

Immortal Essence, Dao Bones

Idioms and Internal Cultivation
in
Daoist, Chan,
and
Martial Traditions

by

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Introduction

One

Language and the Martial Arts

The retired air force captain, a master in the Sūn Lùtáng 孫祿堂 lineage, returned the book I had lent him with a look of quiet disdain. It was an old, dog-eared copy of Robert W. Smith's *Chinese Boxing, Masters and Methods*, one of the works of boxing literature that had inspired me to travel to Taiwan to learn martial arts in the first place. Now annotated in red with the master's thin, spidery handwriting, the headings of select chapters bore sharp comments. "The author is a worshiper of [the well-known Tàijí master] Zhèng Mǎnqīng 鄭曼青," it said on one page. "These are just beautiful stories," I found scrawled upon another. Then, for good measure, he stated: "Robert only rode a horse to admire flowers." Ah, I thought: a poetic insult. In this part of the world, even criticisms are expressed lyrically.

Encountering Language

Upon my arrival in Taiwan in the summer of 1998, I knew only a handful of Chinese phrases. My first teacher in the art of Tàijí 太極, John R. Kells, a Yáng-style master teaching in the heart of London's medical district, had not been particularly interested in learning Chinese. Whether by luck or design, he had been able to find an exceptional teacher in Taipei who spoke competent English, and he preferred to put his efforts into pure training in the short time available to him rather than spend time studying Mandarin and other aspects of the culture. As he explained: "I was only interested in essence." After more than a decade of diligent practice in the basement studio of his London home, he achieved a formidable level of internal power and technical mastery.

With this in mind, I travelled to the East and at first, I didn't place too much importance on language. With the help and support of Chinese-speaking friends, I gained introductions to teachers and fellow practitioners who spoke English fluently. These were interesting experiences and exchanges, but some nine months on I was still searching for something that went deeper.

It was at this juncture that a Tibetan-Chinese friend encouraged me to see someone she had met on the mainland, "an incredible master"

as she described him. The master was in Henan, one of China's poorest provinces at the time. I was not deterred by the prospect of traveling to a region lacking the comforts and conveniences of Taipei, but when she realized I planned to go alone, she warned against it. Travel was dangerous for lone individuals, she explained, and recommended I first take a safer route to the Shaolin Temple, some eighty kilometers away. There, she had friends who could help arrange for someone to take me to the remote village.

I dismissed the notion of needing an escort, telling her that I had lived in some of London's worst neighborhoods—one being Lower Clapton, which, in the early nineties, was dubbed "murder mile" due to the high number of killings on the local high street. But my friend was adamant. "If you meet a group of bandits in the countryside, no one will be there to help you," she warned. Then, in a matter-of-fact tone, she added, "And since murder and robbery carry the same penalty—a bullet to the back of the head—disposing of a tourist's body could be the safer option for provincial thugs." I felt she was being overly cautious, but, tempted by the prospect of a stay at the Shaolin Temple and traveling to the village with a monk as a companion, I agreed.

However, I now faced a new challenge. Hardly anyone outside the major cities spoke English, which meant that learning the basics of Mandarin was now a necessity. With winter approaching and a limited time frame to complete my journey, I had to make a frantic effort to cram in as much Chinese vocabulary as possible. Just three weeks later, I stepped from a sleeper train into the dense urban sprawl of Zhengzhou, capital of Henan Province, armed with little more than 200 words of the language.

The journey to Shaolin itself was uneventful, but my friend had not exaggerated how conspicuous I would be as a traveler. In Zhengzhou, I mistakenly boarded the wrong bus, drawing a collective gasp from the crowded passengers at the sight of a foreigner in their midst.

Upon arrival at the temple, I was received with warmth by several monks who recognized my friend's name and seemed happy to assist. After spending two nights at a small guesthouse adjacent to a school for young trainees, I was awoken at five a.m., an hour earlier than scheduled, by a wizened monk in his late sixties, ready to take me on the long day's journey deeper into the Henan countryside.

On a rolling bus ride, cramped next to farmers and squawking chickens, with the old monk beside me listening to temple chanting on

his small transistor radio, two new passengers got on at a remote stop and struck up a conversation. “Where are you headed?” one asked with a smile. Eager to practice my Mandarin, I responded politely with the name of the village. “We’re going there too,” he replied, beaming. “If you get off with us at the next stop, we’ll take you there personally.”

At that moment, the monk gave a sharp slap to the side of my leg, and I realized I was being deceived. A few stops later, it became evident that my amiable fellow passengers were not going anywhere near the village after they casually exited the bus on an empty stretch of road. It took another five hours of driving before we finally reached the village they had claimed to be heading to.

Despite my efforts, the master in Henan, whom I had traveled so far to meet, did not exist. It had been a futile quest. My friend had mistakenly given me the wrong name, and the locals looked puzzled by the characters she had written—elegantly, but inaccurately—on the back of a small slip of paper. As a consolation, I was introduced to the most respected martial artist in the village, who turned out to be highly accomplished. I marveled at his professionalism and the purity of his movements, and agreed to stay for two weeks, witnessing the grounded discipline of a rural boxing community, training and living in a manner that was simple, focused, and free of affectation.

It was a valuable experience, but not one in accord with the direction I intended to follow. What I encountered there was martially effective, yet it lacked the internal, Daoist dimension I was searching for. And before long, I returned to Taiwan, where, with the help of good friends, I began receiving introductions to some fascinating people. These were practitioners who studied Tàijí, Shaolin, Qigōng 氣功, Daoist meditation, and a wealth of other disciplines. Over the next year or two, a whole new world began to open up for me. However, I was now mixing with individuals who spoke little to no English, and I found myself relying on dictionaries or the endless favors of bilingual friends with the ability to translate. Coupled with the challenges of living and traveling in the Chinese-speaking world, I finally had a real incentive to sit down and learn the language.

One of the first hurdles I encountered in studying Mandarin was pronunciation. Prior to getting to grips with the various romanization systems, I made the word for “boxing” (*quán* 拳) sound like “boat” (*chuán* 船) or even “breathing problem” (*chuǎn* 喘). It’s one thing to memorize a new word in Chinese, but if the tone is wrong, the meaning

changes entirely. To this day, when I refer to jade (yù 玉), some Taiwanese still think I'm talking about fish (yú 魚).

Not that studying the language was all grind. I was often fascinated by the wisdom contained in the etymological roots of the characters. One such example is *rěn* 忍, a compound ideograph that means “tolerance.” It combines the “heart” radical (心) with the word for “blade” (刃) above it, symbolizing how the heart (or mind) must remain calm in the face of adversity. Additionally, simple colloquial usage often brought more opaque technical terms to life.

The use of the word *péng*, for example, which translates imperfectly as “ward-off” in Tàijí, is normally employed to describe holding something from underneath in a rounded or cupped shape.¹ Previously, I had understood that ward-off was both structural and a technique (it carries with it the idea of water supporting a boat), but suddenly it “felt” natural through a better understanding of its ordinary usage.

Similarly, when my Xíngyì 形意 teacher asked me to lean his bicycle against a wall one morning (*kào zétā* 靠則它), I immediately recognized the word *kào*.² In both Tàijí and Bājí 八極 boxing, *kào* is often rendered in English as “shoulder stroke” or simply “shoulder,” but in colloquial Chinese, it is used for “relying on,” “propping against,” or “coming in close” (*kàojìn* 靠近). This, in part, helped me understand that *kào* is not limited to the shoulder—one can just as easily *kào* with the hip. Linguistically, such terms are woven into the very fabric of the culture.

Gongfu

Another thing I was becoming aware of was the ubiquitous use of the term *gōngfu* 功夫 or *kung fu*, the latter being the older Wade-Giles-derived spelling. The term *gōng* 功 is not always pleasing to the Western ear; it can sound clunky or awkward when mixed with English—and *kung fu*, pronounced in English with *kung* rhyming with “hung,” often

¹ Many practitioners use the character *pěng* 捧, meaning “carry,” to symbolize “ward off.” Historically, Tàijí texts used *péng* 棚, representing “a cap for a quiver of arrows.” It is believed that the earliest related character, *péng* 棚, depicted “a powerful bow.” Over time, 棚 came to replace 棚 due to misusage.

² It is known to many martial artists as Iron Mountain Strike (*tiěshān kào* 鐵山靠), an established technique focusing on stability and power.

sounds garish. But this is not the case in Chinese, where the term carries broad and deeply positive connotations

In the academic field, for instance, there is scholastic credit (*gōngláo* 功勞), while Buddhists speak of merit and virtue (*gōngdé* 功德). Another related term is “work power” (*gōnglì* 功力), which refers to competence and efficiency. What *gōngfu* is not, however, is the name of a martial art. Rather, it is the skill within martial arts, without which a style of boxing is nothing more than a veneer.

What I also found of interest in my early days on the island was its usage. When I was introduced to people in martial and Qìgōng circles, I noticed that the first question asked about any practitioner who came up in conversation would be whether or not they had *gōngfu*. And if they did, “what kind?” Once that was established, the next question would be “how much?” Moreover, the term could be applied to a vast range of practices beyond martial arts and Qìgōng skills, from the art of tea making (*gōngfu chá* 功夫茶), which involves “five steps” requiring precise execution and timing, to the more mundane skills of a local builder. It could even describe a lover’s prowess, or lack thereof.

Beyond the physical aspects of *gōngfu*, such as making the entire body light and nimble in the art of Bāguà zhǎng 八卦掌, there is the *gōngfu* of the mind. This aspect is present in everything from the inner stillness required in martial arts to Chan Buddhist practices, where one can empty all phenomena. In Daoism, the process of *gōngfu* can be described as the “tempering refinement of body and mind” (*shēnxīn de duànliàn* 身心的鍛煉), which leads to a level known as “spirit roaming in great emptiness” (*shényóu tàixū* 神遊太虛), that is, not relying on anything during meditation.

Alongside a growing conceptual understanding, one thing that soon became apparent was a more natural, uncontrived approach to such practices. After being on the island for a few years, I very much had the sense of living in a “*gōngfu* environment.” One boxer who personified this for me was old Mr. Wáng, a student of Lǐ Jīnshuǐ 李金水 (Taiw. Lí Kim-tsuí), the inheritor of an old Shaolin style detailed in Robert Smith’s writing.

For years, I would watch him train in a small park in Tainan City, Taiwan’s old capital in the southern part of the island. The park was populated with dancers, drunks, gamblers, and a host of boxers, but it was always Mr. Wang who stood out as he trained barefoot with an eleven-foot pole for hours in the heat. Each morning, he would bring a

good supply of water and stay until it ran out. He never brawled. He did not tediously correct others; in fact, he did not even seem to run his own school. Instead, he kept mostly to himself, only occasionally offering advice to those who sought it. Coming from the UK, I was unaccustomed to seeing someone put so much effort into their practice without reaping benefits beyond those derived from the training itself.

Woven into this “national art” (*guóshù* 國術) milieu was a world of Daoist and Buddhist temples, monks, nuns, spirit mediums, *fēngshuǐ* 風水 masters, and Qìgōng practitioners. One of my Buddhist friends considered Taiwan to be a Chan environment, while another likened the culture to a giant spiritual spa. This was especially true in the smaller towns and cities, where I quite literally encountered men with wispy beards practicing Qìgōng or calisthenics in the middle of the road. In the expansive grounds of National Cheng Kung University (NCKU) 成功大學 in Tainan, people lay in the branches of trees to absorb the energy of nature or danced around plants and shrubs to draw out their early morning vitality in “fragrant Qìgōng” (*xiānggōng* 香功).

In the evenings, one could visit the night markets and find practitioners of fate calculation³ using small birds known as “spirit birds” (*língniǎo* 靈鳥), believed to possess spiritual insight. These are usually sparrows trained to tell people’s fortunes by pecking at divinatory stones. Some fortune-tellers entwined the long, thin hanging roots of banyan “spirit trees” around the fingers of the enquirer as part of the divination. Taiwan was certainly no ordinary place, especially in the smaller towns, where spiritual and religious practices remained unbroken and clearly visible. In earlier decades, it would have been much like this across the mainland and still is to a lesser extent today.

A friend, a Chinese opera star who had the bittersweet experience of rising to prominence during the Cultural Revolution—at the height of his success, he endured the nerve-wracking ordeal of performing privately for Jiāng Qīng 江青—recalled growing up in the Beijing of the 1940s. He remembered marketplaces full of kung fu masters, medicine hawkers, and necromancers, a medieval atmosphere mostly washed away by time and political change. While traveling through the mainland five decades later, there was still some evidence of this ancient way of life, but after settling in Taiwan, it seemed more prevalent, as though

³ Fate calculation (*suànmìng* 算命) uses various forms of fortune-telling, often combining astrology, numerology, and physiognomy.

all over the island, there was a traditional *gōngfu* culture operating quietly below the high-tech and manufacturing exterior. Of particular relevance to this work is how deeply Taiwan's rich *gōngfu* culture is mirrored in the language. As my studies progressed further, I noticed that boxers often explained their methods and techniques poetically. Many were educated, but even those with limited formal schooling frequently used idioms. One master I knew had quit school at the age of eleven to live and train with his teacher, yet he expressed himself in a surprisingly lyrical manner.

When encouraging me to progress in a particular form of Qìgōng, for example, he casually penciled the phrase: "When the triangular circuit finds harmony, it stirs the very Heavens" (*sānjiǎo hùdiào gǎndòng tiān* 三角互調感動天). Similarly, one of my earliest Tàijí teachers in Taiwan once cautioned that when "working with fire," that is, with *qì* in meditation, "a devil may enter" (see #12).

In the West, with the exception of Muhammad Ali's "dance like a butterfly, sting like a bee," the literary and martial rarely mixed. There simply was not a common association. In the London of my youth, such a combination would have been seen as effete—no one in Britain mixed the poetry of Keats with the valor of boxing! Yet in Ang Lee's (*Lǐ Ān* 李安) *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, when the mythically skilled "Jen Yu" (*Yù Jiāolóng* 玉嬌龍) recites poetry while effortlessly defeating fifteen boxers in a traditional tea house, it symbolizes a deeper harmonization between disciplines, one that can be traced all the way back to the sword poetry of the Jin dynasty.

Classical Sayings

Chinese characters began with simple pictograms. These were carvings on the shells and bones of animals that formed a set of symbols known today as oracle bone script (*jiǎgǔwén* 甲骨文). The ancient Han, much like their modern counterparts, believed they were surrounded by ancestors and other unseen beings, and that communication with these entities was possible through divination. Shamans would bore holes into the plastron of a turtle, or sometimes the bone of an ox, and heat it until it cracked, producing the sound *pū* 嘖, which is represented in the bone oracle script by the onomatopoeic 卜 (*pū*). The oracle would be read by observing the nature and direction of the individual cracks, after which

a written interpretation of their meaning would be carved onto the surface of the shell. The inscriptions found on these shells are the earliest record of the language (Lindqvist 1989, 17; Li 2016).

As the writing system evolved, it transitioned from simple carvings to more refined scripts on silk, stone, and bamboo. The physical limitations of these materials—narrow surfaces and the labor-intensive process of carving or writing—necessitated brevity and careful word choice. This practical need for concision deeply influenced early literature, resulting in the rich distillation of meaning that characterizes classical philosophy.

Reflecting this like time capsules of ancient wisdom are classical sayings (*chéngyǔ* 成語) that infuse the language to this day, many of which stem from the Warring States period and the Chu-Han Contention. Typically consisting of four characters (though sometimes five or even eight), these set phrases condense complex ideas, moral lessons, or historical events into a compact form. For example, the popular saying “guard a tree stump waiting for rabbits” (*shǒuzhū dàitù* 守株待兔) warns against an over-reliance on luck. It derives from a story of a farmer who, after seeing a rabbit accidentally kill itself by running into a stump, wastes his time waiting for another rabbit to do the same. Understanding these expressions requires a full knowledge of the historical or literary contexts from which they emerged.

Prior to the wider spread of education, the use of classical sayings was somewhat exclusive, as only around one percent of the population was literate. Ordinary citizens lacked the means to achieve even basic literacy, let alone access works of literature. Thus, over the centuries, a deep knowledge of *chéngyǔ* became a mark of higher social status. To this day, a well-educated Mandarin speaker will have mastered a prodigious number of these idioms by the time they graduate from university. It was these remarkable expressions that I encountered among the boxers of Taiwan in the 1990s, practitioners who were essentially the last of the crop to arrive with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government at the end of the civil war on the mainland.

Besides classical sayings, there are a variety of folk expressions known as proverbs (*yànyǔ* 諺語), folk sayings (*súyǔ* 俗語), and colloquial expressions (*lǐyǔ* 俚語), along with a plethora of subcategories that are often contradictory and subject to debate. Throughout this work, therefore, I have tended to label such expressions according to how they

render into English rather than fuss over classifications that even native Mandarin speakers cannot agree on.

It is also worth noting that the selection of idioms and expressions in this book is not a fixed set employed universally by all martial artists. These sayings can vary between schools and regions. Instead, it is a collection of teachings, a series of linguistic reference points, drawn from over two decades of study with a diverse range of accomplished masters across the Far East.

In addition, some of the definitions presented here may not be familiar to ordinary Mandarin speakers. “A dazed wooden rooster” (*dāiruò mùjī*, #68), for example, normally means that someone is frozen or dumbstruck in everyday usage. Yet, according to my late Chinese philosophy teacher, Táng Yínán 唐亦男, a renowned *Zhuāngzǐ* specialist, an earlier Daoist interpretation describes a deeper connection with one’s original nature, not simple rigidity.

Another area of contrast lies in the distinct strands of classical philosophy that underpin various teachings. At the core of Confucianism, for example, is a moral view of heaven (*tiān* 天); thus, the Confucian gentleman (*jūnzǐ* 君子) “preferred to be like broken jade” rather than forsake his principles. Taking a moral stand without concern for personal gain cultivates upright *qì* (*zhèngqì* 正氣), a power derived through integrity and uprightness.

Daoists, on the other hand, view heaven as natural rather than moral. They transcend duality and seek to join with nature, which leads to pure *qì*. While *Zhuāngzǐ* discusses the merits of uselessness to avoid calamity through the allegory of a magnificent oak that only survived because its wood was of no use, Confucius berates a student for the opposite reason: “Rotten wood cannot be carved; a wall of manure cannot be trowelled,” said the Master to Zǎi Yǔ 宰予, who was deemed to have spent too much time in bed.

In regard to the passions, the Buddhist approach involves removing all desires to achieve enlightenment (*juéwù* 覺悟), while the Daoist path is one following nature (see #11). From a classical perspective, then, Confucianism is Confucianism, Daoism is Daoism, and Buddhist Dharma is Buddhist Dharma. The paths were seen as distinct and divergent. Yet it is also the case that the Chinese are remarkably adept at harmonizing seemingly contradictory philosophies, even if one tends to remain more dominant. While Daoists and Confucianists might have poured scorn on each other during the early Han period, by the time of the Song

dynasty, there were a variety of systems successfully blending the two schools of thought.

For example, the Complete Reality school of Daoism (Quánzhēn pài 全真派), which arose in the 16th century, is a fascinating blend of Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian teachings. Chan Buddhism, which itself is a synthesis of Buddhist and Daoist principles, later spread to Japan and evolved into Zen. Neo-Confucian scholars, such as Zhāng Zǎi 張載 (1020–1077), went further by integrating Confucian ethics with Daoist metaphysics, particularly the concept of *qì* and its role in both moral conduct and the natural order of the universe (Rainey 2010, 164).

There may be times when a strict adherence to a single philosophical system is desirable—one finds the right key for the right lock—but those who practice the traditional arts of East Asia often do so flexibly. They incorporate what are referred to as the “essentials” of Chinese culture and philosophy, applying these principles in ways that best suit their lives and circumstances.

Confucius in Context

Although it is beyond the scope of this book to discuss the various schools of traditional philosophy in depth, a few words on Confucius and Confucianism are perhaps necessary. This is because, while one might confidently argue that martial arts and other traditional practices are more closely aligned with Daoism in actual practice—what is known as “body and mind joining with heaven” (*shēntǐ gēn tiān yīqǐ* 身體跟天一起)—they are very much governed by Confucianism in terms of modes of behavior.

Kǒngfūzǐ 孔夫子, latinized as Confucius, despite his monumental influence on traditional society, has been a divisive figure for millennia. He is often viewed as having fostered a culture of oppressive hierarchy and, increasingly, in the modern era, as the ultimate patriarchal villain—an overbearing misogynist who once scolded his wife for not chopping meat neatly enough when preparing the family meal. He is also accused of promoting blind obedience among officials, encouraging them to enforce draconian orders without question, and stifling creativity through deference. He is even blamed for the custom of foot binding.

However, in mitigation, foot binding began more than a millennium after his lifetime; though later Confucian household ethics were at times invoked to justify it, the practice has no basis in the *Lúnyǔ* 論語 (Analects). More broadly, in his own era the philosopher sought merely to remedy the corruption and chaos that blighted the land, a period in which ministers assassinated kings, sons murdered fathers, and siblings slaughtered one another for power. Neither was his teaching directly responsible for the authoritarian turn that later made Confucianism rigid and tyrannical.

That accolade can largely be ascribed to the early-Han philosopher Dǒng Zhòngshū 董仲舒 (179-104 BCE), whose writings helped establish the concept of a celestial hierarchy in which the emperor was an intermediary between heaven and earth—a vulgarized form of Confucianism that appealed to the then-ruling dynasty's desire to enforce obedience. It is true that Confucius did promote hierarchical relationships as a means to establish a just society, but his approach was reciprocal rather than absolute—filial loyalty, for instance, is not owed to an abusive parent.

Nor should a Warring States philosopher be judged through a modern lens. For his era, when literacy was confined to an elite class, he was unusually forward-thinking. The principle of teaching without discrimination, for instance, originates with Confucius; it is an idea still prevalent in East Asian culture today. Furthermore, his interpreters argue, it was not pettiness that drove him to berate his wife for cutting meat unevenly. It was his belief in an inner virtue (*dé* 德).

According to Confucius, what is inside the heart is manifested externally, and he simply wanted his wife to perform tasks with a “pure heart.” (It is a purity and a meticulousness seen explicitly in the precision of Japanese culture and art to this day.) Some may still find this an insufficient defense. But laud him or revile him, his influence remains undeniable. If you are studying East Asian art forms in the 21st century, you are operating in an environment partly shaped by his teachings.

Dual Cultivation: Martial Arts and Philosophy

While this book synthesizes the collected teachings of a wide variety of masters, I was aided significantly in its development by my Xingyi-Bagua teacher, Professor Lín Chānglì 林昌立, who, in his mid-80s, is a living

testament to the health-nurturing effects of Chinese boxing. Early in my studies with Professor Lín, I was struck by a passing comment he made about his teacher, the famed Grandmaster Wáng Shùjīn 王樹金, who often said to him during training: “Dao is boxing (*quán*); boxing is Dao”. Master Lín, formalized it in his privately circulated manuscript, *Quándao xīndé* 拳道心得 (Insights on Boxing and Dao), where he writes: “The dual cultivation of boxing and Dao is mutually beneficial; progress in one assists the other.” This concept echoes a similar view from an internal martial arts teacher I encountered in Tianjin, who taught that in boxing, one merges with nature. In fact, after many years of living in the East, such ideas became so ingrained in me that I forgot I had ever encountered ideas to the contrary.

Yet, at a martial arts seminar in London during the mid-nineties, I mentioned to a fellow attendee that my first Tàijí teacher in the UK, Dr. John Kells, regarded it as primarily a Daoist practice. “I hate it when people mix things up,” was his blunt response, as though it was an intrusion of esoteric nonsense into a world of gladiatorial purity. Ironically, such individuals fail to notice the ideological dissonance between their aesthetic admiration for *gōngfu* epics featuring meditative monks in mist-shrouded monasteries and their intellectual rejection of the philosophical and spiritual roots of the art.

So, what is *gōngfu*? Certainly, it is a broad concept. But what it is not is mere brawling—an egotistical exercise in violence for the momentary rush of false self-worth. As one master, Guān Fēngzhōng 官鋒忠, a disciple of the Bājí quán luminary Liú Yúnniáo 劉雲樵, asked me: “Why endure all this [training] when you can just pick up a rock?” Similarly, my teacher in Bāguà-Tàijí, Master Zhào Fúlín 趙福林, once remarked after witnessing two irate martial artists nearly come to blows in his training center (*wǔguǎn* 武館): “If you spend a million in gold and ten years studying throughout the world, and all you learn is how to fight, then what have you gained?” Nor is it an ineffectual display of an art like Tàijí while claiming Daoist insight. If they are to be of their greatest value, these disciplines should amount to a way of being in which martial prowess is a component part.

Thus, survival skills (health, martial ability, mental resilience, etc.) and inner cultivation form a harmonized whole. All of the aforementioned masters demonstrated this balance, expressing both the physical

living power of the arts they practiced while pursuing a deeper wisdom in their lives.

To engage in *gōngfu* fully, then, is to draw upon ancient teachings as diverse as Daoism, Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, and Zen. In Henan, there is even a Muslim (Huí 回) style of Xíngyì, while one of my Qìgōng teachers in Taiwan was a Christian who aligned his metaphysics with the Confucian concept of heaven, earth, and humanity. Other practitioners I have known associate healing exercises and Qìgōng with certain elements of the Kabbalah. Nonetheless, no matter how one configures the practice, it should be holistic, in a manner that improves the human spirit. Only then can *gōngfu* be realized in its highest sense: as a treasure for humankind. At this level, it transcends the physical and can be described as “immortal essence, Dao bones (*xiānfēng dàogǔ* 仙風道骨, #94).

Through this narrative of my journey from London to East Asia, along with the teacher portraits and collection of teachings that follow, I hope to offer readers a glimpse into the world of martial arts and the traditions surrounding them, offering at the same time an understanding of how these practices can lead to a richer way of engaging with life, one more in alignment with nature. The idioms and proverbs I encountered over decades of training and through conversations with accomplished masters serve as gateways to a deeper cultural perspective, revealing the seamless connection between the art of combat and the art of living. Many of these unique expressions act as portals into centuries of accumulated wisdom, melding physical discipline with spiritual and philosophical depth.

Martial arts, therefore, extend far beyond mere techniques of physical defense. They open a path to discovering inner strength, equanimity, and wisdom, guiding practitioners toward a deeper understanding of body and mind. Ultimately, this book explores martial arts as a means of cultivating a way of life, one in which physical practice becomes a vehicle for mental clarity, psychological grounding, and harmony with the Dao. It seeks to make the ancient teachings of East Asian martial traditions and the essentials of Chinese thought accessible and relevant to a modern global audience.

Two

Teachers and Lineages

Before turning to the idioms themselves, I offer a set of portraits of influential teachers, figures whose lives and methods illuminate the milieu from which many of these expressions arise.

The selected portraits in this section are neither a chronology of my studies nor an attempt to document every teacher I trained under. Rather, they highlight key figures relevant to this work, selected for the most part for how they exemplify the shared cultural ecology that underpins different approaches to cultivation.

A number of individuals whose impact on my practice was significant are absent, while some who taught me only briefly, along with others who were simply friends or senior figures, are included. Given a limited number of portraits, I have opted for those that best serve the focus of this book and that most clearly reflect the world in which cultivation is practiced and understood.

Zhāng Qǐyán

Born in Tianjin in 1923 and relocated to Taiwan with the military as communist forces swept across China, Zhāng Qǐyán 張啟炎 was first introduced to me by the dancer and performance artist Sūn Lìcuì 孫麗翠, who had studied with him since the mid-90s. Prior to his career in academia, Zhāng served as a captain in the ROC air force, stationed at the major air base in Tainan, his placement, like that of many masters I came to meet, determined by the government upon arrival. It was there, at a school established for the children of air force personnel, that Sūn first encountered him one morning as he



practiced beneath the banyans.

His sole teacher in the boxing arts was Zhāng Shìróng 張世榮, who had trained under the renowned Zhèng Huáixián 鄭懷賢, a student of Sūn Lùtáng 孫祿堂. Zhèng was one of Sūn's senior students and an accomplished martial artist who represented the Republic of China at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, performing with a 30-pound iron trident (*fēichā* 飛叉), which he threw, caught, and spun across his back to gasps from the crowd. The skill was never passed down, however, due to too many injuries, the professor informed us. Zhāng Shìróng himself had visited the acclaimed boxer in Chengdu once a week over a four-year period, undertaking a twenty-mile round trip on foot each time. For his efforts, he became one of Zhèng Huáixián's most important disciples.

Zhāng Qǐyán did not begin martial arts until his late twenties, but by the time I met him some fifty years later, he had scarcely missed a day of training. He had a fit, compact body, which he employed adeptly in his "explosive power" technique (*fājìn* 發勁), albeit by moving the body and harnessing its momentum.

The Tàijí he taught was not from Sūn Lùtáng but from an old Yáng-style form, modified extensively by Zhāng to reflect Xíngyì and Bāguà principles. It employed concentrated spiralling movements that required shifting circularly on the balls of the feet. I wore out more than one pair of cotton *gōngfú* slippers training on the hot concrete ground for up to three hours each morning. The deep squats of the form toughened the frame, particularly the legs and back.

In Taipei, I later saw Sūn Lìcuì perform a mask dance, a form of 'face changing' (*biànlǎn* 變臉), in which she transformed into different characters emerging from a body of flowing black silk. Changing masks seamlessly, each one appeared from a primordial blackness: first a clown, then a warrior, and finally a court lady (*shìnǚ* 仕女) who virtually shone on the dark stage. The exertion required to perform it so flawlessly would have required legs of steel.

Decades of concentrated training had given her teacher, Zhāng Qǐ Yán, a distinctly magnetic power in his hands, yet he claimed not to believe in the existence of *qì*. Blending a traditional Chinese perspective with a scientific one, he maintained that *qì* was "just a feeling." As a young boy growing up in Tianjin in the 1930s, he knew martial artists who had witnessed the Boxer Rebellion. A scientific approach to the martial arts was, for him, the only viable path after the failure of *qì* to ward off bullets. Yet this belief that it was "just a feeling" still produced

palpable results—unlike skeptics I met who felt nothing and seemed no different from conventional athletes.

Even so, Zhāng referred to the lower (xià 下) *dāntián* 丹田 as “the psychic center” and spoke of having “one’s mind in every posture.” “Great masters,” he stated, “would practise like this for many hours.” Further, he did not ascribe to the notion of softness so much as relaxation, explaining that too much friction in the legs would inhibit the release of power. “*Gōngfu* is in one’s feet,” he said, “and never seen in the hands.”

He also frequently emphasized the importance of creating polarity within the body to generate magnetic force and described force as arising between molecules. “Force is in everything,” he stated. “Even a piece of wood contains material force, so we must free it within ourselves and reduce friction by relaxing the muscles. The body should become a single, harmonized unit, fluid and unobstructed.”

I was most charmed by his Bāguà zhǎng, which he described as “finding the one in the many and the many in the one.” This he aligned with the graduated levels of the Sūn-style Bāguà method: “fixed step” (*dìngbù* 定步), “running step” (*huóbù* 活步), and “changing step” (*huàbù* 化步), as well as with the three main styles in calligraphy: “regular script” (*kǎishū* 楷書), “running script” (*xíngshū* 行書), and “cursive or grass script” (*cǎoshū* 草書).

He would often appear in the mornings with detailed calligraphic illustrations explaining fundamental elements of his boxing practice. On one occasion he presented me with the following, written in exquisite cursive script.

Art embodies truth, goodness, and beauty. It is also the wellspring of spiritual civilization. May we encourage one another in this pursuit. In memory of my dear younger brother, Hǎi Róng Midsummer of the Jímǎo Year.¹

Zhāng Qǐyán was very much an artist, a scientist, and a skilled boxing Confucian gentleman of the Old Republic.

¹ 藝者真善美也亦 精神文明之泉源也 願互勉之 海榮吾棣紀念 己卯仲夏 張少泉留字。

Wú Wénxián

Shì Huìshān

Wáng Yánnián

Wú Xīqīng

Sam Tam

Zhào Fúlín

Adam Hsu

Wáng Jǐnshì

Shì Kōngmíng

Táng Yīnán

Lín Chānglì

Section I

Foundations of Wisdom, Mind, and Virtue

All Phenomena Originate from the Mind

wànfǎ wéixīn 萬法唯心

Derived from teachings in the 4th-century *Avatamsaka Sutra* (Flower Garland Sutra), the first two characters of the idiom, *wànfǎ*, represent all phenomena—literally the myriad dharmas—while the last two, *wéixīn*, translate as “only mind.” This suggests that the external world and all phenomena are ultimately creations of the mind and that our perceptions and experiences are shaped by our own consciousness.¹

In more everyday usage, the saying symbolizes the power of the mind in achieving something, for even when all the necessary conditions are in place—the right timing, the proper environment, the agreement of others, and so forth—it means little without the inclination or the resolve. This could be as simple as a desire to study *gōngfū*, coupled with the determination to finish the training.

In martial arts, *wànfǎ wéixīn* can be used to emphasize how, amid a plethora of internal skills and training methods, our mind is the pivot, a principle echoed in Xíngyì practice, where it is said, “Only 50 percent is physical; the rest depends on our mind.” The ability to concentrate everything on a single point, free from external influence, is an expression of great martial refinement.

A further Daoist interpretation relates to the complexity surrounding us in our daily lives. When all about you is in chaos, the teaching serves as a reminder to remain calm. The mind should be centered and tranquil.

¹ In Buddhist philosophy, particularly the Yogacara school, this concept is known as the mind-only doctrine. It posits that there is no objective reality independent of our consciousness. Thus, the mind is not just powerful—it is the foundation of all perceived reality.



Fig. 1. Amitābha (detail), Zhèng Zhòng 鄭重.

2

*Heart Like a Monkey, Mind Like a Horse**xīnyuán yì mǎ* 心猿意馬

Commonly used in martial circles, this saying has its roots in Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings,² where it describes the condition of a mind yet to be stabilized—a state in which the emotions leap around like a monkey and the thoughts race like a wild horse.³ This inner agitation can be a major obstacle in martial training. In internal styles such as Tàijí, where “the mind leads the qì,” or in Xíngyì, where clear intent is required for every movement, mental restlessness unsettles the entire body. If the mind is distracted or agitated, one cannot perform the postures correctly, and the higher levels of the art will remain elusive.

In Buddhism, “heart like a monkey, mind like a horse” is a reminder that the tendency of the human heart is to seek happiness beyond its natural boundaries, which in turn only leads to more anguish. This unsettled state of being obstructs the nature of mind and leads one’s consciousness into a tangle of distorted perceptions. Tantric Buddhists (Vajrayana) teach that, once these afflictions are removed, the mind becomes a perfect reflector, generating mirror-like wisdom (*ādarśa-jñāna*), in which all phenomena are seen without attachment or judgment. It parallels Zhuāngzǐ’s teaching that notes how the sage’s mind mirrors the world: it pursues nothing, it refuses nothing—it responds but will not grasp (ch. 7).

² It appears in the Dunhuang manuscripts, notably in the *Wéimó jiējīng jǎngjīngwén* 維摩詰經講經文 (Lecture Text on the Vimalakīrti Sutra), dating from between the 5th and 11th centuries.

³ A more colloquial version is “monkey head, monkey brain” (*hóutóu hóunǎo* 猴頭猴腦), a common admonition for a hyperactive child.

*Learning the Handan Way**hándān xuébù* 邯鄲學步

A Qing-era saying derived from the *Zhuāngzǐ* (ch. 15), this originally warned scholars not to lose themselves entirely to a world of books. In the ancient parable, a young man from the state of Yan traveled to the large, prosperous city of Handan to learn the graceful walking style of its inhabitants. Regrettably, despite an extensive stay in the capital, the man failed to acquire the famous gait and even forgot his own way of walking in the process. He thus had no choice but to crawl back home on his hands and knees.

In the martial sphere, the idiom shows that practitioners must go beyond imitation to achieve a deeper realization within: genuine mastery cannot be attained through superficial mimicry or the mere accumulation of external forms.

From a cultivation perspective, if you seek the restoration of your true nature through Wudang or Shaolin training yet become entangled in the mundane jockeying for status and power, where even the practice itself becomes a burden, then the results can be worse than never having studied at all.

4

Ride a Horse to Admire Flowers

zǒumǎ kàn huā 走馬看花

If we “ride a horse to admire flowers,” there is no time to appreciate the distinct qualities of each one. In common usage, this adage means to make a snap judgment or to draw superficial conclusions based on limited knowledge. In general, martial arts teachers use the expression dismissively to describe a person who flits between many styles—a diletante with only shallow understanding.

However, this saying is not always used critically; it can also suggest sightseeing or gaining a broad overview through comprehensive research. The Tàijí grandmaster Wáng Yánnián would advise his students: “See as many styles as possible to gain a richer perspective before focusing on your chosen method.”

It is also worth noting that some schools in East Asia practice a select blend of arts that complement each other, and there is ongoing debate over which approach is more beneficial: the narrow path of a singular style or the broad exploration of multiple disciplines in pursuit of a cohesive system. In essence, while the adage warns against superficiality, it also suggests that a broader perspective has its merits, so long as it ultimately leads to a deeper understanding.

A Teacher for a Day, a Father for Life

yìrì wéishī, zhōngshēn wéifù

一日為師，終身為父

Although the essence of Martial arts is drawn primarily from Buddhist and Daoist teachings,⁴ the conduct surrounding them is largely Confucian. Teachers are held in high regard,⁵ and from a Confucian perspective, a teacher is like a parent because, just as parents nurture children to become strong adults, teachers impart knowledge valuable for the rest of life.

It is also the case that a human life is insufficient to discover for ourselves what others can impart in a relatively short period of time. As the idiom suggests, this could be merely a day; there are ancient tales of individuals meeting a sage on the road and being transformed by the encounter. Thus, it could be said in Martial arts that when a master transmits something of value to us, we stand on their shoulders. This age-old saying reminds us of where our progress comes from.

⁴ The two main branches of traditional boxing in China (Wudang and Shaolin) are inextricably linked with Daoism and Buddhism, while Daoist and Buddhist practices related to energy and consciousness infuse the world of *gōngfū* generally.

⁵ Confucius was given the honorific title Utmost Sage, Foremost Teacher (Zhìshèng xiānshī 至聖先師).



Fig. 2. Recluse Walking with Staff (高士行杖圖, detail), Táng Yín 唐寅.

