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DISCOVERING A NATIONAL TREASURE

INTERVIEW WITH WU DO-NAN, 102-YEAR-OLD TAI CHI MASTER

BY JOU, TSUNG HWA

Each year, the Tai Chi Foundation sponsors a Tai Chi tour to China, including both a two-week stay in mainland China visiting Beijing, Zhenshou, Xian, and Guanzhou, and trips to Hong Kong and Taipei, Taiwan. In 1985 while in Beijing, we heard of a remarkable Master of Tai Chi, Master Wu Do-Nan, who is 102 years old. We did not want to miss this opportunity to talk with a Tai Chi master who had achieved such longevity. Using my personal contacts in China, we were able with much difficulty to arrange a meeting with Master Wu through the Beijing Institute of Physical Education. Master Wu is considered a "national treasure" and as such is highly protected by 8 guards on the first floor of his apartment building and more guards on the ninth floor where he and his wife live. The meeting was arranged, and following in this and the next several issues of *Tai Chi Farm* is information learned from Master Wu Do-Nan.

The Story of Master Wu Do-Nan

Master Wu was born January 23, 1884 to a wealthy Mongolian family in the Chin Dynasty. He was a very frail child, yellow and gaunt, prone to fits of coughing, shortness of breath, and epileptic seizures. His family's high position allowed his father to ask the dynasty ruler to heal his child.

The doctors diagnosed Wu Do-Nan as having been born with three devastating diseases: a liver infection, tuberculosis, and epilepsy. They took the challenge, and Wu Do-Nan began to show some improvement. After

PART 1 OF A SERIES

three years, however, the doctors reached the limits of medical care, and informed Wu Do-Nan's parents that only Tai Chi Chuan could now benefit the child. Master Wu was then introduced to Wu Chien-Chyan (or Wu Jianquan), founder of the Wu form, a variation of the Yang School of Tai Chi Chuan.

A Note on Wu Chien-Chyan

Wu Chien-Chyan can be linked directly to Yang Lew-Shan, originator of Yang Style Tai Chi Chuan. It is said that the famous Yang Lew-Shan taught Tai Chi Chuan to three of the Royal Guards as well as to his two sons, Yang Yu and Yang Chian.

Each of the three Royal Guards had high achievement in other martial arts, and as to his ability, each learned only one aspect of Yang's Tai Chi Chuan: hardness, softness, and Fa Chin, which is the power to throw people away. According to legend, these three aspects are related to learning Yang Lew-Shan's bones, tendons, and skin, respectively.

Yang Lew Shan's two sons, Yang Yu and Yang Chian, both learned all three aspects of Tai Chi Chuan from their father and both were also teachers. Wu Chien-Yu, the father of Wu Chien-Chyan, studied with both Yang Lew-Shan directly and Yang Yu, and Wu Chien-Chyan learned from his father. Wu Chien-Chyan's postures are described in *The Tao of Tai Chi Chuan*, p. 49.

The Training of Wu Do-Nan

So Master Wu Do-Nan was able to study with Wu Chien-Chyan, in a direct

line from Yang Lew-Shan, for 8 years beginning at age 9. Through Wu Do-Nan we were able to learn something of the traditional teaching methods of Wu Chien-Chyan, founder of the Wu style.

According to Wu Do-Nan, in those days training did not begin with Tai Chi form. Instead, for the first 2 to 3 years, students worked exclusively on developing strength and flexibility in the legs, practicing extensive horse stance movements, stretching exercises and kicks similar to warm-up exercises practiced by the Wu Shu teams of China or by Western gymnastics teams.

The training was so difficult and demanding under such a task-master as Wu Chien-Chyan that Wu Do-Nan thought of suicide. He was already weak and sickly, and this great suffering almost caused him to give up. Only by remembering his Mongolian heritage and the strength of his race was he able to muster the enthusiasm to work harder to make great progress.

Wu Do-Nan remembers his greatest suffering when he had to stand with his back to a post, one ankle tied to the post and both arms embracing it from behind. The other leg was attached to a pulley and lifted to the highest position tolerable, and he was left in this position for up to an hour. Each day, the leg was pulled higher until it reached his forehead and later behind his head. Such rigorous training today among Tai Chi players is not widely accepted; however, without good background and hard work to develop flexibility, high achievement will never be reached. Once the body had become flexible, Master Wu was taught the form, but this training was no less rigorous than before. Often one posture, such as Ward Off, was maintained until it was perfected, up to an hour. Only when one posture was perfected was a new posture learned. To learn an entire form often required 2 years; there were no "crash courses." Once Master Wu learned the form, practice involved stopping at each movement or posture to take six deep breaths. The reader can calculate how long it would take Master Wu to complete the 268 movement Yang style he had learned, stopping at each movement for six deep breaths. After completing the form,

Master Wu remembers being able to literally pour sweat from his shoes, even in winter! All his illnesses were purged in this great sweat, and Wu Do-Nan became rejuvenated.

After accomplishing the form, Wu Do-Nan learned push hands. First, he learned the single-hand fixed-stance push-hands using the four directions: Ward Off, Roll Back, Press, and Push. Later, he learned two-handed push hands. The players would lower their centers of gravity until they looked like two snakes slithering on the ground.

Next, Wu Do-Nan learned Da Lu for the four corners: Split, Elbow, Shoulder Strike, and Pull Down. The teacher would stand in the center and pull down the student, forcing the student to run to the next corner to maintain his balance. The teacher would balance the student's energy with his own, and would release the student's hands if his energy was too hard, causing him to fly away. Only when the teacher felt the student had achieved a natural soft movement, like a wind through the trees or like clouds across the sky, was the student allowed to proceed to the next step, Relaxed Kung.

To achieve this relaxation, the student would stand for hours relaxing each part of the body in turn, from the toes to the top of the head. The teacher was very perceptive and could detect relaxation in any part of the body, only allowing the student to pass on to another body part after relaxation had been achieved in the previous part. When the body was totally relaxed, all the joints would seem to be separated.

Application of each posture was the next step in training. The student learned how to put power into each posture, beginning with the basic eight postures (Ward Off, Roll Back, Press, Push, Split, Elbow, Shoulder-Strike, Pull Down), and later with each posture of the solo form.

Chan Ssu Chin was then developed, enabling the whole body to move as a unit and bringing the Chin to the fingers. The Chi Kung was practiced to accumulate Chi in the Tan Tien, and the Chi was then pushed to the hands. Finally, Chi was circulated to every part of the body.

After 8 years Wu Do-Nan had completed this course of study, and Master Wu Chien-Chyan decided he had delivered all his knowledge and that Wu Do-Nan should study with Yang Chao-Hsiung (or Yang Shaohou), the son of Yang Chian.

In the next issue, Part 2 of Master Jou, Tsung Hwa's interview with Master Wu Do-Nan will complete Master Wu's training and will begin to explore the secrets of his great longevity and Tai Chi's influence on Master Wu's long life.

XX

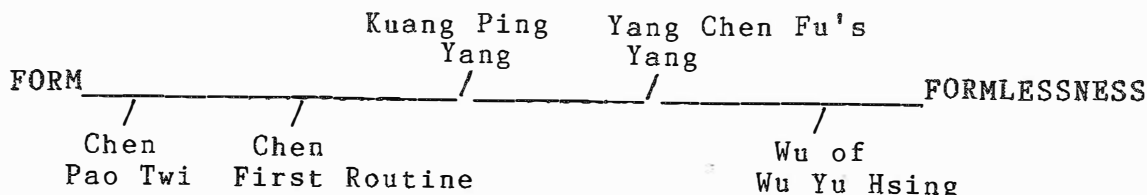
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XX

CORRECTION/ADDITION

Editor's note: In the previous two issues of **Tai Chi Farm**, Master Jou discussed Tai Chi's history as a model for personal development and achievement in Tai Chi Chuan. The progression from form toward formlessness, from external to internal, from expansion to compression, can be described in the evolution of Tai Chi forms. The diagram below, accidentally omitted from Master Jou's articles, shows that evolution as each form displays a different point on the journey from form to formlessness, from hand to body to mind. In the final stage of Tai Chi there is no body, only energy.



REVIEW CORNER

Body Mechanics of Tai Chi Chuan
by William C.C. Chen
Published by William C.C. Chen
128 pp., \$10.95

William C.C. Chen's book **Body Mechanics of Tai Chi Chuan** is eminently adaptable for use by either the amateur or the expert. Like the form itself, Master Chen's book is a model of simplicity. Don't allow the simplicity to become deceptive, for behind the clarity lies a wealth of information relating to the unity of mind, body, energy, and the power of Tai Chi movement.

Master Chen's book discusses not only the historical perspective of Tai Chi Chuan, but also other benefits to be gained, both mental and physical. For example, breathing, not often discussed for everyone, is presented in great detail for each part of each movement. All 60 movements presented by Master Chen are developed with concern for weight shift, angle of turns, movements of body parts along with clear illustrations, and information related to breathing.

This may seem complex, but because of the nature of his presentation it is easy to follow his directions. The clearness with which Master Chen expounds his topic is no accident. He has a breadth and depth of experience and knowledge.

He was the youngest student of Professor Chang Man-Ching, with whom he lived for three years. While still a teenager, he became known as "Baby Master," since his students were older than he. In the pursuit of his art William C.C. Chen has traveled extensively and taught in Singapore, Malaysia, Bangkok, Thailand, and Honolulu.

In essence, the man expounds his deep belief in what he is doing, and in a way that makes his mastery accessible to everyone.

--Reviewed by Angel Chiango



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