

Israel's Chinese Medicine Man

Haifa native Roni Sapir was studying geography and computers in the university and the Polytechnic when a segment of the Israeli TV program *Innovations and Inventions* caught his interest. It showed a Chinese man having open-chest surgery with no anesthetic, completely awake and some Chinese doctors stimulating needles in specific points all over his body.

"The patient was completely awake and conversing calmly while the doctors dug in his chest," he recalls. He was feeling no pain because of the Chinese needle technique called acupuncture. And his recovery time was much faster, too.

"Wow, this is really amazing," Sapir recalls thinking as he watched.

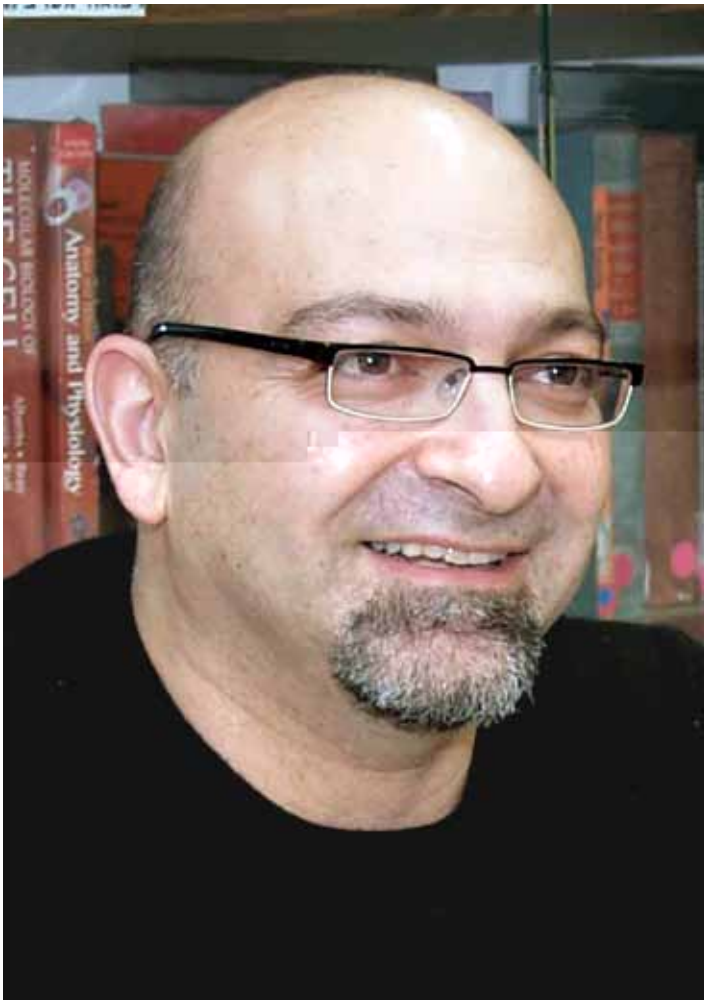
Sapir started his first journey on this long path in 1982 in Israel studying Chinese Medicine at the Israeli College of Complementary Medicine. In 1984 he decided that Chinese medicine must be studied on the basis of the Chinese Classics and started looking for the best school that teaches classic Chinese medicine around the world. A year later he found a school and started his eight years studies, at the International College of Oriental Medicine in East Grinstead, England.

Roni came back to Israel in 1993, with a dream and vision that he accomplishes every day, 'spreading out the beauty and the way of health and living of Chinese medicine'.

The effort involved paying a high price of total loyalty, determination, responsibility and humanity. The action involved parallel ways. One is introducing the medicine around the population and the other is to teach and train therapists, clinicians and researchers to the highest possible standard.

Today, the 50-year-old Sapir is founder and dean of the Israeli Centre of Classic Chinese Medicine, named East-West. Founded in 1997, Sapir works with a number of hospitals in Israel and around China.

He teaches practitioners in Israel and China, sees patients internationally and is director at the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies



Roni Sapir

– a body that oversees 174 associations in about 80 countries. Roni is the sole Westerner at some committees at the federation like the Academic and the Cancer research committees. He is vice president of the new International Red Cross Hospital in Hunan, China as well.

Marine photographer or acupuncturist?

The man who is now one of the world's foremost authorities on the ancient medical art didn't change gears the very night he saw that TV show. He was still hoping to be a marine photographer with a backup in computer science.

It wasn't until two years later that Sapir was standing near a bus stop newspaper kiosk and saw a headline announcing the opening of a Chinese medicine school in Tel Aviv. When he called to inquire, he learned that it was started by two Israelis who had studied in California. The classes were to be given on Tuesdays – the one free day in Sapir's schedule.

Over three years of Tuesday classes, he learned the basics of what is known as Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), whose practices include herbal medicine, acupuncture, massage therapy and dietary therapy.

Sapir was drawn to learn more about Classical Chinese Medicine (CCM), grounded in the original spiritual underpinnings of the practice – such as the *yin* and *yang* forces, the five elements of earth, fire, wood, metal and water and the practical application of the *I Ching* and the Stems and Branches. CCM and its practitioners were banned from China after the 1949 Communist revolution, which is why Sapir discovered that the best school for CCM was in England.

"I didn't know a word of English, but they took me on trial," Sapir says in his now excellent English. He studied there for 1984 to 1992, earning an advanced degree and becoming a clinician and teacher at the school. Eventually, he was running five clinics in England.

And then, a little voice told him to go home. Taking it as a sign from God, Sapir packed enough things for a week and waited at his parents' house for the next "sign." It came when he went to the TCM school in Tel Aviv to meet a friend for lunch, and ran into the director of the school, who asked him to be the director of studies of the Chinese medicine school in Israel. A month later, he was back to stay.

Forging connections in China

Sapir later became medical adviser to a complementary medicine settlement at the northern tip of the Dead Sea. He started a class there as well, but when this area was promised by the Israeli government to the Palestinian Authority they had to leave. This group of students formed the nucleus of East-West, which Sapir established in 1999 in Tel Aviv.

In the intervening years, Sapir was spending a lot of time in Beijing, forming connections with the Chinese Health Ministry facilitated by the Chinese embassy in Israel. CCM was by then regaining favour in the land of its origin.

"They got me meetings with the directors of all Chinese medicine programmes there, and we started working together to help me open the best school for Classical Chinese Medicine," says Sapir.

The four-year East-West curriculum, which will also be given in English starting in the fall of 2011, provides 5,000 academic hours of instruction in areas such as Acupuncture, Herbal Medicine, Tui-na – Chinese physiotherapy, Chi Kung, Lifestyle, Chinese Diet, Breathing exercise and Meditation. Sapir takes fourth-year students for a month of training at a Chinese Medicine hospital in China.

The main idea behind Chinese medicine in the west is to support, not supplant, traditional medical approaches to everything from oncology to pediatrics, to pain, he stresses.

No countries outside Asia regulate Chinese medicine – Sapir and others brought this to the attention of the Knesset in 1997, without any concrete results – so potential patients are advised to find out where the practitioners studied and what insurance they hold. "It's better to go to clinics at schools or institutions, where you know there is a group and academics behind it," Sapir advises.

While TCM "talks more to the Western mentality" by translating knowledge into action, he explains, "in CCM you 'forget' your knowledge and absorb the patient at a point of emptiness, and then only later bring your knowledge into it."

CCM practitioners treat the

patient rather than the disease, taking into account factors such as the climate in which the patient lives, the time of day at which the patient arrives for treatment, the patient's temperament, his mental and emotional state, traumas that he had and his ability to contain the surroundings that he lives in. Differences in the proportion of humidity and dryness, light and darkness are believed to affect how the body reacts. The main diagnosis tool beside the initial conversation is based on the Pulse and the tongue of the patient.

Bringing Chinese medicine to Israel's masses

Sapir's wife, Keren, also a CCM practitioner, directs East-West since Sapir is often traveling. "I trust her completely to run the whole show," he says. Two years ago, he took their two children, now 14 and 10½, on a month-long tour of China.

In an effort to bring CCM to the attention of a larger population as a mode for complementary medical treatment, the Sapis recently moved East-West into the leading organisation in Israel which combines a school and clinics in psychology and 20 geriatrics homes and hospitals as well as 20 medical care centres around Israel. "This cooperation will make us more available and accessible to everyone who needs us, and we can work in all of its centres throughout Israel," says Sapir.

He continues to lecture widely and teach in China – "Beijing is like my second home," he says.

One of his greatest accomplishments was helping to standardise the language of the discipline. Before the International Standard of Chinese-English Terminology of Chinese Medicine came out in 2009, "everyone translated the Chinese terms differently and this caused a lot of confusion. I couldn't talk to a practitioner in New York because we spoke a different language."

Not that languages are a hurdle for Sapir, whose leisure-time reading is mostly in Chinese, on the country's culture and philosophy. To keep in shape, he enjoys swimming and tennis.

If you would like any further information contact Roni Sapir, email: roni@east-west.co.il