

Taiwan Trip Article – October 2004

In September 2004 a group of Australian Cheng Ming members travelled to beautiful Tsaotung in Taiwan. We were expecting to train hard, refine our skills, and to return home happily exhausted. What we actually experienced in Tsaotung was training, gradings, Grand Master Wang Shu Chin's Memorial ceremony, inner door ceremonies and exceptional friendship and hospitality. We returned home wiser, healthier and exhilarated.

The lingering memory of the Taiwan trip is of the endless generosity of our Taiwanese Cheng Ming family who fed us, transported us, translated for us, and shared their culture, their language, their arts, their festivals, ceremonies and traditions, and their tremendous knowledge of Tai Chi, Hsing I and Ba Gua. Some of them had taken days off work to be with us, some had borrowed vehicles from relatives to transport us; they greeted us warmly when we trained in their dojos and they constantly showered us with food, delicacies and smiles. We are humbled by the level of care shown for us.

Training for David and Amelia Zarb was intense as they realised that they were to be graded as Hsing I instructors. They spent many, many hours in the outdoor dojo under the guidance of Master Wang Fu Lai. As usual, they were an inspiration as they ignored the heat and humidity and continued working long and hard to perfect their form. Jeremy Guard from Queensland also experienced intensive training sessions from Master Wang Fu Lai and from several other senior Cheng Ming members, who all turned out to be members of the panel which graded Jeremy for his Tai Chi Chuan instructor level. Jeremy was also a model of persistence, and what a relaxed one!

Those of us who were not being graded experienced training sessions in stand form with Master Wang Fu Lai, several sessions in Tai Chi sword with Master Huang and sessions in tai chi chuan from both masters. We refined, we consolidated, and as always, we made new discoveries. We sincerely thank both masters for their time and patience, and for making each of us feel that we were making progress. And, we now refer to Dolores Turcsan from Melbourne and Anita Robbie from Sydney as "the sword sisters" – they just couldn't resist practising sword at every opportunity.

To take part in the memorial ceremony for Grand Master Wang Shu Chin at his huge memorial shrine on a mountainside in Tsaotung was both an honour and a challenge, as we were to perform Tai Chi Sword form in front of our peers from many Taiwanese dojos, in front of our Masters and in front of Cheng Ming 'elders' who had trained under Grand Master Wang Shu Chin. We rehearsed as a team, and on the day wore the Australian team shirts Amelia had organised for us, which looked very tidy and cool in white.

The sword performance went very smoothly, and even the surprise request for us to perform Hsing I stick went alright (despite Leanne and Nigel clashing sticks in mid-air on the jumping turn, generating some laughter from the crowd), but a highlight was doing Tai Chi Chuan as part of a gently moving mass of at least sixty people. Another highlight was seeing a Buddhist monk in his saffron robes performing Hsing I forms as an ordinary member of his dojo, as was seeing David and Amelia perform Hsing I Dao (sabre).

The memorial ceremony on the mountain was followed by a lavish lunch for all participants at a huge restaurant. At least a dozen courses were presented to each table, all delicious, and we joined in the tradition of leaving our table to go and make a group toast to each of the other tables. Our new friend Mark - the young English teacher whom we had met at the ceremony - was part of our table group; he trains under Dr. Liang, a very senior Cheng Ming member. The Taiwanese were delighted with our attempts to wish them Good Luck. Smiles, laughter and applause all round.

The following day the gradings took place. The morning was dedicated to training, and in the afternoon we had the privilege of observing the grading process. A panel of ten senior Cheng Ming members scrutinised and made notes as David and Amelia performed Hsing I elements, animals, weapons and forms. Jeremy performed stand form (25 postures), and then went on to perform a wonderfully slow and smooth Tai Chi Chuan form, showing none of the after affects of having just done his stand form test...bravo! Amelia and David completed their forms (how on earth do they remember all of this?!) with tremendous focus and concentration, and Jeremy finished with another soft, floating performance of Tai Chi Sword.

The panel closed ranks from the four corners of the training ground to discuss the outcomes. It seemed to take a long time (perhaps fifteen minutes) before we were told the results would be announced. Amelia, David and Jeremy gravely stood before the panel for the announcement, and were delighted to hear that all had passed their gradings. We are so proud of them all! Master Wang Fu Lai joined the panel to exhort the three to continue to practice and perfect their techniques. He cheerfully admitted that he had secretly watched all the gradings from an upstairs window.

Other snapshots of a most memorable trip (to prevent this article from becoming a book) are:-

- Meeting Jibiki Sensei from Japan. An elegant, soft-spoken gentleman of around 77 years of age who speaks at least three languages and who honoured us by sharing some of his memories and knowledge of Grand Master Wang Shu Chin and what it was like to be a student of the Grand Master. Such a generosity of spirit.
- Training at a rural dojo where the roof rafters were huge bamboo poles. This dojo presented David and Amelia with hand painted calligraphy scrolls of all 104 moves of the Cheng Ming Tai Chi Chuan form; in fact, they

presented them with two sets, one for each dojo! And after training, we saw some of their members' wonderful calligraphy skills in action, and they in turn applauded as some of us had a try, whilst we all feasted on the huge spread of delicacies they had laid out in our honour. We all even convinced Master Wang Fu Lai to demonstrate his calligraphy skills.

- Watching Advanced Ba Gua class after dinner one night, and seeing them do Ba Gua Pole and Ba Gua double sword. In this sword form two swords are kept absolutely parallel through 95% of the convolutions of a complicated circular Ba Gua routine, complete with high, slow, smooth turns of the legs.....wow! Master Wang Fu Lai's elder daughter Melody was one of these Ba Gua practitioners, and also one of those who demonstrated on Memorial day.
- Osawa San and his Japanese contingent, young and old. Osawa San is one of those who once challenged Master Wang Fu Lai.....after three failed attempts to defeat him, when he regained consciousness he asked Master Wang Fu Lai for permission to become a student. Somewhere in late middle age, Osawa San still demonstrates great flexibility, grace and agility in performing Ba Gua as he did on Memorial Day.
- 6am training with Mr Lin's dojo based at the Tsaotung Cultural Centre, where we were given jasmine flowers to wear (thanks for the safety pin Dolores!), and surprised with a huge breakfast spread.
- Locals riding scooters everywhere, perhaps laden with two fifteen kilo bags of rice, perhaps with your grandmother on the back and your 6 month old on the front. The younger set have funky helmets and face masks, and the seriously practical ride with their jackets on backwards to keep their clothes clean. Ladies often have an oven mitt sort of attachment on the handlebars for hand protection.
- Wherever we went the Taiwanese dojos were just as excited and thrilled to have Master Wang Fu Lai and Master Huang visit as we are when they come to Australia. Just because they live in Taiwan does not seem to mean that they get any more access to the Masters than we do. It would seem that we are very fortunate indeed.
- Eating red bean ice cream, dragon eyes (longquans), tomato juice mixed with apple cider, endless, endless, endless cups of chinese tea (and I still can't get enough of it), moon cakes, millet cakes, the best mangoes on the planet, fruit, fruit and more fruit. All this to the backdrop of many, many, many firecrackers in the neighbourhood during the Moon Festival celebrations.
- Inner Door student ceremonies in the Master Wang Shu Chin memorial room at the Tsaotung dojo. Jeremy Guard was accepted as an inner door student of Master Wang Fu Lai, and Nigel Curwell and Leanne Mumford were accepted as inner door students of both David and Amelia Zarb. The ceremonies followed Daoist tradition, complete with incense, offerings, pledges, and much bowing. Congratulations to Jeremy, Nigel and Leanne.
- Tien Tien, Master Huang's much adored little Maltese dog. She has a haircut like a little Chinese lion, and the personality of a Chinese empress. She in turn adores Master Huang.
- Dr. Gi passing on restricted information to David and Amelia. After passing on a wealth of detail in fifteen minutes, he suddenly had to dash off to work. We are appreciative of his time, his great translation skills, his sense of humour and his wicked giggle.
- DIY smorgasbord vegetarian restaurant. Who says vegetarian food is boring? Around 30 dishes available at any one time (without counting the desserts and noodles) with more constantly being carried out from the kitchen. Artisans of tofu deliver dishes that look and taste like battered fish, prawns, tuna, beef, and chicken. Eat until you can eat no more (and thank goodness the dojo tradition is a nap after lunch before training). Not one of us missed meat on the whole trip.
- Master Wang Fu Lai's wonderful daughters Melody and Monica (who flew in from Dallas, Texas) who took time out from their personal lives to assist us in every way possible.

In closing, I have two recommendations. The first is, get there. Do whatever it takes to get yourself to Taiwan for Cheng Ming training. Immerse yourself in the life, sights, sounds and smells of Taiwan while your Cheng Ming family share their lives, their homes and their knowledge with you. The second is, if you can ever, in any way possible, be of assistance to another Cheng Ming family member, do not hesitate to go out of your way to assist them. The Taiwanese Cheng Ming members have set an exemplary standard of friendship and hospitality. It may be hard to comprehend if you haven't been to Taiwan, but you are never lonely, you are never without a friend to help you cope in the Taiwanese community, you never feel lost or confused, you never have to struggle. You are surrounded by friends who laugh, smile, and look out for you, even though they may not speak a word of English. They are our brothers and sisters.

Leanne Mumford. October 2004