

Barry Strugatz on *The Professor: Tai Chi's Journey West*

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The Professor: Tai Chi's Journey West is a feature documentary about Tai Chi (or Taiji) Chuan and one of its greatest masters, Grandmaster Cheng Man-Ching (or Cheng Man-Ch'ing) (1901-1975), who brought Tai Chi and Chinese culture to the West during the swinging, turbulent 60s. During my seven years of journalism on Tai Chi in the U.S., I discovered that Cheng is well respected and remembered by many, especially the older generation. However, what he really stood for and the art he was eager to pass on may not be fully comprehended.



Barry Strugatz

Barry Strugatz, a movie screenplay writer and director, has written screenplays for Jonathan Demme and Michele Pfeiffer (**Married to the Mob**), Meryl Streep (**She-Devil**) and directed Melissa Leo (**From Other Worlds**). *The Professor* is his first documentary film and will premiere at the **Laemmle Music Hall** in Los Angeles on May 6. It will have the second public viewing at **Museum of the Image** in New York on June 9 and the general DVD release on July 12.



It took Barry almost 14 years to film and produce the movie. Intrigued by his long-term dedication, recently I interviewed him to understand the purpose of making this movie.

It turns out that Barry has studied Tai Chi for 25 years with many of Cheng Man-Ching's students. He humbly stated that he was still not good at the art - a common sentiment among long-time Tai Chi practitioners because the art is so rich and profound. In 2002, Stanley Israsel, one of Cheng's advanced students passed away. It dawned on Barry that we were in danger of losing important stories and lessons of Cheng Man-Ching. He approached one of his teachers [Ken Van Sickle](#), who is a senior student of Cheng, an award-winning cinematographer and main photographer of Cheng's New York school, with a proposal of making a documentary about Grandmaster Cheng Man-Ching through the eyes and ears of his New York students and his children. Ken embraced the idea without hesitation and collaborated with Barry on the project.

As a master of Five Excellences: Chinese poetry, calligraphy, painting, medicine, and Tai Chi, Grandmaster Cheng Man-Ching was renowned for decades in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the U.S. and had taught students from several continents. He learned the Yang Style Tai Chi from Yang Style lineage holder [Yang Cheng Fu](#) but later enhanced it based on theory from Chinese medicine and named it Cheng Style Tai Chi. Grandmaster Cheng has spent the last 12 years of his life in the U.S. Cheng is considered one of the greatest Tai Chi Chuan masters of modern times. Strugatz's documentary tells the story of the man who overcame cultural divides to bring ancient traditions to the Western world. And in the process, he taught Westerners how to seek an ethical, open-minded and joyful way of life with Tai Chi - not only as a martial art, but also as a spiritual practice and form of mindful exercise.

Barry stated that Tai Chi Chuan is an ancient form of exercise originally created as a fighting art. Known as the "Supreme Ultimate" martial art, it is deeply rooted in classic Chinese culture and philosophy, combining mental concentration with slow, controlled movements to focus the mind, challenge the body, and improve the flow of "Qi" - the life energy thought to sustain health and quiet the mind.

Ken Van Sickle has shot many feature and documentary films including [Marjoe](#) (Academy Award), [Hester Street](#), [Close Harmony](#) (Academy Award), [Between The Lines](#), etc. He is also a famous photographer for numerous memorable still photos. Early this year, PBS did a [feature story](#) on him for his accomplishment in photography. As the key photographer of Cheng's Tai Chi school, he captured precious moments that depicted Cheng's diverse skills as well as his larger-than-life's personality. Ken and Barry have incorporated Ken's archived photos in the movie.

Barry mentioned when he first set out to make the movie that he felt a strong sense of obligation or mission. Through the process, his knowledge of Tai Chi has grown. It was rewarding to see vintage pictures and film footage to gain a better understanding of Grandmaster Cheng. This film was crowdfunded via KickStarter. To Barry's surprise, practitioners of all Tai Chi styles contributed.

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