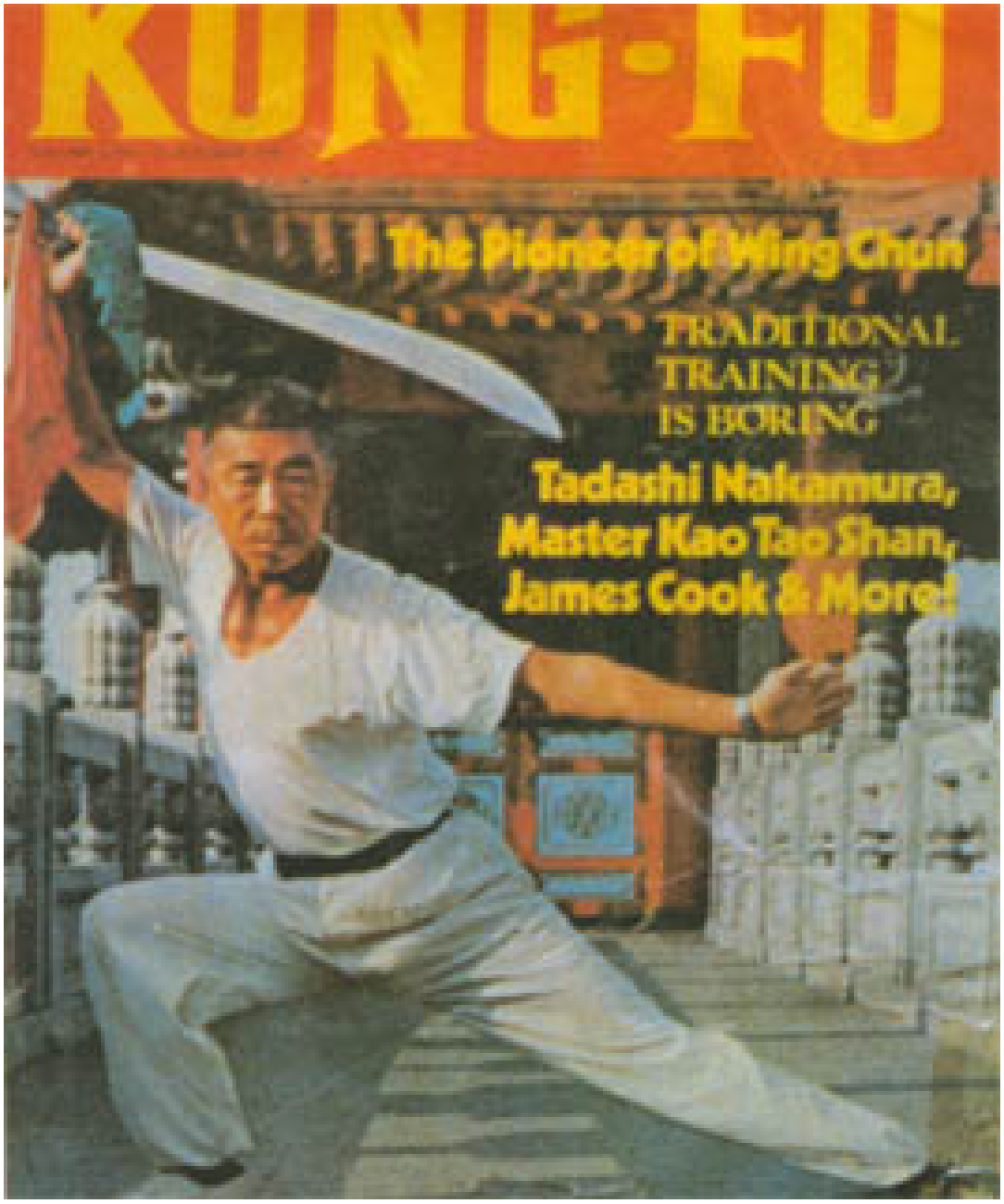

An Old Master takes a new look at a Traditional Art

Taiwan's famous Kao Tao Shan gives Inside Kung Fu a contemporary peek at Gung-Fu in the old country

Article by Jesus Luz Sampedro

It's six o'clock in the morning in Taipei's New Park but it's already packed with several groups of people of all ages working out in the early morning mist. By years of habit, they've segregated themselves into two distinct categories.

On the west side of the park, the older group silently run through stretching exercises, their faces stony, their concentration complete and total. They move with many years of practiced grace and yet there's obvious joy in the repetitious warm-up activity along with anticipation for what is still to come.

On the other side of the small park, the contrasting scene is a little closer to pandemonium. About twenty-five children of elementary school age squeal happily and struggle to keep their activity to a minimum level. They need a warm-up about as much as a tiger needs a bodyguard. In addition, another 20 teenagers look condescendingly down on the little ones, unconsciously mimicking the attitude of the adults across the park.

Suddenly, a man strides into the park and all activity stops. He takes up position in the middle, and quietly asks, "Is everyone ready?" Silently and quickly, both groups move gracefully into four lines facing the man. There is no confusion or unnecessary noise -- not even from the little ones. It's like watching a well-trained military unit deploy for action.

There's a good reason for their precision and discipline. They're all students of Master Kao Tao Shan, one of the most famous sifus in the Republic of China and the serious, purposeful but a humble little man standing resolutely in front of his students.

At a quiet command, the stoic group assumes a stance then over the next half-hour, glides through a repertoire of eight more exercises. Master Kao, moving in an around the group, joins them at times while simultaneously correcting or encouraging the various students.

A fifty-one year veteran of the Chinese martial arts, Kao is an undisputed master of five different styles. For over twenty years, he learned Shaolin, pa-kua, hsing-I utan and taichi from one of the most famous sifus in Santon Province - Wang Son Ting. Wang studied for over five years at the famous Shaolin Temple in Hu-Nan Province in the North of China. He died sixteen years ago in Taiwan, leaving his student Kao to carry on his art.

As the class breaks up into smaller groups for individual practice, a man and a woman hesitantly approach the master with their five-year old daughter, and formally ask him if he would be kind enough to accept her as a student. They tell him of having seen him working with the children's group and want very badly to have their little girl join the class.

Nodding politely at the parents, Kao smiles at the frightened child and gently asks her name. His child-like friendliness immediately wins her over and she giggles shyly back at him. After a few minutes of idle chat-chat, he takes the little girl by hand and casually shows her a few basics all the while smiling gently and capturing her attention in his singsong monotone. It was obvious; Kao had had himself a new student.

"Children," Kao says authoritatively, "make the best students. Her age," he says, gesturing at the little girl who by this time had already joined the group, "is the best age to begin learning the art because

their minds are clear. I enjoy teaching them. That's why I teach two classes at primary schools."

Kao himself began learning the arts at the age of 12 back in his homeland in Santon Province. But it wasn't quite so easy to get a martial arts education back in 1925.

"It was very hard then," he confides. "The masters did not accept students as easily as we do now. First, they had to be satisfied that the candidate had good character and if he came from a good, honest family. It was only that way they could be assured they would not teach the art to people who would use it for bad purposes."

Kao, on the other hand, feels that anyone who wants to learn should be accepted, particularly if they are children. He claims that in this way, the children will learn the good things about gung-fu before they have an opportunity to learn how to use it in an evil manner. In other words, he argues that the inherent good in the art will help an individual overcome any inherent evil he may have within himself.

A reminiscent look comes over Kao as he recalls his long ago initiation in Master Wang's class. "Before he would accept me, I had to worship five things: the Earth, the Heavens, the emperor (at the time there was no emperor but the term signified the spirit of China), my parents, and my new master. After the ceremony, I was accepted into his home and expected to serve him in all things."

The kung-fu training that he received was grueling but according to Kao, it was invaluable. As a full time student, he was of course, expected to literally eat, drink, and sleep the art. In his first year for instance, he performed the eight basic exercises he started the class out with almost continuously. At night, he slept under a stick that was about two meters long and was suspended about six inches over his body. This, according to his sifu, helped to straighten his back. Later on, to build up leg muscles and over-all body strength, he would put weights on his hands, legs and arms, then climb into a hole approximately twenty inches deep. He would spend hours jumping in and out of it and was required to dig in one inch deeper every day.

As if recalling the harshness of the old days was a signal going off within his head, Kao turned sternly back to the class and barked a few orders. His manner looked a little out of place but the smile returned as the two youngsters enthusiastically ran through a form perfectly. Kao continued to walk amongst the class, pointing out various individuals, ordering them to do a specific exercise, and then having the class run through the same exercises another two or three times until everyone had it right.

Finally, leaving them on their own once again, he explains, "I think it's good to work it this way. I let the more experienced students work with the inexperienced ones. That way, both learn because the older students will work harder so they can teach the younger ones

better and in turn, the younger ones will work harder to impress the older ones."

Like most good teachers, Kao is a natural psychologist or, in this case, perhaps psychiatrist would be more accurate. As a master, Kao knows as much about the healing arts as he does the fighting arts. And, as a life-long advocate of physical fitness, it's obvious that he practices what he preaches concerning the merits of internal medicine and Chinese herbology, not to mention the tenets of physical conditioning. The trim, healthy looking, 61 year old martial artist also discourages smoking and drinking with the exception of a herbal wine that he concocts at home.

"Breathing," he argues, "is the basis of good health. Proper breathing gives you strength and cleans your lungs. Proper technique of course, is difficult to learn and takes a long time but it is important for your health and is worth the effort."

At the end of the three hours, Kao called the group back to order and the formation he started the class off with. Before dismissing them, he spoke for a few minutes, calmly explaining in that relaxing, sing-song monotone voice of his, the secondary benefits of the arts. It was obviously something he talked about often with every word, as if their attentiveness would make the class last longer. But finally, it was time. Kao barked another order and the group reluctantly disbanded.

"It is good for them," Kao says absentmindedly as he watches his students straggle slowly out of the park. "They will learn much good. They will learn more patience, more humility and most importantly, they will learn how to use their minds."

Kao, the teacher, smiled that gentle smile of his and then turned and walked away. There was still time for a cup of tea before the next class.

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