

Newsletter February 2008

First let me wish you all a Happy Chinese New Year, Gong xi fa cai, from sunny Malaysia where the beginning of the Year of the Rat is about to be celebrated.

At the end of this month I shall once again be visiting the UK and since the annual grading is to be held this year in Devon on March 2nd I thought I would write something more about tests and their relation to our study.

Over here work continues on the Centre with the sprung wooden floor going into the training area and more accommodation being added. At the same time preparations continue full swing for the 20th Anniversary celebrations. Zhong Ding Penang has now been accepted into membership of the Penang Wushu Association and they will be arranging a pushing hands competition to coincide with the September celebrations. Furthermore Tim Nicklin Sensei 5th Dan Goju Ryu Karate has agreed to attend the event offering instruction in his approach to the martial arts.

As well as the article on Tests I have also included an article I wrote about a young Chinese martial artist in Malaysia who fought his way to the finals of The Ultimate Malaysian Warrior competition.

Enjoy the articles and enjoy your training. Looking forward to seeing you all soon.

Nigel

Tests

Tests and gradings are not usually a part of training in traditional Chinese martial arts; at least not as they are taught in the 21st century. There have, however, always been informal tests of skill on a number of levels ranging from the friendly rivalry between members of the same martial arts family to demonstrations of skill in front of the general public, or even challenge matches where skills are compared in a sometimes violent fashion.

With my experience of the heart-thumping, bruising ordeal of karate gradings under my belt I thought that I at least had an idea of what tests in the martial arts were all about. How little I knew!

My introduction to tests Chinese style came with the realization that often the biggest test was what you had to do to get a Chinese teacher to teach you in the first place. Thus the test came at the beginning of the training rather than further down the line when you were more experienced.

When I arrived at the Hutong (traditional courtyard) house of Master Gao Ziyong in Beijing in 1984 I was not expecting what followed. After introductions were made and it was explained that I was a brown belt in karate, the 79 year old Master Gao invited me to "play" with him. Unsure as to what this meant I looked quizzically at my interpreter and he smilingly suggested that I should attack the old man. I hesitated, as I'm sure anyone else in that position would do, and a growling noise emanated from the throat of the old man. I attacked. For the next ten minutes or so, actually it felt like an hour, I was smashed around the room, bouncing off furniture, the walls and occasionally the floor, all of which seem to have been conveniently placed there for just that purpose.

At the end of this exquisitely painful "test", with a satisfied look on his face, Master Gao announced that he would teach me.

As an aside this is the same Master Gao who is referred to in Robert Smith's book, *Martial Musings*. Although Smith never met him he repeats stories of how Master Gao was able to defeat opponents with the lightest of touches. Well if he could I didn't feel it that day. I got beaten up with extremely painful, skillfully placed strikes which exhibited the kind of controlled violence and ferocity that one would expect from a man who has spent his whole life training in the martial arts.

In subsequent years I underwent similar tests with most of the Chinese teachers that I trained with. On first meeting, or maybe if they were a little coy, on the second or third meeting there was always the request to see what I had learnt from my previous study.

How could I forget that magic occasion on which Master Tan Swoh Theng of Shaolin Five Ancestors decided to show me how his art could beat the baguazhang that I had previously studied in China. In the small concreted area at the front of his terraced house in a small town in southern Malaysia with the temperature at 38 degrees celsius and nearly 100% humidity I walked a circle around him and he turned one step at a time until almost contemptuously, having decided he had had enough he charged forward and pummeled me most energetically with his rock hard fists.

"There," he said as he stepped back to admire his handiwork, "That's how you deal with baguazhang!"

To be perfectly honest by that time I had learnt that if I wanted to study with the teacher I had to do what they expected me to do rather than what I had been trained to do. Were I actually using baguazhang to fight there would have been no walking around him in circles. I have little doubt, however, that given our comparative skill levels, the result would have been the same.

In my practice of the Chinese martial arts there have been other tests most often in the form of challenges whether formal or impromptu. Over the years I have become used to accompanying my teachers as they visited friends and acquaintances and when the latter were martial artists it was not uncommon to be asked to "show what I had learnt from the Master." This I was able to do fortified by the fact that my teachers trusted me enough to allow me to represent them in such situations. This trust mitigated the lack of faith I had in my own abilities.

I was further strengthened in the knowledge that when I first took the formal bai shi and became a part of the Cheng Man Ching lineage, I had to promise that I would not refuse challenges. For me this was a source of strength as I felt that I was not so much representing myself but rather representing my teacher and the whole lineage.

Over the years of living in Malaysia I have been visited by local martial artists wishing to "shi gong fu" or test my gong fu. Indeed one such occasion was responsible for my very traditional Chinese father-in-law to at last recognize that his laowai (old outsider) son-in-law might actually have some understanding of Chinese martial arts.

At the time I was living with my wife in her family home in Batu Pahat in Southern Malaysia and I was reasonably well-known amongst members of the local taijiquan community, many of whom were my seniors in Zhengzi taijiquan. One day two local taijiquan practitioners turned up at the family house ostensibly to come and say hello but it was obvious that that was not their true motivation. They were both rather large for Chinese, similar in both build and height to myself at that time. After the usual tea and small talk their repeated requests for a practical demonstration of my taijiquan abilities became impossible to ignore so we retired to the large open hall area upstairs which I used for training. While one sat down the other asked if he could do pushing hands with me. This I readily agreed to, after all it is usually a lot less painful than fighting, and without further ado the first fellow extended his arms and we began. My father-in-law had followed us up the stairs and stood watching with an expression on his face which can only be described as excited.

There wasn't much for him to watch. As soon as I touched him it was obvious that the challenger was not a particularly high level exponent. He made his move and I responded with the most basic of taijiquan's "expressions of force", a double-handed push which sent him reeling across the hall to end up crashing into and rather spectacularly breaking a coffee table. Now my father-in-law was both laughing and clapping his

hands with glee. That was it; the erstwhile challenger had had enough and his companion suddenly developed a bad knee which prevented him from having a go himself.

From that day on my father-in-law saw any visitor I had as a potential challenger. Even visits from my friends were greeted with earnest enquiry as to whether we were going to fight?

Not all such encounters were as bloodless as the one described above. There was one occasion when I was teaching at a tertiary college in the town of Johor Bahru that a student asked to "play". At that time we were on a weekend "field trip" to a beach resort and the student concerned, who was from Mainland China, saw such play as an added entertainment for himself and his friends. The fact that he was in his early twenties while I was a rotund forty something who hardly looked like the martial artist of popular fiction, I think sweetened the pot. It was the evening of our arrival and the students were hanging out and relaxing. The sound of the waves splashing on the sandy beach less than fifty yards away was a soothing background music, punctuated by the usual insect noises of a tropical night. I agreed to his invitation. We were on a patch of open ground next to the whitewashed walls of the shower block, a row of hand basins adorned the wall at waist height.

He stood facing me in a fighting stance such as that used in Chinese sanda (full-contact sparring for competitions). That fit as I knew that he had recently left the Armed Police, one of China's quasi-military uniformed bodies, and I knew they trained extensively in sanda and unarmed combat. I had a feeling this was not going to be pretty and that I would be absolutely no match for him in terms of stamina or general fitness. He made his move and I attacked. Not thinking, not planning just moving forward while delivering a constant barrage of punches to his head and upper body, I immediately had him on the retreat. Then there was nowhere else for him to go as his waist hit the basins and a final cracking punch to the face doubled him over so that he ended up with his head under the tap muttering something about that being enough. I stepped back breathing hard and he stood up gingerly holding his hands to his bleeding nose. To his credit he smiled ruefully and complimented me on my gong fu and I replied that it was my fear of his sanda skills that made me "panic" and charge in, so with face saved all round we were friends again. Funnily enough no one else wanted to test my gong fu that weekend.

A less sanguine form of test for the student of Chinese martial arts is the form demonstration. Anyone who has practiced Chinese martial arts for any length of time, particularly in Asia, will be familiar and comfortable with the idea that they have to "strut their stuff" at the drop of their teacher's hat. While it is acceptable to protest that your skills are not adequate, that the performance will be poor and so on, at the end of all this you still have to do your thing and do it sufficiently well that your teacher does not lose face.

In the Malay martial arts tests and what might be termed gradings are an integral part of the training. Even if there are no formal grades issued during the training process, it is normal practice to include some testing element in the final graduation ceremony, which is often referred to as the Khatam.

If the system of silat being learnt includes ilmu batin, or internal knowledge, then the test might include firewalking or being cut with a variety of sharp knives. If the style is a kampong (village) style then such a test is likely to include some kind of sparring, usually full-contact, and often against a series of opponents in succession.

Over the past decade or so I have taken part in numerous such tests. Even when I "failed" and I have on more than one occasion, I have always won in the sense that it has allowed me to confront my own fears, to learn more about the art and to discover where I need to improve.

In fact I would go so far as to say that the lifelong study of martial arts is a constant series of tests in which one measures one's ability, action, skills and training of today against those of the previous day. And when you stumble or fall there is always another opportunity to get up and start again, content in the knowledge that every day of training is a step on the path and, although it may be a cliché, the truth in martial arts is that it is the journey not the destination that is important!

Duelling in the Sun

Malaysia's Ultimate Warrior – Penang

On Saturday the 30th of June and Sunday 1st of July a group of more than 70 courageous fighters, in two weight classes, battled for the honour of participating in the national finals in Kuala Lumpur. All of Malaysia's three major racial groups were represented, Malay, Chinese and Indian.

Although the venue in the car park of Queensbay Mall exposed to the blazing sun, was far from ideal, the awning erected over the ring provided some protection for the fighters, and the excitement generated by the event drew spectators who, undeterred by the total lack of protection from the sun, avidly supported the participants.

Throughout the two days there were numerous examples of courage, perseverance and sportsmanship. While fighters did their utmost to overcome their opponents there was an almost total absence of deliberate fouling. Indeed fighters often smiled at each other in recognition of a good technique and, at the end of each match, genuine respect was shown to their opponent irrespective of the result. There were no temper tantrums, no cursing and none of the macho posturing which is all too sadly prevalent in similar events in the West. This event reflected the fact that this is Malaysia where quiet courage, a gentle smile and respect for people of all colours, races and creeds is an integral part of the national character.

The Warrior spirit was strong in the participants in this event who came from a variety of martial backgrounds. There were exponents of Muay Thai, traditional Silat, Silat Olahraga, Taekwondo, Chinese Sanda as well as exponents of the more modern discipline of Kickboxing.

While it is true to note that the martial arts in the 21st Century may generally be divided up into the competitive fighting-based sporting arts and the traditional systems which focus on self-defence and the preservation of cultural martial traditions, it seemed that there were exponents of both camps represented in this competition. It is also true, however, that the majority of the fighters came from competition fighting systems such as Muay Thai, Kickboxing, Silat Olahraga and Chinese Sanda. The reason for this, while apparently obvious is one that is often overlooked, namely that a familiarity with the rules, permitted techniques and a firm grasp of the vital importance of the mental and physical conditioning required for such competition is vital to success.

One example of a fighter who was well aware of all the above factors and had obviously trained accordingly was Chee Jian Kai of Ipoh. This young Chinese man, who trains at TNT kickboxing in Kuala Lumpur, exhibited not only courage, stamina and endurance in the face of pain, but also demonstrated the ability to outthink his opponents, changing from one strategy to a more successful one, according to the requirements of the game.

That I have chosen to focus on this fighter in no way reflects badly on all the other worthy competitors who showed such spirit, endurance and skill. It is more a reflection of the fact that the Chinese traditional martial arts in Malaysia are at a point in time where they are in danger of straying from their fighting origins. The shimmy-shammying, silk pyjama clad, gyrating dance that is modern sport wushu threatens to eclipse those very real fighting traditions which have long been a source of protection and pride for the Malaysian Chinese. Young fighters like Chee Jian Kai are representatives of a tradition that goes back hundreds of years and though the form may be different, the fighting spirit, the sheer "heart" is the same.

Chee, who has been practising kickboxing for more than a year at Andre Thomas' TNT Kickboxing, has trained in an approach which covers Muay Thai, Chinese Sanda and Western Boxing. Under the watchful eye of Head instructor Mr. Khoo Meng Yang and with the assistance of Mr. Alex Lim and other senior and junior training partners, his skills have grown and he has taken part in more than ten fighting competitions under a variety of rule sets. He has also represented his home State of Perak in Chinese Sanda under the tutelage of Mr. Phan Poh Ngean, who is also Malaysia's national coach for sanda. Chee also trains Muay Thai under Mr. Bernard Radin at his gym Muay Thai Academy Tambun.

In his very first match he dispatched his opponent with seeming ease; executing thundering kick after thundering kick, some of which took his opponent right off his feet to send him crashing to the mat.

As the competition progressed, with tiredness setting in and the heat taking its toll, as well as having to face more and more experienced opponents, Chee's professionalism showed. His ability to switch tactics from blistering punching combinations to a succession of fast and powerful high kicks to bone-crunching throws favoured in Chinese Sanda, stood him in good stead.

In such competitions, however, fast and powerful hands and feet are often not enough. An almost superhuman stamina is required as is the ability to survive sustained and punishing blows. In the semi-final the young Chee went to the floor twice and on each occasion his over-zealous opponent delivered a pounding head kick as he hit the floor. Notwithstanding the fact that this infringement of the rules resulted in two fouls, it was Chee's ability to stand up, shake off the pain and continue to fight with strength and commitment that took him through to eventual victory.

Over the two days Chee Jian Kai, when not fighting, stayed at ringside, stretching, exchanging slow practice techniques with his diligent training partner, Alex Lim, and watching all that was going on in the ring. Outside the ring the smiling, bespectacled Chee exchanged banter with other fighters and officials looking more like a university student than a full-contact fighter.

The future of Chinese martial arts lies in the hands of fighters like Chee Jian Kai. His fighting spirit, his professionalism, mastery of his fighting techniques, and his humble yet steadfast demeanour, are all the hallmarks of the Chinese warrior of the past. It would be a great loss if those exponents of the traditional arts cannot learn from and emulate such warriors of the modern discipline!

Win or lose in the finals in the national finals in Kuala Lumpur, Chee Jian Kai is young enough and has the requisite attitude that will enable him to rise to the very top of his chosen discipline and to stand with pride as a Malaysian Warrior.

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IMPORTANT NOTICE

If you wish to attend either the May visit to Beijing or the September Penang Extravaganza please contact me or let your instructor know asap so that we can ensure you have a place.

Thank you.

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