

An Interview with Professor Li Deyin

DICK WATSON [QUESTIONS SUPPLIED BY DAN DOCHERTY FOR COMBAT] CYBER ENLIGHTENMENT, FEB. 1999

For many years now Dick Watson has been involved in bringing Professor Li to Great Britain from China. Professor Li is the head of the Physical Education Department at the Peoples' University in Beijing.

Both he and his family are steeped in a background of Chinese *Wushu* and *Taijiquan*. Whilst he has a preference for the Yang style *Taijiquan*, Professor Li has a direct lineage with Sun Lu Tang, who created the Sun style *Taijiquan*. His preferred system for fighting is *Hsing-I Quan*.

Professor Li is a published author on *Taijiquan* both in China and Japan. He also has a number of Training videos to his credit. When *Wushu* and *Taijiquan* were introduced to the Asian Games in 1990, Professor Li was selected to be Chief Judge. Beginning his training when he was a boy, his involvement with Martial Arts has continued for nearly 50 years. He is now considered to be one of China's foremost teachers and developers of modern *Taijiquan*.



What was the Martial Arts background of your father and grandfather?

I came from a Martial Arts family, starting with my grandfather through to my father. We have all practised and taught Martial Arts.

My grandfather, Li Yu Lin (1888-1965), was born in 1888. He had three teachers. The first was Hao En Guang. He was employed as security escort. On an assignment he was engaged in conflict with bandits and was fatally shot. Hao En Guang's teacher was Li Yun Yi, he was also engaged as a security escort. They were both famous in the role. My grandfather, Li Yu Lin, learned from both of these teachers Martial Arts. The main thrust of this training was *Shao Lin Quan* and *Hsing-I Quan*.

When Hao En Guang was killed by bandits, my grandfather made arrangements for the funeral and transported his body to his home for burial. This came to the attention of Sun Lu Tang (1861-1933). He was touched and impressed by his actions. They met later and my grandfather was accepted by Sun Lu Tang as a student. This was in 1924 when my grandfather was 36. With Sun he studied *Taijiquan*, *Hsing-I Quan* and *Pa Kua Zhang*.

He also studied with Li Jing Lin at this time, who was the Deputy Director of The Central Wushu Association. In 1929, Li Jing Lin was appointed Director of the Shan Dong Wushu Association and my grandfather was appointed Chief Instructor. Li Jing Lin had learned his Yang style from Yang Ban Hou (1837-1922), and he was an expert in the Wu Dang sword. My grandfather learned these disciplines from Li Jing Lin.

Later my grandfather travelled to Shanghai and practised *Taijiquan* with Yang Cheng Fu (1883-1936). This was not as teacher and student; they met as equals and exchanged ideas about Taiji techniques.

My grandfather passed away in 1965.

My father, Li Tian Chi, and my uncle, Li Tian Ji, started their *Wushu* training from a very young age. My father later went to work as a doctor in a hospital using *Taijiquan*, *Qi-gong* and massage to treat and help patients to recuperate from illness.

My uncle, Li Tian Ji, graduated from the Shan Dong Martial Arts College as a Martial Arts instructor in 1931. He taught at various universities and Martial Arts schools in the provinces of Shan-xi and Hei Long Jian. He came to Beijing in 1950 and was appointed coach to the state Wushu Team. From 1955 until his death in



Li Yu Lin, Professor Li's Grandfather

January 1996, he was a member and executive member of the Institute of Physical Education and Sport. His main preoccupation was Research, Study and Development of *Taijiquan*.

What other Taiji/Martial Arts have you studied apart from Sun style?

Because of my family background I started my training when I was still young. The first was *Shao-Lin Quan*. When I was a young lad, regardless of what we were going to learn, we had to begin with the study of *Shao-Lin* and *Chang Quan*. This was to facilitate good training for the waist and legs. When I was a little older I began to learn *Pa-Kua Zhang*, *Hsing-I Quan* and *Tai Ji Quan*. The *Taiji* I learned was centred on Sun style and Yang style. When I started as full-time coach at the People's University in 1961, it was necessary to widen my knowledge and so I studied Wu style with Xu Zhi Yi who was senior student with Wu Jian Quan. I learned Chen style from Li Jing Wu who was a top student with Chen Fa Ke.

Mr. Li is still living and is 86 years old. At the same time I went back to school to learn modern long fist and Woo style. I have been coaching at my university for 35 years.

Is Sun style *Taijiquan* real Taiji or is it a separate art like *Liu Ho Ba Fa*, bearing in mind that Sun Lu Tang was famous for his *Pa-Kua* and *Hsing-I*?

Chinese *Taijiquan* has many styles and schools. The main five are: Chen, Yang, Wu, Sun and Woo. In addition there is *Zhao Bao Shi*, *He Zhao Yuan Shi* and from Beijing there is Li Rui Dong's creation of *Taijiquan*, *Wu Xing Chi*, etc. All these styles have their own special movements and characteristics, but they are still recognised and come under the heading of *Taijiquan*.

I cannot say which, one is real *Taiji* and which one is not. In the same way I feel it would be difficult to say that English soccer is the real soccer and the French soccer is not or Brazilian soccer is not. Each style has its own flavour.

About 70 years ago a Chen style master came to Beijing to teach. Many people could not recognise the style and a lot of people said this was not *Taiji*. Of course at this time the Yang style was very popular in Beijing. However when Master Chen explained the history of *Taiji*, these people realised that the Yang style came originally from the Chen style. The realisation that there are different styles gave them the opportunity to broaden their knowledge and be able to practise the Yang style and learn Chen style from Master Chen.

Taijiquan is a developing Martial Art, we cannot look at it as fixed and set. There must be changes.

What percentage of the art as practised by Yang Lu-chan does your school retain?

In the life time of Yang Lu-chan there was no photography or video technology. So we can only surmise and take from the recorded literature and hear-say and create an image of what his form and style was like. In Chen Wei Ming's questions and answers on *Taijiquan*, he mentions that Yang Lu-chan when performing "snake creeps down" was reputed to be able to pick up a coin with his mouth, he was so low that it was like sitting on the floor. He was also accredited with being able to use elbow stroke to an opponent's knee. From these records we can gather that Yang Lu-chan's form was rather low.

Also Yang Ban Hou and Yang Shao Hou when they practised their style were closer to Chen style. One of the Yang family taught the Wu family so we know the Wu style developed from Yang style. How close the many styles are to Yang Lu-chan is difficult to ascertain with the material and information made available.

What makes the Sun style different from other styles?

Sun style has in common with other styles' stability, central equilibrium, light and agile movements. The main difference is the adoption of moving, following steps. Sun style is known as the "moving step" *Taijiquan*. This involves back and forward moves of a light and agile nature. When you step forward the back foot follows, when you step back the front foot follows. This stepping technique had already appeared in the Woo/Hao style.

Sun Lu Tang incorporated characteristics of *Hsing-I* and *Pa-Kua* and created a *Taijiquan* using features from the three internal/soft arts. They all follow common principles. In *Hsing-I* you always step and follow, in *Pa-Kua* we encompass the characteristics of open and close, step and turn. So I believe Sun Lu Tang developed his style because of previous training in martial arts.

In the same way Wu Yu Xiang developed his Woo style influenced by his background training. Each style has developed influenced by the previous Wushu training.

Why do you think the Chen style, as now practised in the Chen family village, is so different from the Yang family lineage styles?

The difference between *Chen Jia Gou* and the Yang style that is the question.

The first three generations of the Yang family took three directions. The first is to bring *Taijiquan* from a village art to a wider audience in Beijing and encouraging its popularity to spread to the whole country. The Yang family can be regarded as the influence that initiated interest in *Taijiquan* to a



Li Yu Lin, Professor Li's Grandfather

world-wide audience.

The second is the modification of the Chen style. Whilst retaining the principles of Chen style foundations adapting the characteristics of smoothness, stability and practising the form at one level. The adaptation took place over three generations. The hard and fast movements learned by Yang Lu Chan were gradually replaced to develop a new style more suitable for a wider appeal. After this creation, many areas of society began to take part in *Taijiquan* training. Interest was aroused among intellectuals, workers, the young and elderly, strong and weak. many of these practitioners put aside the emphasis on martial aspects and contained their interest in areas of rejuvenation, well being and health. So this development was the causative factor in the creation of Yang style and the reason why it differs from the style of *Chen Jia Gou*.

Many people in England consider the 24 simplified and 42 combined *Taijiquan* to be a mishmash, chop suey. What is your opinion?

In 1956 the 24 was choreographed by the Institute for Physical Education. It is a syllabus simplified to help the novice. It has taken many of the significant postures from the Yang style. Depending on how one counts, the Yang style exhibits 81, 85 or 88 postures. Without repetitions there is actually forty. If you wish to popularise the art and introduce it to school curriculum such a long sequence as the 85 is very difficult to learn. The time and energy required is not available to the majority of the population. Therefore it was considered necessary to create a shortened form to fill this purpose and help the beginner. A form that would highlight the important characteristics and emphasise the most significant moves. That is why the Yang style was chosen. In China of course the 24 is not considered as a mishmash.

There are many variations of the Yang style practised in China and many of these different schools were concerned that their style was not chosen for popularising or not included in consultation. When the 24 was created the choreography was taken from one source. Several years earlier an attempt had been made to create an amalgamate form but this proved to be unpopular because it was difficult to learn.

With regards to the 42, this was developed when *Taijiquan* became popular as a competitive sport/art in the 1980s. It was considered necessary to develop a unified style of *Taijiquan* to allow athletes to compete. The Physical Institutions of China have set competition forms for all the five major styles, i.e., Chen, Yang, Wu, Sun and Woo. Competitions take place for all three styles, but for international competition we have created the 42. This was introduced in the 11th Asian Games in 1990. Forty seven nations took part in this international event. The 42 incorporates movements from the major styles and competitors have the opportunity to show their overall skill and knowledge.

So we should examine why these different forms and styles have appeared. The 24 was introduced for the novice, while the 42 was created to standardise international competition. They in no way interfere or cancel the importance of traditional forms of *Taijiquan*.

What do you think of competition *Taijiquan*?

First of all, should we compete in *Taijiquan*? Can you compete in *Taijiquan*?

In the old days competition was with *Tui Shou*, attack and defence, to win or lose. This was the method to decide whether your *Taiji* was good or not. As *Taiji* became more popular the forms have assumed more prominence. Some people have asked whether you can use *Taiji* forms in the same way as we use and judge the floor exercise in gymnastics. If then it is possible, how do you award marks and what is the criteria for judging performance?

There are two opinions. Some insist that *Tui Shou* is the only way. Another group say both form and *Tui Shou* can be judged. These opinions exist both in China and throughout the world. In China today you can compete in one or the other or both. There is a third theory that *Taiji* is a pure form of self defence and competition is inappropriate and one should not take part in contests. Self cultivation is the only goal.

My personal view is that *Taijiquan* is an ancient health motivated exercise, however it can be used for physical competitions. Furthermore through competition the standards can be raised. It affords the opportunity for people to meet and exchange views. This can also encourage the incentive for others to join and practise.

Do students of your school take part in *San Shou* competition? If not, why not?

San Shou competition has only developed in the past few years, both in China and outside. Before it was called *Da-Lei-Tai*. *Da-Lei-Tai* is not a part of *Taijiquan*. It is set competition for all forms of *Wushu* or Kung Fu as known in the west. In *Da-Lei-Tai* they use the techniques of *Pi*, *Da*, *Shuai* and *Na* (i.e., Chop, Throw, Grab and Wrest).

Taijiquan practitioners engaging in *Tui Shou* only use the techniques of *Peng*, *Lu*, *Ji*, *An*, *Cai*, *Lie*, *Chou*, and *Kao*.

What do you think of the difference in approach in the east and west?

I think that any brilliant cultural developments of the human race should not be subject to the division of east and west. Western influence should spread to the east, eastern culture can travel to the west. They should be common treasures for humanity. However, because of geographic location and the events of history, this

exchange has been resisted or blocked. To understand takes time. When English soccer first came to China, we Chinese could not understand it. The Chinese had played a form of football a thousand years earlier but this was completely different. But now western soccer has a great audience in China. It has become one of the most popular sports. Every year the Cup Final attracts a large viewing.

Chinese *Wushu* and *Taijiquan* were not popular in Japan thirty years ago. Today there are over 500,000 students. Because of this cultural exchange *Wushu* has developed rapidly.

For the last few years I have spent my summer holiday in England. I can see more and more people love to practise *Taiji*. Although the level of skill at the moment cannot be compared with China and Japan. The learning exchange in England is different. It has taken place with small groups and individuals, nothing on a large scale. So it takes more time. Let us consider the intensive promotion of the Olympic Games, how quickly and strongly it became a huge world-wide activity.

Chinese *Wushu* has been created for self cultivation, stillness is promoted within movement. The emphasis is on being natural, balanced and relaxed. To pursue the release of tension and to combat fatigue, this is the essence of Chinese Martial Arts.

Many westerners realise that strenuous types of exercise are inadequate. Using only movement is not enough. Cultivation of relaxation and stillness in movement is necessary. This is like a human being and nature becoming one.

The late development in England will delay progress in *Taijiquan*, but it can follow the parallel of football in China with more and more people enjoying *Taijiquan*. I have been able to watch and enjoy the growth of *Taiji* and *Wushu* on an international level. I have seen it grow to competition at World class. I have seen the levels of skills rise and the arts enjoy greater popularity. To move further forward we need earnest development; we need all interested participants to enjoy cultural exchange. To raise the standards we require more organisation to promote *Taijiquan* and *Wushu*; we must bring our sport/art to the attention of the respective sporting and health authorities. We need to let them know about our arts and seek their support.