

The Modern Warrior and Wushu Practice in Wuhan

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Introduction

Originally, the primary purpose of *wushu*¹ was to condition the body and mind for combat and warfare. In today's comparatively peaceful society, one's purpose for practicing *wushu*, and martial arts in general, has been laid open to the interpretation of the modern world. Even without bandits and warlords, some still feel the guttural draw to martial discipline. In my experience of martial arts, in both the US and China, for many practitioners, training is more than just an exercise or hobby. Training becomes a way of life as a source of satisfaction and self-improvement.

I leave the details of technique and history to the experts and instead focus on the reasons why people practice martial arts in the modern day and the role of contemporary warriors within the martial community. In traveling to Wuhan, in Hubei province, I practiced *taiji* and *gongfu* for the duration of three months under Grand Master Lu Zhun in his martial arts institute near Wuhan University while interviewing and observing him and the members of his school. One of the great pleasures of training in martial arts is listening to the stories of fellow practitioners and getting to know them on a personal level. It was therefore an honor and a pleasure for me to take the time to explore some of the more personal aspects of martial arts with my fellow practitioners.

¹ Translated literally into "military art" and is today the most popular national sport in China. Modern wushu is comprised mainly of performance art emphasizing aestheticism whereas traditional wushu is more concerned with practice and application fighting. In English, the term Wushu has in the recent 20th century been used to refer to Chinese martial arts. (Wong Kiew Kit, *Art of Shaolin Gong Fu*)
The term *wushu* can, and will be used here, as a catchall phrase for all Chinese martial arts without excluding any martial art forms. The term is all inclusive, meriting *gongfu* and *taiji* to be equally fundamental branches of *wushu*.

It goes without saying that one's reason for practice can be a combination of several variables. One's reasons for training in martial arts can run the gamut from self defense to self discovery, from maintaining health to satisfying one's masochistic tendencies. Though the standard reasons for practice, such as health and discipline, play a large part in training, the less conventional reasons for training give insight into the subtle dynamics of training motives. Special attention to the relationship that develops between students and teachers give a greater understanding into the lifelong devotion that is cultivated through training.

For many practitioners, not only is practice greatly satisfying but also equally satisfying are the people one meets and trains with. Through martial arts one has the opportunity to interact with fellow students and teachers who are the stuff of warriors. These warrior figures are tangible contemporaries to their legendary counterparts who serve to inspire devotion and awe in much the same way. Though stories of invulnerable *shaolin* monks seem far-fetched by today's standards, the warrior figures one meets in practice provided for exemplary representatives of their school and perpetuate traditional martial values.

Although I will primarily refer to *wushu* in this paper, many of the values perpetuated in martial arts are not exclusive to training. Students, leaders, and teachers in both Western and Eastern culture can appreciate the benefits of practice.

About My Background

Over my summer I began intensive training in Yang style *taiji* and *shaolin gongfu* while continuing in my training in *judo*, *aikido*, and *iaido*. I am a beginner in martial arts,

having practiced for approximately two years of *budo*², and having had no experience in *wushu* prior to this summer.

Lu *Shifu*'s Institute of Health

The martial art school where I trained in *taiji* and *gongfu* is located in a converted concrete factory near Wuhan University. The school's front faces the east so that by the end of morning *taiji* practice, every brow is bowed in the blinding light of the rising sun. The doors, windows, and mirrors are warped with age but there is plenty of space and the school is well ventilated in anticipation for hard training in smoldering afternoon heat. The cheaply made wooden weapons are worn smooth with use and reuse. The weights for strength training seem crude and primitive at first glance: solid metal balls the size of baseballs, a soccer sized cement ball, and six foot logs amongst them. One can imagine a 16th century monk training with the same type of weights. Like any good Chinese restaurant, the place is a bit run down and a bit unsanitary but the food is as good as it is cheap.

Lu *shifu* is the founder of the school and also runs an acupuncture/massage parlor in the same building on the above floor. Bai *shifu*, second head instructor, is a tall, courteous man in his late seventies who runs the *taijijian* class and conducts most *gongfu* practices. Peng Mai-kai, the head senior student, began practicing *wushu* three years ago and placed second in a national pushing hands tournament earlier this summer. Peng *ge* (brother Peng), as most refer to him, is not yet a formal instructor but aspires to be one. The school is approximately one hundred strong plus the above listed three core instructors. Although most students will come and go over the years, there are about five

² Japanese martial arts

senior students who make up the core students and are accepted as true representatives of the school. The large majority of the school consists of informal students who have varying degrees of martial expertise. Some informal student have trained with Lu *shifu* for several years, such as some of the older *taiji* practitioners, and other, like myself, have had backgrounds in a different school or style of marital arts. Very few have had no experience with martial arts prior to practicing with Lu *shifu*. About three fourths of the informal students range from the beginning to intermediate stage of training. The remaining fourth, consisting of young to middle aged men, are the up and coming practitioners who show the ability of become formal students. Each practice session consists of about thirty people though on weekends students can double and in the early morning classes numbers can dwindle to ten or fewer. *Taiji* and *gongfu* are equally popular among the students although *gongfu* draws a higher number of young men. At least half of the students seriously practice both forms of *wushu* at some point in their training.

Taiji form practices are held twice a day, one hour in the mornings and one in the evenings. Practicing forms involves following the movements of the teacher who stands in front of the class, facing away from the students. The movements are collectively called a form and the same form is practiced every day. Pushing hands, *tuishou*, consists of improvisational-partnered practice where the goal is to knock the partner off balance without using strength. Pushing hands is a staple of *taiji* practice and teaches the application of *taiji* in self-defense. There are no scheduled classes for pushing hands. Instead students are taken aside and shown pushing hands by one of the senior students

after they have shown sufficient proficiency in their forms practice.³ *Gongfu* practice is also held twice a day, with an informal morning practice and a structured evening practice, for two hours each class. At informal sessions, students may improve upon the forms they have already learned and, or practice sparing with other students. At formal sessions, students are instructed in new forms in small groups of two or three. In *gongfu*, students may choose to practice any form given to them and are gradually introduced to the more advanced forms over a period of several years.⁴

Students from both *gongfu* and *taiji* enter into competitions. The national competitions are held in Beijing in the spring and other regions competitions are held throughout the year. There are several trophies displayed in the front window of the school and there are clutters of pictures along the walls of smiling students, some very young, with red and gold ribbons around their necks. On the second floor, there are pictures of Lu *shifu* in his twenties receiving awards, lean and muscular but with the grave expression of an old man. His certificates from national championships and medicinal schools are hung around the school. Rank and tournaments are clearly a worthy cause for many of the schools students. Competitions give students a chance to exhibit their skills and bring honor to their school. Reputations build as students circulate nationally and talented individuals stand out for their skill and character.⁵ Seminars are also common, especially in the summer months, and hotels are rented out for the retreat where teachers and students are given the opportunity to mingle with practitioners from

³ The first time I was shown push hands was in a parking lot after an evening interview with Peng *ge*.

⁴ To learn the basic forms, the first twenty forms learned, to the standards of the school it took Bai *shifu* ten years and Peng *ge* two. There is really no set period of time or deadline for learning.

⁵ Young students tend to make competing more of a priority than older practitioners. Peng *ge*, for example, hopes to one day open his own school when he had garnered sufficient respect and support from the national martial arts community by gaining a reputation through tournaments. To his success, Lu *shifu* had done the same when Peng *ge*'s age.

around other regions. There is often a banquet one evening where there may be music performances and dragon dancing supplied by talent from participating martial arts schools. At seminars, one may train with highly skilled practitioners and guest teachers who would otherwise be inaccessible.

Methodology

I practiced on a daily basis at Master Lu's, attending three classes daily and also attended weekend seminars when available. I gathered my information by training with and talking to practitioners. Many practitioners are all too eager to talk about their views on *wushu*. After making my project known to the school and my fellow practitioners, I began by interviewing individual practitioners formally. Though all practitioners readily consented to being participants, as I began individual interview sessions I soon realized that formal interviews were not the best way for participants to comfortably express their opinions. Most practitioners found it difficult to recall a specifically poignant story when being interviewed.

In contrast, practitioners naturally recall a story or turn of phrase that gives insight into training when something is triggered in every day practice. So, I recorded my daily observations passing time with fellow practitioners while training and socializing. The evening *taijijian* classes ended at 10 and sometimes 10:30. Once or twice a month, on Fridays and weekends, Bai *shifu* invites his students to have a drink with him at his home that is walking distance from the school. On weekdays, after *gongfu*, several of the senior students and Lu *shifu* will go out for lunch and tea. In these settings, discussions on martial arts was natural, though sometimes restricted by the presence of elders. The crowd of young and middle aged men will get together on odd nights, whenever students

can muster up the time away from home, and go out for a drink or two. This crowd was not rowdy by any means but they were like brothers with one another: a lot of joking around and friendly pestering went on. Most of the quotes and stories I heard were on these occasions. I also spent substantial time with Peng *ge* who often walked me home when it was late. I would tell him my thoughts for my paper and he would contribute his insight into them.

The Purpose of Practice

When beginning martial arts, many people do not know why they started. Many will refer to a vague fascination with combat or reminisce about the first time they saw the style they wanted to follow. Whatever the purpose for beginning, after a time, many practitioners integrate practice into their person. As Bai *shifu* put it, “Whenever I take the time to ask myself who I am, *wushu* is always apart of that answer.” One middle-aged family man mentioned, “Whenever I leave on business trips, I think of my family and I think about training. It takes about two days and my bones will begin to ache with lack of the routine adrenaline from training. It is very addictive.” How does the lifelong practitioner develop this mindset? What does a student want out of practice and how are these wants satisfied? The following are some answers to these questions that I have encountered or observed in training.

Practicing for Self Defense

One question that any martial artist must come to terms with is whether or not the skills practiced can be used to kill and the importance of that answer. Possessing or obtaining the ability to kill can range from being key in one’s purpose for practice to not being of particular concern. Some of those who focus on more aggressive *gongfu* practice

and sparring are proud to proclaim their lethal abilities. Some *shifus* make a show of their abilities so that there is no doubt of the lethality of the technique. When watching Lu *shifu* execute a lethal technique, a young male student of two years described the power as being “as solid and natural as the weight of a falling boulder.” His admiration is apparent in his description; possessing lethal skills can be greatly empowering and creates a concrete goal than one can work towards in practice.

It should be noted that there are very few, if any, respected warrior figures that would be unable to defend him self. All of the most well respected *taiji* figures amongst my fellow practitioners have backgrounds in *gongfu*. Lu *shifu* can often be heard telling his senior students, “No attacker will respect your rank if you can not prove yourself at that crucial moment. It is one thing to be a beginner but once you are a true practitioner your skills must be for more then mere show, you must know how to apply them.” One’s martial abilities are often merited by its effectiveness in maiming or killing both inside and outside of the martial community.⁶

There are no over arching traits that define the practitioner who trains mainly for self-defense. Many students with lethal abilities will profess to never have had the chance to use them. Others make it obvious that they have the power to break limbs in necessary. Some practitioners have served in the PLA and they share a distinctively more realistic style echoed by their military training.

⁶ A senior *taijijain* student expressed his frustration with this sometimes unmerited standard, “While practicing *taijijain* in the courtyard one evening, a young man who was riding by an a motorbike stopped to watch. After a few moments he shouted out to me, ‘Could you kill someone with that?’ I replied curtly, ‘No, the blade is rather dull.’ At first I was annoyed by such an ignorant question but after pondering the issue I realized my reaction was too harsh. It is fair to wonder whether any style can be used for self-defense. It just saddens me that even though there is so much more to appreciate from training, the basic reaction from many non martial artists is this preoccupation with killing.”

In the case of *taiji*, although the movements are explained in terms of punching, breaking, and cutting, a matured practitioner views these movements as metaphors for self-discovery instead of focusing on practical utility, as I will later elaborate upon. Lu *shifu* makes it clear that in order to use *taiji* in self-defense, it must be practiced for the purpose of self-defense (i.e. focus on pushing hands practice). However, self-defense is not reason the majority of *taiji* practitioners roll out of bed for morning practice. The little old ladies who practice in the mornings go to stretch and meditate and gossip a bit before setting out for groceries.⁷ For many health oriented practitioners, the simple satisfaction in early morning exercise that helps relax and prepare them for the coming day is reason enough for practice.

Practicing *Taiji* for Health

Especially when speaking to elderly practitioners, for most, *wushu* is only as good as it is healthy for their bodies. As one elderly woman commented, “I’m not young and I feel no need to prove myself. There is no point in overstressing my body through hard conditioning.” Today, most *taiji* practitioners practice for health, with self-defense as low or at no priority.

One of the distinguishing factors of *taiji* from other more aggressive martial arts lies in its origins. The founders of most martial art styles were often warlords, aggressive men who trained to battle. The founders of *taiji* were, in contrast, Taoist masters who sought to prolong life and achieve immortality.⁸ Self-defense was a secondary concern in developing *taiji*, spirituality and health taking the foreground. It is not uncommon for

⁷ The elderly crowd that practice in the mornings tend to make practices more casual. They are much more easygoing than the younger crowd of students who are more concerned with looking like diligent, serious students.

⁸ Kit, Wong Kiew *Complete Book of Tai Chi Chuan* (2002, Tuttle)

taiji masters to be able to touch their elbow to his toes with astonishing ease well into their 70's. The health-oriented aims of *taiji* make practice accessible and beneficial to the young and elderly alike. The resulting style bares several advantages over more aggressive martial arts.

Building Trust in Partnered Practice

The majority of forms practiced in Wushu, and all of the beginning forms, are performed alone as opposed to partnered forms. Partnered forms create a higher risk for injury, especially for inexperienced students. The idea is to “know yourself first,” your limitations and strengths, before confronting an attacker. The individual is able to determine a comfortable speed and force to practice the form. In partnered practice, one must cooperate with one's partner who may or may not know the limits of their partner's skill. Injury may occur when a pin is taken too far or when a throw is landed improperly or when a joint is locked too quickly. Individual practice does not need to take such risks into account. Established rules dictate responsibility for injury, as Lu *shifu* explains, “If an experienced student injures a less experienced student, it is the seniors fault and if a less experienced student injures a more experienced student, it is still the senior's fault.”

With this description of the risks of partnered forms, one may wonder why partnered forms are practiced at all. There are several advantages to emphasizing partnered practice. Partnered practice is more realistic and teaches one how to interact with an attacker. Correct timing becomes crucial and techniques can be easily tested and improved with resistance from the attacker. A more subtle advantage to partnered practice is the innate trust that must be built between the partners for the form to be performed safely and elegantly. The attacker must trust that his partner will not take

advantage of his vulnerability to maim him. “When Lu *shifu* demonstrate a technique on me [for the benefit of other students],” says Peng *ge*, “I give myself to him so that the technique can be demonstrated properly. I can make myself vulnerable to him because I trust him not to break me. It is the same when sparing. We come to an understanding that we are here to better ourselves, not to hurt one another.”

Over time, this type of practice deepens trust and lends itself to developing a warm sense of camaraderie. Practicing with someone with whom you share this trust is both challenging and greatly satisfying. Partnered practice contributes to building relationships between practitioners and, as I will explain, interpersonal relationships in the martial community motivate training and builds school loyalty.

Practicing Humility

The type of learning that takes place in martial art schools is unique in the modern day in that there is a heavy and unavoidable emphasis on hierarchy. The student is expected to be humble and heed the advice of the teacher wholeheartedly and without question. Although it may seem obvious that one enter a martial arts school for the purpose of learning, there are countless students who enter with arrogance and or skepticism. As one novice student said, “Having a humbled mind is the most courteous and respectful way to approach learning.” Although a healthy skepticism and independent thinking are necessary parts of a good mental backbone, a novice who wants to be known as being devoted and respectful to his school should use them sparingly.⁹

⁹ It is widely acknowledged that student should never correct their teachers. There was an incident when a beginning student, a young man who I trained with in *gongfu*, was disciplined for inappropriate behavior. Having some background in a different style, he had a tendency to question and argue about the techniques being taught to him. Finally, after several unheeded warnings from senior students, Lu *shifu* told him that he refused to teach such an insolent student. When the young man returned he was ignored by the instructors and was given chores in lieu of training. To everyone’s surprise, the young man continued to

The ability for the teacher to command humble respect depends on the quality of the teacher as equally as the trust and willingness of the student. “It is especially true of beginning students, who have not developed a personal reason for practice, that they must trust in their teachers that what they are being taught is worthwhile,” says Master Bai, “At the same time, teachers must be patient and have some tolerance for their student’s inevitable mistakes. I’ve taught for over forty years and I have yet to encounter a bad habit or attitude that cannot be undone with student teacher cooperation.” Again, as in partnered practice, trust is necessary for effective learning. Building trust between student and teacher is necessary for successful lifelong training. Bai *shifu* has observed, “I don’t believe I can name one accomplished martial artist who has not had some profound relationship with his Master. The process of pursuing the respect of your master and being accepted by him is deeply personal.” The idea of putting aside pride for the sake of learning is useful in any type of education. Many practitioners joke that they are such good students because they practice humility every night at home with their wives.

Community

One senior student succinctly put his feelings this way: “I started here to learn how to break someone’s arm and I found a family.” This type of sentiment is commonplace within martial art schools and communities. There are many sources of community built into practice, such as partnered practice and humbled learning, as described above. Also, depending on the level of socializing associated with the school, the sense community outside of class can be very strong. “There are few things more

return, doing chores to redeem himself and in a month’s time, Lu *shifu* reaccepted him as a student. Lu *shifu* admitted, “This young man taught me a great deal. I had thought he was arrogant and useless, too prideful to humble himself. But he learned his lesson and showed us all that he was a worthy student.”

satisfying about tasting the sweat in your beer with a few of your fellow practitioners after a grueling evening practice,” a senior student mentioned. It is generally recognized that a few beers is the least offensive and most effective way to get a stoic teacher talking. Many would say that the best discussions on martial philosophy they’ve had have been in these relaxed settings.

Every week or so, after *taijijain*, Bai *shifu*, invites students over to his home after evening practice for beers where it is not uncommon for discussion to continue well past midnight. He often speaks fondly of passing time in the same way with one of his particularly stoic and influential Masters. After class the two would have beers on his Master’s porch, discussing the history and philosophy of *taiji* while feeding his Master’s songbirds. “Spending time with my Master outside of training was a privilege, particularly because I knew he was not sociable,” recalls Bai *shifu*. This type of socializing carries an undertone of respect and heightened awareness not present on a casual night out with friends. I will be further discussed this unique and special relationship between teacher and student in my section on the modern warrior.

Developing Qi

Qi, vital force or breathing energy, should be what generates power in a technique. *Li*, or physical strength, should be minimized in favor of *qi*, the idea being that well developed *qi* is much more powerful because it does not depend of the physical build and can be used to great effect even against a stronger opponent. Building powerful *qi* is one of the most abstract concepts of practice. When being taught to build *qi*, the exercises usually involve concentrating on proper rhythmic breathing and learning to generate power from the center by moving with the whole body. When first attempting to

build and feel *qi*, it can be very difficult to grasp what exactly is being taught. After a time, one gradually becomes aware of the ratio of muscle and *qi* used. Some students, discouraged, frustrated, or skeptical, will give up on the concept altogether. However, others will learn to trust in the competence of their teachers and to continue to struggle with grasping *qi*.¹⁰

The first time I met Lu *shifu*, he showed me a cement ball, about the size of a soccer ball. This, he demonstrated to me, was to be held in the hands while being rotated in a circular motion in front of the body. It is shocking to feel the immense weight of the thing, never mind rotating it. “This,” he said, “Is the *qi* ball. The embodiment of *qi* in its most unforgiving form.” Now, when one is asked to imagine *qi*, one thinks of some fluid abstract concept but, as one young *gongfu* student commented, “Ah, there’s nothing like a cement ball to instill humility in any heart.”

Practicing for self discovery

Lu *shifu* often speaks about the three levels of practice, “First, condition the body, then calm the mind. Last, is to discover your spirit within your technique. The awareness of the body accesses the awareness of mind. In the calm mind is reflected the soul.”

After a certain point in practice, teachers will begin to explain exercises and forms in terms of metaphors for self-discovery. For example, the *qi* ball is a metaphor for fear.

As explained by Lu *shifu*, “Fear, heavy and debilitating, troubles the mind and body.

Instead of avoiding fear, set time apart to confront it. Struggle with fear with deep breaths

¹⁰ “I have always been a skeptic and until recently I had always tried to explain the power in my technique in terms of the structural integrity in my stance or the momentum of my movements. I’ve become more spiritual as I’ve become older and have finally come to terms with *qi*. For me, even if *qi* is only a facet of our imagination, it is still the best way to teach how to generate power. The concept generates a certain mood, a streamlining of intention in students that captures the important aspects of good technique.” (Xulei, elderly *taiji* practitioner)

and elegant movement.” In *taijijian*, the sword is also thought of as a metaphor, cutting through the distractions that muddle the mind. “Practice is a pond reflecting the mind,” says Bai *shifu*, “When practicing at first, we are constantly mulling over the details of proper posture and our mistakes cling to us. Each though is a pebble rippling the pond. After several years of practice, the form becomes internalized, part of your being, and gradually the ripples dissipate. From this mind immerses the crisp, untainted technique of a man free of disillusionments, expectations, and confusion.”

Although these metaphors are subject to different various interpretations, at heart they are meant to provoke self-awareness and self-discovery. As one enters the advanced stages of practice, these metaphors deepen satisfaction by turning physical practice into exercises for self-improvement.

The Warrior

In the process of training and learning, one hears many numbers of stories of certain people who, through committed practice, stand out among their peers as models of the martial spirit. Some of these stories stem from the feats and experiences of men and women who train alongside us while others reach back to pull out the most impressive stories of long gone masters. Regardless of the story’s setting, the telling and retelling of these fine examples of hard work and perseverance are meant to inspire and motivate. Today, the warrior tradition is alive and constantly rejuvenated by modern interpretation.

There are several points of interest that emerged when asking practitioners about the warriors that have influenced their practice. What are the values and morals that make up the warrior tradition? What common values and qualities do the historical warrior and

the modern warrior share? How do contemporary practitioners pay respect to this tradition? How do modern warrior figures deviate from this tradition? How do warriors attract followers and instill loyalty in their students?

Defining the Modern Warrior

The use of “modern” in the context of this essay is not meant to create a duality in between the historical or ancient warrior and the modern. The term is meant to create a distinction between the warrior, alive and well, in the 21st century and the deceased, ranging from the earliest martial artists to masters who have recently passed away. The term modern does, however, create a paradox with the archaic concept of the warrior. When there is little apparent need for self-defense and there are no rumors of war, what is the warrior doing in a peaceful society? The modern warrior begs the question: “what is the role of warriorship and how has it evolved to fit the modern martial artist’s needs?”

Although the term warrior is not commonly used to refer to influential figures in the martial community, per se, students have an inherent understanding of the warrior’s character and tradition. The term *wuxia* connotes a robust, courageous, and strong disposition found among martial artists that will here be referred to as the warrior. Every student has heard stories about *wuxia* like Chang San-Feng and Yang Lu-Chien, founding fathers of *taiji*. The plethora of *wuxia xiaoshuo*, martial arts novels, and *wuxia pain*, martial arts movies, often reflect more fanciful versions of the warrior tradition. Most stories that circulate are closer to home: stories of local masters in their youth or of a particularly dedicated student in his prime. It is widely recognized that it takes much more than brutish strength to be considered a warrior. The following sections will further define the qualities of warriors and their time-honored abilities.

Tradition

As I have already alluded to, the exchange of stories amongst practitioners is a way of paying homage to the warrior tradition. There are several ways in which contemporary practice aligns itself with the stories and values of past masters. During practice, teachers often use a verse or two to explain a form in the same it was taught to them. The feats of the *shaolin* warrior monks are widely known and set up as humbling standards and examples for students. These stories and phrases are preserved and respected in martial practice. I will begin by describing this tradition and in a latter section elaborate on the influence of these stories on modern warriors.

In *gongfu* practice, the tradition of *shaolin* monks were often referenced by Lu *shifu*'s students and it was commonly recognized that many exercises have been preserved in its original form. Any student could list off a dozen ancient feats of the *shaolin* monks, real or fictional: breaking stones with bare hands, fighting with tigers, and various forms of invulnerability from weapons among them. Although fanciful concepts of invulnerability are not favored in practice, (i.e. testing a student's ability by attempting to run him through with a spear) exercises such as breaking stones are practiced at the advanced levels. Other more subtle techniques are also incorporated from ancient techniques: using a blow from the hand to extinguish a candle or rippling a bowl of water using only *qi*. Previously mentioned tools for conditioning like the *qi* ball and log training have maintained their crude form throughout the century but have not lost their utility. Lu *shifu* purposefully pays tribute to the origins of his practice by using many of the same practice methods and tools used historically to emulate the power associated with warrior monks.

Stories of ancient warriors cultivate an aura of respect that becomes closely associated with their name and presence. The story of Yang Lu-Chien, founder of Yang style *taiji*, is a particularly poignant in establishing him as a noble and powerful man. It is said that Yang began his *taiji* practice as a young man by becoming a servant in the Chang household, which at that time was the only *taiji* style. Since he was not a member of the family, he observed and diligently practiced the Chang style secretly. In one version of the story, Yang is discovered and the Chang household accepts him as a student. In another version, a challenger arrives at the Chang school and proceeds to challenge and defeat all the highest-ranking students. Upon a demand for a match with the head teacher, Yang steps up to the challenger and reveals his secretly acquired skills in victory. Having saved the Chang family from dishonor, he was accepted into the school with great fanfare.

The story of Yang Lu-Chien establishes several values observed by practitioners today: the idea of overcoming obstacles with perseverance and purpose, the glory of displaying one's accumulated skills, and earning acceptance from one's school. Bai *shifu*'s own story of his induction into *taijijian* shares many parallels with Yang Lu-Chien's and has much the same inspirational effect. Bai *shifu*, describes his first encounter with his Master in a almost mythical fashion:

“As a young man, I would often go on evening runs near the lake by my home. On one such night, I saw a man dressed in traditional *taiji* garb practicing alone in a courtyard. Having some experience in *wushu*, I recognized him as possessing the mark of a master: each movement so exact it seemed divine.

I watched from a distance and waited for him to finish his form before approaching him. By the time he had finished, I knew that this was the style I wanted to study. However, when I asked him to take me on as a student he refused saying that his style was not suitable for boys and that besides, he did not take on students. I asked his permission to watch him practice, promising not to steal the technique by practicing on my own. He consented and so I returned daily to watch him practice on a semi daily basis.

We continued on like this for nearly a month before he began speaking to me, mostly to discourage me saying there was much conditioning that I would have to go through before I could even begin training. ‘Young minds are too impatient for *taijijian*.’ Even so, my desire to train under him grew fanatical with each passing week and it was not until another month that he began me on grueling conditioning. It was only until half a year later that he accepted me as his student and began my training in forms. Even after earning my degree as his student, he was no less ruthless on me. My muscles still sour thinking of him standing by me with that long bamboo cane.”

Although Bai *shifu* is relatively unknown compared to Yang Lu-Chien, the similarities between the two stories ties Bai *shifu* to the long and proud Yang style. Indeed, the respect Bai *shifu* carries amongst his students likens him to a modern day embodiment of warrior tradition. Bai *shifu* is one warrior figure among many in the school. Both the way he carries himself and his stately style makes him a model for study.

Perpetuating Warrior Values

The definitive traits of the warrior are all based upon the ability to inspire. The warrior has the ability to motivate struggle for common values by being a supportive and well-respected teacher. The warrior's message emphasizing perseverance, skill, and community is widely recognizable and appealing to advanced and novice students alike.

As previously illustrated, one point of pride in the warrior tradition is the value of perseverance and earning one's due through hard work. The formidable hurdle of achieving the status of a formal student enforces these values. Peng *ge* recalls one evening early on with Lu *shifu* staying, practicing solo, hours after all the other students had left. Lu *shifu* came into the school intending to close up and seeing him there, looked at his watch and asked, "What are you still doing here? Get out before I make you pay rent." Walking home that evening, the student determined that this would not be the last time Lu *shifu* would reprimand him.¹¹ The system of formal and informal students is one in which you must earn the right to call him *your* Master. The majority of students who come and go fall into the informal category. Those who are inspired to train hard and to become formal student will learn to respect him for his strict methods. It is said that the harder he is on you, the closer you are to becoming his student. As illustrated by Yang Lu-Chien, Bai *shifu*, and Peng *ge* enduring the challenges of practice is part testing one's resolve, an exercise in mental training.

¹¹ There is a Zen story that recalls a young martial artist making promises of devotion to a martial arts Master, promising that he will train with dedication and conviction. The student then asks how long it will take to become a Master. The Master replies that it will take ten years. The student protests with disbelief that he will train very hard everyday, harder than all the other students. The Master replies, "Well, in that case it will take you twenty years." Although it would be impossible to know that Lu *shifu* thought of this parable, it is not hard to speculate that he acted in the spirit of the story.

Lu *shifu*'s stoic manner consciously upholds the warrior tradition in the spirit taught to him by his own Master.¹² Lu *shifu* occasionally mentioned how there would be days when his teacher would heave sighs about his technique even before he could start the form saying, "Alright, lets go over how to stand again."¹³ Today, a black and white photograph of his Master hangs at the front of the room, "Looking at his picture, some days I think he is frowning on me and other days I think he is looking on approvingly." Lu *shifu* is proud that the same piercing look of disapproval that motivated him as a young man lives on in his teaching, "Those critical eyes are as effective as they ever were in humbling pride and fumbling the most basic of techniques and yet it is one of most effective, yet subtle, motivators in correcting technique."

The display of technique, power, and skill is another value perpetuated by the warrior tradition. When students watch a technique performed by an experienced practitioner, faces often widen with smiles or, especially for beginning students, break out in an admiring laugh. They look on with delight at the skill displayed and cannot help but feel moved. "It is so pleasing to watch Peng *ge*," says one old *taiji* woman, "because he is so young and agile, his movements are playful and mesmerizing, like smoke rising from incense." The technique and the practitioner are admired as one, each element reflecting spirit of the other. In everyday practice, because practitioners observe and admire one another's improvements, one is able to earn the respect of one's peers with good technique. Similarly, competitions or celebrations provide opportunities to

¹² Master Lu is a stern, reserved man but never fails to politely greet each student before class. It is rumored, cautiously, that despite his power and presence he is really just shy, especially with women, but with a little bold friendliness he warm up easily. For others, myself included, his presence commands a degree of formality that makes it difficult to muster up the gall to speak casually to him. Master Lu is the classic example of the stoic warrior, a man of few words who lets his technique speak for his character.

¹³ Towards the end of his years, Master Lu's teacher, who was becoming senile, would switch the details of a technique from day to day saying "Who taught you to do that? This is how it is done."

showcase one's skills with pride. "There is no point in being shy while displaying one's own skills," as one senior *gongfu* student recommended, "You should always practice as though someone is watching. Of course, your technique gets twice as good if you just think of *shifu* watching."

It can be gathered from the description of the warrior tradition that warrior figures are regarded in a mixture of awe and fear. Their strict enforcement of high standards may seem unreasonable or unappealing to many. However, there are just as many others, if not more martial arts practitioners who covet the stoic tradition. So why do these steely warriors inspire such a wide following? The answer lies in that the stoic does not cater to all personalities, only to those who find satisfaction in the abuse. Masochistic tendencies are not uncommon in the martial mind and are often praised as an indication of strong character. The student who can enjoy being thrown and choked and pinned has an advantage over a frail, cautious personality. For many practitioners, the pain and sweat of training is cleansing. Moreover, some natures are drawn towards the unattainable and mysterious character of the stoic teacher. The stoic nod of approval is all the more valuable because of the high price with which it was earned.

Adapting the Warrior Tradition

How is the warrior tradition adapted in the modern day? In what respects do modern warriors deviate from the values expressed by the traditional warrior? Simply basing the modern warrior on stories of the traditional warrior does not do him justice. In large part, the surviving stories and techniques of passed on by martial artists tend to focus on drawing awe through a show of power and perseverance and give little insight into the compassionate aspects of warrior figures.

Although most warriors will lean towards the stoic, traditional type, many others find a more approachable way of commanding respect. While still paying heed to traditional values, some warriors take a friendlier attitude towards students, freely showing compassion and readily encouraging them. There are many advantages to deviating from the traditional warrior image and showing compassion: while the stoic warrior may have little concern for overwhelming the meek and putting off the skeptical, the approachable warrior has a more diplomatic way of commanding respect. These warriors leave their rank in the school and may be very informal after class. Approachable warriors are open and sociable, having an inoffensive way of holding his title.

Although it may be assumed that these approachable warriors existed historically, it is understandable that few stories of compassion are referenced in Lu *shifu*'s school.¹⁴ However, Peng *ge* adopts a definitively more compassionate approach to teaching. Peng *ge* teaching style is adaptable and possess the ability to recognize the needs and desires of students. He will take the time to coax along uneasy beginners as well as join in the macho spirit when among his younger up and coming students. In the mornings, he offers a cheek to the pats of little old ladies who practice *taiji* and feigns comic disinterest when they tease him about being a bachelor. However, for those student bent on sweat, Peng *ge* is quite capable of a strictly enforcing Lu *shifu*'s high standards with crisp rigor. He is appealing to all types of personalities and takes the time to satisfy different needs.

¹⁴ There is a contemporary story of compassion, involving two young men who were sparring in front of some fellow practitioners. The more aggressive to the two was clearly straining to throw all his energy at his opponent. The other young man, who had a more relaxed but equally skilled style, managed to pin his opponent long enough to give him a kiss on the forehead. He was reminding his attacker that they were brothers of the same school. The story is meant to illustrate that compassion can be both disarming and effective in the midst of struggle.

Peng *ge*'s approach is especially effective because it cultivates trust in the students he teaches. Like with any type of student-teacher relationship, it takes a student time to fully understand the quality of service provided. This is especially true in martial arts where the skills learned cannot be readily tested in real situations. When the student feels comfortable enough to trust in the skills of his teacher, he becomes more willing to learn. In contrast, a removed, stern teacher may illicit a more cautious response from his students given that stoics may sometimes be interpreted as being indifferent to the student. Though the stoic has the ability to gain the trust of his student, the approachable teacher is more accessible and tends to gain trust more readily. He derives pleasure from teaching in part because of his appreciation for the students. Peng *ge*'s attitude is one of humility: "When thanking your students after class, the teacher's thanks should be heard more loudly and clearly than any student. It is to set a good example to the students but more importantly, it recognizes that without students it would be meaningless to be a teacher."

Conclusion

At heart, this paper deals with the fundamental elements of motivation in wushu practice. We now have a clearer understanding of how practitioners derive satisfaction from practice on an individual and communal level. The wide range of training associated with *wushu* allows for young and old to enjoy the benefits of practice. The focus on health and maintaining longevity gives *wushu* practitioners a lifetime to cultivate their skills. Practice is also a source for mental and spiritual satisfaction. Taking the time to practice humility and trust is often neglected in the bustle of everyday life. The attachment that is formed to practice runs deep for many. That is why people often say

practice is a luxury: a time to relax and enjoy the company of friends. In these communities, we find students and teachers engaging in an age long practice preserved through centuries.

The process of learning is probably the most personal and satisfying element of all. As teachers of any profession will recognize, teaching a willing and dedicated student can be a pleasure. And any student will agree to how comfortable and enjoyable it is to learn from an inspiring teacher. Inspirational figures found in martial art have always been a driving force behind preserving the integrity of tradition. In successful schools, there are always several of these warrior figures that instill a sense of pride in being apart of the group. “There is something about the confidence with which they conduct themselves,” says one young *gongfu* student, “It makes you think to yourself: I too would be proud to stand beside him and be like him.” Though most of these warrior figures will become nameless with time, a certain turn of phrase or simple lesson of theirs will live on through generations, passed on through students. Their stories and teaching are a source of inspiration and encouragement for student and teachers alike. As one fellow practitioner describes his teachers, “It is not so much who they are so much how they make us feel.”