

Master of Ancient Discipline Retains Youthful Vigor

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Tibetan Tai Chi master Liu Siang learned the secret of youth in the mountaintop Shao-Lin Temple outside Peking more than half a century ago. Today the temple is a museum and the discipline is no longer taught — except in Liu Siang's Albuquerque studio.

The one-time consultant for the "Kung Fu" TV series — his blind great uncle was the model for the old priest in the show's flashbacks — moved to Albuquerque to relieve a chronic sinus condition.

The attainment of martial arts expertise didn't come easily. The 69-year-old half-Chinese, half-Dutch teacher — whose Dutch name is Willem Reeders — remembers life in the temple as rigorous. "We were underfed, underslept and over-trained," he says, arching his eyebrows.

Rigorous as it was, today his youthful appearance, strength and flexibility reveal the benefits of his continued training. He and his wife, Marilyn, pause between classes to talk about some of their students who have overcome some daunting physical problems with the help of Tibetan Tai Chi. One student lost the use of his legs after being run over by a truck. A year after the accident, he began training with Liu Siang and now, after three months of training, he walks to work every day.

A woman survived a diabetic coma because her lungs were stronger as a result of her training. Before her five months of training, she was always short of breath.

In Tibetan Tai Chi, practitioners perform various graceful, rhythmic movements to draw cosmic energy for cleansing and

invigorating — rendering the body constantly youthful.

"The arms," says Liu Siang, "act as antennae. You are in a kind of meditation as you work out. (After a while,) you don't feel the floor."

"Tai means exercise, 'Chi' means life force or power," adds Mrs. Reeders. "So they're power exercises."

As a boy of 12, Liu Siang journeyed annually from his native Indonesia to the temple for 100-day intensive training sessions in martial arts and philosophy. He then became one of six children chosen every 12 years to learn the ancient art of Tibetan Tai Chi. Liu Siang's temple experiences are the basis for the television series "Kung Fu" for which he was a consultant. In "Kung Fu," a young Oriental traveling through the American West frequently remembers life as a child trainee in a Chinese temple.

He moved to Albuquerque in 1972. He taught tai chi in his home until a year ago, when he opened the Garuda Tibetan Tai Chi studio.

As far as Liu Siang knows, no Tibetan Tai Chi masters remain in China because when the Communists took over in 1949, the priests and students scattered. The Communists turned the temple into a museum and renamed it the People's Temple.

Liu Siang knows of only two students of Tibetan Tai Chi in North America, and they don't teach because they never finished the training. "Even the Tibetans aren't doing Tibetan anymore," he says of the oldest form of tai chi.

Liu Siang began his training at age 4. His great uncle, Liu Siang, Sr., was 80 years old when he began teaching his nephew. Himself a former student of the Shao-Lin



Marilyn Reeders goes through a tai chi movement as her husband, Liu Siang, uses a drum to keep rhythm.



In a 1933 photo, 16-year-old Liu Siang, left, and a friend work out with Liu Siang's great uncle, who was then approaching 100 years of age.

Temple, the elder Liu Siang saw to it that his nephew, as the eldest son of the family, received training there. So at age 12, in the early 1930s, Liu Siang began his yearly trips to Peking.

There, he learned martial arts, anatomy, philosophy, meditation, mind control, use of the elements (fire, water, wind, earth), acupuncture, Buddhism and Tibetan Tai Chi.

Because the temple priests observed the strictest silence at all times, Liu Siang to this day cannot say why certain things were done. He doesn't know why metals weren't allowed in the temple, but he knows students' heads were shaved bald with pieces of glass. He can't say why he and five other students were chosen to train in Tibetan Tai Chi. He knows that at the end of the 12-year training period, only two students, including himself, were still training.

In the early 1940s, he was swept up in the war with Japan and then the Indonesian Revolution. He fought on two fronts until 1955. Had it not been for his knowledge of martial arts, he doubts he would have survived the hand-to-hand combat he frequently encountered "in the jungle, in the houses, in the city — everywhere!"

When the Dutch quit Indonesia after losing the revolution, Liu Siang, who was born in East Java, Indonesia, was surprised to find himself "repatriated" to Holland because his father was Dutch. "Those days

after arriving there, he applied for a visa to the United States and eventually settled in New York. He supported himself teaching kung fu.

While in New York, Liu Siang's memories of his temple training proved invaluable to the writers of the television series "Kung Fu." The program, which ran on ABC from 1972 to 1975, included frequent temple scenes in which the young boy trained in the ancient wisdom and martial arts of China.

Liu Siang told the writers of walking on rice paper to perfect one's balance. "If you put too much pressure, it rips, or if you put your foot down wrong, it rips." He told them of picking up a large hot cauldron of burning coals with the forearms, leaving a long burn on the inside of the arms. The network's writers elaborated on this practice by showing the actor's arms branded with an outline of a dragon on one arm and a snake on the other.

"That's baloney," says Liu Siang. "You don't get dragon there and snake there, you get burn."

The blind temple teacher in "Kung Fu" was based on Liu Siang, Sr., who was also blind. And the young boy? "That would have been me," Liu Siang says, smiling.

He admits that he did not tell the network writers everything he knew about the philosophy and cosmology learned at the temple, things he refers to mysteriously as "the known and the unknown."

When Liu Siang started teaching in Albuquerque, he did not advertise, took few students and was difficult to find, says Marilyn Reeders, who had to search him out. She had heard of him from three different sources and finally figured out everyone was talking about the same teacher.

Liu Siang is adept at aikido, ju jitsu, judo, kendo, shotokan karate (6th degree black belt), and a variety of kung fu styles. He has a working knowledge of 81 weapons. He is a 7th degree black belt in budozen soundje kempo, the fight system of the Buddhists. He was recently named Grand Master — an indication of the highest level of expertise possible — by the Chungwa Kung Fu Hui, an international federation of kung fu practitioners.

Even though she has studied with him for 10 years, Marilyn Reeders holds her index finger and thumb an inch apart and says, "I have this much of his knowledge. I'm trying to at least, of what I know, know well, but out of all the things he learned in China, I know this much. Everything else is gone."

Is Liu Siang concerned that the art will pass away?

"What can you do about it? That's the way it is. It's something you cannot change. You can't feel bad."

In the meantime, he will continue to teach his unique art in Albuquerque.