

## »Do the best you can within your ability«

### Interview with Faye Li Yip

Faye Li Yip is one of the most outstanding personalities within the European Taiji and Qigong community. She grew up in a family with a long martial arts tradition, she has trained since her childhood and for the last twenty years she has been teaching Taiji hand and weapon forms, Xingyiquan and Qigong in the United Kingdom and in many other countries. In an interview with Ronnie Robinson she talks about her apprenticeship with her father and other major masters, the influence of her grandfather Li Tianchi who used Qigong and Taijiquan for therapeutic purposes, and her experiences with competitions. She also discusses the similarities and differences between Qigong and Taijiquan, which complement each other in her training, as well as training with weapons.

#### **How old were you when you first start training, what were you taught and how often did you train?**

I started with basic Shaolin Quan foundation training just before turning seven under the tutelage of my father Li Deyin and his colleague at the University, Mr. Jiang Hong Sheng. The training involved early morning sessions with running, jumping, stretching, various kicks and punches. Then after school, we'd have a longer training session that was much the same, but followed with basic form training. We always trained outside, putting our legs up the tree trunks to stretch, and competing on how high we could reach up. I used to hang an elastic band between the trees, setting a target to improve my kicks. As I progressed, I started to learn weapons forms using bamboo swords, wooden sabres and waxwood poles. My favorite weapon was (and still is) the sword. Sometimes my father would arrange for me to train with other coaches in a martial art school during the school holidays.

When I was about 10 or 11, I started to train with the University Wushu Squad where my father was the head coach. I was the youngest, but I never felt out of place and of course didn't have any special treatment! The training sessions were 3 hours long and very intense, especially before a competition. But they were also lots of fun, and everyone was so encouraging and supportive that it was always a happy time.

Every Sunday, my father took the whole family to visit my great Uncle Li Tian Ji on the other side of Beijing. The journey would involve a 20 minute bike ride (with all of us on one bike) to the University bus stop, then 3 bus rides through the City, followed by a 20 minute walk to the flat. Here there would be a gathering of Li Tian Ji's students. They came from all walks of life, from factory workers to musicians, from school teachers to engineers. They would all take turns to receive teaching from Li Tian Ji on their favorite hobbies – Tai Chi Chuan, Xing Yi Chuan and Ba Gua Zhang. My great uncle made me do Ba Gua – circle walking. His teaching was different to my father, very strict – I had to repeat one move over and over, again and again, but still he was not happy! I used to dread it because (at the time) it was very boring, compared to playing sword, sabre, kicking or punching.

For a long time, it was my martial art training that provided me with a release from stress in my school education. I think the happiness and friendship I gained from training gave me the confidence to stay on top of my academic study.

#### **Did you ask to be taught or were you encouraged to?**

One good thing about being born into a traditional martial arts family is that I grew up listening to stories of old-time martial art heroes fighting against evil; how martial arts transformed often sickly youngsters into super fit martial artists with extraordinary skills, and warrior monks from the Shaolin Temple using their martial arts skills to fight against the Japanese invaders in times of war. One of my favorite childhood comic books (in black and white) was called '偷拳 (stolen fists)', a story about how Yang Lu Chan dedicated himself to learning Tai Chi Chuan (in secret) in Chen Village. In 1970's China the only material luxury we had was a radio, so unsurprisingly I took an interest in martial arts from a very young age. Fortunately, I was surrounded by great martial artists in my family - three generations before me.

My father never asked me to become a Wushu athlete, but I think he is rather pleased that I took it up as a hobby, which grew (over time) into a fulfilling career.

### **Were you taught by your father only?**

While most of my training before I went to university was with various Wushu Squads under my father's intensive coaching, I also received regular teaching and invaluable guidance from my great uncle Li Tian Ji, and from my grandfather Li Tian Chi, who worked at Harbin University Hospital, applying Taiji and Qigong for rehabilitation. He used his skills and knowledge in Taiji and Qigong for treating his patients, and I spent many summer holidays in my youth with him, watching him prescribe Qigong exercises in the hospital. He told me that Martial Art, Taiji, Qigong and Traditional Chinese Medicine all belong to one family, and I find myself doing a lot of all these things these days.

I also had the privilege to meet and learn from well-known Chinese masters, including Madam Sun Jian Yun, the daughter of Sun Style creator Sun Lu Tang, and the foremost Ba Gua & Xing Yi Master, Sha Guo Zheng. I also trained with a lot of elite Tai Chi athletes, many of whom have become my good friends and colleagues.

### **Did you compete and, if so, how old were you when you started?**

Before entering any competitions myself, I travelled with my father to watch many competitions where my father had been invited to be either a judge or the head judge. It was a stimulating and inspiring experience for a young child, seeing children and adults showcasing different styles of martial art movements with passion and pride. Although it was a competition with scores and with medals, it somehow felt more like a celebration of Chinese Martial Arts. People in the competition always seemed friendly and easy to talk to.

I started entering Wushu Competitions when I was in middle school through to my university days as I was one of the main players in the school's wushu squad, competing in categories such as Chang Quan (Shaolin based modern routines), Jian Shu (Sword forms), Taijiquan (Tai Chi Chuan) and Dui Lian (two-person drill). I won first place many times in the Sword and Tai Chi categories. I also competed in traditional competition categories such as Eagle Claws and Emei Needles where I gained good results.

As a young person with a passionate hobby, I found the competitions really helped me to work hard to achieve a set goal, and to organize my training with focus and discipline. During the preparation towards a competition, my coach and I would work out a plan, laying out when and what to focus on in my practice. The constant support and encouragement from my team mates during training and competition was also an amazing source of strength, making the whole experience enjoyable, rather than just hard work.

### **Were there any particular aspects that you favoured more?**

It was the smooth and seemingly effortless, yet powerful and dynamic martial art movements that attracted me. I still find that no matter how many times I practice the movements, there is always something new to experience.

Traditional Chinese philosophy/teaching describes life in three levels: 精Jing(形Xing), 气Qi and 神Shen. Jing/Xing is our physical body shape, our head, shoulder, arms, legs, hips, waist and the internal organs, all of which houses the flow of Qi. That's why the way we walk, stand and move all has an impact on how we feel. Shen is the invisible form of Qi that controls our mind activities, including the processing of information, the thinking and the spirit. The Qi that flows around the meridians in the body, which is often referred to as energy, is the key connection for the body and the spirit.

The beauty of martial art training, and Taijiquan in particular, is that we can take our time and progress at our own pace to find the three levels in ourselves, working towards optimum physical and mental health.

### **Did you study and historical or academic work pertaining to taiji etc.?**

I have read a lot of books and articles on Taiji, Xing Yi and Ba Gua. They have mostly been in Chinese, many of which have been excellently translated into English. Certain classical texts are particularly useful for experienced practitioners, such as Yang Cheng Fu's 'Ten Essential Principles of Taiji' recorded by Chen Wei Ming; 'Five Key Secrets' by Li Yi Yu; 'Taijiquan Theory' by Wu Yu Xiang and 'Taijiquan Study' by Sun Lu Tang etc.

I'd advise serious Taiji practitioners to find time to read well written Taiji books in order to stimulate their learning. However, reading books alone won't improve the skills and techniques. Nothing in words and theories can replace the physical experience, the feeling of the expending and the resilient internal energy (Peng Jin). To really understand the meanings of Taiji principles, you need to repeat each movement and technique under expert supervision until it becomes spontaneous.

### **What prompted you to move to the UK?**

I think I had always had a secret desire to see the world outside China; however this was the unthinkable when I was young.

I studied Psychology at Beijing Shi Fan University, where nearly all of the text books were translated from English. Many terminologies were used in English, so I thought it would be nice to read and study the original work. I applied for, and was subsequently offered, a place in the UK to study at Liverpool University. Reading research material in the original language definitely helped me to get a deeper understanding of the subject.

Because I understand how difficult and frustrating it can be to study Taijiquan with translated text, I feel it is important to explain the meaning of Chinese Characters during my teaching, in order to give a broader understanding of the origins and history of the art. We also started to organise regular training trips to China every year, helping Taiji enthusiasts get close to the special cultural places where Taiji originated and grew.

### **Can you give an indication of the structure of your school?**

Tary and I set up the Deyin Taijiquan Institute 17 years ago with the aim of carrying on my family's tradition, and providing a comprehensive training syllabus that can take a complete beginner to an accomplished practitioner.

Our syllabus covers three levels for both students and instructors. A beginner will start with basic stances and hand movements, and will follow a short 8 Step Yang Style Form, as well as doing regular Qigong exercises to improve body alignment and breathing. As the student processes and improves, more challenging Taiji routines will be taught, including the 24 Step standardized Taijiquan, 32 Step Taijijian (sword), short Sun Style Forms and technique applications at intermediate level. This is followed by the long hand forms of Yang & Sun Style Taiji, weapon forms, more hand & weapon applications, as well as international competition forms at an advanced level. We run regular Taiji & Qigong workshops throughout the UK for all levels of practitioners, as well as our annual Deyin Summer Camp, where my father would make a special visit from China, coming over to the UK to give master workshops. To ensure and maintain the teaching standard, we run a 5 module Deyin Instructor Training programme to train intensively on all aspect of Taijiquan syllabus including stances, rooting, body alignment, hand forms, sword technique and applications. We've always made it clear that it is quality rather than quantity that our courses offer. Our instructor course has always been fully subscribed, and we have been delighted by the wonderful feedback from the participants.

Also, in 2009, Tary and I set up the British Health Qigong Association in collaboration with the Chinese Health Qigong Association. This was to promote a specific syllabus of 9 standardised qigong routines. After extensive research and consultation with many prominent Qigong experts, we identified 5 key areas of knowledge for a specific health qigong instructor training course. We understand the wide range of health benefits that Qigong can offer to the aging population, and want to provide people with a good standard teacher training platform. As a result of our effort, this course has proven extremely popular, and indeed has been over-subscribed every year.

### **How much of your time is decided between taiji & qigong and do you see them as different disciplines?**

Taiji and Qigong are inseparable in my training and teaching. They are unified on so many core strands: both developed on the concept of Qi, governed by the principles of yin and yang, following the five element theory, practiced in a gentle, slow and relaxed manner, and both providing a wide range of proven health benefits.

While Taiji and Qigong are very closely linked, I do see them as different disciplines, but in much the same way as I see my left and right hands – one doesn't function very well without the other. Some of the differences between Taiji and Qigong include: Qigong has a longer history than Taiji, and therefore gives birth to Taiji; Taiji is a form of martial art, while Qigong is for healing only; Taiji forms involve more complex movements, while Qigong is relatively easy to learn; There are over 1000 recorded types of Qigong, and that is without including different versions of the same Qigong, while there are five well-recognised Taiji Styles with many variations.

In general, I use Qigong mainly for people who are very weak, maybe recovering from an operation or experiencing a debilitating illness. A Specific Qigong exercise can help to stimulate a particular meridian that promotes the flow of Qi. I recently worked with the Midland NHS on a Pilot Study introducing Health Qigong Yi Jin Jing to ME patients. The early indication showed a positive result. In my regular classes, I always include a Qigong set after a general warm up and before the Taiji. I find it helps students to calm the mind, smooth the breathing and relax the body. The Taiji training will then build on the benefits of Qigong, with the dynamic movements that further improve balance, rooting, stamina and strength.

In my class with school children, I use selected Taiji movements and make them into a short sequence to improve flexibility and co-ordination, while keeping it fun and simple. However, a five minute Qigong breathing to cool down at the end of the class has proven to be popular.

I always do both in my own practice as they complement each other very well. Like most people, I lead a busy life that leaves only a limited time for myself. I always keep a bag with my Taiji shoes, music and fan near at hand. Quite often I will go through Taiji forms while I'm waiting outside children's violin lessons, or do a set of Qigong while waiting at children's gymnastic sessions. There have been some strange looks, but I've got used to them.

### **You organize regular trips to China, both for training and sight-seeing, how did you decide which people to work with there?**

Tary and I have been organizing regular Trips to China since 1998. We found that there was a deep desire from our students to see the real China - from traditional farming villages where martial art was the lifestyle between farming seasons, to the Taoist temples of Wudang Mountain; from the narrow back streets where families cycle to work, to the breath taking scenery on the Great Wall of China.

Unlike the big tour operator chains, we hand pick the partners in China that we work with. As we have extensive connections in China for martial art coaches and cultural guides, we only use highly skilled and experienced teachers that we know personally to facilitate the training and sightseeing on our trips.

We plan every detail of each trip well in advance, and keep in regular communication with the members of the trip right from their booking until they return home. Tary is a fantastic trip leader and a natural entertainer, making everyone feel at ease the whole time. People who have been on our trips often describe them as 'out of this world', 'unforgettable', 'once in a life time experience' or 'like a big family trip with lots of fun'.

### **Do you feel the standard of taiji has changed much over the years since you started training and if so, in what way?**

Every generation has had high level Taiji practitioners. In China, Taiji standards are usually judged in competitions, which still attract a large number of dedicated youngsters. New generations bring new energy into the art, which raises the bar of the whole game.

Away from the competition scene, keeping healthy is a top priority for many Chinese, especially with an aging population. With its proven health benefits, it's not surprising that Taiji is a firm favorite for the Chinese. Standards vary greatly, depending on the time and effort put in.

In my experience as a teacher and judge at regular competitions all over Europe, I have met some very good Taiji practitioners with excellent skills. But the percentage of Taiji practitioners remains relatively low compared to Yoga or Karate.

**Are you able to give an overview of the various benefits to be gained from training the different skills you do, e.g what is sword training good for, fan, sabre... etc.?**

I think the advantage of training in different skills such as the sword, sabre and fan is that you get a taste of the diversity and fun in Taiji. Every apparatus has its own balance, texture, feel and 'personality'. It can be like having a new hand, you have to get to know the new body part and build a relationship with it. The process of learning how to control a weapon is great fun and good for health, which is often overlooked, as everyone is too eager to get stuck in.

Simple opening and closing of the Fan in different ways really helps to develop strength in the wrist and the fingers, as well as improving flexibility in the finger joints and hand. Keeping finger joints moving is useful in encouraging blood circulation to the finger tips, preventing cold hands and managing arthritis.

Sword and sabre play has lots of charm, as well as developing strength and improving flexibility in the shoulders and arms. It also highlights how we use these muscle groups and joints as, if the sword or sabre are held incorrectly, it will result in painful shoulders.

At the same time, it must be said that all Taiji training should be from a holistic approach, and energy channels around the body will be stimulated while you are going through a form in a controlled and relaxed manner, regardless of which weapon you might be using.

**You were born and trained in China, you live and teach in the UK and you are increasingly teaching in various European countries, do you feel there are differences between the various cultures, how they approach their training and what it is that they seek for from their practice in taiji and/or qigong?**

Yes, I teach regular weekend workshops and seminars in the UK, also travel regularly to many European countries to teach Taiji and Qigong. In the last couple of years, I have been invited to teach in Japan, Australia and New Zealand too.

In my experience, all Taiji and Qigong students have a deep desire to improve their level of skills and practice; greater understanding of the principle and theories; how to apply Taiji and Qigong to improve their quality of life (ie. Health benefits).

Sometimes, the way students from different cultural background approach their learning differently, for example, students in Japan are generally happy to practice continuously for a couple of hours without any break; practitioners in China are generally keen to use competitions to improve their skills.

I encountered the first cultural challenge in my first class in the UK in 1991. At the end of my class, a student asked me: 'can you tell me, what does 'T'ai Chi' mean exactly?' This simple question made me realize that, for many western enthusiasts, Tai Chi was a meaningless word on a blank canvas. The name did not fit into the culture they knew, but they loved the Taiji way of movements. So I would talk about the book of Yi Jing (I-Ching), the Eight Trigrams, the concept of Yin and Yang, and how it became the name of a martial art. Students were fascinated.

Of course, I don't get this kind of question any more as Taiji has become much better known. But from this early experience I realized that making the right connection with my students from a different culture was the key to engage my teaching with them, resulting in better learning.

Knowing that most of my UK and European students have an inquisitive mind, I encourage them to ask questions. Once the students understand why I correct their movements, or how it can improve their balance, they are very keen to practice and improve.

I feel there is no difference in physical ability between the cultures, and that everyone with passion and a dedication to practice can achieve their full potential in Taiji & Qigong.

**Are your children interested in these arts and will we see a family continuation?**

They always watch me and Tary doing practice, sometimes they want to follow. I have taught them some wushu classes and short forms. They have been to a couple of competitions, but nothing too

serious. They are all taking regular training in gymnastics, which hopefully gives them skills in balance, flexibility, co-ordination and explosive power. So maybe one day, the Taiji seed will grow in them, and that would be nice.  
We are taking the attitude of 'que sera sera', who knows...