



Yang Qingyu, in a Taipei park.

Photo: Michael DeMarco

Finding My Teachers

Michael DeMarco

There is a Chinese proverb which emphasizes that when the student is ready, the teacher appears. Here is the story of how I met two teachers who became very influential in my life. The first introduced me to the vast riches of Chinese culture in general, and Taijiquan specifically. He then—whether I was ready or not—gave me an introduction to my second teacher, who showed me through example how to live in a Chinese world.

Mr. Harold Chow (Zhou, in pinyin) was a refined gentleman who first introduced me to Taijiquan. He worked in the library and also taught Mandarin where I went to college. In the fall of 1973 I stumbled into his office and asked about his language classes, and, after our short conversation, decided to enroll. It was weeks later when I realized that he didn't flinch once after the many times I incorrectly pronounced his surname as the "chow" in chow mein and chow chow, the Chinese dog.

Seventeen students enrolled in Beginning Chinese, and everyone finally learned to correctly pro-

nounce "Chow" like the English name "Joe." Since only two of us continued into Advanced Beginning Chinese, the next semester allowed more contact between teacher and student. During these wonderful days of sing-song tones and kindergarten-level Mandarin, Mr. Chow also started to teach me Yang-style Taiji at pre-arranged times in whatever classroom was devoid of students. If anyone had an

Michael A. DeMarco, M.A. is a long-time Taijiquan practitioner and teacher. He is the publisher of the Journal of Asian Martial Arts.

interest in any aspect of Chinese culture, Mr. Chow would share all he could. Luckily for me, he was familiar with Taiji.

Even after graduating in 1975, I would pay Mr. Chow a weekly visit at his home. He helped prepare me for a trip to Taiwan so that I could experience Chinese culture firsthand. Mr. Chow had offered to write a formal letter of introduction for me to a Taiji teacher, a Mr. Yang Qingyu. I accepted, thinking this would be a good way to absorb even more of the culture.

Departure day soon came, June 19th, 1976. After arriving in the capitol city of Taipei, I found an \$8.00-a-night downtown hotel two blocks away from New Park, where I would study Taiji every morning starting at sunrise. I explored the city for a bit and, finally tired, went to bed eagerly anticipating my first class with Mr. Yang.

Taijiquan Class in New Park

Through the morning twilight streamed people walking to the park, a lovely place of botanical wonders, a pagoda, and pavilions. It was a sort of Shangri-la amid the streets of a quickly-modernizing capital city. Needless to say, the atmosphere was still conducive to Taiji and health in those days, before air pollution reached critical proportions. There were many Taiji teachers in the park, but I easily found where Mr. Yang would be simply by asking.

While the fifteen-or-so students were waiting for him, I too, waited in anticipation. Mr. Yang arrived, strolled down the sidewalk, and stepped onto the Taiji practice court that nature had provided under the canopy of the surrounding trees. Worn with years of practice, the ground was only soft dirt, slightly textured with thin lines of hard tree roots. Although Mr. Yang wore no uniform or insignia of rank, people always showed utmost respect for him as a person and as a teacher.

Our small group would chat and stretch before

Mr. Yang signaled for all to start the traditional Yang routine. After the twenty-five minutes that it took to complete the routine, students would practice by themselves or sometimes in pairs. They patiently worked to improve their movements in the solo routine and sword form, or the two-person routines and exercises *tuishou* and *sanshou* (push hands and free hands).

As he did with the other students, Mr. Yang taught me one movement at a time. The instruction was primarily visual, since we had a language barrier, and so-called translations often proved to be a foreign language in themselves that I still couldn't understand. It didn't matter anyway, because Mr. Yang taught everyone mainly through example. I'd watch, mimic his movements, and watch closer.

Who knew if I could ever return to Taiwan to get corrections?

Whenever he felt the urge, Mr. Yang would step in to offer suggestions, show a new movement, illustrate the correct way of performing a movement, or demonstrate a function. One time, while learning a new movement, I was holding one of my hands too low to protect myself, so he smacked me lightly in the head. I never again forgot where my hand should be in that posture and paid closer attention to even the seemingly minor aspects of every posture in the routine.

The students were of varied ages and backgrounds, but most were older. Some were retirees, such as a woman who had been a high school principal, and a frail, but always smiling gentleman who was learning to gain strength. A few were younger people in the work force or college who would come for their refreshing morning exercise before going off to jobs or to school. I was the youngest and the only foreigner. We got to know each other well, because it was usual for us to talk for a while after class.



Photo: Barbara Davis

Classes never really ended. Students dispersed according to their own timing, going off to work, school, or home. But there was always a group of us that would go off together for breakfast. A long, thin dough cooked in hot oil (*youtiao*) sandwiched into a flat, dry, white bread with sesame seeds on top (*shaobing*) went well with a hot bowl of soybean milk. But the heat of the day would sneak up quickly and a simple drink made from plum juice really quenched the thirst. A leisurely breakfast provided time not only to discuss Taiji, but to learn of each individual's personality and background. We often met at other times for lunches, dinners, visiting family homes, or sightseeing.

A Traditional Teaching Method

It didn't take long to learn Mr. Yang's simple teaching methodology. He kept things very informal, but at the same time all was organized. Confu-



Photo: Michael DeMarco

Yang Qingyu doing *an*, or Push.

cian ideals concerning proper manners—such as appropriateness of behavior between teacher, student, and classmates—were the common essentials that created a bond within the group. Mr. Yang taught, but it was up to the student to grasp his instruction. Each progressed according to his or her own capacity and innate talents. Mr. Yang

was always there to nurture.

Classes could be informal because the teacher and students acted according to the proper etiquette formalized within Chinese cultural traditions. Written rules and guidelines weren't needed. Instruction and knowledge was honored and the teacher was respected for his age and experience.

Students became more like "family" members, all sharing in their Taiji heritage.

Returning to Taiwan in later years, I learned that the mode of Taiji instruction had changed. Mr. Yang had departed the thoroughly modernized, polluted capital of Taipei and moved to a mountain monastery in the geographic center of Taiwan, where the air and water were the purest on the island. He retreated from the growing disrespect found among the newer, youthful students and those Taiji associates who were clamoring for fame and riches through commercial means.

At eighty-six, Mr. Yang still teaches Taiji, but most often now, it is to the Buddhist monks associated with the monastery where he spends most of his time. Some students from Taipei still go to visit him, including Mr. S.S. Lin, who took me for a visit in 1989. Mr. Lin stayed a few days, but I stayed longer as guest in Mr. Yang's home. He gave me his own room, plus simple gifts that are now treasured mementos. He never asked for a thing, for all he wanted was friendship, and so we spent much time simply walking and talking (thanks to a few more Chinese language courses on my part).

Over these years my teacher had aged, and like other grandfather figures, he was lonely. He felt deserted by the majority of students whom he had taught for so many years. At the same time, he felt elated, knowing that there were a few good souls whose lives he'd touched. He felt connected with them, through mutual respect, love, and Taiji. Mr. Yang's students inherited his Taiji system and they will carry on the lineage. Isn't this what "family" is all about?

As the traditional teacher-student relationship has changed, the daily Taiji routine has changed also. Today, it is easy to find Taiji classes in Taiwan and elsewhere that are very formal and structured: monthly and yearly rates paid with charge cards according to class schedules, diplomas awarded, and so on. But, in some remote mountain areas, or in secluded city apartments, Taiji is still taught in informal settings, according to old methods where diplomas and fees are insignificant when compared to the respect and learning that can occur between individuals. 