

# China 2006 – Ronnie Robinson

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## Zhengzhou, Chenjiagou & the Shaolin Temple

In October this year I revisited China on a trip organised by Faye Li Yip, daughter of Li De Yin, one of the most prominent tai chi practitioners in China who was responsible for the creation of a number of the new standardised forms used for competition. The main focus of our journey was to visit the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Traditional Wushu Championships held in Zhengzhou, Henan Province a town significantly placed for Chinese martial arts, being a mere 65k from Dengfeng which is 15k from the Shaolin Temple and an hour or two by car from Chenjiagou Village. Fellow travellers included my good friend Dan Docherty, founder member of the Tai Chi Union for Great Britain and founder and President of the Taijiquan & Qigong Federation for Europe, Gary Wragg, founder member and Chairman of the Tai Chi Union for Great Britain, Luce Condamine a well-known French practitioner and a few students of Faye's.

Not looking forward to the 11 hour flight we partook of a few glasses of the amber nectar to help us to settle down for the long night ahead. Being a fairly restless traveller, this helped considerably, making me care substantially less about hiding on the floor of the plane beneath the seats. Luce being quite small, lay comfortably over two seats whilst I lay on the floor, head on a pillow with a blanket over my head, undetected to the safety vigilant air stewardesses. Some six to seven hours sound sleep left me feeling delightfully fresh on arrival at Shanghai airport mid-afternoon the following day.



Qigong in Shanghai

### Shanghai

This was Shanghai's second airport which was very different from the original one which I had travelled through a few times before. The service was more efficient and the airport, though dull and soul-less was more clean and modern compared to the original one. Once through the customs we journeyed by bus to our welcoming, clean hotel rooms, took a few minutes to unpack and freshen up and then went for food at the restaurant next door. After an after dinner stroll we said our goodnights and arranged to meet early morning to visit the local parks.

The first thing that struck those of us that had visited Shanghai before (Dan and I) was the cleanliness of the place and the profusion of trees, shrubs and flowers. There has been a major initiative which saw the planting of literally thousands of trees and shrubs along the green and pleasant avenues on the way to the

park. The park itself was beautiful, clean and orderly, neat, protected lawns, hundreds of trees and neatly arranged flower gardens everywhere. The locals were there in their hundreds practising various activities from taiji, qigong, ballroom dancing, aerobics, taiji ball, badminton and the unusual backwards walking. In the main the quality of taiji was average with most people doing basic health taiji. Because of the situation with Falun Gong, teachers now had to be registered to teach in the parks and were now limited to particular practices. No longer could you see qigong healing sessions or the more esoteric practices that one often encountered in the parks. Teachers were identifiable by small white cloths attached to their garments and it was good to soak up the atmosphere of the daily practices of the various groups enjoying their morning exercises. We later left to eat breakfast prepare for our onward flight to Zhengzhou.



## Zhengzhou

Zhengzhou was a bustling city of medium size by Chinese standards but still more than enough for us to endure the slow arduous journey from the airport to the hotel. Getting through traffic took a good two hours or so and we were all happy to settle in our quality hotel which had good sized fresh clean rooms. Once ensconced, we had a good dinner, and then went for an evening stroll.

Everywhere along the streets one could see banners advertising the competition which was obviously a major event for the city. After an hour or so walking down the long avenue with not much of interest we retired to our rooms.

The next morning we once more adjourned to the local park to see what was on display. Once again the park was noticeably clean and orderly, so much so that the local parkie reprimanded Mr Docherty for sitting on the kerb, making the place untidy. The park was lively with people training everywhere, doing all manner of exercises; chanting, modern aerobics to music, ballroom dancing and various systems of taiji. There were even a group of 'tree-huggers' who meaningfully caressed



Entrance to Zhengzhou park

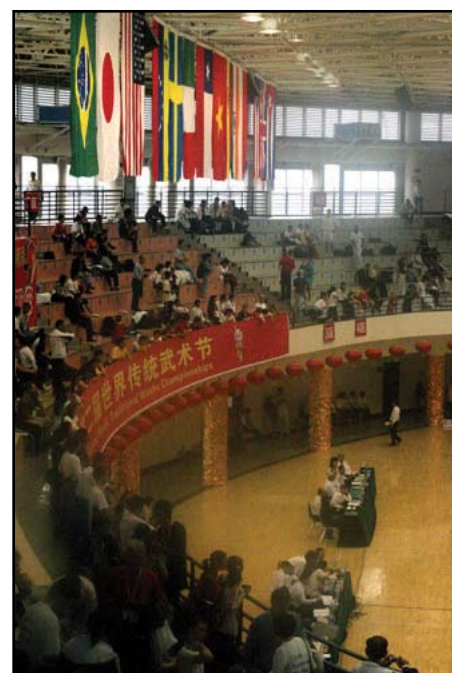
up and down a fairly attractive conifer. On leaving by another exit, we chanced upon a garishly painted, paper-mache' looking sculpture in the shape of a taiji practitioner executing 'Single-Whip'. This noble edifice was deeply embedded in a garden of marigolds and geraniums, creating a false authenticity to the proceedings that took place in the park everyday. This was the first visual sign of how important the Chinese considered taiji to their economy, more would follow later.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> World Traditional Wushu Championships

After a substantial breakfast, we went to the venue for the competition itself. Gary, Luce and Lisa (an American student of Fay) were competing and the rest of us went to experience how things were done at a major Chinese competition. The venue was a huge modern sports stadium with bright new apartments around the campus. On the all-weather courts at the back of the building a couple of hundred anxious competitors were honing their various skills with pre-match practice sessions. All manner of Chinese martial arts were on view, Shaolin, Wushu and internal arts. Around the pristine new buildings there were more and more banners advertising

the event with large red Chinese lanterns floating some several metres high.

Once inside the stadium we got a further sense of the scale of the event. There were four performing areas each with four judges behind desks. Each judge marked his or her score into computers which were in turn collated by a team of six-eight people behind a bank of laptops. The scores were electronically displayed minutes after each performance and also relayed over a giant scoreboard on the wall. Flags of all competing countries hung around the sides of the hall as hundreds of neatly attired



Competition Hall



Chen Wang Ting

competitors and there trainers filled the vast stadium.

Each of the four areas was constantly in use with external arts on one side, weapons at the rear of the room and hand forms at the front. It seemed that every competitor was guaranteed a medal, merely for being there and those that won gold, silver or bronze were competing in smaller groups of up to 14. The standard was variably with some nice forms on display and the livelier external forms were raucously cheered on by their friends. One highly popular entrant was a young lad of around eight performing a very impressive monkey form.



Chen Mural

One significant factor was that all entrants in this stadium were in fact non-Chinese natives; the Chinese competitors were in fact competing in another stadium at the other side of town. Later we would visit them.

Faye arranged meetings for us with various eminent figures from the Chinese martial arts world including her father Li De Yin, and the President of the Henan Traditional Taijiquan Association. We would later arrange to invite a group of officials to join us (The TCUGB) early next year as guests of the British Tai Chi Open Championships in April.

## Chenjiagou (Chen Village)

The next day Dan kindly arranged for two taxis to take us to Chenjiagou Village, the home of Chen Style Taijiquan the original taiji style. The journey took over two hours through a variety of dusty dirt tracks, stopping several times for our drivers to ask directions, always to be told it was another 30 or so kilometres. This went on for some time until we finally arrived at our destination. The village itself is very primitive with rough hewn roads and very old small buildings. The main square, where the world famous taiji centre is located is around the size of a very



Chen Mural

small British village comprising of 30 or 40 buildings, a handful of shops and work of various kinds being carried out on the streets. A small trailer included all the tools of the local bicycle repair shop whilst another served as the local café dispensing simple soup, rice and dumplings.

It cost of £4 or £5 each for entry to the Chen centre, very expensive by Chinese standards. Once through the entry gate the central area was about 40 metres square with typical Chinese buildings around it. Again everything was clean with neatly manicured gardens and fairly new buildings, (or newly renovated old buildings) in the traditional style. There were a number of statues and memorials to the various Chen family members including the largest of which for the founder, Chen Wangting who of course took central position in front to the main 'temple.' Once inside the main building featured various garishly painted statues of the Chen family members through the generations. Each were brightly coloured with a red painted board beneath them signifying in questionable English who they depicted. The other buildings were decorated with



Early morning 'tree-huggers'





'frescos' of the different classical taiji styles being performed. The paintings were of elementary school standard and designed to look older than they actually were. Whole walls were painted with what looked like depictions of legendary tales of great masters although, unfortunately, there was no explanatory literature available in English. As a museum to the 'original' taiji family style the Chen village left a lot to be desired. No clear information in English, poorly painted representations of the past masters and their lives and little else to inform us as to how this world-renowned system came to be passed through the generations, how

it was taught and practiced and what, if any, was the philosophical basis for this highly-respected art.

After visiting the main buildings we checked out the on-site shop which had equally poor merchandise on offer, a few swords, some silk suits, books & CDs. And even the ubiquitous plastic kung-fu figurine that you can pick up in your local Chinese supermarket for a few coins. Chen style Taijiquan is being widely promoted as the authentic style of the art which goes back some 400+ years; unfortunately there are no records, or copies of records to truly verify its passage through these long years. It is hard to credit that, this little, barely developed rural village, as the birthplace of a now world-wide activity practised by millions across the globe. This being the case I'm equally sure that in 10 or 20 years 'history' will be recreated and Chen Village will become an even major pilgrimage site for lovers of the art, with more than enough 'authentic' material to satisfy their requirements.

### Chen Zheng Lei

One little bonus for us was the fact that Chen Zheng Lei happened to be filming his latest DVD in the main courtyard; I took the opportunity to film and photograph the proceedings.



I met and interviewed the good man some 8 years prior and when space permitted I reminded him of our previous acquaintance and gave him some copies of our magazine, Tai Chi Chuan & Internal Arts where I had also included his protégé Wang Hai Jun who trained at the village since early childhood and is now based in Manchester, England. Understandably he didn't remember me until I pointed out his picture in the list of back issues. He was pleased to see his family style featured and told me he would be visiting the UK in a few months and I would be welcome to join his courses.

### Yang Luchan's House

The next stop on our journey was to visit the place where Yang Luchan had stayed in the village. As the information people at the Chen family centre were occupied with trying to keep the few visitors out of camera range of the Grandmaster's filming and the village being so small, we decided to find our own way there. Mr Docherty had visited the place some years before and had a general idea of the direction, but with ongoing changes taking place, he wasn't entirely certain. He stopped two or three locals who were none the wiser before we eventually found it some 15 – 20 minutes later. The small grey brick building was surrounded by a high wall with an old sign pointing directly at it with the words, "Yang Luchan's Taiji Learning place," in both English and Chinese. The wall contained a tablet inscribed, "Taijiquan Learning Place by Mr Yang Luchan," again



in both languages. We tried to open the gate. It was closed. We knocked loudly and walked around it a few times, still no response. At the left side of the building was a rough yard which contained two or three construction trucks, a pile of old bricks, and a couple of lines of hanging washing. At the right side was a narrow lane. I walked up the lane a bit and considered getting a lift over the wall and into the courtyard, but my fear of getting back out again without someone to give me a leg over stopped me from doing so. Dan conversed with a couple of more locals but again they had no information to give either. We began to slowly walk away from the house when a man came cycling down the road towards us. Thankfully he had the key and would let us in.

The first thing on view, facing us as we entered, was a tasteful stone memorial featuring the taiji symbol. The house itself consisted on two very small rooms. Downstairs there was a dusty table and chair with a small wooden staircase leading to the upper floor. A dusty cardboard picture approximately 2m x 1m leaned against the steps with a picture of Yang and some Chinese texts. Upstairs was a bare, empty attic. The second ground floor room displayed two sets of a couple of bronzed figures; one of Yang humbly being passed the secrets of taijiquan in a golden box and the other of two figures in taiji postures. The walls displayed various pictures of the life of Yang, again with Chinese texts.

A small lane led to the back garden with a worn area to the right and a small pagoda at the back. A few trees and shrubs surrounded this area. Here is where Yang supposedly learned the secrets of the art. At the back of the yard the remains of a brick wall were virtually covered in bushes – here there was a sign (in Chinese) saying





this was where Yang concealed himself to watch the Chen family practice. The inside roof of the pagoda had various painting around it with a taiji symbol at its apex. It is doubtful that they are original, although they look old.

In Chenjiagou Village we are led to believe that the original authentic style of taijiquan was created. We are also led to believe that all other styles came from the same source. In the village Yang Luchan has been notably relegated as a lesser figure who was fortunate to be allowed to learn this secret family art. It is harder to find his house and when you get there his subservience to the Chen family is strongly emphasised.



Ironically, had it not been for Yang Luchan I strongly believe that taijiquan would have died and the Chen Village would remain, as it still mainly is, a small insignificant rural village of little interest. This being the case, I am equally convinced that in a few years time we will see a major site for taiji pilgrims to visit with much in the way of 'historical evidence' and plenty opportunity to spend time their training in this 'authentic' family art. (Witness the development of the Shaolin Temple as a major 'cultural' centre, later in this article.)



## 2<sup>nd</sup> World Traditional Wushu Championships

Later that evening we were bussed to a huge stadium on the outskirts of the city to witness the official opening ceremony and celebration of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Traditional Wushu Championships. We were around a hundred or so busses, led by policed escort, through the city of Zhengzhou where everywhere along the route huge billboards and banners advertised this major event. We arrived at a huge bus park, disembarked, and were then led in lines to where we had to meet before entering the massive stadium. The



scene was like that of a big rock concert until we saw the flags of the various competing countries line up at various points along the long route. Eventually, near the end of the line, we saw the Union Jack proudly flying in the wind supported by the strong arms of our French-Vietnamese companion, Luce Condamine who somehow had managed to gain control, much to the annoyance of our English compatriots from the British Council for Chinese Martial Arts (BCCMA). Despite their protestations we Luce maintained her grip on the British standard for the next hour, proudly displaying it more than anyone had a right to.

After some 20 minutes or so the procession began towards the stadium. Most competing countries were smartly attired, in sports or smart clothes proudly featuring their national identity, however our motley group, which consisted of one English member, one Welsh, two Scots, one Chinese, one Jamaican Rastafarian and an American, all causally attired in their bog-standard travel gear excepting, of course, our French-Vietnamese colleague, who obviously, in anticipation of her special role and British flag-bearer, dressed neatly in her long silk Vietnamese robe.

## The Pop Concert

On entering the actual stadium itself we immediately became aware of the enormity of the event (particularly to our host country). Tens of thousands of people filled the stadium, roaring and cheering with delight every time a new country entered the arena, to take their pride of placed in front of the assembled throng. There were three massive screens which focussed on each country as they were led through the ongoing procession and we Brits (much to our surprise) received rapturous applause on arrival. The stadium, it seems, was around 70-80% full of excited locals eagerly awaiting the big show. After opening speeches by the officials in attendance and a few inspiring words from a specially selected South African competitor (also relayed through massive screens) the show began. For the next two hours we were subjected, sorry treated, to the very best that China had to offer in the shape of pop acts. The locals were frantically waving their light sabres in time to the cheesy popsy acts and obviously having the best night of their lives. Frequently, when the music became blander and less poppy they'd liven things up with a firework display, which again sent the local populace into further heights of enthusiastic applause.

Later we were treated to a display of Shaolin monks, again accompanied by fireworks and cheesy music! (It's real hard to get their theme tune out of your head – "Shaaaao – Leene!" - "Shaaaao – Leene!")

The scale and production of the event was certainly very impressive which made it highly evident how much time, energy and money was put in to the promotion of the competition. It seemed like a rehearsal for the forthcoming Olympic Games in 2008, although Chairman Gary became increasingly convinced it was the real thing.

## The Chinese Competitors

The next day we returned to the competition, this time to the Chinese competitors. This was altogether a very different ball-game. The stadium was considerably smaller, much less modern and, in fact fairly grubby and grimy with a profusion of fag-ends around the seating area. Scoring here seemed much more realistic than in the other stadium used by non-native Chinese and westerners. The quality seemed higher and points seemed lower than the other stadium. This could be because the locals have more to gain from getting higher marks and therefore work harder for it in face of fiercer competition or, perhaps they were placating the visitors from overseas to ensure long-term, continued support for such grand events; not for me to say.

## The Shaolin Temple

Our one-day excursion to the temple was not in fact our first visit there this trip. The distance of time causes me to forget the exact evening but we did travel one night, again in many, many busses with a police escort, to witness an evening concert in the grounds of the temple. (I use the word concert but they may choose to call it something else.) The venue was stunning, utilising the very



The visitors get in



best in outdoor lighting to tastefully illuminate the grounds of the temple, its main buildings and the impressive backdrop of Song Shan itself. Once the substantial crowd of spectators were finally seated the performance began. Temple bells were quietly struck as a handful of monks were revealed, meditating by a pool of water, through the subtle use of lighting. The show lasted nearly two hours and featured hundreds on monks, musicians and female dancers performing in a manner that would delight the campest Broadway producer. The spectacle was truly fantastic with the stunning setting and choreography being used in meticulous harmony. Whether its something we expect to see from a holy Buddhist order is entirely



Flag bearers

another matter.

A few days later our entourage set off, again with a hundred or so busses, again with police escort, on the hour or so trip to the Shaolin Temple. Leaving fairly early in the morning had not prepared us for the continuous loud commentary, solely in Chinese (despite the fact that 70% of our bus was not). After some 20 minutes or so it got the better of me and I began to groan rather loudly in desperation. Fortunately, or otherwise, this was noted by our Chinese guide who enquired as to the nature of my cries. I, and a number of others, began to voice our inner feelings at being subjected to this cacophony of noise which was unintelligible to the majority

of us. Mistakenly she then told the narrator that we wanted her to stop immediately when all we required was a slightly quieter tone. This caused much upset to one Hong Kong native who had a go at our Chairman, deeming him responsible for the disrespect he thought he gave. On disembarking I quietly enquired to the nature of his more than evident anger and re-assured him that we meant no such disrespect but merely suggested that perhaps it may be better for the commentator to focus her attention on the handful of native Chinese speakers at the front of the bus and allow those of us ignorant of her words to attain some degree of peace. He was sympathetic to our plight and became increasing friendly towards us thereafter.

Weight lifting



Once entering the grounds of the temple we were over-whelmed by the magnitude of the display put on on our behalf. For over 2 hours we walked slowly through the grounds of the temple and constantly, at either side of us, legions of monks demonstrated their considerable skills. From very young children standing for some time on one leg whilst the other was held adroitly above their heads to the dynamic, fast flashing sabre-fights. Some were constantly lifting heavy weights up and down with one arm, others were fighting with spears, and armies were practising sabre drills whilst others posed statically for many, many minutes. Children were dressed as monkeys, rabbits and tigers to entertain the youngsters whilst

groups of girls in purple and pink silk ran frantically screaming in circles, chasing each other with swords. Neigong skills were demonstrated by supporting the adept with the sharp spears on his chest whilst others ran quickly up and down the tall wooden posts rising to some three metres high. We saw the finer arts of calligraphy and tea ceremonies side by side to dynamic martial displays whilst in the distance still more battalions exercised their impressive drills. In all I believe 50,000 monks were in attendance.

Beyond the area of demonstrations we reached the grounds of the main temple buildings. Most were noticeably well constructed, in good condition, clean and well decorated.



A Shaolin pink rabbit

It seems that because of various fires and attacks over the years that most of the temple has been rebuilt. Alongside the very few original edifices we saw a number of newer tablets which had been donated by various individuals or organisations with an interest in the work of the Shaolin Monastery. In fact it was difficult to ascertain how much of the place was new or old. Luce Condamine and I wondered up to the back of the temples to an area which was brand new, although very much in the style of the original. Further away still we saw even more building being carried out and in a quite corner found the remains of a number of original stone pieces which may, or may not, be reused in the reconstruction.

Young girls with swords



Before the show

the battalions are drilling



In meditation



Resting shoes



Some hours later we made our way towards the exit to meet the busses at our pre-arranged time. Here were around 20 or so shops selling various related wares to the temple. Buddhist beads, training swords and wooden ones for children, incense, silk suits, coins, banners, videos, CDs, cold drinks, snacks and various charts and books. Unfortunately I found it impossible to find any seriously informative literature in English which I, and I'm sure many others would have been more than happy to purchase.

Our visit to the Shaolin Temple was certainly interesting but personally I would be happier to return in quieter times, slowly wonder around, ask questions, buy serious reading matter and get a better sense of what it is they actually teach in terms of physical, mental and spiritual work.

## Summary

Having first visited China in the early 90's, and returning fairly regularly at 3 – 4 year intervals, I'm hugely impressed with the incredible rate of development. More and more industrial, grimy cities are being cleaned up whilst modern, and in the main, tastefully creative new buildings of incredible proportion are springing up everywhere. China has wholeheartedly embraced consumerism and look set to lead the world in many aspects in a few years. It would be a great shame to lose its traditional jewels such as the martial arts of taiji, shaolin and qigong systems but it seems already too late. New forms of a shorter, standardised nature have been created and many of the old, valuable skills will surely be allowed to disappear in favour of packaging for the fast-paced modern world. Whilst my visits to the Chen Village and Shaolin Temple were greatly interesting I'm afraid I learned nothing new, despite the fact I wanted to. China holds many precious treasures from the past which can continue to enrich and enhance our future development which, I'm afraid will be lost and the worthy lessons which can be gained will fail to assist our increasingly endangered world.

**Ronnie Robinson 2006**

Ronnie at a temple door



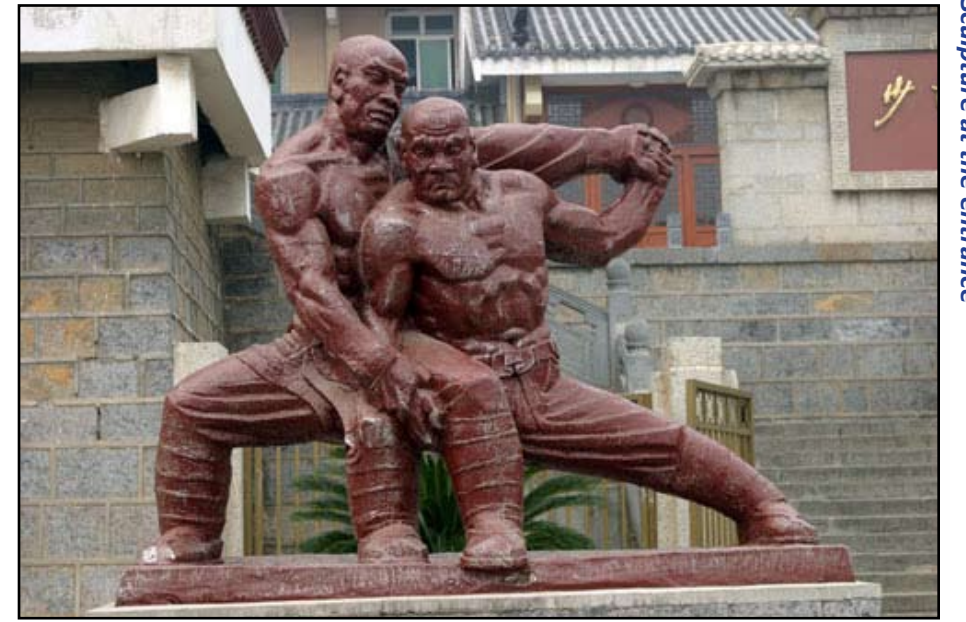
A working weapon



the battalions are drilling



Sculpture at the entrance



Dring Flowers



Standing by the wall



My thanks to Faye Li Yip for organising the trip and for ensuring all our needs were met in a very caring and pleasant manner. Thanks too to Dan Docherty for his knowledge, humour and willingness to act as our tour guide for the Chen Village visit.

In 2007 Chiron Tai Chi in conjunction with Faye Li Yip will be arranging a trip to Beijing, Chen Village, Shaolin Temple, Xian (Terracotta Warriors) and Wudang Mountain.

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