

# A Curious Mind

## Memories of Master Zhou

It is a peculiar and somewhat surreal thing that, a Westerner belonging to a nation of people who are less than 15 million in number worldwide, who dwells in the Middle-East, would come to be a student



of another man, half a world away – one of nation counting over 1.5 billion people. Some would call it Karma, Fate, or Divine Intervention. I, for one, attribute this to the power of Human Wills. For where two people search the same thing, its shape, nature or distance matter less than its essence. What one looks for, with unquestionable desire and an utmost thirst, will bring one to find the answers, in the existence of other human beings. So it came to be, that I have become a student of master Zhou Jingxuan; a man quite unlike myself, who nonetheless shared with me something transcendental and

special. A connection to an ancient mindset, now long gone from the soul of the majority of humanity. This keen interest in the Martial Arts – a glue that brings people together and bridges across cultures



like no other; a gift that master Zhou was handing over to those eager to accept, passing it on as it had been passed to him.

Seeking truthful and serious traditional instruction, I came to study, many years ago, under master Zhou's student, shifu Nitzan Oren – a fellow Israeli, and nowadays also a dear friend. Later, on several occasions, I have had the chance to study directly under Zhou shifu for long periods of time. With both teachers I have studied Xing Yi Quan and Pigua Zhang. My last training period with Zhou had been for several months of daily training, during Summer and Autumn of 2014. Prior to that, I have also trained daily with Zhou shifu for a month in summer 2010, when he had come to Israel to instruct his Israeli students and their students, and in summer of 2012 in China.

To understand what Zhou was about, it is instrumental that I tell you of the place that molded his being. Master Zhou was born and had lived all of his life in Tianjin city, China. Today, Tianjin is a booming metropolis of 15 million people, with infrastructure and facilities no less impressive than those of famous European cities (albeit its pollution being quite terrible). But at its core, Tianjin is an ancient city, and up until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was still quite primitive in its construction and accommodations, not to mention the living standards, which were fitting of a third-world country. While culture in some respects has always flourished, either above or below the surface, the mentality and mindset of most of this city's inhabitants was always that of the poor and struggling. Even today, it can be said that large portions of the city are one big 'rough neighborhood'. This is the environment engulfed Zhou's existence throughout his life – a place which builds character, psychological endurance, and sharp survival instincts.

**Tianjin, circa 1930:**



**Tianjin, 2012 (when I visited there for the first time):**





In 1931, the Empire of Japan had invaded Manchuria, with the goal of conquering all of China, marking the (true) beginning of World War II. The China that was invaded had been at its weakest point in many centuries, following 200~ years of economic conquest by Western powers, and a succession of terrible civil wars. The Chinese barely survived the great war, in which the Japanese Imperial Army was not only close to occupying all of China, but performed some of the worst atrocities and war crimes in recent memory, including mass murders and rapes of

thousands and tens of thousands of women at a time. Tianjin suffered significantly from this occupation, and so had Zhou's family. His grandfather in turn, set out to fight the Japanese. The Chinese army was so scarce in resources, that it was frequent that the soldiers would run out of ammunition, or lack firearms altogether. The 29<sup>th</sup> army, which Zhou's grandfather joined, had therefore experimentally equipped their soldiers with additional weapons – Dao and Da Dao swords (standard and enlarged curved sabers), to fight the Japanese at close quarters, or when the ammunition would run out. It is almost unthought of that in the age of automatic and semi-automatic guns, that people would be fighting against such weapons with swords, but the 29<sup>th</sup> army did so quite successfully. Zhou's grandfather survived the war, at the cost of seeing all his friends being killed by the Japanese. It seems to me that this traumatic experience of the most

brutal kind of fighting had undoubtedly affected young Zhou shifu, who took to heart the lessons of war and violence. From his grandfather, he even learned the Dao form they used to train in order to kill the Japanese.



**In the pictures:** Left – A Chinese soldier, carrying a Da Dao sword on his back, waiting at the Tianjin railroad station. Bottom – Another soldier of the 29<sup>th</sup> army, carrying Dao swords on his back.

For Zhou, it was obvious from a young age that he was going to practice martial arts. The district he lived in, Hong Qiao (红桥), is one of two districts in the city of Tianjin famous for their martial artists (the other being Nankai 南开). He lived near Xigu park – an impressive island of greenery in the middle of gray Tianjin, which had over the years become an attraction point for many martial artists.



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The teaching atmosphere was very different from other places, especially compared to schools in modern times. People simply came to the park and practiced. You could have chosen between many teachers, and if you had the right connections, also be recommended by your own teachers to become a student of others. Because of these unique circumstances, Zhou had the opportunity to get to know hundreds of highly-skilled martial arts teachers in his lifetime, and study under quite a few of them.

Beginning at age 9, Zhou started his studies with the arts of Chuo Jiao, Fanzi Quan and Tan Tui. Later, he also learned Pigua Zhang (under two teachers), Xing Yi Quan (under four teachers), and Baji Quan and Jingang Bashi (under two teachers who are gongfu brothers) and Li style Taiji Quan. Additionally, all of Zhou's teachers taught him several weapon forms, each. Some of these weapons are related to the arts he had studied, while others such as the Six Harmonies Spear form or various joint-locking forms are interdependent from style. Overall, Zhou shifu ended up having over 13 long-term teachers, out of which he became an official disciple (indoor student) of seven.

Zhou also had encounters and knowledge exchanges with several other martial arts teachers. Since he had over the years become such an enormous fountain of martial knowledge, there were always people who were interested in learning his skills – especially material from his rare art of Shaolin Jingang Bashi. It is not the custom in Chinese society, however, that two people of the same class (say two veteran teachers) would become each-others student. Because of this, Zhou exchanged knowledge with these teachers on a friendly basis, and gained insight into the use and theory of many other martial arts and weapons in that manner.

As a child, Zhou was mischievous and adventurous. This had probably been his way of coping with the harsh living conditions in Tianjin, past the Cultural Revolution (a time of great poverty and death throughout China). The country was difficult to survive in, and life was chaotic. People had to learn how to endure and manage, and



teach these skills to their families as well. Thus, when Zhou began his martial arts learning at the age of 9, and through his teenage years and early 20s, he was involved in a lot of fights that were forced upon him by others. Initially, he was wary of violence. But early on in his training, older gongfu brothers have ordered him to pick up fights with other children, while they watched his back. Unable to refuse, he learned how to fight in this manner at a young age.

Times have since changed, China and Tianjin have become relatively safer places, and Zhou the adult turned more peaceful in nature. Also in accordance with the times, Zhou has since been accepting students with all types of goals in training – not just martial; he eventually enjoyed teaching people who sought learning the arts for self-preservation and development as well. He himself had also begun to practice more health-oriented methods over the years, to balance his previous martial escapades. Zhou's previous martial experiences were still evident though; as he demonstrated the proper execution of movements and martial techniques, he did so with a fierceness and intimidation of a true fighting scenario.



**In the picture:** Members of Zhou's gongfu family – practitioners of Bajì Quan and Jìngāng Bāshì, some of them members of the Communist Party. Circa 1980s. Zhou is sitting in the front row, on the far left, wearing a white shirt. Behind Zhou stands his grand-teacher, Tian Jìnzhōng, wearing glasses. To Tian's left stands another grand-teacher of Zhou's – Zhào Fújiāng (bald man with dark-blue shirt), who was master Tian's younger gongfu brother in their Bajì lineage.

When Zhou was a young teenager, he recalls, there was a certain Taijì Quan teacher in the park. To Zhou and his friends, that old teacher was a target for ridicule, as he looked funny, and they did not think much of the slow movements he had been practicing. The old man, on his part, did not mind at all the children's behaviour, and completely ignored them. They used to come at him in the park when he was not training, and try to push him over. Zhou vividly remembered how, despite their best attempts, they could not do anything to him. Whenever they pushed on him, his body would collapse and absorb their energy with no apparent effort. Those who used too much force on him would be bounced back or into the ground by their own strength and momentum. Later as he became a teacher himself, Zhou was stricken by this silliness and his former disrespect towards the old man, when he was younger. He said: "I wish I was wiser, and would have gone to study under this man, as he had obviously possessed great skill in the martial arts".

Such experiences, as well as Zhou's tutelage by many teachers over the years, have made him garner much respect towards other arts and martial artists. It was difficult, and often impossible, to make Zhou shìfū speak badly of other people and their arts. He could go in-length for many minutes on end, on the wonderful skills of practitioners which he thought highly of. But ask him of someone who is not skilled or is not a good person, and Zhou would have rather said he did not know enough about this person or his martial art, than speak badly of them. He also regretted not having the chance or the time to practice under or with martial artists of styles he had not learned. While Zhou was very satisfied and enthusiastic about the styles he practiced and



taught, this yearning for more knowledge was derived from his great appreciation of other practitioners and their arts. Having trained in Xigu park since childhood (and later started teaching there), Zhou was a very familiar figure in the park. It seems that most people who went there knew him somehow – if not by name, at least by recognizing his face and composure. Since his youth, he was also been famous around his neighborhood for his excellent skills in Pigua Zhang.

In Chinese society, where one's name, Ego and 'Face' often play a huge role, it is rare that people publicly ask others, who are not their own teachers, to instruct them. Such an act would, in this traditional society, indicate that the person asking instruction is 'lesser' or even 'inferior' to the other. Nonetheless, I have myself seen many people in the park approach Zhou shifu, asking him to teach them a little something here and there, or to correct their practice. I have also been witness to several parents who came to Zhou, and asked him to formally accept their children as his students. These parents were interested in the physical well-being of their children – their health and ability to protect themselves, and also in exposing their children to traditional Chinese culture, in an age in which most Chinese children were more interested in imitating American culture.

As stated earlier, China at large has suffered from two centuries of Economic and Military occupation by Western powers. The very center of this ugly takeover was the city of Tianjin, which still features several neighbourhoods with lots of beautiful Western-style architecture, reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. These times were



then followed by several decades of strict Communist rule, which was also anti-Western in ideology, and actively fought the West in the Korean War and during the Cold War. That said, it was to be expected that the older Chinese generations would not think highly of Westerners. Neither did Zhou think too positively of Westerners, when he was younger. Having never learned a foreign language or known a Westerner as a friend, like most of the Chinese of his generation, his opinion of Westerners was shaped by the bloody, turbulent history of China over the last few centuries. While one could hardly suggest that this social anti-Western mindset was stained by harsh things like Racism, one could say that suspicion, prejudice and bias were definitely common in this society towards foreigners. Which is perfectly understandable, by the way, considering their historical circumstances, and China's isolation from the Western world throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I believe that Zhou's ideas about foreigners must have taken their first shift once he began to teach Westerners in the 1990s. Slowly but surely, he came to understand that they were not at all as bad as they were always portrayed to be when he was younger. A major change of heart was in the years following Zhou's acquaintance with my teacher, Nitzan Oren. At the time, and throughout his life actually, Zhou had trouble with students leaving his side before they could learn a reasonable amount of martial material and skills. Most of the young Chinese tended to neglect serious martial arts practice, possibly because Zhou was more readily available to them (did not appreciate him enough because of that), and also because the pursuit of careers and finance was of a greater interest to them than training. Few of Zhou's Chinese students tended to stick around for over 2-3 years at most, and those who did, usually never trained as hard as Zhou had probably hoped for. One Chinese female student of Zhou had stayed with him for 11 years, and had reached a very good level. Unfortunately, she quit training altogether once she got married (as commonly happens in Chinese society, which is still very chauvinistic compared to the West).

Nitzan was the exception, remaining by Zhou's side for 7 years straight, and studying with him daily. It was the first time that Zhou had had such a serious-minded student. In the beginning, Zhou still carried some cultural biases and prejudices towards Westerners. Over time though, Nitzan's persistence and perseverance have made him change his mind about Westerners. Following Nitzan, more and more Westerners came to study with Zhou. He then noticed that, not only were these people willing to come all the way from another continent to train with him, some of them also invested more effort in their training than many of his Chinese students. He also figured that these Westerners were genuinely interested in traditional Chinese culture, which ironically, many of the younger Chinese were now throwing away, in favour of chasing fantasies related to the Consumerism and Hedonism of the globalized "American" culture. In an age in which the Chinese are quickly losing their own cultural roots, Zhou had found comfort in knowing that there are foreigners willing to put in the time and effort, to preserve what is dear to him. That is why, as a mature adult, he had a drastic change in some of the ideologies he had been indoctrinated into since early childhood, and have come to accept Westerners as equals, and decent people. To the extent that at such an age (when he was over 30), a person is willing to consciously have this big a change of heart, is in my opinion a wonderful testimony to Zhou's pragmatic, humble and down-to-earth character. In our time, many Chinese (in mainland China) treat foreigners nicely, but think and speak badly of them behind their backs, as a result of the education they had been receiving from youth (though the situation is improving, and there are also many Chinese who are most welcoming and kind towards foreigners). Zhou has transcended that nationalistic mentality, and had come to accept Westerners without prejudice or bias. That sort of attitude may 'go without saying' for a person educated in the safe confines of a Liberal Democracy, but for a person who has been brainwashed all his life as a citizen of a Totalitarian state, this is not at all obvious. During the last decade of



his life, Zhou came to have many foreign students worldwide, and took great pride in many of them.

In general, it can be said that Zhou shifu was very dedicated to his students. He treated everyone with equal care and attention, whether Indoor or Outdoor students, young or old, Chinese or Western, long-term or short-term. He garnered respect for any student with a sincere interest in martial arts, and would have gone out of his way to teach more if the student worked hard. Sometimes, one even had to ask Zhou to slow down, as he was so eager to teach more as soon as he thought the student was capable.

As mentioned earlier, in China many still have mixed or negative feelings towards non-Chinese. Therefore, in the park, rude people would sometimes pass by and mock or laugh at foreign practitioners. These acts are disgracing, especially since a Chinese would usually not dare to behave in that manner towards another Chinese in public (we should consider that sadly, this phenomenon also exists in the West). Zhou could become very upset with such people, and would have immediately shouted at them and scolded them for talking of or behaving badly towards his students; making sure they would leave the place at once. It is important that I stress in any case, that such people are an exception to the rule, and that most Chinese think positively of people who are sincere in their efforts to learn aspects of their culture. More commonly, I would encounter Chinese people who were very happy to see a Westerner practicing Chinese martial arts.



Martial arts were everything to Zhou – his hobby, his job, and his way of life. While educated to an extent in Calligraphy, Chinese literature and Classics and even in Traditional Chinese Medicine, martial arts were always his focal point. In his lifetime, he had many jobs in commerce and trade, from book-salesmanship to gem-trade, but teaching martial arts have remained his only steady occupation. Like many other great teachers of the past, this kind of lifestyle is what had helped him reach a superb level of skill in his pursuit of choice.

There are some teachers who have had more influence over Zhou than others. One such teacher, which he held in high esteem, is master Li Guoliang (of Tianjin; there is another well-known teacher by the same name from Taigu, whose name is written with different Chinese characters). From master Li, Zhou had received much of his knowledge of Xing Yi Quan – a lot of which is rarely seen elsewhere nowadays, and have also gained the deep foundations in Zhan Zhuang (standing post) training. These teachings have deeply affected the way Zhou shifu practiced and taught martial arts. Zhan Zhuang, and other skills taught by master Li, had become 'obligatory material' for any student who came to study under Zhou (with proper, specific adaptations being made for the particular martial art the student is practicing). Zhou considered the Zhan Zhuang training to be the most important, and have told his students that: "Even if one cannot practice at all on a certain day, it is still vital that one would somehow make time for practicing Zhan Zhuang for at least 20 minutes". Another skillset that Zhou would teach, to advanced students, are his Dan Tian development methods, which he had learned from several teachers, but in particular and most of all from Zhao Fujiang (one of his grand-teachers). To train these, one first needs a solid foundation in Zhan Zhuang, which requires prolonged daily practice. The Dan Tian methods can then be introduced, and later be implemented and embedded into any of the arts Zhou had taught, in most fighting movement.







**In the picture:** Zhou shifu, with one of his top students, Ben Bario from Israel. HaYarkon Park, Tel-Aviv, Israel, August 2010.

Master Zhou was also a big exponent of the notion of Quality being more important than Quantity. Although he himself have studied many arts, he had dedicated several years, and many hours a day, for the practice of each of these arts. Therefore, it was important to him that students spend the time required to hone their ability with each method, drill or technique, before they move on to learn more material. Zhou was also pragmatic in his approach however, and did not force the students to abide by his wishes. Nor did he even coerce anyone to study a particular art or skill, and the final choice was up to the student. His words were a hearty recommendation –that is often better adopted, but is not strictly dictated or enforced. A student's free will and self-actualization were, eventually, the most important things to Zhou when he taught.



**In the picture:** Zhou shifu demonstrating an application with his Israeli student, Etai. During this particular moment, Zhou was showing how proper alignment and structure, as developed through Zhan Zhuang training, can make it easy for a small person to resist a much larger individual. Zhou is roughly 5'6 in height, and Etai is 6'4.

Because many of the higher-level skills Zhou learned had originated from his Xing Yi Quan practice methods, and possibly because of his teacher's requests, Zhou refrained from allowing videos of his Xing Yi to be taken. It is a shame, as his Xing Yi was truly exceptional. I remember vividly how I watched Zhou demonstrate things with his Xing Yi that others only speak of.

For example – many people have written of the difference between 'Ming Jin' 明劲 (obvious power) and 'An Jin' 暗劲 (hidden power) in the art. Few teachers, though, can show the difference well. Zhou once demonstrated this difference to us students, using the same movement – Pi Quan – Xing Yi's most basic movement. The first variation, of 'obvious' power, had cut through the air like a baseball bat making a home-run. It was blunt, solid, sharp and defined. Then he delivered the 'hidden power' variation, which is of the higher level. It shot away like lightning tearing a gap in the air, lashing out with a





true killing intent, which was at once both subtle and frightening. Myself, I could demonstrate this too nowadays, but it had taken me many years of practice to do so, and I still look up in my memory to Zhou shifu's example. In his demonstration, even though he had not touched anyone, you could feel the differentiation of spirit and intent behind the movements in a very distinct fashion.

Another time, I have had the 'privilege' of Zhou asking me to try and use short-power striking (Cun Jin 寸劲) on him. This meant I needed to shock him with a strike from zero distance – my hand already on his chest. I was not skilled enough at the time, and Zhou was not satisfied with my power. I could not at all affect him. He then asked me to be his dummy. I was to stand in a strong stance, and flex my chest muscles as he was about to release his force to the side of them. As he did, I felt nothing on the surface of my skin, and he barely seemed to move at all. It was as if he had touched me with cotton. From roughly the middle of his striking palm, it felt as if a very thin needle had dug deep into my chest, and within it had carried an explosive charge, which was then detonated as it had reached the middle of my torso through the route set by the 'needle'. For a split of a second, I felt Death. Psychologically, the closest sensation I could think of is when one vomits badly when one is very ill, and momentarily feels like he is about to die. That is somewhat how I felt – for a moment, as if my game was over; there was not even enough time to fear what was going on – it was only the knowledge of impending doom that was quick enough to enter my consciousness. Luckily, master Zhou knew what he was doing, and did not shock me with his full capacity. Neither was there any damage or pain following the moment of the strike. Still, this was a humbling experience, which had made me realize some of the true potential of what Zhou was teaching.

**In the picture:** Zhou shifu, demonstrating an application on Tom, one of his Israeli students. HaYarkon Park, Tel-Aviv, Israel, August 2010.



This all reflects Zhou's liking for the hands-on teaching approach. He rightfully believed that in order to truly understand martial arts, the student must ***feel*** them. This meant, beyond the obvious, that the student should have had free access to touching Zhou's body when he performed movements, to get a sense of how the body is supposed to move; also, that the student should have been able to execute the techniques on Zhou himself. These things are absolutely essential for learning Zhou's martial arts. They also expose the intimacy of the relationship between Zhou and his committed students – with both sides expected to openly ask any question, and not shy away from physical contact. This is the traditional manner in which many Chinese martial arts were taught, but this approach is becoming exceedingly rare in the teaching of traditional martial arts; especially



in the West and in Japan, where because of cultural politeness and social norms, many prefer a more 'sterile' learning environment and a teacher that keeps his distance and plays the role of an 'authority figure'. Zhou would have none of that, and never claimed to be an authority on anything, or expect a better treatment by anyone because he was a teacher.

When I knew him, Zhou shifu was closing in on his 50s, yet measuring by his skill and power, one could have never guessed. He would still casually perform splits, move faster than any of his students, exert a greater amount of force than them in his strikes, and easily toss people weighing twice his weight. Other things Zhou could do are, too, out of the ordinary. By the power of his mental intent alone, for example, he could make the hairs on his hand stand erect or fall (these are moved by tiny muscles under the skin, which in medical literature are said not be under one's conscious control). I have also seen Zhou using mere one or two fingers to strike people in demonstrations, making them collapse sideways or to the ground at a great velocity because of the shock.

It is not that Zhou was a Superman of sorts. He was nothing but an ordinary person who has taken his skills to a very high level, in a process lasting several decades. He was the first to admit, for instance, that he is not a strong man, and could not carry or lift exceedingly heavy weights. His skill with the martial arts, involving an attuned technical ability and a body built around this skillset, is what enabled him to handle other human beings, in fighting, much better than people who are physically bigger and stronger than him but were not as well-trained as he was. Some of the arts he taught, such as Bajiquan, lend themselves well to people of a greater mass and height. Still, Zhou had proven that with dedication and perseverance, one can reach a level in which is the skill itself matters much more than other attributes.

To have had the opportunity to learn with Zhou and his student Nitzen is something I shall always cherish. I feel that such a privilege,

of finding a true traditional teacher of the Chinese fighting arts, who is both capable and a good person, is rare, even in the age of globalization and access to Internet resources. One of the biggest regrets I have in life is, that my own personal circumstances have not allowed me to spend more time with Zhou shifu, and take from him what he so willingly aspired to give to those interested.



**In the picture:** Zhou shifu, teaching Baji Quan to a group of Chinese students. All of them are bigger and heavier than him. The Chinese guy standing directly behind Zhou is Xiao Hei 小黑 – a national Western-Boxing champion, who is 6'4 and is twice Zhou's weight.

It was August 2010 when I first met master Zhou. We invited Zhou over for a month-long training camp in Israel. I had the privilege of studying twice a day with him for a month, and even hosting him in my house for a week. Since Zhou had never travelled outside of China, and myself having never met him or had a Chinese person as a friend or spoken much Chinese, this was obviously a fertile ground for cultural discovery and comedy.



Zhou was a man of great skill, though this skill was hidden beneath a very simple-looking surface. I was initially perplexed as to how I was to behave around such a man, but my fears were soon gone as I realized Zhou was one of the most down-to-earth people I had ever known.

During my first lesson with him, he was keen on testing my Xing Yi Quan. Being such a hands-on guy, he wanted me to apply a technique on him. His "faster, stronger!" yells got the better of me, and I accidentally hit him in the face. He did not block the blow because I was not actually supposed to hit him, and his hands were down. I was, of course, terrified of what happened. I just hit my teacher's teacher in the face, during our first-ever class together! To my surprise, Zhou was smiling, laughed for a second, and shrugged it off. That is the kind of person he was. Since that incident, I have come to see that this was Zhou's way of doing things. He would go about checking stuff himself, setting a personal example.

A few days afterwards, we drove Zhou to conduct a street-fighting workshop at my friend's Karate school. Though the people there were complete strangers to him, some of them teachers, he frequently asked that they manage to apply techniques on him.<sup>1</sup> He also went about to invest a lot of time in personally explaining things to a young 10 year-old boy who attended the workshop, though it was unlikely that he would even see that child again.

When teaching Zhou was very serious, and was fond of yelling instead of just talking when martial arts were the topic at hand. I figure that he was not actually shouting because he was angry – he did so because he cared so much about the students, and wanted his teachings to be clear and taken seriously. Underneath this mantle of seriousness though, he was humorous and fun-loving person. One could not

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<sup>1</sup> One should understand that in the context of the Chinese customary habits of "saving face", which are nowadays have also unfortunately become spread among many teachers in the west, this kind of behavior is uncommon.

dislike him, as he was constantly in a semi-serious semi-mischievous state of mind.

When I was around him, Zhou was always very humble. He insisted on carrying his luggage and our equipment on his own, and was embarrassed when people did things for him which he could do by himself. I always had to fight with him over letting me do things for him. He even wanted to make the meals for me and wash the dishes at my house after we were finished eating. He was particularly shocked to discover that at the price of one meal at an Israeli restaurant, he could have bought weeks-worth of food in China!

While living in my house, we obviously had a hard time communicating. What could have led to frustration, often resulted in laughter. Zhou always made fun of my muscles, since he believed weight-training was bad for my development in martial arts. As I came back from the weight-gym one evening, all "pumped-up", he took off his shirt and began bodybuilding style posing in front of the mirror, hilariously mocking how I looked. Zhou's muscles were soft as cotton.

The "hands on" thing had a few quite literal implications. One day, briefly after waking up and getting to the park, Zhou asked me for an arm-wrestling contest. Although I was working with weights for a few years by then and considered myself quite strong, I could not move his arm (at the time I could easily do pull-ups with 40kg attached to my waist, and Dips with 60kg attached to my waist. Zhou never trained with weights). At another time, Zhou asked me to move him, while he was just standing regularly. Though I could lift over 160kg of dead-weight off the floor, I could not move him an inch. More disturbingly – I could not even lift him upwards, while he was only weighing about 60kg. His control over his and my center of gravity was so refined, that I could not do anything, yet could not even feel how he was manipulating my strength to his advantage.



Zhou was especially fond of one type of movies – the kind where people kill each other violently, with as many bloody casualties as possible. When watching these movies, he would ask me to rewind some scenes, so he could analyze how the men fought. He would later usually go on lecturing on how they did this or that incorrectly (no matter that I could not understand back then), and ask me to stand up in the middle of the room so he could



demonstrate "how to do it right". At one time he took up two large magazines and rolled them into "swords", reenacting an entire scene from *Gladiator* with me, doing it "right" this time (I was always playing the guy who got killed with a rolled-up magazine-sword).

The Chinese people are notorious for "eating anything on four legs that is not a table, anything that flies that is not a plane, and anything that is in the water that is not a boat". Zhou's eating habits proved that phrase to be (almost) correct. He happily ate all the different meals I have made for him, and only resented cheese (which was surprisingly still very unpopular in China during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century). He had some interesting culinary innovations. He liked the Salami Sausage I offered him, but since he thought it to be "raw meat", he suggested we put it in the microwave. Another time I made him some pasta with tomato sauce. I afterwards gave him some chocolate



waffles for dessert. Verifying they were indeed tasty, he went on to dip them in the remaining tomato sauce.

As an effort to help Zhou feel 'at home', we took him to a restaurant ran by Chinese-Jews. He did not think much of the food. A pretty dog with blue tinted fur that a couple had brought with them (to the restaurant) caught his attention. He then told us of how he and other children used to hunt and eat stray dogs (reader, do remember these were poor and harsh times in China, in which many millions were starving to death, and he was living in a very poor neighbourhood). He continued by commenting that unlike "those people from southern China", people from his province do not eat things like rats and snakes (dogs were OK, though). His childhood dog-eating experiences made him somewhat suspicious of dogs, but he did like Cats. My teacher had a few earlier horror stories of Zhou sending cats flying through the air after they have made the mistake of touching his leg as he was giving lessons. My experiences proved that there were at least some cats he did like. My gongfu uncle Ben had two nearly-identical cats (both called "Snooze"), and while living at Ben's, Zhou was always playing around with the cats; frequently yelling "slooooo, slooos!!" at them and bursting out laughing from their reactions ("slooooo" is apparently "Snooze" in Chinese). He also had an (culinary?) interest in my cat, but the cat did not stick around to find out what Zhou wanted to do with it...

A true martial artist in heart, his subject of study occupied Zhou all day long. When he was talking about anything, the conversation would return to the topic of martial arts in a matter of minutes. When doing anything not related to martial arts, his thoughts would wonder back to fighting in no-time. Driving him around in my car, he was constantly throwing all kinds of martial movements in the air; his face





showing in-depth analysis of this or that technique. I almost got myself into several car accidents because of this. His sudden hand gestures would often look like he was warning me from imminent danger, which took my attention away in the direction he was pointing at, and almost got us both killed.

**In the picture:** The author with master Zhou, at the entrance of the Chinese restaurant in Israel, which fortunately did not serve dog meat!

People often wonder what makes one a "master". When Zhou was asked that question, he plainly answered that one should train a lot, and listen to his teacher. Having lived with such a man, I could account for another important trait – curiosity. A child-like curiosity. Zhou was curious about anything new he saw, and could not wait to get his hands on it and his mind wrapped-around it; mixing things up and creating new ideas out of the existing matter. It seemed that whenever shown something new, he got it right every time from the second he learned how to do it. This curiosity was at its strongest in relation to martial arts. Zhou was a fountain of knowledge, and he always wanted to know more. He had a lot of teachers, with whom he studied for many years, and he continued his research into the martial arts to his last day with the enthusiasm of someone who started it yesterday.

People think a child acting like an adult is special, but what is even more special, in my opinion, is an adult that can think like a child. Were we to take one lesson from Zhou, it should be to always maintain the curiosity and playfulness of a child, and bear thought with the weight and experience of an old man.

***"A master in the art of Living draws no sharp distinction between work and play" – L. P. Jacks***



**In the picture:** Master Zhou, with the backdrop of Tel-Aviv's shoreline. Year 2010.



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In early January of 2015AD, master Zhou suffered a stroke. I knew this was coming. I had a premonition. I have been trying to tell people for a while at that point, that I believed Zhou was not feeling well. I could see his light dwindling. He himself shrugged it off, and did not even consider he was in danger. But then in a moment, some months later, his brain became swollen with blood, and he collapsed. When he had woken up 24 hours later at the hospital, half his body was paralyzed. He gradually retained consciousness and was able to utter some words, understood everything and recognized everyone. His condition was stable, and he was taken out the emergency room. The doctors believed he would survive and get better. In the meanwhile, over 20 people in our gongfu family worldwide, in the West and China, collected money to pay for his hospital bills and care. We managed to transfer the money in time. It was touching to see how everyone cooperated together as a big loving family to take care of him, even though we live so far apart and many did not even know each-other. Shifu received the money and was happy and moved.

A while later though, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January, Zhou suddenly had issues with high blood pressure, his condition deteriorated very rapidly, and his lost consciousness again. Within a very short time the doctors declared him in a vegetative state. The family chose to let him off life-support so he could die with dignity. His two sons were by his side when he passed, in his sleep.

I have spent a few months of my life studying privately and semi-privately with master Zhou, in Israel and China. He was a good man. Better than most. Not once he uttered a bad word of other martial artists or martial arts. Not once did I hear him curse or swear. He loved his close students like family. They were his sons. Though few have lived up to his expectations, he always gave every student his all. He smiled big and lived big, to the best of his ability. A true carnivore and a heavy drinker (never an alcoholic). He did not smoke. I know that he lived his life to the utmost, and most of the time, to me at least, he seemed happy. He cherished his little fortune and the people who loved him, though his life was tough, and he constantly struggled to

make a living. A true people-person, he was seldom alone apart from his personal training. Everywhere he went, there were others to enjoy sharing his company. Many of his students kept coming to classes for years after they have already stopped actual serious training, just to be around him. He never asked anything of me but dedication, and felt uneasy to be receiving any sort of favour or fancy gesture of respect. He strove to give his students more than they gave him, and went out of his way to try and pass on his knowledge to the next generation.

Zhou was a great master of the martial arts. I have always said that videos did not do him justice. The people who saw him for real in his full glory all knew he was a true killer, and that his level of skill was extremely uncommon. When demonstrating seriously, he had an aura of Sha Qi that cut through the air like a knife. He was a martial genius. In 41 years of practice he had studied in great depth over 6 complete systems under more than 13 teachers, and learned minor amounts of martial skills from countless others. Many of Zhou's teachers were still alive when he passed, and I cannot fathom how they must have felt, burying a disciple... burying their child. His knowledge was enormous. There was hardly any weapon one could think of he could not play with: jian, dao, miao dao, guan dao, sticks, staffs and spears of all sizes and of countless forms, meteor hammer, rope dart, double clubs, iron whip, nine-section whip, large farmers fork, halberd, and many more... he knew them all and taught them too. He was also very knowledgeable of meditation practices, and had decent knowledge of traditional Chinese medicine, able to treat well with acupuncture and converse with TCM doctors on the classic texts. Having grown up during the Cultural Revolution, master Zhou was self-taught on many such matters and subjects, and others he had studied strictly through oldschool discipleship and eating bitter. He worked hard, trained hard, and to his last day none of his students exceeded his skill.





**In the picture:** Master Zhou visiting the grave of his beloved shigong, late master Tian Jinzhong. He was very attached to master Tian. Once when I showed Zhou shifu a video of his shigong, he began crying while marveling his gongfu and good character.

Master Zhou was the best student of quite a few teachers, who chose to pass unto him their most complete transmission and most vital skills. Much of what he knew was highly esoteric, not seen anywhere on videos, neither discussed anywhere in writing. I am afraid that many of these things we, his students, shall never even know of, because he did not have the opportunity to teach them. Zhou shifu was highly respected in the martial arts community of his home city of Tianjin, and many teachers came to study with him or asked him to exchange knowledge with them. Due to his status, he was able to make his arts more complete, by filling-in skills, methods, drills and forms from many different lineages. He was a walking encyclopedia of all of his arts, and remembered by heart hundreds of forms, which he could perform instantly - sometimes after not having practiced them for decades. It is said that when an old man dies, a library burns to the ground. Master Zhou was not even old, but what had been lost with his disappearance from our world is the sum of not a single library, but of knowledge spanning many generations. May he rest in peace.

