

The Martial Spirit of Tianjin - An Interview with Nitzan Oren

By Jonathan Bluestein

Tell us a bit about your background in the martial arts, past and present, and how you got to study with your current teacher.

I started training martial arts in 1992, when I was 17. That was my 'official' beginning. I really wanted to start much earlier, but my mother didn't want her child "to turn violent" – a typical Jewish mother response. So at 15 I already had Karate and Judo books about which I was very enthusiastic, and from which I tried learning the best I could... Though

obviously, this wasn't serious. Then at 17 I started looking for 'Kung Fu', some Chinese arts. At the time in Israel there weren't too many places teaching Chinese arts. The closest thing I could find was Goju-ryu Karate, and since my Sensei said it had originated from China, I chose that.

My teacher, Eliyahu Ovadia, was a student of one Yaron Binyamini – a famous Israeli teacher who still runs a large organization (Binyamini himself was a student of Kong Mienho, Ma Hong 马虹, Wu Bin 吴彬, Xie Bahua and other well-known Chinese teachers of various styles). Since Binyamini had studied and taught Chinese styles in conjunction with his Goju-ryu in his organization (though not much at the time), we also practiced some Chinese systems to a lesser degree; primarily, modern forms of Chang Quan and Nan Quan, and also some modern and simplified Chen and Yang styles (nowadays, Binyamini mostly teaches Chen style, and some Bagua). I enlisted for my obligatory military service about 1.5 years into my training, and kept training when I could from time to time (Nitzan was an army officer). I kept training at the dojo following my service as well.



In 1999, my teacher Eliyahu converted his secular way of life into Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, and as a result chose to stop practicing and teaching martial arts altogether (a common choice among such people who convert). Technically, I was supposed to start attending classes under Eliyahu's teacher, Yaron, but his dojo was too far. This forced me to look for another path in martial arts.

I looked around and wanted to experience something different. I then pursued Abadá Capoeira under one Mestre Isaac for a year, which I greatly enjoyed. I was already about 24 years old, and discovered I could still be taught some very fine acrobatic and flexibility maneuvers, which greatly enhanced some of my overall physical abilities. Throughout that time I kept training what I previously learned, also practicing with some former friends from the Dojo. I still had the dream of seriously pursuing the study of Chinese arts, and began to examine the option of studying in China. I went on short trips to Shaolin, Wudang and Emei, but was not impressed with what I had seen in terms of the martial value that the arts publicly practiced there seemed to contain.

In 2000 I moved to China, to study Chinese Medicine in Tianjin TCM University (Nitzan studied there for 5 years, and then interned at a local hospital for an additional 2 years). I moved to Tianjin (a big, central city) of all places because that's the only place I found which would have enabled me to begin my studies without prior knowledge of the Chinese language.

I started looking for a martial arts teacher the day after I had arrived in China. I had no connections whatsoever and didn't really know where to look. I did do some research prior though, and had known that I was interested in the 'Internal Arts'. In particular, I was keen on studying Bagua Zhang. A friend of mine from another class at the university told me that one of her professors, a distinguished man who specialized in Chinese Chiropractic, did martial arts, and that one of his students was a very skilled martial arts teacher. That teacher turned out to be my future Shifu, master Zhou Jingxuan (**pronounced:** Jo Jing-Shwen), under whom I still study today. I studied with him for 7 years in China, usually every day, and have also studied with him for some periods of time in the years following my return to Israel.

What did you study under Zhou shifu?

I studied the following: Xing Yi Quan and its entire curriculum (including Xing Yi spear), from several branches (different Hebei and Song family branches). Two Bajiquan forms, number 3 and 4, and Bajiquan partner drills. The 12 basic hands of Piguang and their 40 variations, the Jibengong, and four of that style's weapons – Feng Mo Gun (Crazy Demon Staff), Dao (curved sword), Miao Dao (Sprout Sword) and Hei Hu Bian (Black Tiger Whip). During my last two years with Zhou shifu I also studied Shaolin Jingang Bashi (Jibengong, basic hands, 64 soft hands and the Jian –



straight sword). Under Zhou I also learned the use of additional weapons which do not specifically belong to any art – Pair of Iron Clubs (Shuang Jian), Pair of Tiger-Head Hooks (Hu Tou Gou; a Shaolin weapon) and the use of the Meteor Hammer.

In the picture: Master Zhou Jingxuan, year 2010.

What was it like studying under Zhou shifu in the beginning?

The first time I met shifu he asked me what I wanted to learn. He followed by telling me about the martial arts he was teaching. He wrote their names on a note, which I keep to this day. I heard all these weird names... “Pigua Zhang, Baji Quan, Fanzi Quan, Shaolin Jingang Bashi...”. I never heard about any of these martial arts before. But then lastly he said “Xing Yi”, and I chose that, because that was the only name I was familiar with... which is quite funny in retrospective, since I made a fateful choice as such so arbitrarily. Xing Yi wasn’t the Bagua I wanted, but I knew it was an ‘Internal’ art, and chose to follow my luck and see this as an opportunity. Years later shifu would also tell me, that in accordance to his own traditional Chinese view and beliefs, he felt it was a matter of fate that a student and teacher find each other like that.

Studying with shifu was quite difficult at first. We had a complex relationship. To begin with, I could barely speak any Chinese, and even with that, I had a hard time understanding anything shifu was saying, because he carried a heavy Tianjinese accent. During the first 6 months I could make little sense of his speech. Luckily, he was good enough at providing physical cues and examples for me to still be able to learn and advance. It also helped that I was being taught as a beginner, so there wasn’t too much need for overly complex explanations. At times, as is the case now, there were Chinese students of shifu around who knew some English, and could translate for me.

I was taught privately by Shifu. He'd come to teach me at the University, and I was usually the only one there (apart from when other Israeli students were studying with me). The few other Chinese students he had studied elsewhere, in Xigu Park. It took him 45 minutes by bike in each direction to reach me, but he was a dedicated teacher, willing to go the distance for his students.

At the time I began studying with Shifu, he had some bitter experience with foreigners. Many came before, but did not take his martial arts too seriously. Quite a few simply wanted to study for a very short period of time, and learn as much as possible within that time frame. That is not how the teaching of Chinese traditional arts works, and Zhou was not fond of that approach and attitude. Also, these students weren't respectful towards him as a teacher, and did not understand Chinese culture and local customs. Then when I came, he was assuming I was just like all of these other foreigners. So while he taught me seriously, as he is very professional about his teaching and arts, he did not pretend he liked me too much or anything like that. Back in the day when I just started, shifu would sometimes bring me before his friends to demonstrate. I would then hear him comment: "Look at those foreigners, they don't understand anything... They just don't get it". That was the sort of attitude he had towards me, and foreigners in general, at that time.



In the picture: From left to right – Ben Baryo, Pigua Zhang master Pang Zhiqi (one of Zhou's teachers in that art), shifu Nitzan Oren and Itai Sholomon. The other students are shifu Nitzan's gongfu brother under master Zhou.

We would meet every day for two hours. First thing I learned was Pi Quan. I would only do that and Zhan Zhuang for the first few months. Later I learned Zuan Quan and did that with the rest for another month, and then each month another fist was added until I learned all of Xing Yi's Five Elements. I studied these basics for a very long period of time, given countless corrections and emphasis. I had also trained them all with different stepping methods. It was only after that long period of setting the foundations that Shifu taught me the rest of the material.

I was lucky to have already had some foundation in the martial arts beforehand. Because of this, the external postures and coordination were relatively easier for me to study. Otherwise, that 'foundation period' might have been longer. I was also lucky to have insisted to learn in that way. As I told you before, Zhou thought of teaching me more casually, like he was used to teaching all the other foreigners up to that point. But during my first classes I made it clear to him, through some friends who could translate, that I wanted to study Xing Yi in the traditional manner – like he had studied it. That is why and how I 'earned' this right of 'eating bitter' during my first year. It surely paid off later. The main point about that period was helping me develop my Yi (Intention). That was the focal point of my early training. Most of my movements, I



trained at a very slow speed. Later I started learning the use of the Spear, beginning with the Five Elements done with the spear, to further develop the 5 forces contained in the empty handed Five Elements. The 12 Animals came later, with all the rest.

In the picture: Master Zhou and shifu Nitzan with Xing Yi Quan master Gong Kuifeng – one of master Zhou's teachers of that art.

In the beginning I was just another regular student; not an indoor student (Tudi). I was more like a customer who hired a professional teacher. With time, our relationship became better. A gongfu brother of mine who was an English-speaking

Chinese joined us. He was very friendly, and helped me and shifu become closer. As my Chinese significantly upgraded, and I had a chance to prove my dedication and persistence, the way Zhou treated me changed accordingly. I remember for instance that in earlier times, he'd really hurt me sometimes when demonstrating joint-locks. Later, when we had a closer Shifu-Tudi relationship, he no longer did that sort of thing. Once he used to speak of me like I wasn't there, and referring to me as a representative of "all those foreigners who don't take things seriously". Later, he began to do the opposite, setting me as a positive example, and saying good things about me in front of his friends and gongfu family. Sometimes, he would even talk of me as a model for a good student, as compared to some other Chinese students who weren't so dedicated. I remember that one of the greatest compliments I had ever received was when people started telling me that my gongfu looked like it came from Zhou shifu. First time that happened was a few years into my training, when one of shifu's gongfu brothers came to visit and told me that.

In the picture: Master Zhou Jingxuan in Israel, in the year 2010.

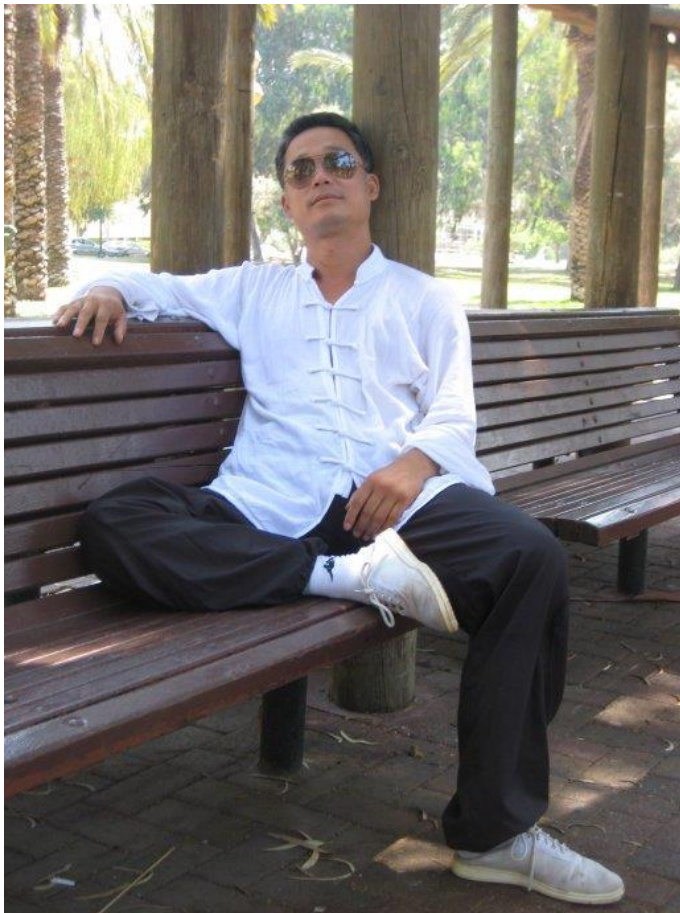
How was Zhou different compared to other teachers you studied with?

Zhou was skilled in teaching and explaining without the use of words. He would do this by giving emphasis on sight and touch. His teaching as such was extremely accurate, down to the smallest details. He was very physical. When teaching, he would press and pull on different parts of my body to align me correctly – mold me into form like a sculptor. He was the first teacher that asked me to touch every part of his body whilst he did things so I could understand

how he moved. He knew how to enlarge small and tight movements so they would make sense, and for the student to be able to grasp what they should feel like. He had an excellent ability to explain how to make the mechanics of something work, and wherein something did not work,



he always knew what had been the small fault or the very specific movement which got things stuck. Following a lot of physicality, he could then also explain verbally quite well where, how and why things went wrong. Across the years, even though I kept practicing some exercises and movements which he taught me during my first month or two, he always had a lot of depth and breadth to add to them. He'd sometimes say that "I had already studied this or that", but then find a deeper aspect of the same thing to teach me. His teaching as such was very structured. Whenever I got better, there was a higher level to the same practices. Additionally, each student was fitted with a curriculum and approach that best suited his personality and abilities. Shifu also has a very distinct style of martial self-expression, which is uniquely his own. Though he teaches martial arts very methodically and in the traditional manner, his personal take on them is distinctive. He has an exceptional ability to enliven whatever martial movement or form he teaches or performs. For instance, when wielding a sword, he would appear like he was really cutting someone down. His mental state and expressions are often like those of a person doing real battle, sometimes complete with sound effects. He would 'get into character', so to speak... like an actor.



What was Zhou shifu like, as a person?

Well, he sure got a sense of humour! Zhou is mischievous and loves pranks and physical humour. Though one has to become acquainted with it... sort of an acquired taste. For instance - he won't shy away from using something like a Wedgie as a martial technique, and incorporate it into a takedown of sorts.

At first glance, especially watching him train and teach from the side, he might appear stern and overly serious. But as a matter of fact, he is quite nice and likable. He likes to joke and fool around. He loves the company of other people, and is at his best when together with more than one person. Once you get to

know him on the more personal level, things become easier overall.

He has a very practical approach to anything related to martial arts or otherwise. He likes to test things, see if they work. I once bought him a fine custom-made sword, as a gift for teaching me the use of that type of sword. He felt compelled to check out if the sword could cut through the nearby tree and wooden bench... had to be practical. Excessive motions and beautiful movements for the sake of beauty do not appeal to him. In fighting, he believes and advocates that one should be cruel.

Some aspects of his personality stayed very consistent since I've known him. For instance, he has always been a patriot - very passionate about the Chinese as a people and culture (though not politically inclined). However, throughout the years he also changed a lot of his other views and inclinations. His approach toward foreigners had changed dramatically. When I had first known him, he wasn't much inclined to use modern technologies (having grown up in a poor environment, following the Cultural Revolution). Nowadays he's always with his smart phone, and runs an online blog and video channel in Chinese. His nationalistic agendas, I suppose are due not in small part to the invasion of foreign armies to China, and Tianjin in particular, over the last 200 years. This is what had originally made him suspicious of foreigners. On the other hand, I had the advantage in this regard, because I came from Israel, and oftentimes the Chinese consider the Jews and Israelis to be 'the wise and successful underdogs who fight bravely for their existence' – something which they can identify with (in general, Jews tend to have a good reputation in China – somewhat of a reverse Anti-Semitism). Over time, as I brought more foreigners to learn from him, his attitude changed for the better. He simply did not originally live in an environment in which he had a chance to get a positive exposure to foreigners. His former biases are now long gone, and he has students from all over the world – Israel, Canada, France, the U.S., Latvia, Poland, etc.

Tell me a little bit about other students of shifu at the time you studied with him.

Well, a few of Zhou's students have been very dedicated, and stayed for many months or years at a time, training hard and really putting their minds and hearts into it. Most students weren't as devoted and serious though.

There was one guy from Spain, who came over for two weeks, and immediately stated he was planning to do the following within the confines of his short trip: Learn a sword form, learn Traditional Chinese Medicine, and achieve enlightenment and understanding of the Dao. Modest goals indeed. He came with a translator, since he couldn't speak Chinese. He didn't quite get the movements and principle Zhou was teaching him. Shifu did his best to explain

things to him through the translator, but the Spanish guy insisted that it was the translator who didn't get it, and that he was doing things correctly. By the time he 'finished' learning the sword form, it was quite a mess. He later took that little knowledge he got back to Spain, and apparently began teaching it to his students.

There were also Chinese fellows who came to train with crazy ideas in mind. In China, there are many TV shows based on Wuxia 武侠 novels (stories and legends of Chinese knights and martial heroes, and their fantastic adventures). Many Chinese are touched and influenced by these, especially as such stories are often interwoven with real pieces of Chinese history. One such guy came to train with shifu, and asked if we had a 'secret book containing the special methods for learning the arts quicker and better'. He was quite delusional. Another time when this student was injured (not from training), shifu gave him a herb formula to put in his bath. He was super-excited about this. Thinking he got some 'secret formula', he went to several different herb stores, to buy in each of them only some of the ingredients – so “no one store could copy the entire recipe”. In retrospect, since I am a TCM doctor, I can tell you that this had been a really basic formula, which is quite commonly used.

I noticed that in the summertime often came groups of high-school youngsters, who had really put in an effort for 2 months, and asked to be taught basic self-defense and practical fighting. They used to spar and lot with gloves and work with heavy bags. It was later found out that they came to study so they could gain a reputation as 'notorious school bullies', to ensure people won't pick fights with them. Street fighting is very common in Tianjin, or at least was at the time, for all age groups. I had seen people there fighting over the most arbitrary and ridiculous things all the time.



In the picture: Master Zhou's Israeli students, in the year 2010. Left to right: Jonathan Bluestein, Yair Dauber, Nitzan Oren, Zhou Jingxuan, Ben Baryo and Itai Sholomon.

I know you have met some of Zhou shifu's teachers. Please tell us about them.

Shifu had studied with over 13 teachers in his lifetime, and is indoor student of about 7 of them. Zhou's main teacher overall was Shen Jiarui, who taught him Bajì Quan and Shaolin Jingang Bashi. Shen is a very interesting person, whose skill in the arts is only equaled by his modesty and kindness. In traditional Chinese society, it is the custom that students pay for the teacher in restaurants, and put food on the teacher's plate. That is a show of respect. But Shen wouldn't have any of that. He'd go and pay for meals in advance, so people won't be able to pay for him. Since Chinese martial families are like real families, Shen figures it is his duty as a 'father' to pay. Once we went with him to Cangzhou it was very cold, so I voluntarily gave Shen one of my hats to wear (he was already in his mid-60s at the time). He seemed moved by what I did. Later when we sat down to eat dinner, he suddenly put food on my plate by surprise. This was in front of many other martial artists. That sort of show of respect from a teacher to his gongfu grand-student is unheard of in traditional China. When Shen practiced and demonstrated, he was like a fierce tiger, but with his normal gait he appeared much more like one would expect from the older gentleman he is. One could never guess he is such a skilled master.

In the picture: Master Zhou with his Bajì Quan and Shaolin Jingang Bashi teachers – masters Sun Zhenyao (left) and Shen Jiarui (right), who were themselves gongfu brothers, and taught him both their martial arts together.



Zhou's next most prominent teacher is Xing Yi and Bagua master Li Guoliang (not to be confused with Li Guoliang from Taigu, who is also a Xing Yi teacher). He was in his late 70s when I met him, and the first thing he asked me to do is show him my Zhan Zhuang. He didn't even say for how long he expected me to hold the stance he asked for, which is psychologically troubling, because I knew he could have kept me in that posture for an hour or more. He only bothered to start correcting me after over 40 minutes of doing this. But following that, he earnestly said he was convinced I was taught correctly. He only came over that day, it turned out, to meet me, since Zhou had told him I had been a serious student of Xing Yi Quan (unfortunately, Zhou did not have any other such serious students for that art). His skill was of such high level that I couldn't really imitate anything he did – only follow his instructions and corrections. He was drawing tiny circles across his entire body as he was moving, and even though he allowed me to feel him up as he was doing it, I still couldn't quite figure out how he had done such things. His minute and subtle internal movements created a lot of power. Months and years later, his insistence that I feel his body going through the motions paid off, as I was slowly and gradually able to recapture the essence of some of these skills, based on having known what they should feel like.

In the picture: Nitzan being corrected by master Li Guoliang.

Another Xing Yi teacher of Zhou that came to the park to meet me one time was Gong Kuifeng, who practiced Hebei style from Liu Qilan's lineage (unlike Li Guoliang, who is from the Shanxi branch, Song family lineage). Gong was in his mid-80s at the time. He gave me a lot of corrections and good advices. Due to his life's circumstances and the place he lived in, he used to climb an endless amount of stairs every day, covering hundreds of storeys altogether. He was convinced that climbing that many stairs contributed a lot to his gongfu, and suggested that I follow his example and do the same.



During my later years of training I traveled with two gongfu brothers of mine to meet Pang Zhiqi – Zhou’s Pigua teacher, in order to learn an ancient version of the Pigua Miao Dao form. It was slower, and had many more steps, compared to the modern one I know. It focused more on large, expansive and flowing motion, in contrast with the more compact structure of the modern Pigua Miao Dao form, which has lots of explosive movements. It was also less ‘whipping’. This experience showed us that after the assimilation of Miao Dao into Pigua in the early 20th century, it had been influenced a lot by the body mechanics of that style. Pang was 70+ years of age when we studied with him, and had still been very active and enthusiastic. A while prior to our visit he started learning Baji Quan from another teacher, and was excited to demonstrate to us what he had learned.

In the picture: Nitzan and master Zhou visiting the village of Cangzhou – the birthplace of the martial art called Baji Quan.



Why did you go and study other martial arts in China besides Xing Yi Quan? And who were your other teachers?

The little bit of Bajiquan I learnt was to improve some aspects of my Xing Yi (more on that later). I started studying Pigua because I really liked its weapons, which eventually led me to study some of the empty handed material as well. I focused on Xing Yi for 5 years, and then started learning Jingang in depth, since I have already covered most of the Xing Yi curriculum.

Zhou always wanted me to study Jingang Bashi. I think that's the art he likes and appreciates the most. He settled for teaching me Xing Yi because that's what I wanted, but I think he'd rather have taught me Jingang. The traditional Chinese view dictates that the student should learn what the teacher tells him to, but he made compromise since I was a stubborn Westerner. By the time I had 5 years' experience, I became open minded enough to listen to his advice on that front.

Shifu had studied with many teachers, and within a few years' time began encouraging me to eventually do the same, especially with Xing Yi, to get a broader perspective of the art. By the time I was with him for 5 years, he was keen on me finding another Xing Yi teacher to expand my knowledge. I eventually found Wu Bingwen, who belonged to our extended Xing Yi gongfu lineage (from the Song family line), and also practiced Yin style Bagua Zhang. With Wu shifu I studied the basics of their Song style – their specific Zhan Zhuang and Five Elements, on visits to Wu's place on the outskirts of Tianjin (Liu Kuai Zhuang village) over the span of my last 2 years in China. I've had many long conversations with Wu shifu about the arts, and these helped me tremendously in understanding the similarities and differences between different lineages of Xing Yi Quan. Wu shifu never agreed to take a penny from me. My enthusiasm and willingness to train was enough motivation for him to teach me. He even gave me a hard time gifting him with fruits I brought over to his place on occasion.

At one point I became interested in Shuai Jiao. Compared to other grappling and throwing arts like Judo, I felt that Shuai Jiao had a far more 'Internal' quality to it, at least in some respects, and that had drawn me to this art. It had lots of low stances and practices that resembled Zhan Zhuang, and I liked that. A friend from Beijing told me of a famous Shuai Jiao teacher he knew from his extended gongfu family, Gao Futong, whose line came from Tianjin. When I first arrived to study with Gao shifu, and first thing they did was to accept me as a tudi within their line; which is unusual, as such a ceremony rarely takes place upon first acquaintance and with people the teacher doesn't know well). It was even more strange given that Gao shifu was already in his 70s, and I was 30 years old. Under such circumstances, a person would normally be listed as a grand-student of a teacher, and not as his direct student. That is to avoid a scenario when one's "gongfu brothers" are decades older than oneself, and even a situation

wherein, students of one's gongfu brothers are older than oneself (Chinese martial society is strongly influenced by Confucianism and its familial hierarchy, which abhors that sort of disorder). But for this particular gongfu family, it had been their first opportunity to accept a foreigner to their ranks, who might perhaps help spread their tradition overseas, so they made an exception. My time training Shuai Jiao tremendously improved my understanding of standing grappling, throws and takedowns. Gao shifu lived very close to me in Tianjin. We trained at the shelter beneath his apartment building (or was it a club of sorts? Nitzan isn't sure what the heck that space was supposed to be). He would invite me to eat at his home, as I was like family to him. He was an extremely nice individual, and I spent a lot of time with him and his family.

During my last year in China, I would travel to Beijing once a week to work at airport security for an Israeli airline company. I figured that since I was there and my teachers weren't around, I should find some nice new martial activity to pursue. I then spent that year doing Kendo once a week. I liked it because it was fighting oriented, and had lots of contact involved. I found it excellent for working on one's fighting intent. Another reason I chose Kendo was because I figured that while it was something different, it did not conflict with my other martial studies. I was able to locate a great dojo there, run by a 3rd dan. There was a large Japanese business community in Beijing, and the Kendo teacher was constantly bringing high-ranking Kendoka to train with us. I even trained with several 6-7th dans, and one 8th dan.

How did the practice of additional martial arts help your Xing Yi Quan practice?

Each martial art gave me a different perspective on fighting. Xing Yi was very much focused on moving the whole body as a single unit, moving all at once. Training the Yi and fullness of the body were the focal points in training. It was very direct, like a train. Bajiquan, while also being direct, was more wide and expansive in its movements. There was a lot more sideways action. Rooting was more strongly emphasized, while Xing Yi puts more emphasis on constantly striving forward. Jingtang Bashi has a totally different flavour and character to the previous two. The feet are very light and agile, and one constantly changes directions. Evasion is encouraged. Its body mechanics are more flexible and pliable. Speed is key, and the power and feel of this art are more 'External'. The hands make large movements, while Xing Yi likes minimalism and working from up close. Jingtang is more akin in its strategies and tactics to Western Boxing than other Chinese arts. Pigua gave me a lot of flexibility, and the ability to whip with the entire body. It was great for helping me develop Heavy Hands skills, used with large motions. Pigua is big on striking from odd directions and angles, which is also useful to learn and train in.

Zhou always thought of Jingang as 'a martial art for martial artists'. Reasons being: 1. That Jingang includes so many techniques of so many kinds, that there is hardly any standing technique which does not appear in its vast curriculum. 2. Jingang works out its fighting with a 'problem-solving' attitude, providing a definite 'answer' for any 'questions'. Each offense is given a 'solution', and then there's a solution for that solution, and so forth. These are usually trained with elaborate movement combinations, of 4-5 movements. My main style, Xing Yi, is focused on principles. It helped a lot, then, to study a style like Jingang, so focused instead on applications. Another unique aspect of Jingang is that one trains charging the opponent with short sprints, throwing many combinations one after the other. It is a type of practiced I have not encountered in other arts.

At one point I was studying Tuo Xing, one of the Xing Yi animals. The end segment of this movement requires the issuing of strong fa jin sideways, which is uncommon in Xing Yi. I had trouble with developing that sort of power, and then Zhou suggested that I practice Bajiquan for a while, to work on my sideways power. Xing Yi is very much focused on the center, moving into and issuing power to the front. Bajiquan contains a lot of sideways manipulations and power issuing. Before I started to learn Bajiquan, Shifu asked me to stop working on my Xing Yi. I then studied our third Bajiquan form (Xiao Jia). I wasn't too keen on giving up my Xing Yi, because Bajiquan "wasn't the art I came for". But since I had by that time learned to abide by the more traditional Chinese mindset, I decided to listen to Shifu and do as he asked of me, completely abstaining from any Xing Yi training for about a month (besides the Zhan Zhuang). This turned out to have helped me tremendously, and my Xing Yi was much better when I came back to doing it. A few years later, I also learned our fourth Bajiquan form, together with my gongfu brother Ben.

Kendo was beneficial in that I was constantly getting hit. I used this sort of learning environment to teach myself how to keep focus under pressure. Maintain a flowing and unbroken fighting intent.

Shuai Jiao helped a lot with my ability to keep stable while being grabbed. It also has a lot of fighting-intent training, and had helped me hone my psychological edge in combat.

What would you recommend to people who are interested in moving to China to study martial arts?

Find a teacher who is a ‘folk teacher’ – of the people (called Mínjiān 民间 in Chinese). Not someone with a large school or from a monastery. A person with an authentic lineage which can be traced a few generations back, who teaches out of the love for the arts and not strictly for money (if at all). In choosing a teacher, one is better to follow personal recommendations from direct students of a teacher, rather than rely on advertisements or hearsay advice. In taking advice, try to do so from a person whom you can safely assume have had serious training.

Since many teachers in China require recommendations for students to be accepted into class, it might prove important to get such recommendations in advance (simply approaching a teacher in a park would not always work). Wherein one lacks social connections for this, it is possible to ask for advice and recommendations on various online forums. Otherwise, one can sometimes make contact with students of a certain teacher by sending messages to people running online video channels with videos of teachers one is interested in. Try asking some of your new Chinese friends while in China – there’s always someone around who knows something about a good teacher.

Listen to the teacher of your choice – he probably knows better. You should trust him. Do not rush to learn, take measured steps in your learning curve. Forms and weapons can wait. Don’t be too eager to get to them as a beginner.

Having knowledge of the Chinese language would certainly help. That being said, a good teacher can give a lot to a beginner even without them speaking the same language (though it is eventually important to learn decent Chinese). Knowing Chinese is more important for those without prior background in the martial arts.

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