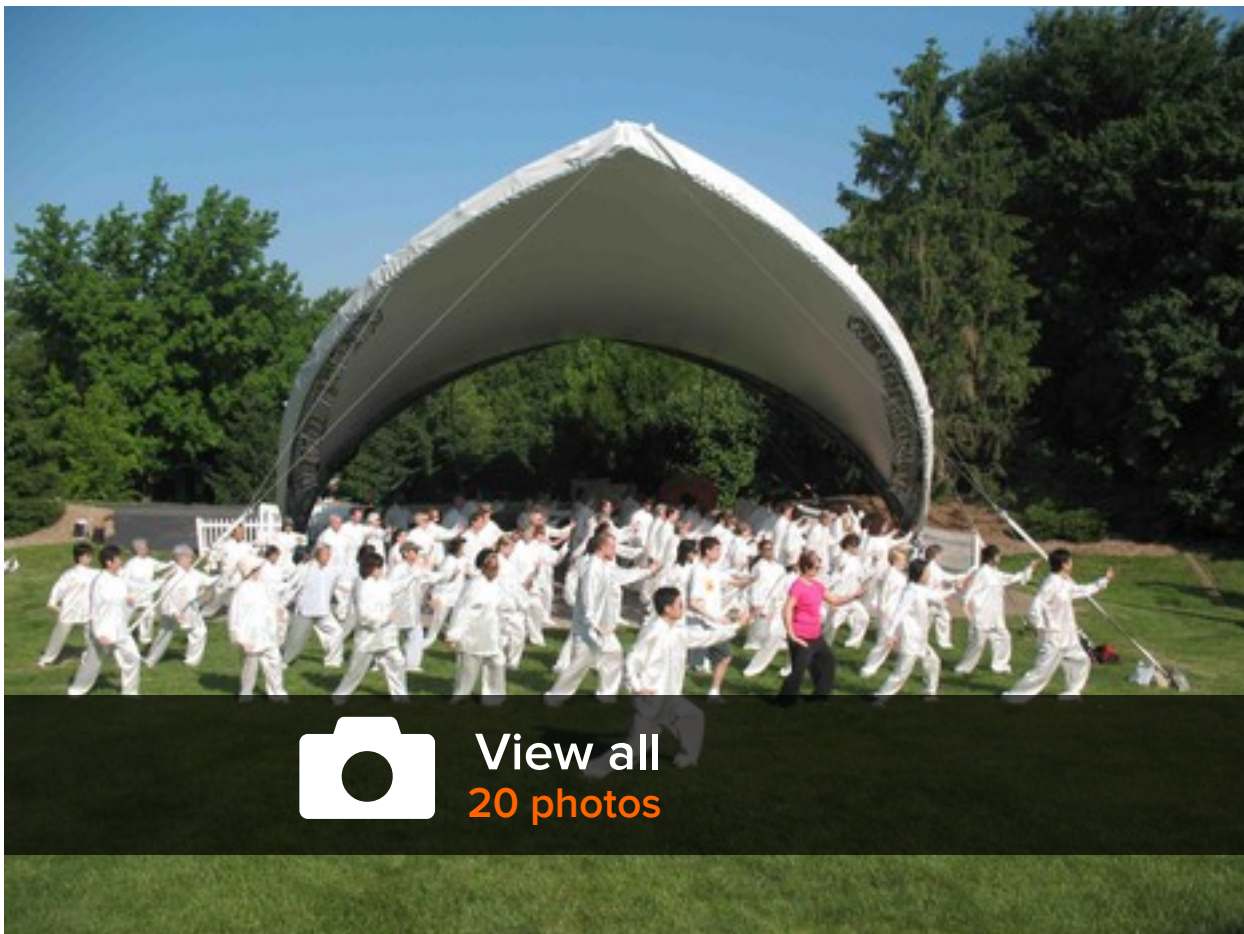


SPORTS / RECREATION / GENERAL RECREATION

"Hundred Man Tai Chi" in the Missouri Botanical Garden this weekend

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"Hundred Man Tai Chi" rehearsal in the Missouri Botanical Garden

Violet Li

To celebrate the annual Chinese Cultural Days (CCD) and [Lantern Festival](#), twenty local [Tai Chi](#) instructors and their schools in the greater St. Louis area have been working hard since last August to prepare a "Hundred Man Tai Chi" performance in the [Missouri Botanical Garden](#) (aka Shaw Garden) on Memorial weekend May 26 -28. It is expected to be spectacular.



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To many practitioners, Tai Chi is organic. Interestingly, "Hundred Man Tai Chi" has grown organically in term of its organization, planning and execution with volunteer work from the community. Inspired by the 2008 Tai Chi performance at the Beijing Olympic Games, the Chinese Cultural Days planning committee and the Botanical Garden preferred a Tai Chi performance with 100 people for 2012 CCD celebration.

Unlike schools in China, no single school in St. Louis has 100 students. Needless to say, this CCD program wants to showcase all different Tai Chi styles and forms taught at various schools. A meeting invitation to all local teachers was sent last summer. Majority of instructors responded enthusiastically. First, they decided on a form that would be easy for all instructors to learn and then to train their students in time for the performance. Since 24 Form is the standard in China and globally, they used it as the base but only adopted the first 11 movements for easy learning. They cleverly added a right Single Whip (or reversed Single Whip) to turn the body around and a smart transition movement so the practitioners can repeat the previous movements and make the entire form about five minutes and 30 seconds long.

Sifus (instructors) Shang Gao and Tim Bruewer, who are the most proficient with this form, agreed to be the head instructors. The instructor training started in mid Oct 2011. There were a dozen training sessions for instructors to choose from to fit their busy schedule. Sifus Herb Parran and Dr. Paul Lee generously donated studio time for instructor training sessions. They even cancelled their regular classes to accommodate the group's need. Some instructors also cancelled their own teaching class to participate in the training.

Missing Tripod's founder John Grove, a martial art aficionado and Eastern culture enthusiast, generously donated his service to this program. He produced a DVD with Tim and Shang to demonstrate the form for instructors to study at home. *Missing Tripod* also produced a high-quality teaching DVD of this form for the general public, which will be premiered this Friday and be sold at the Lantern Festival. This content rich DVD will have a group demonstration, step-by-step instruction at regular speed and half-speed, Tai Chi overview, Tai Chi health benefits presented by local medical doctors, and martial art application of this form. Proceeds of this DVD sale will be donated to the non-profit organization, Chinese Culture Education & Services.

All participating instructors are experts in their own style and form. They gave up their ego and opened their hearts and minds to learn from fellow Tai Chi instructors. They studied the new form from Shang and Tim with a great sincerity. They welcomed the hands-on corrections. They were not embarrassed to be called out for their mistakes in front of their peers. They demonstrated a great learning attitude. Many lingered around and exchanged their Tai Chi knowledge and teaching experience long after each of instructor training classes was over. They felt that through peer discussions their Tai Chi knowledge was further enhanced. Some appreciated the opportunity to get to know other instructors and establish friendship.

The student training began mostly in January or February of this year. For many instructors, teaching the new form interrupted their curriculum. But to support the group effort, they compromised their own classes. Good news was that a few instructors spent extra effort and hosted new training programs for this event. Many first-timers had the opportunity to learn Tai Chi.

During the past ten months, there were hardships that impacted some instructors severely, i.e. job transition, major medical surgery, life-threatening disease suffered by a close family member. But all participating instructors hung tight together and made this event possible.

Jonathan Gathman has studied cello since fourth grade, and received his Bachelor of Music from Wheaton College Conservatory in Cello Performance. Music has remained an integral part of his life, even though he also earned an MBA from Missouri State University, and has pursued a technical career at AT&T in Information Systems, including five patents in the area of Computer Science. He was introduced to Tai Chi by attending classes at AT&T. He enjoys the calming effect of the art. When he was asked to compose the music for this form, he donated his talent by composing *Violets* for the cello. Most participants in this Tai Chi program enjoy this extremely soothing music that resonates of an experience of being on a mountaintop totally immersed in harmony with nature.

Sifus Anna Lum and Goretti Lim along with a few others spent over 400 hours collectively to procure Tai Chi outfits for the group. There were many obstacles and risks of purchasing from out-of-town. Finally they found high-quality inexpensive Tai Chi outfits so every performer could afford it and dress in the same costume to present a unique visual impression.

The biggest challenge for Hundred Man Tai Chi is that there is no venue at the Botanical Garden that is big enough to accommodate the number of performers. The only possible place is Cohen Amphitheater since it has an open stage. Sifu Linda Gatson of University of Missouri at St. Louis (UMSL) Tai Chi club is a great organizer. She methodically measured the Cohen Amphitheater and planned multiple rehearsals with great detail.

After 10 months and nearly 5,000 hours work, about 200 students are trained and 159 of them will perform "Hundred Man Tai Chi" in the Garden during this Memorial weekend May 26 – 28. Along with the Hundred Man Tai Chi, each school will perform their style of Tai Chi to exhibit the multiplicity of Tai Chi. The shows will be held at 10 am and 1 pm at the Amphitheater. Additionally, there will be other Tai Chi performances at the Nanjing Garden 2:30 – 3:30 pm daily. Audience can also participate and learn simple Tai Chi movements there.

For more information about Hundred Man Tai Chi and the Lantern Festival, visit the Botanical Garden website <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/things-to-do/events/special-exhibitions/lantern-festival.aspx>.

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