

A Short Biography of late master Li Xuzhou

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Song style xingyi, noted for its unique power generation and relatively 'softer' approach compared to Hebei variants of xingyi, is one of the rarest of the main xingyi styles, even in China. The vast majority of practitioners remain in Shanxi province, where the art first took shape. However, a few disciples of the Song family did bring the art with them to the developed larger cities, one of whom was Li Xuzhou, who along with Song Huchen's disciple Che Runtian brought Song style xingyi to Tianjin.

Li Xuzhou (1903-1962), a native of Rongcheng in Hebei province, went to Taigu on business. As a youth, he liked fighting. He received personal instruction from Song Shirong himself, and was accepted as a disciple by Song Huchen (Song Shirong's son). Li Xuzhou was assiduous and persistent in his study of Song style xingyi, and was especially skilled in combat. He was renowned in the Tianjin area for his prowess, acquiring the nickname 'He Dong Da Xia' ('the hero east of the river'). In around 1943, he moved to Tianjin and began accepting students. The xingyi passed down by Li is the result of a lifetime of seeking true instruction and 'crossing hands' with other masters.

Even though Li belonged to a highly-respected style, he never viewed other people's arts in terms of such-and-such a style, such-and-such a faction. He firmly believed in Song Shirong's saying that "arts that are good at cultivating qi are internal, those not so are external". He had no desire for fame or fortune, and was a very practical, down-to-earth character. He absorbed the positive aspects of other arts to form his own interpretation of Song style.

The xingyi system passed down by Li includes a lot of neigong and sanshou from bagua, taiji, tongbei and shaolin, most of which was acquired through challenges against other masters. As a result, Li's xingyi has preserved much of the original fighting value of traditional Chinese martial arts. It could even be called a repository of traditional fighting techniques. He not only practiced what he preached, he also encouraged his disciples to familiarise themselves with other arts, and to test what they had learned from him. Most of his disciples had learnt other arts before studying with him, in fact a good many had only become his disciples after being bested by him in challenges. Instead of expecting his disciples to forget everything they had learnt before, Li wanted them to treat Song style xingyi as a reference point for examining what they had learnt before; it was then up to them to sort out which practices were effective and which not. This process enriched the Song style xingyi practiced by Li's line.

Li was a well-educated man who could speak a foreign language and had a good grasp of physics and mathematics. He was dedicated to explaining martial arts through body dynamics and geometry. He often said that “If the student doesn’t understand, it’s the teacher’s fault” and “You only get muddle-headed students if the teacher himself is muddle-headed too.” In his own teaching, he never used metaphysical terminology. The drills and exercises he taught were judged in terms of their effectiveness and he only passed on fighting techniques that had been proven in combat. He often said “If the teacher knows why he does what he does, the student will naturally remember clearly”. His disciples followed in his approach: they are very practical and never talk about any mysterious powers. They believe that practicing neigong should give you great reserves of energy, build a sturdy body, and lead to great agility and power in combat. As Li often said, “You can tell who’s practiced neigong and who hasn’t, there’s a noticeable difference”.

Li Xuzhou emphasised applicability in his teaching – in his view, practice was for use, you should practice techniques as you would use them, he strongly resisted the trend of separation of practice and actual usage. As a result, all of his disciples were skilled in combat, and preserved to a large degree the combat ability of traditional Chinese martial arts.

He had a good many disciples in the Beijing/Tianjin area, such as Xu Fanzeng, Lu Zhongren (who went on to create his own system called ‘Lu’s structure’ based on his studies of Song style xingyi and Yinyang bapanzhang), Zhou Lianju, Zhang Guiliang, Meng Hongfu, Zhang Changtai and Yang Yuebo, to name just a few.

His disciples and grand-disciples, following in their master’s footsteps, have continually enriched Li’s branch of xingyi by absorbing the positive elements of other arts. Amongst his disciples, there was the renowned Lu Zhengwen who injected fresh blood into the research of traditional wushu by investigating the “Internal Unifying Principles of Chinese Wushu”; there were also a number who worked behind the scenes, like the late masters Meng Hongfu, Zhang Guiliang and Yang Yuebo. Two of his disciples who are still with us, Zhang Changtai and Zhang Qifa have made tireless efforts to preserve the combat side of traditional wushu by researching the neigong and sanshou Master Li left behind.