

How I became a Taiji Auntie and took part in my first competition

In my beautiful costume, I felt like a cosplayer among the seasoned competitors. But I overcame my nerves.



Sumiko Tan

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Three Saturdays ago, I woke up and, for a few blissful seconds, didn't know where I was.

Then it hit me. I was in Penang to take part in a taijiquan competition that afternoon.

The WuDeBei Traditional Wushu Competition 2024 was my first-ever competition – taijiquan or otherwise – and I felt totally inadequate despite having practised for it for months. I was so nervous, my stomach hurt.

The road to Penang started in May 2023 when my husband and I began private taijiquan lessons with Ms Hazel Ng, the founder of Hui Taiji Training Centre and a former champion.

For the uninitiated, taijiquan is a form of Chinese martial art, or wushu. The shorthand “taiji” or “tai chi” commonly refers to the gentle, slow-motion exercise derived from taijiquan.

This was our second attempt at learning taijiquan, which I'd always admired for its gracefulness.

Six months earlier, we had signed up for a course at a community centre. Although it was advertised as a beginner's class in English, the instructor spoke only Mandarin and the first lesson was geared towards students already familiar with the basic stances. We couldn't follow, and didn't return.

Months later, a businessman I was interviewing mentioned learning taijiquan near where I live and that his teacher spoke English. I got Ms Ng's contact details and signed us up for lessons every Wednesday evening.

Ms Ng, or “laoshi” (teacher) as we call her, teaches the Chen style of taijiquan. This is a blend of slow, flowing movements punctuated by quick and

powerful ones. I haven't moved from the fist to weapons, but the latter include the sword, sabre, spear and long pole.

Though I've done some running and yoga, I'm not naturally athletic. My lack of coordination, strength and flexibility made mastering the stances really difficult.

Remembering movement sequences felt like learning a foreign language – literally – since I had to grasp the Chinese names for certain forms even if the lessons were in English.

I enjoyed the sessions as Ms Ng and her fellow coach, Mr Chew Koon Loon, were patient and encouraging. But I was clearly not a “natural” and my progress was excruciatingly slow. Not practising enough at home didn't help.

In July 2024, more than a year after I started learning taijiquan, Ms Ng suggested I enter a competition in Penang at the end of the year. She wanted to help me set a goal.

“Okay,” I told her without hesitation, figuring this would force me to be more committed. The event was a long way off anyway, and secretly I had a Plan B: I'd back out at the last minute if it got too overwhelming.

She designed a competition sequence tailored to my level. I upgraded my taiji shoes from a pair I'd bought online to a snazzier version from a specialty shop in Katong. It made training more fun.

To immerse myself further, I attended the 4th World Taijiquan Championships held at the Sports Hub in August with her other students.

Watching the competitors' athleticism and artistry opened my eyes to a world I'd never experienced. I was more inspired. When it came time to get my competition outfit, made-to-order from China, I chose one in black silk with an embroidered blue phoenix. It was inspired by a costume I'd seen at the championships.

In late August, Ms Ng and Mr Chew added free Friday training sessions for students participating in the WuDeBei event and the 2024 National



The writer, whose competition outfit (top) was made-to-order from China and in black silk with an embroidered blue phoenix, performing her Chen-style taijiquan sequence at the 11th International WuDeBei Traditional Wushu Competition 2024 (above) in Penang on Nov 30. She received a bronze medal (below). PHOTO: HUI TAIJI TRAINING CENTRE



Wushu Championship being held a week earlier.

ANXIETY AND THRILL

There were a dozen of us ranging in age from nine to 70. Most were skilled and I was clearly the worst. But I told myself to just carry on. There was always Plan B.

I didn't activate it, however.

On Nov 28, the Hui Taiji team and the two coaches flew to Penang. My husband came along for moral support.

I hadn't realised how many wushu enthusiasts there were in Singapore until I saw competitors of all ages on the same flight, identifiable by their club-branded jackets and T-shirts.

The WuDeBei competition has been held annually since 2014 to promote the heritage and values of Chinese martial arts. It is organised by the International WuDeBei Traditional Wushu Federation, a group founded in Singapore by wushu grandmaster Royce Ang, and is open to wushu clubs, federations, associations and schools.

This year's event was co-organised with the Wushu, Lion and Dragon Dance Association of Penang and attracted hundreds of competitors, including some from mainland China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, South Africa and Australia.

The competition was divided into seven male/female age categories, from “junior” (age seven and below) to “pioneer” (66 and up). I was in the “veteran” category (50 to 65).

Each age category had multiple events. I competed under Chen-style taijiquan where a routine had to be between two and four minutes. During practice, I averaged 3 minutes 30

seconds. Events were split between two venues at Georgetown's Prangin Mall, at the atrium and also a ballroom, which was where I competed.

The competitors surprised me. Elderly men and women I'd assumed were past their athletic prime performed with breathtaking agility – squatting, jumping, skipping and darting with ease.

Standing among them in my beautiful phoenix costume, I felt like a cosplayer, an imposter, a fish out of water.

I was the last of 23 participants in my group to perform and waited three hours for my turn.

The thought of making a fool of myself in front of the judges and seasoned competitors looking on filled me with anxiety. Several times, my mind blanked when I mentally rehearsed my sequence, causing me to panic and run to my teammates for help. They calmed me down. “Breathe,” one said. “Just enjoy the process.”

When my name was finally called, I rushed through my routine (I clocked a mere 2 mins 45 seconds), my stances were embarrassingly shallow and my movements far from fluid. It was clear to the five judges that I was a beginner.

But I didn't forget my routine and I didn't stumble, other than making a slight wobble.

The judging at WuDeBei was forgiving. Everyone who completed got a medal: gold for the top 30 per cent, silver for the middle 40 per cent and bronze for the bottom 30 per cent.

The top scorer in my category earned 8.85 out of 10. I scored 8.37 – the fourth-lowest score out of 23 participants – and received a bronze.

I was thrilled. The competition was not against others – it was against my own fears and limitations. I had set myself a challenge, I had given my best, and I didn't quit. As Ms Ng told me, beaming, afterwards, it was “a medal for courage.”

What I also enjoyed was the camaraderie within the Hui Taiji team. We cheered one another on, exchanged encouraging words and celebrated every performance. It was a fun and positive experience. “You look very happy,” my husband remarked.

Back in Singapore, Ms Ng reviewed our performances and what we should work on as we prepare for next year's WuDeBei competition.

I have many areas to improve on. My stance must be lower, weight distribution needs to be clearer, my movements smoother and more flowing, my gaze more focused and lively, and I need to improve my jumping and *fa jing* (releasing power).

The list is long – but that also means plenty of small personal victories to look forward to.

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The life-changing benefits of taiji

When Mr Alex Kwoi retired in September 2021, he was eager to find an activity that would keep him healthy alongside his weekly game of golf.

What he didn't expect was how taijiquan would change his life.

He used to wake up with ankle and knee pain and needed to stretch in bed before getting up.

“After six months of taiji, the pain slowly disappeared. I'm now able to jump out of bed to start the day,” said Mr Kwoi, 64, a former facilities manager at the Defence Science and Technology Agency.

Taiji offers many health benefits, said Adjunct Professor Lau Tang Ching, a senior consultant in the division of rheumatology and allergy at National University Hospital's department of medicine.

The movements strengthen muscles and improve joint agility, which is why he often recommends taiji to patients with osteoarthritis, a condition where the cartilage in joints deteriorates.

Taiji's practice of shifting weight and moving in all directions has also been shown to be effective in improving balance, which is a key factor in preventing falls.

Most falls are due to a loss of balance from unaccustomed movements, such as when you

suddenly step aside to avoid an obstacle, said Prof Lau, who is also vice-dean (education) at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at NUS.

“If you are doing exercises that allow you to move sideways or backwards, then when you have to do a sudden movement, you may not fall so easily,” he added. “Your nerves will be trained to be more used to your body moving in different ways.”

Another benefit is taiji's ability to calm the mind, said Prof Lau, who has practised the martial art since the age of nine. The deep breathing and mental focus required help put the body into a “resting, reparative mode.”

A general rule of thumb is “if you can walk comfortably, you should be able to do taiji comfortably”, he said.

Some styles of taiji, such as the Chen style, might be more exuberant with fast movements. These may have to be modified to suit the comfort of the learner should he suffer from, say, a back or shoulder issue.

While taiji is often associated with the elderly, age is no barrier to starting.

Games and software developer Lee Li Ting, 42, had always regarded it as “a slow and elegant set of moves filled with magical ancient wisdom to be unlocked as you practised.”

She started to learn it on her



(From far left) Mr Alex Kwoi, Ms Michaela Lim, Ms Lee Li Ting, Ms Hazel Ng, founder of Hui Taiji Training Centre, Mr Jason Yee (behind) and Mr Chew Koon Loon, a coach, are the writer's teammates from the Hui Taiji Training Centre. PHOTO: HUI TAIJI TRAINING CENTRE

Emeishan, China, in 2019. Competitions were suspended during the Covid-19 pandemic and she focused on teaching.

“As time went on, the joy of cultivating taiji students overwhelmed the passion for competitions and winning medals,” said Ms Ng.

The centre has about 120 students, aged nine to 75, and she conducts private lessons, as well as classes at Kaki Bukit, Changi Simei and Bidadari community clubs.

Mr Chew Koon Loon, 62, a coach at Hui Taiji Training Centre, picked up the martial art at 50 and won local and overseas competitions from 2013 to 2022.

Taiji has improved his concentration and balance, said Mr Chew, who is in the air-conditioning business.

“It makes me feel healthier and my body is much more flexible than before, even if age is catching up.”

He has observed that younger students tend to have better focus and can memorise the moves more easily.

“This is why I strongly recommend that one starts taiji as early as possible.”

The practitioners interviewed agree a big benefit has been the socialising aspect of doing taiji.

Mr Kwoi said his social well-being has been enhanced by being with like-minded practitioners and taking part in outings, performances and competitions.

Ms Ng said: “Seeing my students encouraging each other and working hard together brings me great joy.”

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own through YouTube but quickly dropped the idea as she was worried wrong postures would set in and be hard to correct later.

In 2023, she began lessons with Hui Taiji Training Centre.

“I wouldn't say taiji is easy because it's one thing to learn the forms and movements, and a whole other to appreciate and express them with the right technique and flow,” said Ms Lee, who had played field hockey in school.

“This is where your enthusiasm matters, and having a good teacher is priceless.”

Even for seasoned martial arts practitioners, taiji presents

challenges.

Mr Jason Yee, 43, who has practised Goju Ryu Karate since 1999 and teaches it, said: “The process of learning and memorising taiji can feel daunting.”

The assistant director at the Singapore Food Agency picked up Chen-style taiji in 2023.

“Even though the movements seem slow, they are surprisingly demanding. Completing an entire pattern leaves me exhausted, sweating and feeling like I've just done a 2.4km run.”

But the practice also puts him in a peaceful mental state, which he enjoys.

Ms Michaela Lim, 52, an

aircraft services planner, said adding taiji to her wushu practice about three years ago has kept her active and flexible.

“It also keeps my brain alert and has been good for my overall well-being,” she said.

For Hui Taiji Training Centre founder Hazel Ng, 59, taiji has transformed her life.

In 2009, when she was 44, the housewife and mother of four was practising yoga when she saw people doing taiji.

She decided to learn it and her dedication paid off as she went on to win local and international competitions, including a gold and silver at the 8th World Kungfu Championships held in