

7th Jiaozuo International Taijiquan Exchange Competition - Cherry Collins

I returned from Tai Chi Caledonia absolutely buzzing after four fantastic days of Taiji in the Scottish sunshine. My Chen Taijiquan teacher of four years, Master Wang Hai Jun, was teaching at the event this year, leading us in silk reeling and pushing hands workshops.

Master Wang often stresses how important it is to train in Taiji under a single teacher if you are really serious about wanting to reach a high level of understanding and skill. So, not to miss out on an opportunity to learn some more, several of Master Wang's UK & Irish students went to Scotland to study with our teacher at this year's event.

Shifu's reputation meant that a large group of Caledonia attendees had booked for his workshops and even more joined in on the second day when a buzz about his workshops spread around the campus. As always, Master Wang made the sessions fun and interesting, sharing knowledge and anecdotes, but also making sure everyone was fully engaged and working hard.

But now, just 2 sleeps later, it was time for me to set off on a new Taiji adventure:

Entering the World Traveller Plus cabin, I was impressed to find that the 'Nations Favourite Airline' had not only upgraded my free Avios ticket but had thoughtfully provided me with some personal training space in front of my capacious single seat. Whoo-hoo! My trip was off to a great start.

I would be meeting Master Wang again in four weeks time in Henan Province. Myself and six of his other students from UK, Ireland and USA, would be competing in the 7th Jiaozuo International Taijiquan Exchange Competition - the biggest Taiji tournament in the world, held every two years and attracting upwards of 3500 entrants. Each of us was taking part in two events, hand form and Sword form. As the event drew closer, the pressure was mounting.

I planned to stay in Beijing for a month before meeting the rest of our group - twenty five in total. I wanted to get used to the heat and to get stuck into training without the distractions of work and home, in preparation for Jiaozuo. I'd booked a budget youth hostel to save money as I would have no income back home now that I'd handed my classes over to a fellow Taiji teacher, also a student of Master Wang, for the summer.

As I opened the door on my hostel room, it immediately made me think of a traditional Taiji saying which Master Wang regularly shares with the class: 'You only need the space of one cow lying down to practise Taijiquan'. But believe me, you would never have managed to get a cow into my tiny hostel room, let alone have space for her to lie down. But the graffiti on the layers of peeling emulsion was amusing and the rattle of the 1980's aircon unit dulled the noise of incessant car horns on the 8 lane ring road outside. During the day I trained hard in a local park and at night I slept soundly. Bliss.

My month alone was soon over and soon it was time to meet to Master Wang in Jiaozuo. The competition was massive! It took place over five days in six arenas. I'd never witnessed anything on that scale before. The organisation was excellent and everything took place according to schedule. Men and women

competed separately in their respective styles: Chen, Yang, Sun, Wu, etc. We performed in groups of six in front of a panel of nine judges, starting with a perfect score of 10 and losing points according to various criteria such as quality and accuracy of movements, degree of difficulty, continuity and overall aesthetic appearance.

The contestants, who had come from all around the world, were very friendly and we chatted as we waited for our turn to perform, which could be as much as a couple of hours.



Everyone who was performing in the morning session gathered in a large group outside the arena entrance and waited for their name to be called. In my group there were contestants from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Germany, Eastern Europe and Pakistan.

I hadn't seen the arena before I walked out onto the carpet to have my Laojia scrutinised and evaluated. I was quite nervous to begin with but I settled down once I reminded myself that I'd put the hours into training and I knew the form so now I just had to relax and perform it as if no-one else was there. Afterwards I was amazed to see I'd received

a score of 9.04. Between myself and the two other students of Master Wang who competed in Laojia category 'D' we took the gold, silver and bronze medals.

In the afternoon I performed the Chen Sword form getting a slightly lower score, which meant I got a silver medal, and my two companions also picked up awards; silver and bronze. The next day some of the men from our group took part and we cheered them on. All of them were in the medals. Master Wang's red army (the colour of our T-shirts) were on the march. By day four, the seven members of Team Wang Hai Jun, each entering two events,

had won 13 medals: One gold, eight silvers, and four bronze. At the end of the competition Master Wang was awarded a prize for best overseas team organiser.

But for me, the best part of the international event was not the winning, but performing with the group on the main stage for Grandmaster Chen Zhenglei, in front of TV cameras, bright lights and a large crowd. Master Wang led us in Laojia Yi Lu. The atmosphere was amazing and I didn't feel a hint of nerves, just complete euphoria! My best Taiji moment ever. Period.

I discovered that Master Wang is a big celebrity in China - every few metres people were pointing in his direction, excitedly whispering his name to their companion or stopping him in hope of a chat, an interview or a photo. Even the youngsters recognised him - kids who were probably in kindergarten when Master Wang left China to live in UK. But as three times China Overall Champion in 3 different disciplines, I guess it's not surprising that he has a huge following and is held in high esteem.

With the competition behind us, we paid a visit to Chenjiagou, aka Chen Village. It was touching to see where my teacher had grown up and studied with his teacher, Grandmaster Chen Zhenglei.

We practised Laojia Yi Lu in three different locations in the Village and visited the house



and courtyard where Master Wang had lived and trained with his teacher in the 1980s. Some of the villagers remembered Master Wang as a boy and were clearly delighted to see him again. One lady smiled as she recalled how thin Master Wang was when he left Chen Village at 16 years of age, to go with his teacher to live and study in the town of Wenxian. She said how happy she was now to see Master Wang looking so well built, muscular and healthy looking, which was obviously the result of hard training and plenty of good food. It was clear that the villagers were very proud of his achievements. I could see from the look on Master Wang's face that this was a very special place for him with lots of memories and I felt privileged to be a part of this reunion.

Shifu spoke fondly about training with his teacher Chen Zhenglei and recalled how, as a youngster of about 11 years of age, just arriving in the village, he was unable to understand the local dialect for quite some time making things quite hard for him.

Master Wang said that modern technology, TV, computer games and the internet are all big diversions for young Taiji students nowadays and he wonders if they will reach the same high level of Taijiquan as their forefathers did, because of the distractions and freedom that they have these days. He said we will have to wait and see, but I could see it was something which bothered him.

Next, without a doubt, was the best part of any of my trips to China. Three places in Chen village which really touched me:

Grandmaster Chen Zhenglei's old house



After we saw where Master Wang had lived with GM Chen, he led us along a dirt track and through an overgrown area of the village to visit Chen Zhenglei's previous house, which is now in ruins - a house which Master Chen built himself from free materials; compacted earth, tree branches and thatch, because he was unable to afford bricks and mortar.

Master Wang told us that despite working very long hours, enduring poor living conditions and lack of food, Chen Zhenglei would never neglect his daily practise of Taiji. Every day after work he would practise, regardless of how late into the night this was.

I scrambled under some fallen beams into the single room of the house as I heard Master Wang recount that Grandmaster Chen lived according to the principle of Chi Ku - or 'eating bitter' which means to endure hardships without complaining in order to master an art or reach a goal. It encompasses character traits such as patience, endurance, diligence and perseverance through hard times. Grandmaster Chen Zhenglei certainly has this quality and stands as a shining light to everyone who trains in Taijiquan, said Master Wang.

Just after I had started training with Master Wang, I had read about the concept of Chi Ku in a Taiji book and it had really stood out at that time as something I wanted to achieve in my own life: To be more disciplined and have a stronger determination to carry on when things were uncomfortable rather than always taking the easy route and wimping out. I decided to get the Chinese characters 'Chi Ku' tattooed on my ankle to remind myself to strive to develop this quality of perseverance, both in and through my practise of Taijiquan. But there, standing in what remained of Chen Zhenglei's old house with its mud walls and straw roof, and listening to my teacher's account of Chen Zhenglei's hard life, did I really understand what Chi Ku meant.

Chen Zhaopei's grave



After visiting Chen Zhenglei's old home, we paid our respects at the grave of Chen Zhaopei, Chen Zhenglei's teacher who had restored Chen Taiji to its former glory after the ravages of war between the Communists and Nationalists caused a decline in the practise of Chen Taijiquan.



Master Wang told the group that Chen Zhaopei visited the village in 1958 and was disturbed to see so few people practising Chen Taiji. He immediately made the decision to leave his well-paid job and return to the village, where he taught free of charge since most people were unable to afford training fees. Word soon spread and people also came from neighbouring villages to study with the well-known Master. No-one was turned away. Every evening Chen Zhaopei threw open his doors to anyone who wanted to learn the Chen Village art. A great many people studied with him and they began to develop their skills as a result of Chen Zhaopei's generosity and dedication.

However, there was still another challenge for Chen Taijiquan to overcome. During the Cultural Revolution, a ten year period from 1966-76, the practise of Taijiquan and many other traditional arts was banned in China. Many people in Chen village and elsewhere, being fearful for their lives, stopped practising and as a result of this, they failed to reach a high level of skill. Master Wang reminded us that in order to reach a high level, three things are essential: The right teacher, the right understanding and the right practise: A student's practise must be dedicated and continuous, without breaks.

Master Wang said that during the Cultural Revolution Chen Zhaopei was persecuted for his love of Taiji and was denounced and forced to attend repeated struggle sessions which caused him such pain that it brought him to the point of throwing himself down a well in an unsuccessful suicide attempt. Yet still he would not renounce his love of Taijiquan. Every night, despite the severe consequences of being discovered, he secretly continued to teach his remaining students and maintain his own practise.

Four of his students' skills developed to such a high level that they widely became known as the Four Tigers of Chenjiagou and after the Cultural Revolution ended and the value

of various traditional arts was realised again, the Chinese Government officially gave these four skilled practitioners the title, 'Jin Gang' (Buddha's Warrior Attendants) Jin Gang also describes the four deity gatekeepers at Buddhist temples, who serve as protectors and guardians, as represented by four large fierce statues. Jin gang also means 'indestructible'. These four Masters are Chen Zhenglei, Chen Xiaowang, Zhu Tiancai and Wang Xian.

Master Wang continued to recount the life of Chen Zhaopei and told us that before the great master passed away, he made it known that he wished to be buried in Chen village. He told his family and disciples not to put him too far away when he died as he wanted to be able to oversee the training and watch everyone passing his skills on. Chen Zhaopei was totally dedicated to Taiji, even in death.

This was such a poignant time for me. Already feeling shaken and challenged by what I had heard at Chen Zhenglei's old house, I could only stand in front of Chen Zhaopei's grave in awe of his dedication. Then it struck me, not just as words in my head, but square in the centre of my heart - just how much the previous generations of Chen Taiji Masters had to suffer and endure and yet they still had the strength to practise faithfully through sorrow, loss, pain, fear, drought, flood, famine and war so that I could learn this precious art.

This made my own excuses for skipping training seem not just pathetic, but totally null and void. A lump rose in my throat and I had to breathe deeply to retain my composure. I didn't want to cry in front of everyone. Thinking about what my teacher had just told us, I stood for a few moments before Chen Zhaopei and made a few solemn silent promises to myself, my teacher and his teacher's teacher.

The last stop on our tour of Chenjiagou was the valley where Master Wang trained for thousands of hours both as a boy and a young man. At the entrance to the valley from the far end of the Village was a well which supplied Chenjiagou with its magical water. Master Wang told us of a saying about the water: "He he chen guo shui, dou hui qiao qiao tui", which loosely means if you drink the water of Chenjiagou your feet will know how to kick, (ie, you will get good Taiji skills). Needless to say I scooped up the cool refreshing spring water in both hands and gulped it down!

Master Wang showed us the footpath leading up a hill where he would run to training in the valley several times each day from Chen Zhenglei's house, just over the brow of the hill. He told us that training in the valley in the dark was a very special time - it was often so dark you couldn't see your hand in front of your face, apart from when the moon was full. Some people were afraid to train in the valley after dark as several people had been buried there, but Master Wang found the quietness perfect for practise. He spoke of a special air



in the valley, and I could certainly feel what he meant, a heavy, rich, pure quality.

Although less emotional for me than the previous two stops it was very profound to practise Yi Lu on the same training ground where my teacher had honed his own skills, over twenty years ago.

Also on the itinerary before heading further south were visits to the Shaolin Temple and the Buddhist grottoes at Longmen - both wonderful cultural sights steeped in the rich Chinese history. Then we boarded a train for Wudangshan, without doubt one of the most beautiful mountains in China. After spending a few days on Wudang we headed further south to Zhangjiajie, a UNESCO world heritage site. We spent a couple of days visiting the scenic limestone mountains of the region, the subject of many Chinese brush paintings. The director of the blockbuster movie Avatar found the scenery so captivating that he used it as the inspiration for the movie's 'floating mountain' backdrop. It was easy to see why.

With the trip almost over, we headed back to Beijing for a couple of days to visit Tian'anmen Square, the Forbidden City and of course the Great Wall - the essential historical and cultural sights of the Capital. None of them fail to impress and amaze me - their scale, enormous. On the last evening of our trip Master Wang arranged a celebration dinner and we put on our party clothes and let our hair down, exchanging email addresses and recalling the most memorable moments of our travels.

The whole trip has been fabulous. Everything

I expected and so much more. Good company, amazing experiences and lots of training sessions with Master Wang, which led to an important breakthrough for me. And of course delicious Chinese food - plus some food for the soul to take away and digest over the coming months.

Master Wang holds regular Chen Taiji classes in Manchester and weekend workshops and residential camps in London, Ireland and USA. www.WangHaiJun.com

Cherry holds weekly classes in Surrey and Hampshire: www.SurreyandHantsTaiChi.com

