

THE PROFESSOR: Tai Chi's Journey West

A film by Barry Strugatz

72 min / English / 2016 / Color / USA / Digital (DCP & Blu-ray)



FIRST RUN FEATURES

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Synopsis

The Professor: Tai Chi's Journey West is the first major feature documentary about Tai Chi and one of its greatest masters, Cheng Man-Ching, a man who brought Tai Chi and Chinese culture to the West during the swinging, turbulent 60's. Though Cheng is an important transformational figure, his teachings have been overlooked. This documentary film tells the story of his remarkable life and features Tai Chi as a martial art and a spiritual practice. Over the past decade, we have shot approximately fifty hours of footage in New York, North Carolina, and California.

Filmmaker Statement

When I began studying Tai Chi twenty years ago I was looking for a healthy physical exercise, a gentle martial art I could continue to practice as I got older. But I soon began to realize that Tai Chi was much more than that.

Professor Cheng Man-Ching was part of a centuries old lineage. He left China for New York to spread Eastern philosophy.

I have been fortunate to study with some of the leading Tai Chi teachers, all students of Prof. Cheng. As Cheng's senior students aged I realized that an incredible legacy of timeless teachings was in danger of being lost. So Ken Van Sickle and I began work on this documentary in 2002.

Our interviews include: *Maggie Newman, Ed Young, Bill Phillips, Natasha Gorky, Rene Houtidres, Don Hauser, Don Ahn, Ken Van Sickle, Harold Naderman, Carol Yamasaki, Claire Hooton, Myles McVane, Genny Kapuler, Kwok Ming Hugh, Robert Morningstar, Lori Reinstein and Katy, Patrick, Ellen & Wayne Cheng.*

Cheng Man-Ching is an overlooked transformational figure whose valuable lessons are important and of practical value for Westerners. From his modest studio in Manhattan's Chinatown he promoted understanding and taught his students how to try to live ethically and joyfully, a universal message that brings people together in peace. "Do unto others..." was more than a saying, it was Cheng's way of life.

– *Barry Strugatz*

Filmmaker Biographies

BARRY STRUGATZ

Director and co-producer, has made award winning short and feature films. He has written screenplays for Jonathan Demme and Michele Pfeiffer (*Married to the Mob*), Meryl Streep (*She-Devil*) and directed Melissa Leo (*From Other Worlds*). *The Professor* is his first documentary. He has studied with several students of Cheng Man-Ching.

KEN VAN SICKLE

Cinematographer and co-producer has shot many feature and documentary films including *Marjoe* (Academy Award), *Hester Street*, *Close Harmony* (Academy Award), *Between The Lines*, etc. He was a senior student of Cheng-Man Ching.

About the Film

Professor Cheng Man-Ching (1902-1975) is considered one of the greatest Tai Chi masters of modern times. He was a pioneer, instrumental in bringing Tai Chi and Chinese philosophy to the West.

Cheng was unique – not only a remarkable martial artist but also an accomplished painter, poet, scholar and doctor of Chinese medicine. All his talents were deeply rooted in the philosophies of Taoism and Confucianism, finding harmony in the way humans relate to each other and to nature.

Professor Cheng saw Tai Chi as an embodiment of natural laws and as a path of human growth – a way to live, a way of finding meaning, balance and peace.

Traditional but open minded, Cheng came from a conservative world. In China he was a successful painter, doctor and professor. In the 1920's he studied in Shanghai with the great Tai Chi grandmaster Yang Cheng-Fu continuing a lineage hundreds of years old.

After years of study Prof. Cheng revolutionized the form. Shortening it from 108 to 37 postures, he distilled tai chi to its essence, making it more accessible to the modern world.

In 1949 after the revolution he moved to Taiwan where his paintings were acquired by the National Museum. He became a member of the National Assembly. He was a well respected member of the intellectual and political elite.

But in 1964, at age 63, Cheng decided to leave his privileged position and move with his family to New York. His mission – to teach westerners the profound ideas of classic Chinese culture. Living simply in Manhattan he spent the last dozen years of his life teaching here.

Cheng Man-Ching arrived in the U.S. amidst the political and social upheaval of the 1960's. He founded a Tai Chi school in the heart of New York's Chinatown where many of his students were an unusual group of young, eager Americans – artists, scientists, hippies, workers, radicals – who were searching for meaning in a competitive, materialistic, violent world.

His eclectic group of students included: Ed Young, award-winning illustrator; Maggie Newman, leading modern dancer; Stanley Israel, prison guard and union president; Ken Van Sickle photographer and filmmaker; Robert Chuckrow, physicist.

Cheng's lessons and personality touched a chord in his American students who were open to both new ideas and old traditions. They called him "The Professor." The students in turn influenced Cheng, who became more relaxed, flexible even playful.

Cheng had to overcome old world prejudices to bring ancient wisdom to the modern world. There were many in the Chinese community who were opposed to Prof. Cheng teaching westerners Chinese “secrets.” He was ostracized and even locked out of his school, but Cheng wasn’t stopped by intolerance. He established a new school and gladly taught all races and nationalities, men and women.

Cheng inspired and changed the lives of his students who in turn spread Tai Chi and Chinese philosophy in the West where it has taken root.

The Professor is not meant to be an uncritical deification, but the story of a man who sought to live as a “true human being” and who overcame cultural divides to bring ancient traditions to the modern world, teaching Westerners how to seek an ethical, open-minded, joyful way of life.

What is Tai Chi?

Tai Chi is an ancient Chinese form of exercise originally created as a fighting art. Today Tai Chi is practiced by millions of people worldwide every day for relaxation, health and self-defense. It is known as the “Supreme Ultimate” martial art.

Some people consider it a spiritual practice, a moving meditation — a physical expression of concepts like yin/yang and non-action. Deeply rooted in classic Chinese culture and philosophy, Tai Chi combines mental concentration with slow, controlled movements to focus the mind, challenge the body, and improve the flow of “qi” (also spelled “chi”) — the life energy thought to sustain health and quiet the mind. Regular practice of Tai Chi can improve strength, flexibility, balance, and coordination.

Some research also suggests that Tai Chi may help to improve heart function and decrease blood pressure. Tai chi utilizes natural forces (gravity, momentum, etc.) to harmonize one’s body with others and the earth.

