

Interview with Mike Sigman by Cornelia Gruber

Mike, could you give a short background of your Neijia development.

Well, my interest in neijia began in the early 1970's when I encountered a visiting Japanese Aikido-dan who demonstrated control of a very unusual form of strength to me. In following the trail of that strength, I took Aikido for about seven years, but I could only gather small pieces of information in Aikido. Finally, I decided from all I had read and heard that Taiji would be a more productive source of information, so I took my time and carefully looked for a knowledgeable native Chinese teacher close to me. That was in 1982. Since then I have explored Chinese martial arts, neigongs, qigongs, etc., always looking for information on the development of the unusual strengths that are part of the neijia arts. Of course, since the usage of jin and qi also overlaps some of the external arts (the Waijia), I have learned to view the Neijia and Waijia as simply different approaches to many of the same core principles.

With so many different stories going around about the history of Tai-Chi, could you lay out your basic view of how tai-chi developed.

After years of experience and listening to the various stories and histories, I suspect that Taiji, Xingyi, and Bagua may all derive from some proto-martial-art that came from Shanxi Province. As you may already know, the Chen clan was forcibly transported to Henan Province as part of a re-population of the area by the emperor. All the previous inhabitants had been killed deliberately in order to quell an uprising. The Chen-family oral history states that the arriving Chen family already had a special martial art that they had learned in Shanxi... and Shanxi is the home of Xingyi and probably (according to many Chinese) the precursor art to Bagua. The hallmark of the so-called Neijia is the "hitting with the dantien", which refers to the storing and release of power in the dantien. All three of the arts of Taiji, Xingyi, and Bagua use the same dantien storing, the same basic jin, and most of the same qigong methods of developing the "qi" (more on that later). I suspect it's more than just a coincidence.

Are you suggesting that Taiji really developed from Xingyi?

No, because that cannot be accurately determined at this time. Probably Taiji evolved from a common precursor to modern Xingyi (as found in Shanxi Province) or Taiji evolved from a Xingyi variant. Note that it's been reported that some Xingyi manuals were found in Chen Village at one time. Certainly all of the six-harmonies requirements, including using the dantien (and therefore the back-bow) to power each hit is a hallmark of Xingyi and Bagua and Taiji.

“ -but when I went to Wudang Mt. I saw a lineage tree going right back to Chang San Feng.... “ What does that say to you ?

In earlier times, there was an effort by Wu Yu Xiang and others (mainly the notorious liar Wu Tu Nan, in more recent times) to claim that the Taiji which Yang Lu Chan learned in Chen Village was somehow special and different from the Taiji practiced for generations in Chen Village (Chenjiagou). As part of their claim, they tried to attach Taiji to the legendary Zhang San Feng, but there is no definitive record of Zhang San Feng and what martial art he really did, so this is just part of “wild history”. An attempt was made to list a number of martial arts from the time of Zhang San Feng until Yang Lu Chan, but this so-called “Southern Transmission” of Taiji never withstood scrutiny. A book offered by Song Xu Min purporting to show the links of such a transmission was deemed to be a forgery by experts who examined the document. The key character of the Southern Transmission story is a “Wang Zong Yue”, who apparently never existed, even though attempts have been made to validate him. A book called the “Yin Fu Spear Manual” had a portion referring to “Wang Zong”, but “Wang Zong” was never shown to be the same as “Wang Zong Yue” and Chinese convention would never be to shorten a name like that, anyway. “Wang Zong Yue” is often pointed out by amateurs as being mentioned in the Chen-style book by Chen Xin, but it’s pretty well known that the chapter mentioning Wang Zong Yue was added after Chen Xin’s death by a man from Zhaobao Village who paid for publication of Chen Xin’s book but surreptitiously added the extra part. In short, the famous “Southern Transmission” tracing Taiji back to Zhang San Feng simply doesn’t withstand scrutiny.

As noted Taiji historian and translator, Douglas Wile, has told me, his searches of all the available records in China yielded no records of such a person as Wang Zong Yue and about 20 of the quotes attributed to Wang Zong Yue turn out to have come from Zhang Nai Jou, a famous martial artist who did not even practice Taiji. Yang Lu Chan was listed as one of the top three students of his teacher and was given permission to teach a limited version of Chen style on the outside when he was freed from his indentured servitude. I think that’s all there is to this fairly simple story.

What are the components that make a movement a tai-chi movement ?

Taiji moves with the special jin of Taiji described as “starts at the feet, is controlled by the waist, and is expressed in the hands” and that jin powers the winding in and out of the body as it expands and closes. This special relationship of the winding body movement and the power from the ground or weight

of the winding body movement and the power from the ground or weight is, in Taiji, Xingy, and Bagua, called six-harmonies movement". Without six-harmonies movement (the "reeling silk movement" of Taiji is the classic example), an art cannot be said to be one of the internal arts.

Just about every tai-chi student hears at an early stage of practice about a jin that "starts at the feet, is controlled by the waist, and is expressed in the hands". But relatively few learn about the 6 harmonies and silk-reeling appears to be mostly taught to Chen style students. For the benefit of all the other readers, would you please describe six-harmony movement and how to apply it.

The idea of six harmonies is about a system of movements that are all intertwined together in a way that can't really be separated if you examine them closely or if you do them "purely"... they are all interdependent. The jin of Taiji can be done in a roughly linear way, even if you use the dantien to store and release it and to direct it. That is essentially what a lot of the Yang styles have done for many years. However, in more recent times some Yang-stylists, Wu-stylists have begun to speak about using silk-reeling, even though 20 or 30 years ago you never heard of this in those styles. Supposedly, Yang Lu Chan was given permission to teach Taiji in order to earn a living, but he was directed not to show how the dantien and silk-reeling worked. But I digress... the point is that jin and silk-reeling are inseparable parts of correct Taiji movement.

The idea is that the body Opens and Closes using the jin of Taiji (it is called "peng jin" and is the core power of peng, lu, ji, and an) to power the Open and Close, while the connected body winds inward as it closes and outward as it opens. This total coordination of the mind building the jin paths and the body winding and unwinding in a lovely symmetry is what "six-harmonies movement" is all about. It is impossible to have really pure usage of jin unless the body is also moving with the silk-reeling windings and the Open and Close cycle.

There is a phrase describing six-harmonies movement that describes the first half, the "internal three harmonies", as: "Heart leads mind. Mind leads qi. Qi leads jin." What this means is that first you want a jin path to be there and that then triggers the mind to form one and the "qi" forms the path; as the path is actually used, the jin can be felt as the functional manifestation of the qi path.

There is a second phrase describing the "external three harmonies" as: "Shoulder-hip; Elbow-knee; Wrist-ankle". If someone uses the whole body like it is covered in a "suit" with which no part twists or turns without the stretching and twisting affecting all parts of the rest of the "suit", this symmetry will develop. Winding and unwinding the body will indeed automatically couple the ankle and wrist, the knee and elbow, and the shoulder-hip. This is the natural

six-harmonies movement of all the internal martial arts.

Could you talk a bit about “internal strength”?

It's a convention among Neijia practitioners in the West to think of “internal strength” as relating to the criteria I mentioned in question 4, but the word “internal” can be confusing. The “Nei jia” are the so-called “internal” family of martial arts and the “Wai jia” are the so-called “external” family of martial arts. However, there are “nei gongs” (“internal exercises” that are really just specialized “qi gongs”) in the external martial arts as well as in the internal martial arts. From my personal perspective, I prefer to let "internal strength" mean the type of strength that is used in the so-called "internal martial arts" where they "hit from power stored and released by the dantien" and they use the jin from the ground.

If we use the term “internal strength” as applying to the basic strength in the internal martial arts, then we have essentially six-harmonies movement which incorporates the jin from the ground, controlled by the waist (and back), and manifested in the hand. This jin is controlled by the waist, but the jin is also part of the whole body connected by the whole, connected qi of the entire body which is wound and twisted by the waist. When I use “qi” in this sense, I am essentially talking about the fascia-muscle-subconscious relationship developed by the approach to qi-training used in the internal arts. The qi-training neigongs of Shaolin are somewhat different, although they play off the same basic principles in relation to the fascia and subconscious.

To give you an idea of the differences between the external and internal, both use “qi” development, but the external approach tends to be more vigorous and with more mechanical “beating”, etc., to condition the fascia. The internal arts tend to work more with less harsh breathing skills and more use of the subconscious. The various external arts will use different ways of generating power, such as hip power, for instance, or isometric “closure” of the body to develop strength. The internal arts will use the back bow and the dantien as a source of power. External arts will use a linear and broken jin for power; the internal arts will use a continuous jin that is connected via the six-harmonies movement. It should be noted that there is not always a distinct separation of “internal” from “external” arts. At an earlier time, it is thought that many of the current “external” martial arts also used six-harmonies movement, but it may have been lost over time due to the inherent sophistication of that form of movement.

A few years ago you talked mainly about body mechanics and more recently you've been talking more about Qi-fascia. How are the two areas linked and how are they distinct ?

Both the internal and external martial arts develop “qi”, which is partially fascia-related. The core to the internal martial arts is to manipulate jin in coordination with the functional “qi” skills. The problem I was running into was that very few people could get away from arms and shoulders and learn how to manipulate jin with the center and the body whole. Finally I decided that maybe it’s better to at least share the parts about “qi” , fascia, the mind, etc., so that at least some strength and health benefits can be had, even if the jin is really so difficult to learn to control. I’m not sure of a quick way to explain the relationship of jin and qi, but on a very simple level you can think of jin as the force that drives the body open and close and applies force; the “qi” is the “suit” of the body and the net that holds everything together while adding to the power. The dantien is the control area through which the jin goes from foot to hand (it doesn’t go through the shoulders) while at the same time the dantien area is the area of the “suit” that pulls and twists the rest of the suit out to the extremities. That’s not complete, but it gives the flavor of what happens.

Could you please explain what you mean by “functional qi skills”.

In the paradigm of “qi”, everything is some aspect of qi, but in the Chinese martial arts, the more specific area of body skills involves a type of body training that strengthens the myofascial-to-subconscious relationship in the body. Emphasis on breathing techniques (qigongs and neigongs), mental relaxations and visualizations and focuses to strengthen the subconscious, etc., give a series of skills such as increased strength, resistance to blows, heightened impenetrability to punctures of the skin, and increased immune-system functions. The fascia networks in the body (including bone structure) are strengthened and used as a basis for body strength. In the case of the so-called “internal martial arts”, the winding and twisting of six-harmonies movement uses the fascia “suit” of the body as a coherent whole which is manipulated with the dantien-area of the body. All these skills are developed through training, rather like all exercise-based strength, and not through academic understanding.

When you say “the qi is the suit of the body and that net that holds everything together……” are you declaring that QI and fascia are the same thing?

No, I’m not really saying that. The best understanding of the word “qi” is to realize that it more or less refers to “unknown forces”, and hence is a fairly ambiguous term covering many different phenomena – many of which are unrelated physically. What I’m doing is looking at a specific and important part of “qi” that involves training methods heretofore not discussed in western literature and which are only vaguely described in the available translated Chinese literature.

What is the importance of the subconscious mind in internal art ?

The idea of “mind” plays several roles in Chinese martial arts (plus qigongs and yoga), but the basic idea is to give the body more voluntary access to normally involuntary controls. The use of “mind” meditation for “health” generally involves relaxing and stilling the active mind so that the subconscious mind can learn to develop and play a stronger role. “Intention” is used to form the jin paths in Taiji and to control the qi/fascia. Visualizations are a sort of biofeedback (without metering devices) that help us gain control of normally involuntary functions and which can also help train the body’s emergency powers to be more on call for everyday usage.

Does this mean that practicing Taiji brings about a change in the players emotional make-up and personality?

Correct training brings about physical skills and a conditioning of the fascia-related phenomena. To achieve those demonstrable skills (they are not imaginary or rhetorical skills!) requires a certain amount of mental ability to relax, to focus where necessary, etc., and of course this sort of mental conditioning results in mental strength. I’d have to add that the real Taiji experts I know are very practiced at understanding how things work mechanically (i.e., they are not dreamers who think things work by wishing for them), so I’d venture the opinion that real Taiji experts are grounded in common sense, as well. Certainly, the combination of mental strengthening and being grounded in common sense will have a salutary effect.

Do you feel that with accurate practice power increases in a more or less linear way regardless of age, or do you think there is a prime time to develop it and at some time it is just to late ?

It’s better to start fairly young while the muscles and the connective-tissue are still facile and pliable, but beneficial amounts of skills can be learned later in life as well.

I have never met any other teacher who talks so clearly about Neijia as you do - how did you come about this precious information? Is it because your teachers were exceptionally open with you or did you happen on this key information through reading (if yes, what books)?

Well, bear in mind that my curiosity was and is focused very much on how the unusual strength of the internal arts works. I am not as concerned with all the forms and applications and rituals, as are most people. I spent a number of years vigorously practicing judo and karate when I was younger and I am not as easily

distracted about the idea of “real fighting” as are some to whom the idea of “fighting” is such an important consideration. In other words, my perspective on Neijia is on “internal strength” and how it works and that is all I have done for many years, collecting information from a number of different teachers, practicing hard, reading everything, asking questions, and so forth. All of my Chinese martial arts teachers have been carefully chosen Chinese natives and I have kept my focus on how things work, not on the “forms” or “rank”, “status”, being a “teacher”, etc., aspects that so easily distract many people. Let me add that I don’t think my skills are on a very high level and that I think it will be another generation or two before all the useful knowledge is extracted.

You mention very often Chen style and Chen teachers in your teaching even though

Neijia does obviously apply to all styles. Let me ask you : Do you know the Yang and other style teachers ? - do you think that their contemporary representatives are less knowledgeable?

I started Taiji by learning the Yang style from Dr. Her Yue Wong (his doctorate was in Geology). He was pretty knowledgeable, but it was through him that I began to realize that information is not something that is easily given out, even between the Chinese themselves. A Chinese friend of mine who has been a martial-arts practitioner since his childhood on Taiwan informed me that the Yang style came from the Chen style (this is something the Yang family now openly states, by the way), so my move toward the Chen style was simply a move to get closer to the largest source of information. Nothing more. I am not interested in “style wars”; only information on how things work. Also, I am not interested in some of these modern made-up styles of Taiji, Xingyi, etc., that “teach you how to fight” or “have the real secrets”. If someone wants to learn to fight, there are many venues to do so, and if someone is interested in “secrets”, there are plenty of those, although most of the “secret neigongs” I see in some highly publicized Taiji styles are actually pretty well-known Shaolin conditioning gongs.

In terms of who is actually knowledgeable, I’ve begun to realize that there are really not many people in China who are really knowledgeable about Taiji, although there are many more Xingyi practitioners that are knowledgeable and Bagua is a morass without much set purity. If someone asks me if a certain Yang-stylist is knowledgeable, I tend to look at the Yang style as Yang Zhen Duo does and point out that the training is somewhat more health oriented (although there are certainly a few good Yang fighters). However, in terms of what is most useful to most people for health and strength, true Yang style is probably more than adequate for most of us. Unfortunately, most Yang, Wu, Sun style teachers that I’ve seen in the West are not of a very high level.

Could you please elaborate on “true” Yang style.

Unless someone has bought into the “wild history” I mentioned earlier, it’s reasonably clear that the illiterate Yang Lu Chan was in Chen Village as an indentured servant for a 17-year tenure. Chen Xiao Wang explained to me that Yang Lu Chan was the indentured servant of Chen De Hu. Yang Lu Chan was allowed to train under the tutelage of Chen Changxing, who used part of Chen De Hu’s house for a training hall. The top students of Chen Changxing were his son, Chen Gengyun, and also Chen Huamei, Chen Huaiyuan, and Yang Lu Chan (Yang Fukui). As Chen De Hu got into his 80’s, he was apprehensive about the decorum of leaving a man-servant in his 40’s in the same household with four wives, should he die. So Yang Lu Chan was set free and was given limited permission to teach aspects of the Chen style. The true Yang style is a reflection of the instructions about what the disciple Yang was allowed to teach by his teacher.

You are based in the USA but have lots of teaching experience and a wide following in many European countries. What do you think of the tai-chi scene in Europe and the USA? What are the problems? What are your suggestions to bring about a change ?

Well, I think it would have been better if Europe and the US had had better access to good teachers sooner. If you will remember, up until the early 1980’s mainland China was closed and we had access mainly to Chinese teachers from Hong Kong and Taiwan. In both of these places the “internal martial arts” were greatly diluted by southern Shaolin martial arts practices. For instance, it is obvious to anyone with even slight experience that many of the supplemental practices in Hong Kong and Taiwanese-derived Wu-style, Yang-style, Xingyi, etc., are derived from the predominant shaolin practices of Hong Kong and Taiwan. So many of the US and European “teachers” with “many years of experience” actually seem to be teaching their own version of mostly impure internal martial arts.

And since so many of the Hong Kong and Taiwan-related people have gained control of the existing US and European organisations, there is a bias that actually leads away from the fairly pure internal arts that are now available to us on a limited basis. The suggestion I would make is that everyone go take a look at some teacher who is known and recognized as legitimately good, watch how he/she moves and demonstrates (challenge if you must; they are used to challenges if they are good), and then compare with what you see in the larger US and European Taiji organisations. I’m certain that the difference will be obvious to the most casual observer. Even though I have not met him, I am assured by the Chinese that I know personally that Wang Haijun in Manchester, England is a more than adequate representative of Taiji. And remember that all Taiji comes from the same basic principles and should look generally the same

at a high level.

Does one have to be Chinese to get really good at Taiji ?

Yes and No. At the moment, pure and complete Taiji seems to be limited to certain families and clans, with limited amounts of full information going to Chinese that have lived for years with those families. Someone does not have to be Chinese to understand and learn good Taiji, but someone would need to be Chinese to get close enough to obtain really good source information. Generally speaking, if a family or clan makes their livelihood teaching Taiji (or other martial arts), they will not degrade the ability of their own descendants to make a living by showing too much to outsiders.

Taiji competitions are getting more and more popular here as well as in China. There is now a real possibility to have Taiji athletes entering the Olympic games. Do you think that this aspect with it's goal specific training can raise the quality of Taiji ?

Frankly, I don't see how tournaments themselves will raise the level of ability and understanding. For instance, Taiji is actually quite popular worldwide at present, yet there are very few people who are doing real and correct Taiji. A meeting, gathering, or tournament comprised of mainly people who are doing their own take on what Taiji is will not improve the level of Taiji; it will only reinforce the wrong ideas of what Taiji is. My suggestion is that people spend more time searching out legitimate Taiji teachers and see what they do, how they move, etc. And understand that no matter if these people are "good" and they are "friendly", they are not going to tell you all you want to know just because you have good intentions.

Could you put your experience and Neijia knowledge into a final message for us – give us some key reminders to work with ?

My suggestions would be:

a. Decide what you really want to do before you commit yourself. If you want strength and health, good qigongs and neigongs are probably the most time-efficient methods of gaining "internal strength". Taiji, even the watered down Taiji of the West, spends a lot of time learning forms composed of old martial movements... if strength and health is your goal, why waste time learning precise ritualized martial movements of questionable value?

b. If you're really interested in the so-called "internal arts", the hardest part is to learn how to really move from the middle. Most people talk about moving from

the middle, but they don't really do it. Start there. Learn how and practice/play with it in all of your daily movements until it becomes the way you naturally move.

c. If you learn qigongs and neigongs which involve holding the breath and squeezing into pressure postures, these things come from Shaolin neigong training. Be very careful about blood-pressure affects. Use common sense and understand that all of these training methods, when done correctly, are still understandable in terms of western science, so don't blindly follow rituals. Think!