



REQUIEM FOR A TAI CHI BODYGUARD

Cheng Tin-hung (1930 – May 7, 2005)

by Dan Docherty

His appearance was unprepossessing when first I met him in his Mongkok flat in October 1975. With his belly hanging over his shorts, his cigarette dangling in the corner of his mouth as he talked, with his flip flops, string vest and unshaven mien, he didn't look the part of a top-level Tai Chi master or indeed a top level anything else. Yet he was also a voracious reader of history and philosophy and a writer of many books on Tai Chi Chuan, an amateur geomancer and fortune-teller, who changed his name of Cheng Ngar-man to the more propitious Cheng Tin-hung.

A Horse (born 1930) who later declared himself to be a Dragon (born 1928), in his heyday from 1956 – 1980 he was the best-known combat Tai Chi Chuan master in South East Asia and, though he never went to the Americas, he was better than anything I saw from there too.

He first made his name in the 50s, a time when many Hong Kong residents took up Tai Chi as a cure for TB. Gentle Tai Chi people practicing in the parks were being bullied by external martial artists, so they would ask his help and he would go and do some Tai Chi bullying of his own.

Then in 1956 teams from Hong Kong and Macau were annihilated in Taiwan in a three-way international full contact competition. He was the only one to win, defeating the three times middleweight full contact champion of Taiwan. He then met and pushed with Cheng Man-ching and while impressed with his softness, didn't rate him as a fighter. He never had too much time for the Kuomintang anyway.

Over the years he led his students to numerous victories over external martial artists.

I fought for him in Hong Kong in 1976 and then at the 4th South East Asian Chinese \Martial Arts Championships in Singapore where he offered me anabolic steroids – I refused. Finally I fought in the 5th when South East Asian Chinese \Martial Arts Championships in Malaysia in 1980, that annus mirabilis. Tai Chi brother Tong Chi-kin and I were the only male champions from Hong Kong and the only Tai Chi fighters in the whole competition.

He began working with the Sport & Recreation Dept of the HK government in 1976 by providing teachers for morning classes set up in the housing estates to improve public health and well-being – my ex-wife and her mother were amongst the many who attended. He then devised teacher training programmes for the government which run to this day.

He taught millionaires like Sir Tang Shiu-kin, but also street people and treated them all differently according to what he perceived to be their merits or demerits. A man of extremes, he taught in Japan more than 40 years ago, and said he tried to have intercourse with as many women as possible in revenge for the war (they shot him in the leg). He said the Judo people could sometimes throw him if he wore a Gi, but not otherwise.

It was late in life before he started to come to the West. Tai Chi brother and fellow Scot, Ian Cameron and I arranged for him to teach in Scotland in 1981, in Scotland and Southern England in 1986 & 1987. I taught with him in Australia in 1988 and 1989. Despite continuing ill health from the mid-70s onwards due to a genetic condition of diabetes, he never lost interest in people and events until close to the end.

We opened a disastrous restaurant business together in his then village (now town) of San Xiang in Guangdong and the only benefits I ever got from it were a few beers and a lot of bitter melon.

I travelled with him all over Hong Kong – he loved hill-walking, chanting poetry, and explaining to us the medicinal properties of plants. But he also used to take me to meetings of the Hong Kong Chinese Martial Arts Association where I got to know famous masters like Wong Sun-leung, Chan Hon Chung and Chan Sau-Chung. In 1984 I went with him to Beijing, the Northern Shaolin temple and Wudang Mountain. I have returned to all of them since and none remains the same.

Many times also I ate and slept in his house and that was when I really learned things. I was introduced to him through the kind offices of George Button, Chief Physical Training Officer in the Royal Hong Kong Police Training School. And quit all the other arts I was practicing within a few days of our first meeting.

His many pygmy detractors lied constantly about him throughout his life as mine now do about me. There is no point to argue with teenage scribblers in time retributive Karma will catch up with them all – in the meantime our legacy and our success are the best answer and revenge.

He was courageous to the end, last time I saw him in September 2004 we talked about Old Gold, about my girl and boy about dead friends and he said as we said our last good-bye that he had left the Wudang gate and that it was my world. I and we will do our best, but I guess he always knew that. I hope he had smooth winds when he crossed over at about 10pm on May 7th , 2005.

Requiesce in Peace.