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Tan Choo Seng
Head of Hua Tong Pugilistic Art Institute

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Editors Note

Welcome to the sixth edition of The Journal of The College of Chinese Martial Arts.

This issue is about Sifu Tan Choo Seng, when I started training with him in 1988 in Singapore he was 47 years old.

In 1966 at the age of 23 he had founded the Hua Tiong Pugilistic Art Institute in Singapore with additional branches in Malaysia.

Chief Instructor Tan Choo Seng had more than a thousand students in Singapore and Malaysia. He was not only an excellent teacher but also through his martial artist demonstrations and events he raised vast amounts of money for local schools and old peoples homes.

We hope you find this issue interesting and inspiring for your martial arts training.

The College of Chinese Martial Arts provides information for practitioners of all styles so that all students can benefit.

Good luck in your training

Paul Brecher

Founder & Chief Instructor of The College of Chinese Martial Arts

Training with Teacher Tan Choo Seng in Singapore by Paul Brecher

This information originally appeared in the book, A Martial Arts Journey Part 1. The book was about my travels in South East Asia in the 1980's. I had been training in the martial arts since the age of ten so I already had ten years of experience, training with many great teachers, however I consider Teacher Tan to have been the one who gave me the true foundation in Chinese Martial Arts.



**Paul and his teacher - Sifu Tan Choo Seng
Head of Hua Tiong Puglistic Art Institute**



Singapore was a strange place, I had been expecting to arrive in a colonial outpost amongst a sort of old world Chinese shanty town.



However it was in fact a bustling metropolis with sky scrapers and a hi-tech, futuristic atmosphere. It had the world's most advanced underground system with all the station platforms made of marble and the trains were always on time.



Suddenly London with its antique underground seemed like an old world shanty town in comparison.

Sifu (teacher) Tan's number one disciple formally introduced me to his martial arts master. Sifu Tan's house was on one level, and open plan.

A pleasant breeze whispered through the house, dispelling Singapore's stifling summer heat. In the large front room where I waited there was a large Chinese shrine covered with statues of Buddha's and Taoist sages.

Incense smoke drifted up past a painting of Da Mo, one of the legendary founders of the Shaolin Temple martial arts school.

Da Mo's baleful, intense eyes glared down at me in a foreboding way. I later learnt that Sifu Tan had painted this picture himself.

The disciple returned with Sifu Tan, and Sifu Tan's wife brought us some tea and then left the room.

We were in big hard backed, carved, wooden chairs and Sifu Tan was reclining in his rocking chair.

We all sat in silence drank some tea and Sifu Tan puffed on his cigarette, drank his brandy and looked at me from behind his hard eyes. Behind him was a weapons rack containing a huge array of tasseled martial arts weapons, spears, staffs, battle axes, halberds and swords, walking sticks and Buddah's spades.

Sifu Tan was calm, calm like a tiger resting in the shade. There was no disguising the phenomenal coiled power that radiated from him.

He said that I could ask him any question I wished, so I went straight to the point and asked him what was the essence of martial arts. He told me it was Tai Chi Chuan.

For over a decade I had been training the hard external styles of martial arts and so with all the arrogance and dismissiveness of the ignorant and ill-informed I said that Tai Chi could not be the answer because it was not effective for self-defense. It was simply a slow motion health exercise for the elderly.

Sifu Tan smiled and asked if I would like to join him in the garden.

On the way out into the garden his disciple leaned across to me and

said Sifu Tan would not respect me if I held back, it was then that I realized I had just insulted Sifu Tan and also agreed to trial by combat.

I attacked with full force, I steamed in with a left jab followed by a right hook punch to distract him from my follow up main strike, a jumping right roundhouse kick to his left temple. I had intended to part his head from his shoulders and was very surprised to find not only that he wasn't there, but that I was flat on my back on the ground feeling slightly dazed.

My previous ten years of martial arts training seemed suddenly inadequate. But non the less I catapulted myself into another attack and once again found myself on my back again staring up at Sifu Tan. His lightning fast pounding palm strikes to my head spoke very convincingly about the effectiveness of Tai Chi Chuan as a martial art for self defense.

Sifu Tan raised one eyebrow as if to say would I like to make it best of three ? I said I thought perhaps it was time to go back into the house for some more tea.

When we were once again seated, and drinking tea, Sifu Tan told me a little about his own experiences. When he was nine years old, whilst wandering in the then jungles of Singapore, he had come across a Shaolin monk who was hiding in the ruins of an old temple. The monk, whose name

was Sec Koh Chun, had fled mainland China to escape from his many enemies in China's secret societies who's fighters he had defeated.



A collection of photos of Sec Koh Chun on the wall of the Hua Tiong Martial Arts School in Malaysia.

During the day, he would help the monk rebuild the temple and, because training in the martial arts was still illegal in Singapore, he was taught the Shaolin Temple Martial Arts System at night.



Sec Koh Chun



Sec Koh Chun



Sec Koh Chun



Sec Koh Chun



Sec Koh Chun

Sifu Tan said that after having learnt the External Hard Styles of Northern and Southern Shaolin, he went on to learn the Internal Styles of Hsing-I Chuan (Form-Intention Boxing) and Pa Kwa Chang (Eight Trigram Palm Boxing).

He learnt the Yang Family Style of Tai Chi from Yang Chen So and the Chen Family Style of Tai Chi from Chen Xiaowang.

I asked him how many Forms he knew all together, he said that he knew over forty, but only needed one.

Sifu Tan offered to teach me Tai Chi, I assume it was because I had not held back with my first attack (which demonstrated my respect for him) and also because I had made a second attempt (which demonstrated my perseverance).



Sifu Tan



Sifu Tan



Sifu Tan

There was no formal initiation ceremony we just drank more tea and this seemed to confirm the agreement.

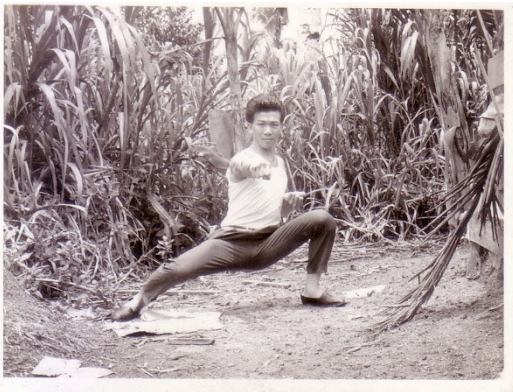
When I say we drank tea I mean the disciple and me, Sifu Tan drank his brandy and smoked his cigarettes.

Even though it was bad for his health he still had more energy and raw power than any other martial artist I had ever met.

In combat he was as fast as lightning and he was as sharp and decisive as a sword. But he smoke and drank like there was no tomorrow.

The first thing Sifu Tan taught me was The Shaolin Five Elements Chi kung Method and The Original Thirteen Postures of The Yang Family Style of Tai Chi and The Original Thirteen Postures of The Chen Family Style of Tai Chi.

(Here is the list of all the names of the movements that he gave me → The Chen Style moves are listed first, then The Yang Style moves, so sometimes this training was called Practicing the 26 Postures)



Sifu Tan

Learning Tai Chi turned out to be very different from my previous training, it was important to be Sung, this means having no unnecessary tension in the muscles or mind. There was just a slight flex in the tendons as a result of ones posture and movement.

The emphasis in Tai Chi was whole body power, not just the local power of the arms and all movements were circular and fluid, rather than linear and stiff. Most importantly the movement had to always come from the Lower Tan Tien energy centre in the belly.

太極起勢 _____
 單順纏絲 _____
 單逆纏絲 _____
 左右靠 _____
 左右雙擺纏絲 _____
 上陰陽纏絲開合 _____
 下陰陽纏絲開合 _____
 右開步雙擺纏絲 _____
 左開步雙擺纏絲 _____
 連環下插掌 _____
 連環上插掌 _____
 左右拍腳 _____
 左右十字腳 _____
 圈收勢 _____
 大太極圈 _____
 左右擺手 _____
 白蛇吐信 _____
 左右陰陽擺手 _____
 野馬分鬃 _____
 左右雲手 _____
 左右樓膝 _____
 左右倒肱 _____
 搬搬擺擺 _____
 左右平太極圈 _____
 右開步玉女穿梭 _____
 彎弓射虎 _____
 進步棚擺擠按 _____
 平太極 _____

I trained in Sifu Tan's garden with his other students for many hours every day, I was honored to be his first non-Chinese student. Sifu Tan taught the moves, their meaning and applications and then returned to his armchair and the senior disciple took over running the class.

One of Sifu Tan's students was a devout Tibetan Buddhist and he took me with him to a Buddhist temple to meet with his Tibetan Lama who was visiting Singapore.

The Lama was very calm and impressive in his robes and with his shaved head and wise eyes. It was through this meeting that I would later get an introduction to meet and study with other Lamas in a monastery in the Himalayas.

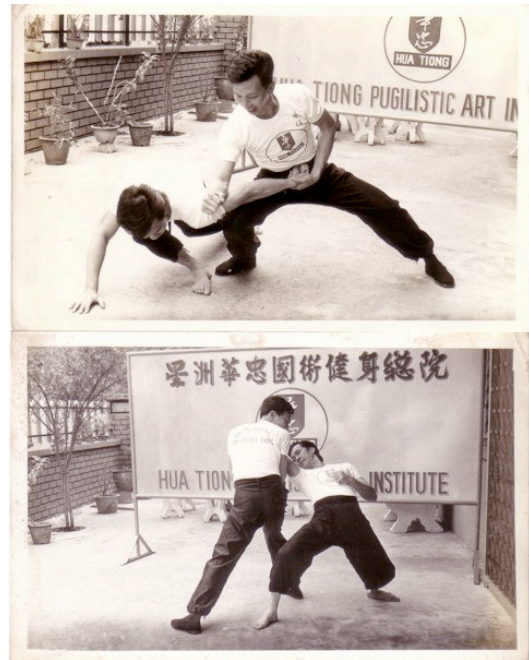
Sifu Tan always stressed that one should have a moral way of life because the great internal strength developed through the Tai Chi training meant that a strike could cause extreme internal damage to an opponent. The Tai Chi way of striking was called fa jin which meant an explosive release, fa, of internal power, jin.

Sifu Tan was very powerful, on one occasion after striking down a martial artist who had come to his house to challenge him he had then picked him up and thrown him over the garden fence back out into the road.

I asked Sifu Tan how fa jin worked, he showed me how the power comes from the legs and the

rotation of the hips, flows up through the body, and is released through the hands 'Like a bullet from a gun' he said.

I was still doubtful that it would work in all circumstances. For example, what if a person with a knife tried a slashing or stabbing technique? Sifu Tan went in to the house and came out a moment later with a big kitchen knife. He gave it to me and said I should try to stab him, I lashed out with the blade, he easily deflected it, moved in and hit me with fa jin.



Sifu Tan

Learning from Sifu Tan was always like this, an intense and interesting experience. There was however one aspect of the training that unnerved me more than the physical knocks and scrapes. This was when Sifu Tan became inhuman.

It would happen just as he was about to demonstrate a martial arts application, he would change...

By 'change' I mean that having decided to give a demonstration, he would put his drink down and come out of the house into the garden.

He would casually take a few puffs of his cigarette, meander over in our direction and with the cigarette still casually hanging from his lip he would, with a wave of his hand, indicate that he wanted me to attack him.

As I attacked, he transformed into an unstoppable, ferocious force, like a bird of prey at the end of its dive, or a cobra striking with its fangs.

It was the memory of his eyes that lingered, long after my field of vision had been blacked out by his pounding palms, for like his painting of Da Mo, Sifu Tan suddenly acquired a menacing, baleful glare, but at the same time it was like he was not there at all.

Immediately after his demonstration of the application, he would, once again, return to himself and give me the raised eyebrow expression indicating, did I understand it now ?

He would then go back into the house and sit down in his rocking chair and carry on smoking and drinking quite as if nothing had happened.



Sifu Tan

I lived in Sifu Tan's house and ate with him and his family and really enjoyed being immersed within Chinese martial arts culture. I have good memories not only of the training but also of the atmosphere.

The ash from the incense sticks on the house altar, the rickshoret driver pedaling Mrs Tan back from the market and the heat and humidity of Singapore and later in the year the afternoon monsoon rains.

In the evenings students came to Sifu Tan's house for training sessions in his garden near the big stone table which always had a pot of hot tea and cups on it for us all to sip whilst training.

After training we would all have dinner together at the big round table in the centre of the house.

That evening the talk was all about how Sifu Tan had recently been attacked with axes by two other martial artists.

He had defeated them but would not talk about the incident.

His unenviable position as an undefeated fighter made him a target, for whoever defeated him, by fair or foul means, then ranked as number one.

A year of daily practice had past and Sifu Tan decided it was time for me to start learning the first form of the Old Chen Family Style of Tai Chi.

This Form had not only the familiar slow movements, but also fa jin movements.

Fa means to release, and jin means internal strength, so a fa jin is an explosive release of internal force.

The slow movements build up the energy like drawing a bow and the fa jin explosive movements are like releasing the arrow.

This is what one uses in Tai Chi moves to make them more effective in combat, so for the next few months, this form was the centre piece of my training.

Myself and the other students would be woken up at five o'clock each morning by low flying fighter jets taking off from the nearby military base, drink tea, and then go out into the garden to train till eleven.

Some times it was Sifu Tans very serious smokers cough that woke us up.

Sometimes, when training in the garden at dawn, I would see Sifu Tan sitting cross legged on the

floor in front of the altar. His body was as pliable as rubber and extremely flexible.



Sifu Tan

Once, he came out into the garden and told me to put him into a wrist lock, I tried, I turned his hand one way and then the other, but which ever way I turned it, I could not lock his arm. He seemed to have no joints at all.

Practicing Tai Chi under the palm trees in Sifu Tans garden as the sun rose was a magical experience (apart from the mosquito bites!).

Watching the sky subtly change from black through deep purple to blue, the gentle shades of pink and orange then blending in to form the morning's sky.



As the world came to life with the noise from radios, TV's, traffic, and the hustle of the city, the energy would change and lose some of its purity and clarity. By eight o'clock the chi of the natural world had retreated to the jungle and the chaotic energy of man had re-asserted itself.

After myself and the other students had finished our evening training session with Sifu Tan we would drink tea together, and occasionally have the opportunity to ask him questions about the martial arts.

Sifu Tan emphasized that the most important thing about martial arts training was not so much which style one learned as the internal principles one was developing.

Three of the most important principles were correct posture, spontaneous action and Connection.

He said it was important to know all the rules and applications but not be limited by them. One must go beyond them and develop spontaneous action, so that you don't know what you are going to do, or once you have done a move, what it was. Your body knows the moves. Let it do them, let go, be fluid and natural, and that way you can react spontaneously.

The 'Being Connected Way of Moving', he added, meant that the whole body worked as a single unit. When you hit the opponent with one part of your body, it was as if you had hit him with your whole body weight.

The technique used would eventually seem effortless to you, but would have a devastating effect on your opponent. The way the body moved when one had developed being connected was like flowing water, or like a whip made of chain.



As the wave like whipping movement went through the chain, link by link the power would be transferred throughout the body.

As well as Tai Chi and Chi Kung, we also did a lot of Pushing Hands training.

Sifu Tan used to tap his ear and say that you do not feel or see an opponent's intentions, but hear them. You must listen for their energy.

On one occasion, I thought I sensed an opportunity to break through his defenses and to strike him in the solar plexus. But he had set me up and so as soon as I made my move I got hit.

The process of learning Tai Chi involves not only the movements and their applications, but also, of course, the internal principles.

Sifu Tan would first introduce these ideas with a few enigmatic, almost poetic words and let us try to grasp what he meant. Once he stopped me and said:

‘Be like bamboo’



I contemplated this, and even went over to the bamboo and watched it, but could not understand what he meant.

Later, he explained in his usual way, which meant I attacked him and got hit.

But this time it was different, because instead of hitting me once, he used a combination technique and hit me several times.

This was achieved by taking my incoming force, rebounding off it and returning it to me.

It was as if I had compressed a spring, let it go, and it had released itself at me.


What was happening was that to execute a simultaneous block and strike to my first punch, he had rotated his tan tien to one side, creating a torque in his body, which he then released.

This resulted in another simultaneous block and counterstrike to my second attack.






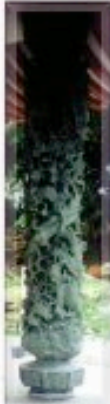
This rebounding happened several times, but it was all one fa jin movement.

I had attacked, and scored zero. He had counter-attacked, and won the match.

As the training continued, it dawned on me that the faster and harder I tried to hit him, the faster and more potent the counter-strike was. So from then on, when he said to attack, in the interests of self-preservation, I did not use full force.


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Some of the temples Teacher Tan Choo Seng built in Singapore

As well as being a martial arts instructor Sifu Tan Choo Seng built temples, he was now overseeing the construction of a

huge new Chinese temple dedicated to Kuan Yi, the Goddess of Mercy.

His garden had huge ceramic dragons in it ,they were all in pieces and would eventually be assembled on the roof of the temple.

Myself and the other students were constantly asked to move these dragons from one place to another, to get them out the way, or was it martial arts weight training ?

Sifu Tan, his family and many other students and myself were all sitting at the large round table, having dinner. Sifu Tan's tea cup was empty, so I filled it up, and left the pot pointing straight at him.

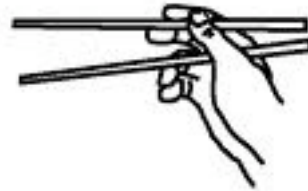
The light atmosphere changed, and the conversation suddenly stopped as all heads turned to look at me. I felt a cold chill run down my spine, Sifu Tan was staring at me with a menacing glare, his eyes were like Da Mo in the picture.

Just in time, his disciple interceded and explained to me that in Singaporean Chinese martial arts society, pointing the teapot at someone was a direct challenge.

Sifu Tan generally had a very relaxed manner, but I had obviously overstepped the mark this time. Sifu Tan gave me one of his raised-eyebrow looks and said that a senior student had once come back to challenge him, the student was not only defeated but also made to kowtow (bow down , forehead on the ground three times) as well.

I apologised profusely, and the meal resumed. The weeks went by and the temperature and humidity in Singapore climbed higher and higher. Lee, one of the other students, had been wandering around one of Singapore's huge, air-conditioned shopping malls and caught a chill.

He was a well-built man with a braided ponytail. He was usually in good spirits, laughing and joking, but this chill had developed into a fever and had brought him down, so after that evening's training session Sifu Tan's disciple took him to see the Chopstick Doctor. I went along as well.



We drove past an old, disused cinema and wandered down some side-alleys where we came across a small group of people waiting to be treated.

The Chopstick Doctor was a pleasant old Chinese man with most of his teeth missing.

Nonetheless, he had a reassuring smile and a pair of very old, worn, wooden chopsticks. The person in line before us put the traditional red envelope on a ledge, as had the other patients, each giving whatever he thought was appropriate.

The Chopstick Doctor diagnosed the problem, he then began his chopstick technique.

While Lee stood there, the old doctor rapidly began poking the chopsticks into different acupuncture points on Lee's back, legs and arms, rotating and twisting the sticks to re-balance and regulate Lee's chi energy flow.

Within a few minutes he had finished. Lee put his red envelope on the ledge, said thanks, and we left.

The old Chopstick Doctor gave us a warm smile and moved on to the next patient.

On the way back to Sifu Tan's house, Lee said he felt nauseous. That night, he had disturbing dreams and the next morning he was well again.

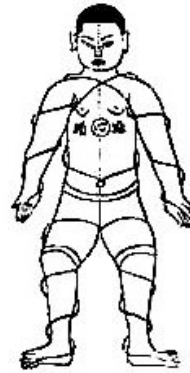
So training continued and when we had all developed to the appropriate level, Sifu Tan introduced us to the Tai Chi Internal Principle called 'Being Connected'.

He explained 'Being Connected' in his usual abstract fashion, by saying one should imagine that one's whole body could move through the air as if it were underwater.

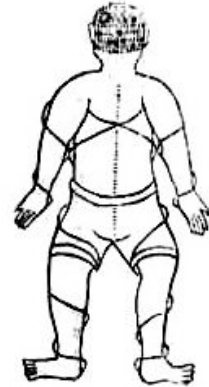
He then exaggerated 'Being Connected' in the Chen form and it was obvious there was something profound going on but I could not

work out what it was and we were left to try and work it out for ourselves.

圖面正絡身人



圖面背絡身人



Waves of spiraling chi making the body 'Connected'

After many days intensive training, no matter how hard I tried, I still could not understand how to become 'Connected', but one evening Lee suddenly 'Connected', and started grinning broadly.

Whatever it was, he had now got it - I asked him what it felt like, but he said he couldn't explain it and just carried on grinning.

I was even more determined to master it, and went on training after everyone had gone inside.

I carried on with the Chen form, but it had been a long day, and I was very exhausted, and I did not have enough power to maintain a high level of intensity.

I therefore slowed the pace of my movements, mentally and physically relaxing very deeply, when suddenly I felt as if I was moving through water, and my body seemed to have no joints at all. I felt someone close by and turned to see Sifu Tan standing by the house, he had been watching, and seen me 'Connect'. He gave me an imperceptible approving nod.

It was the annual festival of the Warrior Buddha's birthday and the whole of Sifu Tan's martial arts school went to Kota Tingi in Malaysia to meet other major martial arts schools for a huge celebration with the Hua Tiong Pugilistic Institute Dragon Dance playing a major part.

When we arrived at the Malaysian Chinese temple complex, the Dragon Dance began, to the accompaniment of gongs, cymbals and a huge drum dragged along on a cart.

The dragon was over thirty feet long, and very beautiful. It had green and gold scales, huge teeth and wild, staring eyes. It leapt high, slunk low and cavorted around and around the temple. One of the other martial arts schools had brought two lions with them, and so the lions and the dragon all danced together.

We were waiting for the priests in the temple to finish their prayers and meditations, so we could all begin the long parade to the five Chinese villages nearby.



Paul (holding staff, front centre) taking part in the Dragon Dance

There was an ecstatic, highly charged energy in the air as the priests emerged from the temple, clouds of incense smoke surrounding them. Their robes had Yin-Yang symbols on them, encircled by the Eight Trigrams of the I Ching. They all seemed to be in trance states.

Some carried incense bowls or boxes containing holy objects others had spears piercing through their cheeks.

The parade set off from the temple, led by the village elders and the priests, their feet tracing the Yin-Yang symbols in the dust. The procession stretched behind them, banners fluttering in the breeze, drums beating as everybody danced and chanted.

At each village we came to, the dragon would dance three times clockwise around the main village altar as a good luck blessing. Everyone was smiling and merry. We went from village to village and must have walked many, many miles before we returned to the temple.

Everybody said their goodbyes but, before we left, I accompanied Sifu Tan and his disciple into the temple. Sifu Tan was going to consult with the temple oracle on some important matters.

We entered a room filled with statues of meditating Buddha's. There were also statues of Huang Ti (the Yellow Emperor, the first Emperor of China), and of Lao Tzu, the Taoist sage, and Confucius. There was also, of course, a large statue of Ta Mo.

Here and there were statues and carvings of dragons, some with ferocious talons in defiant postures, others with a sublime expression, reaching towards heaven. All these different images were united together in the swirling incense smoke. I felt as if I had been transported to the realm of the immortals, one in which the supernatural seemed, well, natural.

One of the priests who was an oracle met Sifu Tan and they talked in hushed tones for some time. Then the oracle stepped towards the altar and entered into a trance state as a spirit entered him and spoke through him, answering all of Sifu Tan's questions.

The spirit which possessed the oracle picked up a paint brush and wrote some Chinese characters on a sheet of rice paper which it handed to Sifu Tan. Then, the spirit left and the oracle began speaking in his own voice again and seemed interested to find out what had happened whilst he had been gone.



We all lit incense sticks and placed them on the altar, thanked the oracle, and left.

Outside, in the late evening at sunset, the air cleared my head and I was back once again in the real world, almost. Because for me at that time in my life the modern world of cars, fast food, and mass communication and the mysterious and ancient world of spirits, dragons and immortals dancing on the rings around the moon were merged into one another.

The link between the modern world and the ancient world, the normal and the mysterious, the physical and the spiritual for me was Tai chi. I was glad I had found it or maybe it had found me ?

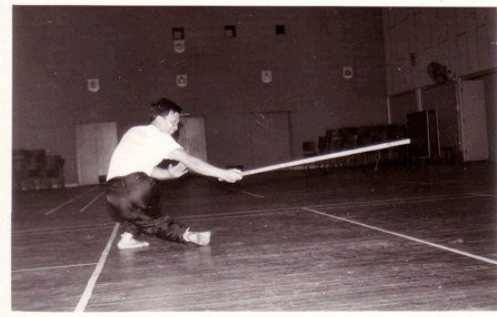
Apart from this special trip we used to go to Malaysia quite regularly to train at one of Sifu Tans martial arts schools. One memorable occasion was when they were holding a selection process to see who would be sent as a representative to the South East Asian full contact tournament.

The school was in a town called Johor Baru at the very tip of the Malaysian peninsula.

We arrived in the afternoon and as we drove into the compound, one of the instructors came over to talk with Sifu Tan. They went inside and I went to watch the local students train. There were about twenty all going through the rigours of a Shaolin Staff Form.

The movements were very effective but seemed disjointed and abrupt, lacking something.

Everybody stopped as Sifu Tan strode out to the middle of the training ground and took a staff from one of the students. We stood back expectantly, as he clearly meant to give a demonstration of how this form should be done. He began going through the moves and though he performed the same series of movements as the students, it all looked subtly different, and after a moment I saw that he was putting Tai Chi into the Shaolin. He was 'Connected' and the form now had a fluid, dynamic power to it. When he had finished, the students just looked at each other and shook their heads.



Sifu Tan

All training now stopped so that the process of selecting the representatives could take place.

There was a painted circle on the ground about twenty feet in diameter. Everybody stood around the circumference and the process began.

There were only two people in the ring at any one time. The one who stayed on for the next fight was the one who remained standing. There was one fighter whom Sifu Tan told me to watch carefully. After he had knocked out a few other fighters, I could see why, he was Connected. He did not have a big build but because he was Connected, he only had to hit his opponents once to knock them down. Of course, he was chosen to be one of the representatives.

A few days later back at Sifu Tan's house after one of the evening training sessions we had another opportunity to question him about the martial arts.

I asked him about Iron Palm and Iron Shirt training. He said that the Internal Iron Palm training was better than the External Iron Palm training, because it did not fade away if one stopped training.



Sifu Tan smashing a brick onto the head of one of his students to demonstrate Iron Shirt Chi Kung.

I asked him what Iron Shirt training consisted of for the rest of the body. Sifu Tan said that there were two aspects to the training, the External and the Internal.

The External aspect mainly involved hitting oneself with a variety of objects almost all over the body.

To begin with, one should slap almost every part of the body with an open palm.



Sifu Tan

After a few weeks of this, one could then fill a sausage-shaped cloth bag with dried beans and hit oneself with that.

After several months, the beans could be exchanged for small pebbles, then later the pebbles for larger stones and then the stones for rocks.

Eventually, one could use a wooden stick or steel rods.

The result of this kind of training was that one's defensive Chi increased, and the body became as strong as iron.

Also, a person would become used to taking a blow to almost any part of the body so that, during a fight, he could concentrate on hitting the opponent and not be distracted by his attacker's blows.

The Internal Iron Shirt training involved various Chi Kung still and moving postures, combined with different breathing techniques and leading the Chi to different acupuncture points in a certain order through various meridians.

Sifu Tan explained that it took about two hours a day, every day, for two years to get to a good level.

Sifu Tan had been doing Iron Shirt training for decades and his body looked as if it was covered in layers of plate armor.

Sifu Tan agreed to give a demonstration and sent somebody to get a wooden chopstick from the kitchen. The student returned and Sifu Tan took the chopstick from him and placed the sharp end into the depression at the base of his

throat, holding it there by pressing the palm of his left hand against the other end.

Then, with his right hand, he slapped the back of his left hand. This should have made the sharp end of the chopstick puncture his throat, but instead the chopstick broke and splintered into several parts.

A few days later I was fortunate to see a demonstration of Iron Shirt Chi Kung from some of Sifu Tan's advanced students, who were now instructors in their own right.

The performance was in a large hall and it was full to capacity, the demonstrations of Iron Shirt strength were done with a certain theatrical flourish to the applause of the audience.

First an A shaped ladder was put up, then a bed of nails was held up for the people in the front row to inspect, yes the nails were very hard and sharp !

The bed of nails was put at the bottom of the ladder and one of the instructors wearing only his black training trousers lay on his back on top of it. Then the biggest, fattest, heaviest student started to slowly climb up the ladder. He reached the top, bent his knees in preparation for his leap, took one look down at his target, gave a big grin to the audience and then jumped.

He flew about fifteen feet through the air downwards and landed with

his heels in the solar plexus of the prone instructor on the bed of nails and then stepped off him.

The instructor did not move, there was a nervous silence from the audience and then suddenly the instructor jumped up and laughed to the great relief of the audience who joined in. He showed his belly and his back to them, not a mark .

Next another instructor knelt down and rested the side of his head on the top of a stool, two other instructors walked on to the stage carrying a sledge hammer and a large concrete block which they placed on top of his head. With a massive overhead swing the sledge hammer was swung down onto the concrete block which shattered.

I thought that the instructor who's head had been under the block would have had his skull fractured by the force of the blow. Alarming he did not move, a hush of concern came from the audience, had something gone wrong ? Suddenly he jumped up, gave a big grin and nonchalantly bowed to the audience.

There were many other demonstrations of Iron Shirt power involving the instructors taking blows from members of the audience to vulnerable parts of their bodies.

One visiting Sifu had some students smash him in the belly with a log whilst a chair was smashed over his back. His belly

received the force of the blow which he used to shatter the chair as it hit his back.

However the grand final was the highlight of the evening. The bed of nails was once again placed below the ladder, one of the instructors lay on his back on it.

Then a huge concrete block, that was bigger than him, was lowered on top of him and another instructor lay on his back on top of it and another concrete block was placed on top of him !

Ten of the biggest of Sifu Tan's students then lined up, the largest one at the end of the line. Then one by one they climbed up to the top of the ladder and jumped down on to the top of the instructor, concrete block sandwich beneath them.

By the time the last and largest student had landed I did not think that there was going to be anything left of the instructors beneath the concrete blocks but it was not over yet, out came the sledge hammers again and the top block was smashed to smithereens and the instructor who had been under it was lifted off, still in one piece!

Then with a few more overhead swings of the sledge hammers the second block was shattered and the last instructor got up off the bed of nails and then to a big round of applause all the instructors and students bowed to the audience.

When I finished my training with Sifu Tan I thanked him for his hospitality and for introducing me to the essence of the martial arts, Tai Chi.

I had not been charged for the Tai Chi lessons, or the transmission of Tai Chi's true meaning and application so, just before I left, I gave Sifu Tan a red envelope, the traditional Chinese way of making a gift of money.

Sifu Tan took it and gave a nod of his head as a gesture of recognition of my offering. He took the money out of the envelope and gave it back to me.

But kept the red envelope on the altar and said that what he had imparted transcended money.

When I left, Sifu Tan did not say goodbye. He just smiled and said:

‘Practice! Practice!’



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End Note

I hope you found the sixth edition of The Journal of The College of Chinese Martial Arts interesting and I hope that your martial arts training brings you good health, self defence and self development.

I wish you great success and hope that this journal can contribute information that will be helpful to you on your martial arts journey.

More interviews, articles, analysis of ancient texts, discussions about various styles and principles in the next edition.

Good luck in your training

Paul Brecher

Founder & Chief Instructor of The College of Chinese Martial Arts

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