

# The American Acupuncturist

AAAOM's Official Publication

for Practitioners

of Oriental Medicine

English

Chinese

中文

Japanese

日本語

Korean

한글



AAAOM  
全美中醫公會

Winter 2010

Volume 54



# Acupuncture, 1965-85: Birth of a New Organized Profession in the United States

By Sherman Cohn, BSFS, JD, LLM

This paper was first presented as a talk at the 2008 AAAOM conference. It is still a work in progress, with plans to turn it into a published piece.



## Part 1 of 2 Parts:

[In the fall issue of *The American Acupuncturist* (vol. 53, “Franklin Bache: A Pioneer of American Acupuncture” by Michael Devitt, BA), we learned about acupuncture, or “acupuncturation” as it was called, that was researched and developed back in the 1800s by Franklin Bache and to some extent by Thomas A. Elliott and John Jefferson Hall. To learn more about this time, please refer to a remarkable book by Dr. Linda L. Barnes, a medical anthropologist from Boston University, titled “Needles, Herbs, Gods and Ghosts: China, Healing, and the West to 1848” (Harvard University Press, 2005).]

There is no doubt that when people from Asia came to the United States in the 1840s, 50s, and 60s to work in the fisheries and the forests of the West Coast and then help build the railroad, they brought their medicine with them. In that respect, they were doing the same thing that was done by each of the various immigrant groups that came to the United States. (My own mother, who emigrated from Eastern Hungary, brought with her the medicine of her community, particularly herbs, much of it taught to her by her grandmother, who was the healer of the district in which they lived. I remember my mother trading remedies with our neighbor Mildred Trambley, who had brought her family remedies including herbs from her native Ireland.) So it should be no surprise that the Asians did the same – and along with them came acupuncture, herbs, Asian bodywork and martial arts, and the Asian diet.

However, as we know, the United States went through a century or more of deep racial prejudice. In most of the country, the Chinese and Japanese lived in their own communities. As all people in those circumstances do, they circled their wagons in self defense. By and large, their medicine stayed within the ethnic community, and as long as they stayed in their own ethnic communities, the general community – meaning the police and other authorities – did not disturb them. As an

understandable reaction, by and large, the practitioners also tried to keep their medicine within the Asian communities. Thus, when Dr. James Gordon, then a young medical doctor in the Bronx, went to New York Chinatown to find out about acupuncture, all those with whom he had spoken in English just a few minutes before suddenly could no longer understand the language. Others reported similar experiences.

A few of the Asian practitioners ventured out into the general community or encouraged people from the general community to come to them as patients. But those practitioners were then prosecuted for the crime of “practicing medicine without a license,” often jailed, and driven out of business.

An interesting study is that of Fong Wan, who practiced Chinese herbal medicine in the San Francisco Bay area. He was known as the “King of the Herbalists” and had a large following in the general population. He was arrested twenty times, but he was one of the few who fought back. He would appear at hearings with a large number of satisfied patients, and his attorney would put them on the stand, one by one. Before the list was fully called, the judge, needing to proceed to other cases, dismissed the charges.

At a particularly spectacular hearing before the Federal Trade Commission, in January, 1940, more than 200 patients voluntarily testified on behalf of Fong Wan and the seemingly miraculous relief his treatments had provided after they had received no relief from Western medicine. The FTC ordered Fong Wan to stop advertising that his herbal medicine was a helpful therapy. He did. But he then published, verbatim, the FTC hearing in various newspapers, 14 pages of it in a booklet, which he distributed free. The result was tremendous publicity and a vast increase in business.

Miriam Lee, an acupuncturist as well as herbalist, was similarly prosecuted multiple times. She spent some days in jail, more than

once I am told, but she persisted, despite the official persecutions. Most practitioners, though, pulled back into the Asian communities, where they were safe, and stopped offering their services to those outside those communities.

Many of you may recall that when we go back about forty or so years ago there was no real AOM profession in the United States. There were no schools and very few practitioners outside of the ethnic communities known as Chinatowns or Japantowns. Things began to change in the mid to late 1960s. A fascinating set of questions is Why? How did it happen? And where did they find the teachers? There were no AOM schools like the ones that many of you have attended.

In the 1960s our country was in turmoil, much of it over the war being fought in Vietnam. This was an era of the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and then Robert F. Kennedy as well as the Kent State University killings of demonstrating students. Faith and hope in the system as we knew it disappeared, particularly among the young. Many young, educated, middle class people were opting out of a society that to them appeared to be repressive and had no hope. Some went over the border to Canada or to Europe or South America. Others became the Flower Children, the Hippies, and the Yippies. Some became more violent, joining groups such as the Weathermen. All were educated and middle class – and searching for something alternative, something more satisfying, in life.

During this time, some of these people, and I would put the number at 25, no more than 50, found Asian medicine and particularly acupuncture and Oriental medicine. For the purpose of this study, I have now interviewed many, but not all, of these people. Almost all are still alive; a few have passed away. I draw from these interviews and whatever small amount paper records I have been able to find. Let me tell you some of their stories.

*“Many of you may recall that when we go back about forty or so years ago there was no real AOM profession in the United States... Things began to change in the mid to late 1960s. A fascinating set of questions is Why?”*

First there is Ted Kapchuck, currently a professor at the Harvard Medical School, working with Dr. David Eisenberg. In the mid-60s, having graduated with a degree in Eastern Religion, he was living in a commune. In his own words, he was a leftist, a communist. The FBI and the police were after him to testify before a grand jury. He took refuge in a Chinese safe house, a “Red House,” in California. There, he had little to do except read. There were books in English, and the *Peking Review*; most of it was Communist propaganda from Maoist China, but, for the first time, he learned something about AOM. It fascinated him.

In 1969, when he could leave the safe house, Ted hooked up with a teacher in San Mateo, California, Chang dan An, and studied AOM. He then studied it for a year in Taiwan, but he was looking for a more systematized way of approaching the subject. He went to Macao, where there was organized a school taught and attended by overseas Chinese who at that time could not go back to China. He was later joined by Dan Bensky and a few other Americans. Ted stayed in Macao until 1976, when he was able to return safely to the States. At that time, he became a teacher at the newly founded New England School of Acupuncture—but that takes us to our next story.

Second, in the mid-60s, Steven Rosenblatt, Bill Prensley, David Bresler and Gene Bruno were students at UCLA. Dave Bresler was working on a PhD in neuropsychology and was head of the graduate students organization. Steve Rosenblatt and Bill Prensley were working on master's, and Gene was a pre-med student. All were involved in the anti-war movement, participating in marches and sit-ins in California and Washington, D.C. They occupied public land for the people, maintaining tent cities. They were leaders of the group that shut down UCLA. Bill Prensley was the chair of that Strike Committee. And they were arrested; Dave Bresler was arrested three times.

(A side story: In the 1990s, Dave Bresler was appointed to the White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine. In filling out his security

questionnaire, he, of course, listed his arrests. When he was interviewed by the FBI, he told them about the arrests and that he was sure this would disqualify him for a presidential appointment. They responded: arrests during the anti-Vietnam war era are a badge of honor. Dave was not disqualified and served on the Commission.)

In 1969, these four students began to study Tai Chi with Marshall Ho'o, and they spoke with him about Chinese culture. Marshall Ho'o told them about Chinese medicine, including acupuncture. As Steve Rosenblatt states, they had never even heard the word “acupuncture” before then. They became quite accomplished at Tai Chi. On Chinese New Year Marshall Ho'o took them to perform in Chinatown. While there, they saw some acupuncture being practiced and were fascinated by it. They told Marshall Ho'o that they wanted to learn how it was done. Marshall Ho'o introduced them to Dr. Ju Gim Shek, known as Dr. Kim, who humbly and simply practiced Chinese medicine on Cottage Avenue in Chinatown, largely unknown outside the Chinese community. Coincidentally, Dr. Kim had seen them perform Tai Chi. He had been amazed that these “Lo Fans”—a

term roughly equivalent to the Mormon use of “gentile” or the Jewish use of “goyim”—could do so well. Marshall Ho'o convinced Dr. Kim to take the four young men on as students, despite the aversion to teaching the medicine to outsiders.

They saw Dr. Kim perform what to them seemed to be miracles. An old Jewish man came in with what Dave Bresler said was the worst case of osteoarthritis he had ever seen; his hands were so gnarled that he really could not use them. Dr. Kim said, “Arthritis. That easy.” The four looked at each other and shrugged, “Oh, yeah!” Dr. Kim gave the old man one treatment. After about 15 minutes, the old man began to cry: “This is the first time in years, I feel no pain.” They watched with amazement as the gnarled fingers unraveled. Gene Bruno tells of referring his girlfriend's mother who had terrible migraine headaches. Western medicine gave her no relief at all. Dr. Kim's treatments relieved her migraines; the four young men were hooked.

In order to study with Dr. Kim, first, they had to earn his respect. They followed him around, always observing. They cleaned the clinic at the end of the day, did grocery shopping, took children to school, and performed other go-fer activities. Finally, Dr. Kim was ready to teach. But he wanted payment of \$200 a week, which our “merrie band” did not have. So they recruited about 10 others who each paid \$20 a week. And classes began.

In 1970, they began to meet as a class twice a week in Marshall Ho'o's Tai Chi studio on Sunset Blvd. in a Hollywood strip mall called

## THE CAREER CONNECTION

**Connect to the Right People and Opportunities with NYCC'S CAREER OPPORTUNITIES DATABASE... FREE!**

**Finger Lakes School of Acupuncture & Oriental Medicine of New York Chiropractic College Career Development Center**

**For more information:  
PHONE: 1-315-568-3039  
WEB SITE: [www.nycc.edu](http://www.nycc.edu)**



- Sell your Acupuncture Practice
- Hire an Acupuncture Associate/IC
- Sell Acupuncture Equipment
- Rent Acupuncture Office Space

**Send postings by:  
FAX: 1-315-568-3566  
E-MAIL: [career@nycc.edu](mailto:career@nycc.edu)**

The Crossroads of the World. They called this the Institute for Taoist Studies in Los Angeles – which is truly the first school of AOM in the United States.

They studied in classic style; that is, they worked in Dr. Kim's clinic during the day, observing, helping. Then in the evening they gathered to discuss what they had seen during the day and listen to a lecture on what they should learn out of that experience. Gene Bruno recalls that, when they showed up for the first class, they each had notebooks, to take notes like good American students. Dr. Kim immediately objected: "In the head. Not in notebook," said Dr. Kim. "What happens if you lose notebook and there is nothing in head? No notebook." So they listened intently and then went home and cooperatively wrote it all out in their notebooks. Thus were born the first instructional materials in acupuncture.

After some time, one Saturday Dr. Kim asked Steve Rosenblatt, Bill Prensky, and another of the students, Louie Prince, whether they were serious about really learning acupuncture. When they responded with a resounding "Yes!" he said that he was now ready to truly teach them. They would be students five days a week, all day, and then on Saturday they would help him teach the regular class. If they were serious, they would start on Monday, two days later. They gave up everything else and became fulltime students – six days a week. They became a part of Dr. Kim's family. They became his "Lo Fan Sons" where he provided them with everything they needed, including meals.

In July, 1971, China, which had been closed to Westerners, finally invited Western newsmen to their country and a very important event occurred: James Scotty Reston, probably the most respected newspaper columnist of the day, went to China where he had an appendicitis attack. He was operated on while he was there, and then his post-operative pain and nausea were controlled by acupuncture. This captured the imagination of the media persons who were there, who then visited hospitals and clinics and saw acupuncture being used effectively, mainly as an anesthetic. They wrote about what they observed and took pictures. The news swept the U.S. Many went acupuncture-wild. Acupuncture fever was continued with President Nixon's visit to China in 1972.

**One Saturday in 1972**, while the group was studying with Dr. Kim, there was a knock at the door. A news crew from the local CBS affiliate wanted to know: "Is this where the

*"Interest in acupuncture in the West was overwhelming, but education was non-existent. Through the NAA, this band of budding acupuncturists began to lecture, mainly to doctors and dentists. A program for the USC School of Dentistry was so oversold that it had to be moved from the largest lecture hall in the university to the grand ballroom of the Ambassador Hotel."*

American hippies are studying acupuncture?" Yes, the students were "alternative" looking. Bill Prensky had a pony-tail down to the small of his back. CBS wanted to film them and do a story about them. Acupuncture was hot, and they were the only Lo Fans in town.

**So they did what any good group of Americans with a mission would do. They got haircuts. Some bought new clothes. And they went on TV. After their interview, they formed a non-profit organization called the National Acupuncture Association and elected officers, with Bill Prensky as president. While their Institute for Taoist Studies was the first formal acupuncture school in the United States, the NAA was the first formal professional organization for acupuncturists.**

Interest in acupuncture in the West was overwhelming, but education was non-existent. Through the NAA, this band of budding acupuncturists began to lecture, mainly to doctors and dentists. A program for the USC School of Dentistry was so oversold that it had to be moved from the largest lecture hall in the university to the grand ballroom of the Ambassador Hotel. Workshops at the University of Oregon were so popular they were scheduled back to back. And so it went throughout the country. As there were very few persons who could give such lectures in English, they were much in demand. J.R. Worsley came from England to do several lecture tours.

In 1972, Dr. Kim took Steve Rosenblatt to Hong Kong to meet his master, Dr. James Tin Yau So. Dr. Kim had to convince Dr. So that Steve Rosenblatt was a worthy receptacle of this medicine. When Steve was accepted and began studying, he was the first Westerner to be admitted to the Hong Kong Acupuncture College. There is another important thread here. Dr. So, who had converted to an evangelical form of Christianity, felt that he had received a tremendous gift from the West. He felt his mission was to repay this gift by sharing Chinese medicine with the West, and he had a premonition that he would do so in the United States. As Dr. So explained in his

1985 book, "God, step by step, guided me to come and work in America." When Steve invited Dr. So to come to Los Angeles, he agreed.

But there were problems to be resolved. First, to conduct experiments on humans at UCLA, approval had to be given by the University's Human Subjects Protection Committee. Dave Bresler, by then a faculty member at UCLA, obtained the support of the outgoing chair of the Anesthesiology Department and put in proposal after proposal for approval. Each one was turned down. At about the 12th turndown, he was told by the chair of the committee, "You might just as well quit. This committee will never approve an experiment with acupuncture." Dave's response was: "I will not quit. I have the academic freedom right to submit proposals."

Then a strange coincidence happened. A faculty member who was active in the anti-war movement, Angela Davis, was fired, and UCLA was censured by the Association of American University Professors for violation of her academic freedom. That is a big deal in academia, and UCLA was very sensitive about this censure. When Dave Bresler submitted his 17th request for approval, the newly appointed chair, Dr. John Dillon, went to the chair of the Human Subjects Protection Committee and told him that if this one was turned down he, Dr. Dillon, would join Dr. Dave Bresler in an academic freedom complaint to the AAUP. The request was approved.

Now, about the problem of a visa. With the approval of his project and the support of his chair, Dr. Dave Bresler, on behalf of the Department of Anesthesiology at UCLA, created a research program in acupuncture, the UCLA Acupuncture Research Project, and applied for a visa for Dr. So as an "Alien of Distinguished Merit and Ability." The visa was granted. As far as is known, this is the first recognition of acupuncture by any agency of the United States Government.

Another problem was money and space. While UCLA had approved the research project, they furnished neither money to

carry it out nor a place where it could be conducted. Using the NAA, the group began to raise money. However, many of those who were interested in giving wanted their contributions to be tax deductible. Dave Bresler solved that problem by recruiting the UCLA Foundation, authorized under Section 501(c)(3) to receive tax-deductible contributions. The contributions were earmarked for the conduct of acupuncture research. As the project proposed by Dr. Bresler was the only acupuncture research at UCLA, the money was theirs to use.

Dave, Steve, and Bill located space in the basement of the psychology building that was used for storage of abandoned equipment. Dave went to the chair and asked for the space. The chair was hesitant, saying perhaps the department might need it in the future. Dave offered to pay \$3,000 a month rent. The chair said that the space belonged to the State of California so rent could not be charged. Dave asked if they could have the space if he found the way to transfer \$3,000 a month into the Department of Psychology's account—money that the chair could use for scholarships or faculty support or whatever other reasons he wanted. The chair agreed.

Another problem was that it would be illegal for Dr. So to use needles in California; this was considered to be the practice of medicine, and he was not a California MD. They then used the National Acupuncture Association – small, but the first organization in the field – and convinced the California legislature to pass a law (Duffy-Song Bill, 1972) making it legal for an acupuncturist to practice acupuncture at a medical school under direct MD supervision.

Dr. So worked at UCLA during the day. He taught the students in the Institute for Taoist Studies in the evening. He had a private practice in AOM on Saturdays, and he gave sermons in an evangelical church on Sundays. He was a busy man.

When it came time for Steve, Bill, Dave, and Gene to begin practicing acupuncture on their own, they found that in California it was illegal to do so outside of a medical school research program. After all, they had been instrumental in having that law passed! Licensing laws were passed by the California legislature but were vetoed by Governor Ronald Reagan.

Massachusetts, meanwhile, had a regulation that permitted the practice of acupuncture under the general supervision of a medical doctor. It need not be part of a medical school research program, and the medical doctor

need not be physically present in the room. Steve, Bill, and Gene moved to Massachusetts and began their practices. David stayed at UCLA.

The three then thought about starting a school. They invited Dr. So to join them, which he did. In early 1975 they started the James-Steven School of Acupuncture, named after James Tin Yau So and Steve Rosenblatt. This school was informal and not licensed by the state. However, by 1976 it evolved into the New England School of Acupuncture, which was the first school to be licensed by a state as a school for the teaching of acupuncture in the United States.

To finish this part of the story: in 1975, Ronald Reagan left office, and Jerry Brown became governor. He signed an acupuncture licensing bill into law. It was then time for the Medical Regulatory Board to create licensing requirements. The Board asked Dr. David Bresler and Robert Duggan to testify. They testified that, in their opinion, there should be no required curriculum; the only requirement should be competency. (More will be discussed about Robert Duggan in Part 2.)

The Board said that is all well and good, but American practice is to prescribe a minimum time for education and the curriculum of that education. When the Board asked how long it would take to put those things together, Dave Bresler told them they would need to gather a group of experts, and it would take four to six months to come up with a complete answer. The chair of the Board told him the Board did not have that kind of time, the Board would adjourn for lunch, and that they wanted the answer after lunch. Dave, Bob and Steve Rosenblatt, who was with them, found a corner of the men's room where they could talk. Should it be three or four academic years? They decided on three. They jotted down a curriculum. After the lunch break, they again went before the Board which asked for their scribbled notes. Without any real discussion, the Board approved those papers as the first official requirements of any state.

By 1976, California had a licensing law. Steve Rosenblatt and Gene Bruno therefore returned to Los Angeles from Boston. Dr. So stayed in Boston with the New England School of Acupuncture. Steve and Gene began their own school in Gene's living room meeting three times a week, using their notes from their classes with Dr. Kim and Dr. So. The story goes that when Gene's wife evicted them from the living room, they adjourned to Gene's garage. Soon after, they rented space in West Los Angeles for this nine-month pro-

gram. Dr. So taught some of the classes and signed the diplomas. This was the beginning of the California Acupuncture College.

*Part 2 of this article will appear in a future issue.*

Sherman Cohn, professor of law at Georgetown University, has worked on behalf of the AOM field since its regulatory inception in the late 1970s. He has served as chair of the Accreditation Commission of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine and as a board member of the former National Acupuncture Alliance. He is an active board member for the Integrative Healthcare Policy Consortium, the National Acupuncture Foundation, and the Tai Sophia Institute in Maryland.

**Author's note:** As this is a work in progress, the reader who has any information concerning these matters is asked to submit it to the author. It may be that your recollection of one of more of these incidents is different than what is in this article. If you have any paper records of any of these matters, that would be very helpful. Thank you for your help. cohn@law.georgetown.edu

