

HOSTED BY



ELSEVIER

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

journal homepage: <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jtcms>



Acupuncture journey to America: a turning point in 1971

Yongming Li

American TCM Society, NY, USA

Many people know of Henry Kissinger's secret trip from Pakistan to Beijing in 1971 setting the stage for President Nixon's visit to China in 1972. Few people, however, remember the first U.S. reporter invited by Chinese government to tour China at the very same time.

In June of 1971, James Reston (1909–1995), a columnist and editor of *The New York Times* and winner of two Pulitzer Prizes, received a message from the Chinese ambassador in London saying he could have a visa to China. He managed to actually get two visas, and with his wife Sally, he crossed the 'little iron bridge' from Hong Kong to the customs station at Luo Hu, and landed in mainland China on June 8, 1971. The couple probably did not expect that the small village Luo Hu would later magically transform into the biggest area of the modern city Shenzhen, growing to a population of millions of people in less than 20 years.

After Reston and his wife arrived in Guangzhou, they were informed that their trip was postponed, and that only a slow train, instead of airplane, was available to travel to Beijing. When they finally got to Beijing, it was already July 12th. What Reston did not know was that Kissinger had arrived in Beijing on July 9 by means of a private Pakistani airplane. He then secretly met with Premier Zhou Enlai, negotiated with the Chinese government on the date of President Nixon's visit to China, and left on July 11.

After being told the 'news' on July 15, Reston suddenly felt a stab of pain in his groin. He naturally blamed Kissinger for his pain in an article in *The New York Times*. The next day, however, still feeling pain, he checked into the Peking Union Medical College Hospital, which was then named Anti-Imperialist Hospital.

Reston was diagnosed as acute appendicitis, a conclusion reached by the 12 top consulting experts, and underwent an appendectomy by Dr. Weiran Wu with conventional drug anesthesia on July 17, 1971. Though the operation went well, Reston was in considerable discomfort during the second night after the surgery. Zhangyuan Li, a doctor of acupuncture at the hospital, with Reston's approval, inserted three long thin needles into his right elbow and below his knees, presumably at the point of Zusanli (ST36).

The needles sent twinges of pain through Reston's limbs and diverted his attention from the distress in his stomach. Meanwhile, Dr. Li lit two pieces of the herb called Ai, which looked like the burning stumps of a cheap broken cigar, and held them close to his abdomen, while occasionally twirling the needles into action. Reston later learned that this was the procedure called moxibustion.

'All this took about 20 minutes, during which I remember thinking that it was a rather complicated way to get rid of gas in the stomach, but there was noticeable relaxation of the pressure and distension within an hour and no recurrence of the problem thereafter,' he wrote in his article.

On the same day of Reston receiving his acupuncture treatment, Xinhua News Agency reported to the world that 'Chinese medical workers have successfully developed the method of acupuncture anesthesia.' Reston and his wife obviously learned about the news from their interpreter. To this day, it is still not clear whether this was a merely coincidence or there was some diplomatic arrangement.

As an experienced journalist, Reston felt great regret and anger at having missed a golden chance to cover the breaking news of Kissinger's visit to China. Having nothing else to report from China, Reston wrote an article entitled *Now, About My Operation in Peking* in his hospital bed. The article appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* the next day along with the Apollo 15 lift-off on July 26, 1971. It was a wonderful story for millions of Americans who

E-mail address: ymlia@aol.com (Y. Li).

Peer review under responsibility of Beijing University of Chinese Medicine.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jtcms.2015.03.001>

2095-7548/© 2015 Beijing University of Chinese Medicine. Production and hosting by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

were then so curious about what was happening in China after its doors have been closed for more than twenty years.

While in the hospital, Premier Enlai Zhou surprised Reston with a visit and granted a formal interview that Reston certainly appreciated. In the interview, Premier Zhou first asked him about his operation and acupuncture. Their conversation and dinner lasted 5 hours in the Great Hall of the People. At the end, Premier Zhou invited him to come back again, and Reston replied: 'I would like to come back, but I have only one appendix to give to my country.'

Though acupuncture had been practiced in North America ever since the first immigrants came to the continent from China, it rarely entered the mainstream before the early 1970s. Reston's article was the first genuine American acupuncture experience in P. R. China to appear in the mainstream Western media.

Reston's story of the 'Oriental Apollo' unwittingly sparked widespread 'acupuncture fever' across the United States in the coming years. In early 70s, acupuncture stories appeared in many major American media and publications, including *Time*, *People*, *Life*, *Newsweek* and many more.

There is no doubt that President Nixon's visit to Beijing in Feb 1972 further amplified American people's interests in acupuncture and widely spread the news of Chinese acupuncture all over the world. At the beginning of acupuncture fever in the early 70s, because of the lack of formal diplomatic ties between the United States and China, there was an acute shortage of acupuncturists in America, and qualified acupuncturists were needed badly. Some practitioners of acupuncture in New York City still remember the remarkable 'business' generated by the article that appeared in *The New York Times*. After Reston's report, busloads of patients began coming to New York Chinatown every day, from Washington D.C. and other out-of-town locations, in order to seek acupuncture treatment.

In order to deal with the sheer numbers of patients, some acupuncturists rented an entire floor of a hotel to accommodate them. The acupuncturists were so busy that they only had enough time to insert the needles into patients, one by one, and left the needles in place to be removed by their assistants. It is said that the business for acupuncturists was so good that one week's income was enough to buy a house. There was no regulation in those days on practicing acupuncture, and no minimal requirements existed then for qualifying a person as an acupuncturist. Many laypersons would go to Hong Kong, take a short course in acupuncture for a month or less, and come back to the United States claiming to be a qualified acupuncturist. For reasons that can be readily understood, acupuncture fever did not last long.

Sally Reston was also very interested in acupuncture and helped her husband answer many letters from readers of *The New York Times*. She even wrote a foreword for the book entitled *the Layman's Guide to Acupuncture*, which was first published in 1972, and was followed by 10 subsequent printings. Sally described details about their experience of watching acupuncture anesthesia in Hua Shan Hospital and Ninth Medical Hospital in Shanghai after they left Beijing. She stated: 'Nothing in the new look of China has surprised or fascinated the American people more than the picture of Chinese doctors using modern Western

medical methods alongside ancient acupuncture,' and 'I thought that China's wonders might surpass even the silks and spices of Marco Polo.'

Interestingly, Reston's acupuncture legend was only known in the United States, and no one seemed to know the story in China, because formal U.S.—China diplomacy was not established until 1979 during the Carter administration. In fact, there are a few different versions of Reston's story in the West, some are facts mixed with hearsay and others are pure fabrication. The most popular fabricated version says: 'a young reporter of *The New York Times* went to China with Nixon and had an operation with acupuncture anesthesia.'

After many years of investigation, I have tracked down all of the key persons involved in Reston's operation, taking me more than five years to finally locate Dr. Zhanyuan Li, who retired from the Peking Union Medical College Hospital in 1995. Much of the time it took to undertake the investigation caused by Reston's use of the old Western ways to spell the Chinese names, as Changyuan Li.

On Jan 20, 2006, a special memorial meeting for the 35 year anniversary of this acupuncture story was held in Beijing, organized by World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies (WFCMS), World Federation of Acupuncture Societies (WFAS) and Traditional Chinese Medicine Association & Alumni, U.S. (TCMAA). All key members of Reston's medical team attended the meeting, including the lead surgeon for Reston's operation Dr. Weiran Wu who was the honorary president of the Beijing Hospital, the interpreter during his trip, Mr. Guihua Jin who later became China's ambassador to Thailand, Dr. Zhanyuan Li, the acupuncturist for Reston's post-operation treatment, and many others.

The key person in Reston's story, Dr. Zhanyuan Li, did remember having performed acupuncture treatment on an American reporter for post-operative discomfort in the summer of 1971, when he was on night call. Dr. Li also said: 'No one has ever asked me about this case until recently I got a phone call from Dr. Yongming Li in the U.S.' Dr. Zhanyuan Li was in his 70s and retains his love for acupuncture, training young students in a vocational skills education center in Beijing. Interestingly, even while telling his students the story of acupuncture's spread to the United States, he mentions only Nixon's visit in 1972. 'I never expected Reston's experience with the silver needles to evoke such a strong response in America,' he said. Obviously, no one, including himself, knows that what he did 35 years ago has helped the spread of acupuncture to the West.

Although the acupuncture fever cooled after the initial burst of enthusiasm, acupuncture treatment retains its influence in the United States. In the 1990s, there was a resurgence of interest, as more Americans began paying greater attention to alternative and complimentary medicine.

Acupuncture anesthesia, as it turns out, is a difficult procedure that can be used in only a small percentage of cases and under restricted conditions, as concluded by American medical experts later. However, the basic research on acupuncture anesthesia done in China during 60–70s did play a crucial role in helping the spread of acupuncture in the United States, and has attracted people's attention because of its pain-relieving effects. After many years' of effort and experience of researchers and practitioners, acupuncture now finally finds its role in the Western medical system.

In 1997, the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) concluded that acupuncture provides effective therapy for certain medical conditions. The first one on the list, post-operative nausea and vomiting, is the exact condition Reston was treated for by his Chinese acupuncturist more than a quarter of century ago in Beijing. It also recognizes that acupuncture is remarkably safe, with fewer side effects than many well-established therapies.

One of the clear signs indicating acupuncture acceptance by the Western medical community is the increasing allocations of research funds at National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) at NIH. Such funding now accounts for about half of the research funds for Chinese medicine, which in turn accounts for approximately a quarter of the total funds earmarked (114 million dollars in 2005) for complimentary and alternative medicine.

Acupuncture in America, number talks:

- There are about 40,000 acupuncturists in the USA and more than 5000 of them are physicians.
- 44 out of 50 States have independent acupuncture laws.
- The national examination system for acupuncturists has been established for years and it is recognized by most States.
- There are nearly a hundred schools of acupuncture in the USA and about 50 of them are accredited for licensing application.
- About 10% –15% money of federal funding on complementary and alternative medicine goes to acupuncture research.
- In American hospital systems, the use of acupuncture ranks number one among all complementary and alternative medicines, for which a license is required.
- A 2007 survey shows about 6.8% of American adults had used acupuncture in the past.
- In 2007, 79.2 visits to acupuncture clinics per 1000 people which was a three-fold increase as compared to a 1997 survey that only 27.9 visits per 1000 people visited acupuncture clinics in that year.
- In 2007, 3,170,000 Americans had acupuncture treatment and the total treatment number was 17,600,000 annually.
- In 2007, American patients spent 823 million dollars out of their own pockets in acupuncture treatment and the average cost per treatment was 47 dollars.
- A national random survey indicated, among several thousands of acupuncture patients, 86% stated that acupuncture treatment was helpful for their problems and about half of them said that they had a great help from acupuncture treatment.

The acupuncture legend continues when Dr. Anlong Xu, the president of Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, met with Kissinger in his Manhattan office on May 7, 2014. Kissinger recollected the Reston's story meanwhile Dr. Xu introduced the development of Chinese Medicine around the world. Kissinger was greatly impressed by the growth of Chinese medicine in the United States. Having received Chinese medicines books from Dr. Xu, Kissinger planned to 'delving into them to further educate myself on this intriguing practice'. He hopes Dr. Xu and his team 'continue to achieve success in spreading Chinese Medicine across many continents'.

Years after Reston's 1971 trip to China, he recalled his trip to China in his book *Deadline*: 'I have more adventures than Marco Polo. I missed Kissinger and lost my appendix in an operation by acupuncture, but I got a couple of good stories and discovered that China was a very big place with a lot of people.' In response to the comment of his colleagues saying his visit was a shrewd bit of timing, he replied: 'It was merely another instance of my dumb luck.' Reston himself might have never imagined that one day acupuncture would find such wide acceptance in his country as he wrote his article in a hospital bed in the summer of 1971 in Beijing.

The impact of Chinese acupuncture to the West has reached far beyond its effect on human body. The needle did not only link a doctor to a patient, but has also become a tie between the East and the West.

Forty-one years later, Dr. Andrew Vichers who is based in New York, published a remarkable article on his research about acupuncture. He analyzed research data from 29 large clinical trials including nearly 18,000 patients and found that acupuncture was clearly superior to placebo controlled sham acupuncture as well as to the conventional care in treating chronic pain including four types of chronic pain: back and neck pain, arthritic pain, shoulder pain and headache.

Note

1. The author wishes to thank the help from Reston's sons: Thomas Reston, James Reston, Jr., and Richard Reston. Acknowledgment also goes to the Reston Papers Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and sources of photos from named publications and websites.
2. Coincidentally, Mr. James Reston, Dr. Yongming Li, and Prof. Anlong Xu all graduated from the University of Illinois at Urban-Champaign.