

INTERVIEW OF SIFU ADAM HSU

Conducted by Jean Paoli in December of 2002

In November of 2002, a group of journalists from martial arts magazines were invited to Taiwan by the Taiwan Tourist Bureau to better acquaint them with traditional wushu, a Chinese cultural treasure. A group of Taiwan kung fu Sifus, among them Adam Hsu, gave a presentation to the journalists, sharing their knowledge and expertise. This interview was conducted by one of the journalists, Jean Paoli from France's Karate Bushido magazine. Contents of the interview first appeared in an article by Mr. Paoli that appeared in the March-April 2003 edition of the French publication, Wushu-Kung Fu.

I. Can you tell us about your family and your ancestors?

I grew up in a military officer's family. Earlier than my paternal grandfather, my ancestors were scholars and businessmen. My grandfather, father and my only uncle were military officers. So this may have had something to do with my strong interest in martial arts. However there were no great martial artists on either my mother's or father's side of the family.

My mother's family is Mongolian. Centuries ago her ancestors were among the soldiers and cavaliers who invaded China with Ghengis Khan. Subsequent generations intermarried with Chinese and so today my mother's family is no longer purely Mongolian. My grandmother wasn't Mongolian and my grandfather was mixed. But even today, my mom's family in China still registers with the government as a minority Chinese. In communist China, believe it or not, there are some benefits to being a minority. In the days when China was still closed, when things were very bad, they were given extra food. Also, by law, they are allowed to have more than one child.

II. Can you give our readers a resume of your traditional martial art education, and a portrait of your own master Liu Yun Chiao?

Before I started high school, my father taught me a little kung fu. In those days, there was nothing strange about this. He was an army officer, not a martial artist. Basically I just played around with it and got a little experience.

My serious kung fu training in Long Fist style began during my first year of high school under Sifu Han Ching Tan. I learned the forms, loved the art, but I didn't know how to use it. I didn't have a clear idea as to what internal training was about, nor the final goal to be reached. I was puzzled but not entirely disappointed and I wanted the answer to this question.

I then studied praying mantis. I didn't feel I belonged to any particular family or group. I was just looking for the answer to my own question: How to use kung fu to fight. So I had an open mind, which gave me a chance to study several different mantis systems. I learned Seven Star with Sifu Li Kun Shan and Eight Step with Sifu Wei Xiao Tang. Through mantis, I learned how to use the kung fu and felt much more comfortable and confident. But I was still very young and skinny. Mantis required me to move fast—quick, quick. I obeyed, and followed. I was pretty fast but found that I couldn't issue power. I would hit the target in a pretty short period of time, several hits, kicks and punches, but I knew it couldn't do much damage.

That's why I moved on to my third kung fu stop: xing-yi quan. It looked so simple. I didn't want fancy techniques or forms anymore. I wanted to learn the xing-yi quan and how to issue power. This training, under Sifu Chau Lian Fang, was very different from praying mantis. For example, instead of performing lots of rapid movements, I was made to hold postures for a very long time. This was a great challenge to my patience because at that time my understanding of the training was very incomplete. I didn't stay with this style too long, but it gave me something very valuable: I learned the importance of developing internal energy, along with external, physical development.

This insight was valuable because when I did move on to my fourth stop, baji quan, under my fourth teacher, Sifu Liu Yun Chiao, I then had the proper attitude. Baji also looks simple but contains such richness. The baji training, quite naturally, progressed into pigua zhang. Pigua really really



Bagua Zhang

interested me, not only for itself but also as a contrast to baji. I did lots of analysis and comparison in order to better understand and get into the depths of the art—not only about the complementary relationship of baji to pigua but also to get a more complete understanding about traditional kung fu. So I can number pigua zhang as the fifth station, where I stopped and stayed.

Well, I did move on to a sixth stop, bagua zhang, just because I was following Sifu Liu and the bagua was from him. During this training, I looked back to make comparisons with xing-yi, which also brought me even further and deeper into the kung fu art.

Once again, because it was from Sifu Liu, I moved on to study mizong quan, Lost Track style. Lost Track is pretty interesting. It belongs to the long fist family. Long fist is a very large family. Some styles include “long fist” in their names—Islamic long fist, tai zhu long fist, mei flower long fist, and so on. Others belong to long fist family, absolutely are long fist, but not called it—like Six Harmony and Lost Track. Mizong, my seventh stop, further enriched me.

Although I'd already studied seven styles, taiji quan was not one of them. This does seem odd, since taiji quan is undoubtedly the most widely practiced style in the world. Even when I was a child, before ever starting my martial arts training, I used to see many people early in the morning doing taiji in the parks, by rivers, in their homes and front yards. Strangely enough, it was my baji-pigua-bagua teacher who forced me to learn taiji quan from Sifu Tu Yi Che. What I followed was Chen style. This was the eighth style that made up my total kung fu training.

The styles that Sifu Liu Yun Chiao studied and promoted are truly pure, good styles. He reached a very high level in kung fu, the highest I ever encountered. This is partly attributable to indoor training with his teachers. However, foremost among the reasons he achieved such a high level was sparring experience, a great deal of it. I don't mean two-person drills or the so-called sparring engagements you see nowadays in tournaments and schools that have so many rules and restrictions. He challenged and was challenged by many of the martial artists of his day. He fought real matches. That's why he was so great.

III. What is the position and part of Sifu Liu Yun Chiao in the Taiwanese martial art community?

Certainly, he contributed a lot to the Taiwan kung fu community. He brought in styles that were new to the island. He showed people technique of the highest level. He set the standard. He also stimulated a great interest in martial arts in the younger generation. These are his very positive contributions to Taiwan and its martial arts community.

I spent many, many years with Sifu Liu Yun Chiao. I don't feel he held a mainstream position in Taiwan's kung fu sector. He had a chance to get involved and was smart enough not to do that. There's just too much politics involved and he preferred to be on his own. He established the Wu Tang Martial Arts Development Center and built up his own kingdom, so to speak. And then he promoted himself, promoted his kung fu. That's rather smart.

Several projects were less successful than we would have liked. For instance, the Wu Tang magazine--publishing is not an easy task and involves business acumen as well. Neither he nor myself nor other helpers were good at business, so the magazine lasted only two years.

In those days I taught classical Chinese literature in college. So naturally, without much thought, we decided to promote kung fu at the college level. At the time, focusing on people in higher education seemed like a good direction in which to go. Many years later, I really regretted that decision. I've come to realize that high school and junior high school kids are still developing physically and mentally. Compared with college-aged students, they're more pure, innocent, less rigidly formed, and therefore more open to the training, more capable of change, development and growth. There's more potential for the training to successfully shape their bodies and minds in the kung fu way. I'm not referring now to the U.S. or Europe, but in Taiwan by the time they enter the universities, students are somehow already more established, physically and mentally somehow fixed, have difficulty using the kung fu to change. Another thing--many college-age students who try to learn kung fu have been immersed for a long time in kung fu fiction, movies, and fantasies and they can't take the real training. So that decision was a big mistake.

Regarding the Wu Tang Center, Sifu Liu Yun Chiao was a martial arts genius. He was by temperament a competitor, whose basic drive is always to win, fight to the finish, dominate others. He did not have the nature and instincts of a teacher. Nor did he have a teacher's inborn desire to help other people improve their art.

Sifu Liu Yun Chiao also belonged to the security team that guarded the president of Taiwan. Security for a leader of state or celebrity in our modern times--where rifles and bombs are among many possible threats--involves a variety of skills and technologies. This includes everything, from data collection, strategy and surveillance technologies to weapons and hand-combat skills. Sifu Liu was one of the trainers in this program.

IV. Can you tell us about the two great masters of the Qing dynasty, Sifus Li Shu Wen and Gong Bao Tian, and their practice?

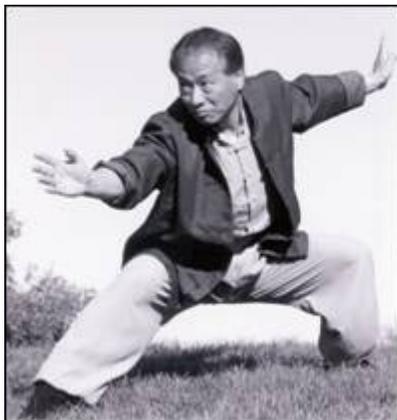
Sifu Li Shu Wen, Liu Yun Chiao's primary master, was a loner. In life, he only knew kung fu. A regular life, filled with friends and warm family, was not for him. He taught kung fu in order to make a living. His income wasn't great because training with him was really tough and very few students could take it. In his late age, when he worked for the Liu family, one of the richest in Cang county, he was treated very well. At that point in his career, he'd reached the maturity of his kung fu. He was at the peak of his expertise and wished to find a successor who could continue to pass down his art. He wasn't interested in promotion, large classes, or becoming a famous teacher. He only wanted to have the top, very best student.

Sifu Gong Bao Tian, Sifu Liu's bagua zhang teacher, was different. He served as bodyguard in a high-ranking government officer's family. In addition he taught some of the family members and trained the bodyguard staff. He had good social skills and mingled well with people. His original style was lou han quan and by the time he shifted over to bagua zhang, his kung fu had already reached a pretty high level.

Dong Hai Quan is thought to be the founder of the bagua style. The time in which he lived was probably the last in Chinese martial arts history when people still treated the art seriously. Dong Hai Quan only taught martial artists who had reached a high level in their styles. In those days, young masters of any style wanted to be good, stay good, continue to improve. This was the mindset of the martial artists who trained with him. We don't have any documented history on this but it's possible that many more people followed Dong Hai Quan. However, only a select group of his students who reached a certain level in this training were pronounced as successors to the bagua style. Yin Fu was one of them, and he was Gong Bao Tian's bagua teacher.

At the time Gong Bao Tian started bagua zhang, things had changed a lot. Firearms already dominated the battlefield. Never again would kung fu styles be treated so seriously. Gong Bao Tian fully realized this and didn't quite know how to shift gears from martial art to health exercise. He could see that bagua zhang, a highly sophisticated, intricate, difficult style, was, as a martial art, beyond the reach of the general public. So when he did teach, he didn't do so with big hopes and ambitions. He didn't have a lot of good students and that's why.

V. What are the characteristics and complementary relationship of the baji quan and pigua zhang you teach?



Pigua Zhang

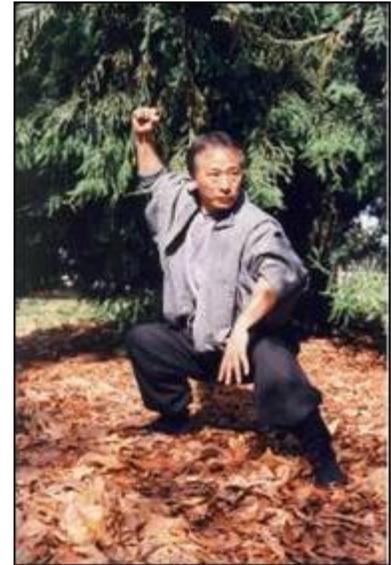
You really have to practice the styles, get to know them experientially. Or, at the very least, watch, take a look. Baji quan and pigua zhang--one is harder, one is softer. Notice the "er" -- this is very, very important. I must emphasize that I am NOT saying one is hard and one is soft. Each style contains both hard and soft. Baji uses more fist; pigua uses more palm. But each uses both fist and palm. Baji is more straightforward, pigua's movements are more circular. Baji training is tough on your legs; pigua training is tough on your arms. Baji imitates the bear and tiger; pigua imitates the eagle and snake. All this is interesting to read about but there's only way to really understand what these words mean--you must see directly with your own eyes, have a taste, learn a little.

VI. You have also studied under Sifu Tu Yi Che, inheritor of an Old Form Chen style taiji quan. What are the differences between this form and Chen Fa Ke's? And more recently, through the Chen Jia Gou's masters?

First of all, we must understand one important fact: There's no such thing as "standardization" in traditional wushu. Wushu is organic. Wushu is also an art. Everyone is supposed to be different. The art reflects people's personalities. The only real standard for traditional wushu is how effective is it in fighting situations. This is the bottom line.

The ethics of modern society forbid all-out fights to maim and kill. Thus, testing and judging the worth of one's kung fu has become really difficult. I agree with modern ethics. But sadly for kung fu, this has opened the door for the successful promotion of fake, dishonest and incomplete systems.

Yes, Sifu Tu Yi Che, my Chen taiji quan teacher, did teach me the older way to practice taiji quan. Though I don't automatically assume that older is better, I can say that older does have a more martial orientation.



Chen Taiji Quan

That's why Sifu Tu is different from other masters.

There's no point in trying to compare him with Sifu Chen Fa Ke. Chen Fa Ke, himself, was absolutely good. But he taught in Beijing, a big city, at a time when people no longer used taiji quan to fight. Faced with students whose main interests and needs were health and fitness, it's realistic to think that he would teach differently from the way he was taught. We know that he trained his own son differently than his other students.

Martial arts had to change. Taiji quan led the new wave. It became martial arts for health, not martial arts for injury or death, and rightly so. The reason I myself am willing to keep the old form is to maintain the purity of the martial art so that students will get full health benefits from their practice. Kung fu usage, not only taiji quan, is really quite different from other martial arts. When kung fu's fundamental principles, way of movement, and mind are correctly employed, the practice leads most directly to both optimal fighting and maximum health benefits. I don't want to see it shift too far away from its roots, so that after several generations you are left only with the name, "taiji quan" or "pigua zhang," along with a series of movements that are a shadow of the original art. If you change the movements and internal practice, the integrity of the structure and foundation, and violate the basic principles, then I question whether this can benefit people as deeply as the traditional way.

So my classes do emphasize the usage of all the styles I teach. We're not promoting violence. That's only in the kung fu movies.

In this regard, I strongly feel we have to be very careful with children and young teenagers. We must not overemphasize usage—"fight, fight, punch and kick." Nor should we romanticize martial arts or reinforce the persona of the miraculous, heroic kung fu fighter popularized by movies. It can change a youngster's personality. You may restrict his behavior in class but outside class, unsupervised, he might still pick a fight or do something wrong. This is always in my mind when training children.

VII. For many years you have been promoting Chinese martial arts in America. What parts of this experience do you keep?

In America I learned how to teach. Of course my kung fu teaching began in Taiwan but the big difference there was my students were Chinese. They lived in a Chinese society, growing up with the same background and language, and somehow had some familiarity with Chinese kung fu. Kung fu is culturally foreign to American students.

I arrived in the U.S. too late. During the hippie era, when kung fu movies first became a hit in America, lots of people wanted to learn kung fu. By the time I moved there in 1978, it was much too

late. Many people were already teaching and many misconceptions about kung fu had already taken root in the fertile American soil.

Six years ago, after an almost twenty year absence, I moved back to Taiwan. As I got to know the younger generation in Taiwan, I made a shocking discovery. Teaching these students turned out to be extremely difficult because they've lost their roots: their Eastern roots. Many young Asians are westernized, you could almost say Americanized. To pass down the art I needed to reach the younger generation, and then what a shock, what a *culture* shock, that was!

Today, western culture dominates the world. We Asians have willingly given up our roots. We wanted to learn from the West and we gained science and democracy. These are very very important. But then our whole lifestyle, way of thinking, and goals in life have also undergone major changes. Our educational system—from grammar to graduate school—is western. The way to prepare class, how to deliver your instruction, is all westernized. Anything that influences the educational system to this extent gets into the blood and changes the soul.

Western sports principles, training methods, ideas, habits, mental processes, and way of movement just will not work in Chinese kung fu. If you follow the western way, forgive me to say this, you can't be good in kung fu.

I really believe in cultural exchange--bridging the Pacific has been my dream for a long time. Recent political events have created a volatile worldwide situation in which cultural respect, understanding and exchange is crucial for our planet's healthy future. There are signs that awareness of this has grown but, I think, not enough. Many many people, especially Americans, believe that theirs is the only truth, the only way. I know this is much too big a picture and kung fu is, in contrast, much too small. But it's my hope that if we really promote kung fu correctly, based on the cultural principles that saturate this art, it may help to open people's eyes, widen their viewpoints, and ultimately contribute to peace in the world.

I feel lucky to have spent 20 years in the San Francisco Bay Area, such an open-minded region. I brought over some styles, techniques, and ideas. I taught, wrote articles and a book. But benefits flowed in two directions. I learned a great deal from my experiences in America.

VIII. The Bruce Lee phenomenon, the opening of mainland China, the Kung Fu culture in western countries, the reopening of the Shaolin Temple – seem to have put all traditional Chinese martial arts in the shadow. What is your opinion about this situation today, in the beginning of the 21st Century?

I feel let entertainment be entertainment. Enjoy the Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan movies, go see movies like Hero, nominated in the category of Best Foreign Film for both a Golden Globe award and an Oscar.

But all fantasy MUST be grounded in reality. The Shaolin Temple, Wudang Mountain, Omei Mountain—they are the fantasy. They're famous, popular, respected by so many kung fu lovers, but, in fact, their revered reputations are all based on romantic martial arts fiction. They were never centers of real, traditional kung fu. Although entertainment and fantasy have helped to introduce and popularize kung fu, they have also caused damage to real martial arts by giving people false ideas and information about the true, traditional art.

As an example, the widely respected National Geographic Magazine and the Discovery Channel recently produced a special feature on the Shaolin Temple. Following on this, the Shaolin Temple applied to the United Nations for recognition as a human cultural asset—an award that would place them in the same lofty ranks, side by side, with true culture treasures such as the Kun Opera (Classical Chinese opera) and the ancient Buddhist temples of Japan.

Mainland China's communist government must take a lot of the blame for the misinformation and misconceptions surrounding kung fu today. This topic is too big to be fully discussed in an interview like this so I can only sketch out what has gone on. In the late 20th century, the government systematically suppressed and reinvented, if you will, China's native art forms. This was one of its methods to manipulate and control the people. For instance, during the Cultural Revolution, the government promoted a total of eight "politically correct" stage plays created specifically for propaganda purposes. For ten years, an entire decade, these eight were the only plays one hundred million people were allowed to see. Another tactic was creating a fictional person—a "sample" or "model" hero--with a long story line of obedience and sacrifice for Chinese children and citizens to emulate. The art of traditional wushu (kung fu) was suppressed and reinvented in the form of modern wushu, a performance art that fuses western and eastern influences. Today, the real art of kung fu is, in fact,

suffering.

IX. Taiwan seems to be a shelter for ancient traditions. What is the opinion in Taiwan concerning the admission of wushu to the Olympic games?

Regarding the development of wushu, promotion throughout the world, and the Olympics, the relationship of Taiwan to mainland China is like the tail to the doggy. When the doggy moves, the tail follows. For wushu, Taiwan follows the mainland, goes where it goes. The Taiwan government has never had the ability to establish and promote its programs outside of the country. Taiwan has martial arts but its community lacks unity, businessmen and leadership. You can't get power unless you can band together towards the same goal.

X. You have been to mainland China. What can you say about the martial arts situation in China today?

I think what the Chinese government is doing to kung fu is totally wrong. I am against it is because it is destroying the real kung fu. Again, this topic is way too big to cover in this interview—I can only give a thumbnail sketch here. But, for traditional Chinese martial arts, the situation is tragic. How to fix it? That's a very difficult problem.

An additional factor, the people of China were very poor and for many years the country was completely cut off from the outside world. Individuals searching for a better life looked for any opportunity to move from their villages to the big, more prosperous cities, and hoped, ultimately, to leave the country. The "model" wushu program offers such opportunities for those who can compete and win. The gold medallists are rewarded with prestige and political positions in local government. They may also have opportunities to live and perform outside the country, perhaps even become movie stars. So there's governmental control over its program, and the fact that large programs tend to guard and perpetuate their own existence, and then that governments do not want to admit and fix mistakes. And who dares to go against the government in a communist society?

XI. You are considered the keeper of traditional wushu in many of kung fu's major styles from the north and south of China. Bagua zhang, baji quan, pigua zhang, Chen taiji quan, and also mizong and tang lang – How do you plan for the transmission of these styles?

I never really studied southern styles so the information in this question is not totally accurate.

My way to promote and pass down the art is like this. I have a very weak point: I studied lots of styles. As I said before, it wasn't because I had such a greedy appetite to devour many styles but because I couldn't get what I wanted from one or two. Don't get me wrong—this was not because the styles or masters I studied with were no good. I was young, still in high school. I had to prepare for college exams. I couldn't spend enough time practicing. So fate led to my involvement with eight different styles—way too many. My suggestion to youngsters is always to focus on one style. OK, a student can have one or two on the side, but he should pick a major, one suitable to his mental and physical ability and interest.

These days, nobody has a lot of time. I believe the Japanese did a very good job 100 years ago. Realizing that martial arts can't succeed against firearms, they divided their martial arts to kendo, karatedo, aikido, all the "do"s. Students studied only one "do." So a really good karate practitioner doesn't know how to use the saber. A judo champion doesn't know how to deliver a punch. I feel that there's nothing wrong with this.

In Japan some of the old style practitioners and masters I met are still dreaming they can do everything. They practice long spear, shoot the bow & arrow, do punching and kicking, learn take-down techniques, and of course wave their swords or knives, somehow just like Chinese martial arts. But that's the minority group in Japan. The Japanese have it right: the majority of their martial artists devote themselves to one "do," one style per person only. I see that as the future of Chinese martial arts. So that's the reason I am against learning many styles. You are spread too thin and thus can't do your martial arts well.

I want to turn my weakness into strength. My intention is to find the similarities in the different kung fu styles, not only those I practice but any I can lay my eyes on. I am looking for similarities in

techniques, principles and usage among styles. Then, to state it clearly, my ambition is to try to build a Chinese kung fu constitution. We've never had one in all of kung fu's history, and it's badly needed to establish the basics of the true Chinese fighting arts, debunk the misconceptions, and relegate fantasy to the realm of entertainment, where it belongs.

I want to make it possible for traditional wushu to once again be pure, strong, and clear. I've been working on this for many years and will try to write it all down. This will not be a definitive Bible but the beginning step which, hopefully, the next generation will continue, standing on my shoulders to see further than I. It should take at least three generations to complete this project because kung fu, traditional wushu, isn't like karate. The field is much too big, there are too many styles, and it's impossible for one person to adequately research even a part of them. So like a relay race, the baton should be passed along from generation to generation. Thus the entire project can have a successful completion.

Then the best way for martial arts survival and development is, first, establish good programs in the educational system, PE classes starting in elementary school and continuing all the way through college.

Secondly, we need kung fu to succeed as a business. Business relates to economic concerns but also to serving people's needs. Everyone needs to be healthy and live a long, happy life. This is not an area in which I have any talent but perhaps creative businessmen can find an honest way to successfully promote traditional kung fu. So in this new century, the business staff may be one of the most important "weapons" kung fu has on its side.

XII. Master, what are your exact official duties in the Taiwanese martial art community?

I don't hold any position or shoulder any duties with government organizations and programs.

I don't feel the preservation of traditional kung fu can be furthered through any existing governments or official programs.

When the martial arts reporters from France, England, Germany and America visited Taiwan (in 2002), our small group chose to create our own independent presentation, not to cooperate with any government bureau or kung fu organizations, because we were committed to sharing only the true, traditional art passed on to us through our training.

I myself am teaching, researching, and writing on my own. I'm very busy, and find it difficult, discouraging, and lonely. But this is my life's work and so I will continue to struggle forward, inch by inch, step by step, and pass along what I have learned.