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"The way of the mind"

By **Diane Brooks**

Times Snohomish County Bureau

Late one night, 15 years into his political exile, Zhou Chu-Xiong visited his latest construction project: a 2,500-seat theater in a rural area of northeastern China.

A self-taught architect, Zhou had invented his own construction techniques to compensate for the region's primitive technology. The theater's second-story concrete floor had just been poured, and he knew from his studies that it needed to remain warm for a month to harden properly.

So on the ground floor he arranged three large pots of steaming water, kept hot with burning coals beneath, and hired elderly people to watch the fires around the clock. But he worried. What if they fell asleep?

When Zhou dropped by that night in 1973, he surprised an old monk performing tai chi while he watched the pots. Over the next 28 days, Zhou learned the martial art that he now passes on to his American students.

Zhou had studied tai chi with his eighth-grade gym teacher before he quit school to join the Chinese army. By the time he met the monk, Zhou was 49 with a host of ailments: high blood pressure, a swollen liver, back pain and arthritis.

He had spent two years in the United States near the end of World War II, learning to fly P-51 fighters for the Chinese air force.

Years later, the ruling Communists labeled Zhou a "rightist" because of his ties to America and sent him away for labor reform.

He lived and worked under that stigma for 22 years, earning barely enough to survive while designing major buildings for a county government.

The monk agreed to teach him tai chi in secret. Over the next four weeks he went to the theater every night,



[enlarge](#) ROD MAR / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Zhou Chu-Xiong, 80, leads his tai-chi students in a warm-up during a recent class. He conducts classes at two sites in Everett.

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Tai chi with Master Zhou

Zhou Chu-Xiong teaches tai chi through Everett Parks and Recreation, 425-257-8300. His upcoming classes include:

Tai chi — Beginning 24 Forms

Despite its name, this class at Legion Hall, 145 Alverson Blvd., also includes intermediate students studying 48 forms. The group meets from 6 to 7 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays; the next two sessions will start July 19 and Aug. 16. Cost: \$48 (\$24 for ages 55 and over).

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learning "the long trial," which includes 108 tai-chi movements.

When Zhou emigrated from China to Everett in 1990 to join other family members, he had a full physical exam. He said his doctor found no trace of his former liver ailment, and his blood pressure was normal. His back pain and arthritis had long vanished.

"He said it must be the tai chi," said Zhou, now quite lithe and graceful at 80.

Achieving balance

Energy channeled through the body

The "chi" is the body's life force, or vital energy, which the Chinese believe flows continuously through a channel system. Both tai chi and acupuncture aim to balance and stimulate the flow of chi through that meridian, to heal sickness and increase longevity.

While acupuncture uses needles to fine-tune the flow, tai chi uses the human mind to lead the chi through the meridian.

"The way of the mind is the way of the chi," Zhou said.

Zhou has taught tai chi through Everett Parks and Recreation for 11 years, with classes at the Everett Senior Center and at American Legion Memorial Park in the city's north end.

Many of his most advanced students are retirees — the eldest is 83 — who have practiced with him from the start. Twice a week they gather at the senior center to perform their seemingly effortless, synchronous moves. They execute graceful 180-degree spins, stand storklike on one leg and generally seem in better shape than many people half their age.

And they are devoted to their teacher, whom they call "Master Zhou" or "Master Joe."

As easy as they make it seem, many beginners are intimidated. The dropout rate is high.

Mary Golden, 74, remembers how difficult it was at first. She and her husband, Ed, enrolled in their first class with Zhou about nine years ago.

"Oh my gosh, it was like a puzzle," she recalled. "You have to think about your feet and your hands and, of course, your head because that's part of it, too."

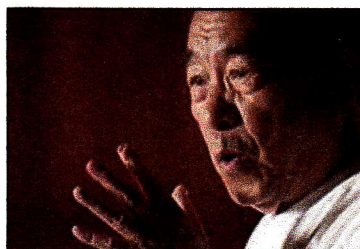
Her husband chimed in: "Now you don't even think about the forms and the sequences. It really flows."

Like most of Zhou's students, the Goldenes are mostly interested in the physical, not spiritual, aspects of their practice. Ed Golden, a retired Central Washington University professor, has made a scholarly subject of tai chi, reading books and ordering videos.

A Yale University study found that seniors with regular tai-chi practice suffer few broken bones, he said, because they have improved balance.

Tai chi — Beginning 24 Forms for Seniors: Nonseniors may take this class at Everett Senior Center, 3025 Lombard Ave. The group meets from 1:30 to 2:30 p.m. Thursdays and 9 to 10 a.m. Saturdays; the next two sessions will begin July 22 and Aug. 19. Cost: \$48 (\$24 for ages 55 and over).

Tai chi — Intermediate 48 Forms for Seniors: Nonseniors also may take this class at Everett Senior Center, 3025 Lombard Ave. The group meets from 3 to 4 p.m. Thursdays and 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. Saturdays; the next two sessions will begin July 22 and Aug. 19. Cost: \$48 (\$24 for ages 55 and over).



enlarge ROD MAR / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Zhou discourages beginners from even thinking about the mental or energy aspects of tai chi.

Tai-chi movements require practitioners to shift their weight fully from one leg to the other throughout their exercises; the weight is shared by both legs only at the start and finish.

Golden, 76, doesn't think about chi or try to manipulate it while doing his movements, he said. But he does feel it.

"It's hard to describe," he said. "It's not a surge going through the body — it's an awareness."

Zhou doesn't talk much in class about the spiritual side of his practice. He actually discourages beginners from even thinking about the mental or energy aspects of tai chi.

"No mind, no chi in the beginning," he told new student Sandy Wenzel, who recently joined his all-ages class at Legion Park.

"Without thinking about the movement, you can do it smoothly," he said. "Once you get familiar with the movement, you try to use your mind to lead the action."

Wenzel was immediately impressed with Zhou. She had tried tai chi with two other teachers, she said, and they were nothing like him.

"I almost knew when I saw him that he was a master," she said. "The way he moves is so graceful, he floats like clouds. That's what I want to do. The whole body, every muscle, is moving. It looks so easy, and it's not."

Zhou teaches two sets of tai-chi movements: 24 forms for beginners and 48 forms, a completely different series, for his more-advanced students.

A single "form" is actually a series of flowing movements, which can be broken down into as many as 15 different steps and components. Each form flows naturally into the next one.

Zhou leads most of his classes wordlessly, instead using a boombox to play audiotapes he has recorded. He and his students follow along as his recorded voice counts off the sections of each form.

But if he's working with a beginner or if an entire class is learning something new, he gives intricate explanations. His directions are simple and precise:

Hold the palm at 30 degrees, he'll say, or turn the torso 45 degrees. Zhou recently graduated two of his Legion Park students from 24 forms to 48 forms. So two longtime students took over the 48- and 24-forms groups, giving Zhou time to personally instruct the two women.

He described the subtleties of each move as he taught them: "White snake puts out his tongue" — which involves placing the right hand, palm up, near one's nose, then crouching with crossed legs — followed by "pat the foot to subdue the tiger."

"My world is very stressful, and this is very calming," said student Adie Bolach, 45. "It's soothing and kind of counteracts that. It slows us down."

Witness to tragedy



[enlarge](#) ROD MAR / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Though he teaches at a senior center, Zhou's students cover a range of ages.



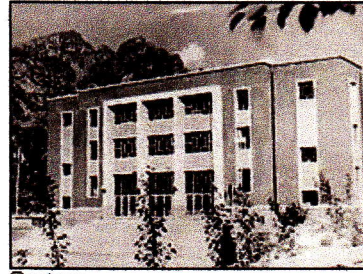
[enlarge](#) Zhou Chu-Xiong joined the Chinese air force in 1944. Two years later, his class of 23 men was sent to the United States for two years of pilot training in Texas and Arizona with the Army Air Forces.

Zhou survived Japan's attacks during WWII

Zhou's affinity for Americans traces back to World War II, when he witnessed two devastating Japanese air attacks on Chinese cities. He had entered a military academy in 1939 at age 16.

In 1940, he saw Japanese bombers destroy the busiest section of Chengdu, a large city in south-central China. It was a Sunday, he said, and the bombs killed many people caught exercising in the city park.

The next year, Zhou was passing through Chongqing, the wartime capital of China, when the Japanese attacked. He ran out of the city, he said, so he wasn't among the thousands of people killed.



⊕ enlarge
Zhou, a self-taught architect, designed this theater in China in the early 1970s.

Zhou was an artillery second lieutenant in charge of Chinese troops in Hunan province the next time Japanese bombers suddenly appeared in the skies overhead, on a Sunday in 1942.

But this time, the United States' Flying Tigers flew to the rescue, forever endearing Americans to Zhou. Officially called the American Volunteer Group, the mercenary aviators shattered Japan's air campaign against China during World War II.

"I was so afraid," Zhou recalled. "But then a few minutes later I saw the Flying Tiger P-40s shoot down and kill all of them. Stop the evil Japanese from killing innocent Chinese people."

Zhou wanted that power, too, so in 1944 he joined the Chinese air force. After undergoing preflight training in India, his class of 23 men was sent to the United States in 1946 for two years of pilot training in Texas and Arizona with the Army Air Forces.

As World War II ended, the Chinese civil war escalated between the Nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek and the Communists. Zhou didn't want to fight his own people, so he requested a military discharge and became a commercial pilot.

That's how he met his wife, Cynda Wang; she was a stewardess. They married in 1948.

Zhou's interest in architecture was sparked in 1955, when he began a two-year job as a building inspector on a new airport, which today is Beijing Capital International Airport.

"I worked hard," he said. "I read many books [on architecture and construction]; I learned from the writers how to do it."

At first he flourished professionally, Zhou said, correcting some critical mistakes made by the airport construction company.

But it didn't last.

Communist leader Mao Tse-tung in 1957 launched his Anti-Rightist Movement aimed at crushing dissent. An estimated 500,000 intellectuals and other free thinkers were rounded up and either imprisoned, killed or sent to labor camps.

"Anybody who had an education and different ideas than the Communists, they labeled 'rightists.' Teachers, scholars, boxers, engineers," said Zhou, who fell victim in 1958.

His salary was cut by 80 percent, and he was sent into a rural area of Xinglong County in northeastern China that lacked electricity, modern roads, pure water or modern buildings.

"I had to labor to wash my brain," he said.

For the next 22 years, he rarely saw his wife or their three children, who lived south of Beijing in Tianjin.

After Zhou had done nearly two years of manual labor, the local Communists discovered his background with the Beijing airport project.

They offered him a new job — county architect — but at his farmworker's salary.

"It's better than stay at farm. I say, 'OK,'" Zhou said.

Over the next 20 years, he designed and oversaw the construction of an array of county projects — a small fertilizer company, cement and paper plants, a hospital, a school, two theaters, a refrigeration facility and even a cemetery.



[enlarge](#) ROD MAR / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Zhou Chu-Xiong practices with a sword during a recent class. Tai chi "looks so easy," one student says, "and it's not."

Each time he got an assignment, the county paid for his books and his travel to look at similar projects. Then he would study, design the building, teach workers how to build it and supervise its erection. When a facility was finished, he taught the new employees how to use it.

His new job also allowed him to see his family more often, when his business trips passed through Tianjin. He was allowed only one true vacation per year — five days off for the Chinese new year — throughout his 22 years of labor reform.

Zhou is proud that none of his buildings was damaged in a devastating 1976 earthquake in northeastern China, about 150 miles from his workplace. With a strength estimated at 7.8 to 8.2, it was the 20th century's deadliest quake, wiping out the city of Tangshan and killing more than 240,000 people.

"After the earthquake, the county leader wanted me to see a play in the second row of the second theater I designed," Zhou said. "He said, 'I am so glad our theater did not have any harm.'"

It was the theater, completed in 1973, where Zhou had learned to practice tai chi. The pots of steaming water had worked.

Correcting a mistake

5 years' back pay comes with new freedom

Zhou said he finally was released from his low-wage job in 1980, when then-leader Deng Xiaoping formally corrected the Communist Party's mistake with the rightists. Zhou said he received the equivalent of five years' back pay and was given the freedom to seek a job of his own choosing.

He was hired as an English teacher at China's Foreign Trade Institution, where he worked five years before retiring in 1985.

"They said since 1949, people not allowed to speak English. How did you remember a language you didn't use?"

He laughed telling the story. He tricked a military guard to keep him from confiscating Zhou's English-language copy of a large book written by Mao promoting the Communist principles. Throughout his exile, he read it daily to preserve his English skills.


In 1984, Zhou's daughter moved to Seattle, where she married an American she had met in China. Wang came to visit three years later and stayed, landing a job teaching Chinese at Everett Community College. He followed in 1990. Now Zhou and Wang live with their daughter's family in Everett.


Zhou's fondness for Americans remains firmly tied to his memory of the Flying Tigers.

"When I stand on the stage teaching Americans tai chi, I always feel this emotion. [My students] are friends and relations of the Flying Tiger pilots. I must teach them heartfully, with everything I can," he said. "That's why I keep my class for 11 years. And I feel so happy Chairman Deng gave me the freedom to come over here, to pass on the traditional Chinese martial arts to the American people."

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