

# Cultural Appreciation. Or Cultural Appropriation?

By Shirley Chock

You may know me. I'm the Tai Chi lady. For the past 20 years, I have studied Tai Chi in its authentic form as an internal martial art and been the disciple to one of the greatest masters in the world. A fortunate twist of fate brought both of us to CT and I've poured my soul into the study of the multi-layered complexities of this deep philosophical and martial art. 4 years ago, my master passed her school down to me to run and teach this important aspect of our Chinese culture to the Connecticut community.

Over these many years, I have met many fellow instructors, practitioners, enthusiasts, and admirers of Tai Chi. I have met many people who have fallen deeply in love when seeing our art on its full enchanting display. I have seen people enraptured watching the graceful fluidity of its motion, admiring its quiet strength and control of balance. I have met many admirers who after seeing Tai Chi, want to embark on their own journey to learn the art.

I have met many Tai Chi admirers and enthusiasts who really love the *idea* of Tai Chi. They see the beauty of it and want it for themselves. They have an exoticized view of what it is and believe they can have that without having to learn about the Taoist philosophies it was born from or the martial applications that is its entire foundation. They find authentic Tai Chi classes unnecessarily challenging because they only want to be able to move beautifully like they admired in the park, not to learn all the underlying components that make it what it truly is. So they bypass my school and other instructors that teach Tai Chi in its authentic form and, instead, flock to those who strip it of all its important cultural components and teach it as an exoticized empty shell.

I have experienced profound pride in my Chinese cultural heritage because my art is so admired and appreciated by those with whom I share it. I have also experienced profound "otherment" when the cultural elements that make my art unique and special are disregarded and discarded in favor of a culturally appropriated version of it that reduces it down to a mere fragment of its true self. I painfully watch the culturally appropriated version of my art soar in popularity, slowly extinguishing the authentic version. But I will keep the fire alive and teach authentic Tai Chi to those who want to learn its deep complexities and cultural traditions.