

## Tai Chi – Just Playing a Game?

How I began to study as a young boy

Autobiography: Part 1 by Dr. Shen Hongxun

*The Chinese say that in order to become a master; you need 4 things: good teachers; good friends, and to be in the right place at the right time. Looking at my life, you will see that I had the chance to practice a lot of different things. In the beginning I could not understand these things, nor could I know where they would finally lead me. Perhaps this story can inspire you in your practice and give you self-confidence.*



I am now 61 years old, and have practised Taijiquan (Tai Chi) for over 49 years. After the Communist revolution (1949), when I was still a boy, Taijiquan was mainly practised by men over 40 years of age for health reasons, and was studied by very few young people and hardly ever by children. In 1951, when I was eleven, I suffered from stomach-ache. Nearly all my family were doctors, my father, my mother, and some uncles and aunts, but when we were ill we usually called upon a doctor from outside the family. So I went to the clinic of Dr. Wu BaoYuan, who was a study friend of my uncle, Dr. Shen GuanChang. He gave me belladonna tincture, which quickly relieved the stomach-ache.

I also often went to see Taijiquan demonstrations after mass on Sundays, by Don SiZhuo, who was a student of Professor Yao HuanZi. Students were encouraged to attack him with a spear, and when they got close to him, he would throw them backwards without touching them. Therefore I knew who it was I wanted to study with, and was only waiting for the chance.

I knew Dr. Wu was an important student of Professor Yao, so when he asked me who I wanted to practise with, I quickly replied I would really like to work with Professor Yao, and asked if he could introduce me. But it wasn't that easy! I first had to prove I was really serious about studying Taijiquan (Tai Chi), so I would start studying under Dr. Wu, and if I worked hard at it, then Dr. Wu would introduce me to Professor Yao. We agreed that I would start the following Sunday afternoon.

**Dr. Wu BaoYuan, my first Taijiquan teacher**

Dr. Wu was one of the early students of Professor Yao. They met at ZhengDan University, where Dr. Wu studied medicine, and Professor Yao read Classical Chinese and English.

Every Sunday afternoon Dr. Wu and his students practised Taijiquan in the garden of his mother-in-law's house. The garden was big enough to practise at leisure with about a dozen students – before the revolution the family was quite rich and had a garden of more than 200 square meters.

Dr. Wu taught me the standing postures such as the basic standing position, An, Bai, He, Lian Chi (White crane spreads its wings) and Ti Shou Shang Shi (Lift the hand). He taught me the basic Yang style form and pushing hands. I still practise what I learnt from him.

Dr. Wu was not tall, at just 1.69 metres, but he was very strong with piercing eyes. During pushing hands he often told me to run very quickly towards him in order to push him. When I was just in front of him, he would lift his arm, or move his foot, and I would feel a pushing force and fall backwards, or a pulling force and be pulled forwards to just in front of the wall. He would use different Taijiquan postures during pushing hands: he would name the one he was going to use, and then do it with one of his students, who would invariably be thrown aside. Some of his students were much taller than him – he looked like a child next to them – but he would control them completely. Dr. Wu would also use Taiji forces to heal his patients.

### **Study with Professor Yao**

My dreams were still about studying with professor Yao one day, so I worked extremely hard. After three months, I was rewarded: Dr. Wu took me to Professor Yao. He lived at 124/20 MaoMing Road, only 15 minutes walk from where I lived, and so, twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, I went along to his class after school, where there would be 7 or 8 students.



Professor Yao had many students, and some of them had important positions, like Long YiRen, who was Vice-President of China some time ago. I was only twelve at the time and was afraid of asking anything, so I just listened, and worked very hard. After each class, I could barely walk upstairs to go to bed. And I practised at home every day for about 3 to 4 hours, leaving a pool of sweat on the floor after I had finished.

Professor Yao was a Buddhist. He radiated so much gentleness that just looking at him made you feel happy. He was very precise in using Taiji forces. Whilst he was teaching, he would usually treat people as well.

He would hold his hand above the head or behind the patient's back, and at the same time use his eyes to correct his students' postures. Teaching very often happened through mental transmission. He would also tell very simple stories to explain the Taijiquan techniques and the richness of the underlying philosophy.

To keep me interested he would sometimes perform tricks. One day he put a football in the middle of the room and asked me to pick it up. Easy, I thought, so I went to pick up the ball, but it was so heavy I just could not lift it, not even with all my force. Other students tried too, but none succeeded. The last one to try was a big, strong man, and while he was trying to lift the ball, Professor Yao counted to three. The ball became as light as a feather, and the man just flew backwards with the ball. There were many other games like this, but I do not have the space here to tell them all.

Studying with Professor Yao was extremely enriching, not just in terms of Taijiquan (Tai Chi) techniques, but in terms of self-development, helping me develop strength of character. I also became very healthy and strong.

### **With a student of Tian ZhaoLing and with Tian ZhaoLing himself**

One Sunday morning in 1952 I went to HuanPu Park, where master Tian ZhaoLing was teaching. There was a big group of students doing the form with him, and then they would do pushing hands, first with the master and then amongst themselves.

Tian ZhaoLing was one of the most important students in the Yang family. He had studied with Yang ChenFu's uncle and had reached a very high level in the field of Taiji. There is a Chinese saying that a very good teacher also has very good students. This was certainly true of Tian ZhaoLing and some of his students.

After he went home, his students used to continue practising pushing hands. I loved watching them, and sometimes I became so excited that I started giving uninvited comments and advice.

One of the students who saw me doing this asked me if I did any pushing hands. I enthusiastically said yes, and he challenged me to try with him. Until then I had only done pushing hands with Professor Yao's students, but I did accept the challenge. For more than 20 minutes we did pushing hands and tried to find a way to uproot the other, but neither my opponent – a big man of 40 – nor myself – 13 and weighing about 40 kg succeeded. Afterwards he asked me who I had learnt from and admiringly said I must have a very good teacher.

Later I got to know his name, Zhao TongFan. He had been working with Tian ZhaoLing for more than 20 years, and had been doing meditation for the same amount of time. Another very advanced student of Tian ZhaoLing was Fu ZhiJian, a dentist. He also wanted to try out pushing hands with me, and after that, there were others. They liked the fact that I did not use any muscle power and hardly touched them.

I realised how lucky I was to live close by so that I was able to witness all these things that the other students had never seen.

Tian ZhaoLing was very quiet when he was teaching in the park. They said he was unhappy because one of his students had betrayed him. Master Tian ZhaoLing had written a book, Taijiqian sword, sabre, stick, pushing hands and partner form, together with his assistant Chen YiLing. The latter published the book under his own name. Afterwards he felt so ashamed that he hid himself for over 20 years.

When people asked Tian ZhaoLing how many students he had, he said 'none'. And when they mentioned all those people who followed him in the park, he answered that they only saw it as playing a game. I do think it is true that one cannot get deep knowledge of Taijiqian just by following a master and doing his form in the park. In that sense Tian ZhaoLing's observation was true...

Shanghai is a rich commercial city, and many masters came from other provinces. I often joined them, as I lived in the same area of the city. I often gave my pocket money to so-called 'masters'; only to discover that they were charlatans and tricksters. But I also met with some great and successful masters such as Lu Song Gao (a Xin Yiquan master) with whom I studied a lot. I was very fortunate to have such high quality masters in my neighbourhood, to bring me to the doorway of Taijiqian. However at that time I had no idea that one day I would become a professional Taijiqian (Tai Chi) teacher...