The Birth of Acupuncture in America: The White Crane's Gift

By Steven Rosenblatt, MD, PhD, LAc, and Keith Kirts

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BEFORE READING THIS BOOK, I had no idea of the hurdles involved in bringing acupuncture to North America. If I thought about it at all, perhaps I naïvely dismissed it as “no big deal.” However, it actually required passionate people with keen minds doing a lot of planning and catching a few lucky breaks. This is a book written by a couple of those people. Steven Rosenblatt, MD, PhD, LAc, and Keith Kirts are longtime friends and fishing buddies. In *The Birth of Acupuncture in America*, they recollect the late 1960s and early 1970s, when acupuncture first started to stir the continental collective consciousness.

Dr. Rosenblatt (Dr. R) was on the ground floor of the emergence. He and a couple of University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA) graduate laboratory partners in the university’s department of psychology were studying brain chemistry and pain mechanisms when they met Dr. Ju Gim Shek (fondly known as Dr. Ju or Dr. Kim) in a *t’ai chi* class in 1968. On discovering that he was a respected acupuncturist, they asked him to teach them what he knew. These were heady times. The “hippie” movement was in full swing; China was opening up; and Eastern ideas of meditation and energy medicine were attracting attention. Although initially hesitant because of the cultural clash, Dr. Ju eventually relented. In actuality, his vision was to bring acupuncture to the West anyway, after being forced to leave China during Mao’s revolution. Was this the right moment? Were these enthusiastic Americans the right students? Perhaps so.

Dr. R and some colleagues apprenticed with Dr. Ju for a couple of years. Then, in 1971, Dr. R and his partner Kathy went to Hong Kong to study under Dr. James Tin Yau So at the Hong Kong Acupuncture College, where they acquired degrees in Oriental Medicine. Around the same time, a jour-

nalist covering the planning of Nixon’s 1972 visit to China had an emergency appendectomy there, and this journalist experienced acupuncture given to him to treat his postoperative pain. Concurrently, other prominent medical people witnessed neurosurgery with anesthesia supplemented by acupuncture. Everyone was suitably impressed, and the ball started rolling.

On their return, Dr. R used his connections to start the UCLA acupuncture research clinic under the oversight of local MDs in the department of anesthesia. It turned out to be a smart strategic move. By working with MDs instead of setting up a separate entity (such as, for example, chiropractors), the approach led to acupuncture being embraced by mainstream medicine. Later, Dr. R. and colleagues went on to start the National Acupuncture Association and several acupuncture schools. They were also involved in initial acupuncture regulation in Oregon, Nevada, and California.

The book is written in a question-and-answer format, to mirror the style of the *Huang Di Nei Jing (The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Cannon)*. In addition, there are italicized notes from Dr. Ju’s daily journal, with anecdotes from his experiences and interactions with these unusual students. One story I found amusing was his reference to his Westerners as *Lo-fan*, which directly translates as *barbarian dogs*. Used in a Chinese context it is apparently an insult, but it transformed itself into a term of endearment toward his protégés.

Kirts plays the role of the Yellow Emperor, directing his queries to the court physician Li Po (Dr. R.), who expounds on all matters of energy medicine. As the book unfolds, the authors explore a broad range of acupuncture concepts, discussing topics such as Yin and Yang, energetics, meridian theory, 5-elements, *Gwa Sah*, Moxa, and first-aid. But this publication is not “text-bookish.” The narrative has a conversational style, interspersing instruction with excerpts from Dr. Ju’s personal diary. The book also recounts intriguing case histories, including how a man immobilized with pain obtains relief; how a paralyzed girl rises and walks; and how a uterine prolapse resolves with Moxa on a patient’s chest.

Practitioners will identify with such histories, given that many of us caught the acupuncture “bug” when we saw such things ourselves. I know I certainly did.

In the second part of the book, the authors delve into clinical practice, discussing various topics, such as history and pulse taking; first-aid massage; herbs; and related disciplines, such as homeopathy and diet. In the massage section, Dr. Ju uses the term *finger-needles* to describe an interesting amalgam of acupuncture and fingernails. It is never quite clear whether practitioners should use one or the other; and perhaps it does not truly matter. The last chapter explores the process and difficulties of getting acupuncture practice legalized and regulated in a culture that, at the time, only accepted MD legitimacy and conventional concepts of illness.

If I have any criticism of the book it is largely to do with editing. There are a number of mistakes and misspellings throughout

the text. Also, the meridian diagrams in the middle of the book are labeled in Chinese—perhaps intentionally so, given that the book is a historical reflection—but the average reader will likely find these labels superfluous. These things do not affect the overall readability, but the authors might want to have a more thorough look if they have another edition published.

All in all, a great read. I thoroughly recommend it.

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