

## Newsletter May 2007

Welcome to the new format newsletter which will now appear monthly here on the website. I shall be writing a monthly letter and also including one or more new articles. As always I welcome your contributions which may be sent to me care of this website.

First I must congratulate all of those who took part in the March national grading in Manchester. I must also extend a big thank you to John and Vicky for all their help which made the day such a success. Thanks to all who attended from all over the country and even from as far away as Ireland and Spain.

Here in Malaysia we are very happy to announce that the new Zhong Ding training headquarters in the scenic fishing village of Kuala Sungai Penang, is now undergoing renovation. When finished there will be an outdoor training hall, an equipment training area complete with bags, training dummies and assorted targets and an indoor hall for baishi and other ceremonies. There will also be dormitory facilities for live-in students.

The village is on the less-inhabited side of the island and is shadowed by mountains and surrounded by lush greenery. The area is renowned both for its Chinese martial arts but also for Malay silat and, for those with a romantic turn of mind, was also once a haven for pirates.

As some of you will know next year marks the 20th anniversary of Zhong Ding and celebrations will be held in the form of a training holiday in sunny Penang. Start saving your pennies and watch this space for more details as I'm sure it will be a wonderful event.

Until next month train hard and enjoy your training

Nigel

### Tiguan – School Closing

Tiguan, which literally means "kick the hall", is the expression used to describe the Chinese practice of school closing, whereby any challenger could walk into an established school and demand to fight that school's representative. If he were successful then he could fight the school's master, and if successful in that endeavour, the school would be forced to close. If the challenger lost, politeness dictated that he should ask to become a student of the victor.

This tradition served to keep any martial artist willing to open a formal school on his toes. He had to be able to prove the efficacy of his art at any point in time. In recent years this tradition has declined, but amongst masters of the "old school" there still exists this attitude of willingness to fight to preserve the reputation of their chosen art.

Here on Penang Island there is one master from the Shaolin school whose willingness to "prove" his skills is legendary. Anyone wishing to open a school under the name of Shaolin had to face this gentleman. Even now, though he is in his sixties, he still invites visiting teachers from China, usually exponents of the modern wushu, to face him in combat. On the whole, advised of his reputation, they refuse and give him face as a master of "real" Chinese martial arts. One "expert", homegrown in Malaysia, renowned for his books on a wide variety of subjects from Tai Chi and Shaolin to Chi Kung and even Zen Buddhism, was forced to relocate his school from the island of Penang to the Malaysian mainland, on hearing that such a challenge was imminent. Such is the world of Chinese martial arts in Malaysia.

My own teachers, whether in the Shaolin arts or those termed "internal", all tell their own stories of such "tiguang" challenges that they have had to face.

Master Tan Swoh theng of Fujian Wuzuquan (Five Ancestors Boxing) tells how a challenger from Hongquan (Hung Gar) visited his school looking for a fight; and how he dispatched him with a footsweep and a chopping blow to the neck; the latter being his favourite and "trademark" technique.

Master Lau Kim Hong, one of my taijiquan teachers in the Zhengzi (Cheng Man Ching) tradition recounts how two challengers trained in western boxing, came to his school demanding to test his skills. After he had soundly beaten the first one with an open-hand strike to the face that broke his nose and knocked him down, the second one decided that he didn't need anything else by the way of a demonstration of Master Lau's skills. They did stay for some time after this abortive challenge due to the fact that the "challenger" could not move from the chair where he slumped clutching his bleeding nose and moaning out loud.. Master Lau remarked that it was difficult to continue teaching the class with all the noise that he was making. He also noted that the man did not understand wu de (the code of moral conduct expected of martial artists) as he never came back to learn from Master Lau despite having been beaten.

Even though, at that time, I had no formal school in the small town where I was living in Southern Malaysia, due to the fact that I was one of my master's senior students and a foreigner to boot, I received periodic challenges from local martial artists. My father-in-law, who is something of a pillar of the local community, had always seen me as a foreigner trying to learn Chinese martial arts, and with the fierce pride of a China-born native, had always seemed to hold the opinion that I would never really be able to practice the "real thing". That all changed when two challengers came to the family house where I was living, and he watched me destroy various pieces of furniture using the body of the first of the two, who fortunately was not that skilled. This caused the second challenger to develop a hitherto undiscovered injury, which prevented him from making his own challenge. From that day on I went up in my father-in-law's esteem, so much so that to this day he asks excitedly whenever I receive a visitor whether he and I are going to fight.

It must be pointed out that I am personally reluctant to enter into such encounters but it is my responsibility as an initiated member of the lineage to protect the reputation of my teacher and that lineage. Furthermore it has been my experience that genuine martial artists of a high enough level do not necessarily need a fight to recognize the skills of a fellow martial artist.

It is not just in the world of Chinese martial arts that such a custom exists. In Malay silat there is a similar tradition in that a teacher must be prepared to prove his skill and the efficacy of his art to outsiders. While a loss would not necessarily dictate the closure of his school, the ensuing loss of reputation and face might ensure that few, if any, students would want to learn from him.

As a part of the khatam or graduation ceremony in the Silat Tua school of Guru Zainal Abidin of Penang, students are examined, not by Guru Zainal but by an invited master from a different school. If this master is not satisfied with the standard of the would-be graduates then he can ask them to perform additional tasks or even to fight him. At one such khatam the visiting examiner was unimpressed with the performance of one of the students and insisted on fighting him. This student was so nervous that, immediately after the examiner performed an explosive opening movement, he rushed forward and with one punch knocked the erstwhile examiner to the ground. Guru Zainal notes that the student was obviously competent, and the visiting master, when he had recovered, had no choice but to pass him.

The existence of such tests and challenges among the exponents of traditional martial arts in Malaysia serves to ensure that exponents remain realistic in the expectations they have of their training. It also means that those who open martial arts schools do so knowing that one day they might have to put their money where their mouth is.

Unfortunately, in recent years, with the increase in the number of teachers from the modern wushu "performance art" approach to martial arts, school closing is becoming less of a common practice. But, as I have mentioned earlier, it still informs the practice and teaching of the older generation of masters; and

those of us who have been tasked with carrying on the traditional arts still practice in the spirit that we might have to defend our art and protect its reputation if needs be.

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