

Martial Arts: An Ingrained Element of Chinese Culture

Stanley E. Henning - 2014

I developed this view of Chinese martial arts over a number of years following my study of Shanxi style Xingyi Quan (Form and Mind boxing) during a military tour in Taiwan between 1971-72. This initial experience with a wonderful teacher has stayed with me ever since (nearly 50 years), both mentally and physically, and resulted in the views I present in this paper which I hope will stimulate readers' minds.

My teacher, Wu Chaoxiang, was one of a number of older Chinese originally from mainland China who practiced martial arts and gathered on Sundays in space available in the Taiwan Legislative Yuan courtyard to practice the martial arts they had learned and exchange their views on the subject. I was fortunate enough to be introduced to this group and spend nearly two years studying and practicing Shanxi, Taigu, Che style Xingyi Quan there.

My experience in Taiwan has stayed with me and I have since been able to meet many key Chinese martial arts scholars and practitioners in the People's Republic of China and collect a mountain of valuable writings on various aspects of the subject. My experience to date has impressed upon me the fact, expressed in the title of this paper, that the martial arts truly are an ingrained element of Chinese culture, not just sideshow sports.

Interestingly, the earliest example in trying to put together the pieces of Chinese martial arts history in order to reveal the big picture has been the tomb located in Henan Province of an early king's consort, Fu Hao (+/-) 1500 BC, which was loaded with weapons of the period, revealing her role as a military leader. Then, moving to about 25-220 C.E. we come to the early story of the Maiden of Yue who is said to have described the basic elements of sword fighting to the King of Yue, who was seeking to defeat the King of Wu to his north. She described these simply as the interaction of Yin and Yang and this story was alluded to in the mid-Ming period (1500+) when Generals Qi Jiguang, Tang Shunzhi, Yu Dayou, and others were training civilians to eradicate the Japanese and other pirates invading China's coastal provinces. Consort Fu Hao's tomb and the Maiden of Yue story are confirmations that Chinese martial arts were practiced by both sexes from earliest times. The Maiden of Yue description of martial arts techniques as comprising Yin and Yang further confirms that these generally accepted martial arts principles were based on a Taoist worldview, not necessarily religious Taoism.

Even Confucianism as described in China's earliest history, the *Record of History* (Shi Ji), provides a broad civil - military framework for martial arts throughout society: **“when there are civil matters there must be military preparedness and when there are military matters there must be civil preparedness.”** Topping this off, we should notice that many old statues of Confucius show him carrying a sword.

As early as 284-363 AD famous Taoist thinker, Ge Hong, had also been a military officer, practiced martial arts, and noted that their techniques were kept secret to be effective. His description of martial arts practices at that time reflects how widely they were practiced in Chinese society from leaders to commoners and even literati who were expected to learn archery, one of the Six Arts emphasized in Confucianism.

Unlike the Samurai class in Japan, Chinese martial arts were essentially practiced throughout the society. They were practiced in monasteries essentially to protect monastic property. Buddhist monks helped the first Tang emperor Gao Zu (566-635 AD) establish his control, but Emperor, Wu Zong (845), later dissolved a number of Buddhist monasteries considering them a potential threat to imperial control. Shaolin Monastery, located on Mount Song, the central of China's five sacred mountains gained a certain mixed political aura. During the Mongol Yuan period the head monk, Fuyu, cooperated with them and was given authority to build five additional subordinate Shaolin monasteries in north China. Only one was built, on Mount Pan, north of Tianjin, which was destroyed by the Japanese in WWII, but has recently been rebuilt. The original Shaolin was destroyed by Red Turban rebels at the end of the Yuan period and then rebuilt. About 120 martial arts capable Shaolin monks participated in anti-pirate operations, possibly to maintain their credibility with the Ming regime. This can be compared with a fierce Zhuang Minority woman who led nearly 1000 men to Shanghai where they killed about 1000 pirates, a reflection of the fact that minorities in China also practiced martial arts.

Taoism and Mount Wudang as opposed to Buddhism and Shaolin Monastery were favored during the Ming period, As a result historian Huang Zongxi, who fought with Ming forces against the Manchu conquest, wrote *Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan*, an officer in the Ming forces who he claimed was a practitioner of Internal School Boxing originated by Taoist Monk, Zhang Sanfeng, who is said to have resided on Mount Wudang. It was clear, however that the Internal - External School description was really a subtle way to express his dissatisfaction with Manchu rule versus actual martial arts characteristics. It is also more likely that martial arts were generally introduced to Shaolin Monastery as opposed to being developed there. However, the story that Indian monk, Bodhidharma, introduced martial arts to the monastery was proven to be a story not fact. As for the so-called Internal School of boxing, martial artists living in Huang Zongxi's hometown of Ningpo claim that they still practice it there.

Boxing Classic Essentials of Boxing (1784), which contains a mix of inputs is an example of martial arts materials that entered Shaolin Monastery. It even includes reference to a movement involving the Taiji concept of central focus. In other words, it appears that Shaolin martial arts were also based on the Taoist Yin-Yang interacting worldview.

During the Qing period many martial arts continued to be practiced locally and in secret societies. There was even a claim that a Southern Shaolin Monastery was established in Fujian to escape the politics surrounding the Mount Song Shaolin Monastery.

With the Republic of China in 1912, Muslim warlord, Ma Liang wrote manuals to include martial arts in military training and Sun Lutang taught Taijiquan, Xingyi Quan, and Ba Guazhang, all three of which he categorized as Internal martial arts.

People's Republic of China in 1949 - martial arts were initially integrated into propaganda shows and included in physical exercise programs and have since been organized with training manuals and university programs.

It was difficult to select a specific Chinese martial art for the Olympics of 2008 - too many styles. Japanese Judo apparently evolved from what was called "Rise Fall Boxing" (Kitoryu Kempo in Japanese) which was introduced by Chinese emigre, Chen Yuanyun, in the wake of the Manchu conquest of China. Its Japanese practitioners raised a stone tablet to this effect on the grounds of Atago Shrine in Tokyo in 1779.

The Chinese have continued to spend considerable efforts to support martial arts programs throughout their education system.