

Lǎoshī and Shifu -Teacher or Master?

by George Lin and Don Klein

Out of respect for Wang Yen-nien, Westerners reserve the English term *Master* or *Maître* for him, although the Taiwanese more commonly addressed him simply as *Lǎoshī* 老師 *teacher* (*lǎo* literally as *old*, *shī* itself translates as *teacher*, so perhaps more figuratively *venerable* or *esteemed teacher* in English) and *Teacher Wang* is more appropriate usage in English.*

There are two Chinese homophones *shifu* that translate as *master*, 師傅** and 師父,; the former a qualified skilled worker in certain professions [master chef, master carpenter, master Taijiquan practitioner]; the latter is more serious than 師傅 because it expresses the deeper relationship between disciple and his teacher by performing *bàishī* 拜師: either swearing to him or in front of God. An adept with specific recognized skill might be referred to as 師傅, only one to whom one has performed *bàishī* should be called 師父. Wang Laoshi signed certificates simply as 師 *Teacher*.

There are references to him that might loosely be translated as *Grand-Master* in the sense of grandmother or grand uncle (*zōngshī* 宗師 or *dàshī* 大師 [zōng, ancestor, and dà, big, have similar connotations to *lǎo*]); the more traditional 師公 *shīgōng* is probably only appropriate in a *bàishī* lineage relationship which may be used by his students' students who have also performed *bàishī*. Some of his Taiwanese inheritors may use the term 師父 in the more formal way. But again, he was most normally referred to simply as *Lǎoshī* 老師 *teacher* or 師爺 *shiyé* which translates as *one's teacher's teacher* or *Grand Teacher*.

Wang Laoshi was not the *lineage holder* or *gatekeeper* (*Zhangménrén* 掌門人), since Zhang Qinlin had eight senior students and did not appoint any as such. Some of Wang Yen-nien's students might refer to him as *Zhangménrén* (掌門人) because he was the only one available who knew and brought YMT to Taiwan, yet he referred to both Zhang Qinlin and himself simply as 傳人 *Chuánrén* or *lineage transmitters*. Wang Laoshi specifically did not appoint a *Zhangménrén* (掌門人) to succeed him; he stated many times that there was not going to be one person to carry on the lineage but that everyone who practiced and learned Yangjia Michuan, adhere to and do not stray from his teaching had a role to play in their own ways; all those who teach and transmit the tradition as passed on by him may be termed lineage transmitters (傳人 *Chuánrén*).

*Perhaps this is why teachers such as Chen Man Ching and Hou Chi Kwang preferred to be addressed as *professor* in the United States.

**師 *shī* translates as either teacher or master depending on what other character with which it is joined

Note by George Lin: Taiwanese who were brought up in older times such as 50 years ago, might call Master Wang either *shifu* 師傅 or 師父 in front of him because it is much more formal and polite. But times have changed , so instead of being so formal and rigid , Taiwanese students would call Wang Yen-nien *Laoshi* 老師 when they saw him face to face or talk about him to each other. For example , just as the cases in America:

- 1) When a friend refers to me , he addresses me as George rather than Mr. Lin.
- 2) My son would call me Dad rather than father when he was in front of me.

Therefore, if students referred to Wang Yen-nien when he was not present , they might either refer to him as *Laoshi* 老師 or *Shifu* 師父 , or use *zōngshī* 宗師 or *dàshī* 大師 when they wished to express the highest regards for him to other people.