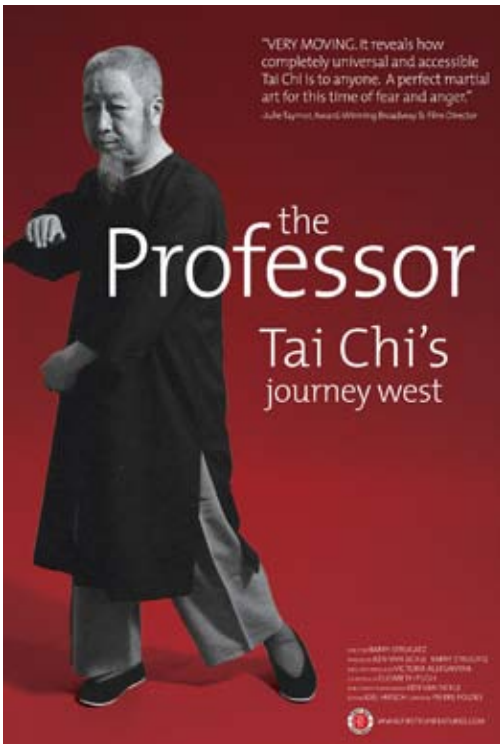


DOCUMENTARY REVIEW

The Professor: Tai Chi's Journey West
Barry Strugatz (Director, Co-producer)
USA 2016



The title of Barry Strugatz's *The Professor: Tai Chi's Journey West* is a word play on the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. Lacking an authorial argument or omniscient 'voice of God' narrator, the story is told through a select cast of intimates: family and first-generation American students of taijiquan master Zheng Manqing. This gives the film a distinctly phenomenological, or emic, tone. The structure is not strictly chronological, and the levels of social analysis – systemic, institutional, and individual – are represented by American culture of the 1960s, the taiji school community, and the lives of the students. Topical sections, entitled 'Form', 'Push-hands', 'Sword', etc., develop a multi-dimensional view of the art, the master, and the students. The expository mode of the documentary is enhanced with poetic touches, sweeping the viewer into a stream of vintage photographs and film footage that create a montage of the exhilarating encounter with an Asian master that changed the lives of the film's student/informants.

Chinese disciples such as William C. C. Chen and Benjamin Lo, who remain highly influential in Zheng style taijiquan's dissemination in the West, are not included, nor are his Taiwan students such as Liu Xiheng and Xu Yizhong, who have attracted Western students to Taiwan. The film leaves the impression that Zheng was the first to introduce taijiquan in New York, and the date usually given is 1964, but it should be noted that Sophia Delza taught Wu style taijiquan a decade earlier at Carnegie Hall and Choy Hok Pang, also a student of Yang Chengfu, was the first to teach taijiquan openly in the US in 1939.

The Professor exists in a kind of time warp. Exactly the same film could have been made forty years ago. There is no acknowledgement of today's vastly more diverse martial arts marketplace, the challenge to traditional arts by mixed martial arts, the proliferation of popular and scholarly books on the Zheng legacy, the emergence of martial arts studies as an academic discipline, the existence of fifty accredited schools of traditional Chinese medicine, or the reams of biomedical studies on the therapeutic benefits. Zheng's name is no longer blacklisted on the Mainland and his hometown Wenzhou now claims him as a famous native son. With Deng's policy of 'reform and openness' in the 1980s, and the arrival of the internet in the 1990s, the number of biographies and articles on Zheng published on the Mainland has exploded, adding a wealth of new anecdotal material but leaving us wondering why even such basics as the date of his birth, the length of his study with Yang Chengfu, his modifications of the form, his arrival in the US, and the circumstances of his death are so wildly divergent in various sources.

The filmmakers make no attempt to reconcile these contradictions or provide a definitive account. Having said this, there are some interesting revelations in the film: his refusal to live in Chinatown in favor of the more upscale Riverside Drive, his rejection of a Japanese student and conditional acceptance of a Japanese-American student, and the landlord lockout of his Canal Street studio. The film also raises a host

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of provocative questions. For example, why do world and Olympic records constantly improve, while Zheng insists he did not equal his teacher Yang Chengfu, and Zheng's students say they cannot match him? Is this false modesty, do 'secrets' die with their keepers, or is this movement art somehow more akin to painting, poetry, and calligraphy, whose ancient masters are held to be unrivaled?

Viewers of the film may also wonder about Zheng's unique style of dress – neither Western, Mao, nor Manchu – or why they rarely hear his own voice. Certainly his long beard and robes contributed to an air of authenticity in the eyes of his Western students, but this was actually the standard style of self-presentation for senior Chinese artists of his generation such as Qi Baishi and Zhang Daqian.

The issue of language is a bit more complicated and involves the awkward symmetry between Zheng's refusal to speak, and presumably learn, English, and his students' neglect, with one notable exception, to learn Chinese. Catholics learn Latin, Jews learn Hebrew, and Muslims learn Arabic, all to be closer to their Source. Zheng's students were equally devoted to their Source, so one cannot help but wonder at the persistent monolingualism. For his part, Zheng's refusal to speak English may have been a strategic act of resistance against the legacy of Thomas Macaulay's 1835 policy to promote English in the colonies to enable them to better serve the British Empire.

In this way, Zheng reasserts China's role as 'teaching civilization', to use Tu Weiming's term, against the forces of Westernization and registers his resistance to the subaltern role that requires language as a badge of acceptability. In reality, he even refused to write in the Chinese vernacular, considering it a Communist plot, and persisted in writing in the classical style long after most of his contemporaries adopted the vernacular. He likewise rejects Christianity and communism, or any dialogue with modern scholarship, modern art, or modern medicine. His native Wenzhou dialect, considered a 'living fossil', was used for code talking in military communications during the War of Resistance against Japan, and thus his use of Mandarin is already a forced concession to modernity. Teaching through body language (what Mauss called 'technique du corps' and Bourdieu called 'habitus') Zheng succeeds in sinicizing his students and assimilating them in a kind of inverted hybridity.

It is not surprising that the style of indirect narration tells us more about the subjective lives of the informants than the subject, but is there no way to access Zheng's interiority? Zheng, after all, was a political refugee, leaving all but immediate family behind and suffering the ultimate Confucian catastrophe of 'loss of the nation' (*wangguo*). How did he feel about America, for example? America was China's exploiter during the opium trade and her oppressor during the Opium Wars, Boxer Rebellion, Open Door Policy, and Exclusionary Act of 1882, but also China's savior in World War II and the Nationalists' protector in 1949. His feelings must have been ambivalent to say the least. Film is the visual medium par excellence, and there is evocative footage of taiji, painting, calligraphy, and even medicine, but his fifth art, poetry, perhaps the best source for his emotional life, is completely missing, as is his voluminous scholarship on the Chinese classics. Is it impossible to bring poetry and philosophy to the screen, or is it another case of language barrier?

One of the film's narrators (and co-producer) Ken Van Sickle says, 'I'm not sure why he came to live here ... As far as I'm concerned, he came here to teach me'. This captures the magic of the moment but truncates the story arc and leaves the master as a Martian who arrived from outer space without a past. Did he come originally as cultural ambassador to the overseas Chinese community and stumbled into teaching non-Chinese, or was that part of the original plan? The 1960s-1970s was a period of intense ideological competition between Communists and Nationalists in the New York Chinatown community, and Zheng would have been one of the greatest assets for the Nationalists. Or, were his motivations purely personal?

Seeing the wholesale destruction of traditional culture on the Mainland, and the best and brightest in Taiwan running to the STEM subjects, he might have concluded that the survival of the traditional arts depended on

the 'periphery', to use Tu Wei-ming's term. Is there a symbiosis of the alienated on both sides of the master-disciple relationship here? In unguarded moments, many Asian masters of traditional arts lament that their foreign students seem more serious than their own countrymen, an echo of the Biblical 'prophet not honored in his own land', and ironically, the respect of non-Chinese can become currency to bid up the value on the home front. Perhaps he was an early example of what Tu called 'cultural China', a Chinese identity not dependent on geographic or political definitions. In any event, refusal to serve a new dynasty is the principled Confucian response to what is perceived as illegitimate rule, in this case, the Communists.

As brought to life in the film, Zheng was one of the most remarkable polymaths of the 20th century, perhaps only equaled on the American scene by 18th century Benjamin Franklin, who among other talents was posthumously inducted into the Swimming Hall of Fame. Franklin distinguished himself as scientist, inventor, statesman, and diplomat during the turbulent Revolutionary War period, and Zheng was esteemed as a master of painting, poetry, calligraphy, medicine, and martial arts during China's two revolutions, semi-colonialism, warlordism, a civil war, foreign invasion, and annual natural disasters, all of which cost the lives of tens of millions.

His ten years in America coincided with the Cultural Revolution in China, a violent campaign to destroy everything he held dear. His close association with the Nationalist Government undoubtedly made him a marked man. Although his education was exclusively in the disciplic succession style, he became a public intellectual, holding countless posts for governmental and non-governmental bodies. From 1937 to 1949, he lived the life of a refugee, in constant dislocation; from 1949 to 1964, he joined two million refugees and the Nationalist government in Taiwan, living in exile under one party rule, martial law, and as a virtual colony of the US. By eliding his background, the film underestimates the intellectual capacity of its audience and misses an opportunity to contextualize his achievements. After all, even genius is situated.

Absent from the film are any references to modern Chinese history, or such relevant postcolonial studies concepts as Fanon's 'hybridity', Spivak's 'strategic essentialism', Chow's 'coercive mimeticism', or Tu's 'cultural nationalism'. Even the most elementary categories of critical theory – race, ethnicity, gender, identity, and embodiment – are never uttered. Is the film simply suffering from what Chow calls 'orientalist melancholia', seeking to preserve an imagined, pre-contact Chinese authenticity? It is very instructive for devotees of Chinese culture to experience the ridicule of Chinese engineers and microbiologists, who think you are wasting your time reading the *Daodejing* in the original or practicing taijiquan and qigong. Less diplomatic interlocutors will tell you it is the luxury of hegemony, adding that what protects China's sovereignty is not the ability to bounce push-hands partners off the wall but nuclear weapons and ICBMs, and that what actually improves the quality of life for Chinese is flush toilets and air conditioning.

No work of art is made without an intended audience. Is this merely a self-congratulatory exercise in nostalgia on the part of aging boomers? How will it play to Generations X, Y, and Z? Taiji long ago lost the youth market to karate and taekwondo, the Olympics judo and taekwondo, and fitness and glamour to yoga. Is this film a propaganda piece for prospective students, or an educational resource for established students? *The Professor* is not an action movie, it is not an instructional video, and it is not a history lesson on modern China. The release of this film is a significant event in the evolution of the Zheng Manqing taijiquan lineage, but its resonance in the wider taijiquan community, Asian martial arts at large, and martial arts studies is a question that can only be answered at the box office.

In one of his writings, Zheng says that if you hit a big bell with a small stone, you get a small sound, and if you hit a big bell with a big stone, you get a big sound. Few would argue that Zheng was not a big bell, but there is bound to be fruitful debate over whether this film is the long-awaited big sound. It is certainly a labor of love, though, and one that celebrates a moment in time when innocence met authenticity and an unlikely community emerged uniting East-and-West and old-and-new.

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