael Smith in the Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx, New York, which saw 200 to 300 patients every day, and is financially supported by the state. In contrast, Dr. Wu did all the work on his own with great difficulty. His clinic had no funding from the city, the state, or the federal government. In an interview[14] by Dr. Redwood in early 1990s, Dr. Wu said that he and his associates at Green Cross did the work because they had hoped that it would encourage other people to do the same. However, the clinic required a great deal of money and dedication. “I know of many groups throughout the country that have tried to do what we have done, and they have not been successful because of the lack of one or the other. I can not tell you how much dedication it really does take. The staff are burnt out. We are basically on our second group of staff in seven years. Luckily, our practitioners work for very little. So what has happened is that no one works full-time except two of the administrative staff. Everybody else works part-time. They make money outside of this work, so that they can keep body and soul together. I subsidize the clinic through my personal work, and one or two of my friends have put in substantial
amounts of money.” At that time, his detoxification clinic might have been the only one using Chinese herbs, alongside the acupuncture, to treat drug addiction and acquired immune deficiency syndrome[6] in the United States.

His second notable work was the push for the first acupuncture regulation in Washington, D.C., which was released in 1989. He served as the chairman of the Acupuncture Advisory Committee for the District of Columbia, which has advised the Board of Medicine, Washington, D.C., on the regulation and licensing of acupuncturists in the District for over 10 years. He did “one of the more frustrating jobs” in his career — the Washington, D.C. Board of Medicine, and Dr. Wu had agreed early on with regard to the acupuncture guidelines. It then took Dr. Wu and his colleagues three years and five lawyers to put out only 12 pages of rules and regulations. “That is because Washington, D.C. mires in a system of bureaucracy that is impossible to understand. That impossibility stems from one critical lack — that they have no one in the city bureaucracy that can type! So we ended up in a situation where the lawyers get so frustrated that after five months they quit. In dealing with this, it was not until our fifth lawyer that we finally got the rules and regulations into a piece where we could publish them. It is that type of procedure which I think is analogous to the drug situation.”[7]

Dr. Wu also played an important role in acupuncture development in the United States. In 1994, as one of three licensed acupuncturists (the other two were Dr. Lixing Lao, and Dr. Xiaoming Tian) was invited, he gave a presentation on acupuncture as a medical device and the safety of acupuncture in a workshop co-sponsored by the Office of Alternative Medicine, National Institute of Health (NIH), and the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Since this workshop, acupuncture needles were no longer listed as an investigational device in the FDA regulations (as it did for 20 years prior to the workshop). This was a milestone in acupuncture development and make acupuncture have broader applications in clinical practice. As a renowned acupuncturist, a Chinese medicine scholar and a practitioner, Dr. Wu was also invited to be one of the key board members listed for the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine — one of main journals in the research of acupuncture and Oriental medicine, in which he published an article introducing the history of acupuncture.

His third notable work was his introduction of Taoism and promotion of Chinese medicine in Georgetown University, George Washington University, and many other institutions all over the country. He translated and published several important classic books related to Chinese medicine, completing the “homework” that his elder relative had given him many years before. Such works were the Spiritual Pivot (Lingshu,《灵枢》, published by University of Hawaii Press, 1993), Yi Jing (I Ching,《易经》, published by The Taoist Center, 1999 and earlier), and An Illustrated Chinese Materia Medica with the collaboration of Dr. Qian Xinzhou, the former Minister of Ministry of Health of the People’s Republic of China (published posthumously by the Oxford University Press, 2002). These books have been widely cited by Western scholars. Before his death, Dr. Wu also completed a translation of Tao Te Ching/Lao Tzu (《道德经 / 老子》), which, sadly, was not published.

Dr. Wu’s fourth notable work was the use of multiple natural remedies to treat patients. In the 1980s, there was a natural health center located at Wisconsin Avenue and 30 Street that included acupuncture, Chinese herbology, nutrition consultation, Chinese medicine lectures, as well as an Oriental medicine book store and a small Oriental dietary therapy restaurant. One of my patients recalled that this center was also established and administered by Dr. Wu. Dr. Wu invited several renowned practitioners to take part in the center’s work. The center was unique and attracted many people. However, because of financial difficulties, it closed after several years.

Dr. Wu was involved in promoting Chinese herbology. He said that among Chinese medicine therapies, Chinese herbology is the major one. He was one of the earliest well-known Chinese herbalists in the Washington, D.C. area. Besides his daily clinical work, he carried out a clinical study for women going through menopause using Jia Wei Xiao Yao San, also called Free and Easy Wanderer Plus Powder under a NIH funding. His work was recommended by FDA to the public as an alternative therapy for menopausal women.

3 Dr. Wu, the artist for healing

In the 1980s, Dr. Wu began creating abstract art that embodies the holistic ideas of the traditional Chinese healing system, and had an exhibition at the National Botanical Gardens (Washington, D.C., USA). “My vision for the artwork grew when a patient who was ill with cancer asked me to paint a picture for him. Suddenly I realized that I had found a way to heal many more people than the number I could see in my office every day,” he said. His paintings and sculptures eventually evolved into therapeutic devices, used to promote health, balance, and relaxation by evoking responses from the inner aspects of our being (see Figure 1). Once upon a time, Dr. Wu mentioned that “visual art can and should be celebrated not only for its aesthetic and decorative value and as a record of historical events but also for its potential to help us express, understand and heal ourselves”. He said: “The quest for the transcendental experience has been a popular trip for mystics, and religious
persons through the ages. They have followed the paths of meditation and spiritual practice. In the empirical vision and methods of traditional Chinese medicine, entry to the transcendental is an everyday experience. The most significant outward manifestation of the transcendental state is relaxation of the physical body. I attempt with my art to change and to reset the clockwork of our inner being to the most beneficial and health-inducing rhythm. When reset and unburdened from the tics of anxiety and social pressure, one is being entered a calm field where new patterns of behavior can develop and take hold within. These quiet inner fields are my new medical country and my artwork is the way of passage." Ten years after his death, his paintings are still available for purchase online.\(^\text{4}\)

In a city founded on convention, Wu is a soothing reminder that there is another way.\(^\text{6}\)

Dr. Wu did many beautiful things; people will remember him. His life of promoting acupuncture and Chinese medicine was just like the beautiful, moving and meditative song that shares his name.

4 Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Ms. April Enriquez for English editing; Ms. Ann Miller, a former assistant of Dr. Wu’s clinic, provided information about Dr. Wu, and permitted the use of the picture. The interviewer was Dr. Arthur Yin Fan.

5 Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

REFERENCES