



article in Shanghai magazine for martial arts
Kongfu & mma magazine, 2011 August issue,
ISSN1002-7475

A TALE OF INNER PEACE:

***How a French Writer Discovers Taiji in Yangshuo and How that Martial Art Changed her Life*[1]**

By Christine Leang[2]

The Beginning of a long trip

In October 2010, while on a trip to Guangxi province, fate brought me to set foot in the tiny village of Shi Ban Qiao 石板桥, where the most unexpected adventure was about to start for me: the discovery of taiji, that ancient Chinese martial art.

Located at a 20-minute walk from busy and touristic Yangshuo, Shi Ban Qiao is that quiet piece of heaven, where the rooster wakes you up at dawn, the

buffalos play in the ponds and the frogs sing for you at night. It is right in the middle of the stunning karstic mountains, and along the Li river.

Like some of my future classmates, I happened to find the school where I would do my first taiji steps by chance. Originally, I was supposed to stay at the other side of the river, but a mistake made me end up in that tiny village. Right across the guesthouse where I was staying, there it was, Master Fu's Taiji and Kungfu school. I was like taiji was waiting for me.

At that time, when I decided to enroll for just one week of training, I thought it would be just a trial, a kind of 'sports vacation', and that would be the end of it. Back to my normal life after that. What I didn't expect was that I would totally fall for that martial art. Neither did I think it would change the course of my life.

Discovering what Taiji really is

When I walked into the school, I had no knowledge at all about taiji. The only thing I knew was that it is an exercise practiced by old people in parks, made of slow movements. Veryyyyy sloooooow. For me who was doing kick boxing and body combat, and who like to go wild, I must say I had some prejudice about taiji and never thought it could attract my interest. But still, I wanted to try, because everything in life is worth trying, right?

So here I am, having no clue yet about who Master Fu and Grandmaster Chen Zheng Lei[3] are. Therefore, not being impressed at all. But what did impress me immediately were the simplicity, yet authenticity of that place. There's something about Master Fu's school which makes you feel comfortable the minute you step in. The beautiful natural surroundings, the relaxed atmosphere, the friendly people, all these things that make a place alive and make you feel at home.

I also soon realize that this school is an ideal place for immersion into the study of martial arts. Why is that? Because everybody here, students and instructors (Master Fu is assisted by 6 young instructors), is 100% dedicated to the learning and practice of Taiji. Classes are 5 hours a day, 6 days a week. Be ready for that intensive training!

What is taught at the school is Chen style Taijiquan. A total discovery for me. As soon as I started to train, my prejudice that taiji is only slow and boring died. Indeed, Chen style, as opposed to Yang style (which is the most well-know style, the slow one), has lots of punches, kicks, jumps, of *fajing* 发精. Chen style taijiquan requires a low stance, and therefore, is very physical and demanding. It is usually practiced by younger people.

I discovered all this, painfully, during my first week of training at the school.

First Week of Training – October 2010

Day 1: getting a taste of what that martial art is. Like some of you may have, I've often seen Chinese people in parks doing taiji and I've always thought: "This looks easy!" Well, let me tell you something: it's not! All those flowing movements are not random or just aesthetic. They all have a purpose or a meaning, whether it is to help your 'qi' circulate or to attack your opponent. I started to learn the basics on that day and, again, I confirm that what seems the easiest movement is definitely not easy.

Day 2: waking up in the morning with pain in my legs. My instructor tells me it's normal, it's because I still haven't managed to 'fang song kua' 放松跨, which is one of the basic posture of taiji. I'll try to describe what it is: basically, it's a standing posture, but with the hips opened (to let the 'qi' circulate),, the knees bent a little bit. The whole thing feels and looks like you are about to sit on a chair. And you need to keep that posture during your whole practice, while making your movements. You're not supposed to stand up, NEVER, not as long as you're not done with the whole form 套路 (which can take up to 20 minutes). I told you: looks easy, not easy!

Day 3: waking up and feeling that somebody during the night exchanged my body for a block of concrete. Uuugh... How am I gonna climb down the 10 steps that separate me from the dining room and my breakfast? That third day is horrible. During the class, I suffer a lot because of my every single muscle feeling sore, because I can't focus since my body is screaming to me to stop torturing him, because after already 10 hours of lessons, I still can't memorize the form. I'm getting impatient and angry at myself. I think I can't do it and I even consider giving up. That night, I make an appointment for a massage and this is when the weirdest thing happens... As soon as the wonderful massage girl is done relieving my body from its tension, I start to have big fever. Out of nowhere. Cold. Hot. Sweat. Cold. Hot. Sweat. Horrible night.

Day 4: I wake up and I still feel a bit dizzy from the previous night fever. I decide I'll attend the class and see how I feel. As soon as we start doing the warm-up moves, I have that very strange physical feeling: it is like a flow, doing all kinds of funny stuff to the different parts of my body, moving around as if to catch the last bits of tiredness and to finally chase them out of me. After half an hour, I feel 'refreshed'. No more fever, no more tension, no more pain, neither in my body or my mind. I do my 2.5 hours taiji practice without any problem. All of a sudden, the movements and postures are much easier and I realize that I've finally memorized the form! I tell the Master about that weird phenomenon, he explains that my 'qi' was probably stuck and the first 3 days of practice helped stimulate it. The massage must have finished unblocking it, liberating all the bad 'qi' (the yang, as opposed to the good 'qi', the yin). That certainly explains why I felt amazingly good during that morning, and why I could finally integrate the moves and reproduce them (let's not forget my hard work either!).

Day 5: I wake up and I feel brand new. Not a single trace of any soreness. I feel like I can fly. I start to really enjoy my practice. My improvements suddenly grow very fast. I feel great, I feel at home, I feel at peace. I feel like I want to spend the rest of my life here. And this is basically how the rest of the days will pass by until I'll have to leave.

At the end of my first stay, of my first week of training, I know already that I will be back at the school... sooner than I could imagine.

I think what really caught me is that unique combination of physical exercise through techniques of self-defense, with relaxing meditative aspect of taiji. Yes, practicing taiji allows you to exercise your body by relaxing it. How paradoxical, isn't it? By coordinating movements which flow smoothly and gracefully into each other, the practice of taiji stimulates your internal energy (referred to as 'qi' 气). When you practice taiji, your consciousness, breathing, and actions are all closely connected. Taiji uses coordination and relaxation, rather than muscular tension, in order to neutralize your opponent or to initiate attacks. It stimulates the body and calms the mind, bringing an overall sense of well-being, while having a positive effect on personal growth and physical fitness. And for someone like me, who suffer from a lack of self-confidence, from mood changes, and who easily feel down, whether morally or physically, the discovery of taiji changed my life.

Back for a second and longer stay at the school – January-February 2011

After I left the school in October 2010, my heart full of gratitude and my body longing for more training, I decided to go back to Shanghai, where my base was, and then to France, to sort some personal and professional things out, with the aim to be totally free to go back to the taiji school as soon as possible.

January 2011: Master Fu, here I am again! Two months only after my first stay, I'm ready for more pain, more suffering, but also, for more knowledge and inner peace. But what I didn't anticipate was that, this time, there would be another big challenge on top of the intensive training: fighting the cold winter of the region.

OH-MY-GOD. In addition to being a taiji student, I've also become a cold-fighting student. Wherever you go, it's so freezing cold that you almost feel like there's a blizzard blowing inside your body. In the training area, in the lobby, in the dining room, in the TV room, in the bedroom, in the bathroom, under the blanket... there's nowhere to hide. The cold is everywhere, all the time. It takes much tenacity not to runaway from this place. I must admit that, during the first week, I thought of it several times of taking the first flight back to Shanghai, where a warm apartment and bed would be waiting for me. But then I realized that training in that outrageous cold was probably part of the process of becoming a real taiji practitioner.

During that second stay, I learn 'Lao Jia Yi Lu' 老架一路. It is the first form of Chen style Taijiquan, composed of 74 movements and which serves as the learning base of all the other forms. The whole sequence takes 15 to 20 minutes to perform. It is quite challenging for me to learn it in that weather, but I guess taking up this challenge is also what keeps me from running away.

Sometimes at night, we make a fire in the courtyard and everybody, students and instructors, sits around to keep warm. Even the kids, Master Fu's son and niece, come and join us. And like this, we squeeze against each other, we talk, we joke, we play, we live in the moment, we enjoy the beauty of simplicity and serenity. This, all these small but precious moments, the talks and the emotions shared, is also part of the spiritual experience. It really makes you think. I'm convinced that going back to more simplicity and authenticity is the way to happiness and to a more meaningful life.

One night, Master Fu told us the story of his boys, the young Chinese instructors, who are between 20 to 28 years old. He explained how each of them came to see him a few years ago and asked for his mentoring. Some of them even quitted their job in the factory, hoping for a chance to have a better career and a better life. Master Fu said that sometimes he had been reluctant to accept a disciple, being doubtful about the boy's potential. But for the 6 of them, now the instructors of this school, he said that after giving them a hell of a hard time for a whole month, he could only acknowledge their fierce determination. Although it's amazing the skills they acquired within just a few months thanks to Master Fu's coaching, they are still training very hard, to reach the highest level possible, the one which will guarantee them a good career in the field of taiji.

Third stay: the Beginning of the Frustrating Phase – April-May 2011

When I come back for my third stay in the beginning of April, I've trained for a total of 5 weeks only, but I realize that I've learnt so much already in such a short time. I'm no longer a beginner. For that reason, I get the privileged to train with the advanced students, meaning directly under Master Fu's coaching. It's an incredible opportunity; each minute spent with Master Fu is so valuable of knowledge. If only my body could memorize right away all the right postures and movements! But the path to becoming a really good practitioner is still very long.

This time, I came back with my knees still tired from the winter training. The pain is quite sharp, sometimes waking me up in my sleep at night. So I talked to Master Fu about that. He corrects my legs and hips posture, and after two days, my pain totally disappears! It's like magic. There is a mystery about taiji and the qi. Since I've experienced it, I do believe now in the concept that if your qi is blocked in some part of your body, because of bad body habits, it creates some pain and disease. But if you learn how to unblock it, by practicing taiji, it really improves your body condition.

This third stay is also when I enter the 'frustrating phase'. I experience that period when you feel like you're not going anywhere. Like any learning, for example learning a new language, at the beginning the improvements are fast and tremendous, because you start from zero. Then there is a phase when the improvement slows down and you need to keep the effort for a while until you reach the next level. The same process for taiji. Now, I'm in the phase where I feel that the next level to reach is so far away. At some point, I lose courage and confidence. So I go and talk to my master, who finds the right words to encourage me. He confirms that yes, the path is long, but it will be so rewarding when I finally reach the level when taiji is so anchored in me that I will be able to practice on my own, with the feeling that I can't spend a single day of my life without taiji.

This time, in addition to improving my Lao Jia Yi Lu form, I also start learning the sword form 剑. A new challenge for me! I feel so clumsy at the beginning. Again I feel I will never be able to learn it. But with time and hard training, with patience, hope, and encouragement from your teachers, nothing is impossible.

Another thing which keeps me going is the other students of the school. Half of them are Chinese, coming for short stays, and the other half are foreigners, coming from all over the world, staying several months in most cases. It's a very enriching experience to train with them, to see people from different countries, with different cultures, but all united around one common interest: taiji.

The students, whether Chinese or foreigners, are from all ages, 15 years old to 70. All levels are represented, from beginners to advanced practitioners. People with interest towards Chinese martial arts, but also students with several years of experience, and even taiji teachers who are looking to refine their practice, come from all over the world to train at Master Fu's school. I got to meet students from Switzerland, Israel, Slovenia, Canada, Great Britain, Spain, Australia, USA.

One thing I've noticed is that Chinese students are more interested in the health benefits of taiji and its link with the traditional Chinese medicine, while foreigners pay a bigger attention to the spiritual aspects of taiji. As a French citizen of Chinese origin, in which group am I? I don't know, and that has been one of the unsolvable questions for my whole life. But what I know is that, having both cultures, speaking both Chinese and English (+ French), is a wonderful gift. It gives me access to both groups, not only I can help translate and bring better communication between the Chinese and the foreigners, but it also allows me to catch both sides' spirits and ideas, and make my own philosophy of taiji.

Fourth stay: Getting ready for the competition – Since July 2011

I have been back for my fourth stay since the beginning of July. This time, with now the experience of 11 weeks of training at the school, which is the equivalent of 350 hours, I'm ready to start learning two new forms: the broad sword 大刀 and Lao Jia Er Lu 老架二路. I feel so excited about it! Because those two forms were precisely the ones I admired so much, when I came to the school for the first time. At that time, I was dreaming of being able to perform them one day, but thought I would never reach that level. Now, it really feels like I'm training to play the role of a warrior in a kungfu movie!

More seriously, Master Fu has expressed his wish that I participate in the International Chen style Taiji Competition, which will take place at the end of August, in Henan province, the birthplace of taiji. I'm not sure I want to go and feel ridiculous in front of the 800,000 expected attendees. But one thing you also learn when doing taiji, is to forget about your ego. When we train at the school, there are of course people with all kinds of level. But never will anybody make you feel that you are way behind compared to the others, or that you are not good enough to do taiji. Everybody can do taiji. At his own level.

One way to keep my motivation alive is to watch the Chinese boys, our instructors, training. Lao Wu 老五, Lao Si 老四 (those two are Master Fu's nephews), Wang Jian 王坚, Ah Qiao 阿乔, Ah Wei 阿伟 and Mo Yu 磨昱[4]. You should see their graceful movements, their powerful kicks, the expression on their faces. So beautiful, so intense. Those impressive. Knowing their situations, the fact that they have no other choice than to train as hard as they can to ensure their future, it makes me stay humble. As a student, learning from them at the school, I admire their art and I take them as my models. As a friend, I feel proud of them, of how determined they are and what they are capable of.

One of the most important things that the experience at the taiji school taught me is that, our vital needs, in fact, consist in the least. Happiness is not in how much you can spend and how much you possess, but in what lies within your inner self and in your own ability to see it, expand it, share it with other people. It was not even hard to go back to the essential and get rid of the superficial. It was just natural. Thanks to taiji.

INTERVIEWS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

- **Inès**

A Spanish woman in her early forties. She currently lives and works in London, in a languages center, but is now focusing on taiji and complementary therapies to change her career into that direction.

How and why did you start learning Taiji? For how long have you been practicing now?

Twelve years ago, my flatmate told me: "I'm off to my taiji class, would you like to join me?" I had no idea what taiji was. I agreed to go along as I didn't have anything special to do on that day. The minute I joined the class, I got into it straight away, and I haven't stopped since then! This was in London, under Paul Whitrod 师父, a hugely inspirational teacher who taught me for the following few years.

How did you hear about Master Fu's school? What motivated you to train there for such a long time?

After 7 years of doing taiji part time, I decided to try full time training. For that, there was no better place than China. I went to Yangshuo for the first time in 2006, and I was very lucky to come across Master Fu's school which was just opening at that time. My motivation to try full time

training was partly to take a year off to think about a career shift from a language background to complementary therapies. I had studied massage and I wanted to see if taiji could be part of it as well. Moving into a school seemed to be the perfect way to train more seriously and also to have time to think and take decisions. I really enjoyed the intensive training and immediately fell in love with the school. Master Fu's dedicated teaching took my taiji practice to a different, much deeper level. I go back to the school every year, in search of my own personal space, and to continue developing my practice.

What impact did Taiji have on your daily life? On your spiritual life?

When my first visit to China ended, taiji had become part of my daily life. It provided me with the tools to being physically fit and to a more meditative approach. This is what I love about taiji: the possibility to work differently, depending on what I need, or feel like, at any given moment.

You're about to make a career shift. How much would you say Taiji influence your decision?

Taiji was definitely an important part of this decision. Learning taiji is a lifelong process during which you can learn a great deal about yourself. I am now finishing my studies in Cranio Sacral Therapy, which has developed pretty much parallel to taiji. With both activities combined, I learn introspection on one side, and on the other side, I learn about the body, both structurally and energetically.

• Laetitia & Davide

A Swiss couple in their late twenties, who has been on a round-the-world trip on their bicycles, since September 2009. In October 2010, they "bumped" into Master Fu's school...

For what reasons did you start learning Taiji? How did you find out about the school of Master Fu?

Davide:

About 10 years ago, I had practiced kungfu and one of my dreams was to go and learn in China. In 2010, here I am, in China, on my bike, together with my girlfriend Laetitia. Taiji and kungfu were not part of the program, we had other plans in mind, but a crazy series of events brought us to spend the night at Master Fu's school in October 2010. All the hotels were booked out in Yangshuo and thanks to the Head of the village, we found shelter at the Taiji school of Shi Ban Qiao. The next day, when we woke up, we saw people training, and all of a sudden, my old dream became alive, my heart started to beat and my mind insisted that we change our travelling plans. And he was right. In the end, we stayed for five whole months.

Laetitia:

Fate awakened a profound desire, a dream which was asleep for many years. The desire to learn a martial art, and to discover the Chinese culture. But also the desire to become more conscious of my body and to help my spirit become free.

Yuan Fen 缘分 led us to Master Fu's school. While we were about to leave China, the school appeared on our way in the most unexpected circumstances. This was also the right time, the discovery of Master Fu's Taiji school happened a year after we left home and started our round-the-world trip on our bikes. We welcomed that break in our nomadic, mentally and physically demanding daily biking routine.

What impact did Taiji have on your life and your daily life? Would you say that your life changed after the discovery of Taiji?

Laetitia:

Taiji is like water to me. It feeds me in a purely natural way. It has become essential in my life. It also helps me to stay humble, because learning Taiji reminds me that the way to discovering, learning, feeling and moving with my body and my mind is very long.

Davide:

Taiji, like all passions that require a complete involvement of the soul, changes a person. Training the body in a healthy way is also a way to train the mind, and vice versa. If you do something you love, which makes you feel alive, it improves your mental health and therefore our physical health. I'm not saying it's easy or immediate, but it works for me.

Taiji is a school of life, and it is also a way to explore the Chinese culture, lifestyle and philosophy. Yes, I can totally say that Taiji changed my life for the best.

Today, you are no longer at the school. Do you still practice? If so, how often?

Laetitia:

Whenever possible. Now that we have settled down in Thailand for a while, a new break in our unlimited round-the-world trip, I practice on average every second day.

Davide:

Yes, twice a week, sometimes less, sometimes more, when I feel the need. Here in Thailand, I also have the opportunity to try another martial art: Muai Thai.

Do you plan to return to the school of Master Fu one day? If so, why?

Davide:

I want to go back to say hello to Master Fu and his team, to thank them for sharing this treasure which taiji is, and for having deepened my knowledge in martial arts, in the Chinese culture, and in life.

Laetitia:

Yes! In my opinion, learning Taiji cannot be pursued alone. It is important to have a Master and to train under his coaching regularly. I would like to seize that opportunity to thank Master Fu and his coaches for their patience and for all their generous ways of sharing their knowledge. The school became a home for me, and I would be happy to return to my 'homeland'.

■ Marko & Dragi

A married couple in their fifties, from Slovenia, a small European country with less than 2 million people. Marko and Dragi teach Yang style taiji in their home country. They came to the school for the first time in September 2010, and stayed for two months. This year, they are training for three months in a row and will participate in the International Taijiquan Competition, which will take place in Henan province from August 20-25, 2011.

How and why did you start learning Taiji? For how long have you been practicing now?

In our forties, we did other sports but got some injuries. We decided to look for an exercise which would be less 'dangerous' for our aging bodies. Taiji appeared as a rescue, and for the last eight years, we've been practicing with more and more zeal.

One day, we saw a poster nailed to a tree in our village. A young boy was offering taiji classes. It was like taiji found us, not vice versa. But youth is unstable, and the young boy disappeared.

Later, we heard about taiji classes in a neighboring town. There we found our first teacher. He introduced us to Yang style, and all the principles he taught us, about taiji and the Chinese culture, appealed to our spiritually inclined minds. During the classes, he often mentioned Grandmaster Chen Zheng Lei. We did some research on the internet and it became clear to us that Grandmaster Chen Zheng Lei's Chen style taijiquan was the one we secretly wished to practice.

How did you hear about Master Fu's school? What motivates you to train here for such a long time?

After the discovery of Grandmaster Chen Zheng Lei, we attended some of his disciples' seminars in Europe. Then, our great good luck came: Grandmaster Chen Zheng Lei himself came to Bonn, Germany. After seeing him performing a short demo of Lao Jia Yi Lu 老架一路, our desire to learn from him became even stronger. As rational human beings, we calculated that for the price of one seminar in Europe, we could spend almost one month in China. This is when we started to plan our trip to China.

On the internet, we found the romantic village of Yangshuo with Master Fu living there. That was it. Master Fu is one of the ten foremost disciples of Grandmaster Chen Zheng Lei. Our luck couldn't be greater. Today, while being here, in Master Fu's school, we feel our destiny is kind to us again.



from Kongfu & mma, August 2011

He is a first class teacher of Chen style taiji.

Now I am 54 and my wife three years younger. We only regret that we didn't start our search when we were still young. But in life, it is also a matter of timing. In India, there is a saying: "When a disciple is ready, the Master appears."

What about your main occupation? What do you do for a living? How do you manage to include Taiji in your busy daily lives?

I am a computer Engineer and did a lot of programming too. Nowadays the internet enables us to be wherever we want in the world. Thanks to that, I can support my customers from China, from the school. It is a 6 hours time difference, which means I can do taiji in the morning and afternoon, and take care of my business for another few hours in the evening.

Is Taiji popular in your home country? What kind of students do you have in your classes? What motivates them to learn Taiji?

At home, we practice or teach taiji every day. It has a very high priority in our life. We teach groups of 6 to 20 people, four times a week, in three different cities. My wife teaches beginners and sometimes intermediate level; I teach the advanced group. The average age of our students is around 50 years old. We teach Yang style, and we train alone Chen style on Saturday mornings. Sometimes, a few advanced enthusiasts join us.

Most of our students joined our class based on personal recommendation. Besides our web site, we also advertise in local newspapers and radio, but people coming through such channels are more 'curiosity people'.

Taiji is becoming more and more popular, because nowadays people in the West are desperately looking for a way to relax from their sophisticated and materialistic lives. For that reason, some commercial types of taiji, taught by people without proper knowledge, have appeared.

What we really appreciate and deeply respect about Master Fu is that, he propagates and teaches authentic Chen family taiji in his school. That is probably why the practitioners who had the chance to visit his school express their common desire to be able to come back and practice in the same atmosphere of the real spirit of taiji. I think many of Master Fu's disciples carry this same spirit on. This is good news for taiji.



from Kongfu & mma, August 2011

THE LEGENDARY STORY OF MASTER FU

The Yangshuo Taiji and Kungfu school was opened in 2006 by Master Fu Neng Bin 傅能斌师父. An accomplished taiji teacher for more than 20 years, Master Fu is one of the four preferred disciples of Grandmaster Chen Zheng Lei 陈正雷大师, who is the 11th generation direct-line successor of the Chen family, the legendary warriors who are at the origin of the birth of taiji. Grandmaster Zheng Lei is also recognized as one of the top ten Wushu masters of our time.

Born in 1969, Fu Neng Bin grew up in the village of Fang Cheng 防城, Guangxi province.

He is the 6th child of a family of 9 boys. Fu Neng Bin's first encounter with Wushu happened at the age of 10 years old, when a Wushu teacher came to his home to teach his older brothers. After that, the idea of becoming a martial artist himself never stopped growing in the mind of the young boy.

It's in high school that he decides to train and dedicate himself to kungfu and taiji. In a magazine, he reads about Chen Zheng Lei. Fascinated by the Grandmaster, Fu Neng Bin writes to him directly, applying for his newly opened school in Henan, dreaming of becoming one of his disciples. Soon, Fu Neng Bin receives the notification letter 通知书 that he got admitted. However, his family, of poor conditions, cannot pay for his school fees. Also, his parents are against the idea that their son leaves their home village to study Wushu. Full of determination, Little Fu Neng Bin spends several months doing farming jobs in the mountains, picking aniseed grains, grating cinnamon branches. He manages to gather the precious amount of 2,000rmb: the key to the door of Wushu!

In 1989, with the disapproval of his parents, but the support and complicity of his siblings, Fu Neng Bin secretly goes to the train station, accompanied by his older brother. It's his first time leaving his home town, his first time taking the train. After long hours of travelling, he finally

arrives in Zhengzhou, Henan province. There, he discovers the school, based in an old factory, and its harsh living conditions. 900 students, divided into classes of 50 people, training 6 to 7 hours a day. As if he couldn't get enough of the training, young Fu Neng Bin also practices during his free time at the school, sometimes training up to 10 hours a day. He will stay and train at Grandmaster Chen's school until 1993, that is to say a total of five years.

After two years of training in Henan, Fu Neng Bin goes back home for the first time in 1991. His family is still hoping that he will come back and look for a job in their hometown, but looking at his good performance at the Henan Wushu school and the awards he got during the competitions, his parents can only accept and support his choice.

In 1993, after graduating from Grandmaster Chen's school, Fu Neng Bin wishes to push further his kungfu knowledge and skills. He gets admitted to a Shanghai Sports University, but is not able to enroll because he cannot afford the school fees. He therefore goes back to Guangxi province, where he finds a position as bodyguard for a successful businessman. But after a month, he realizes that this is not the kind of career he wants.

This is when he starts teaching, holding positions of General Coach and Adviser for several Wushu organizations and teams in China. All along, he wins several international competitions, as well as he brings his teams to perform in national championships. Fu Neng Bin has won 17 gold medals and 9 silver medals in Taijiquan, sword, broad sword and push hands. Under his instruction, his students have won over 50 medals in national and international Taijiquan competitions.

In 1996, Grandmaster Chen Zheng Lei recognizes Fu Neng Bin as one of his best disciples. From now on, he is officially 'Master Fu', a 12th generation successor of Chen Style Taijiquan. He then starts assisting Grandmaster Chen, whom he accompanies in many places in China and abroad, teaching Chen style taiji and push hands at international seminars.

In 2000, Master Fu comes to Yangshuo for the first time. He discovers a window to the world: many foreigners travel and live in those beautiful natural surroundings. He sees the opportunity to bring taiji to an international audience, as well as to learn about the Western culture at the same time. This is when the project of opening his own training center in Yangshuo is born. It will take much time and efforts before he finds the right location and opens his school. Finally, in the fall of 2006, the Yangshuo Taiji and Kungfu school is officially opened and can operate.

Since then, several thousands of Chinese and foreign students have studied taiji with Master Fu and, as he puts it himself, he will "keep spreading taiji, as a way to help as many people as possible, and teaching to whoever has interest and is willing to learn that martial art."

INTERVIEW: Master Fu shares his insights about the future of taiji.

Not many people knew about taiji in the 1990s, at the time when you started your training. Now, twenties years later, taiji has become more and more popular. How do you explain that?

Because of the modern society, the demanding and stressful lifestyle, people are looking for a way to relax and to take care of their body and mind. It is now admitted that taiji, as an internal martial arts, with low risk of injury, has actual benefits for health. As a spiritual discipline and a philosophy, it can also help you have a more meditative approach of your daily life and work, if you decide to make taiji a part of your lifestyle. I think this is why more and more people have interest and find that martial art attractive.

I grew up in poor conditions, and when I was a young child, our diet at home was not always nutritious enough. Taiji was a way to build a more robust body. It is still true today, and I think this is one of the reasons why Chinese parents push their children to start learning taiji at a young age.

What are the major differences between the Chinese and the International students?

Thanks to their comfortable living conditions and the choice of a relaxed lifestyle, international students can afford to spend lots of time in learning taiji. We have many foreigners who put their job on hold, come to the school and stay here for several months in a row, sometimes a whole year. Although foreigners might learn and improve more slowly than the Chinese, mainly because of differences in the body, culture, lifestyle habits, I have noticed that when foreigners have interest in taiji, they take the training very seriously and are dedicated to learning. This is also very important in the spirit of taiji.

Chinese people are more practical. They usually don't spend as much time as the foreigners do, and what motivates them to learn taiji is usually to improve their health conditions. I have several

Chinese students who came after they got a heavy injury or were diagnosed a serious illness. As a Master, I always try to disregard the cultural differences and put all my students on equal terms. It is part of the job of a good teacher to have the patience to explain the concepts of taiji to every student, and not to assume that some already know, and others would not understand.

How do you see taiji developing in the next future?

In the past recent years, I have been receiving more and more invitations to do seminars and teach abroad, especially in Europe. This is a sign of the boom of taiji in the West. Today, taiji is known in more than 100 countries and has 150 million (1.5亿) practitioners, and it will not stop becoming more and more popular. I can foresee that the West will need more and more teachers in the next future.

What are your personal plans?

I plan to bring my school in Yangshuo to becoming a training center of high level in the next two years. In parallel, I am now working at the conception of a second training center, which would be located in Fang Cheng, my home town. This would be more of a leisure and sports retreat, but of course, with also a high-quality of taiji teaching (太极山庄). In that center, people will be able to do several kinds of sports and activities, while relaxing in a peaceful environment, in the middle of the gorgeous nature.

I also have in mind the project of gathering a team of high level taiji teachers, a sort of special committee, with the aim to keep spreading our art, so that it can reach and help as many people as possible.

A final word to encourage people to learn and practice taiji?

My master, Grandmaster Chen Zheng Lei, often uses that idiom:

流水不腐，户枢不蠹

Constant activity prevents decay

It applies for taiji: by practicing and getting your qi to circulate inside your body, this constant activity prevents decay of the body, sickness. But one can also use that idiom for any other field or challenge he or she faces in life. In fact, this is what taiji is: a school of life.

If you, too, would like to learn taiji with Master Fu and experience one of the most rewarding adventure, please check the school's website: www.masterfu.net

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[1] Magazine Kongfu & mma is in Chinese, so we are enclosing original English text.

[2] Christine Leang is a French Writer of Chinese origin in her early thirties. She grew up in Paris and has been living in China, mainly Shanghai, for the past 7 years. She discovered Taiji in October 2010, and since then, she has been training intensively with her Master at his school in Yangshuo, in parallel to her writing activities.

[3] Grandmaster Chen Zheng Lei is the 11th generation direct-line successor of Chen Family Taijiquan, who was at the origin of the birth of Taiji in the 17th century, in Chen Jia Gou, Henan province. Grandmaster Zheng Lei is nowadays one of the top ten Wushu Masters of our time. Master Fu has been one of Grandmaster Chen Zheng Lei's best disciples for the past twenty years.

[4] Since then, two of them left the school: Lao Si, because of a bad injury, decided to make a career shift, from taiji to Chinese medicine; Ah Wei is now a private teacher to one of Master Fu's friend.