



A Precious Heritage: Maintaining the Traditional Principles of Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan

An interview with Grandmaster Eddie Wu Kwong Yu
By Rosalind Gill



**Grandmaster Eddie Wu Kwong Yu
Head of Wu Family & Gatekeeper of Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan**

Sifu, would you comment on your role in maintaining traditional Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan?

I would describe myself as a fifth generation Wu style gatekeeper. My role is to keep the principles of Wu style Tai Chi Chuan intact for the next generation. My objective is to ensure that quality is maintained and that people understand the difference between traditional Tai Chi Chuan and Wushu Tai Chi Chuan. In a way, I have to wear two hats, in that I am Chairman of the Board of Wushu Canada and also Chairman of Wu Style Traditional Martial Arts of the Wu Family.

Could you elaborate on the difference between traditional Tai Chi Chuan and Wushu Tai Chi Chuan?

For the last 12 years, the Chinese Government has been promoting Wushu, both hard style and soft style. In 2008, Wushu will be a demonstration game at the Olympics in Beijing. To prepare for this, they are developing a standardized form for training. They will be presenting a set of movements in different hard styles and as well as a soft style that contains elements of the five Tai Chi Chuan family styles. But in an attempt to meet the criteria for the Olympics, they are adding more acrobatic elements to the movements. These criteria are based on extreme

difficulty, speed and beauty, which are not elements of traditional Tai Chi Chuan. In fact, these are more like criteria for gymnastics - they involve being airborne, making 360 degree turns, landing on one foot and other movements that require extremely difficult balancing. Such elements diverge from the traditional art of Tai Chi Chuan. Traditional martial arts people recognize this and immediately say that this is gymnastics and not martial arts. Young people find these movements very attractive and challenging but they only represent 25% of the audience. The other 75% want to maintain the traditional art. There is a traditional Wushu division in the Wushu Federation in China now, but I am very disappointed in it, as they still insist that competitions include things like kicking very high and sitting very low. They are distancing themselves from the traditional principles. This type of training is suitable for sports or for gymnastics but not for martial arts.

Sifu, is the move away from the traditional solely due to this preparation for the Olympic Games?

No, there are also historical reasons. During the time of the Cultural Revolution, there was a great loss of traditional martial arts. For a period of 10 years, more masters left China than stayed. The situation was such that if you practiced martial arts, you went to jail. Many traditional martial arts practices were lost at that time.

How was the Wu family affected by this period?

Yes, part of my family was affected by this - my great-uncle, Wu Kung Cho, spent over 20 years in jail. However, my grandfather, Wu Kung Yi, had migrated south to Hong Kong in 1937, and hence, he was able to play a major role in passing down the art. Wu Kung Yi promoted the segmental form throughout the Wu style academies that were established. Thus, the Wu family has been lucky, as we have been able to pass on the tradition in our family. However, over the years, there have been there disciples who use different versions of the form rather than using the standard form promoted by my grandfather. These people tended to dilute the form with their own concepts. Different performances of the form have confused new generations seeking to learn the proper Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan. In fact, the standard form is not all that wide spread, as it was not known outside of the academies and was hardly even seen in China. It is this standardized segmental form that I want to promote as the certified Wu style form.

Given all the influences, how do you promote a standardized Wu style form?

I use the 54 competition form to make it easier for the general public to recognize the language (round movements) of Tai Chi Chuan. The 54 form is based on the round form that was taught by my ancestor, Wu Chien Chuan, after the Ching dynasty fell. At that time, all the martial arts families were competing to teach to the general public. Wu Chien Chuan (second generation Wu family) taught the round form with a small circle so as not to compete with the Yang big circle form. This was done out of respect for the Yang family. Now, as I explained, I am promoting the segmental form developed by my grandfather (third generation Wu family) as the standardized Wu style form. But both the segmental and the 54 competition forms are fully based on our traditional principles. In other words, there is a theoretical martial arts explanation for everything we do in these forms.

As I have said, some disciples have been known to practice variations of the form, but I am not interested in controversies, or comparing or setting up competitions between these variations. In The Gold Book, which is soon to be published, you can see that despite any variations in performance of the form, the basic martial arts principles have been maintained and passed down through the family. The most important thing is that we understand that these principles can never be changed. From day one, they were there and they will be there for decades to come.

What are some of the measures you are taking to ensure that the traditional Wu Style principles are maintained?

First of all, there is the forthcoming publication of the translation of The Gold Book. This is long overdue and I would like to thank all those who make it possible. This book will provide, in English, a permanent record of both the theory and the practice of Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan. This is an invaluable means of preserving our traditional martial arts principles. It will be an excellent learning tool, as well, it will explain the history of how the Wu family has managed to maintain quality and be true to the principles of Tai Chi Chuan. We will be making available DVD's of members of the family performing the form. This is another excellent reference tool for precision.

Another important initiative is that we have begun a certification process for Wu Style Tai Chi Chuan instructors. We now have over 100 certified instructors and anyone is welcome to certify. This will guarantee that quality will be maintained and that the proper principles will be passed on to the next generation.

Sifu, the issue of quality teaching is an important one for people who decide that they want to learn Tai Chi Chuan. How can a student decide which teacher to choose?

It is up to the individual how deep they want to go. If you want to learn authentic traditional Tai Chi Chuan, you have to carry out research and learn about the history and principles of the art. You must then ensure that your teacher is instructing within the tradition (ying/yang separation, etc.). There is a lot of commercialized, or less disciplined Tai Chi Chuan available. These classes may be an enjoyable form of exercise but they do not constitute proper Tai Chi Chuan. It depends on what you want and what your objectives are.

Sifu, a lot of people are attracted to a more user-friendly, superficial practice of Tai Chi Chuan, how can we promote the traditional inner aspects of the art and make it more attractive to the public?

Proper Tai Chi Chuan involves health aspects, martial aspects and chi kung. But unfortunately, people don't have the patience to devote the time needed to develop skills in this art, particularly in North America, where there is a preference for instant results. But there are people who realize the commitment that is necessary, and are willing to learn over a long period of time.

Must all students of Tai Chi Chuan learn the martial aspect to truly benefit from Tai Chi Chuan?

You can gain good health without really becoming adept at the applications. You can improve your focus, your circulation, your chi kung, the benefits are endless. But you do need to know the theory of the applications and you must practice seriously. Another important aspect is that you must have good teachers. A coach is invaluable to a student of Tai Chi Chuan. Even an accomplished golf champion or Olympian always practices with a coach to ensure that there is no deviation in his form. You tend to bring your own habits into your form if there is no supervision. Good quality instructors are the key to attracting people to Tai Chi Chuan.

Are you optimistic about the preservation of traditional Tai Chi Chuan?

I feel it is my duty to ensure that there is no watering down of our traditional principles. My determination to preserve a recognized certified Wu style form is not motivated by ambition or a desire to control anything. I am motivated by respect for my ancestors and a sincere wish in my heart to preserve the profound principles of the art of Tai Chi Chuan that have been handed down in my family.



Grandmaster Eddie Wu Kwong Yu and Rosalind Gill

Toronto, Canada

January 2006.

Copyright 2006, forwarding of this article is permitted but modification of this content, including without limitation any modification or removal of any is strictly prohibited and violates federal and international civil and criminal copyright law.

You can contact us at:

wustyle.toronto@yahoo.ca

Wu's Tai Chi Chuan Academy, Toronto, Ontario, Canada