

# FIGHTING SPIRIT

For 12 years, wushu exponent and Southeast Asian (SEA) Games gold medalist **TAO YI JUN** was in perpetual pursuit of perfect form and focus. Now a physics teacher, the petite 28-year-old strives to impart the life lessons learned from sports to her students.

For a fraction of a second, Tao Yi Jun stood still on the competition carpet. With a *taijijian* (straight sword) in hand, she breathed evenly, focused on the moment when the routine would start. The minute it did, she set out in a series of choreographed movements—each one executed with a fluid, almost poetic, quality.

During this timed *taolu* (routine) at the 2006 Asian Games in Doha, Qatar, Yi Jun was a picture of poise. But she failed to impress the nine judges and was placed in 11th position with a score of 9.35. She was crushed. To train for the competition, the then-21-year-old Yi Jun had taken a semester off from National University of Singapore (NUS), where she was studying Electrical & Computer Engineering. She says: "I did my best to concentrate on my



routine, but I still fell short of my competitors' standards."

But Yi Jun did not stay discouraged for long. With a morale boost from her coach and teammates, she decided to strive harder to achieve a good *taolu*, characterised by fluid, graceful and powerful movements that must be carried out according to strict aesthetic, technical and conceptual guidelines. "It has a lot to do with focus," she explains. "A wushu exponent has to concentrate hard so that there is an unbroken thread of intent from one movement to the next."

So, Yi Jun threw herself into intense training, all the while juggling her studies at NUS. "A typical session consisted of warm-up exercises, stretches, basic techniques like kicks and jumps, difficult moves like balances, *taijijian* and *taijiquan* movements, as well as physical training," she describes. Her hard work paid off – six years later.

At the 2011 World Wushu Championships in Ankara, Turkey, Yi Jun won the *duilian* (sparring) event with her teammates Tay Yu Juan and Emily Sin. It was Singapore's first gold medal in 16 years. Later, at the 2011 Southeast

Asian (SEA) Games in Jakarta, Indonesia, the team clinched gold again in the same segment.

Yi Jun herself considers the double win in 2011 as one of her biggest sporting achievements. "Getting there was a tough journey, but it was one that was truly worthwhile," she says. "In fact, through this experience, wushu has taught me not to dwell on past losses – or glories – but to always focus on doing better the next time."

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### WINNING AS A TEAM

Although Yi Jun's pet event was *taijiquan*, she was most successful in the *duilian* event. In wushu, the *duilian* event is a one-minute choreography of sparring wushu exponents, featuring rapid weapon thrusts and acrobatic flips. As it is a team event, the ability to work together greatly influences the result.

"When Yu Juan, Emily and I sparred during training, it was very common for us to make mistakes in the coordination or the positioning of our weapons," Yi Jun explains. "Sometimes, these mistakes cannot be solved in one session, and it may get frustrating for everyone." The team would spend

hours tweaking their moves to match one another perfectly.

It was not an easy process, as each athlete was used to a certain way of moving. "We had to be open when discussing problems in our teamwork, or it would have led to misunderstandings and unhappiness," says Yi Jun. Through this process, however, Yi Jun and her two teammates gradually became more accepting of the differences between them. "From this, I understood the importance of open, honest communication and how teamwork can bring out the best in people."

It was how the trio took home top honours at the 2011 World Wushu Championships, beating Vietnam's Hoang Thi Phuong Giang and Duong Thuy Vi. And how, a month later at the 2011 SEA Games, they scored 9.71 points to edge out Brunei's Lee Ying Shi and Faustina Woo by a mere 0.01 point. For these achievements, the team won the Team of the Year (Event) award at Singapore Sports Awards 2012.

### RESPECT IN RIVALRY

Yi Jun was naturally drawn to wushu from a young age. "As a child, I was fascinated by Chinese wuxia films like Jet Li's *Once Upon a Time in China* series as well as Japanese manga (comics) like *Dragon Ball*." But it was not until 1999 – when Yi Jun was 14 – that she realised learning wushu was a possibility.

A family friend, who was a stunt double at MediaCorp Studios, visited often. "He noticed my interest in wushu and started to teach me basic backflips in the house," Yi Jun recalls. "When I discovered that I could do all the cool stunts in wuxia films, I got hooked."

Yi Jun entered the national wushu team in 2000, armed with nothing but her potential. In 2005, she competed for the first time in the 8th World Wushu Championships in Hanoi, Vietnam. "I participated in two events, Freestyle Taijiquan and Taijijian. It was a nerve-wracking but eye-opening experience to perform before a large international crowd," shares Yi Jun. It took immense will to not buckle under the stress.

Yi Jun quickly realised that the best way to deal with competition pressure was to ensure that she had sufficient practice. "I believe in the phrase 'practice makes perfect'. The more practice I have, the more familiar I am with the movements, and the more confident I become. It took years of wushu training

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and competition experience to build the level of confidence I have today.”

Yi Jun went on to compete in other international competitions like the 2008 Asian Championships in Macau, China; 2009 SEA Games in Vientiane, Laos; 2010 SportAccord Combat Games in Beijing, China; and 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou, China. Ever since she started competing internationally, she has seen her competitors not as rivals for the gold – but as fellow wushu exponents to learn from.

“There is a collective sense of community that fosters individual growth in wushu,” Yi Jun notes. “Even during wushu competitions, you will find competitors cheering each other on. Because of this sense of mutual respect, I have formed strong friendships with fellow wushu exponents from Taipei, Canada and Japan. While there is a language barrier between some of us, a common passion for wushu binds us together.” She had various opportunities to train with overseas competitors throughout the years, and she respected them as her role models. “I witnessed their strong dedication to the sport, the sacrifices they made, and also the positive attitude they displayed during training. These only inspired me to work harder.”

### A SWITCH IN FOCUS

After the highs of 2011, Yi Jun decided to retire from the competitive scene. She says: “I had been juggling sports, work and my personal life since I was

14. It was time to pursue other things in life. Besides, I wanted to end things on a high note.”

So, she turned her focus to her other passion – teaching.

Since then, she has been concentrating more on her role as a physics teacher at Maris Stella High School. She says: “In wushu events like *duilian*, a lack of focus can cause us to miss the right moment and hit our teammates, causing injuries. Just as I’d learned to focus on my role as an athlete, I now stay true to my job as an educator, doing my best for my students.”

Yi Jun finds great purpose in her role as an educator. She adds: “Clichéd as it may sound, I believe that children are our future and hope. Through teaching, I’m able to directly shape young minds – and their future.” In the classroom, she makes it a point to share wushu life lessons with her students. She says: “Wushu is not only a sport, but also a way of living. The philosophies

behind the sport – with an emphasis on balance and harmony – make it particularly meaningful. With that, I always nudge my students to put in a little more effort during each examination so that they can keep improving.”

Even though Yi Jun no longer competes, she still contributes to the local wushu scene by training young athletes and helping to groom future champions. “In a way, I will never really leave the sport.” She has a dream for the future of wushu. “Wushu is still not recognised as a full-fledged official Olympic sport, although it is one of the eight sports that will be considered for inclusion in the 2020 Summer Olympics.” She adds contemplatively, “Hopefully, we will be able to groom our young talents into Olympic gold medallists one day.”

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### VALUES

Teamwork • Respect • Sportsmanship

### REFLECTION

1. Wushu has taught Tao Yi Jun not to dwell on past glories or losses but to focus on improving for the next time. What matters most to you in life? How does a desire for learning and improvement play a role in your decision-making? How do you see your successes and failures?
2. It is common to find wushu competitors cheering for each other during competitions. What can we learn from this “spirit of wushu” – grace in defeat, humility in victory, and camaraderie in sport? How does it strengthen individuals and the wushu community? How have you applied these principles in your life?