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Shuting Zhong '11

Illinois Wesleyan University, szhong@iwu.edu

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Exploring Acupuncture in the American Midwest

Shuting Zhong

Anthropology 450: Independent Study

02/22/2011

Introduction

Having previously benefited from acupuncture treatments, an Eastern method of healing using needles, in a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) clinic in China, I was excited to have the opportunity to learn more about acupuncture by collaborating with a Chinese practitioner, Mr. Jiong Gu L.Ac, in Bloomington-Normal, IL.

Through visual anthropological methods, I explored the mechanism, efficacy, and practice of acupuncture in the American Midwest. I took photographs during the clinical visits to include a visual component, which serves not only to illustrate the concepts, but as a mechanism to gain deeper insight about the healing tradition. The act of reviewing the photographs and the selective emphasis on certain concepts was a collaborative effort with Mr. Gu, commonly referred to as Dr. Gu, allowing for a blend of viewpoints from the expert consultants and my own conclusions. The feedback from Dr. Gu and the office manager at each step of the research process ensured correct representation of the practice

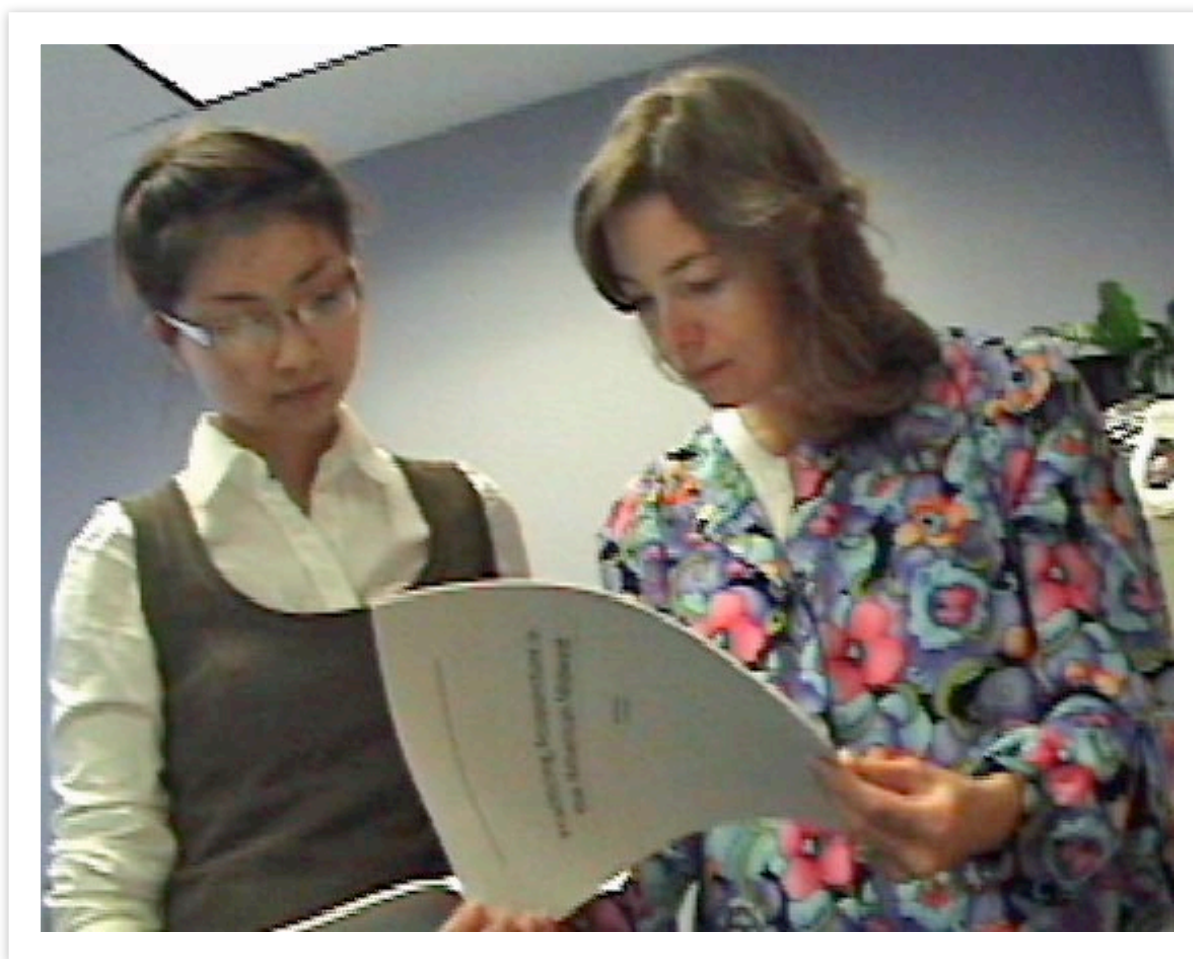


Figure 1: (Right) Office manager and I (Left) reviewing my photo-essay of Dr. Gu together making sure the information presented is an accurate reflection of the practice. Dr. Gu was also given a copy to review. Ensuring collaborative research, all of their comments were incorporated into the final product.

and facilitated the development of a working relationship. This systematic and integrative approach gives participants a voice, facilitates transparency, and establishes legitimacy of the information presented.

I only had a rudimentary understanding of TCM; thus, I spent three weeks reading about acupuncture combined with more than sixteen hours of clinical observation in October of 2010 at the Applied Pain Institute, LLC where Dr. Gu's practice is housed. I discovered acupuncture is often used in combination with cupping, the use of vacuum suctioning on the skin, and massage, all of which are explored in further detail. Dr. Gu's practice in Bloomington-Normal is highly modified due to restrictions in the American medical practice policies and the Department of Health Regulations, but he remains unwavering in his philosophy of providing patient-centered holistic care. A better understanding of the applications of TCM is important because of the rapidly increasing usage of complementary and alternative medicines in America.

Literature Review

Most of the articles published tested the efficacy of acupuncture for specific illnesses, but also analyzed the prevalence of the therapy in American society. In terms of effectiveness, Dr. Gu's own published articles cited a study conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2003 that aimed to determine the usefulness of acupuncture. According to WHO, acupuncture treatments can address twenty-eight different illnesses such as depression, migraines, and musculoskeletal disorders. Preceding the WHO results was the National Institutes of Health (NIH) consensus study in 1997 on acupuncture declaring, "There is clear evidence that needle acupuncture treatment is effective for postoperative and chemotherapy nausea and vomiting, nausea from pregnancy, and postoperative dental pain." Further research showed that of all areas that acupuncture has been approved to treat, the most dominant ailment addressed in America are musculoskeletal disorders and associated pain (Xu, 2001, p815). In the face of strong support for the efficacy of acupuncture in literature, there are still skeptics like physicist and science writer, Simon Singh PhD, who demanded more rigorous research guidelines in his 2008 book, *Trick or Treatment*.

Analyzing biological mechanisms behind the effectiveness of acupuncture from a physiological perspective is also a popular topic. Physiological consequences of acupuncture include,

“Changes in levels of endogenous opioids or stress related hormones” (Kaptchuk, 2002,p379). In fact, entire books have been devoted to understanding TCM and acupuncture in biological terms such as in, *An Introduction to Western Medical Acupuncture (2008)*, by Adrian White.

Besides mechanistic studies, researchers also focused on analyzing the popularity of acupuncture in American society. In 2007 another study by NIH approximated that 3.1 million adults in America have had acupuncture treatments (White, 2008, p.2) with the majority (72%) of them being female (Xu, 2001, p.15). The female patients were further divided into racial categories to reveal interesting patterns between socioeconomic factors and health. According to the 2006 publication of the *American Journal of Public Health*, 52% of female patients were non-Hispanic whites (Kronenberg, p.1238) who were more likely to use acupuncture in combination with western medicines. Physicians and acupuncturists should be aware of the increasing interplay between the two modes of healing to better accommodate patients. To meet the increasing demand, the number of acupuncturists in the US is also growing from only 5,000 practitioners in 1990 to a projected 40,000 by 2015 (Cooper, 2001, p.56)!

The large body of research supporting the use of acupuncture is important for establishing validity in the U.S where heavy emphasis is placed on empirical evidence. Simon Singh’s critique of acupuncture carried an unmistakable Eurocentric tone and personal bias, which weakened his argument in my view. However, I do share Dr. Singh’s viewpoint on the need to develop more sophisticated randomized clinical trials to account for the complexity of acupuncture treatments. As a senior biology major at Illinois Wesleyan University, I am conditioned to be critical, but the volumes of published literature conveyed a promising future for acupuncture therapy. Therefore, I entered Dr. Gu’s practice as an advocate of acupuncture and TCM.

The Healer and the Work Space

I believe some background about the healer and an overview of the work place is important in understanding his personal style of practice. Dr. Gu is often referred to as the best acupuncture practitioner in central Illinois because of his rigorous training in China and in the US. Dr. Gu was educated in Shanghai at the prestigious Traditional Chinese Medicine University and practiced for fifteen years before immigrating to the United States to obtain licensure under the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine, NCCAOM (fig.1). Accredited in both

acupuncture and Chinese herbology, he has been practicing the healing arts in the Bloomington-Normal community for more than two decades (HANA, 2004). Dr. Gu has also taken classes on western biomedicine and is very familiar with the western tradition of healing. Over the years, he has actively educated the public about the benefits of TCM and its treatments such as conducting Tai Chi classes, which is a popular form of energy exercise in China, publishing commentary articles about acupuncture, and speaking at major institutions in the area.

Dr. Gu practices at the Applied Pain Institute, LLC and shares the clinical space with an allopathic physician specialized in pain management. I was surprised to find Dr. Gu's office down the hall from the Central Illinois Foundation of Neuroscience, but later learned that the location was ideal for expanding the acupuncture practice. The close proximity to the four neurosurgeons in the area and the pain specialist serves as a great bases for patient referral networks and is one of the many ways he is able to integrate TCM into mainstream medicine.

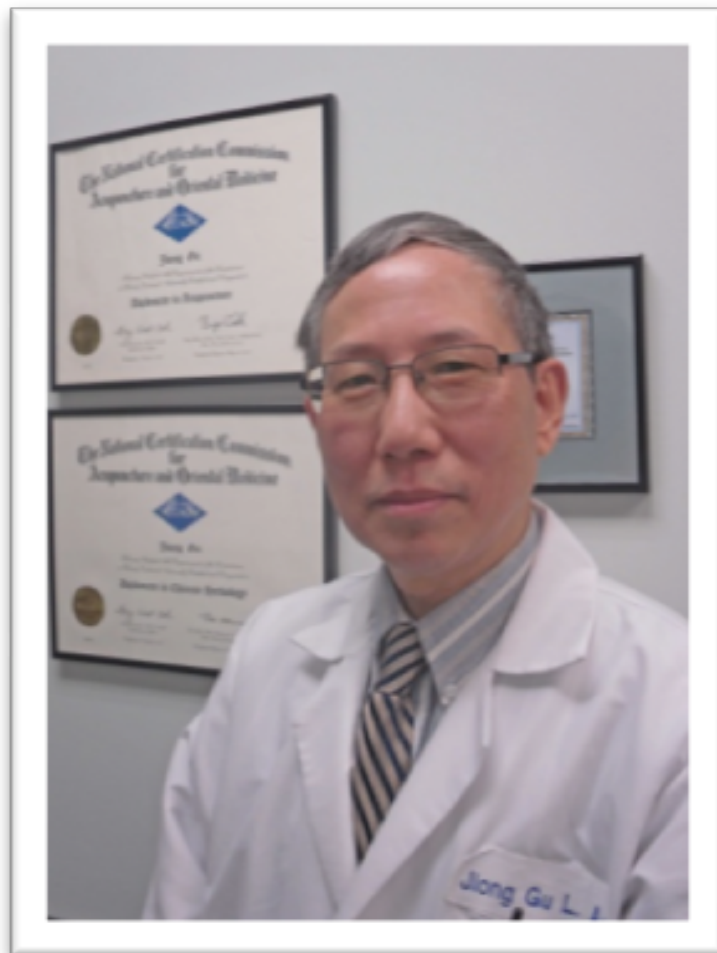


Figure 2: Dr. Gu's impeccable grooming and professional appearance are important elements in fostering patient trust. White coat and diplomas are powerful symbols of legitimacy and authority.

Demographics

Even in times of economic recession, the healer will see about twenty-four patients a day totaling 495 active patients annually. I heard from more than five patients that it is difficult to schedule an appointment; due to the large volume of patients, bookings are often made three months ahead of time. Similar to national statistics (XU, 2001, p.815), approximately 71% of the practitioner's clientele are females ranging in age from 3 to 80 years old. Many patients are residents

in Bloomington-Normal, but some travel more than 45 minutes to be treated by the healer. Most patients suffer from chronic pain, but some children are treated for autism, and a few seek treatments to maintain wellness. Most of the patients pay out of pocket, which is currently \$60 per treatment and will soon increase to \$70 in 2011.

Snap Shot of TCM

In the first few minutes of meeting Dr. Gu, he asked me simply, “What do you want to know?” Caught of guard by such a broad question I quickly muttered, “Uhm, Everything?” I realized my eagerness to learn his trade was too ambitious and settled for a general understanding of the most important principles of TCM as it relates to acupuncture. In an article Dr. Gu published titled “Meridians, Qi, Blood Circulation, and Acupuncture Treatment”, he states that the theory of acupuncture and TCM is complex, making it especially challenging to describe briefly. Dr. Gu attested that, “Acupuncture is only one part of the whole spectrum of traditional Chinese medicine.” Acupuncture is based on the 5000-year-old concept that well-being is a state of equilibrium between nature and man. Practitioners strive to restore balance between opposing forces (Yin and Yang), nature’s five elements, and vital energy, *qi* (Fee, 2002, p.1592).

The concept of Yin and Yang is analogous to Newton’s law of equal but opposing forces such as negative and positive, cold and hot, excess and deficiency. According to TCM, all illnesses occur due to imbalance between Yin and Yang; too much of either produces characteristic symptoms. Therefore, the path to recovery and health comes by way of restoring the body’s natural balance (Huard, 1968, p.194). Dr. Gu is quick to note that even though two different patients can have the same affliction, their treatment plans are different.

Personalizing the treatment plan is necessary because of the five elements principle. The principle states that based on lifestyle and character traits, every person is dominant in one of the five basic elements: wood, fire, earth, metal or water (Fee, 2002, p.1592). I took the elements quiz online and discovered my element was water and was also provided with a general description of my habits, which were mostly accurate. I noticed that the healer tells many patients to drink more water, but not everyone. Generally, drinking water cleanses the body, but as the healer points out, “Someone with a heart condition, drinking too much water can make things worse.” Likewise, when I ask how long the typical treatments last, he frequently answered, “It depends on the person. We take into account their situation and their time restraints.” Customizing patient care to meet the specifications of the body, the seasons, and lifestyle is critical to obtaining and restoring a healthy balance.

The Chinese believe that *qi* flows from the universe, into all of us, and down to the cellular level (Huard, 1986, p.16). In the body, *qi* flows through channels referred to as meridians or *jing* in Chinese (Fig.2). The *jing* forms networks called *luo*, which branch out to carry *qi* to organs (Gu, Meridians). When blockages occur in the meridian system impeding the flow of *qi* throughout the body, imbalance occurs and illnesses can result (Kaptchuk, 2002, p.375).

Diagnostic Techniques

Practitioners trained in TCM use four major diagnostic techniques usually utilized simultaneously, “Looking, listening, smelling, asking, and touching” (Gu, The Examination). With almost 500 patients and individualized treatment plans for each person, it can be a major challenge to keep the information organized and up-to-date. The clinic maintains a chart for each patient, which includes health history and Dr. Gu’s notes from each service. The set of diagnostic skills are the primary method by which he identifies the current condition of the patient and helps to guide his treatment approach to achieving balance under an ever-changing environment.

The diagnostic process begins immediately upon entering the treatment room. Dr. Gu asks each patient how he or she is doing while paying close attention to the sound of the patient’s voice, demeanor, and even smell if possible. For example, he asked a patient after a short greeting, “How are your sinuses? You sound much better than before.” Dr. Gu also has a keen eye for detecting the color of a person’s complexion because “The color of the face is closely related to the body’s energy and blood” (Gu, The Examination). Dr. Gu mentioned that his keen sense of smell has diminished



Figure 3: Dr. Gu uses the model and dozens of pamphlets as educational tools for his patients. The dots on the model indicate acupoints. The lines indicate the meridian networks.

over the years because most westerners wear perfumes, cologne, or deodorants to cover their natural body odor. Nevertheless, he can still detect obvious irregularities such as “If someone smells like applesauce, it’s diabetes.” I am amazed at the vast array of subtle clues he is in tune with even before lifting a finger or resorting to technology.

Next and probably most importantly, Dr. Gu asks to feel the patient’s radial pulse on both left and right wrists (Fig.3). With three fingers on the lateral wrist, he spends about 20 seconds on each side feeling for a number of characteristics. The healer gauges the conditions of all the internal organs without a stethoscope by pressing lightly, harder, and quite deeply on each side. Taking a pulse is much more than measuring cardiac output and heart rate; Dr. Gu is feeling for the nature of the pulse. Some people’s pulse and blood vessels feel more elastic than others, which the healer describes, “Feels just like a green onion and other’s feel like string.” I spent some time feeling my own arterial pulse while applying different pressures and came to the conclusion that my own pulse felt firm and narrow like string. To illustrate the importance and effectiveness of palpations, Dr. Gu recommended that a patient be transferred to a cardiologist because the irregularity of the pulse demanded immediate attention. Palpatory skills of a TCM practitioner are very refined and take years of experience to perfect, but it is the best method to identify imbalances and abnormalities in organs.

Touch is most important, but Dr. Gu also takes great care in examining the color, texture, and shape of the tongue. Most western physicians examine the inner oral cavity for swelling of the throat, but in TCM the tongue itself can reveal additional clues about the condition of the patient and “Is an essential part of the diagnostic process” (Gu, The



Figure 3: The condition of the deepest layers in the body can be assessed at the radial pulse. The physiological mechanism is a popular subject of research in China, but Dr. Gu is primarily interested in the fact that it does work as a diagnostic tool.

Examination). During an examination of the tongue, Dr. Gu said to a patient, “You are under a lot of stress, sleep deprived.” The patient confirmed the statement in surprise. Since I looked so stunned, Dr. Gu signaled me to come and see for myself while explaining that, “The tongue looks puffy, swollen...see the indentations on the side from pushing up against the teeth?” Color and the amount of white coating on the tongue are also important as deviations from “a normal tongue...pale red and somewhat moist” (Gu, The Examination). While observations and palpations provide valuable information, Dr. Gu, like most physicians in America, interviews the patient.

Dr. Gu asks the patient pointed questions to gather a complete health history. For a patient with back pain, the healer asked if there are sources of air blowing directly on the back, which could cause a chill. Another common question is level of thirst because “Thirst without desire to drink is a sign of Deficient Yin”(Gu, The Examination). Lifestyle patterns and possible social stressors that could cause Yin and Yang to become unbalanced are also assessed indirectly through casual conversations. I’ve been to doctor visits that felt like an interrogation, but Dr. Gu did everything possible to make the patient more relaxed by exhibiting positive body language and limiting interruptions.

Performing accurate diagnoses is crucial to restoring health, maintaining safety, and determining the treatment process. It takes tremendous skill and focus even for an experienced practitioner. Thus, I was asked not to observe a series of new patient consults because Dr. Gu needed to concentrate.

Treatments:

Dr. Gu has a variety of tools used in a number of different combinations to address particular illnesses: acupuncture and moxa (a herb burned for warmth and scent), electro-acupuncture, cupping, massage, education, and prevention.

The goal is to allow the body to heal itself once elements are in harmony. Acupuncture seeks to restore the natural balance by adjusting the *qi* levels in the body to improve circulation (Fig.4). Acupuncture stimulates the meridians through the use of needles inserted at specified acupuncture points or acupoints (White, 2008, p.21). Depending on the patient, different sets of acupoints will be stimulated to open up blocked energy channels. *Qi* reaches three levels of the body, detected with three pressures by three fingers. The number three is important because it reflects the ancient Chinese belief that people live in the middle kingdom with heaven above and earth below.

Similarly, the three depths within the body can also be called “superficial, middle, and deep” (Gu, The Examination). For example, inserting the acupuncture needle slightly into the skin is superficial and stimulates just the local area. Inserting the needle deeper will produce a sensation known as *de qi*, which only results when the needle comes into direct contact with the meridian channel. *De qi* is experienced differently from person-to-person, but can generally be described as creating feelings of warmth, tingliness, heaviness, or soreness. When I received acupuncture in China, I experienced a deep heaviness in my muscles that persisted throughout the treatment. When the practitioner fiddled with the needles to increase *qi* stimulation, the heaviness sensation intensified and even traveled down my limb. Dr. Gu explained that the traveling sensations were due to the depth at which the needle rests. Going past the meridian will produce sensations far away from the actual acupuncture site, thus intensifying the experience.

According to Dr. Gu, “Acupuncture and moxa are supposed to be used together, but we cannot do it like that here.” Unfortunately, the sensitive smoke alarm system and the public firecode prevent the burning of moxa, an herbal substance that facilitates the flow of *qi*. In cultural hubs like Chicago and New York City, TCM clinics operate very similarly to those in China, using many of the same techniques. Dr. Gu said, “I walked in to my friend’s clinic in New York and immediately I could smell the moxa...it was everywhere.” In his own practice, the aroma and warmth generated from the burning of moxa are substituted with infrared lamps. The lamps not only keep the exposed body

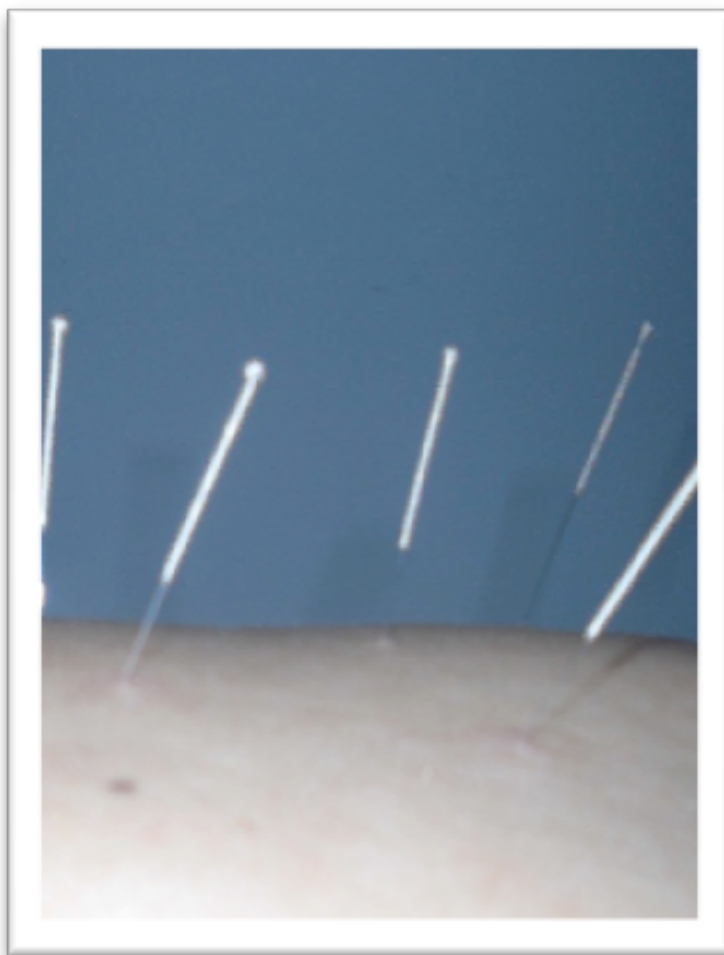


Figure 4: One-time-use acupuncture needles are sterile, vary in length, and narrow as a hair. Before inserting the needles, the Dr. Gu feels the skin for the location of the acupoints with his fingers. Acupoint selection is highly personalized to the individual.

parts warm during the treatment, but help increase the effectiveness of the acupuncture needles.

In addition to the supplementing infrared lamps for moxa, Dr. Gu also uses low voltage electricity to stimulate acupoints, a technique called electro-acupuncture (Fig.5). The acupuncture needles are first inserted into the correct acupoints and then electrodes are clipped to the shaft of the thin steel needles that conduct current. He does not use electro-acupuncture on everyone. It is only used in more severe cases in which the patients have greater pain symptoms or if pain is due to neurological causes. One patient described the sensation of electro-acupuncture as, “Light pulsations of warmth.” By relying on voltage to gently stimulate the acupoints, Dr. Gu avoids possible discomfort from manually stimulating the acupoints to produce adequate *de qi*. Dr. Gu contrasts the attention to comfort with previous years of experience in China practicing acupuncture on in rural areas where, “We just went out into the fields and treated the farmers with needles as they continued to work.” The standards of good practice are now much stricter because of high patient expectations in the United States.



Figure 5: Black and white electrodes can be clipped onto various lengths of needles for electro-acupuncture. Researchers have shown that the tissues at the acupoints conduct current better than surrounding areas, which empirically supports the efficacy of the treatment.

Acupuncture opens up blocked energy channels, but is used in conjunction with cupping (Fig.6). Cupping is the painless technique of applying a vacuum suction to the skin at acupoints, which helps to draw out bad blood and negative energy from the meridian network. The bad blood is dark in color producing the characteristic deep purple bruises on the cupped area as the vacuum suction draws the blood toward the surface (Fig.6). Dr. Gu explained that when patients experience trouble breathing, he applies a cup directly behind the neck on the lung acupoint and then releases a small amount of blood at the site. Immediately the airways open allowing the patient to breathe normally. In China, practitioners use fire cupping, which relies on a flame to eliminate oxygen in the glass cup creating a stronger vacuum. Dr. Gu cannot use fire cupping due to the sprinkler system at the clinic. He also cannot leave the vacuum cups on for the ideal length of time because it leaves deeper bruises afterwards. Dr. Gu supports his modification on cupping because even though, “It is not long enough, but it will still help.”



Figure 6: (Left) A vacuum is created in the plastic cups via a hand pump. The vacuum draws the flesh upward and the skin reddens from the pooling of blood underneath. (Right) Cupping pulls up fluids from damaged tissues, helping to unclog blocked energy channels. Placement of the cups aligns with the acupoints.

While patients received different combinations of treatments, they all ended the therapy with a massage (Fig.7). The massage helps to further release energy channels and also helps to eliminate bruising from cupping. One patient received a massage that lasted about five minutes longer because as Dr. Gu describes, “The patient is depressed, which is not just mental, but physical and emotional so the massage helps to open her up more.”

Dr. Gu does much of the manual work in the clinic, but patient participation is another highly promoted aspect of his practice. Patients often go home with homework to further improve their health and have access to dozens of educational brochures. One patient suffering from neck and shoulder pain was instructed to do a series of simple exercises three times a day to loosen up the muscles and alleviate the pressure on the nerve. Patients are also encouraged to change lifestyle habits that adversely affect their health. Dr. Gu also establishes reasonable goals before treatments such as saying, “I always say that I want to help, but I don’t say that it *will* help because I don’t want them to worry about expectation.”

Education is a key part of preventing future health complications. Dr. Gu expresses the need to educate and empower patients because, “Any doctor can cure, but the best doctors can prevent illnesses before they start.” People’s energy levels need to be adjusted frequently to stay in equilibrium, which will improve the body’s natural healing abilities. Prevention is a fundamental part of TCM because of the need to maintain balance in a continuously changing environment. Prevention is also a priority for Dr. Gu because he is truly dedicated to serving and



Figure 7: A patient laying face down as the infrared lamp warms the exposed skin to prevent catching a cold. After removing the acupuncture needles, Dr. Gu massages the acupoints with the left hand while holding the used needles in the right. Massage facilitates circulation of blood and *qi*.

empowering patients with the knowledge to stay healthy. He strives to identify the root causes of illness rather than simply alleviating symptoms because he believes in treating the whole person. For example, one patient came in for shoulder pain and numbness in his fingers. Dr. Gu addressed the shoulder with electro-acupuncture and cupping directly at the site, but also treated the patient's neck where the shoulder pain and numbness was "Probably a bulging disk...pressure on the nerves causing the discomfort to travel down the arm." While relieving just the shoulder pain would have been easier, D. Gu goes beyond the chief complaint as he says, "I want to help them because they are good to me...I am lucky to have such good patients."

Dr. Gu's Philosophy

In Dr. Gu's practice, the primary concern and the ultimate goal is to achieve patient satisfaction by providing a relaxing environment, adjusting techniques to minimize discomfort, and up holding the highest safety standards.

Although the workplace has the feel and look of a traditional hospital clinic with x-ray light boxes and examination beds in each patient room, the healer pays special attention to the aesthetics of a healing environment. Research shows that ambiance of interior spaces have a dramatic impact on people's mood and can improve health. In Europe, trips to the spa are recognized as a medical treatment and are reimbursed by insurance, but in the USA it is considered a luxury(Queler, 2006, p.52). Dr. Gu hopes to foster a similar luxurious healing space. The patients enjoy their treatments in spa-like atmosphere created by gentle lighting effects and carefully chosen décor (Fig.8). I was puzzled to see floor lamps in addition to the overhead fluorescent bulbs, but when the overhead lights were turned off the room was pleasantly transformed. The florescent bulbs were cold and uninviting compared to the cozy glow of the dim floor lamps that casted softer shadows across the Chinese paintings on the walls. The patient can also choose to have Chinese instrumental music play in the background during the 30 to 45 minute treatment as the lights are dimmed enough to lure clients into a deep state of relaxation. Some patients even fall a sleep lying on the plush and "incredibly expensive massage tables" as the office manager describes. Allowing the patient to rest during a treatment is very important to the healing process because many suffering from chronic pain also experience insomnia.

With patient's comfort in mind, Dr. Gu frequently asks the patient, "Are you feeling alright?" It is not uncommon to produce feeling of nausea with aggressive acupuncture or cupping. The sensations of *de qi* can overwhelm sensitive patients. Practitioners can avoid over stimulation by monitoring the amount of tension around the needle as it comes into contact with the *qi*, which he says feels, "Just like fishing, when the fish bites you feel a pull..." Dr. Gu places the needles swiftly, but with great precision as he says, "I'm very careful... [I] take time..." He is efficient, but never rushed. Gently tapping the acupuncture needles into place, Dr. Gu does not ask the patient to describe what they feel as each needle is inserted because

as he described, "I know from experience that I've reached the spot..." Relying on his expertise is more accurate since "sometimes the patient will let you know, other times they won't say anything." To further prevent discomfort, the healer prefers to use more needles around a problem site instead of relying on manual manipulations with fewer needles. As a result of careful monitoring, his patients usually reported, "I feel fine" during treatments.

Dr. Gu is also sensitive to aesthetic side effects because cupping can leave red or purple bruises on the skin. He decreases the duration of the treatment followed immediately by a

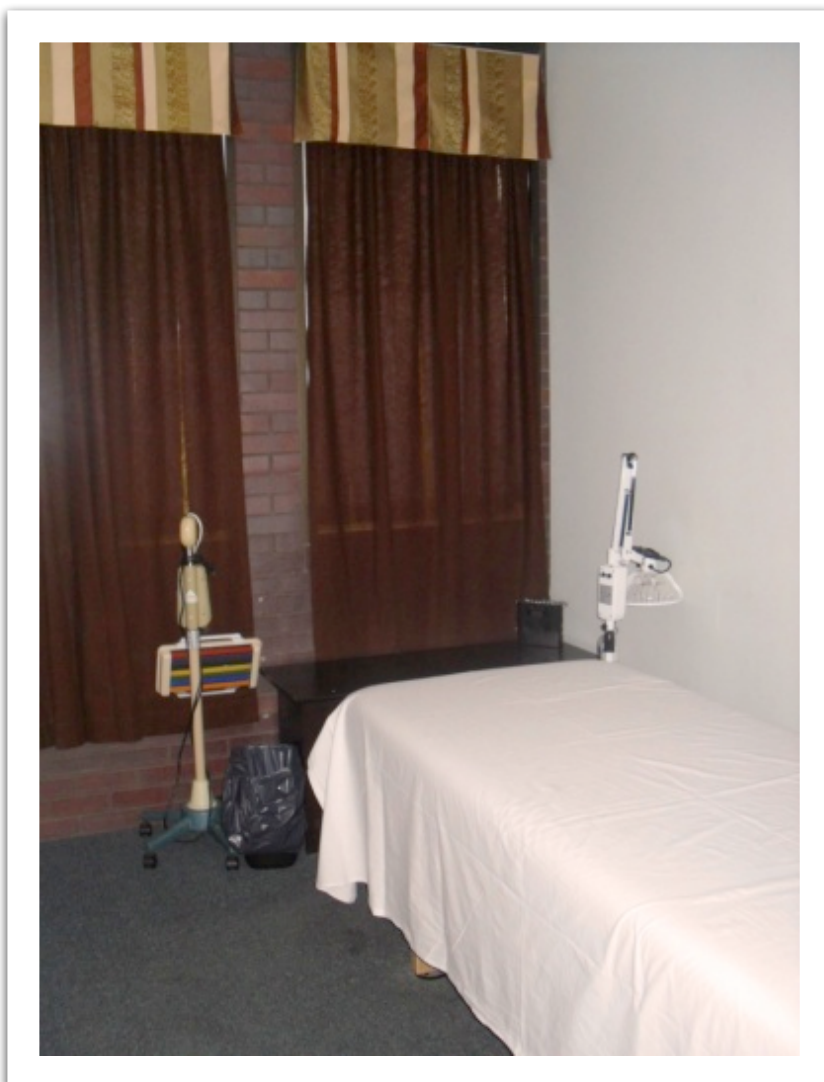


Figure 8: Known as the Sun Room, the space has a spa-like ambiance, which makes this room a favorite amongst the staff. Interestingly, some patients prefer rooms without windows. All four rooms are equipped with massage beds, CD players and infrared lamps.

thorough massage to help minimize bruising. Dr. Gu tells a patient during the cupping procedure, “I had done a cupping procedure to a woman once and later that day I received a phone call from her husband asking me what I did to his wife.” We all laughed, but Dr. Gu understood the serious consequences that could have resulted from misinterpretation of TCM treatments and their side affects. He said, “I don’t want to cause trouble...we do things very safely here.” Dr. Gu recommended the documentary filmed in Saint Louis, “Gua Sa,” which is about the true story of an ill Chinese boy who underwent a TCM treatment that leaves superficial bruising. Due to a public misunderstanding, the boy’s grandfather was incarcerated for alleged child abuse because of the bruises. Although Dr. Gu’s own experience was less severe, he is very cautious not only for the patient’s safety, but also for the purpose of avoiding malpractice.

When Dr. Gu and I sat down to talk for about ten minutes at the end of the day, I asked if he was concerned about the possibility of litigation. The answer was, no. The healer said many times, “I am very lucky to have such open-minded patients.” Half the patients trust him completely without feeling the need to ask questions. It was very apparent to me that Dr. Gu has great relationships with all his patients. In response to my research, three patients told me, “You’re learning from the best...he is the best in town.” Reciprocally, Dr. Gu said even the grumpiest of patients are good to him or as he describes, “They are all wonderful...” The healer respects his patients and is very grateful for their support, leading him to say, “Thank you,” before, during, and after treatments. With compassion and meticulous attention to detail, Dr. Gu can confidently say, “I don’t worry...nobody has sued me so far...my job is like a vacation.” After all, it is hard to sue a friend.

Keys to success

Practicing acupuncture in a small town in the Midwest twenty years ago was as the healer describes, “Very, very difficult at first,” because many alternative medicines were considered taboo. The office manager also attested to Dr. Gu’s own stories about challenges in overcoming the language barrier. Being a first generation immigrant from China, I can relate to the hardships, which made the successful practice an even greater achievement in my eyes. We all need help when starting from scratch, whether it is to learn a second language or to establish a career. Luckily, as Dr. Gu often said, he has made some influential friends in politics, businesses, and medicine. A dear friend and patient of Dr. Gu is a self-acclaimed Chinese at heart, a political activist, and also

a board member of the NCCAOM. The healer refers to this particular patient as “family” and the patient described Dr. Gu as a “son.” Although I was not present in the treatment room, I had the pleasure of meeting the patient afterwards. I was shocked to learn that the patient refers to President Obama and the First Lady as Barack and Michelle because they have met in person. This patient, politically savvy and well connected, was a force behind changing the Illinois law so that acupuncturist can practice independently without the supervision of a licensed physician. The law passed, and today Dr. Gu and many other acupuncturists in Illinois can enjoy greater freedom in practice.

The major institutions in town like the nearby companies and the handful of universities contributed greatly in facilitating a welcoming community for complimentary and alternative medicines (CAMs). The open-mindedness of the education and professional communities and the willingness of the general public to try acupuncture, even though it is a largely uninsured therapy, have sustained the practice financially though the years. Many patients come with no symptoms or illnesses, but simply want to improve their wellness or “open the energy channels” as one patient requested.

Unfortunately, insurance policies are slow to adapt to the growing public demand for acupuncture (Cooper, 2001, p.57). The office manager said that they have petitioned insurance companies to change their policies to include acupuncture treatments in their healthcare plans, but have been met with marginal success. However, State Farm and Country Insurance do refer many employees to Dr. Gu’s office for musculoskeletal conditions caused by prolonged sitting and poor posture. Illinois Wesleyan University’s previous healthcare plan covered acupuncture; hence, Dr. Gu has treated many of the staff and faculty on the Illinois Wesleyan campus.

As the cost of treatments increase in 2011 after being static for many years, the office manager doesn’t anticipate any major changes in their patient population. When people are ill and uncomfortable, they will seek relief regardless as one patient explains, “If I don’t get treated every few months, I start to feel a little off, so I come back.” Instead of aggressive advertising, the growth of the practice has been largely dependent on physician referrals and word-of-mouth. Last year, the practice received about ten new patient referrals from the Illinois Foundation of Neuroscience next door in addition to the referrals by other physicians in the area. Being located next to the neurosurgeons helped establish a referral network by virtue of proximity because the physicians had a chance to interact and see firsthand the benefits of acupuncture. Expanding patient referral

networks further integrates acupuncture into mainstream healthcare since neurology is considered to be the pentacle of western medicine. As Dr. Gearhart, Chair of anthropology and sociology at Illinois Wesleyan University, explained, “Once you are recognized by the neurologists, that is it. You’re in.” Most patients who subject themselves to acupuncture are already somewhat knowledgeable about TCM, but to be centrally located in a highly respected medical setting further boosts patient morale.

An increasing number of physicians and patients are realizing the benefits of acupuncture for non-surgical candidates and in enhancing post-operative care. Dr. Gu said that the pain management physician who owns the Applied Pain Institute, LLC wanted to hire an acupuncturist as a part of the team because the treatment could benefit patients. Similarly, one patient’s husband is a local physician, who now sends patients to receive acupuncture after seeing a remarkable improvement in his wife’s health. Patients also report higher rates of satisfaction when using complementary and alternative medicines like acupuncture, which gives physicians another incentive to incorporate the technique into their treatment plans to improve patient outcomes (Cooper, 2001, p.58-59).

Conclusion

Acupuncture is a subfield of the larger system of Traditional Chinese Medicine, which follows the concept that illnesses arise from physical, mental, and emotional imbalance. Organisms have life energy, *qi*, but blockage in the flow of *qi* can lead to imbalance and illness. Abnormalities are detected through seeing, listening, smelling, touching, and interviewing; the diagnostic results determine the care plan and allow the treatments to be customized to the person. Acupuncture restores and maintains harmony of the *qi* by stimulating the meridians at specific acupoints. The technique is often used in conjunction with infrared lamps, cupping, or substituted for the more potent, electro-acupuncture.

Dr. Gu, trained in China and in the USA, has successfully adapted his acupuncture practice to suit the needs of the Bloomington-Normal community by focusing on achieving patient satisfaction with a strong emphasis on maintaining safety. Trained in a healing modality founded on the principle of individualized care, Dr. Gu is exceptionally flexible with the services he provides. In the last two decades, he has managed to obtain high yields while adjusting the treatment plan to suit the patient’s schedule, to comply with stringent Illinois regulations, and to satisfy higher aesthetic expectations common place in western medicine.

The aspects that have made Dr. Gu's practice flourish in the last two decades are a combination of support from influential people in politics, a welcoming community, and a dynamic sensibility. Since Dr. Gu has already established a reputation as the best in the area, the future for the practice can only shine brighter.

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