

## **In memory of master Ma Jiangbao**

By Bart Saris, October, 2016

On the 12th of October 2016 grandmaster Ma Jiangbao passed away in Rotterdam (NL). His death is a great loss, not only for the Wu style but for taiji worldwide. Meantime in Europe this message hits us hard, because he actively taught here since 1986 and as a consequence a large group of students are left alone.

Ma Jiangbao was the son of Wu Yinghua and Ma Yueliang, both considered to be taiji-legends already during their lives in China and abroad. He was also the official successor of the Wu taiji lineage. We in Europe consider ourselves blessed that a direct family member, as well as a gatekeeper from one of the most influential taiji families, settled over here.

In 1986 Ma Jiangbao and his father Ma Yueliang were invited by Tommy, as he was known here, to come to Europe. Tommy, a Chinese student of Ma Yueliang who lived in Düsseldorf (DE), was a Chinese physician and bookstore owner.

I met the both of them for the first time at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam in 1986. At that time so-called China-days were organized in conclusion of the beginners-course Chinese language “Ni hao” as broadcasted on the Dutch television by TELEAC (an educational broadcasting studio). I had some years training in taiji as it was practiced in those days. The little information that came to Europe was practiced and shared by everyone interested for as far as it was understood. In actuality, nobody really understood what they were doing. Most information that came to us through Taiwan and later New York was passed on after a short 3 week course, but nobody had answers to the unavoidable questions that arose. When asked, your teacher would ask his teacher for an answer and he would then ask his teacher in turn and so on. When finally an answer came from the highest echelon, as it seemed the “professor” [Zheng Manqing] had always done it that way. Nobody would know why, not even his “master” students. From the first moment I saw father and son do their thing I knew I witnessed the real stuff and immediately knew what it was I wanted to learn. Soon after I learned that both of them were staying in Düsseldorf and that Ma Jiangbao was also teaching over there. His father, 86 at the time, went back to China leaving his son behind to teach Wu style taiji. I visited him and asked if it was possible to be taught. His answer was: Yes! And since then I was taught by Ma Jiangbao, at first in weekly lessons, but later on also privately.

In the first two years of his stay in Europe, master Ma Jiangbao was living in Düsseldorf, but after his visa expired, it was expected that he would return to China. He suddenly disappeared and we all thought he went back to his native country, leaving behind us students, a mixed group of German and Dutch people. Anyway, ever since Amsterdam and the contacts with the Chinese community that arose from that, it was made possible for Ma Jiangbao to come to Holland, to stay and teach in Rotterdam. The Chinese community first took care of his visa for 4 years and later he got married and he eventually also got his Dutch passport. Through my contacts I soon discovered that master Ma was living in Holland and I got hold on his whereabouts. He was staying at the Ocean Paradise, a floating Chinese restaurant / hotel at the base of the Euromast in Rotterdam. This place also housed a wushu school, where Master Ma was invited to teach the Chinese and their children. In the meanwhile our German-Dutch group stayed in contact and we practiced a lot. But from the moment I knew of the whereabouts of master Ma, I went over there. It was a

very happy reunion. After the initial greetings he offered me a big glass of beer and we went upstairs, where we practiced tuishou for about one hour. Of course I did not know what he was doing or how he was doing it, but the end result was that I became intimately familiar with all the corners of his room! What an experience! Despite my not knowing, I realized afterwards that I learned a lot from what he made me feel during that hour. After that, we went down again. He gave me another glass of beer, this time accompanied with some delicious food, before asking what the reason of my visit was. I asked him if it was possible for him to come to Venlo to resume his teaching. And... it was! Soon after, I took it upon myself to organize the lessons for master Ma and gradually Venlo became the German-Dutch center for his teachings. At the time he could not cross the border because of his visa, which meant that the German students had to come to Venlo. A number of years later, when the borders opened up and he had his passport there were some German students that took it upon themselves to organize lessons and seminars over in Düsseldorf, thus expanding the range of his teachings to Germany. Particularly Martin Bödicker and his student and future wife Freya have to be credited for this. This way started from Venlo the spreading of Ma's taiji through Europa. In these early days the EWTC, the European Association for Traditional Wu Tai Chi Chuan was also founded. Many practitioners became a member. Later, the EWTC also organized teacher examinations, in which master Ma tested the candidates personally. From the beginning master Ma Jiangbao and his parents were honorary members of the EWTC. All members of the EWTC, especially the teachers, learnt his taiji. We consider him the only true source.

Highlights of that blooming period were the Whitsun-seminars in Venlo, the taiji manifestations at the "Museum Insel" in Hombroich and the practice-vacations in Casimierz (Poland).

A unmistakable turning point in the development of Wu taiji in Europa from 1986 onward was the decision of some members to leave the democratically organized EWTC to establish a commercially based school. They wanted to make professional business out of taiji. To make this work they felt they needed an organization in which they would have to answer to nobody except maybe to master Ma himself. Something that did not fit in well with the EWTC due to its democratic organization and familiar character. As a result the EWTC lost a number of members, but enough people remained to go on and spread Wu taiji within Europe. Nowadays growing centers of development are Holland, Germany (Köln and Bodensee), Austria, Spain, Italy, France and Rumania. Unfortunately this split still exists. However, we wholeheartedly hope that the death of master Ma Jiangbao has a unifying effect on all that practice his taiji and want to safeguard his legacy for future generations.

### **The Teacher**

Master Ma Jiangbao didn't only practice taiji, he embodied the extraordinary and genuine tradition of his family. Master Ma Jiangbao was a humble person, benevolent and respectful to all. His affectionate teaching method had a way of motivating and inspiring his students. He was always patient and put up with all the questions we "long noses" posed, something that isn't common in China. All questions would be answered, not only the how but also the why would be addressed. His hands-on approach immediately made one aware that a movement should be executed in that manner and not in any other way. Not because he said so, but because master Ma had the ability to let taiji communicate with you on its own merit. In this way he facilitated the experience that could further the development of his students, always

accompanied by the saying: “One should know what one feels and feel what one knows!” All forms master Ma passed on can be characterized by an unprecedented degree of accuracy (one of the most important criteria for correct practice). It was pure, meaning full and complete up to every intricate part. Everything master Ma taught was stripped down to its bare essentials leaving no room for fancy movements. His execution and flow were peerless and breathed the beauty of silence. His approach was one of no-nonsense and stripped of any ‘cloud nine value,’ something we unfortunately see in so many other modern styles. If he saw people move in this fashion, he would always make the remark: “That’s not taiji, that’s dancing!” Not that he taught less of that, on the contrary, but taiji was something completely different in his eyes and shouldn’t be identified or presented as such. His level in pushing hands was unprecedented. One could never detect any form of hardness within him, nevertheless, he was able to throw you any which way he liked. It was as if he always knew your intended actions in advance and neutralized them beforehand. He loved pushing hands and I demonstrated it with him numerous times: such a pleasure and learning experience! And in retrospect I can honestly say he loved every minute pushing with his students. He thought tuishou was extremely important, because it made explicit the essentials of every movement within the form(s). To him tuishou and form were inseparable and belonged together. The one could not exist without the other and together they formed the nucleus of taiji.

Another thing he thought was extremely important, and also expected, was that every student tried to become a better person. Unfortunately he had no children of his own. It is probably for this reason that people who became close with him, had the feeling to be his children, especially the so called Tudi’s, the circle nearest to him.

### **The prospect of the EWTC after the passing of master Ma Jiangbao**

In the last months prior to the death of master Ma Jiangbao some commotion has arisen concerning the future plans the board has for the EWTC. Whatever may be, we consulted master Ma about this topic when he was still clear of mind and able to speak and he endorsed our plans whole heartedly. The board’s basic assumption is the conviction that the passed on knowledge of master Ma can be considered a treasure. So much so, that it is not uncommon that people from other taiji and/or martial art styles feel attracted to it. To us that’s nothing new, because the level of practice and explanation are so profound that most other styles of taiji, including the more general Wu style itself, are unfamiliar with it. His legacy is worth safeguarding it, as pure as possible, for future generations. During his career master Ma Jiangbao not only gave us the instruments to perform taiji up to his standard, but also the theory behind it. More importantly even, and maybe his greatest achievement is that he gave us the tools and ability to test our own performance, in every stage and on every level. Revealing an additional value, namely, a clinical evaluation method that is needed to judge the correctness of different interpretations of the same movement. I would like to remind you all that master Ma gave more than one performance possibilities of a single posture. These different varieties are all equally valid and can coexist together! The board is well aware of the fact that the information underlying other styles didn’t survive and got lost in time during its propagation, resulting in an endless row of “masters” who all claim that they are the only one who know the truth. Therefore, we, as the board deem it absolutely necessary that there is at least one place that safeguards the legacy of master Ma in its most pure form for the sake of future transmission. The board of the EWTC thinks the association can function as such a place, since the knowledge is already there, provided that the members

support and share this view. It deals with the knowledge and expertise as it has been passed down concerning long-, short-, quick-, sabre-, spear-, sword forms and tuishou. Moreover, the association already trained/examined teachers on the basis of this same material for years. In other words the EWTC has been master Ma's association from the beginning. But before the association can devote all its effort and time to master Ma's taiji, the statutes of the association have to be changed. At this moment the aim of the EWTC is the promotion of traditional Wu taijiquan in general. If the EWTC is to promote master Ma's interpretation of Wu style taijiquan, than this aim is too comprehensive. It would most probably have as consequence that his interpretation would disappear in the various and diverse interpretations Wu taiji encompasses, or it could be associated with the interpretation of Wu taiji practitioners that he would not welcome himself. But all that aside, not so long ago we asked master Ma if he could agree to an EWTC that would be devoted exclusively to his taiji and his answer was a straightforward "YES!" It is therefore that we will propose to change the statutes of the association in the next general meeting. If this proposal is accepted, it doesn't imply that members are not allowed to study with other members of the Wu/Ma family, or any other teacher for that matter. We are well aware of the fact that master Ma didn't teach us all the forms, like the 13 spear set, some of the sword forms or the tuishou manipulations with steps for that matter. That's no problem, more over we would welcome these practices! We are aware that the association is not the only place where Ma's knowledge is stored: Many have learned a lot directly as well as indirectly. We hope that these people will be kind enough to share their knowledge and experience to complete the body of Ma's material and maybe develop it further. However, our focus will be on sharing and deepening (where possible) of what master Ma Jiangbao indeed has taught us and the same applies to the education/examination of teachers, and on the further schooling of active teachers the way Ma did during the monthly seminars in Venlo. This schooling is a task he gave me when he began to feel unable to continue this job himself. So, the EWTC will not disassociate itself from additional information or knowledge concerning Wu taiji, assuming that the legacy of master Ma will not be watered down in practice or transmission. Besides, it is master Ma's legacy that certified teachers are supposed to practice, develop themselves further, and transmit their knowledge.

We sincerely hope that all who practice master Ma's Wu taiji can continue to do so in unity and in honor and memory of the man we all loved and had so dear!

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Student of Ma Jiangbao since 1986