

T'AI CHI

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THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF T'AI CHI CH'UAN

www.tai-chi.com

Vol. 25, No. 3

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\$3.95 U.S.A. \$5.75 CAN.



Wu Yan Hsia—A Legacy Remembered

By Rosanna Hsi

“She radiated T’ai Chi.” That description of Wu Yan Hsia (1930–2001) filtered through my grief as I absorbed the news of her death on March 3. I had lost not only a great T’ai Chi master but also someone I loved as a mother. Chinese tradition views teachers as parents, and if ever a teacher lived up to that tradition, it was Wu Yan Hsia.

My last T’ai Chi lesson with her was in Hong Kong in 1999. With great reluctance I said goodbye but—alas!—without telling her how much she had come to mean to me and how much she had inspired me.

When I was first introduced to Wu style T’ai Chi in Honolulu, I knew I had found the key to calming my nervous temperament and improving my health.

Lao Shi Patricia Leong spoke with such high regard of her mentor, who lived in Hong Kong, that I knew I must meet this woman and learn more from the heritage she had to offer. It was this eagerness that sent me knocking on her door when I visited Hong Kong in 1994.

Wu Yan Hsia’s unpretentious greeting put me at ease immediately. “Please call me ‘Wu Lao Shi’ (Teacher Wu),” she said, indicating she was one among all the other T’ai Chi teachers.

Over tea she shared fascinating stories of her childhood, which had been steeped in the T’ai Chi tradition. Being the only granddaughter of Wu Chien Chuan’s household, Wu Yan Hsia was well loved, but unspoiled, and was always treated on a par with the sons. At mealtime, the whole family joined in conversation.

Wu Chien Chuan, her grandfather, was Manchu and was renowned for establishing Wu style T’ai Chi Ch’uan and for his archery skill on horseback.

“He was kind but strict,” she recalled. “The first thing he asked every time he saw me was, ‘Did you practice?’” In her grandfather’s house in Shanghai, there were always disciples taking lessons in T’ai Chi, practicing T’ai Chi sword, and training in push hands. She observed the close bonds between disciples and teacher,



From left: Rosanna Hsi, Wu Yan Hsia, Kwok Hsiao Jong and Peter Hsi. The photo on the wall is of Wu Kung Yi, Wu Yan Hsia’s father.

and saw first hand how powerful Wu style T’ai Chi could be when applied to martial arts.

When reminiscing about her father, Wu Kung Yi, Wu Yan Hsia’s voice swelled with fondness. “My father was magnanimous; he had the spirit of a martial artist.”

She described vividly the 1953 Wu-Chen fight in Macao. Cornered in public combat to prove the applicability of Wu Tai Chi, her father used swift loose maneuvers to nullify and overcome his opponent in two rounds. The combat was halted while Wu had the upper hand, in order to avoid further injuries to Chen.

Having been reared by two T’ai Chi legendary figures, Wu Yan Hsia felt called to dedicate her life to fostering the growth and development of Wu style T’ai Chi. She followed the footsteps of her forebears with pride and dignity, perpetuating a precious Chinese health-gift for posterity.

And she saw the fruits of the present generation and of the labor of those who had gone before her in the expansion of Wu style T’ai Chi throughout the world. As president of the Hong Kong Headquarters Chien Chuan Tai

Chi Chuan Academy, she shouldered the obligations and challenges of running the Academy, offering her leadership, strength and integrity. But her real passion was teaching.

She crowned three generations of traditional teaching with a nurturing style of her own. Her warmth created an instant rapport with students, whom she inspired with her affection, selfless devotion and commitment. She held no secrets. She gave without reservation.

Wu Lao Shi had an exceptional ability to adapt to students’ levels and needs. This kept her classes challenging but not overwhelming. When teaching the basics of T’ai Chi, she constantly stressed three points: “Each form must be done accurately, appropriately and consistently.” With a masterful touch, she identified problem areas and gave clear, direct and succinct instruction on how to improve.

She constantly searched for ways to help students enhance the form. “Let the chi [“energy”] follow the mind, and let the shen [“spirit”] express the form.” So effective was her communication that she even gave workshops on T’ai Chi and the sword in Canada and the U. S. without speaking a word

of English.

She continued the practice of bonding with students through concern and encouragement, and thus passed on the holistic values of T’ai Chi: mindfulness; integration of the body, mind, and spirit so they act as one; and the benefit to the whole person when the body is energized, the mind centered and the spirit uplifted.

Besides being an outstanding teacher, Wu Lao Shi was an affectionate wife, mother and aunt. She shared much with me about how she vigilantly guided her four daughters through childhood, sustaining them with love, and maintaining a closeness to them.

And her thoughtfulness was practical. She once photographed her daughter Dorothy’s many shoes and pasted the photos on the shoeboxes for easy identification.

In the past seven years, I have treasured a close friendship with Wu Lao Shi and have felt a growing affinity with her. I had the privilege of taking private lessons from her in Hong Kong and of hosting her in my home when she visited Honolulu.

During that visit she was playful, broke into frequent laughter, and took delight in sightseeing, walking on the beach, social gatherings, and especially in giving T’ai Chi workshops.

My husband and I wanted to absorb everything she had to offer, and she was enthusiastic about sharing. When we bade aloha to her at the airport, she was still demonstrating the single whip at the departure gate. “Hawaii is beautiful,” she sighed as she waved goodbye. “I would like to return . . .”

In some mysterious way, she has returned. For her death has deepened our awareness of her character and of its deep imprint upon us.

Her ultimate gift to us is her shining example of living out the T’ai Chi attributes; she was strong in conviction but flexible in attitude, focused in mind but gentle of heart, spirited in gait, and always consistent with her principles. By her committed, selfless life, she fittingly carried on the legacy of the Wu family.

We can show our love and gratitude by continuing the quest to grow and improve in T’ai Chi and by keeping alive in our hearts the radiance of an incomparable master and mentor. ●