

## Shifu Justin Meehan remembers Robert W. Smith

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On July 2, Barbara Davis, editor of Taijiquan Journal and [Taijiquan Journal Blog](#), published sad news regarding the passing away of [Robert W. Smith](#). I called up [Shifu Justin Meehan](#) of St. Louis, who was one of the early adopters and promoters of [Tai Chi](#) in this country, to talk about his memory of Robert Smith.



*Justin Meehan*

Mr. Smith was born in Richard, Iowa in 1926, and grew up in an orphanage in Illinois. After his second high school year, he left school and enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps. Upon completion of his military service in 1946 he began to work for a railroad company and completed his high school certificate. He got an undergraduate degree from the University of Illinois and a graduate degree in Far Eastern Studies from the University of Washington.

His interest for [martial arts](#) started early. He entered a Chicago Judo club in 1947 and met [Donn Draeger](#), one of the foremost Western martial artists of the twentieth century. They co-authored [Asian](#)

**Fighting Arts**, which is like an encyclopedia of Asian martial arts, according to Justin. Mr. Smith's involvement with Judo lasted thirty years. He was credited for popularizing Judo in the U.S. through teaching, hosting tournaments and writing ***A Complete Guide to Judo – It's Story And Practice***.

As fate had it, Mr. Smith was hired by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and sent to Taiwan in 1959 until 1962. During this assignment, Mr. Smith met, interviewed and filmed scores of top Chinese martial artists. It also brought him the opportunity to meet the legendary Tai Chi Grandmaster **Cheng Man-Ch'ing**. After he witnessed Grandmaster Cheng's "four ounces of power" to deflect "thousands pounds of incoming force," he was convinced the power of Tai Chi or "the Supreme Ultimate Exercise". With Robert's sincerity, Grandmaster accepted him as his first western student. He started to teach and promote **Cheng Man-Ch'ing's** 37 Form after he returned to the United States.

Shifu Justin thinks that Robert Smith really helped popularizing Tai Chi in the U.S. "What he did was fantastic," commented Shifu Meehan. In addition to teaching Tai Chi, Robert Smith wrote many books, articles and book reviews on Tai Chi and other internal martial arts. "He set a tone for everybody by elevating Tai Chi from simply a martial art to the art of self-cultivation embodied in ancient Chinese philosophy." He thinks that every serious martial artist and premium writer all should read Robert's writings.

Meehan calls Robert the greatest student of Tai Chi, because Robert was very humble and never drew any attention to himself regardless of his great contribution to the arts. Robert wrote about Tai Chi and other martial artists with respect. He was a great Tai Chi practitioner of great enthusiasm, which attracted good persons to work with him. People in the Tai Chi community like to talk about his friendship with another Cheng Man-Ch'ing disciple, **Grandmaster Ben Lo**.

Meehan also calls Robert a great Tai Chi teacher. In the 70's and 80's, American martial arts practitioners regarded Mr. Smith like an astronaut, who went to Moon (Taiwan) and brought back the treasure of Tai Chi to share. In 1980, Shifu Meehan invited Mr. and Mrs. Smith to St. Louis to host a Tai Chi workshop. Shifu Meehan recalled that Robert had a good sense of humor. Even though his military training sometimes made him formal, he joked a lot and sometimes kicked students' butts in a non-harmful way, just like his fiction novel "**Secret Fighting Arts of the World**" under a pen name John F. Gilbey. Alan Ludmer of St. Louis, who attended Robert's workshops, remembered that Robert showed them the black and white movies that he filmed in Taiwan, which were eye-opening since no one at that time had seen a book or a photo of these Chinese masters before. "Robert shared the Tai Chi insight with us that no one had heard of if before. He corrected our movements, and pointed us at the right direction," added Alan. Upon requests of students, Mr. Smith returned to St. Louis a few times later. Meehan said that highly intelligent people enjoyed learning from him tremendously because Robert Smith knew everything.

Nowadays, we see so many masters and grandmasters around. Some address themselves in that

manner. But for Robert W. Smith, he never wanted the title. With all his accomplishments in Asian martial arts and Tai Chi, we should all respect him as a master.

Some of the books by Robert W. Smith:

- [Asian Fighting Arts](#) by [Donn F. Draeger](#) and [Robert W. Smith](#) (Dec 1969)
- [Chinese Boxing: Masters and Methods](#) by [Robert W. Smith](#)
- [Chinese Internal Boxing: Techniques of Hsing-I & Pa-Kua](#) by [Robert W. Smith](#) and [Allen Pittman](#) (Sep 15, 2006)
- [Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts \(Bushido--The Way of the Warrior\)](#) by [Donn F. Draeger](#) and [Robert W. Smith](#)(Jan 15, 1981)
- [Fighting Arts of the World](#) by [John F. Gilbey](#) (Jan 1, 1963)
- [Hsing-I Chinese Internal Boxing](#) by [Robert W. Smith](#)
- [Hsing-I: Chinese Mind-Body Boxing](#) by [Robert W. Smith](#) (Dec 1990)
- [Martial Musings: A Portrayal of Martial Arts in the 20th Century](#) (Dec 10, 1999)
- [Pa-Kua: Chinese Boxing for Fitness & Self-Defense](#) (Dec 10, 2002)
- [T'ai-Chi: The Supreme Ultimate Exercise for Health, Sport, and Self-Defense](#) by [Cheng Man-ch'ing](#) and [Robert W. Smith](#) (Dec 1998)
- [Secret Fighting Arts of the World](#) by [John F. Gilbey](#) (Feb 2001)
- [The Way of a Warrior](#) by [Robert W. Smith](#) (Apr 1983)
- [The Way of a Warrior: A Journey into Secret Worlds of Martial Arts](#) by [Robert W. Smith](#) (Jan 14, 1993)
- [Western Boxing and World Wrestling: Story and Practice](#) by [Robert W. Smith](#)(Mar 16, 1993)

For other writings about Robert W. Smith, click below links.

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➤ [Shifu Meehan on the Yang Style Taichi and Cheng Man-Ch'ing](#)



**Violet Li**

Tai Chi Examiner