

## **Zi Ran Men Kung Fu**

**Master Liu Deming, disciple student of Hong Zheng Fu, is the 5<sup>th</sup> generation lineage holder of Liu He-Zi Ran Men.**

*The practice of Chinese martial arts is blossoming in western societies. Once thought of as simply 'Kung Fu' and associated with the dramatic action of Chinese cinema, there is now a growing appreciation of the rich tapestry of styles, knowledge and philosophies that collectively form Traditional Chinese Martial Arts. To have survived for millennia, through dynastic change, communism and the cultural revolution, Chinese martial arts has proved itself to be ever-changing and adaptable yet fundamentally constant and true. Hence, it is no surprise that there is renewed interest and life in arts previously unknown in the west and apparently heading for obscurity in China.*

### ***Zi Ran Men Source***

Zi Ran Men Kung Fu (自然门功夫) is one such art. This style, also known as 'nature boxing', traces its lineage back to Dwarf Xu (徐矮子), and Du Xin Wu (杜心武) and was championed by my Grand Master, the famous Wan Lai Sheng (万籁声), during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By its very nature, Zi Ran Men was never a 'closed' martial art practiced only by a few lucky initiates. The famous masters of Zi Ran Men's history devoted their lives not only to learning and teaching this art to students and disciples, but also to spreading their knowledge far and wide. Hence, as a modern practitioner of Zi Ran Men, I feel some responsibility to contribute to keeping this knowledge alive and well. As interest and awareness of this great art has grown among martial arts enthusiasts worldwide, I thought it would be timely to make a journey back to China and speak with some of those remaining from my Master's generation. In this article I will share some of what I learnt, as well as some of my own teachings with you, a new generation of Gong Fu devotees. Hopefully my offering will convey some of the depth, charm and mystery of Zi Ran Men.

As I travelled back to my home province of Fujian (福建), I wondered in what state Zi Ran Men is in today and into what will it develop in the future? For the first stop on my journey I decided to travel to the city of Fuzhou (福州), capital of Fujian. Fujian is my home province, and it is also the spiritual home of Zi Ran Men, where my master Hong Zheng Fu (洪正福) and my grandmaster Wan Lei Sheng (万籁声) lived and taught. My Grandmaster lived in Fuzhou from the end of the Second World War onward and hence it was his 'half' hometown. Here, he spent dozens of years practicing Traditional Chinese Medicine

and raising subsequent generations of Zi Ran Men disciples, many of whom would go on to become distinguished Masters themselves.

The early to middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of great upheaval and change in China's history. China had been destabilized by foreign powers and the ravages of civil war, followed by the devastation of the Japanese invasion in 1937. Amid this background of instability and hardship, the Grand Master Wan lived his life and carved out a career. Like many during those years, Master Wan spent his time on the move. Driven by a character of intense passion, Master Wan fought in one place after another, from the North to the South of the country. He did not miss an opportunity to engage with other martial artists and to promote and teach the arts. It was his patriotic belief that the Traditional Martial Arts were a treasure and a key to a strong and healthy Chinese people.

In his teenage years, Master Wan began studying Liu He Men (六合门) with Zhao Xin Zhou (赵鑫洲). After six years of intensely disciplined training in that system, he then embarked on his studies in Zi Ran Men with Du Xin Wu (杜心武). Through this combination of training and his inherent fighting character, he soon gained a reputation for his great martial skill. In 1928 he published his first book, 'Wushu Hui Zong' (武术汇宗) which is now a classic martial arts text. In the same year he participated in the open combat competition at the Central National Martial Arts Institute in Nanjing. In famous circumstances, this competition was brought to a premature conclusion due to the fierceness of the bouts and the high and dangerous injury toll. However the organisers and competitors had seen enough to recognise individual skill, and Master Wan was honoured as a champion for the qualities he displayed. He, along with four other elite martial artists from that fateful event, were called to support the Guandong Guangxi Commander in Chief Guandong Province President Li Ji Chen (两广总指挥兼广东省主席李济琛).. The Commander asked them to establish a Martial Arts Institute in Guanzhou (广州) which became known as the Guan Dong Guan Xi Two-Province Chinese Martial Arts Academy (广东, 广西两馆国术馆). In Chinese martial art history, this event is now known as 'The Five Tigers Head South' . (五虎下江南)

Due to the politically unstable environment, Li Ji Chen was deposed as Provincial President and the Two-Province Chinese Martial Arts Academy lasted only half a year. After this event, Master Wan spent his time travelling from one town to another, in both the North and South of China, and rarely stopping for long in any single place. This period of transience further shaped Master Wan's life. He engaged with martial artists in Shanghai, Henan (河南), Hubei (湖北), Hunan (湖南), Sichuan (四川) and Fujian (福建). He learned Lou Han Men (罗汉门) from Liu Bai Chuan (刘百川) and studied with the great Wudang (武当) knight and errant swordsman Master Li Jing Lin (李景林). Finally in 1945, after the end of the Second World War, he settled in Fuzhou.

Master Wan's life took another twist in 1969. Amid the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, Master Wan suffered the fate of many prominent and educated people and was accused as a counter-revolutionary and sentenced to political imprisonment for two years. He was sustained in these difficult years by his strong will to prevail and by a sense of history that provided him with faith in his future, and the future of the Chinese people. Those who knew Master Wan during this period speak of his undying passion and love for the martial arts. They speak of his preparedness for the day he could return to his true calling. When the time was right, he would reveal and spread his Zi Ran Men Gong Fu like a swan stretching its wings. After being released from prison, Master Wan returned to Fuzhou and his Chinese Medicine and quietly continued to practice and teach Zi Ran Men and build a foundation for that future.

### ***Zi Ran Men***

I arrived in Fuzhou harbouring this deep sense of history, and cherishing the memory of my late Master. His passing in July 2000 severed my direct links to the past, and I greatly looked forward to hearing stories of past times and exploits. My first stop was to Haixia Zi Ran Men Research Academy(海峡自然门研究院). I arranged to meet the Academy's Vice Principal, Master Zheng (郑钟国), in his apartment where I was to be introduced to other members of the school. Upon arrival at Master Zheng's home, a recording of Buddhist chanting and the perfume of incense greeted me from the doorway. These familiar sounds and smells worked their magic on my mood and I felt at once relaxed and carefree. Master Zheng introduced me

to the Principal of the Academy, Master Weng (翁辉勇) as well as Masters Gu Jian Liang (辜建良) and two other Academy members, Mr Zhang Min(张珉) and Mr Cao Shi Yi(曹士毅).

After drinking tea together we started to talk, an exchange that was soon dominated by the endless questions I had in my mind. What was it like to learn from Grand Master Wan? What was it like to experience his skill? What was his character?

Gu Jian Liang said;

Master Wan was an extremely traditional teacher. He acquired the nickname ‘The Iron Hand’ because of his strength both as a teacher and a martial artist. Such a figure inevitably invoked an element of fear among his students. When I was young I was very mischievous, often fighting with our neighbour’s son. My father took me to Master Wan’s home and told him I was in need of discipline. Master Wan said to me, “You like to fight, why not try me?” This was how I started learning the Martial Arts and Wu De (the virtues of martial arts).

Master Gu added, with great respect;

On the other hand, Wan had a huge passion for Zi Ran Men. Even though many circumstances arose that prevented him from continuing the martial arts, he never gave up on his devotion. Apart from acknowledging the duty to keeping the art alive and well, Master Wan felt a sense that he had something personal to offer. This was part of his nature. As a Doctor of Chinese Medicine he was continuously helping others, often without payment, despite his own circumstances being difficult. His training was strict, based on hard work and self discipline. If there is a single legacy he left to me, it is the idea that one should purify the body in order to excel at the art. This is of primary importance to me. Master Wan assiduously stuck to the virtues he espoused. For all martial artists, he laid down five classical principles to understand and follow.

1. Literature (文)
2. Wu De, the virtues of martial arts (武)
3. Taoist Philosophy (道)
4. Traditional Chinese Medicine (医)

## 5. Martial Technique (拳)

His focus on literature and study was strong and he himself was forever researching and writing. In order for some documentation of Zi Ran Men to be available for posterity, he compiled several extensive and classic texts. These include ‘An Introduction to Chinese Wu Shu’ (中国武术介绍) ‘International Wu Shu Teaching Compact Manual’ (国际技击武术教范), ‘International Qi Gong Wu Shu Teaching Manual’ (国际气功武术教范), ‘International Gymnastics and Martial Arts Field Manual’ (国际体操武术教范) ‘Expression of Wushu Technique’ (武术言论集), ‘Techniques of Traditional Chinese Medicine’ (中国骨伤科) and ‘A General Discussion of Chinese Wushu’ (武术三谈). In all, Master Wan penned sixteen books on martial arts.

Since the Grand Master’s spirit was so alive and well in the minds of his former students, I was curious as to what the Research Institution’s activities were, and what they planned for the future.

Master Zheng;

The academy has established a school focussing on developing the teaching of Zi Ran Men. We are also in the process of establishing an official photographic collection of the Grand Master’s life, which we hope to publish.

To support this effort, Master Zheng has gathered a massive collection of photos of Grand Master Wan. He has also prepared a biography and documented his numerous disciples and the current representatives of Zi Ran Men, both in China and overseas. The most prominent school in Fuzhou has been founded by another of Master Wan’s students, Master Lu Yao Qin (卢尧钦), who has also opened a branch in the United States.

Another Master in Fuzhou who I should mention here is Master Lin Yin Sheng (林荫生), who was once the Vice Principal of the Fujian Police Academy. He trained as a student of Master Hong and later, Grand Master Wan. He is credited as the person responsible for converting the traditional Zi Ran Men fighting techniques into modern competition San Shou

(散手) . His has trained many students, who have collectively won over 100 gold medals in both national and international San Shou free hand fighting competitions. Master Lin, together with Grand Master Wan's nephew Wan Mu Tong (万慕通) , authored the book 'Zi Ran Men – Internal Fighting Technique (自然门内功技击) '

### *Zi Ran Men Training Techniques*

After much discussion and story telling, our conversation inevitably turned to Zi Ran Men itself. Very little material regarding Zi Ran Men technique has been formerly translated from the original Chinese. In this article I will present some fundamentals of Zi Ran Men Qi Gong and Fighting Technique which I discussed with the Masters in Fuzhou. Along the way, I will try and provide a modern, western translation of the basic conception and purpose of these fundamentals.

Zi Ran Men Gong Fu is an 'internal' martial art. Through Zi Ran Men foundation training and specialised Qi Gong practice, one works to nurture the spirit of the mind (shen 神) and regulate the circulation of the body's energy (qi 气). Through dedicated practice, a high level of well being and health may be achieved, where the internal and external aspects of the body are unified and the qi flows harmoniously, smoothly and fully, supporting the physical self like a breeze in the sails of a ship (hun yuan zhi qi 浑元之气). As the name 'Nature Boxing' suggests, in Zi Ran Men philosophy self defence and combat are seen as natural, perhaps primitive human functions. Hence, development of hun yuan zhi qi is also essential for Zi Ran Men fighting technique, through the attainment of a clear mind and control of the body. In this natural state, the mind (yi 意) guards and directs the qi. The qi, in turn, naturally engages the body's motor skills and muscular strength (li 力). Bringing these elements together (Yi, Qi and Li) the body moves freely, with deft coordination of eye, hand and foot and with fast, spontaneous reactions.

Therefore we say that when you are facing your opponent you are calm and almost playful, like a child or a curious animal. Such a state may sound peculiar for someone preparing to fight, however the free state of mind and body means that, once attacked, your response is unencumbered, fast and spontaneous and of a manner that provides your opponent with no

means of escape. This aim is captured by the saying ‘Dodging like the wind, moving like a sword from the scabbard 闪如清风，躲如抽鞘’.

Mental clarity and spontaneity are keys to Zi Ran Men fighting technique. When facing up to your opponent, Zi Ran Men strategy is based upon quick, clear actions that transform the nature of the engagement to your advantage. Whether you are launching a long-range attack or exchanging punches, all thought and movement must be sudden and decisive. In Zi Ran Men, this strategy is based upon agility and foot movement. It is said that if your step is slow, your attack will be slow and if your step is unstable, your attack will be unstable “步不快则拳慢，步不稳则拳乱”. With the suppleness and foot-speed of a dancer, you must step in and out of your opponent’s space, dodge and weave left or right, and quickly adjust from defense to offence and back again. Once you have summed up your opponent, if you are game to fight then fight. Decisiveness, and ability to rapidly take the initiative away from your opponent, is how you can occupy the superior position and dominate the situation.

That all sounds good philosophically, but how does one condition the body for Zi Ran Men combat? In terms of conditioning training, ‘dodging like the wind and moving like a sword’ requires extremely strong and flexible ankles, knees and hips. A good analogy for the physical state one aims for in Zi Ran Men conditioning is to look at the movement of a cat, whose speed and power rely not on bulking strength and endurance, but rather upon small but powerful tendons and muscles that store and release energy like a steel spring.

Zi Ran Men Gong Fu training has three main components, Basic Training, Conditioning Training and the ‘Nature Form’ Form training. Unlike many traditional Chinese martial arts, form training does not comprise a major element of building a physical foundation. The emphasis is more upon moving freely and naturally rather than being controlled by form. A central element to Zi Ran Men foundational conditioning is the Ba Fa Dang(八法档), Eight Method stretching and strengthening exercises. The Ba Fa Dang is a series of static and dynamic postures and exercises that act to open up the hips and lower back and increase ankle and knee flexibility and strength.

The ‘Eight’(Ba 八) in Ba Fa Dang refers to four methods of stretching and opening up the lower back and legs, and the development of four types of power in the lower legs. The four

stretches are static postures, which involve low stances with the hips open and sunk. The shape of these postures follows the shape of the Chinese symbol Ba. The ankles are held close together (or far apart), while the feet and knees point outward (or inward) from the body and the pelvis lifted. Such postures are isometric exercises that simultaneously build strength and flexibility in the leg muscles and tendons and open up the meridians. This practice helps to develop the catlike steel springs I talked about earlier by developing ‘four powers’ in the lower leg; the tip of the foot (pushing off the ball and toe), the middle of the foot (supporting through the arch and metatarsals) and the ankle and heel (particularly powerful dorsi-flexion and plantar flexion).

Hence in the Ba Fa Dang we have four postures, The Green Elephant Draws the Needle from the Earth (Qing Xian Xi Zheng 青象吸针), The Eight Shaped and the Inverted Eight Shaped Stance (Zhen Dao Ba Zhi Gong 正倒八字功), and the Crow Sparrows Step (Ya Que Bu 鸦雀步), The One (Zi) Shaped Horse Stance (Ling Pai Shi 令牌式). Dynamic elements of Zi Ran Men conditioning training include the Lower Hip Step (Ai Dang Bu 矮档步), The Inner Circle Hand (Nei Quan Shou 内圈手) and the ‘Ghosts Head Hand’ (Gui Tou Shou 鬼头手).

The dynamic elements of Zi Ran Men foundation training are perhaps the most interesting, and warrant some explanation and discussion. So called ‘step’ training is most often performed in a circle. The most basic circle walking step is the Ai Dang Bu. This step is performed in a low legged crouch with hips sunk and the pelvis raised, and with the lower back relaxed (also known as ‘sitting in the chair’). The feet tread forward and around the circle ‘like a drill’ meaning that there is emphasis on grounding the foot, toe to heel, with downward pressure placed progressively through the arch of the foot and through the ankle. In each step the tip of the leading toe must follow the line of the circle and the ankle joint must remain completely stable (no lateral movement) throughout the shifting of weight.

A typical upper body drill to combine with the Ai Dang Bu is the Nei Quan Shou (矮档步内圈手). The inner circle is created by rotation of the arms, as if the hands are turning a large wheel that is held out from the chest and at right angles to the body. The ‘inside’ hand rises from the chest, past the mouth and curves upward and away from the body, turning into the ‘outside’ hand that pulls down and toward the abdomen (Dan Tian 丹田) and chest. As one arm works the inside hand, the other hand works the outside hand, turning over and over a

circle without end or beginning. The step and hand movements are combined such that the forward step is synchronised with the outward moving hand on the same side of the body. The intention is to combine the Yi, Qi and Li of the fist and foot, so that they gather as one, both working like a wheel to propel your body forward. The necessary focus of Yi during circle walking is characterised as, ‘Body like the curve of a bow, hands shooting like arrows and feet sinking like drills’.

As well as building the appropriate physical conditioning for Zi Ran Men combat that I have discussed, the Ai Dang Bu is a powerful form of Qi Gong. From a Traditional Chinese Medicine perspective, repeated practice opens up the meridians in the entire body, especially in the chest and torso. This disperses the heart fire and brightens the eyes. Hence the final focus of Ai Dang Bu is ‘Eyes like shooting stars’, where the vision is clear and unflinching. In practice, the focus is upon relaxing your body’s Qi so that it naturally sinks to the Dan Tian where the mind should remain calmly focussed. The front of your body becomes like a well or gently flowing waterfall, while the back of the body becomes like a flexible ball.

According to legend, when Du Xin Wu started his training with Dwarf Xu, Master Xu instructed him to walk the circle (Ai Dang Bu Nei Qian Shou) and nothing more. After months of this training, Du Xin Wu finally asked, “I have been walking this circle for some time now, what am I doing this for?” Dwarf Xu answered “It is for everything. It is Qi Gong for your health and longevity. It is Gong Fu for your fighting skill.” Observers at the 1928 Nanjing martial arts competition report that when Master Du performed the Ai Dang Bu Nei Qian Shou for the crowd, he moved so quickly that his body seemed a blurred shade while his eyes remained clear and solid.

Initially, Ai Dang Bu practice may be uncomfortable, as the body clears its fire. The next stage is the purification of the Qi and the sinking of fire into the water of the Dan Tian. The body’s movements during this stage of practice become light and almost effortless. In the final stage, after a long period of practice, Gong Fu is finally achieved and the Qi proliferates through the entire body. Enormous amounts of internal strength and power (jin 劲) are generated and the body reacts as previously described, with total unity and freedom. The whole body now becomes ‘the eye’, sensing the opponent regardless of his line of attack and seamlessly moving from offence to defence with devastating speed.

Achieving heightened awareness is also the subject of Zi Ran Men lore. It is said that Du Xin Wu was forever testing the skill of Dwarf Xu, by launching surprise attacks on his Master. Some of these attacks were said to be bold and precocious, sometimes while the master was asleep, sometimes with a weapon, and on one occasion dangerously near a cliff when Dwarf Xu was not paying attention. However the young Du Xin Wu never got the better of his master and was, more often than not, on the receiving end of fast retribution for his attacks.

Beginners should be conservative in their approach to Ai Dang Bu training. Initially, the hips should not be sunk too low when attempting to step, to preserve the knees and ankles. Everything else should proceed naturally, in accordance with the main principle of Zi Ran Men training. Hence the breathing should be natural, inhaling and exhaling through the nose, and the length of practice determined by what feels appropriate to the individual. Like the experience of taking for a brisk walk or a jog, Ai Dang Bu is a little like ‘getting in the zone’, where the body starts to carry itself thoughtlessly. One should not expect to experience extraordinary feelings or experiences when attempting circle walking for the first time.