

Taekwondo coaches and their wheelchair-bound students visited facilities for people with disabilities in Jiangmen, Guangdong, in early 2012.



Fighting back

They're in the fight of their lives battling personal demons that sap them of their vitality and well-being — though many of them are confined to wheelchairs — they still pack a punch. Li Yao writes.

Anthony Li authored a booklet teaching taekwondo's upper body movements. The booklet was published with support from the Equal Opportunities Commission.

For six years, Guo Ping had wallowed in self-pity over the way life treated her. She thought she'd earned the right. She was in a wheelchair. Her husband was in jail. Life had become indescribably miserable. One day in 2010, a group of teenagers in wheelchairs caught her eye. The kids wheelchair-bound though they surely were, were throwing punches. It was Guo's introduction to the martial art of taekwondo. That was the day she started changing her life.

Seven years earlier, the world started caving in on Guo. She was still living in Shenzhen in those days, but married to a Hong Kong permanent resident and eagerly looking forward to the day not far away when she could move to Hong Kong and start her new life. Fate took a hand, and her husband was arrested in Singapore for running a gambling den. He was sentenced to six years in jail. Guo was young, healthy and confident she would be able to fend for herself but fate took a hand there, too.

In the following year, 2004, her self-sufficiency was demolished when a hit-and-run driver in Shenzhen consigned her to life in a wheelchair. It needn't have turned out so badly but her family couldn't raise the money right away to pay for a badly needed operation to repair damaged nerves at the base of Guo's spine. By the time her family had gathered the 100,000 yuan (HK\$127,000) to pay for the operation, it was too late. The damage couldn't be undone.

She moved to Hong Kong where she had no friends; her husband's family wanted nothing to do with her. And because she was a new immigrant, she was not entitled to social welfare.

A distant relative set her up at a private columbarium where she could sleep in the kitchen. A man in his 40s, living in the storage room next to the kitchen, made life hell for Guo. She complained that he harassed her at night constantly. Nobody listened. Nobody believed her. In despair, she took matters into her own hands and in her efforts to defend herself, stabbed her finger with a pair of scissors. Eventually, the man moved on and Guo continued her miserable life in a wheelchair. She begged non-profit organizations to help her, trying to enroll in tertiary courses. Finally, she took a job as a beautician and worked long hours for about HK\$3,000 a month.

Guo's husband won his release from prison. They divorced. Guo moved in with another man and looked after his two kids. That was the nature of her existence on the day she saw the kids in wheelchairs. Hesitantly, she joined in. The weekly taekwondo class was nothing more than a recreational pastime for her at first. She didn't expect that she would quickly become an enthusiast.

"After every class, my legs felt much lighter

and I could move around more quickly than before," she said. She's earned her green belt but she wants to match her younger classmates who already hold brown or black belts.

"They are my inspiration. They've overcome many difficulties to perform simple movements, like a forward punch. Some can't even make a proper fist, or keep their arms straight. A few can lift their arms only to chest level. But they never give up," Guo said.

She recalls a student afflicted by cerebral palsy trying to break a wooden board. He summoned all his strength, and became so rigid, a foot pedal fell off his wheelchair.

She takes pride in the recognition the special classes have received at public demonstrations around the city.

"I was worried nobody would show up to watch our performance. But I was wrong. The audience applauded us, even when I forgot how to make a proper fist and couldn't break a 15-centimeter board," she said.

In December 2012, the class visited facilities for the disabled in Jiangmen, Guangdong, in the hope taekwondo training could be extended to help people on the mainland.

She is grateful for the good things taekwondo brought her. The distress, insecurity and sense of inferiority that once defined her life were replaced by acceptance, soaring confidence, and an eagerness to participate and contribute.

"We are disabled, but we are not useless," Guo said. She will continue the training and level up her rank. "If I meet the man who molested me, I will not be afraid of him. And I hope I can compete in real contests one day," she said.

A taekwondo-for-all initiative

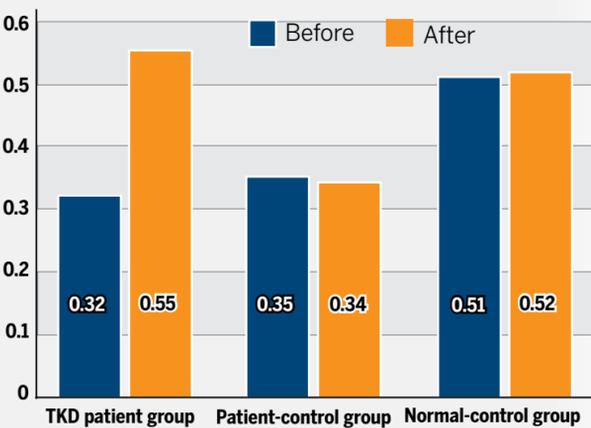
Since 2004, more than 1,000 students, including Guo, have learned taekwondo from Anthony Li, a 14-year taekwondo coach who founded a martial arts association for students with disabilities. Most of his students were wheelchair-bound. He has authored a booklet on taekwondo's upper body techniques,

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ANTHONY LI
TAEKWONDO COACH

Patients' balance ability before and after taekwondo therapy

Vestibular ratio



punching, thrusting, blocking.

He doesn't charge. Every Tuesday, he opens his studio at the Mong Kok Community Hall where he volunteers his services. The Social Welfare Department pays for the hall. Two groups practice together, disabled and able-bodied. Li believes that combining the two groups gives the disabled kids a sense of inclusion.

"The ones sitting in wheelchairs aren't there waiting to be served. They have to put more effort into practice and improve their health. They can't reach the level able-bodied students can, but they deserve a chance," Li said.

Kristy Chu, 19, started training with Li eight years ago. She has congenital syndactyly: her fingers are fused on both hands. It's affected her deeply, psychologically. She's spent her life compensating for her affliction. She concentrated on her schoolwork, got top grades but had no friends, no hobbies. All she did was study.

"My parents were worried because I never went out with friends, didn't take part in sports or any other recreations," Chu recalled. The slow-dawning recognition she didn't have much of a life laid the groundwork for her to take up taekwondo. "I found that life is not only about studies," she said. She was right. She's made new friends. She has confidence in herself and struck the critical balance between study and play. She's one of Li's assistant instructors these days.

Untapped therapeutic potential

Shirley Fong, pediatric physical therapist from the Institute of Human Performance, the University of Hong Kong, believes taekwondo training shows real potential as an alternative therapy.

"Martial arts like taekwondo involve more

impact force, which helps bone development. If the children just do exercises while they're immersed in water, or stay only with tai chi, they don't apply enough external force to stimulate bone growth," Fong said.

Fong finished her doctoral study last year, which examined the effects of taekwondo training in children with developmental coordination disorders (also called the clumsy child syndrome).

One group of 21 children with developmental coordination disorder took taekwondo classes every week for three months. A second group of 23 children with the same disorder, and a third group of 18 typically developing children, served as control groups. All participants were between six and nine years old.

Children with developmental coordination disorder have poorer postural control, which



Anthony Li (left) volunteers his service and gives taekwondo classes for free to disabled students on Tuesday evenings at the Mong Kok Community Hall.



Students wearing taekwondo gloves practice punching and striking skills.

limits their daily activity and participation, and increases the risk of falls and injuries. Sports training may improve their motor proficiency and balance performance, Fong said.

From the assessments of physical conditions before and after the taekwondo intervention, Fong found that the short-term taekwondo practitioners showed improved balance, and were more stable when standing on one leg than untrained peers. They also demonstrated better knee muscle strength and joint function.

"Taekwondo movements require a lot of turns. This may stimulate children's vestibular function, the sensory mechanism in the inner ear that helps to maintain balance," Fong explained.

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Taekwondo as alternative therapy

Fong concluded that clinicians can suggest taekwondo as a therapeutic leisure activity for children with developmental coordination disorder and other motor dysfunctions, like autism and cerebral palsy, so long as the program is adequately modified, and the coach is qualified and devoted to giving close supervision and repeated instructions.

In Hong Kong, after children are diagnosed with developmental coordination disorder, they need to wait a long time to get eight therapy sessions through the Hospital Authority. After that they are discharged because there's a long waiting list.

"It is worthwhile to do something during the waiting period. I recommended

taekwondo as an alternative therapy before they got their turn at the Hospital Authority," Fong said.

As for safety concerns, taekwondo uses a lot of protective gear, and the injury rate is minimal, she added.

Fong is a martial art enthusiast. She started practicing taekwondo and judo more than 20 years ago. She has black belts in both, and taken part in taekwondo tournaments. She is also a Wing Tsun coach.

"People may say every exercise is good for health. Why martial arts? I think martial arts have additional benefits for health and physical fitness, in terms of muscle strength, flexibility, body fat percentage, agility and reflexes," she said.

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If that happens, Ma said — if Alibaba goes to the US, it will never come back to Hong Kong, even for a secondary listing.

He said that being listed is not a very big deal for Alibaba right now, and where it's listed matters even less, but the partnership mechanism is important. He said he doesn't want to see Alibaba turn into another Yahoo, a company which has had eight CEOs in seven years. Yahoo Inc and Softbank already own 50 percent of Alibaba's stock, data showed.

Ma said he understood Hong Kong's intention to protect minority shareholders. He says what Alibaba wants is not in conflict. Ma insists, the company is not pro-

tecting itself from small shareholders. The management team, he argued, comprises "small shareholders." Alibaba is trying to protect itself from being overrun by investors with even deeper pockets.

As Li said in his blog, innovative companies (like Alibaba) are distinct in two ways. First, their success largely comes from the founder's unique vision, rather than from other factors that usually drive success in traditional companies. This vision is a core asset of these companies. Secondly, the founders tend to start with nothing and usually must rely on outside funding when they start out. By the time they consider a public listing, the founders' shareholding may have been diluted by rounds and rounds of financing.

Recently, there have been calls for Hong Kong to accept listings from companies with dual-class shares giving company founders more voting rights than ordinary shareholders. Many large Internet companies operate under that corporate governance structure, including Facebook and Google.

Edward Au, co-leader of the national public offering group at Deloitte China, told China Daily that during the past two decades, Hong Kong has not had an IPO even similar to Alibaba's. A corporate structure involving dual-class shares is completely new for investors in Hong Kong, especially retail investors.

Au noted that the dual-class structure empowers company founders to implement their long-term strategies without constant-

ly looking over their shoulders and having to worry about being kicked out by the board.

Some shareholders seeking short-term investments, are not looking to the long-term vision but are looking for financial gains in the short term.

Retail investors in general feel insecure, knowing that the minority shareholders can control the company by appropriating "voting rights" in excess of their shareholdings, said Au. Ordinary investors with depleted voting rights worry their voices will not be heard by the company board.

Unlike the US market, where the majority of investors are sophisticated, experienced institutional investors, around 20 percent of the market players in Hong Kong are retail investors. That means a lot of "investor

education" will be needed before the city can take in any new listing rules, said Au.

He said Hong Kong Exchange may launch a soft-consultation about the city's listing rules very soon, and a public consultation will come after that.

"But it will require a lot of preparation and discussion as well as opinion collection, so I believe from the initiation of the consultation to the point where a conclusion was reached, it will be at least a year."

Alibaba is in no hurry, said Ma. The drama will play out but no one is holding out hope for an early conclusion and certainly not this year.

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