



## Newsletter May 2008

A big hello from sunny Penang where over the last few months we have been blessed with several special visitors. There is a Silat saying that when the gelanggang is ready the students will arrive and this has certainly proven to be the case.

First there were Roddy McGlashan and Rick Morrow, both students of Shifu Andy Norman. Both of them have visited Penang before and bravely come back for more and both of them share a positive and hard-working attitude towards their martial arts. Their sweat now stains the wooden planks of the training hall and I'm sure if one were to look hard enough their blood would also be there.

When not busy training their time was spent sitting in the local coffee shop watching life go by or walking along beside one of the many streams and canals that criss-cross the area.

The village sits on the river estuary in the shadow of the mountain range that runs down the middle of Penang Island. The majority of the villagers are either fishermen or associated with the fishing industry and their lives rotate around the rhythms of the tides. When the weather is bad the local coffee shop is full and the sound of shuffling mahjong tiles blends with the shouts and cries of the villagers as they watch a Chinese soap opera or just chat with their friends.

The rhythm of training here is also dictated by nature. We train in the morning when it is cool and then again in the late afternoon and the evening. Sometimes we even train into the early hours of the morning. Around us the life of the village ebbs and swirls. Early in the morning before it is light a qigong group practises in the playground of the local primary school which is just across the road from the centre. Then, as the sky lightens, the first children arrive eager to meet their friends and study. In the heat of the afternoon all goes quiet and the clouds scud across the mountain tops spreading those patterns of light and dark which the Ancient Chinese dubbed yin and yang. Sometimes it rains and the temperature drops, the sound of the downpour hammering on the roof of the training hall. As dusk approaches the village comes to life again and children play in the street, curious villagers pass the centre on their motor scooters and stare into the training hall; the bravest stand at the gate.

Amidst this all our training continues; forms are repeated over and over again, the wooden dummy rattles as it receives thousands of blows. The swish of weapons and the crack as they hit rattan targets fills the air. The thud of bodies hitting the mats and the occasional cry of pain or animal effort can also be heard and the smell of sweat fills the nostrils.

In the short time that we have been there we have started to establish our own community within the community and this is very important in the traditional martial arts. Here in Penang our Zhong Ding activities grow apace, in addition to the private lessons I give, Fong now has three classes, two in schools and one at the apartment complex where we live. Zhong Ding International is a registered association and Zhong Ding Penang is a member of the Penang Chinese Martial Arts Association.

In the past few weeks we have had other visitors, Paul Gitsham from Zhong Ding Yorkshire and Didier Binetruy a Frenchman who lives in India and is a student of Glen Pelham-Mather. Together with Lian and myself we went to perform at the wedding of one of our Silat brothers. Many members of the silat community were there to pay their respects to the bride and groom. Students and teachers were present from Silat Gayong Pusaka, Gayong Fattani, Siku Duabelas and Silat Tua. The wedding gift we took was our performance of the art and this we did in a large hall in the compound of a school. At one end the bride and groom and their parents sat in state, robed in elaborate traditional costume.

For all of us the highpoint of the wedding was when the groom's brother invited him onto the performance area to dance his silat. The groom smiled shyly yet proudly and came out to give a breathtaking display. Then his brother passed him a keris, the traditional wavy bladed knife of the Malay warrior and together they fought or did they dance; it was a dance, it was a fight, above all it was a display of love and respect that was enough to bring tears to the eyes.

During the course of the afternoon one by one and in groups the groom's silat brothers performed and saluted the couple with love and respect. This is how the martial arts live, as something that is an integral part of the lives of the people in the community, there to offer support and protection whenever and wherever needed.

Paul, Didier and Lian all performed well and we had an inspiring day. Then it was back to the hard work. Didier, who is a superb artist, learnt the taiji form as well as an array of weapon skills. Paul worked not only on his bagua, taiji and xingyi but also his silat. Together they helped to add their sweat and blood to the training hall.

So now our Zhong Ding community stretches from Malaysia to the Philippines, to India, Spain, France, Germany, Ireland the US and UK. In all of these places there are students and teachers who are doing their best to apply the principles of their art and top continue the teaching of our teachers.

Not a day passes that I don't think about Master Liang and his life and teaching. In the traditions that I practice it is considered that any effect that the teaching of a good teacher has on those he teaches accumulates merit for this life and the next. By carrying on his work we pass on merit to those who have gone before. This is an idea that resonates with me, and that I try to live.

In the traditions that Zhong Ding preserves and hands down are many amazing "secrets" collected and collated from the observations and experience of our ancestors, which serve to make our lives both more meaningful and richer. Like all good secrets they are common knowledge, hidden in plain sight, the gold in lumps of mud which the unwary step over.

One such wonderful teaching is that of the taiji, the endless changes and permutations of yin and yang that we find embodied in the taijiquan. This is a truly remarkable "secret" and one which I shall explore further in the next newsletter.

Until then train, dance, enjoy!

## 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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