

Wu Style T'ai Chi Sequence Background

Margaret Emerson

Kao Ching-hua (Madelaine Kao Leonida) learned this form as a girl in pre-Revolutionary China. She was living in Wuxi, not far from Shanghai, where her father had a silk factory. Madelaine was an athlete in high school, excelling in track, when she began to have fainting spells. Her parents consulted Chinese and Western doctors. None knew how to deal with what Madelaine believes was a heart ailment. An herbalist suggested she learn T'ai Chi. A friend of the family instructed her in this Wu style that was taught to the upper classes. Because it was practiced by people who didn't have to defend themselves (they had others to do that for them), the emphasis shifted away from the martial toward mental and physical fitness and meditation. Within a year, Madelaine was back on the track, succeeding as an athlete again.

Madelaine Kao Leonida attended National Central University in Shanghai and taught this form to the women at St. John's University during those years. After graduating in 1948, she and some other Chinese athletes came to this country to get their master's degrees and learn Western sports. (At the time, the only sports practiced in China were "Wushu" or martial arts.) Before she left China, she was made the only honorary female member of the all-male T'ai Chi Ch'uan Association of Shanghai and was slated to head the women's phys ed department in a new college in Chunking when she returned. The Communist Revolution in 1949 made it impossible for her to go back until 1976. Madelaine earned her master's from the University of Iowa and did further graduate work at the University of Wisconsin. She married here and had a family. Madelaine taught T'ai Chi, phys ed, and dance for several decades. I was her student for six years in Springfield, Illinois.

This sequence is an offshoot of the southern Wu style that developed around Shanghai—a more internal art than the fighting-oriented northern Wu style. The movements in Madelaine's form are modified and shaped by the focus on T'ai Chi as a therapeutic mind/body exercise free of some of the practicalities of a martial art. Madelaine is second-generation Wu Chin-ching. I call this form "Wu T'ai Chi, Kao Style as Practiced and Taught by Margaret Emerson" because it came directly to me from Kao Ching-hua and I've made changes that I believe are consistent with the principles she taught me as well as with additional knowledge gained from other teachers, the people in my classes, and my own forty-year-long practice.