

Music Charts.....page 14
 Movies.....page 15
 Taichung What's On.....page 17
 Weekend Warrior.....page 19
 Sports Calendar.....page 19
 Restaurants.....page 20
 What's Cooking.....page 20



Last week, we incorrectly attributed the Star Wars photo on page 15 to Columbia/Tristar. The photo was actually courtesy of 20th Century Fox. Our apologies for the error.



Mainland movie buffs rejoice! A free festival of China's films is coming to Taipei, Taichung, and Kaohsiung. > 22



Best wishes to our designer Alicia Beebe and her husband Loren Lung on their long-overdue honeymoon.

Weekend

Friday, April 18, 1997

The China News

Vol. 4, No. 15

The legend of the praying mantis

It is told that a 17th-century Ming Dynasty general named Wang Lang, a native of Shandong, took refuge from the invading Manchus in Shaolin Temple in Hunan. He was said to be a skilled warrior who had mastered 18 styles of fighting, specializing in the Bird and Monkey styles.

While staying in Shaolin, he often sparred with the monks and was generally considered better than most of them, but he was never able to best the senior abbot. After many failed attempts, Wang left the temple demoralized and frustrated with his technique.

In a nearby forest, contemplating his failure, Wang then witnessed an event that was to revolutionize martial arts. Distracted from his thoughts by a sound, Wang turned to see two insects — a mantis and a cicada — fighting.

"It was not long before the poor cicada was mauled and eventually swallowed by the superior mantis, whose quick, front arms gave it a significant advantage.

Fascinated by the fight, Wang caught the mantis and returned to the temple, where he studied the insect's movements. He teased it with pieces of hay and observed how it reacted.

He learned that the mantis is an insect with specialized fighting styles, and drew lessons from it about advancing and retreating, as well as fighting tips on striking, seizing, blocking and catching. Wang began to imitate the mantis movements and later developed a powerful new hand technique.

Still unsatisfied with his skills and finding that he lacked coordination between his fists and feet, he incorporated steps from the Monkey style and other aspects of the Shaolin, Tai-chi, Eagle Claw, Nan-chuan, Hsing-yi and Pa-kua styles.

This was the birth of the Praying Mantis style.

As Wang went on to beat all the monks at Shaolin, including the old abbot, students began to flock to his impressive new style.

After Wang's death, the style was so popular that a number of variations had already emerged, including the Plum Flower Mantis and the Seven Stars Mantis.

The assimilation of other types of martial arts into the Mantis school were highly beneficial. Styles like Tai-chi, Pa-kua and Hsing-yi are classified as "soft fist" (primarily defensive) while the Shaolin, Monkey, Eagle and southern styles are categorized as "hard fist" (primarily offensive). The Mantis comprises both the "hard" and "soft" schools, which conforms with the yin and yang aspects of Chinese philosophy.

— Tony Faress

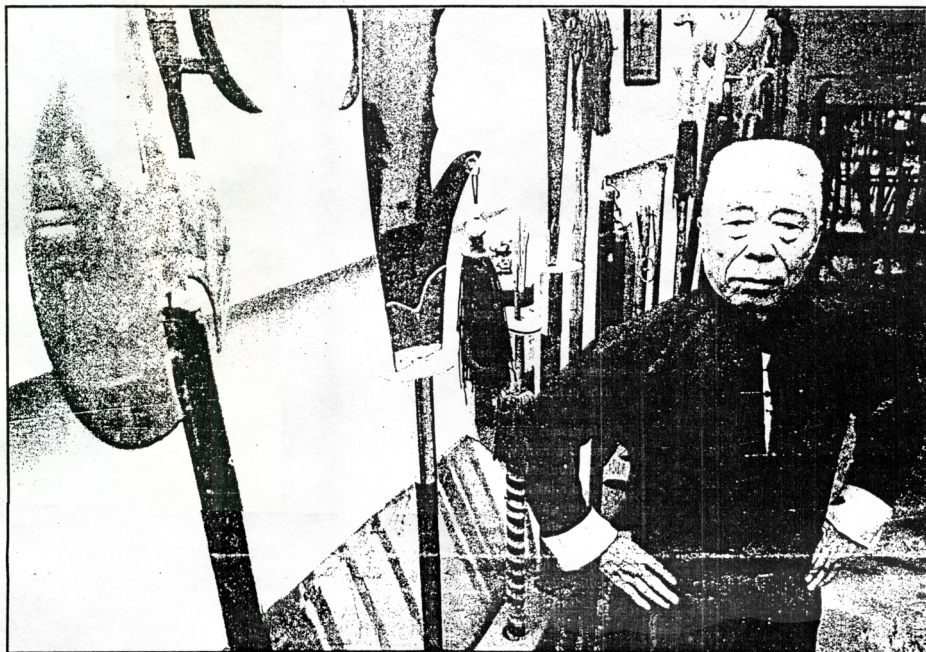


PHOTO BY TONY FARESS

Tales of a Grasshopper

Nearly a decade ago, *Weekend* correspondent

Tony Faress came to Taiwan in search of a legendary martial arts master. He found him in venerable Master Kao Tao-sheng, Taiwan's undisputed master of the Northern Long Fist and Praying Mantis styles of kungfu.

Fist, to make its spectacular Wushu forms.

Master Kao's style embraces all the aspects of fighting — punches, kicks, locks to the joints, pressure points, shuai-chiao (grappling) and ground fighting. Beginners must first spend time stretching and learning the eight basic stances to improve flexibility, suppleness, endurance and strength.

Early training incorporates eight basic fighting methods that stress balance, footwork and the proper stance.

As is true with most styles of Chinese martial arts, forms (choreographed sequences designed for practice) play an important role in this style. But even these incorporate strictly no-nonsense, self-defense techniques — there are no flashy movements included for show. Master Kao teaches an extensive system of training, which contains 19 fist forms, four ground rolling forms, 14 sparring forms and 39 forms for weapons.

In Chinese martial arts, weapons are an extension of the arm. As a beginner, students learn to move the weapon at will, but later study how to move in harmony with the weapon. The most advanced fighters allow the weapon to move according to its own will.

To get a glimpse of this final level, one has to see Master Kao perform his weapons form. The movements are so beautiful, graceful and uninterrupted, as if the weapon has come alive in his hands, flying through the air, cutting, paring,

• continued on page 18

IT WAS A CLEAR, WARM SUMMER morning when I entered Taipei's New Park for the first time, driven by my passion for the martial arts and inspired by an article in a kungfu magazine. That was nine years ago, and I had come from Belgium on what was supposed to be a one-and-only trip to meet a renowned martial arts master. That trip was followed by others, and finally ending up with me settling here.

Looking back, I cannot say which attracted me more, the art or the master. Master Kao Tao-sheng, 83, is Taiwan's undisputed master of Northern Long Fist and Praying Mantis styles. He was born in 1915 in a Shandong village, the son of a humble blacksmith. As a teenager, Kao worked in a match factory in Qingdao, a city known for its high martial arts standards. At the time, there were over a hundred martial arts schools in Qingdao alone.

At age thirteen, Kao studied *ti kung men* (Ground Rolling style) with Master Fan Zhongqing for three years. He then studied the Praying Mantis style at the Qingdao martial arts school, Northern Shaolin Fist at the Jinan martial arts school, and *wu tang* under Taoist priest Fa Zhou. Later, he went to Fushan and for eight years, where he became a disciple of the famous Grand Master Wang Songting (1884-1964) who specialized in Shaolin Long Fist and Praying Mantis. He started to teach martial arts in Qingdao at the age of 22.

His skills were honed by the grueling training he received. Kao recalls as a student, he was expected to "eat, drink and sleep" the art, and was expected to serve his teacher in all things.

To build up leg muscles and body strength, he would put weights on his hands, legs and arms and then practice jumping out of a hole 20 inches deep. As he progressed, he had to dig the hole deeper. To train in "ching-kung" (training of "lightness" to enable one to jump to a great height, and to run with ease and speed), he would carry weights on his legs and waist and run up a long wooden board. As he progressed, the wooden board would be placed at a steeper angle until he could run straight up a low wall and onto the roof. To practice his rolling skills, his teacher made him roll from the top of a small hill down to the bottom.

"Those days are over," he laments. "Students nowadays cannot withstand that much hardship."

In 1937, Kao joined the army. He moved to Taiwan in 1949, following Grand

Master Wang. After retiring, in 1961, he founded the Hsing-sheng martial arts school in Taipei near Youth Park, and has been devoting all his time to teaching and training. He has branch schools in Australia, the US, Japan and Belgium: "The Changchuan Tanglang Kungfu Wushu Academy."

The Chinese Kuoshu Federation of Taiwan awarded him a ninth *Dan* (degree) title, the highest degree awarded to a living master, in recognition of his achievements in martial arts.

At his martial art studio in Taipei, Master Kao teaches the Long Fist and the Praying Mantis styles. The Long Fist is a combination of various styles such as the Northern Shaolin Fist, the Plum Flower Fist, the Cha Family Fist, Paochuan (Cannon Fist) and Tantai (Spring Legs). These styles all emphasize strength, speed, lightning kicks and powerful strikes. Their movements are open, wide and acrobatic with lots of jumping, tumbling and rolling. China has drawn from these styles, mainly from the Cha Family



Tales of a Grasshopper

• continued from page 13

attacking and retracting as if it were a baton in the hands of a maestro.

"You must practice with all your heart and all your will, in order to understand the secrets of the movements," he once said to me, "and when you've accomplished that, your movements will be beautiful and efficient — the perfect movement."

Having such skill might make one hungry for fame and power. But for Kao, the *wu-te*, or virtue, of martial arts, is a code of honor.

"If you're a martial artist, never be the one who strikes first," he teaches. "If you receive a blow from someone, you must endure it. If he tries a second blow, then you may defend yourself. Always be very patient."

Practice hard for the sake of the practice and never expect to get anything in return. Be modest and humble and cultivate love and respect for the other people."

Along with the physical training comes spiritual development. As a reflection of Kao's persona, his students tend to be humble, disciplined, well-balanced and free of the common "martial artist disease," which turns one into an insecure, unbalanced egomaniac, constantly having to prove oneself and seek attention.

Kao is a warm, sincere, generous and even-tempered person. He is a living example of the ideal traditional master — a skilled fighter, a caring teacher, a loyal friend, and a symbol of justness and kindness. His relationship with fellow martial arts teachers and his students is one of mutual caring and respect.

In contrast to many martial artists who tend to brag about themselves and dwell on the glorious past, Kao is refreshingly down-to-earth and humble. Even though he has won

numerous martial arts tournaments and challenges, he rarely mentions his accomplishments.

But his students trade the stories of his exploits like kids collecting baseball cards. One example is Kao's teaching trip to Japan during the 1960s. Members of the Yakuza (Japanese Mafia) interrupted one of his classes and challenged him to a fight. After

with his continuous chain kicks and scissors' legs. When pressed about his many battles, Kao simply says: "Times have changed."

With bitterness in his voice the master says: "Chinese people will soon be losing their art. They do not pay interest to their cultural treasures and, little by little, everything will pass away."

With this generation of old masters passing on and a plethora of the new "self-proclaimed" teachers, the serious student is confronted with the problem of how to find a good teacher.

"On this question," Kao says, "a student must not be impressed by a teacher's appearance or talk. Instead, he must look for the five signs: the hands, eyes, body, technique and footwork. These five signs are the conditions for mastering the art and a good teacher must be able to show his proficiency."

Kao believes in *you chiaou wei lei* (anyone who wants to learn should be accepted). He believes that martial arts are an inherently good discipline,

and when students are taught properly in a gradual progression and guided carefully over a long period of time, they will develop a good character.

Watching him practicing his kung-fu is like seeing a vision: the stability of his positions, the intensity of his eyes, the quickness (rapidity) of his movements. At that time and only then, the technique will have a whole new meaning, a whole new dimension.

When I asked the master about the secret behind his art and his apparent good health, he looked at me and said simply: "Kungfu means devotion and having time."

Dedicated to my late friend Kimi, a true martial artist. You will always be in our hearts and minds.

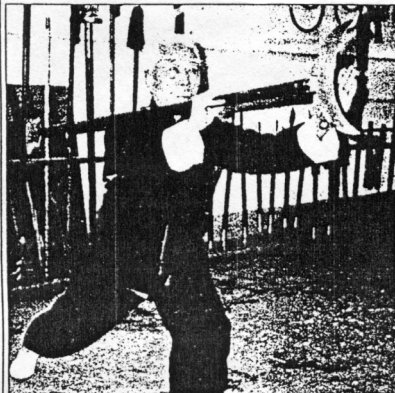
According to many of his senior students, even into his 60s he was able to sweep down a room full of people with his continuous chain kicks and scissors' legs.

being beaten up and thrown out, the Yakuza members returned, knelt on the floor and asked Kao to accept them as students.

According to many of his senior students, even into his 60s he was able to sweep down a room full of people



PHOTOS BY TONY FARRIS



SA Expo, which

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