

Remembering Teacher Wang Yen-nien 1914-2008

Editor's Note

Late last year I came across a short video clip, posted on Facebook, of the late Wang Yen-Nien performing a hand form. The footage was grainy and badly lit but his movements were clearly discernible. The form was very slow and deliberate and very soon after a series of comments were added, questioning various aspects of his performance.

One of the inherent problems of our art is the fact that much of what is going on comes from the inside and what we can see on the outside can often give little indication of the intention, focus or ability of the performer.

Having met a number of students over the years, from the Wang Yen-Nien tradition, who were accomplished practitioners I thought it would be interesting to get a clearer sense of the man and his work. My search for more information coincided with the fact that we were, by coincidence, in the centenary of Wang Yen-Nien's birth which was as good a time as any to re-evaluate his legacy. With the wonders of modern technology I contacted a few key tai chi practitioners who had studied with Wang and what follows are their experiences gained from working directly with the man.



I have been very fortunate in my study. I have been able to learn from men who are either legends in the art of taijiquan or who will no doubt be remembered as such. Men like T.T. Liang, William C.C. Chen and my principle teacher, Wang Yen-nien. A few days hence is the centennial of Master Wang's birth. I have been meaning to honour his memory, so I was quite pleased when approached to write about him for this journal.

To be honest, it is quite difficult to transmit even a small part of what a man like Wang was. Naturally, all students talk of their teacher in terms that often sound like they are attempting to describe one of the Greek demi-gods and not a person of flesh and blood. And also, to be blunt, the skill of the vast majority of "masters" these days is simply not what it was, and if we are to continue in a forthright, honest vein, many teachers are given a pass and never actually demonstrate any martial skill. So how can I share with the reader the depth of a man as unique and special in the history of our art as Wang Yen-nien without sounding like just another devotee who has drunk deeply of the kool-aid?

The only hope I have of passing on a bit of what Wang was and what it was like to study with him is to share some of my recollections of training with him.

I first met Wang in 1984. I was studying with Robert W. Smith at the time. To be honest, Smith was rather unimpressed with teachers in the world of taijiquan and rarely had positive critiques to offer. At the time, I was still quite the novice and very interested in learning how to develop my qi. This led to a very real interest in Daoist practice. However, in those days, there was simply no one I could find to learn from. Smith of course had learned of my interest, and one day during push hands class came up to me and said, "Wang Yen-nien is coming. He's the real thing, he's a Daoist." Wang was visiting the U.S., teaching a few seminars and visiting old students. Robert Smith has studied with him in Taiwan, so he was coming to visit Smith at his home and school in Maryland. Of course, I made sure that Smith knew I was available to be a driver. Happily, I was chosen to guide Master Wang around Washington, D.C.. And so began my life as his student.



The author with Wang Yen-nien 1996

From the very beginning, it was clear Wang was a teacher unlike any other. This was obvious from the way he answered questions. That is, he answered them. And he did so with straight forward explanations and instructions. If he was asked about qi circulation, he told the student exactly the route and how it was done. If asked about fajin (releasing intrinsic energy), he explained clearly, and demonstrated his skill with ease. There was no hype. No fanciful allegories that might leave some impressed, but in actuality taught nothing. And he pushed with everyone. He didn't stand back and act the "big master" who you might get to push with after years of bowing. Nope. I had only just met him and got to work with him that evening. He didn't hold back his teaching. But perhaps more to the point, he could do everything I had read about. Everything that was spoken of in the classics, was there in his body.

Naturally, after meeting a man of such skill, I was determined to study with him further. A year later found me in Taiwan, practicing with Wang mornings at the Grand Hotel and evenings at his daoguan (literally "way hall," i.e. training hall). My Mandarin at the time was limited to about four or five words, so much of my learning had to be done through careful observation, though there were also many expatriates around that helped with translation as needed.

During one evening class, Master Wang took me aside. He had me place one hand on his dantian and the other on his back at the kidney. Then he inhaled. Honestly, the way his belly and back inflated, it seemed he might burst like a balloon. His back expanded more than my dantian could on the best of days. In a moment, I learned a great deal about how to breathe properly. Then he placed my hands on his spine. One was at the mingmen, a point opposite the dantian, and the other on the

back of his neck. I thought he wanted to show how the upper body was still as the area at the back and dantian expanded with inhalation. Remember, I couldn't understand anything he might have said, and vice versa, so he wasn't trying to communicate with words. He inhaled, and as I expected, his back inflated and the upper part of the spine did not move. Then he exhaled. I felt a warm vibration move up his spine, first passing under my palm at his mingmen, then under the one on the back of his neck a moment later. There are those who don't believe in qi, but once you have experienced something like that, you have no problem setting your mind to developing it yourself because there is no question about it. I was not expecting anything so simply amazing and had no idea what to expect but in that moment, I learned something few are fortunate enough to experience.

Today it is unfortunately not uncommon to find "teachers" repackaging taijiquan as some sort of therapeutic exercise for the elderly. Never having been one who forgot the quan (quan literally means fist or boxing), I sought Master Wang's guidance in the practice of sanshou (literally "free hands," i.e., free fighting). After an enlightening conversation at my apartment, where he outlined how I

should train and develop my skills, we went out to lunch. His verbal explanation was characterised with his typical exactness and clarity, but I wanted a real taste. After all, sanshou is not tuishou (push hands), and responding to a strike is not like dealing with a push in fixed step push hands. So I took a chance. As we walked through the parking garage, without warning, I turned and threw a punch at Wang. The fact that I didn't end up lying on my back unconscious or staring at the ceiling was a true testament of his skill. I simply found my fist hanging in empty space with my teacher standing at my side, his body almost touching mine, his palm ever so lightly resting on my heart. He said not a word, but just looked me calmly in the eye. I took the wordless message as something like, "Understand, kid?" He was in his late 70's at the time.

Many years later, Master Wang, now in his early 80's, was in a terrible car accident. He was riding in a taxi. Taiwan taxi drivers drive like they are either insane, training for Le Mans, or both. Wang told me that when the car smashed head on into another, he flew forward off his seat. He put his arm up in ward off in time to protect his upper body, but his right leg slammed into the steel bar at the base of the



Wang Yen-nien, born in Taiyuan City, Shanxi Province, December 19, 1914 - May 4, 2008.

Wang Yen-nien

1914-2008

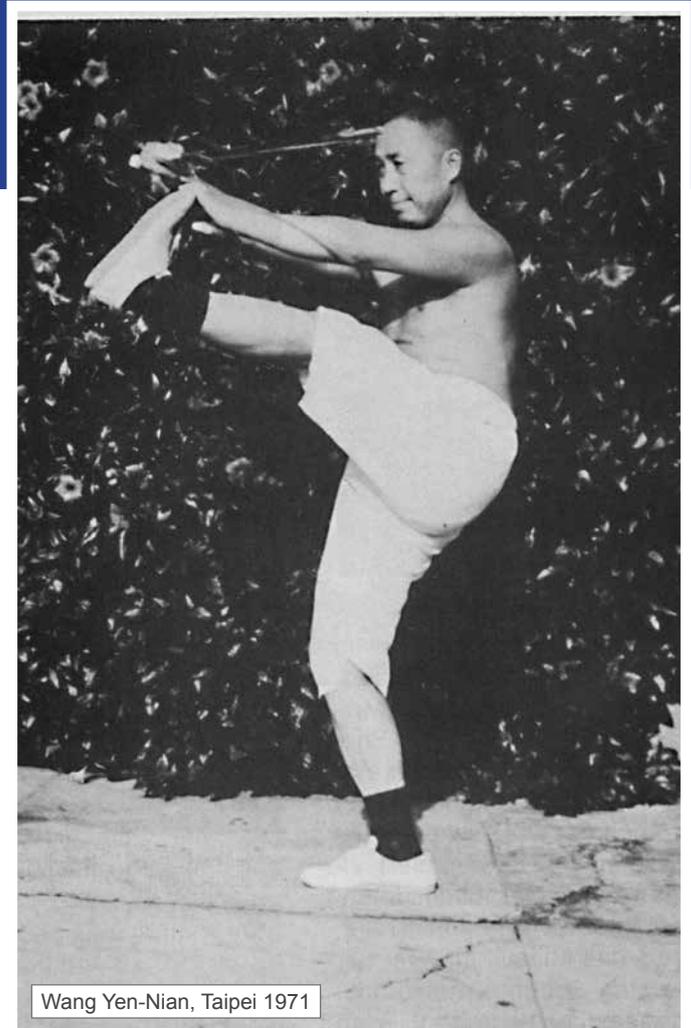
seat in front of him. He said he leg was struck right near a striking point. The car he rode in was totaled, and Wang was permanently injured, having to walk slowly with the aid of a cane. This was on top of his being bowlegged from malnutrition as a child.

After that, he walked very slowly. I remember him telling me how he was up to some seconds of zhan zhuang (standing post), happy that he could stand and strengthen his injured leg. Zhan zhuang is typically trained for a half hour or more. Naturally, his condition scared the hell out of his students. It was selfish in a way, but many of us were worried about how we would continue our studies. It was shortly after this time that I found myself alone with Wang at my center in Washington, D.C. Wanting to check on my progress, he took my arm, led me over to the wall, and said, "Let me see how soft you are." Now I don't mean to sound boastful, but I have a fair reputation in push hands circles. I won several "national" level push hands competitions in the United States and took second place in International competition in China. So one would expect that I could handle an 80 some year-old cripple. And honestly, I thought to myself, there's no way I can make him lose face, it is just the two of us alone. So I endeavored to do my best and push him. Not only did I not succeed, Master Wang knocked me down. After that, I was more cautious and he only put me into the wall.

What was it like pushing with such a skilled man? There just wasn't anything to push on. The contact under my hands was extremely light. It was literally like pushing on a cloud. But there was this substance hidden in that mist. Whenever I did attempt a push, I was caught immediately. Wang never forced his counter-push or was even slightly anxious to get me. I could neutralize his first, second, or even third pushes but I could not get away. Eventually, I would find myself stuck with nowhere to go, and then I was sent into the wall. There were moments when I thought I could see him, like a shadow passing through fog. But when I tried to catch him, I was the one who got trapped. Such was his level; it was true steel hidden in cotton.

With all this skill, I never heard master Wang boast or speak ill of another teacher. He was just a regular guy. One time, I was visiting his home in Taipei. We got up to head out and I noticed a small plaque on the wall. It was a bit dusty, but I saw that it was from the National Taijiquan Association. It recognised Wang as a ninth-degree teacher, or in terms most readers will be more familiar with, the equivalent of a ninth degree black belt. If I had not noticed this little plaque, half-hidden behind the TV, I don't think I would have ever heard of it. I certainly wouldn't have learned about it from Wang.

Looking back, the only important question is what set Wang Yen-nien apart from other teachers. I believe the answer is that he embodied the complete art. I have met genuine masters who were extraordinary soft and who made it nearly impossible for me to find a place where they could be pushed. I have been pushed by teachers who had a fajin that rocketed me off my feet. I have worked with others who had such excellent listening skills that they simply knew my every move and were always a step ahead of me. But in each of those cases, while any one of those skills made it easy for them to neutralise me, each one of these masters also tended to rely upon that particular skill that gave them such an edge. What set Wang apart was that he had all of these skills and put them all to use as one skill. It wasn't just that he knew your intent before you could even manifest it, but that as he neutralised an action, he also had you off your root and, if he choose, into the wall. In short, he truly embodied the teaching in the classics: He was taijiquan completely.



Wang Yen-Nian, Taipei 1971



Wang Yen-Nien demonstrating fajin at Great River Taoist Centre 1988

Scott M. Rodell is a martial artist, author, and teacher of Yang-style taijiquan. He is the founding director of Great River Taoist Center, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. www.grtc.org



A Senior Student Remembers Master Wang Yen-nien
 by Lin Jingtai,
 Deputy Administrator,
 Republic of China National Association of Yang Family Taijiquan

On the auspicious occasion of our celebrating Master Wang Yen-nien's fifty years of instruction in Taiwan, I am honored and very grateful to have this opportunity to render homage to our teacher, under whom I have studied now for forty years. I have spent most of my life by Yuanshan, and under the tutelage of Master Wang, have obtained not only health and happiness, but also an understanding of the true nature of Taijiquan and the arts of self-defense. My most precious learning, however, has been in the Daoist practices that enhance vitality, and the philosophy of life these draw on. I am now happy to share some glimpses of the real Master Wang I have observed over these many years.

Master Wang is very seldom angry or perturbed. A person's temperament tells us whether he is erratic or unstable, and is the proof of whether he has achieved mastery of his qi, as when one's qi is settled in the dantian, anger is rarely aroused. Whatever pressure that might assail him, Master Wang invariably maintains an even composure—clear-headed in thought, fair and courteous in action. His face in fact shows few traces of anxiety or distress.

Forty years ago, Master Wang first made his name in push-hands, and many an expert in this discipline met defeat at his hands. Yet Master Wang rarely mentions these heroic past exploits, and it is the rare survivors of this earlier generation who now show the greatest respect for both his technical ability and his modesty of character. For when you are pushing hands with Master Wang, he can at any moment control your intentions and your direction, so much so that when he suddenly ejects you from the ring, you experience no pain at all. This is indeed the highest attainment in push-hands, and totally unlike the usual rough-and-tumble that features so many errors and variants that it more resembles wrestling.

A master of Taijiquan not only needs intelligence, determination and endurance, but must also be able to earn the respect of the other branches of the martial arts and the population at large, as well as the love of his own students. I have in the past seen Master Wang in several moments of crisis, and in each case he was able to overcome the problem and return to health. In particular, he recovered from leg injuries suffered in a traffic accident and a subsequent illness so well as to not have to alter his existing plans, and left soon afterwards for a teaching engagement abroad. His resilience, vitality and will-power need no further illustration!

Master Wang's students come from all walks of life, and no distinction is drawn between men and women, the young and the old, or the wealthy and the poor, nor on the basis of religion, race or nationality. Indeed, the great respect and veneration he is shown by students from around the world amply confirm his status as a genuine Master of outstanding contribution to the history of Taijiquan. The final testimonial of my gratitude and respect for my Master can be read in the following verse.

*"Young, with celestial ambitions, I aimed to soar afar,
 Fate came to my aid at Yuanshan, where flowered the Dao.
 With fist, sword, bone and tendon, I trained in exacting regime,
 And knew the mysteries of Yin yang, and grew, alive to the themes,
 Loose, soft, exact, matters all of intent;
 Even of mind and of power, spirit in concealment.
 And should one ask anon, where the marvels lie,
 They're in the breath alone, that gives longevity."*



When I arrived in Taiwan, I was looking for a Kung Fu teacher. Having practiced karate in France for many years, I was not looking at all to practice taichi, but more external martial art.

My feeling about taichi was something too slow, too soft ... and then I met somebody who suggested that I go to the Daoguan of Master Wang. I smiled but I went, just of curiosity - and then I went back almost every day! It's unnecessary here to explain why ... I also trained with other teachers of Yangjia Michuan so that I can work hard.

After a few years of training every day, I passed diplomas and I began to teach.

At every moment, I remembered the words of Master Wang and I shared with the students. Words of heart, words of a Master who transmitted with all his strength and soul.

That's what I keep of Master Wang, a man with an exceptional generosity, always concerned about our practice, our progress, a word, a board, a gesture, and a smile! A man with peaceful mind. A Master!

These words always help me in my everyday life, I will never forget. Thank you, Master Wang, you have been and you will remain in my heart for ever!

Noëlle KASAI, Taipei - Taiwan

Wang Yen-nien 1914-2008

by Claudy Jeanmougin

Laoshi and his persuasive strength to push us further



During the training course in Yuchi in 1992 Laoshi mentioned the fact that he was not eternal and that we had to be very attentive to what he was going to teach us. In Châlennes, during the summer 1999, he had promised to live a hundred years... I believe that he will continue to live even much longer in the followers of our style's mind. For my part, he remains very present and I still hear his patient explanations and his true laughs.

By reading again this passage of the *Dao De Jing* by Laozi, I could not help having a thought for Laoshi because it applies so much to him: "When he is in the world, the wise man evolves slowly and calmly, and his spirit harmonises with the world. He treats each one as if his own children." Lao Tseu: "My words are easy to understand", the *Tao Te King* commented by Master Cheng Man Ch'ing, chapter 49, *Le Courier du Livre*, Paris, 2012.

Laoshi, indeed, never used to leave somebody aside and we had the impression that he was always observing us. In spite of some dissatisfaction, he never raised his voice; some words and a look were enough to annihilate any disagreement. Maybe we were all a little like his children whom it was necessary to put back on the straight path, which he did softly and kindly. Laoshi, was a very good grandfather, adored children and used to play with them when the occasion appeared. I remember seeing him playing with my daughter Raphaëlle when she was four years old.

I could carry on speaking about the kindness of Laoshi for some time but what I would like

to share now, is Laoshi's transmitting strength. Twice, he passed on to me the necessary energy to go beyond what seemed to me, my limits.

When I began to study Taijiquan, I began translating Laoshi's book. At first, the text describing gestures because I wanted to learn the Chinese terms to understand what Laoshi was saying. I had been learning Chinese for two years only and the work was rather difficult. To know I was doing it correctly, I asked Sabine Metzlé if she would read over my translation, which she willingly agreed because she was interested in seeing the text in French. One evening, as I gave her some pages to be corrected in the practice room at the top of the building of Taipei, Laoshi called out to Sabine to ask her what it was. A few moments later, Julia Fairchild, came to find me to tell me that Laoshi wanted me to translate his book into French. It was a real challenge for me, with my very precarious Chinese, but I set to work and completed it that year. I still wonder today about what motivated Laoshi to allow me to do the work as he had little knowledge of how good my Chinese was. The result is that I now work seriously with the written language and continue translating. Would I have had this courage if Laoshi hadn't challenged me?

In 2000, I was going through life changes and I gave up my classes in Angers to get ready to leave the region. At that time, I didn't teach more than one class every two weeks in Saintes. During my courtesy visit to Laoshi who was leading a training course in Brittany in 2002, he told me never stop teaching Taiji

quan. How had he known that I was leaving Angers and that I didn't have class anymore in this city? It doesn't matter but the fact is that Laoshi knew about all our acts and facts. I thus took back my pilgrim's stick to continue to propagate our style in many cities of Charente-Maritime and I have no idea when I will give up teaching.

As long as my health will allow, I will continue to teach Taiji quan otherwise, if I stopped, I would feel this like an act of treason to the commitment that I took to respect the world of Laoshi.

For all these reasons, Laoshi will always remain very present and that is why, at the end of every class, I ask my pupils not to forget to greet him. I would like that his testimony would be understood as a lesson of life which was passed on to me.

Claudly Jeanmougin is based in France and is connected to the Yangjia Michuan School of Taiji Quan who preserve and continue the legacy of Wang Yen-nien.

"In the spirit of friendship and solidarity, AMICALE is composed of numerous individuals and associations in order to maintain links and exchanges as wished by Master Wang Yen-nien (1914-2008)."

www.taijiquan.free.fr