

Understanding Chinese Martial Arts Culture

I have been writing on aspects of Chinese martial arts history since 1981 when I published *The Chinese Martial Arts in Historical Perspective* in *Military Affairs* magazine. Since then I have continued to discover issues which can lead to misunderstandings of the nature of martial arts in Chinese culture. I believe one of the of these misunderstandings can arise from an entry in *The Spring and Autumn of Chinese Martial Arts - 5000 Years - Plum Publishing 1995* claimed to have been written by Chinese Wushu Research Institute professor, Kang Gewu, and claimed by Kang in his forward to have been translated by an individual named Shen Zhen.

I personally know and respect Professor Kang Gewu and feel one can learn a great deal from this book, but feel that one of the entries can be misleading. This is the entry titled *A.D. 643 The 17th Year of Zhen Guan: Tang Dynasty* (p.42) (貞觀十七年，公元六四三年).

“They hit each other without bloodshed as an entertainment. This is the first case of the use of long weapons for hitting each other as a competitive activity of amusement.”

This statement could be true if all the participants were merely wearing felt armor and armed with wooden staffs. However the original A.D. 643 *Zizhi Tongjian* (資治通鑑) entry describes the situation as follows:

“King Han, Li Yuanchang was a trouble maker. Superiors admonished him and were disappointed with him. The imperial prince liked him very much, they constantly played together and they would each lead a group of men covered with felt armor and with staff weapons they fought in battle formations. They stabbed each other and blood flowed, and they saw it as an amusement. For those who don't listen to orders, tie them to a tree and beat them until they are dead. If I

were emperor today I would arrange 10,000 men on the grounds, split them up with King Han and watch the battle, wouldn't it be great! Also, if I were the emperor, I would do as I please and kill those who protest, kill at least several hundred, and the masses would be controlled.”

If the staff weapons they were using were merely wooden it is doubtful that this description would apply. The *shoushuo* (手槊) staffs as written can also mean a long staff with a sharp, possibly even metal, point. It is possible, however, that the entry in this book was written in a manner meant to show Chinese martial arts in a positive as opposed to the negative manner actually described in the *Zizhi Tongjian* which was merely an extreme example of the possibilities which could arise under conditions of poor leadership. The actual entry in the *Zizhi Tongjian* was likely meant more as a warning and should have been appropriately entered, translated and explained. Felt armor and wooden staffs were used in martial arts practice but not pointed or metal tipped staffs.

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