

## Transcript of Interview with Michael Wang by Kit Heintzman

**Interviewee:** Michael Wang

**Interviewer:** Kit Heintzman

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**Location (Interviewee):** Boulder, Colorado

**Location (Interviewer):**

**Transcribed By:** Angelica S Ramos

### **Some of the things we discussed include:**

Already pivoting to online work pre-pandemic, having little change in work as a coach. Working as a Kung Fu, Tai Chi, and Qigong instructor during the pandemic. Taking martial arts classes outside and holding them no matter what the weather. Coaching highly sensitive people. Challenging ideas about the limits of what one can do. Martial arts as relational, creating new exercises to accommodate distancing. Helping clients better understand emotions and thoughts. Lineage and tradition in martial arts. Staying away from politics. Self focus and inner work. Emotion and thoughts reinforcing one another in a cycle. Finding healthy ways to relate to the unknown.

**Kit Heintzman** 00:03

Hello, would you please state your name, the date, the time and your location?

**Michael Wang** 00:07

Sure. It's Michael Wong. It's October 11 and 11:31am. Mountain Time. I'm in Boulder, Colorado.

**Kit Heintzman** 00:16

And the year is 2022.

**Michael Wang** 00:18

Thank you.

**Kit Heintzman** 00:19

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**Michael Wang** 00:28

Yes.

**Kit Heintzman** 00:29

Thank you so much for being here. Would you start by introducing yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening?

**Michael Wang** 00:35

Sure. I'm a kung fu Tai Chi and Qigong teacher in Boulder, Colorado, I have a studio here. I've been in business since 2007. But I've been studying these Mind Body practices for over 25 years now.

**Kit Heintzman** 00:55

Tell me a story about your life during the pandemic.

**Michael Wang** 00:59

So interestingly enough, during the pandemic, my school actually was at its largest it's ever been. And I think part of that reason is, besides the mandatory shutdowns, which is about six weeks in duration here, we actually held classes, no matter what so could be raining, hailing snowing, because we were outside for almost a full year at a local park nearby the studio. And I think just having that space for people to kind of work on, you know, improving their physical, mental, emotional health was very, very great for them. So a lot of places were closed. A lot of martial arts schools actually shut down during that period. But because I made the decision, and I do believe that the way of kung fu Tai Chi and Qigong is one of building resiliency, and, you know, just regular practice. And so, I think the students that attracted during that time, or that had been with me for many years, they saw the value in in having a space to practice.

**Kit Heintzman** 02:20

Do you remember when you first heard about COVID-19?

**Michael Wang** 02:26

I actually don't remember the specific thing that I, the specific event where I learned about it first, but I would imagine, it became clear seeing headlines in the news.

**Kit Heintzman** 02:43

What were some of your early reactions?

**Michael Wang** 02:46

The earlier reaction there, my earliest reaction was just not really knowing how big of a kind of an event in history, this would be. You know, and that was kind of mirrored in the news. So how big was it going to be? How long it was going to last? There was just a lot of unknown during that period.

**Kit Heintzman** 03:10

What are some of the things you noticed about other people's reactions around you in the early days?

**Michael Wang** 03:17

I did definitely notice a lot of fear and anxiety about around the unknown. And so just even from, you know, biological standpoint, like how, how dangerous was this thing that we didn't know about. That definitely created a lot of anxiety in the people around me. Yeah.

**Kit Heintzman** 03:44

Are you pandemic, what was your day to day looking like?

**Michael Wang** 03:47

pre pandemic I had pre pandemic. So pre pandemic, I'm trying to think back it's, it's been a long, right two years. I was kind of starting to transition to a new coaching practice, but very early stages. So I was already working from home. Personally, I kind of had just redid my home office to kind of create a nice kind of sanctuary space to create and but I would say outside of teaching at my studio. Most of my work was done at home so, yeah.

**Kit Heintzman** 04:37

And then once locked down hit what changed?

**Michael Wang** 04:40

So interestingly, not much had changed. So I created this just starting a new coaching practice and and working from home a lot of my clients were virtual. I did have to suspend some local clients. I also I do have a shared office space that I rent nearby to do one on one sessions. So those went virtual or they just paused. But, but day to day living was very similar for me, outside of, you know, the original, the initial six week mark where everything was just closed, people weren't really driving around on the streets and stuff like that.

**Kit Heintzman** 05:28

Would you give me a sense of who your clientele are like, demographics what are they like?

**Michael Wang** 05:34

for coaching or the studio where I teach Kung Fu and Tai Chi? Both. Okay, so, so, so at the studio. So I would say, Have you heard of the term highly sensitive people. So I would imagine that I almost exclusively attract highly sensitive people, even though I don't use any of that languaging in my marketing, it's just kind of who I am. And being authentic to myself, I attract people that are sensitive. And so a lot of the people that actually are able to pick up the arts that I teach, tend to be very aware, or need, or have a desire to cultivate awareness and learn to manage their energy. And so I would say, at the studio, that's often who I attract new people interested in tradition, I come from a lineage that has been around for, you know, hundreds of years. So they're looking for some kind of, kind of practice to help kind of ground them in life and, and in grow on many different levels. Coaching wise, I, during pre pandemic, I was actually focusing on using the the term highly sensitive people to work with them exclusively. But I found that a lot of people, you know, whether it's due to culture or whatnot, they didn't like that term, or there would be an extra step where it have to convince them or, you know, show them, you know, that the traits of that label and then help have them self identify, before being open to actually working with me. So I saw that as an unnecessary step. So I've since taken that aspect of my coaching practice away. But I would say coaching a wise I work with a lot of different people types, with all different types of, you know, issues that they originally come to me with. But a lot of the work I do now is what I call like, inner training. So there's some similarities between that in the studio work I do, but it's essentially, like, better understanding or inner landscape, you know, our emotions, and what are, what our mind is doing, what it's focusing on. And also, just like whether that's aligning with what people actually want to create in their lives.

**Kit Heintzman** 08:15

I'd love that if you shared something about your specific lineage or lineages and your practice.

**Michael Wang** 08:21

Sure. So I have one main teacher. So in the, in the practices that I study, it's tradition just to have one teacher so my, my teacher's name is Jamel Torres. He's in Chicago, Illinois. I started training with him in the mid 90s. And

I've been training with him since he, I'm in Colorado. Now I lived in Chicago prior to this for 11 years. So during that time is when my training, my basic training essentially occurred. After about 10 years of training, I was given permission to teach. So I decided I wanted to move somewhere else, Colorado ended up being where it was. And I opened up a school less than a year after I moved here. And so I'm still learning, he's still teaching. He visits a couple times a year and I tried to go back a couple times a year just to further my training and those practices. But our you know, he's I think, getting the numbers mixed up. I believe he's ninth generation or eighth generation, and I'm the one after that. But our tradition goes back all the way to the Ming Dynasty, as far as you know what's recorded, but it came through Hong Kong two generations ago and prior to that Shanghai and then northern China. So.

**Kit Heintzman** 09:56

If such a thing can be generalized about would you say something about what you observed in people who may or may not identify with the term "highly sensitive people" and their reactions to everything that's been happening in the last couple of years.

**Michael Wang** 10:13

Could you repeat the question? Sorry.

**Kit Heintzman** 10:15

What are you noticing in your clients? It's probably like the much smoother version of that.

**Michael Wang** 10:22

What do I notice on my clients? So I would say, most of my clients for the coaching are coming to me with like, essentially, kind of issues around feeling fulfilled in life. So many of them come to me originally. Due to feeling unfulfilled in an intimate relationship, I would say that's a big one. And the second biggest is just feeling unfulfilled at work. So just a lot of people having a lot of great external success, like, they, they look really great on paper, you know, I work with professors at the university here. So they've, they've worked really hard, they've become tenured professors. But there's still something you know, kind of missing. And they're trying to figure out what that is. So I would say, I've, I've heard, and I don't really talk about it too much with my clients, but just a lot of people during an after the pandemic kind of reevaluated their priorities in life a bit. And so I think the settlement is a big piece of that. Not just going through the motions really like being more mindful or intentional with the people that they spend time around the work that they do, how they're spending their day to day lives.

**Kit Heintzman** 11:56

I'd love to hear more about practicing in the elements of Colorado outside.

**Michael Wang** 12:03

I. Yeah, so I think that was a big thing that I really pushed as a teacher during the pandemic. Especially with sensitive people, you know, an example I often give like, I once connect reconnected with an old friend that I hadn't seen in many years. And we went out to coffee together. And so, so we ordered our drinks, sat down. And, you know, my friend said, Oh, it's a little, you know, noisy here, can we move to like that table over there across the room? And so sure, no problem. So we moved to that table. And then oh, it's, there's, there's some weird smell here. Like, can we move outside? So sure, no problem. So we move outside. And then outside there was, what was it? Oh, like, it was too windy, or there was a draft like and we move back inside and and we essentially move

back to where we started. And to me, that was a big thing where, you know, especially as sensitive people, but I think this happens broadly is that our mind often prevents us the thoughts that we fixate on, often prevent us from being really present in the moment and really actualizing what we really want in the moment. So at that time, I imagined both of us just wanted to connect and and really have like, um, you know, a great conversation getting, you know, seeing what we're up to. But that was just very evident to me, like the monkey mind, essentially, the thoughts that were arising, wasn't allowing my friend to really be there. And so it's similar to practicing outside in the park is like we are our mind will always come up with reasons why we can't do something, if that's the type of things we allow it to think. So I believe what we focus on and what, you know, what we focus on, and really understanding what our mind is thinking and doing is a big part of being able to kind of create the type of lives that we want. So for if we're fixated on Oh, it's raining today, I can't work out or I can't do my practice, then you know, the practice doesn't occur. And so there's always there's always things we can find to prevent us from moving forward, so.

**Kit Heintzman** 14:51

How did people respond in terms of just like general safety precautions in an outdoor space?

**Michael Wang** 14:59

Yeah, I think, yeah, safety regarding like COVID specifically or you mean like snow and ice?

**Kit Heintzman** 15:08

Always gonna be both.

**Michael Wang** 15:09

Okay. Okay, so COVID wise, you know, I kind of just follow local, you know, I don't know if they're, they're not worded in cis, but just the the recommendations by our local government as far as what, and the CDC like what was required. So I would say it was more on the, I just followed what was required and whatever my students felt comfortable. So during a period, it was not actually permissible to actually have physical contact with each other. And martial arts is relational in its very nature. And so that's why a lot of schools went under anything during that period. But so we adapted, I really believe in adaptability. So we just we did everything we could normally do without contact and the stuff that was contact based, I would make a new exercises that could train, you know, wouldn't be exactly the same. But I believe in just keep moving forward and creating exercises that could train some elements of the paired exercises that we couldn't do. And that was fun. That was like a creative exercise. And then as far as like physical safety, you know, I believe our bodies are a lot more resilient than we give them credit for. And so, you know, practicing on ice or snow, it's slick. But, you know, martial arts is a lot about being grounded to the to the earth. And so it actually, people's concerns didn't really pan out in real life. So it was, again, the mind that created these limitations that weren't real. And so when we there, my students saw that they could still do our normal practice, whether they were getting wet, whether the ground was icy. But they could still do it. So to me, that was so powerful. Because that was a concern early on. It's like, how are you going to? How are you going to? Like when we fall on the ice, and then, but that's the thing they didn't try to. So another big thing that I often talk about, with my students is, you know, I remember my teacher, when I was in Chicago. There was a big snowstorm. I mean, like you had to dig your car out for hours. And so I called up my teacher the morning after it's snowed, and I'm like, Oh, I don't know if I can make it to class. You know, it's snowing a lot, I believe, even Lakeshore drive was closed, which is a big north south expressway, the Lake Michigan and Chicago, I'm like, you know, and I just didn't want to get out of bed and, and go shovel snow. But no he had me

come anyway, took me three hours to get to class. By the time in our classes were about three hours. So by the time I got to class Class is over. But then oh, great. You're here? Well, why don't we go out to lunch. So to me a lot of that, you know, the commitment to the practice, which ultimately is a commitment to ourselves, is, you know, like, at least try so even when it snows here. Some students, when they're new, they'll be like, Oh, it's snowing, like, I don't know if I can make it to class. But they often are just relying on, you know, news that's old, or or, like, you know, a family members, you know, earlier report of road conditions, but they never actually physically went out and looked outside their door. So of course, I want my students to be safe. I don't want people to get into accidents. But I think a lot of us, you know, we have been, we learned to come up with excuses of why we can't grow without actually confirming that they're real. So like, if if someone looked at their door saw, Oh, I really don't think I can make it like I can respect that. But, But I think one has to look first, let it confirm. Is this a real thing that is preventing me from from showing up to something? Or is it just something the mind is creating?

**Kit Heintzman** 19:45

May I ask what some of your places of growth have been over the last couple of years?

**Michael Wang** 19:51

So me personally, I would say they've been very similar since pre pandemic, I would say one of the greatest awarenesses I've had is just, it's really, it's really magnified just how prevalent I think anxiety and and just how how noisy the mind can be with a lot of people. And it really just it's really saddening to see people kind of self sabotage themselves, often due to just not understanding how to relate to the unknown in a very healthy way. An example that I often see, so I did have a few students quit at the beginning of the pandemic, you know, for obsessively different reasons. But most of those people have ended up I think, feeling trapped during the pandemic. So they became more anxious because they no longer even had an outlet to move their bodies focus their attention and time even. A lot of them kind of went really strongly into following politics and the news which created more anxiety within them. And yeah, I would say, you know, that's not a direct answer to your question. But, you know, there's there's definitely just I think, I mean, just even just having even more compassion for people that are experiencing those things, but also, really feeling like, one of the, one of my purposes is, as far as through the coaching is to give people more tools to kind of navigate when, where their thoughts and where their emotions aren't really serving them. And so that's big, a big growth aspect for me as far as like, showing up to offer something to contribute to help people. I don't know if that answers your question.

**Kit Heintzman** 22:17

Other than COVID-19, what have been some of the social and political issues on your mind and heart over the last couple of years?

**Michael Wang** 22:26

It's kind of related to my last answer, I believe there's too much focus on trying to change the external things to us. Politics to me, occurs on the level of ego or egoic identity. And so as far as politics is concerned, especially in current day, whenever even as something that one side sees as progress, is going to feel like oppression to some other side. And so I don't think any lasting or substantive healing can occur on that level. And I believe the only thing that we can truly control is understanding our own inner landscapes or mental and emotional patterns, and then learning to heal those or to grow those. And so, inner work to me is what I think will help humanity as a whole in finding more love, compassion, peace with everybody.

**Kit Heintzman** 23:37

What does the word health mean to you?

**Michael Wang** 23:41

Health? Hmm. That's a great question. I guess I haven't really directly thought about it. But I do feel health encompasses not just the physical body, you know, as a Mind, Body teacher. I see I feel like it encompasses, you know, our mind, the health of our mind, meaning. To me, a healthy mind is one where we're not necessarily attached to our thoughts, like, our mind comes up with, you know, 60,000 thoughts every day. And what's interesting is we can often we can think things that we don't necessarily believe. And so every, there's so many thoughts and what we choose to or train ourselves to focus on is what we can create. So it's all related. So if we focus on, you know, how we want to have a fit body, then training ourselves to really focus on the thoughts that make us kind of held ourselves accountable to create that healthy body is, is very important. And similarly with emotion slike you know, I believe that our thoughts are actually created by the emotions that are kind of underlying it. So how we, you know, so like, like, I believe I talk a lot about vision. So what we want to create on the outside really must come from the inside first. So, and I believe emotion is what is the foundation for our vision. So when we when we feel a certain way, let's say if I feel like unworthy, then we might, our mind will create thoughts from that emotion, like, I might think I'm ugly, or I might think I'm, you know, undeserving or something like that. And it becomes this loop that, that kind of reinforces each other. So the thoughts and reinforces the emotion and the emotion reinforces the thoughts. So to me, like health, in a way stems from our, our capacity to feel empowered to create within our inner landscape that makes sense.

**Kit Heintzman** 26:21

What do you think we would need to change as a society to make that version of health available to everyone?

**Michael Wang** 26:28

Hmm. Well, that's, that's a great question. It's the one that I'm really focused on in my coaching practice now. I'm really trying to reach people through the power of meditation, like things like meditation, because not everybody wants to learn Kung Fu and Tai Chi. And so I believe a lot of the things that I have to offer transcend those practices. And I would say one of the most profound for me personally has been meditation. But there's just there's so many ways, but the main thing is to allow space or create space or hold space for people to explore their their inner landscape without judgment, so that they can truly get to know themselves better. I think a lot of fear stems from our on our lack of capacity or unwilling, unwillingness to actually look inside of ourselves. There's this assumption that because we've lived with ourselves or ourselves our whole lives, that we should actually know ourselves. And that to me is a you know, it's it doesn't, I don't see that in real life. It actually takes intentional practice and focus to really understand our patterns and our conditioning that often happens at an early age and how they're influencing our decisions and behaviors today.

**Kit Heintzman** 27:58

What does the word safety mean to you?

**Michael Wang** 28:02

Safety, from from, like, coaching standpoint is just having just the having, like having or creating the space to explore without judgment. Or do you mean physical safety?

**Kit Heintzman** 28:30

With that answer, I'll take physical safety after.

**Michael Wang** 28:35

physical safety. Yeah, that I don't it's it's feeling empowered to. To not be harmed. Yeah. So physical safety is, is feeling empowered in a way where you can you can exist peacefully and not be harm.

**Kit Heintzman** 29:06

Thinking about that sort of narrow confines of physical safety in relationship to COVID-19. What are some of the things you've been doing to keep yourself feeling safer?

**Michael Wang** 29:23

I will say, for myself, not much of my day to day life has changed. Like I said, I work from home. A lot of my clients are virtual, when there was a time, and I forget exactly how long, it was not possible to meet clients face to face due to local restrictions. But I would say I you know, as far as the studio I just followed the CDC recommendations. So as long as they add record I heard like maths or social distancing. I did that.

**Kit Heintzman** 30:06

What was that like doing martial arts and a mask?

**Michael Wang** 30:09

That was pretty challenging. I would say, I didn't really, I didn't really spend money on a sports mask, until the restrictions are pretty much over with. But you know, the practices I teach, often there's a lot of sweating. And so the masks become, basically, they prevent you from breathing. So even with the spacers, or, like special material, it was still very challenging. But we did it.

**Kit Heintzman** 30:49

When you've needed support over the last couple of years, who do you turn to?

**Michael Wang** 30:53

Huh. I would say in the end, I mostly turned within. So I think just staying with my practices, things like meditation, chi gong, tai chi, Kung Fu it gave me a way to one move energy. Because often when we're in pain or anxiety, it's there's too much energy in one place for too long, that isn't able to move and kind of stabilize or harmonize. And so I would say, I turned to my practices, mostly.

**Kit Heintzman** 31:34

I came to the end of my questions. And I'm wondering, do you think of the pandemic as a historic moment? And if so, why?

**Michael Wang** 31:47

I haven't given that much thought before. I mean, obviously, it was a big event in the course of history. But I also think that in the grand scheme of things, it's just a small blip in, you know, the history of humanity. So for sure, there'll be research like this, that you're doing and, you know, things that are documented to kind of capture, you know, the state of humanity during this time. But just like a lot of the other history that we read in history books,



you know, they were huge at the time. And they will likely be remembered to some degree. But, you know, time has been around for a long time.

**Kit Heintzman** 32:33

What are some of the things you wished you had learned more about in history when you were younger?

**Michael Wang** 32:40

Hmm. I'm really interested in like, again, the inner landscape and relationships. So my favorite history classes actually do not incur did not occur until I was in college. So in college, we mostly read primary texts, if possible, if it was an English, and they were often things instead of like, you know, dry dates, and facts and stuff like that. They're actually like letters from one person to another. So it just felt more like it felt more like really understanding kind of like this, this, this interview, it's like it gave a greater like a deeper appreciation and perspective to what actual people going through during the time, versus just very, like, kind of like an intellectual level understanding of what was happening.

**Kit Heintzman** 33:41

What do you think researchers in the humanities and social sciences, so departments like literature or sociology or political science, what should we be doing right now to help us understand the human side of this moment?

**Michael Wang** 33:55

Hmm. Well, I have a feeling this study is great. And that sense. Yeah, I think anything that just brings more humaneness to the experiences of people, like just people's direct experience through challenges or obstacles is the most powerful. Again, for me, I'm not as interested in understanding like, different when it becomes too intellectualized that's where I think it becomes less relatable to people and they have. Yeah, I would say finding ways to make it more relatable to like how how a lot of these struggles are shared experience across humanity is probably the best way to to encourage people to to kind of look towards, like history and stuff, for better understanding of themselves and others.

**Kit Heintzman** 35:10

This is my last question. I'd like you to imagine speaking to a historian in the future, someone far enough away that they have no lived experience of this moment. What would you tell them cannot be forgotten about right now?

**Michael Wang** 35:35

I'm not sure I have something specific to this moment, as I imagine that there's been moments like this all throughout time. But for me, again, what I mentioned earlier about the inner work, I think, is the most important part to, to keep focusing on the external, like, things like politics, where it's mostly about power, and you know, when it's about power, and on the egoic level, there's no long term healing. So if we want to better understand ourselves and be more love and compassion for other people, I think it all starts from within. And, you know, it's been that way forever. But I think, you know, the more you know, a lot of people believe right now is the most chaotic or hateful period of at least some reason history. I do think that you know, always go back to understanding ourselves is the is actually the most direct way, I believe, to, you know, more lasting healing love in the world.

**Kit Heintzman** 36:54

I want to thank you so much for the generosity of your time and the thoughtful beauty in your answers. Those are all of the questions I know how to ask at the moment. So right now, I just want to open some space. If there's anything you'd like to share that my questions haven't made room for, please take some space and share it.

**Michael Wang** 37:12

I think I shared a lot of the main things that I would normally share. So thanks for asking great questions and kind of probing. I feel complete.

**Kit Heintzman** 37:24

Perfect. Thank you so much.