

STUDENT PROFILE: LEM COLEY; IN HIS OWN WORDS

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As soon as I explored beyond the campus of Shanghai International Studies University, I discovered Lu Xun Park. Across a wide avenue with hectic bike lanes, the walls of the park stretched for blocks. People sold sandals, tapes, umbrellas and fruit outside the gates. Inside, older Shanghainese read newspapers aloud, sang together fiercely or paced backwards along the crowded walks, slapping their shoulders to help the circulation. A walk shaded by ginkgo trees ran beside a stream, crossed an arching bridge, and opened out along a field bordered by yellow iris and giant red peonies. People did T'ai Chi there.

They might be in groups, forty or fifty with matching conical hats and red fans, which made a loud crack when opened in a slow, bowing pivot. These big groups had leaders who may have been professionals, but the little teams of four or five seemed like neighbors just meeting on the way back from the market to enjoy the graceful forms with friends before the day got too hot. They stuck their shopping bags in the crooks of ginkgo trees.

Those images stayed with me when I came home, and while memories faded I thought of T'ai Chi as a way to stay in touch with China. At the same time, I began singing in a choir. It occurred to me that the deep satisfaction of making sounds in harmony with others might be achieved also in movement with others, through T'ai Chi.

One day my wife came inside and said she had seen our neighbor, John Davis, doing T'ai Chi in his back yard. He told me he went to Water Tiger School with his wife. They are people whose judgment I trust, and the convenience of having Water Tiger School just up the street appealed to me.

I had never done any form of meditation or martial arts. So many people I know are into yoga and Buddhism but, perhaps unfairly, I felt that the last thing I needed was an encouragement to detach. And I've always been a little skeptical about the "wisdom-of-the-East" mystique. There are as many phonies and as much hot air in Asian disciplines and religions as in ours. Of course I respect the texts, the arts, the fresh perspectives, knowledge and the valuable skills embodied in these disciplines and religions.

Watching T'ai Chi gave me no feeling for how it worked. People told me that there are various traditions and methods of teaching. Some teachers apparently just lead beginners through long forms until eventually they get it right. I hadn't sought out a class earlier because, while I bike and play tennis, I have always felt physically uncentered. I fall easily. That made it hard to picture myself doing the long sequences of forms, at least with the deftness and simplicity of the Chinese I watched in Lu Xun Park.

I like the Water Tiger style. It reminds me of the Suzuki violin training our youngest son did as a child. The four-year-olds would learn one small lick, then another, and another until a musical phrase could be put together. Later a tune would emerge. Laoshi teaches one thing at a time, but the process seems cumulative. He has a great eye for analyzing your movement and picking out one step throwing off the fluency of the whole, like the wrong note in a musical phrase.

Balance is a central motif in T'ai Chi. What I like most about Water Tiger — and what is most noticeable — is a sense of balance. The pattern of the classes becomes familiar, yet no two classes are the same. The classes are relaxed, but also purposeful. There is balance in the way veterans and rookies get equal attention. I experience each session as something private yet communal. T'ai Chi is described as meditation through movement and I feel that. Directing your focus out to your body moving through space clears away head-noise and allows space to form inside where your mind can turn and be calmly aware of itself. Both body and spirit are addressed, creating a kind of dialectical interaction. They become like two sides of a moebius strip. Follow either surface long enough, it turns into the other.

I like the exercise, using different muscles differently. Hamlet tells Polonius that "Old men have weak hams," and the back of my knees and thighs felt tender through most of the fall. I walk and stand differently now, which helps the sciatic strain I used to get standing with my knees locked.

Although Western males are wary of grace, T'ai Chi gives men permission to be graceful. Permission is not achievement, but moving slowly across the big gray mat, repeating the same moves, tuning in and out on the other students, pleases me, and I feel like I'm learning something difficult to express.



Lem recalls his experience in *Lu Xun Park* in China and seeing small groups of people enjoying the grace of T'ai Chi Ch'uan.

From things I've overheard Laoshi say, it seems that here the balance of T'ai Chi becomes even more elusive, for at the same time you move in synch with others, you are essentially self-possessed, self-generating. I feel some tension around this idea. I've played on teams and worked with others, but deep down, I'm afraid that if you give yourself up to act with others, you can lose yourself. Yet I really want to do the forms with other students.

Yeats ended a poem with the line, "How can you tell the dancer from the dance?" I remembered that line watching the people do T'ai Chi in Lu Xun Park, and I remember it now when I catch a glimpse of students wheeling slowly like a flight of birds turning into the wind. I want to get there and usually I expect to get there, though sometimes I'm afraid I'll be like the crippled boy who couldn't keep up when the Pied Piper of Hamelin led the dancing children into the mountain. The Chinese I watched seemed untouched by such fears. Their faces were centers of calm in the midst of moving bodies, full and empty at once.

So I look forward to the sessions late Sunday afternoon. When I started in September, it was still light, now I can see the sunset out the front door. Sometimes I see the long shadows of people who pause on the sidewalk to watch us. The last light hits the white screen with a framed Japanese text, the picture of a bearded sage with hollow temples, a mantel with two swordsticks, at the bottom the little gong, and a smaller framed portrait between two flickering candles. We bow to the shrine, bow to Laoshi, move into the process.



Lem in the
kwoon playing
Ward-Off (Peng).

