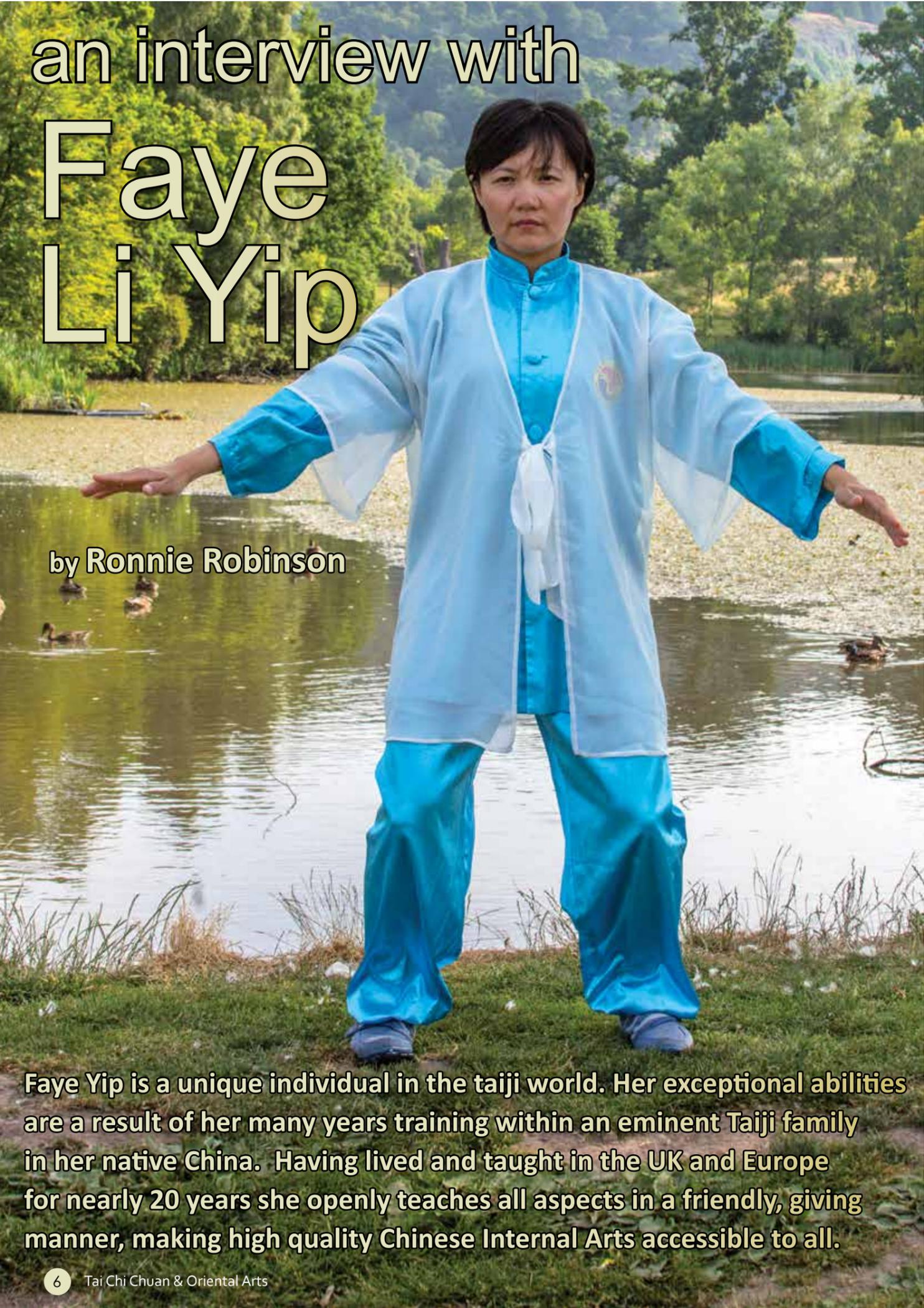


an interview with

Faye Li Yip

by Ronnie Robinson



Faye Yip is a unique individual in the taiji world. Her exceptional abilities are a result of her many years training within an eminent Taiji family in her native China. Having lived and taught in the UK and Europe for nearly 20 years she openly teaches all aspects in a friendly, giving manner, making high quality Chinese Internal Arts accessible to all.

How old were you when you first start training, what were you taught and how often did you train?

I started with basic Shaolin Quan foundation training just before turning seven under the tutelage of my father Li Deyin and his colleague at the University, Mr. Jiang Hong Sheng. The training involved early morning sessions with running, jumping, stretching, various kicks and punches. Then after school, we'd have a longer training session that was much the same, but followed with basic form training. We always trained outside, putting our legs up the tree trunks to stretch, and competing on how high we could reach up. I used to hang an elastic band between the trees, setting a target to improve my kicks. As I progressed, I started to learn weapons forms using bamboo swords, wooden sabres and waxwood poles. My favorite weapon was (and still is) the sword. Sometimes my father would arrange for me to train with other coaches in a martial art school during the school holidays.

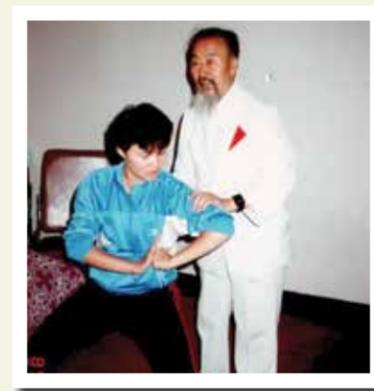
When I was about 10 or 11, I started to train with the University Wushu Squad where my father was the head coach. I was the youngest, but I never felt out of place and of course didn't have any special treatment! The training sessions were 3 hours long and very intense, especially before a competition. But they were also lots of fun, and everyone was so encouraging and supportive that it was always a happy time.

Every Sunday, my father took the whole family to visit my great Uncle Li Tian Ji on the other side of Beijing. The journey would involve a 20 minute bike ride (with all of us on one bike) to the University bus stop, then 3 bus rides through the City, followed by a 20 minute walk to the flat. Here there would be a gathering of Li Tian Ji's students. They came from all walks of life, from factory workers to musicians, from school teachers to engineers. They would all take turns to receive teaching from Li Tian Ji on their favorite hobbies – Tai Chi Chuan, Xing Yi Chuan and Ba Gua Zhang. My great uncle made me do Ba Gua – circle walking. His teaching was different to my father, very strict – I had to repeat one move over and over, again and again, but still he was not happy! I used to dread it because (at the time) it was very boring, compared to playing sword, sabre, kicking or punching.

For a long time, it was my martial art training that provided me with a release from stress in my school education. I think the happiness and friendship I gained from training gave me the confidence to stay on top of my academic study.

Did you ask to be taught or were you encouraged to?

One good thing about being born into a traditional martial arts family is that I grew up listening to stories of old-time martial art heroes fighting against evil; how martial arts transformed often sickly youngsters into super fit martial artists with extraordinary skills, and warrior monks from the Shaolin Temple using



their martial arts skills to fight against the Japanese invaders in times of war. One of my favorite childhood comic books (in black and white) was called '偷拳 (stolen fists)', a story about how Yang Lu Chan dedicated himself to learning Tai Chi Chuan (in secret) in Chen Village. In 1970's China the only material luxury we had was a radio, so unsurprisingly I took an interest in martial arts from a very young age. Fortunately, I was surrounded by great martial artists in my family - three generations before me.

My father never asked me to become a Wushu athlete, but I think he is rather pleased that I took it up as a hobby, which grew (over time) into a fulfilling career.

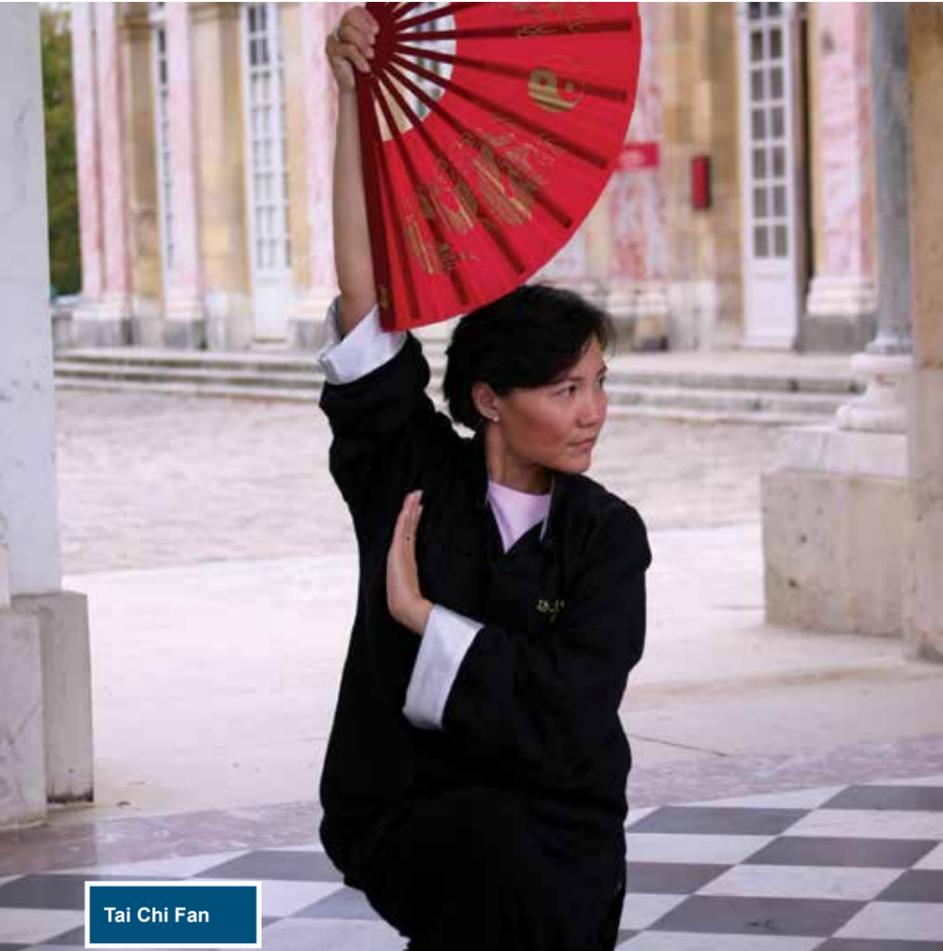
So you worked with different teachers?

While most of my training before I went to university was with various Wushu Squads under my father's intensive coaching, I also received regular teaching and invaluable guidance from my great uncle Li Tian Ji, and from my grandfather Li Tian Chi, who worked at Harbin University Hospital, applying Taiji and Qigong for rehabilitation. He used his skills and knowledge in Taiji and Qigong for treating his patients, and I spent many summer holidays in my youth with him, watching him prescribe Qigong exercises in the hospital. He told me that Martial Art, Taiji, Qigong and Traditional Chinese Medicine all belong to one family, and I find myself doing a lot of all these things these days.

Can you tell me something about how your saw tai chi and/or qigong applied as curative measures for health problems?



Photos: (Clockwise from top left) Sword Training, Wushu Team at Tiananmen Square, Three section staff, Personal tuition from Master Sha Guo Zheng, San Shou with her father Li De Yin.



Tai Chi Fan

Tai Chi and Qigong have been widely used in China as curative measures and as prescribed complementary treatment as well as post-treatment recovery/rehabilitation therapy for hundreds of years. Most hospitals in China have a dedicated TCM department where experienced TCM doctor's prescription includes three aspects: prescribed herbs for oral intake, specific diet to follow, and prescribed energy channel based Tai Chi Qigong exercises.

I believe that most common health problems seen in our daily lives are due to or related to the 21st century living environment, such as Diabetes, Arthritis, Stroke etc. 150 minutes of weekly Tai Chi and Qigong will provide you with enough moderate aerobic activity and muscle-strengthening activity that scientists recommend for an adult to stay healthy and to improve health. For example people who do Tai Chi and Qigong regularly are more likely to have better blood sugar control and reduce the risk of having Diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. The reason for this is that muscles which are working use more glucose than those that are resting.

Obviously depending on one's ability and physical conditions, you should choose your exercise programme carefully and appropriately, but given the wide spectrums of styles, characters and focus of Tai Chi and Qigong, there is something to gain for everyone. My classes are usually having a mixture of people with all ability and conditions, without making anyone feel as though they are picked out, I often tell them to follow two simple rules:

1) Do the best you can within your ability

2) Do the movements slowly with attention to the fine changes in the body.

You were in a well connected family for training in martial arts?

Yes, I had the privilege to meet and learn from well-known Chinese masters, including Madam Sun Jian Yun, the daughter of Sun Style creator Sun Lu Tang, and the foremost Ba Gua & Xing Yi Master, Sha Guo Zheng. I also trained with a lot of elite Tai Chi athletes, many of whom have become my good friends and colleagues.

When did you start entering competitions?

Before entering any competitions I travelled with my father to watch many competitions where he had been invited to be either a judge or the head judge. It was a stimulating and inspiring experience for a young child, seeing children and adults showcasing different styles of martial art movements with passion and pride. Although it was a competition with scores and with medals, it somehow felt more like a celebration of Chinese Martial Arts. People in the competition always seemed friendly and easy to talk to.

I started entering Wushu Competitions when I was in middle school through to my university days as I was one of the main players in the school's wushu squad, competing in categories such as Chang Quan (Shaolin based modern routines), Jian Shu (Sword forms), Taijiquan (Tai Chi Chuan) and Dui Lian (two-person drill). I won first place many times in the Sword and Tai Chi categories. I also competed in traditional competition categories such as Eagle Claws and Emei Needles where I gained good results.

“It was the smooth and seemingly effortless, yet powerful and dynamic martial art movements that attracted me. I still find that no matter how many times I practise the movements, there is always something new to experience.”

As a young person with a passionate hobby, I found competitions really helped me to work hard to achieve a set goal, and to organise my training with focus and discipline. When preparing for a competition, my coach and I would work out a plan, laying out when and what to focus on in my practise. The constant support and encouragement from my team mates during training and competition was also an amazing source of strength, making the whole experience enjoyable, rather than just hard work.

Were there any particular aspects that you favoured more?

It was the smooth and seemingly effortless, yet powerful and dynamic martial art movements that attracted me. I still find that no matter how many times I practise the movements, there is always something new to experience.

Traditional Chinese philosophy/teaching describes life in three levels: 精 Jing (形 Xing), 气 Qi and 神 Shen. Jing/Xing is our physical body shape, our head, shoulder, arms, legs, hips, waist and the internal organs, all of which houses the flow of Qi. That's why the way we walk, stand and move all has an impact on how we feel. Shen is the invisible form of Qi that controls our mind activities, including the processing of information, the thinking and the spirit. The Qi that flows around the meridians in the body, which is often referred to as energy, is the key connection for the body and spirit.

The beauty of martial art training, and Taijiquan in particular, is that we can take our time and progress at our own pace to find the three levels in ourselves, working towards optimum physical and mental health.

Did you study any historical or academic works pertaining to taiji etc.?

I have read a lot of books and articles on Taiji, Xing Yi and Ba Gua. They have mostly been in Chinese, many of which have been excellently translated into English. Certain classical texts are particularly useful for experienced practitioners, such as Yang Cheng Fu's 'Ten Essential Principles of Taiji' recorded by Chen Wei Ming; 'Five Key Secrets' by Li Yi Yu; 'Taijiquan Theory' by Wu Yu Xiang and 'Taijiquan Study' by Sun Lu Tang etc.

I'd advise serious Taiji practitioners to find time to read well written Taiji books in order to stimulate their learning. However, reading books alone won't improve the skills and techniques. Nothing in words and theories can replace the physical experience, the feeling of the expending and the resilient internal energy (Peng Jin). To really understand the meanings of Taiji principles, you need to repeat each movement and technique under expert supervision until it becomes spontaneous.

What prompted you to move to the UK?

I think I had always had a secret desire to see the world outside China; however this was the unthinkable when I was young.

I studied Psychology at Beijing Shi Fan University, where nearly all of the text books were translated from English. Many terminologies were used in English, so I thought it would be nice to read and study the original work. I applied for, and was subsequently offered, a place in the UK to study at Liverpool University. Reading research material in the original language definitely helped me to get a deeper understanding of the subject.

Because I understand how difficult and frustrating it can be to study Taijiquan with translated text, I feel it is important to explain the meaning of Chinese Characters during my teaching, in order to give a broader understanding of the origins and history of the art. We also started to organise regular training trips to China every year, helping Taiji enthusiasts get close to the special cultural places where Taiji originated and grew.

Can you give an indication of the structure of your school?

Tary and I set up the Deyin Taijiquan Institute 17 years ago with the aim of carrying on my family's tradition, and providing a comprehensive training syllabus that can take a complete beginner to an accomplished practitioner.

Our syllabus covers three levels for both students and instructors. A beginner will start with basic stances and hand movements, and will follow a short 8 Step Yang Style Form, as well as doing regular Qigong exercises to improve body alignment and breathing. As the student



Tai Chi Sword

processes and improves, more challenging Taiji routines will be taught, including the 24 Step standardized Taijiquan, 32 Step Taijijian (sword), short Sun Style Forms and technique applications at intermediate level. This is followed by the long hand forms of Yang & Sun Style Taiji, weapon forms, more hand & weapon applications, as well as international competition forms at an advanced level.

We run regular Taiji & Qigong workshops throughout the UK for all levels of practitioners, as well as our annual Deyin Summer Camp, where my father would make a special visit from China, coming over to the UK to give master workshops. To ensure and maintain the teaching standard, we run a 5 module Deyin Instructor Training programme to train intensively on all aspects of Taijiquan syllabus including stances, rooting, body alignment, hand forms, sword technique and applications. We've always made it clear that it is quality rather than quantity that our courses offer. Our instructor course has always been fully subscribed, and we have been delighted by the wonderful feedback from the participants.

Also, in 2009, Tary and I set up the British Health Qigong Association in collaboration with the Chinese Health Qigong Association. This was to promote a specific syllabus of 9 standardised qigong routines. After extensive research and consultation with many prominent Qigong experts, we identified 5 key areas of knowledge for a specific health qigong instructor training course. We understand the wide range of health benefits that Qigong can offer to the aging population, and want to

provide people with a good standard teacher training platform. As a result of our effort, this course has proven extremely popular, and indeed has been over-subscribed every year.

How much of your time is decided between taiji & qigong and do you see them as different disciplines?

Taiji and Qigong are inseparable in my training and teaching. They are unified on so many core strands: both developed on the concept of Qi, governed by the principles of yin and yang, following the five element theory, practised in a gentle, slow and relaxed manner, and both providing a wide range of proven health benefits.

While Taiji and Qigong are very closely linked, I do see them as different disciplines, but in much the same way as I see my left and right hands – one doesn't function very well without the other.

Some of the differences between Taiji and Qigong include: Qigong has a longer history than Taiji, and therefore gives birth to Taiji; Taiji is a form of martial art, while Qigong is for healing only; Taiji forms involve more complex movements, while Qigong is relatively easy to learn; There are over 1000 recorded types of Qigong, and that is without including different versions of the same Qigong, while there are five well-recognised Taiji Styles with many variations.

In general, I use Qigong mainly for people who are very weak, maybe recovering from an operation or experiencing a debilitating illness. A Specific Qigong exercise can help to stimulate a particular meridian that promotes the flow



Qigong is a complex and difficult subject to study, because it has roots in all fundamental principles in TCM, Taoism Philosophy and Tai Chi Principles. Also Qigong came to existence a lot earlier than Tai Chi Chuan, resulting in hundreds if not thousands of different styles and variation in practise today. We try to create a structured programme for Health Qigong Instructors to follow and study. Five key areas of knowledge have been identified as:

1. Traditional Health Preservation Theories in Qigong
 - ☉ yin and yang philosophy theory and Three Levels of Life – 精气神
 - ☉ Five Element and The Five Systems of Life/ 五脏学说
 - ☉ Unique TCM Viscera Doctrine-中医脏象学说
 - ☉ TCM remedial body pathway theory– A Different Kind of Chinese Medicine Anatomy 经络论
 - ☉ A Different Kind of Chinese Medicine Physiology - 气化论
2. TCM – Energy Meridians and Frequently Used/Important Acupuncture Points in Health Qigong.
3. Technical Requirement - Practical Training in Chosen Health Qigong Routine/s
4. Health Benefits – Measureable Elements and Un-measurable Elements
5. Client Care – Teaching Skills, Adaptations and Evaluation

We run the Health Qigong Instructor Course every year and see a high rate of returning participants eager to learn more, which is a sign of approval to us. I also think while Qigong is often described as simple and effective holistic exercises, most people only practise it as a form of slow rhythmic aerobic activity, without fully appreciating the depth of internal power.

You organize regular trips to China, both for training and sight-seeing, how did you decide which people to work with there?

Tary and I have been organizing regular Trips to China since 1998. We found that there was a deep desire from our students to see the real China - from traditional farming villages where martial art was the lifestyle between farming seasons, to the Taoist temples of Wudang Mountain; from the narrow back streets where families cycle to work, to the breath taking scenery on the Great Wall of China.

Unlike the big tour operator chains, we hand-pick the partners in China that we work with. As we have extensive connections in China for martial art coaches and cultural guides, we only use highly skilled and experienced teachers that we know personally to facilitate the training and sightseeing on our trips.

We plan every detail of each trip well in advance, and keep in regular communication with the members of the trip right from their booking until they return home. Tary is a

fantastic trip leader and a natural entertainer, making everyone feel at ease the whole time. People who have been on our trips often describe them as ‘out of this world’, ‘unforgettable’, ‘once in a life time experience’ or ‘like a big family trip with lots of fun’.

The key sites of interest to tai chi practitioners are Wudang and Chenjiaogou, how do you feel about the dramatic changes taking place there?

Yes, we have taken many groups of students to visit and train at these special historical sites – Wudang Mountain, Shaolin Temple and Chen Jia Gou Village etc. Like many cities in China, they are going through tremendous transformation. Every year we go back, we see new buildings popped up. Most of these changes in Wudang and Chen Village are made to accommodate and encourage tourism such as improved hotel standards, road conditions and housing conditions, but I think the Chinese Local Authority needs to learn how to preserve the unique cultural heritage that these places hold and not letting the economic demands take over completely.

Do you feel the standards of taiji has changed much over the years since you started training and if so, in what way?

Every generation has had high level Taiji practitioners. In China, Taiji standards are usually judged in competitions, which still attract a large number of dedicated youngsters. New generations bring new energy into the art, which raises the bar of the whole game.

Away from the competition scene, keeping healthy is a top priority for many Chinese, especially with an aging population. With its proven health benefits, it’s not surprising that Taiji is a firm favorite for the Chinese. Standards vary greatly, depending on the time and effort put in.

In my experience as a teacher and judge at regular competitions all over Europe, I have met some very good Taiji practitioners with excellent skills. But the percentage of Taiji practitioners remains relatively low compared to Yoga or Karate.

How do feel about the current practise of separating Chinese and non-Chinese competitors at International Competitions in China, like we saw in Zhengzhou?

I think this was a transitional measure we saw in Chinese organised international competition, where the practise standard among Chinese athletes were considerably higher than Non-Chinese competitors. It’s not a format that I like or any Non-Chinese competitor prefer, and thankfully, it doesn’t happen any more in Zhengzhou or other international competitions in China as far as I know.

Can you give an overview of the benefits of training the different skills you do, e.g what is sword training good for, fan, sabre... etc.?

The advantage of training in different skills such as the sword, sabre and fan is that you get a taste of the diversity and fun in Taiji. Every apparatus has its own balance, texture, feel and ‘personality’. It can be like having a new hand, you have to get to know the new body part and build a relationship with it. The process of learning how to control a weapon is great fun and good for health, which is often overlooked, as everyone is too eager to get stuck in.

Simple opening and closing of the Fan in different ways really helps to develop strength in the wrist and the fingers, as well as improving flexibility in the finger joints and hand. Keeping finger joints moving is useful in encouraging blood circulation to the finger tips, preventing cold hands and managing arthritis.

Sword and sabre play has lots of charm, as well as developing strength and improving flexibility in the shoulders and arms. It also highlights how we use these muscle groups and joints as if the sword or sabre are held incorrectly it will result in painful shoulders.

What is it about swordplay that you really like?

I really feel the connection with Chinese swords. As a fine weapon, it requires the most experienced craftsmanship, to choose the right type of steel, to the beautifully handcrafted finishing touch on the hilt and hand guard. It’s such a joy to hold and play a well balanced, good quality sword, much like having your favourite toy!

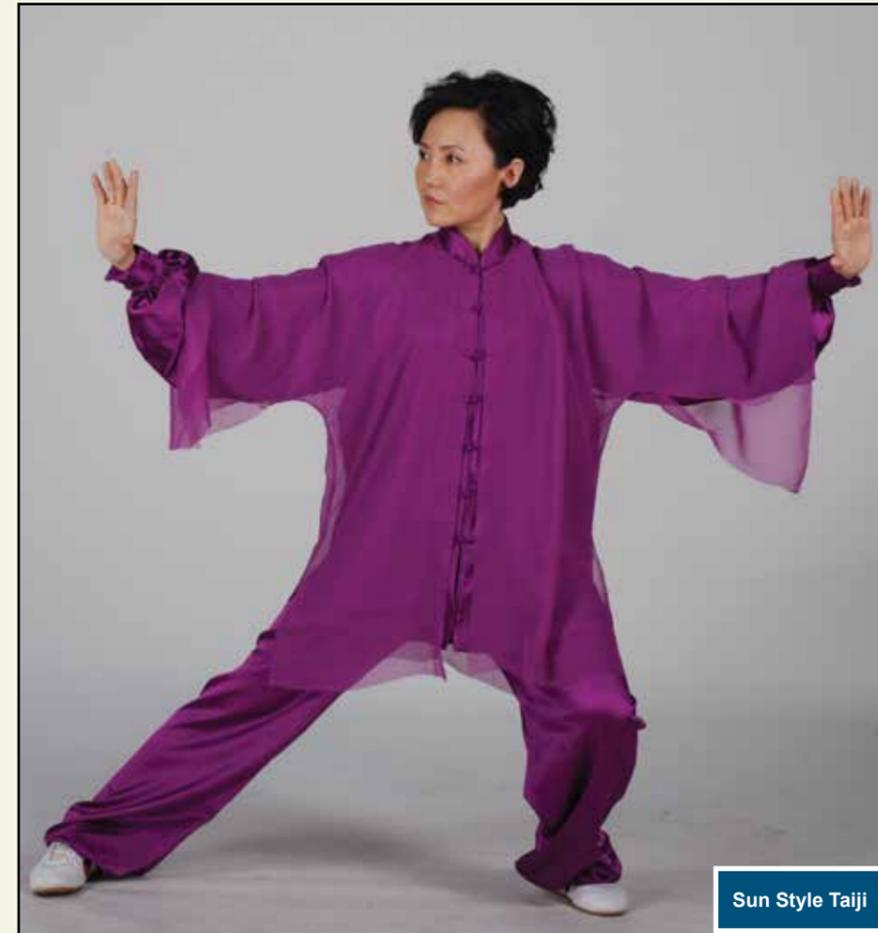
I enjoy working on and refining my sword techniques and feel the sheer physical power that is generated in the sword yet not by using brutal force. I feel practising the swordplay allows me to use more muscle groups than hand form, be more conscious of the Kua, more sensitive to the central equilibrium and improvement on my reflex.

At the same time, it must be said that all Taiji training should be from a holistic approach, and energy channels around the body will be stimulated while you are going through a form in a controlled and relaxed manner, regardless of which weapon you might be using.

You were born and trained in China, live and teach in the UK and regularly teach in various European countries, do you feel there cultural differences on how they approach their training and what it is that they seek for from their practise?

Yes, I teach regular weekend workshops and seminars in the UK, also travel regularly to many European countries to teach Taiji and Qigong. In the last couple of years, I have been invited to teach in Japan, Australia and New Zealand too.

In my experience, all Taiji and Qigong students have a deep desire to improve their level of skills and practise; greater understanding of the principle and theories; how to apply Taiji and Qigong to improve their quality of life (ie. Health benefits).



Sun Style Taiji

Sometimes, the way students from different cultural background approach their learning differs, for example, students in Japan are generally happy to practise continuously for a couple of hours without any break; practitioners in China are generally keen to use competitions to improve their skills.

I encountered the first cultural challenge in my first class in the UK in 1991. At the end of my class, a student asked me: ‘can you tell me, what does ‘T’ai Chi’ mean exactly?’ This simple question made me realize that, for many western enthusiasts, Tai Chi was a meaningless word on a blank canvas. The name did not fit into the culture they knew, but they loved the Taiji way of movements. So I would talk about the book of Yi Jing (I-Ching), the Eight Trigrams, the concept of Yin and Yang, and how it became the name of a martial art. Students were fascinated.

Of course, I don’t get this kind of question any more as Taiji has become much better known. But from this early experience I realized that making the right connection with my students from a different culture was the key to engage my teaching with them, resulting in better learning. Knowing that most of my UK and European students have an inquisitive mind, I encourage them to ask questions. Once the students understand why I correct their movements, or how it can improve their balance, they are very keen to practise and improve. I feel there is no difference in physical ability between the cultures, and that everyone

with passion and a dedication to practise can achieve their full potential in Taiji & Qigong.

Are your children interested in these arts and will we see a family continuation?

They always watch me and Tary doing practise, sometimes they want to follow. I have taught them some wushu classes and short forms. They have been to a couple of competitions, but nothing too serious. They are all taking regular training in gymnastics, which hopefully gives them skills in balance, flexibility, co-ordination and explosive power. So maybe one day, the Taiji seed will grow in them, and that would be nice.

We are taking the attitude of ‘que sera sera’, who knows...

Faye Li Yip is based in the Midlands, UK and teaches throughout Europe.

www.deyin-taiji.com