

From Wei Hai to the University of Leeds: the journey of an ancient Daoist practice

A year ago, if you were walking on the 2nd floor of the Union building on a Friday afternoon, you could catch a glimpse of a group of people doing standing meditation in Room 6, staying absolutely still with their eyes cast down. Or you might have passed by Jade Studio on a Monday and spotted a group of students practicing a soft kung fu -form, whirling around the room with a fast-paced set of movements.

This year, things are a little different, and both Room 6 and the Jade Studio have stood empty for a while. But the people who used to practice in them have not disappeared — they have merely migrated online to continue their training.

The arts in question are called Lishi Daoist Tai Chi, or Lishi for short. It is an ancient Daoist system originating in Wei Hai, China, at the coastal tip of Shandong Province. Lishi covers a diverse mix of exercises: tai chi, soft kung fu, daoist yoga, breathwork and standing qi gong, to name a few.

In the 1930s the last remaining member of the Li family practicing these arts settled in the UK. This was how Chan Kam Li, an international jewel merchant, became one of the first people ever to teach a family system of Chinese physical arts outside of China.

One day in a park in London a little Chinese boy mis-kicked his football, making it land on the head of Chan Li, the revered Chinese master. And this is how the journey that brought Lishi to our university began. The boy, Chee Soo devoted his life to making these esoteric arts accessible to Westerners, helping them improve their energy levels, reduce stress, and open up latent talents in thousands of people.

Since then, Lishi has spread to many different countries, and its global centre is situated right here in Leeds. In 1990 the first Lishi class opened at the University of Leeds. A small claim to fame within university circles is that the classes have been running year in and year out ever since then, bringing the arts of Lishi to hundreds of students — many of whom have gone on to become teachers themselves, settling far and wide and continuing to promote this wonderful practice right across the globe.

In this past year our classes have moved online for the first time ever, which has enabled us to continue teaching in these exceptional times. Furthermore, thanks to modern technology, we have been able to have students join in from wherever they are. People have been logging onto the classes from Finland to France, creating a little global hub around our weekly Lishi sessions.

During the World Unite Festival of 2021 we are offering all of our classes as free tasters. They take place on Wednesday 12-1PM, Wednesday 6-7:15PM and Friday 2:30-3:30PM. You can find the events and links to the classes via our webpage (linked below). We will also continue to offer our Friday classes as free wellbeing sessions throughout the term. Come give this ancient Daoist practice a go and see for yourself what all the fuss is about!

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Lishi Daoist Tai Chi Society