



Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour - Vol. 2

*Pakistan - Gansu China - Qatar - Addis Ababa, Tigray
Ethiopia - Vietnam - Japan - Indonesia - Shanghai, Ningbo,
Yuyao China - Thailand and Hong Kong*

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Marhaba! Huanying huilai!

Marhaba is the simplest type of greeting used across the Arabic speaking world; it is soft to say and polite. Most people along the land and maritime Silk Road countries know this word.

Chinese often use the phrase “**huānyíng huílái**” (欢迎回来) “Welcome back.” In this case welcome back to the **Wǔlín** (武林), “Pugilistic Fraternity” and “Circle of Warriors” of the **Sīchóu zhī lù** (丝绸之路 Silk Roads)!

The Silk Roads are a fantastic mosaic of languages and cultures and it's good to know a few key words and phrases in different languages.

In Volume 2 we continue the ongoing adventures along the Silk Roads starting in Pakistan, then return to China, followed by the Middle East, East Africa, Southeast Asia and then enjoy the action at the amazing 15th World Wushu Championships in Shanghai in 2019, finishing up in Hong Kong. It's a non-stop adventure because I like to pack as much as is humanly possible into a trip. The world of Wushu Kung Fu is growing and one big family after all.



Extraordinary places explored during the Silk Road Kung Fu
Friendship Tour - Volume 2

Before leaving on any particular trip I try to plan a schedule to meet the Wushu masters and federation people including national team coaches and athletes, in addition to visiting national museums, ancient Silk Road sites and unique cultural highlights. Likewise, I believe it's really important to also learn about the indigenous martial arts of every place I visit.

In Volume 2 I brought an old friend on several of the trips in this series and thanks to her interest in gemstones we visited a traditional famous diamond mine in Indonesia and the biggest gem markets in several countries. Gemstones have near universal appeal and people have been collecting them for at least 5,000 years. The Silk Roads have always transported the most precious commodities with gemstones foremost among them.

Each stop on these adventures finds new friends and offers new beauty and wonder. Right at the beginning I thank the readers for giving me the motivation to record and share these stories.



Sparks from the campfire rush up into the heavenly constellations and join in their mighty presence while the camels meditate in an amused silence.

The way is always there if you can discern it.

Continued from Volume 1...

Part 17 in Islamabad Pakistan

Amazing Pakistan: Interview with Wushu Master Noor Ahmed Saqib & Visit to the Ancient Metropolis and Silk Road Junction of Taxila.

My small place in this story is I left Beijing on December 25th 2017, arriving in Islamabad early on the 26th. A good Pakistani friend I met waiting for the airplane in Beijing gave me a ride to my hotel. My first full day in Pakistan I went to the ruins of a huge ancient civilization called Taxila which I'll describe later in this story.

December 27th, 2017 Islamabad, Pakistan

It was on my second day in Pakistan I met and first interviewed Wushu Master Noor Ahmed Saqib. His story is heartwarming, inspirational and profound on many levels. A few days after interviewing him I got an e-mail that had his story in his own words and it was better than the one I wrote. So, in this, Part 17 of my Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour series I simply copy and pasted what he wrote with a few incidental notes from our interview. After that I'll briefly describe the ancient metropolis of Taxila.

Wushu Master Noor Ahmed Saqib

"I was born in August 1973 in a town named Baddomalhi in Narowal District, Punjab Province."

This is a very rural area in Pakistan. During our interview he mentioned "Our family stitched the designs on shawls; it was enough to get by, to survive. We did not always know what will be in our future."

"In 1986, when I was 13 years old, a guy came to our village and showed me and my fellows some kicks and punches. On our request he told that this is 'Taekwondo Karate.' We requested him to teach us but after 15 days he left. Then next year in summer vacation again he appeared and taught us kicks and punches. Because I was his best student, he promised me that when I will complete my 10-year study he will teach me up to black belt. I was very excited but later he shifted to the UK.

"In 1992, one of my class fellows named Abdul Hameed Tahir met me in Lahore. During discussion he told me that he is learning Kung Fu and he invited me to join the club with him. So, I joined the Kung Fu club in Narrowal. My teacher's name was Mr. Raza Ali Raan.

"My teacher taught me very well and I became his good student. During my second month of training my teacher told us that there is an open martial art competition and we will go to participate. It was 25th December 1992 we went to participate in competition. There were different rules like no face punching and no under belt kicks. But our training was like a street fighter with full body contact and knock out based. So, I fought according to Kung Fu rules and I knocked my opponent down within 40 seconds. Let me tell you that my opponent was blue belt in Taekwondo while I had only 2 months training.



“In 1993, I left my village and came to Islamabad (Capital of Pakistan). I started my job at a book shop as a salesman.”

During our interview he said: “I came to Islamabad in 1993 and saw another world. Then I got some sense of martial arts and business. I lived in the market for 12 years and used to sleep on the roof of that building,” pointing to a nearby older shop building. “At that time the food stall area where we are now was covered in grass.”

In other words, he wasn't sleeping on the street; he was sleeping on a rooftop.

“In 1993, I participated in the National Wushu Championship in Quetta Baluchistan province and secured the Silver Medal. Then in 1994, I participated in a Wushu championship “Punjab vs Azad Kashmir”, where I secured Gold medal and the “Best Fighter” award as I knocked down my two opponents within 7 & 9 seconds.

“In 1996, I opened my first Wushu Training school in Islamabad where I had 26 students from 5 countries including Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bosnia and Comoros. I used to speak in three languages including Urdu, Arabic and English because some students couldn’t understand English or Urdu. It was great time when I was learning and teaching at the same time because I had to survive.

“In 2000, I started participation in District Wushu competitions; then Divisional Wushu competitions and then I participated in a national championship and won gold medals in all competitions. Those were my last championships in which I participated as a player.

“Despite that I was a national champion and best fighter I could not survive with Kung Fu only as there was no financial benefit in teaching or learning Kung Fu. I decided to start some business to survive and keep Kung Fu as a hobby instead of profession.

“In 2001, I started my business of building maintenance. I got married in 2003 and was enjoying my life. My daily routine was I used to go to my office at 9 am to 5 pm then go to my club to teach Kung Fu to my students.

After a long time in 2016 my school fellow who introduced me in Kung Fu, Mr. Abdul Hameed Tahir called me and asked me to come for Wushu trials for the National Championship.



I went there. My friend told me that I was selected as a national coach and I will have to participate in the National Championships with my team. I was surprised. I couldn't understand how this happened suddenly. I was going to receive the fruit of my 24 years efforts for Wushu Kung Fu and work hardness. I was going to be recognized that I am Kung Fu man. I found tears in my eyes. I praised God Almighty who suddenly blessed me with this greatest prize of my life, *Al-ḥamdu lillah* (Praise to God).

I participated in the 2016 National Championship with my team. My boys secured one Gold, one Silver and one Bronze medal, (*Al-ḥamdu lillah*). I also participated in the fighting division just to examine myself and where I am, and by the grace of God Almighty I secured the Bronze medal.



When I came back from the championship on 20th December, God Almighty blessed me with another award; I found Mr. Gregory is here in Islamabad on his Silk Road Friendship Tour. I emailed him but in fact I was not hoping to get any chance to see him but because it was a gift for me from God Almighty. Mr. Gregory not only responded to my email but also asked me to meet with him.

“After some discussion he asked me for my interview. I was shocked. It was the second time in my life that my interview was going to be published in an international magazine; before it happened in 1996, when a Saudi magazine “*al Sharq ul Aosa*” published my story.

“Mr. Gregory interviewed me and now I am in front of you with my entire story. All the credit goes to Mr. Gregory who helped me to get my identity in Wushu World community otherwise I was a hidden star.

“Thank you so much Gregory my friend, I will never forget you and your kindness. May God bless you and your family and keep you in his care...”

To that I can only say: “Thank you Master Noor Ahmed Saqib.”

In actual fact when in his office he showed me a collection of several dozen, perhaps 50 or 60 awards and certificates from different competitions and training seminars all over Asia and the Middle East going back decades. I am deeply touched by his great work as a teacher, greatly impressed by his legendary prowess as a Wushu fighter and genuinely honored and thankful he took the time to talk with me. He now owns three companies, two in the engineering/construction industry and another that deals with surveillance and security systems. Though he's not a rich guy he's been quite successful in business and has a younger brother that drove us around in a monster Mercedes SUV. Wow! Rags to riches? Not exactly. He's not rich but the lessons and skills he learned as a Kung Fu/Wushu fighter and trainer translated well into business success in Pakistan's capital city of Islamabad. Hats off and profound respect to you brother Saqib!



Besides meeting the masters of Kung Fu/Wushu along the ancient Silk Road, I also am compelled to visit the most ancient and famous of Silk Road sites along the way. Below are some stories from just one such visit.

The Ancient Great Metropolis of Taxila

To quote the classics:

“The city of Takshasila or Taxila as it has more familiarly been known to Europeans ever since Alexander the Great’s invasion of India, was situated at the head of the Sind Sagar Doab between the Indus and Jhelum rivers and in the shadow of the Murree hills where they die down into the western plain.”

A Guide to Taxila, by Sir John Marshall

In fact, this was an old city long before Alexander the Great entered the Punjab at the age of 30 in 326 BC. Yet it is not so ancient as many others I’ve visited having been dated to only about the 6th Century BC. Heck, the Hittites reigned supreme around 1,700 BC and even they were far from the oldest of civilizations. None-the-less, the great metropolis of Taxila is still quite ancient. What it may lack in great antiquity it makes up for in historic prominence. It was for more than half a millennium the king city of the Southern Great Silk Road.

It was at the meeting place of three major trade-routes, from India and the “Royal Highway,” West Asia and Bactria (northern Afghanistan) and the north in Kashmir and Central Asia. Over time it connected Rome and Greece to the Persian Empire and China.



Standing at the crossroads between civilizations at sunset

The Silk Road to my right leads to China. The Silk Road to my left leads to Persia (Iran). Behind me is Dharmarajika Stupa one of the grandest Buddhist temples on the Silk Roads 2,000 years ago. Those were the bases of pillars just behind me.

They were clearly some awesome pillars for a huge temple.

Taxila has a legendary history in Indian literature. The Ramayana states it was founded by Bharata, younger brother of Rama who appointed two of his sons as rulers of the two cities: Taxila and Pushkala. In Buddhist literature Taxila is referred to as a seat of learning and home of world-famous teachers. According to the "Jains" Taxila was visited by Hindu Saint Rishabha - eighth Avatar of Vishnu of the twenty-two incarnations - in about 6th Century BC!

[Jainism is a non-theistic religion founded in India in the 6th century BC by the Jina Vardhamana Mahavira as a reaction against the teachings of orthodox Brahmanism, and is still practiced there. The Jain religion teaches salvation by perfection through successive lives, non-injury to living creatures, and is noted for its ascetics.]



Remains of the Jain Temple in Taxila archeological site

Because of its historic prominence – the greatest of all the cities between the Indus and the Jhelum - it was visited by many of the greats of history, including Alexander, Plutarch (46-120 AD) who remarked on the richness of the soil. It was visited by Chinese travelers Fa-Hien (405 AD) and the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim traveler Xuan Zang (602-664) who described the rich harvests, flowing streams and fountains, abundant flowers and fruits, and an agreeable climate.



Remains of Xian Zang's Temple

Yet enormous battles were fought here on foot, horses and battle chariots. It has seen the rise and fall of many civilizations. After the death of Alexander, the troops which remained in the Punjab were soon driven out or destroyed by Chandragupta.

The pathways through this ancient capital are rich in the fine powdery dust of the ancient habitants of this still fertile valley.

A sign posted in the Taxila Museum states:

“In the first 1000 years after Christ, merchants, missionaries, monks, mendicants and military men traveled on the vast network of Central Asian tracks that became known as the Silk Road. Linking Europe, Pakistan, India and the Far East, the route passed through many countries and many settlements from the splendid city of Samarkand to tiny desert hamlets. Sogdian merchants traded in Baltic amber, lapis from Afghanistan, spices and cotton. Itinerant Buddhist monks, Persian Manichean priests, Zoroastrians and Nestorian Christians sought converts among the desert settlers; storytellers, acrobats, musicians, dancers, courtesans, diviners, peddlers and miracle-workers offered their wares in the market places and at temple fairs.”



Remains of St. Andrews Church in Sirkap Taxila

Taxila like other metropolis is actually composed of several cities combined into one, and the ones I visited are: the Bhir Mound, Sirkap and Sirsukh as well as the ancient and marvelous Dharmarajika Stupa.

Sirkap, the first city I visited was a beautiful old town first built by Demetrius, the Greco-Bactrian King after his invasion of India about 180 BC. That city thrived for about 180 years, declined and was rebuilt by Menander 1st, an Indo-Greek king and patron of Buddhism.

Possibly the most impressive thing about this ancient metropolis is that the followers of so many faiths/religions/philosophies lived here in peaceful co-existence.

For example here along the main street in Sirkap one may find a Jain Temple (the central theme of this ancient Indian religion belonging to the Sramana tradition is non-violence and respect for all living beings), very close to the Temple of the Sun God, nearby Xuan Zang's Buddhist Stupa, a Hindu Temple, Ionian Temple (of ancient Greek origin), Zoroastrian Temple, and with the remains of the ancient St. Andrews church only a short walk away.

This was and remains - a set in stone - example that people of different faiths can indeed live together in peace for hundreds of years.



Remains of the Sun Temple

Yet also within some partly excavated walls one can find the remains of human bones crushed in the earthquake that destroyed most of the city in 30 AD. Nature is not always so kind.

In Sirkap I also saw the famed "Double Headed Eagle." Double headed eagles go back to the Hittite civilization (1,700 BC), were used in the Anatolian Seljuk Sultanate, Mamluk Egypt, Islamic Spain, and by the Eastern Roman Byzantine Empire, Western Roman Empire, Serbia and Russia by Christians, and least I forget is called the *Reichsadler* or Imperial, heraldic Eagle in the modern coat of arms of German, the Second German Empire, the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich.

In one of the suburban areas one can find the huge Dharmarajika Stupa and several other Buddhist monasteries for this once was a massive center of Buddhist learning with hundreds of monasteries and in the museum here (at Taxila) and National Museum in Karachi one finds huge numbers of perfectly preserved Buddha statues with faces showing Indian, Greek and Chinese influences.

According to Tibetan tradition the Great King Ashoka (273–232 BC) died at Taxila. The name of Prince Kunala is associated with Taxila as he was the presumptive heir to Ashoka and thus the Mauryan Empire which ruled almost all of the Indian subcontinent, however he was blinded by his jealous step-mother Tishyaraksha (after he refused her "advances") and ultimately his son Samprati became his heir. Sources as diverse as Xuanzang confirm that Prince Kunala was celebrated around the vast empire for his piety and humility. According to one history:

“Blind and destitute, Kunal and his wife left the palace and wandered about the land until at length they arrived at Patliputra. The prince’s plaintive song attracted the king who was shocked to see what had become of his favorite son. The inquiry was swift and the libidinous queen was executed. Legend, as preserved by Xuanzang, tells us that the prince’s eyes were restored by a Buddhist priest called Gosha. Other sources, however, tell us of the prince never regaining his eyesight and dying in Patliputra.”

<https://discoveringpakistan.wordpress.com/2013/04/17/the-blind-prince/>

In spite of palace intrigues during the Buddhist era things probably were probably considerably better than a couple of hundred years earlier during the Greek period, as remnants of the Greek army that survived noted about Taxila the prevalence of polygamy and widow-burning (*Sati*) and the custom by which girls too poor to be provided with a marriage dowry were exposed for sale in the market-place.

Such were the harsh realities of the ancient world, though Buddhists at least would have outlawed killing in all of its forms and instituted greater levels of social egalitarianism among the common people.

The entire site at Taxila is much, much larger than has been excavated so far and most of this ancient metropolis is currently being used for farmland. None-the-less one must give the Pakistani government credit for having meticulously preserved so many of the ancient relics in museums, and having facilitated excavations thus far, however much more remains to be done.

The museum there had this remarkable stone recording their exercise area.



This is the famed “kicking the horse that’s biting your elbow” technique well known to all real martial artists! (OK, I just made that up, but it is an amazing piece of art, or perhaps an instructional carving.)

When gentle evening came upon my guide and I we were at the Dharmarajika Stupa and monastery. It’s a wonderfully peaceful place this time of year; the summer-like air was warm and fresh in spite of it being January. (I heard in July and August its beastly hot.) Who would ever wish to leave?

Are there secrets buried there as to how humanity can live together in peace that might help us poor beleaguered modern people in our increasingly divided world? Probably not. The religions and philosophies there that have survived the thousands of years all teach pretty much the same things: patience, tolerance, forgiveness and alms for the poor and needy. *There are no secrets.* We just need to practice what we already know – thanks to those very same ancient masters.

While at Taxila I sat for a while on the platform of Xuan Zang’s Stupa and simply rested amidst the ghosts and histories. Was it all a dream?

Getting back to Beijing a couple of weeks later I had so much work to do at school I didn't have the time to finish writing the stories and interviews I'd started in Pakistan. Now, almost a month later, I review my notes, photos and books. Nope. It wasn't a dream.

Pakistan, her kind and warm-hearted people, for example Wushu Master Noor Ahmed Saqib and histories for example at Taxila are just-simply-amazing and as real as real can get.

In the next story we meet Pakistan Wushu Federation President Malik Iftikhar Ahmed in Lahore and two of His Teams, visit the ancient metropolis of Mohenjo Daro where the dust from the bones of sinners and saints mingle peacefully along the ancient Silk Roads, followed by a visit to the old capital of Pakistan, Karachi with the incredible National Museum, shopping malls and kind beautiful people.

Part 18 Lahore and Karachi

Interview with Pakistan Wushu Federation President Malik Iftikhar Ahmed in Lahore and Two of His Teams, and Visit to the Truly Ancient Metropolis of Mohenjo Daro and the National Museum of Pakistan in Karachi



Grandmaster Malik Iftikhar Ahmed,
President and Founder of the Pakistan
Wushu Federation

Pakistan Wushu Federation President Malik Iftikhar Ahmed in Lahore and Two of His Teams

December 31, 2017, Lahore Pakistan - Today I was very fortunate to have an interview with Grandmaster Malik Iftikhar Ahmed who is President & Founder of the Pakistan Wushu Federation, President of the South Asia Wushu Federation, Vice President of the Punjab Olympic Association, and President of the Red Dragon Wushu Federation(!) and, work-out with and photograph two of his illustrious teams.

I had an appointment for 12:00 and arrived just about on time. I was warmly greeted at the entrance to his home, private training center and hostel by Grandmaster Malik along with his wife, son and some of his coaches and team members. I was greatly pleased with this meeting as I've looked forward to it for a long time and had chatted with the illustrious grandmaster several times on Facebook prior to our meeting. During the interview my expectations were exceeded when I got some grasp on the living legend that is this true gentleman's real-life story.

Settled into his office adjacent to the training enter I started by asking about his family and early martial art experiences.

"Some of my ancestors migrated to Thailand near Malaysia a long time ago. One of my cousins visited us here from Thailand in 1969. He played Kung Fu then and I was 12 years old at the time. Though he was only here for a couple of weeks his skills really inspired me. And then along came Bruce Lee's movies that even further got me going. In 1970 I started training with Ajmal Mughal a Wing Chun master but after a while he left."

"I and some of my friends started Karate in 1977 but were disqualified in competitions for doing things like sweeps and dumping our opponents on the floor. I did train hard though and even wrote a book titled: Master Karate Text Book dedicated to Gichin Funakoshi."

"But after a time, my friends and I went back to our roots in Kung Fu and planned to get affiliated. Then we left Karate again."

"In 1992 I traveled to Beijing by road. It took 17 days to get there from Lahore. Things were very much different then with checkpoints every few kilometers checking our IDs."

"In Beijing I met a Mrs. Kong, Secretary of the International Wushu Federation or something like that. I was very happy and surprised it only took three days to get the affiliation for the Pakistan Wushu Federation. I asked her if she would like to see my performance and she said: 'We want organizers not players; we can see your courage and enthusiasm.'"

"We had established the Pakistan Wushu Federation under the name of our club, the Red Dragon Kung Fu Club but later decided to change the name to simply Pakistan Wushu Federation to give it a more professional image."

"In the beginning there were lots of problems, like lots of fights. It was rough in the beginning. Some people wanted to fight us saying 'fight with me and if you win, I will join with you.' That's how it was in the old days. After three or four challenging years people started to understand this is not the way."

"The Pakistan Wushu Federation was affiliated with the International Olympic Committee in 1998 and registered with the government in 2009. Bureaucracy was a big hurdle, but we were very patient."

"Now each province in Pakistan has its own association, Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, Sindh, Capital Territory, the Tribal Areas, Azad Jammu Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. Also, there are federations for the Pakistan Army, Police, Railway, Higher Education and the Water & Power Department."

"Just last week December 24-27 we sponsored the Inter-Army Championships and there are regular intra- and inter-province, national and international competitions."

When I asked Grandmaster Malik how many Kung Fu/Wushu players there are in Pakistan he said: "Unregistered, around 30,000 but if you're asking about only registered players there are approximately 12,000."

I asked about the percentages of his players preferring Sanshou vs. Taolu, he chuckled: "Pakistanis do love Sanshou!"

Asked about their competition record Grandmaster Malik answered "We are the only martial arts federation in Pakistan that has had three consecutive victory standings in the Asian Games, Doha in 2006, Guangzhou, and 2012 in Incheon, South Korea 2014."

I asked about the Wushu training club with the elevated ring which I could see through the window of his office there at the federation headquarters and he said: "Oh this? This is all my private property. Later you can see behind these buildings is a hostel; visitors to our federation can stay there up to 60 persons at a time. The government by the way does not pay for this."

Which led me to my next question about his annual budget to which he responded: "It's something like 800,000 per year. I was suitably impressed till I asked: "Is that Pakistani Rupees or US dollars (?) " to which he answered: "Rupees my dear!"

That means he's operating the Pakistan Wushu Federation on something like \$7,700 per year. "But," he added: "for the games and camps the government does pay for those."

In regards to private sponsors Grandmaster Malik said: "Only cricket gets private sponsors here in Pakistan."

I asked him about visa issues and he said: "We've never had any visa problems, but it's a tough job sometimes as each embassy has different criteria."

At this time, it was apparent his club members were ready for action in the training hall so we moved on to the next stage of what turned out to be a very interesting day.

It appeared to be mostly a girls and ladies training day and a couple of the students squared off in the elevated ring for some pretty exciting Sanshou sparring.

After a couple of minutes, it appeared they were more or less equally matched and another pair took the floor.

Those are some hard hitting ladies and they really demonstrated precision punching and kicking as well as take-down techniques.



Following this I trained the young team in a stretching routine I'd learned decades ago from Hatha Yoga called "Salute to the Sun," and then practiced a few kicks and kicking combinations with them.



It was huge fun and really felt good for me to get at least a little work-out there, and share some skills I found useful for Wushu skill development with the enthusiastic students.



After a round of photos Grandmaster Malik invited me into his office again and presented me with a couple of the books he's written and a beautiful iron Wushu sign. Fantastic gifts!

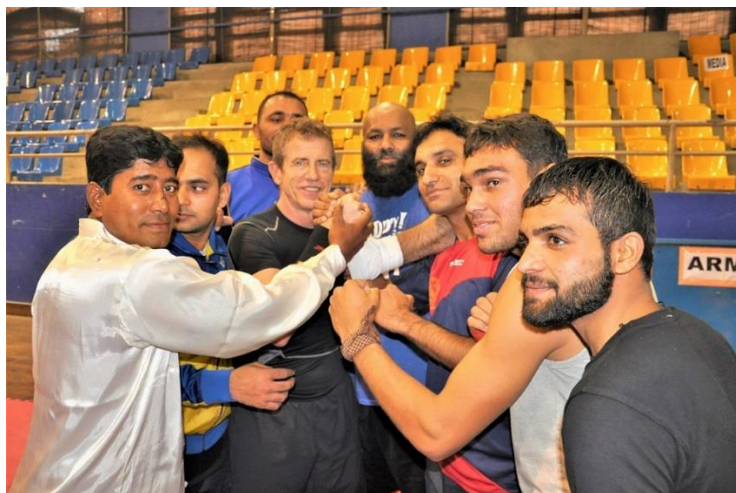


Then we drive over to another training center of his, the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) and there were around 30 - 50 men training most enthusiastically in both Sanshou in one area and Taolu in an adjacent area.



I walked around photographing them for a while then I was introduced to the coaches, including Malik Osman, IWF Qualified coach and Grade B Judge, as well as Chief Coach of the Pakistan National Wushu Team and the super WAPDA team that was training there.

Then I was introduced to Muhammad Saleen, Senior Coach of the Pakistan WAPDA team who teaches both Sanshou and Taolu. In addition, he's the first International Wushu Coach of Pakistan Wushu Federation, having received his certification in 1995 in Wuhan, China. He also mentioned that he was a co-founder of the Pakistan Wushu Federation along with the President, Grandmaster Malik. But the way, Teacher Malik doesn't call himself a Grandmaster, but it's obvious to me that's what he is, so that's what I'm calling him in this story.



Next, I was introduced to Ijaz Ahmed, 2010 Asian Games Silver Medalist and man, he is one powerful looking man with clean precise technique. Then I met Maratab Ali Shah, who won two Bronze Medals in the Asian games and three Gold Medals in the South Asian Games, another very powerful gentleman with excellent technique.



I then got all the players together in a (very large) circle and we went through the stretching routine I'd showed the other team earlier in the afternoon, as well as some kicks and kick combinations. Though being the Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour sole member, promoter, writer and photographer, which is really, really fun, I probably enjoy training even more.

During our interview Grandmaster Malik mentioned sometimes whole teams come to visit and can stay in their hostel. So, I suggest Wushu Kung Fu teams world-wide take up his offer and spend a week or two in beautiful Lahore, live, train, and share. Though on the outside some of the Sanda guys and ladies are rough and tough, underneath they all kind gentle people.

Somehow the afternoon had slipped by and it was time to bid farewells, but not before I told them: "It's great to be a traveler discovering new brothers and sisters of the worldwide Wushu Family. But the difficult part is saying 'goodbye,' so I never say goodbye. Instead I just say: 'See ya later,' to everyone."

Grandmaster Malik is on Facebook by the way ("Malik Iftikhar") so it's easy to hook up.

Trip to Mohenjo Daro archaeological site

After departing I headed to the bus station as it was almost time for my 5:30 pm, 16-hour bus ride to Sukkur where I thought I'd spend the next evening. Sukkur (yes, it does sound like sucker) by the way is close to Larkana, which is close to Mohenjo Daro, the site of a 5,000 year old mysterious Indus Valley civilization in which the central structure was "the Great Bath," which Gregory Possehl of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia believes may have served as a temple suggesting a religion based on cleanliness. Mohenjo Daro in turn was a stop on the way to my final destination of this Silk Road trip, Karachi.

The bus ride – which also transported me into 2017 as it was December 31st, was long but most entertaining. Sitting next to me was a handsome young man named Hisham, who is a second-year medical student and we talked for hours about medicine, life, love and other things.

He said he liked foreign money so I exchanged some for him and then gave him a bit more. Then he gave me some very nice prayer beads and Muslim cologne.

The gentleman sitting just across the aisle from me was Mr. Munsif a mechanical engineer who was on his way home to his wife. Fortunately for me he was getting off at the same stop as me, Sukkur. His help was instrumental in finding the fine hotel inter-Pak Inn.

Also, on the bus was an energetic very healthy older gentleman named Joel Andrews, age 76 as I recall who is absolutely and totally into health and fitness.

In fact, he was a member of Pakistan's track and field team back in the 1970s, former National Athletic Coach in Pakistan and compiled Pakistan's Track & Field Athletic Results Book. In addition to all that he runs a Christian ministry and is just a totally dynamic and enthusiastic guy all around!

He's also great at making friends, encouraging everyone around to be more health conscious. What a crew with whom to spend New Year's Eve! Real Silk Road - totally multi-cultural and educational travel.



Joel Andrews, age 76 and looking good!

On the other hand, the 16-hour mostly night drive was a bit difficult in some ways because of the heavy dense fog which made it almost impossible to drive and also there were a couple of near miss accidents that woke those who managed to sleep. Again - real Silk Road! The element of danger historically - was always there.

In the morning I finally got to see some of the countryside landscape in Pakistan for the first time. Basically, the land was hilly desert, but due to fine irrigation there were also some very verdant fields. We crossed several rivers, but practically everyone I'd met since coming to Pakistan reminded me that it hadn't rained in some four months. I could believe it as the air was quite dusty almost everywhere.

Arriving in Sukkur bus station my new friend Mr. Munsif helped me into one of the three wheeled motor vehicles which are ubiquitous in Asia it seems called *san-lun-chua* in China, "tuk tuk" in Thailand and rickshaw in Pakistan. The first hotel we went to didn't allow foreigners which is normal enough, but luckily the second one called the inter-Pak Inn did. It's a large older hotel but clean and the staff were quite friendly. It's the only hotel close to Mohenjo Daro archeological site where foreigners can stay as far as I know. Thanks so much to Mr. Munsif for his help. Again, Silk Road travel - sharing and caring.

Please note: In many or most Silk Road countries foreigners are not allowed to stay in just any hotel. There are "special hotels" where foreigners can stay. This is true in China also. Why? I don't think this is some "fascist conspiracy," (as some more cynical foreigners assert), instead I think it probably makes it much safer for foreigners. For example, local people in developing countries mostly think all foreigners are rich and Americans in particular can accidentally draw some negative attention given the complexities of the modern world. On one hand I can't count the number of times I've rolled into hotels in Asia thirsty, hungry, tired, sweaty and dusty only to be told: "No foreigners here, sorry!" On the other hand, the standards of the hotels where foreigners are allowed are higher both in terms of cleanliness and safety. Locals for example mostly have immunities to microbes in local water and can appear in food. So, when refused, just smile and find another hotel.

Mohenjo Daro

January 1, 2017, Sukkur Pakistan -I spent the evening typing notes from previous days and before going to sleep January 1st I got an in-house telephone call from the front desk asking if I planned to go to Mohenjo Daro the next morning.

Indeed, I was and the front desk gentleman named Korbana asked if I'd made transportation arrangements. Funny he should mention that as indeed I hadn't and traveling in quite rural areas in a foreign country where one doesn't speak the language, travel arrangements can be quite complicated indeed.

So, I was absolutely delighted he'd thought of it and called me. I went to the hotel lobby and had a most excellent conversation with the very kind and thoughtful gentleman there.

He was so kind as to hook me up with a driver that would take me first to get a bus ticket for a ride later in the day to Karachi, and then to the site of this ancient doorway to the Indus Civilization, followed by a ride back to the bus station and all for a mere 5,000 Pakistani Rupees, or about \$50. That's really quite pricy for me, especially for a few short rides, but 1) that's the way most foreigners travel here and 2) maybe I was getting lazy or something so I agreed.

Waking in the hotel in Sukkur town I packed and went to the hotel restaurant for my complimentary breakfast.

I had my travel and camera bags there with me in the restaurant and promptly at 9 the driver was there. I took some photos with new friends working at the hotel and was off on a new adventure.

First the bus stop and I was a bit disappointed to find out the busses were filled until 9:00 pm. That meant a 10-hour bus ride - again at night and arriving Karachi in the morning, pretty much unquestionably quite tired.

Not seeing any other options, I reluctantly bought the ticket for 1,500 Rupees or about a dollar and a half.

After that it only took about 30 minutes to get to Mohenjo Daro. The driver (sounds like Emmet, but he spells it 'Ahmett') had arranged for a most excellent guide named Ishab who had, like my guide in Taxila worked with archeologists some years earlier.

Ishab knew well the huge ancient metropolis of Mohenjo Daro and first we visited the museum, which held many artifacts from this ancient Indus Valley Civilization, also known as the Harappan Civilization which started around 3300 BC and was really booming by around 2,600 BC. Wow! That's my kind of place!

Dust of the Bones of Sinners and Saints

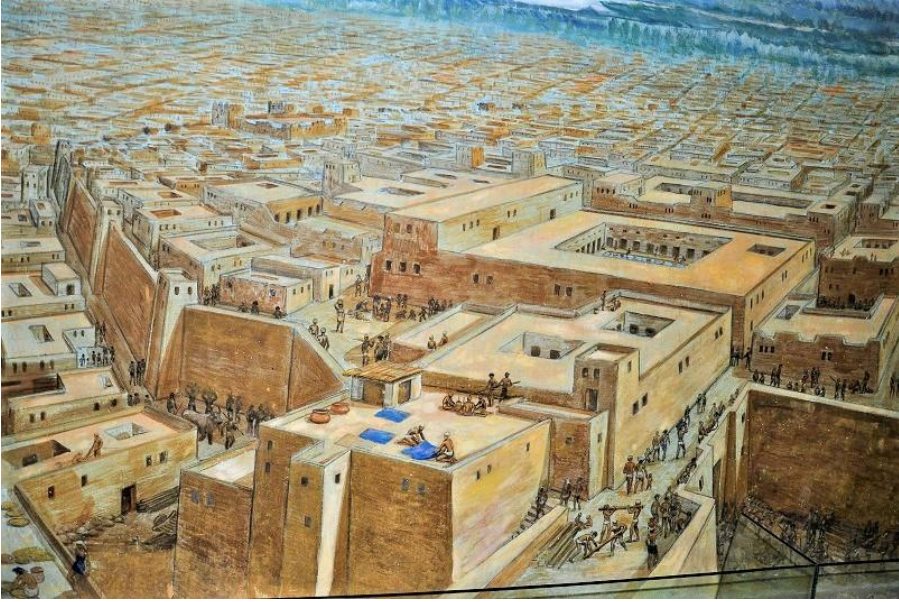
We started our tour of the site itself at the remains of a large Buddhist Stupa (pagoda in Japanese and "ta" or tower in Chinese). The Stupa dated from the 2nd Century AD and thus was flourishing long after the heyday of Mohenjo Daro, yet because it was occupying the high ground of Mohenjo Daro was obviously of great influence in its day. That Stupa was real Silk Road, whereas most of the Mohenjo Daro had been abandoned over a thousand years earlier long before the development of a transcontinental Silk Road.

Following a walk around this ancient holy place we visited the ancient College, Divinity Street, Street with a Drain, and then Ishab showed me the Great Bath which for some reason occupies the very center of the ancient metropolis of Mohenjo Daro.

It is an engineering masterpiece, built some 4,600 years ago. Researching this site, I found that some archeologists believe that they had a religion based on cleanliness, given that the Great Bath was located in the very center and heart of this huge ancient city. The sign said it was eight feet deep which looked about right and made me question if it was a bath at all, but rather instead a swimming pool.



He showed and explained the advanced water distribution system which was astonishingly well designed such that water was available throughout the entire huge city, including the baths, homes, kitchens, private and public toilets and so on.



Artist's conception of Mohenjo Daro during its heyday. There were remains of three- and four-story houses. This ancient city was an engineering masterpiece.

While there we met some other travelers and Ishab asked if any had a 20 Rupee bill. Indeed, one did and then he showed me that Mohenjo Daro is the picture on the front of the bill.



Walking along the dusty deserted streets of this ghost city Ishab showed me some human bones in the rough wall of a partially excavated part of the site.

The fine powdery gray-white dust from the bones of sinners and saints are mixed equally along the pathways of this and other ancient Silk Roads.

Before long he showed me the Yoga center where the ancients did physical training. I asked Ishab how the archeologists figured that out and he said artifacts for physical training and other clues were found there, but were moved to museums. Was this perhaps a city dedicated to health and fitness some four thousand five hundred years ago (?) I wondered. For that matter it could have been a military college. Who knows!

Then we walked along a long dusty pathway to another excavated site in the ancient city and I saw various wells and toilets. Indeed, the water system was remarkable with fresh water and covered sewers for all.



The streets got a little wider as we entered the HR area so named because it was excavated by Herald Hargreaves, back in 1924-25.

Further along the walkways he showed me large rooms where the skeletal remains of some 14 bodies were found, and another room with one skeleton. Though this sounds like the start of a great murder mystery or ancient war story, examination of the skeletons by Kenneth Kenney in 1994 showed that the marks on the skulls were caused by erosion, not violence.

However, the question remains, why were skeletons found in those rooms and why were they not buried?

Indeed, foul play, murder, war or even disease might indeed have been the reason for their presence there. There are many ways to die besides bangs on the head! So much of ancient history is simply unknown.



In one room of this neighborhood a very famous figurine was found called "Dancing Girl."



There was also a large cotton textile building, and kiln building found suggesting some kind of commercial center. And there was a jeweler's area.

Then after walking along further we came to the royal palace area where the rooms were bigger and the remaining walls higher.

I noticed some things that looked like brick towers or chimneys, but Ishab told me they were actually wells and some parts of the city were built with two stories such that at the time the wells were accessible from the upper levels.

In one well whose mouth was at the ground level, Ishab told me they'd found a large king cobra a couple of days earlier.

I contemplated that for a moment and decided this was possibly not the best place for camping.

I was also amazed when Ishab told me there were paintings and sculptures of unicorns there at Mohenjo Daro. How can such a "mythical" creature's existence keep popping up around the world given that no skeletal remains have ever been found?

Before long the tour ended and I was left with that "dizzed" feeling as we drove away, like a huge part of my own past was being left behind – departing perhaps a mostly better time in our collective archetypal memories.

As we drove away Ahmett offered to drive me to Karachi 450 kilometers away to the south for an additional 15,000 Rupees. This is a king's ransom in this part of the world, but the alternative was hanging out in the small town of Sukkur for the day. I didn't know exactly what else I would find there, didn't relish spending all night on a bus again and consequently feeling exhausted the next morning. So, I agreed and we drove for eight hours to Karachi.

I learned a lot from Ahmett during the drive. Mohenjo Daro is located in the Larkana District within the Sindh province, one of four provinces in Pakistan. I found out that each province has its own language and Karachi where I was going is the capital of the Sindh Province. Islamabad isn't in a province per se, but rather its own Capital Territory where they speak Urdu and Lahore where I'd been a couple of days previously is in the Punjab Province.

I must say the Sindh police were exceedingly nice giving us an escort most of the way to Karachi, putting on their siren to help clear sometimes slow traffic to help speed us along. They had an amazing relay system such that as one Toyota police truck left another would be found just ahead to escort us along. I felt like the president! In fact, 28 years previously, (1993) I'd visited Pakistan and the military had been a huge help to me when I'd gotten sick, giving me medical treatment in their hospital and refusing my money when I offered it upon departing. These guys are really selfless hardworking people dedicated to helping their guests and ensuring they are happy and well cared for. A thankful salute to them all!

Karachi – The old capital of Pakistan

Driving into Karachi that evening was a real thrill because it's the biggest, most modern, and populous city in Pakistan. I absolutely love the countryside and rural areas, but getting to a big city is quite exciting too.

Around 10:30 pm we got to my Karachi Hotel reserved by the tour company I needed to get the visa. It was quite nice and I relaxed after a long Day 10 of this journey, January 2nd, 2017.

National Museum of Pakistan

January 3rd (Day 11) Waking as usual these days around 5:30 am, I started typing notes from the day before and around 12 noon a new driver - this time from the tour company came to take me to the National Museum of Pakistan here in Karachi.

I'd also looked forward to this for a long time as I knew most of the artifacts from Mohenjo Daro would be here.



Buddha with mustache Karachi Museum

I toured this museum in about an hour photographing everything from several angles.



Hanuman holding bow warrior position, Karachi Museum



Goddess Lakshmi holding lotus bud Karachi Museum

Afterwards I was very fortunate to get a meeting with the director, Muhammad Shah Bukhari. I introduced myself and of course mentioned that I write for Kung Fu Magazine.

Before meeting him, I was told that Director Bukhari was a learned and wise man, a Hafiz in fact, that is someone who had memorized the Quran. When I met Director Bukhari with this jolly sparkling gray blue eyes, easy going manner and excellent American English I was a quite happy.

And not a moment later he was quoting “Uqman Ibn ‘Anga Ibn Sadun,” a Nubian slave extolled for his wisdom in the time of the Prophet Mohammad (and about whom an entire chapter or Sura in the Quran is written).

“When asked what raised Uqman to his highly respected status he answered: ‘Oh my son: let your speech be good and your face be smiling; you will be more loved by the people than those who give them provisions.’ And he said: ‘Kindness is the head of wisdom...’”



During the next hour or so we had a wonderful chat about 100 subjects and I learned among other things he used to train in Kyokushinkai Karate, along with one other gentleman in attendance. I also found out that'd visited my home town of Milwaukee, Madison and some other quite nice places in the U.S.

I learned that the oldest mosque around Karachi is about 60 kilometers to the east and was founded by the Companion Ali as evidenced by an inscription in the Kufic language.

I learned that the oldest port around is called Makran in Baluchistan Province which was visited by Alexander the Great, and from which some of Xerxes the Great's army that fought at the battle of Thermopylae came.

Earlier yet it was the home province of Cyrus the Great, founder of the Achaemenid Empire, and I found out ancient Babylonians used this port to sail to India.

The name Makran comes from the older word Makar which means sea dragon, so-called because of the whale sharks and humpback whales frequently seen in the Arabian Sea (where I'm going swimming tomorrow). Gwadar town/beach and port by the way is in the Makran region and the ancient port there is key terminus of the land Silk Road. Unfortunately building the huge deep-water port there has covered much of the ancient remains, if indeed there were any. The development of this joint Pakistani/Chinese port project presents a huge opportunity for economic development in Pakistan and few will disagree that economic development is seriously needed here.

I learned that there is a hadith (companion texts to the Koran) stating that parents should teach their children archery, swimming and horseback riding, which sounds perfectly good to me as I very much like all three. I asked for a specific reference and he said it was Hadith Bukhari, which I suspect he knows rather well as his name is Muhammad Shah Bukhari, after all.

Following this most stimulating conversation we took some photos and he walked with me for a while. After that I also had some time to chat with Anwar Hussain, the museum's Production Officer who told me that if I come and visit Pakistan again, he will have a gift for me. I can't wait, especially given that I found out he also makes replicas. Anwar also showed me a display area I'd somehow missed that had the coolest weapons of the Islamic Era in the museum. Wow! How did I miss it before?

After all this it was definitely lunch time and I went with my newest driver Mr. SanAulla to a real traditional restaurant with normal regular everyday Karachi people. That was most excellent and cheaper than some of the places I'd been brought to before. Hats off to SanAulla! (Actually, all the food in Pakistan was GREAT! But the prices did vary a lot.)

Shopping Malls, Swimming in the Arabian Sea, Gem Shops, Mosques, Port Grand and New Friends

After a bit of a tour of the city I needed to return to my hotel to finish typing some Mohenjo Daro notes while the memories were fresh, then had dinner and called it a day.

To make a long story short, for the next few days in Karachi I visited shopping malls, went swimming in the Arabian Sea, rode a camel, hung out at tea shops and restaurants, bought a couple of gems for a friend, visited several amazing mosques and on my last night went to Port Grand where I made several wonderfully kind new friends.



Dolman Mall



A wonderfully kind family spent a lovely hour chatting with me at the Grand Port my last evening in Pakistan.

Then, flew back home to Beijing. It was an awesome trip and I have to thank so many people there. Pakistanis are beyond a doubt some of the world's friendliest, most warm-hearted, inclusive, generous people I've ever had the honor and fortune to meet. My sincere thanks to one and all. A word to the wise: It's a good idea to hook up with the Wushu Federation before visiting. Why? Let's be honest, some parts of New York, Miami, LA, Philadelphia, Detroit and Chicago can be rather "rough" too sometimes. In any case, I had a fantastic time and reaffirmed my great love for this beautiful timeless land and especially their great Wushu people. I love Pakistan!



There is a goodness here that cannot be measured by money or science. Some things must be experienced to be believed.

Part 19 Through the Eye of the Camel

The Secrets of Ancient Kung Fu in China's Mogao Caves, Western Frontier Fortresses and the Gobi Desert

Chinese frontier cities of Jiayuguan (嘉峪关市), Jiuquan (酒泉市), Dunhuang (敦煌), Yang guan (陽關), Yumenguan (玉門關), and Hecang Fortress (河倉城)

April 29, 2017, Saturday – Day 7

The strong wind blows, peppering the silly serious people with countless granules of sand, blinding them, but not the camel as he has two eyelids, inner and outer, unfazed, and so undaunted, he marches onward. There am I, amongst endless sensually molded vistas of sand and sky, great mountains and little truths, munching some prickly desert weeds wherever found. Sun and heat are nothing; only going forward. Now, up into the dunes where nothing grows.

This journey is a bit unusual perhaps dominated in some mysterious way by the wisdom of the camel- that loving but cantankerous beast – the ocean liner of the desert – he who is wiser in the ways of nature than any man. This trip culminated in a week in the Gobi Desert oasis town of Dunhuang in China's northwest Gansu Province, one of the most ancient Silk Crossroads in Asia, home the largest collection of Buddhist art and literature in China, a diverse Muslim community, intermingled families great and small. Time has no meaning here beyond the sun, moon, trillions of brilliant bright stars and changing of the seasons. Minutes and centuries are indistinguishable.

I came here to discover for myself the ancient secrets of Wushu, and there it was directly from the camels own rather comical mouth, and highlighted in bold relief, the brilliant artwork in Mogao Caves 285, 196, 465, 249 and oh, so many other places.

Sunbeams illuminate, leading back to the primary source of energy on earth.

Just so while researching my upcoming travel in Gansu Province I found an article by Wang Kun from the School of Wushu at Shanghai University (in Chinese of course). In that article the author analyzed academic papers on ancient Dunhuang Wushu published from 1984 to 2016, specifically the relationship between Wushu and ancient Dunhuang social development, geographical environment and cultural traditions and characteristics and value of ancient Dunhuang Wushu. Simply put he reviewed articles that tried to reconstruct ancient Wushu from art, mostly paintings that survived the nearly two thousand years of Silk Road history in Dunhuang. What one will find in the Buddhist cave art frescos of Dunhuang include kicking and punching combined with acrobatic play, throwing, take-downs in both single and melee fighting and battles great and small. In the caves and in other museum artwork there I also found quite a lot of dance maneuvers that were indistinguishable from martial arts. Gansu and Xinjiang in particular were/are heavily influenced by Uighur culture which traditionally reveres martial arts, music and dance. Indeed, musical instruments sculptures of dancing and music players girls are ubiquitous in Dunhuang displayed everywhere from the caves to the museums as well as sculptures on streets and corners, bridges, restaurants, hotels, shops, and so on.



One might argue the best martial arts are forged in the hottest fires against the most diverse adversaries and those historically were at the Chinese frontier cities of Jiayuguan (嘉峪关市), Jiuquan (酒泉市), Dunhuang (敦煌), Yang guan (陽關), Yumenguan (玉門關), and Hecang Fortress (河仓城), just some of the places I visited on this trip. They were the individual and collective locations of many battles great and small, seen objectively through the doe like, almond shaped, dark brown eyes of my new familiars.

Day 2 April 23, 2017 – Yesterday under the silent ice capped eternal gaze of the Qilian Mountains my small plane from Gansu's provincial capital of Lanzhou touched down in Jiayuguan, the end of the Great Wall, the Western Silk Road gateway to China and last outpost of the “civilized word,” from a Chinese perspective for a thousand years.

Jiayuguan Castle

Today I visited the Jiayuguan Castle at the western end of the Great Wall which was once very much like “The Wall” in Game of Thrones. Nomads like the Xiongnu (3rd Century BC to 1st AD), Tanguts, Khitan, Jurchen, Bayarku, Uighurs, Mongols, Manjus, and so on beyond “the wall” were characterized as fearsome beasts – inhuman aberrations of nature, yet those who lived here at the end of the wall, the last gate, the frontier, knew better.

“On the north wall (of Jiayuguan Fortress) is the story of Zhang Qian being dispatched to the Western Region by Emperor Wu (who reigned 140-87 BC during the Han Dynasty). According to history, Zhang was sent with the intention of forming an alliance with Yue-Zhi (a tribe originally northwest of China, which moved to the west to escape Xiongnu) to fight against Xiongnu (the Huns). Although his mission failed, he travelled as far as Bactria (Afghanistan), and brought home very detailed information about Central Asia and even India.”

<http://public.dha.ac.cn/content.aspx?id=294471978405>

In fact, Zhang Qian fathered a child, a son specifically while held prisoner of the Xiongnu for seven years... but that's another story.

The nomads where people who liked and needed to trade, and as long as they were permitted to trade, they were joyful free-spirited horse and camel loving wanderers.

It was complicated back then, similar probably to today. For example, in the 8th Century the Turgis made an alliance with the Tibetans that would have cut China off from the west, so the Chinese made a deal with Arabs who had penetrated as far east as Kashgar and effectively broke that treacherous alliance.

Beyond Jiayuguan, what was once the absolute western terminus of China, lies the forbidding Gobi Desert which adjoins the Taklamakan Desert, also known as the most dangerous desert on earth and which in the local language means: "You go in and never return." These are the hottest, driest deserts in the world and the farthest from any sea or ocean. This is the wasteland into which the Western Gate of Jiayuguan empties. The Western Gate is also known as the "Gate of Sorrows," because through it walked disgraced officials, officers and others, magistrates and emperors preferred not to kill, but rather exile into the terrifying merciless desert and wild "barbarians" beyond. Or that's what most people believe.



Jiayuguan from the North Side of The Wall. An agreeable camel smiled for the photo.



This was the entrance and exit passage. For many who had been banished, it was the walk of shame, a walk into oblivion and death. For adventurers, traders and diplomats it was a passage of hope. For those who wanted the freer lifestyles of the horse tribes, it was a passage to liberty. For those returning from “the wilds” it was home sweet home.

Hope also passed through these gates in several forms, caravans for example traveled east and west through this momentous narrow doorway to and from China along the Silk Road. Pilgrims also such as the illustrious Xuanzang and all manner of other humanity passed through this archetypal doorway into the beyond.

No great truths can be kept truly secret and it is said there were also those in China who simply chose to leave preferring the more socially mobile and relaxed nomadic way of life outside the wall. Though there are two formidable deserts, there are also fertile valleys all along the periphery fed by sumptuous water from mountains and glaciers that still exist in the region, and dots of oasis – lush with fruit trees, grass and other life - like Dunhuang, Hami, Karash, Kucha, Aksu, Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan, etc.

Jiayuguan Castle rests strategically located in the 15 kilometer valley between the Wensha Mountain, a branch of the Qilian Mountain range, and the Black Mountains, a branch of the Mazong range, at one of the narrowest places in the 1000 kilometer long Hexi-Corridor – the bottleneck border region between western China and east Central Asia. It was from here during the reign of Emperor Hongwu (1328 – 1398) at the founding of the Ming Dynasty the great General Fengsheng was sent to destroy the last of the retreating Yuan Dynasty Mongolians.

Thus, one might well reason, Jiayuguan Castle was a martial arts paradise manned by soldiers who relentlessly trained for war.

It should be noted that like the Samurai, even an ordinary Chinese gentleman 2,500 years ago had to train in martial and academic arts. Confucius for example was educated at a school for commoners where he trained in the Six Arts: Rites, Music, Archery, Charioteering, Calligraphy and Mathematics.

Archery obviously has martial applications, though it was most commonly used for hunting. Chariots came to China a thousand years after it was invented in Central Asia by the Hittites (whose civilization peaked around 1600 BC) and by Confucius' time (500 BC) it was also a "sport" not unlike in Ben Hur, and parade spectacle like Julius Caesar (100 BC - 44 BC) celebrating a triumph.

In any case, Jiayuguan Castle has been fully restored and it can take several hours to explore all around. There's a noteworthy museum there too; and camels?

Oh yes, yes, yes, many camels just out the west gate, any one of which can trigger the great enlightenment in any motley illusion driven modernist, if he or she is worthy.

Don't believe it? Remember the words of Yoda: "Many of the truths we cling to depend on our point of view."

And, "Through the force you will see other places, the past, the future, old friends..."

In fact, one night in the desert I even got reacquainted with an ancient Sogdian trader friend from the Tang Dynasty named Suyoa, which also means archer. Was he one of Yoda's ancestors?

Only the camel knows.

For those with less esoteric leanings, one can simply take a short camel ride for a paltry sum, led by acolytes of the Kings of the Desert.

Silk Road Museum in Jiuquan

Day 3 April 24, Monday Went to the Silk Road Museum in Jiuquan about an hour's drive from Jiayuguan; experienced/absorbed and photographed their exquisite collection, then was very fortunate to interview the Director, Ms. Mei Qin Yin, mother of Ms. Mei Ping Wu, the amazing lady that gathered this collection mainly from overseas, returning China's national treasures to China. Everything there was striking, a talisman to the ancient world, but one in particular stood out for me, a small black statuette of a nomadic tribesman from the Jade Kings Tiger Iron Sword of the Xiongnu Empire (403 to 221 BC).



Though often characterized as “wild barbarians” the Xiongnu obviously had skilled craftsmen and a sophisticated social structure.

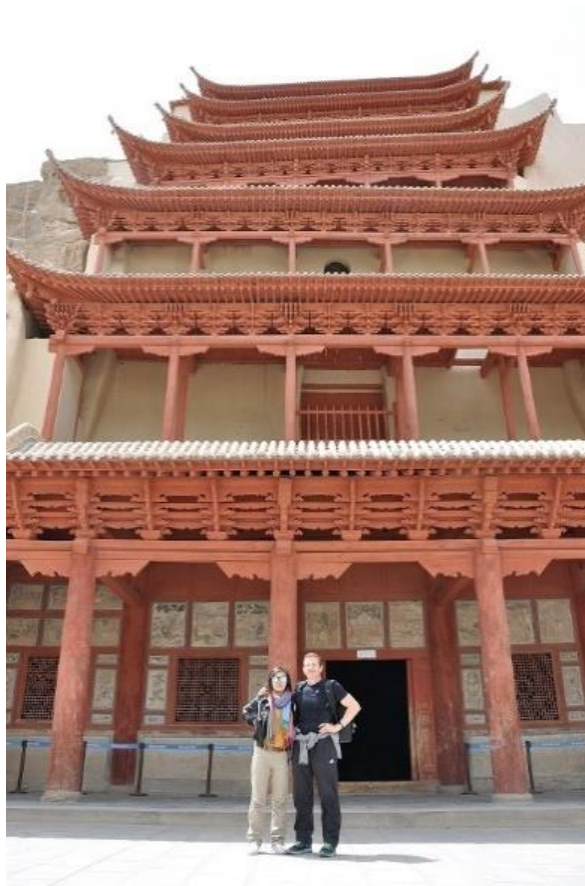
Then a short ride to Wei-Jin Period Tombs (A.D. 300-500) and descended into the underworld of one excavated tomb with clear and beautiful paintings of many aspects of life more than a millennium and a half ago, politics, economy, military, culture art and folk customs.



Painting on stone wall within Wei-Jin Tomb

Then, a dash to the bus station to go to Dunhuang at the Western end of the Hexi Corridor, the most vital hub of Eurasian cultural convergence and dissemination, the transcendent oasis town of myth and legend. This more than anywhere is where the Han (Chinese) and non-Han met and traded and sometimes fought.

Thousand Buddha Grottoes



Writer and companion in front of the “Great Buddha Cave.”

Dunhuang's Mogao Caves are homes of the largest collections of truly ancient Buddhist art and manuscripts nestled into 735 surviving caves along the mountain cliffs. The labor of love creating this monumental mostly Buddhist metropolis was begun in the year 366 by monk Le Zun who had a vision of a thousand Buddhas bathed in golden light. The caves and art evolved over the millennium –ever expanding, ever more powerful, every more beautiful.

Records of ancient Wushu are well preserved here. For example, Cave 196 has the painting of Raudraksa's battle with Buddha's disciple Sariputra and though it was more a battle of magic than brawn, therein one may find several figures in martial activities from wrestling poses to a well-structured large hammer strike.

In Cave 465, nicknamed the Huang Grotto there is a Tibetan Tantric image of a deity and his consort in what appears to be standing yogic coitus, each with drawn bow targeting opposite directions painted sometime between 1271-1368 CE. (A bit reminiscent of Mr. and Mrs. Smith actually.)

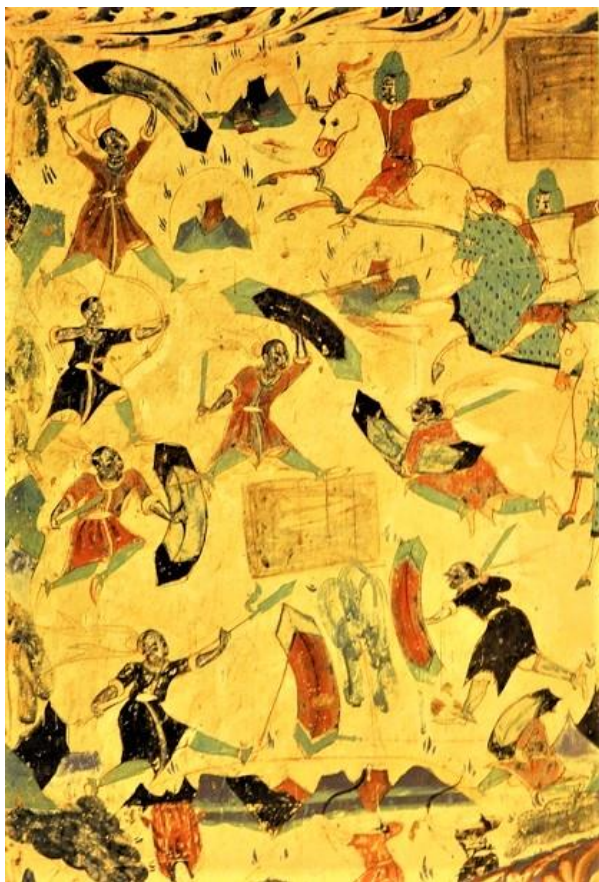
But in my opinion, the heart of any good story is in transformation, the sweet melody of loving kindness aided by philosophical religious signposts guiding one to forgiveness and redemption.

Virtue/ Ethics 道德

The greatest battles are not of the flesh but of the spirit and the story in one painting in Cave 285 exemplifies this transformation splendidly. It's titled "500 Bandits become Buddhas."

The story goes that 500-starving people in South India rebelled, and upon imperial orders an army was sent to subdue them. They were horribly beaten in battle and exiled to uninhabited mountains.

The Buddha heard their pitiful lamentations and gave them the opportunity to reform themselves - in the end they all attained enlightenment.



Cave 285

Though the cave art at Mogao Grottos in Dunhuang is usually characterized as “Buddhist,” in fact they are fantastic amalgams, syncretic expressions teaching enlightenment through many processes, including the martial way. Dunhuang was the major crossroad foci between Asia and Eurasia, east and west and naturally therein one may find the whole world and its philosophies fused in brilliant expression reflecting the ultimate plurality of culture, religion, and oh so many arts.

Transformation is alchemic path of Hindu’s four Purusarthas, which include Dharma (teachings), Artha (work and prosperity), Kama (passions and desires) and finally Moksha (liberation, freedom and salvation). Tao, Buddhism, Chan, and the great monotheistic religions likewise teach transformation as do all masters of Wushu Kung Fu. Guided by proper teachings, through the fires of great effort (Artha) we master our passions (Kama) and attain awakening, enlightenment, liberation and harmony (Moksha). Hindu, Zoroastrian, Buddhism, and many more faiths and religious are encoded in the paintings at Mogao Caves.

If I have learned anything traveling the Silk Roads these past years it’s how well the followers of the great philosophies and religions got along in history. Certainly, this is displayed in living mosaics of color here at Mogao, but I also saw this vast harmony of spirit so very clearly at the ancient ruins of Taxila in Pakistan this past spring with scores of temples of different philosophies and religions all residing next to each other for a thousand years – in peace.

Probably my favorite martial art painting is Mogao Cave 249 (Western Wei 534-556AD) with tumblers and fighters who appear to be running at each other – a formidable dauntless attack style. There is an orange, red and blue mandala in the center of the ceiling painting which makes it easy to recognize, and they're surrounded by flying asparas, female spirits of the clouds and water in Hindu and Buddhist mythologies. In this cave one finds Buddhist images alongside immortals and gods from Hindu and Chinese mythologies.



Mogao Cave 249

The wrestling scene from Buddha's life stories in Mogao Cave 290 painted in the Northern Zhou Dynasty is very clear and beautiful.



Mogao Cave 290

Wrestling scene from Buddhas life story Zhou Dynasty

Unfortunately, in the early 1900s five foreigners came to Dunhuang and made off with truckloads of the most magnificent of the hundreds of thousands of manuscripts stored in a previously hidden cave chamber. They are now scattered around museums in Europe, U.S, Japan and South Korea. (This story is told in the book: *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road* by Peter Hopkirk.)

Nonetheless, the thousands of cave wall paintings and large, sometimes giant Buddhas which mostly remain are transcendentally inspiring to a higher level of existence, not only undiminished but in fact enhanced by the thousand plus years since their creation.

Though one could spend an entire lifetime studying the Mogao cave grottos and even just the martial arts and warriors within, there is much else I need to do here in Gansu Province – yet a part of “me” remains in every place I’ve ever been, and a part of the spirit of a place comes with me when I leave. Fortunately, it is not a stolen thing, but a shared presence freely given and taken.

Mingshashan



After the splendid eternity at Mogao Grottos the phenomenal sand dunes of Mingshashan (Whistling Sand Dune Mountains) rose to greet. Located in Yueyaquan National Park, Mingshashan is about 105 km. in circumference and as high as 1,715 meters. There my friend and I rode camels (again) for a few hours up near the top of some mountainous dunes; then we climbed to the very top to view the spectacular sunset. In the cool evening we walked to and around Half Moon Lake – a magical geologic anomaly in that the lake has been there for at least 1,600 years but has never been engulfed by the mountains of sand starting only a few hundred meters away. Whole towns have disappeared beneath the shifting mountains of sand, yet Half-Moon Lake shines back the starlight towards the heavens every night – untouched by time.



Half Moon Lake at twilight

It's really astonishing that this small lake can survive so close to the billions of tons of sand on Mingshashan and never get buried! It's really amazing.

An old friend from Hong Kong back in the early '80s told me that the Yin Yang symbol is really about change and harmony of opposites.

Here on the side of the ancient Crescent Moon Lake at the edge of the sand mountains desert at sunset, the cool evening air swept in. The self-evaporates like morning dew when immersed in such timeless change.

Stay tuned for Silk Road Friendship Tour Part 19 - Through the Eye of the Camel - The Secrets of Ancient Kung Fu in China's Mogao Caves, Western Frontier Fortresses and the Gobi Desert - The Sequel - in the blink of the noble camel's eye.

Part 20 Through the Eye of the Camel



Western Frontier Fortresses and Gobi Desert

Day 5 April 26 – Wednesday – Dunhuang Museum & Mosque

Recurring themes present themselves everywhere in the ancient city of Dunhuang, Gansu Province in Northwest China: music, dance, martial arts and Buddhism, yet there is more, adventure, mystery, harmony at the end of conflict and - time – infinite it seems.

Traveling in Central Asia is time traveling for this part of the world was for all practical purposes largely cut off from modern trade and economic development in the 1500s due to the rise of the “littoral states” that is – seacoast nations with ports.

Yet, there are natural resources here, abundant underground oceans of oil, gold and other rare and precious metals, gems of all kinds and new life is blossoming – great and beautiful new cities are rising from the dust and detritus of history.

Still, the past lives here as nowhere else – for they have more of it than anywhere. In the blink of the camel’s eye, a thousand years pass.

This day started with a tour of Dunhuang Museum and absorption into a great collection of vintage photos from the late 1800s and 1900s – quite illuminating to see how things have changed there since the invention of photography.



Ladies Kung Fu Training in 1984 Photo in Dunhuang Museum



Real Silk Road Caravan in 1907

Then winding our way through the museum collection, I found great artifacts, the things of ordinary life spanning the millennia, tools, kitchen and dining ware, and of course gorgeous weaponry and armor. There are both replicas and some original Dunhuang manuscripts in the collection too, for example some of the earliest translations of many Buddhist sutras into Chinese.



Moving on after the Museum, always forward like the implacable camel, I came to Dunhuang's Shi Qingzhensi - Dunhuang's local, ancient Mosque. Well it was ancient.

According to Professor Ji Xianlin, a distinguished scholar on Dunhuang Studies, "there are only four, rather than five influential cultural systems in the world: Chinese, Indian, Greek and Islam, and they all met in Dunhuang."

Finding this mosque was easier than finding the Jiayuguan Mosque last week maybe because I'd learned the word *Qingzhensi* or "Temple of Purity and Truth," which I found out is used to refer to both Jewish and Muslim places of worship in China. In Beijing I'd learned the word "*li bai*" for mosque, but *Qingzhensi* is better I found out at least in Dunhuang.

Upon arrival I was a bit disappointed because it was a construction site and despite the signs in front with large beautiful pictures of how the masjid will look upon completion, there was no sign of a mosque inside yet. After a slightly confused moment a rather beautiful female construction worker came out from the construction site effortlessly carrying an amazingly heavy bundle of wood and stone waste in a large basket. Then I recalled, a mosque isn't just a building, it's the people that make the mosque. Later I learned the mosque was still there as it has been for 1,300 years; the faithful simply pray in the (modern) cafeteria until completion of the new Prayer Hall.

Recovering from that chance epiphany we walked in and talked with a construction manager who referred us to the on-site member of the Muslim community overseeing the construction. After introductions he called Mr. Ma Ruqi Jusef the mosque manager, imam (Islamic version of a minister), and teacher who arrived about 10 minutes later.



Writer with two Mr. Mas at Dunhuang Masjid

After a second round of introductions we went into one of the offices on the side and chatted about the construction and history of the ancient Dunhuang mosque.

Though everyone associates Dunhuang with Buddhism because of the fabulous Buddhist collections in the World Heritage Mogao Caves, Islam has been in China for 1,300 years, almost as long as Buddhism, and Dunhuang a major Silk Road crossroads from the beginning – and almost all the Silk Road countries have been or are Muslim – to some extent. Officially there are only around 30 million Muslims in China compared to some 240 million Buddhists, nonetheless people of different faiths and no faith live together harmoniously. Muslim restaurants are hugely popular in every Chinese city I've visited.

This Dunhuang Qingzhensi (Mosque) location has been used as a Silk Road center since time immemorial serving the needs of travelers and the local Muslim community.

Not long after, Ma Xuexing, the Executive Director of the mosque arrived and the interview continued with Jusef continuing to answer most of my questions. When I mentioned that “Ma” was such a famous name in Chinese Muslim martial arts, Mr. Ma and Mr. Ma started humorously debating whether Hebei or Ningxia was more famous for martial arts. A few years ago, I visited Cangzhou in Hebei which is world renowned for martial arts (principally Baji Chuan) and gymnastics, whereas Ningxia is the home and capital of the Hue Muslims, famous for being the most valiant of fighters during the rebellion against the tyrannical rule at the end of the last imperial Qing Dynasty. Anyways, those gentlemen were very funny to listen to.

We talked for a couple of hours and among other things I found out by this September the main prayer hall should be finished just in time for the Dunhuang Silk Road Exposition that will start that same month. “People from all over the world will come and we are working very hard to have a beautiful Prayer Hall by then,” said Imam Ma.

I asked Imam Ma about the ratio of Uighur to Hui in the neighborhood and he said their populations were about 10% to 90% respectively at this time. Uighur and Hui Muslim groups are quite different in some ways, in that Uighur retain their own traditional language base and lands, whereas the Hui are much more integrated into Chinese society and spread all round the country.

It was about time for Asr, or mid-afternoon prayer, so like the stalwart camel, it was “onwards!”

Day 6, April 27 Thursday

This day started at Dunhuang “Ancient” Town of Gu Cheng. Originally based on a Song Dynasty painting of an ancient city, Gu Cheng is actually a movie set built in 1987 for a historical feature film co-sponsored by Chinese and Japanese film makers, simply called: “Dunhuang.” Nonetheless, this is one of the coolest Silk Road sites to visit because it’s not empty like most (real) ancient sites. A lot of huge excellent movies were filmed here and consequently very real props can be found including a fantastic costume rental place where for a very modest price one can rent all manner of ancient clothes and take photos in the very real looking ancient city.

The magic of movies, suspended reality is here in force. This is one of the best places to visit in China, not only for the highly detailed exterior and interior reconstructions, but also for movie nostalgia.



So many famous movies were made here it's a paradise for film buffs and time travelers like yours truly.



Xuan Zang's Route Home

On his way to India in search of sacred texts Xuanzang took the southern route around the Gobi/Taklamakan Deserts. On his return trip from India to Xian, Xuanzang took the northern route, walking through some very strange territories many of which I revisited on this trip.

In the Dunhuang area this would start at the most northwest Silk Road sites I visited during this week, the Yadan Landforms, then due east to Hecang Fortress, and continuing southeast he would come to Yumenguan Pass.

After that possibly Yangguan, West Thousand Buddha Caves, then after crossing the Dang River he might have visited White Horse Pagoda (Baimata), skirted Mingshashan (Whistling Sand Desert Mountains) but stopped at Crescent Lake on the side, then gone on to Mogao Grottos. This would be the natural Silk Road route home.

Western 1000 Buddha Caves

Stepping back to the 21st Century we hopped in the car provided by the caravanserai-looking-hotel and paid our respects at more ancient Buddhist Grottoes, the Western 1000 Buddha Caves then walked a few hundred meters downhill through some tall trees in the oasis there to the shore of the Dang River where I took a little dip in the rapidly flowing icy clean water. It is water that makes an oasis like Dunhuang, and the magnificent cultures past, present and future possible there in the otherwise burning and freezing Gobi Desert.

In my Silk Road travels I've seen the remains of several civilizations that dried up and died for lack of water. Yet, the Dang River still flows, nourishing Dunhuang, and still lends life to the perky tall old trees and grasses in front of the Western 1000 Buddha caves. Here too no doubt stopped Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang on his way back from India in the year 645.

Though not ransacked like Mogao caves by foreign adventurers, ironically water damage has resulted in some of the Buddhas showing a bit of wear and tear over the past thousand plus years. Fortunately, the caves, Buddha's and other artworks are beautifully protected now.

Yangguan Pass and Museum



Part of the old wall of Yangguan

In Chinese the south of a hill or mountain, and north of a river is called Yang, and this mountain pass is south of Longtou Mountain and lies 70 Km. southwest of Dunhuang. Though the town is gone, disintegrated into the dust of history, the walls of an ancient military granary still reside there baking in the desert, scant testimony to its part in the thriving Jin Dynasty (1115 to 1234) Silk Road pass it was.

A touching poem for departing friend at Yangguan Pass

Seeing Yuan'er off on a Mission to Anxi

The morning rain of Weicheng dampens the
light dust,

The guest house is green with the color of fresh
willows

Let's finish another cup of wine, my dear sir,

Out west past the Yangguan, old friends
there'll be none.

Yangguan Pass was subsequently abandoned in the Tang Dynasty – as the western border moved outwards.



Reconstruction of Yangguan. It's actually pretty cool. One can for example get a replica passport for international travel in ancient China made up by a real ancient scholar. There's a small bookshop and tea shop also. All in all, a refreshing break from the desert.

Night in Whistling Sand Desert

Around five pm it was time to meet with new friends Charlie and Mr. Li for a night in Ming Shashan Whistling Sand Desert Mountains. Charlie wasn't around but Mr. Li proved a fantastic guide to life on a camel in the real desert.

The camel ride, sunset on the crest of a large dune, dinner cooked over a fire at night, endless brilliant stars, crescent moon, quiescent camels (normally), good company, humorous and philosophical discussion all made for a great night.



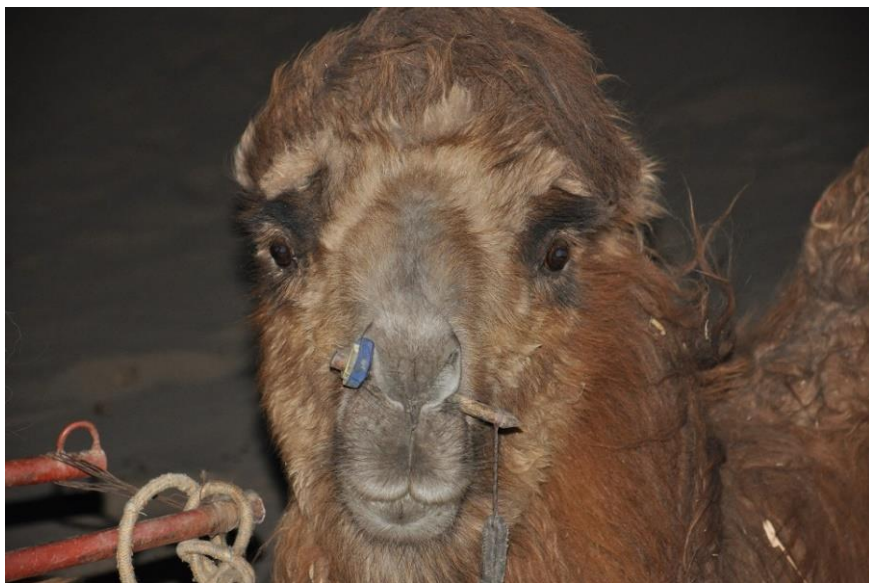
Mr. Li – camel master - in his hostel next to Ming Shashan. He's quite well known, well liked and one of very few guides that speaks English



Yes, it was only 10 million degrees... not really. The dry heat of the desert there was not as hot as Turpan, or the sticky wet heat of Fujian and/or Qatar.

Mr. Li told stories about people who were injured and sick and their noble camels always brought them home however far the distance. Typically, camel caravans have at most 18 camels in a single file, led by a puller that walks. Camels are survivors like no other creature. Their bodies preserve water so well their dung doesn't have to be dried to use for fire. Mr. Li made a long fire from camel dung in a shallow ditch we dug, then when it had burned down a bit put a couple of inches of sand over it and we slept on top. Warm and comfy! Naturally I was up before dawn for my required 1000 kicks and punches and found balancing on the peak of a sand dune peak at daybreak just a wee bit more difficult than one might think. The camels however were not impressed as they have seen it all before. One yawned, another laughed.

It's an old Saudi proverb that "if a camel gets his nose in the tent, the body will soon follow." Why? Camels are usually curious animals. An ancient Muslim proverb says: "Trust in Allah, but tie your camel." Why? Ask the camel.



Swift, strong and enduring of hardships, loyal to his master, a fast learner but independent thinker, frugal and generous, king of the hottest, driest, harshest places on earth, we all have something to learn from the wisdom of the camel. Look into the eyes of the camel under the light of the moon, and you may see yourself looking back in a fresh or ancient way.

Dunhuang Yadan National Park

Yadan Landforms - After Xuan Zang's phenomenal 16-year journey to India and back, the Dunhuang Yadan National Park - very strangely shaped huge colored rocks in an otherwise flat black desert must have seemed surreal, perhaps even hallucinatory - life on a strange planet.



There are dozens of iconic landforms, but tourists are expected to rent jeeps with drivers. For the "thrifty minded" (like me) you can share a ride with other travelers and bargain ferociously ultimately getting a reasonable price for the tour.

Continuing his walk east along the Silk Road Xuan Zang had to notice the black mountains and black gravelly desert on the left, contrasted by the more normal tan sand colored landscape on the right, punctuated here and there with huge red rocks on the way to his next stop. It seemed like a dream.



Black hot mountains on the left, a sharp contrast to the tan desert

Hecang Castle

Hecang Castle was built during the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD) and thus was quite ancient even in Xuan Zang's time, a natural stop on the way to Yumenguan. I loved this place anyways because it was not rebuilt so the spirits there were not confused with modern ideas. There were no books or pamphlets or anything about the place in the small nearby shop which did have a few tourist books about Dunhuang and Yumenguan. This if anything enhanced the mystery and romance of the ancient frontier Hecang Castle. A good place for a spot of tea also.



I love the quiet and untouched reality of Hecang Castle – no tourist stuff anywhere. Sections of walls and buildings are scattered all around. A book about the place might have been nice though. Hecang City in its day was an important military warehouse for grain reserve in the border defense of the Great Wall. There's a river nearby and some grasslands. Quite a lovely place really.

Yumenguan Pass – Jade Gate

This is it – the legendary Jade Gate, once thought to be the “end of the world,” the outer limits of “civilization.”



Ninety kilometers northwest of Dunhuang this huge square shaped stone tower/gate remains undaunted by time, though the walls are gone. They're recently installed yellow wooden stairs and fence to protect the property. It looks bit odd like putting a bright yellow tutu on a grizzled noble tiger. Nonetheless, this was an essential entry/exit point from China for much of history. Xuanzang had to pass through Loulan and then here – the Jade Gate in the early Tang Dynasty (mid-Seventh Century) on the way back from India. It's built a little strangely because the gates on this ancient monument are not North/South or West/East, but rather he would have as I did, entered from the western gate and exited the northern which was within the high thick walls protecting China from the wilderness beyond. A majestic doorway in time, this monument has eternity encoded in every grain of sand – well that's what the camel told me.

White Horse Temple

April 29, 2017 (Day eight of this trip) White Horse Temple or more accurately Puguang Temple no longer exists as it was washed away in a flood according to the lady that sold the tickets, except for the most ancient Stupa which holds the key and lasting memory of the White Dragon of the Western Sea. This stupa was built in memory of the white horse of the monk Kumarajiva – an Indian born in the Qiuzi Kingdom, present day Kucha in Xinjiang. He brought sacred texts to China, but when he got to this spot in present day Dunhuang - something happened. I copied the following from the wall around the Stupa:



“Kumarajiva had a dream, and in that dream the white horse he’d ridden (across deserts and mountains, through rivers and ice storms) spoke to him: ‘Master, I must confess that I am really the White Dragon of the Western Sea. Since the road to Yangguan is so hazardous and the sea of sand around it boundless I had to come to carry you to fulfill your task of preaching the scriptures. Ahead of you there are no more treacherous roads. I shall go no further. Let us say farewell.’

With these words the white horse arose to depart. But Kumarajiva could not bear to part with the horse. He caught it by the tail and begged: ‘Do you want to forsake the great cause of promulgating the Buddhist scriptures by abandoning me half way?’

The white horse turned its head and tried to explain to him. 'I have fulfilled my task. Ahead of you, not far from here you will find Crescent Moon Spring where the heavenly steeds gather. There you will find another white horse waiting for you. It will accompany you to the east.'

After this a white flame shot out of the stable into the west. Just then the monk woke up.

Another monk came and said to him the white horse is dead. Kumarajiva was very sad. He erected a sacrificial alter for the white horse and performed Buddhist rites at it for nine days. In the courtyard of Puguang Temple he built the White Horse Pagoda."

The Diamond Sutra was one of the scriptures Kumarajiva brought with him to China in the year 402, and it was first translated by him a couple of hundred years before Xuanzang was born. It endured as the most commonly read translation for many centuries after.

Walking around outside of the temple grounds I noticed parts of the ancient monastery walls mostly buried under wildlife. A few hundred meters further uphill I saw more than a dozen gleaming bulldozers all parked in neat rows. But, they too looked peaceful, pointed in the opposite direction of the old monastery.

From there I walked across the Dang River, noting the designs on the stone bridge, alternating stupas and Islamic domes, presenting an accurate harmony of different cultures along this ancient Silk Road location. Looking to the southwest along the river from the bridge I saw the natural beauty of old Dunhuang and to the northeast I saw high-rises and the new Dunhuang.

Sha Zhou Market (Dunhuang)

One of the hardest parts of traveling is finding where local people eat and shop for fruits and vegetables, as well as traditional folk arts. My last stop on this journey was at Sha Zhou Market which is part of the old, real city of Dunhuang.

After this it was a train back to Jiayuguan, and then the next day a plane back to Beijing.

Day 9 – April 30, 2017 Sunday

1:00 pm flight back to Beijing

Day 14 – May 5, 2017 Friday

The Gobi came to visit me! BBC reported: “Dust storm chokes Beijing and Northern China.” Reading on I found the Gobi Desert came to visit Beijing. The camel in me rejoiced.

Desert poems by Rumi

There is a desert
I long to be walking,
A wide emptiness,
Peace beyond any understanding of it.
By Rumi

Be empty of worrying.
Think of who created thought!
Why do you stay in prison
When the door is so wide open?
By Rumi

NOTES

More poetry by Rumi

<http://www.khamush.com/poems.html#Make%20yourself>

Part 21 Noble Martial Art Legacy of Qatar



Wushu in the Harmonious Land of Qatar

This visit to Qatar is my first to one of the Maritime Silk Road countries and also the first time I stayed for any length of time in the Middle East. True, three weeks isn't long, but hopefully enough to get a feel for the culture, some introduction to the local martial arts and state of Wushu training in this lovely ancient land where mysteries only unfold in their own good time. In my opinion to travel and not learn about the indigenous martial arts is – to put it bluntly – downright rude and so I explored many aspects of martial arts here including history, ancient swords and honor codes, falconry and even fashion, as Gulf region traditional clothing is related to survival here in one of the hottest places on earth.

It wasn't easy to find the Kung Fu people in Qatar perhaps because July and August are the hottest months with average daily temperatures of 110 degrees Fahrenheit, and many of those with the capacity to fly or sail to cooler climes do so.

Fortunately, while I was here, I had the honor to meet and interview Tai Chi teacher Linda Aarts who's been living in Qatar for about six and a half years... but first some background on Qatar, its history and martial traditions.

Qatar is a small peninsular country on the east coast of Arabia, with the Arabian Gulf to the east and Gulf of Bahrain to the west. The total population of Qatar is around two million of which only about 270,000 are actually Qataris with the rest being foreign workers, teachers, experts of one kind or another, technicians, and so on brought here to build and support a very futuristic nation. So this country is kind of like a miniature United Nations and as far as I could tell everyone gets along marvelously. But to even begin to understand any land or culture one must look its history, shrouded as parts may be in the mists of time, yet brilliantly preserved in myths, legends and arcane texts which I always seek out.

Background

In the 5th century BC, the Greek historian Herodotus referred to the seafaring Canaanites as the original inhabitants of Qatar. The geographer Ptolemy showed on his map of the Arab world 'Gatara' which is believed to refer to the ancient now abandoned Qatari town of Zubarah up on the northwest coast. Once upon a time though it was one of the most important trading ports in the gulf region.

There are at least 100 tribes or large extended families within Arabic culture each with its own distinct history and sub-cultures. The Al-Thani tribe is the most powerful here in Qatar being the tribe of the Emir, followed by the Al-Emadi, Al- Mana, and Al-Kaabi families and so on. Some 13 tribes have the lion's share of the ministerial positions in Qatar according to the Council of Ministers. Qatar was once controlled by the sheikhs (tribal leaders) of Bahrain, but in 1867 war broke out between the tribes in Qatar and those in Bahrain.



Consequently, the British appointed Muhammad ibn Thani al-Thani, head of the leading Qatari family as this nation's ruler. In 1916, the emir agreed to allow Qatar to become a British protectorate.

Like his father, the current Emir of Qatar Sheik Tamin bin Hamad Al Thani is an avid sportsman, promoter of the arts and humanitarian causes. In 2005 he founded the Oryx Qatar Sports investment company. In 2006 he chaired the organizing committee of the 15th Asian Games in Doha - this was the first time all country members attended. That same year readers of the Egyptian newspaper Al Ahran voted Emir Tamin "best sport personality in the Arab world."

Qatar has hosted many international sports events like the 2014 FINA, International Swimming Federation's World Championships and is already preparing to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, probably the single most popular sports event in the world. Emir Tamin is also a member of the International Olympic Committee. In other words, he's not your average national leader. He's a sports guy who as a lad was sent to school in England, and graduated from the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst.

When I first came here to Qatar like most people I thought of this country as a desert land with not much growing except desert brush and maybe some palm trees along the coast, and the animal life limited to camels, snakes, and scorpions, etc. But, having been here a while now I can confidently report most of my preconceived notions were wrong for hidden beneath the deserts dry and sandy appearance lays a rich and delicate beauty, full of life, color and variety. Hundreds of species of plants and animals fill the wide plains and warm surrounding seas, many of which are endangered species. In the spring I was told the desert blooms with grasses and flowers and through the summer in the oasis fruits of countless varieties ripen as I saw and tasted.



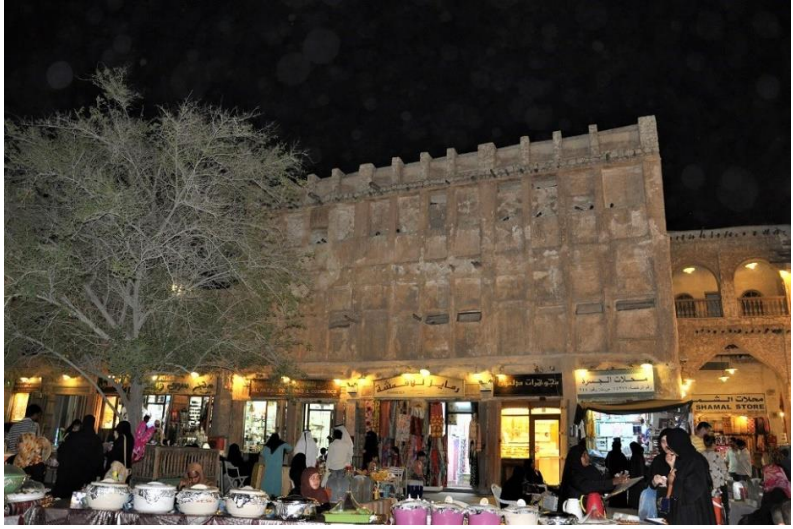
After the desert an oasis is heaven

Myths and legends about unicorns have ancient roots and are spread around the world, for example in the ancient city of Taxila in Pakistan this past winter I found stone images of unicorns. Some believe the origin of those myths may be found here in Qatar's desert oasis with the Oryx, a deer like animal with long straight horns. Were an Oryx to lose one horn, and/or just be seen from the side, it could indeed resemble the magical unicorn. The national flower of Qatar is the "Qataf" also known as Limonium, but one will see all kinds of flowers in the oasis with the "frangipani" flower – also widely found in South Asia – smiling happily at the skies filling the air with sweet fragrant smells – yep even in July.

July is hot though, rather like a steamy blast furnace except in the deliciously moist and lush oases. Fortunately, though a small country, Qatar is also the richest country in the world as measured by GDP and they have wonderful air conditioning everywhere. Hospitals, education, electricity, and water are all free at least for the Qataris.

Souk Wakif

My first day here I went to the old traditional maze-like market Souk Wakif, an ancient place full of shops and restaurants and a colorful mix of people from all over. There are Qatari people, distinctive because most Qataris wear long white traditional Arab Gulf clothing, as do some of the immigrants, hailing primarily from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Philippines, Uganda, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and a few other places, about half of whom wear their own traditional clothing so sometimes it's pretty easy to guess where people are from. This ancient market quickly became my favorite hangout in Doha.



Soon after arriving in Doha I was wandering the winding old stone roads in Souk Wakif and happened upon a sword shop. I went in and introduced myself to two gentlemen Shamsan Algebahy from Yemen, and Salah from Syria who own this place. I also found out their factory was nearby and arranged to meet to visit the factory. The steel I learned comes either from India, Syria, or Germany, and in the factory, I visited they manufacture and attach hilts and make exquisite scabbards. Later on, Shamsan and Saleh taught me more about Qatari swords and culture in various forms.



Al Furusiyya and Museum of Islamic Arts and Al Furusiyya

Soon after my arrival in Doha I went to the Museum of Islamic Arts in Doha, an ultra-modern architectural masterpiece located on a man-made island in the Persian Gulf.



I toured and took several hundred photos of their fabulous collection, and then found my way to the rare book room which I'd read about on the Internet.



There I was so very fortunate to meet the Library Coordinator Soumeiya, who helped me find an ancient book I'd been looking for called Kitab al-Furusiyya. Though they didn't have it in their collection she found a pdf with some English translations of the Contents at least in the Qatar National Library online system, thus I was able to download a copy of this magnificent book.

For those not familiar with it, al-Furusiyya is a Mamluk - warrior slaves of primarily Egypt who ultimately became the leaders the Muslim Empire) manual on martial arts written in 1348 by Muhammad ibn Is ibn Isma'il ibn al Aqsara in Damascus, recorded by the scribe Ahmad ibn Umar ibn Ahmad al-Misri, which covers horsemanship, archery, use of the lance, swordsmanship, mace, the arts of soldiers and cavalrymen, conscription, assembling of troops, arrangements of battle lines, military strategy, and divisions of spoils, along with 18 colored paintings and 25 diagrams.



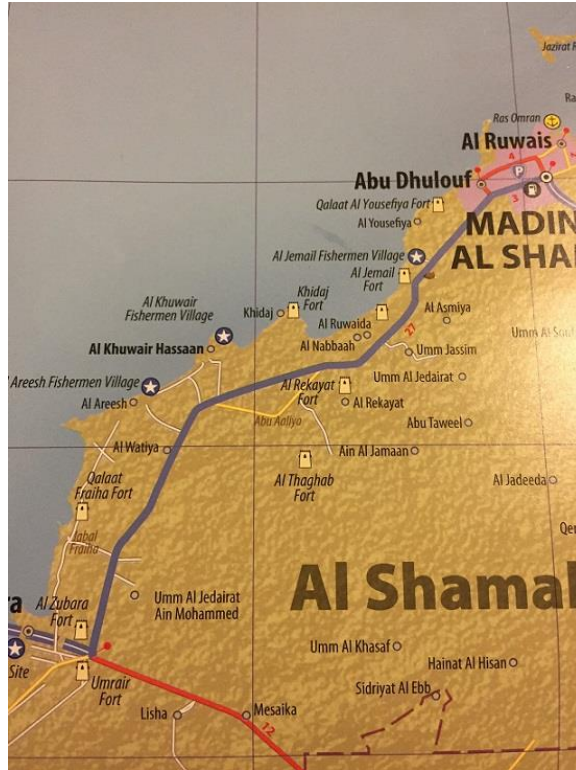
That very same evening I was reading a book titled: *The Great Caliphs, The Golden Age of the Abbasid Empire*, specifically about al-Nasir (1180-1225) and found:

“Having achieved some freedom of political action he (Al-Nasir) set about restoring the authority of the caliphate by developing an integrative version of Islam which brought together Sunnism and Shi’ism under the umbrella of Sufism (Islamic mysticism). He gave his religious program an institutional framework in the form of Futuwwa, a term literally meaning ‘young men’ but used in this era for groups of men bound by a common moral or honor code and loyal to a particular master or leader... Al-Nasir reformed the organization, took over its leadership himself and made it into an empire-wide hierarchy, a military order in the service of the caliph.”

Personally, I believe all great martial arts have an honor code, for without such I don’t consider it “great.” Some translate Futuwwa as chivalry, a Sufi term also meaning virtue. In Medieval Muslim culture this included honesty, peacefulness, gentleness and generosity. I also recently read a book by John Man titled: “Saladin, the Life, the Legend and the Islamic Empire.” Remarkable as it may seem to some readers, even western writers and historians hold Saladin to be a paragon – not perfect but generally pretty darned good – model of chivalry. For example, when King Richard lost his horse in battle, Saladin sent him two. When Richard was sick, Saladin sent him medicine.

Ancient Forts of Qatar

Continuing this martial steam of research July 19th, I took a sun-drenched tour of the remnants of ancient forts up on the northwest coast of Qatar.



My internet research and map of the country both showed that most of the ancient forts are along the northwest coast so I started at Al Ruwais at the very northern tip of the country and took a taxi in search of my first objective just south of the adjacent town Abu Dhulouf heading south towards Qalaar, Al Yousefiya Fort.

Finding it wasn't so easy and I was very fortunate to meet a young Qatari man called Sheik Fahd Hamad, in Abu Dhulouf who knows the country, culture and history quite well and as luck would have it he has a splendid SUV that allowed us to go off the road to get some of the ancient forts. After there we drove down the coast to Al Jamail Fort, Khidaj Fort, Qalaat Fariha and Al Zubarah Fort the most locally famous of the old forts.

Al Zubarah is at least 250 years old and is one of the best preserved of the traditional pearl fishing and merchant towns in the Gulf. Why so many forts along the northwest coast? To quote a book titled: Al Zubarah Archeological Site, sponsored by Maersk Oil, UNESCO and others: "The success of the settlement attracted the attention of other Gulf powers and there were several attacks on the town. In 1811 the town was raided and most of its buildings were abandoned or destroyed. While al Zubarah was subsequently resettled and slowly rebuilt as a smaller town, it never fully recovered and was totally abandoned by the early 20th Century." Later on, the book states: "Many of the wares and porcelain found on the site come from as far away as China, Japan and Western Europe. This is evidence of the far-reaching trade networks that linked East with West, of which Al Zubarah formed a part."



Al Zubara Fort

Thus, Al Zubara Fort specifically and Qatar in general are most definitely real maritime Silk Road trading centers.

Tai Chi Teacher “Linda Aarts” in Doha Qatar

July 31, 2017 She's a bit shy about teaching Tai Chi and being interviewed for Kung Fu magazine saying she's only a mid-level student herself, but three things suggest to me she is modest indeed. First, her teachers are many and highly respected around Europe, second, she's been practicing nearly 20 years, and third, I played pushing hands with her in the gardens behind her house for a short time and could feel her Chi and technique are both soft and powerful indeed. Meet Linda Aarts, one of the very few Kung Fu Wushu teachers in Doha, Qatar.

With that introduction a little about her background. To quote from her website: "When she started Tai Chi in Amsterdam in 1998, she thought it was magic. To relax standing up, was something she thought would be impossible. She learned that there was something between feeling 'tense' and 'limp', which is called 'structure.' Tai Chi is not just about learning a form (a pattern of movements in a certain order), it is mostly an Internal Martial Art, that made her so much more aware of the energy (Chi or Qi) in her body and the way to move it. The method she uses most is Chen Man Ching Style.



Her teachers include Ans Rodenburg, Rob and Erich Völke, Daan Hengst, Henk Janssen, Pim van den Broek, Judith van Drooge, Jacqueline Ansem and Wee Kee Yin. Also, almost every year, she joins the North Sea Tai Chi Festival in the Netherlands and the International Pushing Hands Festival in Hannover, Germany, to train Tui Shou and to do workshops with Ronnie Robinson, Roberto Benetti, Lauren Smith, Wilhelm Mertens, Cornelia Grüber, Ruud Raaijmakers, Barry McGinlay and other international teachers. She mentioned learning a lot at Tony Ward's workshops in 2013 in Amsterdam. Her knowledge of different forms is impressive, including the 37-movement form of Chen Man Ching, and the 8 Silken Exercises or Brocades. In 2014 she was introduced to the 'Tai Chi Bone,' by Henk Janssen and Lau King. In 2015 she learned the Long Stick and Fan Forms taught by Judith van Drooge. All this is supported by training in her other passion, Chi Kung as healing arts are her central theme, I think.

During our interview I found out she's lived here in Qatar about six and a half years mainly because her husband is in the petroleum industry. She teaches both in the garden-like areas around her home, and sometimes, like in the extreme heat of July and August in her quite beautiful home located in one of the more luxurious areas of Doha.

She said although she started Tai Chi in 1998 it was just a casual once a week class with a mid-level teacher – kind of like she sees herself now. Then in 2002 she met with the larger Tai Chi community in Amsterdam. "I felt kind of embarrassed because they were so advanced and I felt like a beginner. But we became best friends. One reason I like Tai Chi people is their attitudes – healthy, balanced, and relaxed."

Linda also said she figured out very quickly when she started teaching there are two very important skills needed to do that well. First of course, Tai Chi skill, and second teaching skills. "I think my teaching skills may be better than my Tai Chi," she added with a smile.

"But every year I go to the Tai Chi Pushing Hands Festival in Hanover Germany. I meet and practice with people who are so great and I feel like I'm nothing in comparison. I suppose in every martial art you may meet some people with – like big egos and sometimes they're very good, or not. But the people I respect most seem like nothing special but then you do the pushing hands with them you can feel their level of skill is very great.

"In the mornings there are master's classes and in the afternoon there's time to train. Every ten minutes you change and practice with a different partner. Some are so soft, but then they push and are gone – absorb and give back. I so admire and enjoy the skills of these people – totally soft and relaxed."

Linda's background is quite interesting as well. She started her professional careers in sales, transitioned to interior design, and then health education as part of her study of pedagogics, working about five years as a health and expertise instructor. Her journey from 2004 to 2011 led her to being trained in Health Tao, by Ilona Botterweg, Inge Maassen and Mantak Chia in the Netherlands and Czech Republic. Healing Tao is closely related to Chi Kung. Simultaneous to this she practiced meditation learning different techniques including Vipassana Meditation and one time in a Buddhist Monastery in Belgium spent 10 days in total silence.

Thus, her life path reflects movement towards the kinds of wholeness and health characteristic of a Tai Chi master, in my opinion.

After a bit of conversation, we went outside into the rather warm morning surrounded by paradise like scenery and she showed me some of her forms, flowing like water in the summer morning surrounded by grass and the flowering trees under the blue sky.

Quite harmonious and beautiful I'd say. Add together a great lady, great art, great teacher, great environment and I'd call it a great morning and day. Thank you so much Linda for sharing it with me and the readers of Kung Fu magazine.

Part 22 Noble Martial Art Legacy of Qatar, Continued

The desert is a land of extremes beyond imagining. The extreme heat of the day can turn into bitter cold at night. Except along the coasts and in oasis, there is not so much to eat, and little or no water. This story is Part II of Wushu in Qatar, an exploration of martial arts and what Wushu can be found in this ancient land with its noble martial legacy where simple survival can take on war-like properties and certainly have martial applications.



Falcon Market in Doha, Qatar

Falconry

Following again the martial trend, falconry is an ancient tradition in Qatar passed down from father to son encouraging the values of chivalry, courage, patience and diligence. Falconry is usually practiced in winter when people start hunting the falcons in order to train them. Training these supreme survivors of the desert takes various forms like offering mock prey, sometimes a rabbit, or pigeon tied to a string and allowed to fly. It's painstaking work but once the hunting skills of a falcon have been honed and harnessed by his master and friend, the falconer need no longer fear hunger in the desert. There is a special souk in the old marketplace specifically for falconry. As for the martial applications of a falcon, this is not discussed openly.

Gulf Arab Clothing “*Thobe*”

Self-defense can take many forms and the heat here in July and August can absolutely kill a strong man that doesn't know how to survive, raising the question, just how did people survive here during the summer months before air conditioning, especially out in the desert as Silk Road travelers had to do?

I've visited the sword shop in Souk Wakif a few times and one day expressed some interest in the flowing white robes so many people here wear. “Is it really cooler?”

It wasn't long before I persuaded Shamsan to walk with me to one of the many clothing places for Gulf region gentlemen's clothes. This turned out to be a whole new world of education for me.

Most men of the Gulf region wear a long tunic or robe called a thobe and it's usually worn with a pair of loose pants under called sirwal. The headscarf is called ghuthrain, and it's held in place by a double black cord called agal which is used with a white skullcap called thagiyah.

One can often see the thagiyah whenever Muslim men go to pray at the mosque because it's the standard everywhere, though most cultures also have culture specific thagiyah. But I found out, it's considered mustahabb (commendable) to wear the traditional white thagiyah.

Got that?

Though one can buy ready-made thobe, most men have their thobe tailor made for about 200 - 400 Riyals, or about \$55 to \$82. One Qatari I met last week told me he had 30 thobes in his wardrobe. Seems like a lot to me, but hay... a man's gotta have some fresh threads for every occasion.

Discussing the material for a thobe at the sword shop with both Shamsan and Saleh, I found out Toyobo and Shekibu are generally considered the number one and number two fabric brands.

Later at the tailor shop I found out they're both made in Japan. Why? They are superior materials that don't wrinkle, do resist stains, breathe well, keep the wearer cool, and look quite excellent I have to say.

After being measured for a thobe it takes a couple of days before it can be picked up.

The daily temperatures Qatar in July and August are around 110. That's every day. At night it cools down to the 90s, maybe.

A couple days later and whala!



I must thank brother Shamson again for instructing me in the ways of the Arab Gentleman.

I'm well on my way to becoming a respectable Gulf region gentleman, and I've got to add, not only is it cooler in the extreme heat, but also blessed relief in the extreme air conditioning some places have.



Altogether it's very practical and comfortable clothing I'd add one shouldn't even waste the \$10 to get an "off the shelf" thobe, because I did and couldn't walk very well. It wasn't wide enough in the lower leg area for my normal long strides and it felt like my feet were chained together. The good thobe however has a couple of small pleats and are all-together cooler and much more comfortable.

Anyways, the swords are a bit pricy for me, but the Gulf fashion tour was quite reasonable, practical, comfortable, aesthetic, and culturally and socially pleasing. Imagine me, the wandering Silk Road martial artist, appearing to be - a Sheik of Arabi!

Survival in different environments involves different things. Even rest or the lack of it can be a weapon.

Throughout evolution those who adapt to their environments survived, those who failed to do so did not further their genetic lines. These days like always education is the primary tool essential for the survival of individuals and their tribes.

Qatar Foundation and Education City

On July 25th at 10 am I visited Qatar Foundation, a futuristic heaven of education and community. Early in 1995, His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Father Amir, shared a vision with Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser while sitting under a tent at Umm Qrayba farm. Together, they conceived a plan for the future development of their country that would provide Qatari citizens with a greater choice in education, health and social progress than ever before. They then set about turning this dream into reality and, in August that year, founded Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, near downtown Doha.

This metropolis sized place is called “Education City.” Their symbol is the Cidra tree, and they have students from 29 countries, of which 2,710 are male and 2,117 are female.

Their Education programs include Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Virginia Commonwealth University, Academic Bridge Program, Weill Cornell Medical College, Texas A&M University Engineering program, Carnegie Mellon University, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, Northwestern University, HEC Paris (MBA), University College London (Archaeology of the Arab and Islamic World, Conservation Studies, Museum and Gallery Practice), HBKU College of Science and Engineering, Translation and Interpreting Institute, HBKU Faculty of Islamic Studies Awsaj Academy (Elementary and Secondary schools),

Qatar Academy Sidra (Primary School), Qatar Music Academy, and Qatar Leadership Academy. Try saying that all in one breath!



The Foundation selects the best programs from each of the universities invited to open a campus at their now world-famous Education City, so they only have the best of the best which includes over 40 different programs. And there's the Qatar National Research Fund which operates under the umbrella of the Qatar Foundation. They already have received 300 patents for new inventions in biotechnology, environment, and cyber security. The Foundation has a focus on community development and the educational ecosystem. During my visit to this other-worldly citadel of educational wonder, I wasn't too surprised to find out it was Qatar that built the first public library in the Gulf Region, opening its doors in 1962.

Gulf Arab Swords

In order to appraise the swords in my friend's sword shop in Souk Wakif I figured I needed to research swords in this region, then examine their blades again.

The following is a composite of my research and information from Shamsan and Salah.

In English the Arabian curved sword is called a “scimitar,” in Arabic it’s called *saif*. Historically they were used around the Middle East and North Africa with the roots of the word possibly going as far back as the Egyptian word for sword, *sft*.

The best Arabic blades are made of Damascus steel. Damascus is the capital and largest city in Syria and has a history going back at least to 9,000 BCE. It is mentioned in Genesis (14:15) as existing at the time of the “War of the Kings.” Thus, it is not terribly surprising that one of the best steels in history comes from that very same city. Unfortunately, some aspects of the art of producing the most renowned Damascus steel blades have been lost in the mists of time and smoke of wars however quite a lot of modern research has tried to reconstruct their system of manufacture, with some clues emerging.

“...the distinct surface patterns on these blades result from a carbide-banding phenomenon produced by the micro segregation of minor amounts of carbide-forming elements present in the wootz ingots from which the blades were forged. (Verhoeven, J.D., Pendray, A.H. & Dauksch, W.E.)



Wootz steel in turn was developed in Southern India in the 6th Century BC and exported globally, then and now. After arrival in Damascus metalsmiths then further forged and worked the ingots into Damascus steel blades. Research now shows that the unique “carbon nanotubes” found in Damascus steel can be derived from plant fibers, possibly first burned, then the ash pounded in during the reforging process with the nanotubes increasing flexibility and making it lighter. The American Bladesmith Society determined that to make a Damascus steel blade now it must have a minimum of 300 layers.

Before going on to the Sword Dance, one other little story from the sword shop. One evening some Qatari customers came in, one of whom had his younger 5-year-old brother with him. When the boy realized we were talking about Kung Fu he candidly told me he’d learned Kung Fu.

I politely asked him where he’d learned it and he confidentially told me his stuffed animals at home had taught him.

I couldn’t help a little chuckle but he was quite serious about this and soon I came to believe him. I was of course tempted to test his mastery but getting beat up by a five-year-old wouldn’t make me look good as a guest in this amazing country!

Other Chinese Wushu Schools in Qatar?

I visited other Kung Fu schools advertised on the internet and found schools that used to have Kung classes but don’t any more.

I spent five and a half hours on the evening of August 2nd following the cryptic messages of one “Kung Fu teacher” trying to find his school, and never did find it - the first time in 45 years of world-wandering finding martial arts schools in North America, South America, Europe and all around East, West, North, South and Central Asia - that ever happened.

I did however get to know a real cool and very patient taxi driver with great music in his car...

Sword Dance

While hanging out at the sword shop in Souk Wakif in Doha I noticed young men regularly came in small groups and bought these fine scimitars, some of which are highly ornate with gold inlay and studded with gems. In fact, the store is doing a pretty good business and selling more than I might have imagined. I asked a few of the customers why they needed a sword and the answer usually was a cousin or brother was going to get married and a traditional sword dance is part of the ceremony; naturally the groom participates in those dances and needs an especially fine sword.

In regards to the sword dances they are ubiquitous at weddings in the Middle East. I found one Qatari wedding Sword Dance video on YouTube (and another couple featuring President Trump and Tillerson in a Sword Dance in Saudi Arabia). There's a popular wedding hall here in Doha where one can visit and see the dances; though not generally of taolu precision they're having fun.

I tried to find a sword dance teacher but according to a Qatari friend named Hamad I met at the sword shop; the techniques are passed down only from father to sons within families.

This always has been the norm of traditional martial arts. We exchanged phone numbers and our interview continued over the next few days. "Does each tribe or family have its own variation of sword dance?" I asked. "Not in most cases," he answered. "But, in some cases tribes are easily recognized by the way they sword dance, especially when the dance is between two people in a sort of challenge of technique and tactics showing off their sword dancing skills. In general you need to really know sword dancing and its history and techniques to know the different tribes by the way they dance."

Wednesday August 2nd I got a message on my phone from Hamad that he "had a wedding" on Thursday, the next evening and invited me to attend letting me know the sword dances would commence shortly after sunset or around 6:45. Not an especially shy sort of fellow I happily accepted. Previously he'd identified the location of the wedding hall on my google maps so it was all good. Knowing this was a Qatari traditional event I also had the opportunity to wear my Thobe (traditional Gulf State long white garment) and accoutrements, to harmonize with the culture and otherwise not look like an alien. Also, to prepare of this I called Noor, my limousine driver 'cause in for a penny in for a pound as they say. Since it was to be my last night in Qatar, I set the time for 4:30 so we'd be able to stop by the sword shop and I could bid farewell to Shamson and Salah. When Noor showed up he didn't recognize me at all until I called his name and walked right up to him. He was visibly startled. "Ma-sha-Allah," he said, "I thought you were a Qatari!"

We stopped by the sword shop and they too were quite impressed at my dapper demeanor. They called for tea and in a few moments a young friendly looking Qatari came in asking them to re-tie the waist rope on his sword.

I suspected he needed it because he was going to a wedding and asked if this was the case. Yes, indeed it was.

Though he was dressed and looked a lot like a Qatari he had blue eyes so I asked the most common question here and found out he's from Syria and also knows Hamad.

Noor and I arrived at the banquet hall about half an hour later as it's on the outskirts of Doha. It took a whole hot minute figure out there were at least three different wedding halls in that large opulent palatial wedding complex right out of Aladdin's lamp.

Since Hall 3 was right in front of the parking place I tried that one first hoping to recognize Hamad or the young Syrian guy. Walking up some wide steps I came upon an older very distinguished looking gentleman dressed, not surprisingly exactly like me. "Assalamu Alaikum," I said, and he responded with the traditional "Wa AlaikumMusallam!"

We chatted as we approached Hall Three and I explained I had a friend who invited me but didn't know which hall. He said something to the effect of: "No matter," and invited me in.

Genuinely friendly I thought!

Walking in with a gentleman who appeared such a distinguished patriarch is quite the way to make an entrance. Very fortunate for me!

Anyways right inside the entrance of the huge hall mostly young and a few older men were lined up with some singing and others doing the unique steps and sword movements similar to what I'd seen on YouTube.



Several smiled at me enjoying themselves and perfectly willing to share the joy of the happy occasion. After I'd taken some photos and short videos with my smart phone one of them came by me and asked if I'd like to participate and well... heck yeah! So, he pointed to a sword rack off to my left, and said: Choose one and come on! It didn't take me but a second to pick out a healthy-looking scimitar and in a flash there I was doing my best to match their steps and sword movements.

First observation is there's a bit more to it than meets the eye. It should be remembered that despite a sharp point, the scimitar is primarily a slashing weapon designed mainly for horseback fighting.

For some of the dances it was like a double step with the right foot leading. In others the feet alternated also with a double-step – which could be mimicking riding a horse, or simply advance and retreat ground fighting steps.

The sword movements varied with the first pattern being what looked like a downward parry with the flat of the blade then raise the sword edge pointed out in what could be a preparatory strike position. This parry, prepare, parry prepare sequence was repeated several times followed by other sequences. The scabbard, held in the left hand was in some sequences alternatively raised between parry strike preparation movements with the sword. It looked like another parry designed to protect against a second attack. So, the sequence including the scabbard was low parry with sword flat- preparatory sword strike position, upper scabbard parry in time with the advancing double-step. There were several other combinations also.

Some individuals made an X shape from crossed sword and scabbard held in one hand, which reminded me a bit of the flag of Qatar but when held like a T shape probably has other meanings.

After about 15 minutes of this they seemed to take a break and I realized I didn't see either of my friends there so maybe I ought to try a different wedding hall. I chatted with the young gentlemen that invited me and found out one was a student at a university in Florida.

I asked the name of the groom and was told “Abdul Rahman,” I think; another said something about “The Sultan.” Another thing I learned talking with the men at this first hall is that secondary schools sometimes have inter-school sword dance competitions. Again, I asked if there were teachers, and again I was told it’s always passed down within the family and thus there no regular or professional teachers.

Very interesting! Sometime I’d really like to see the school competitions as I suspect they’re more rigorous than the light-hearted wedding ceremonial dances.

Anyways I explained I needed to look for friends and really, truly appreciated their allowing me to share in this special event... and with warm feelings I was off to the next wedding hall and then the next. It was quite an exhilarating evening!

But alas I didn’t see my friends and knew there might be more halls but... all things must pass and my driver apparently had a regular customer waiting for him at 9:00 pm and I had to finish packing at my hotel so reluctantly I had to go.

Fortunately, I’d mostly packed earlier, rushed to the airport and the five-hour return flight to Beijing was smooth. So, although I didn’t find a heck of a lot of Chinese Wushu in Qatar, I was very happy to meet Linda Aarts and learn a lot about the beauty and martial legacy of this ancient land.

Though Chinese Wushu isn’t big here now, I suspect in the future it will be judging by the enthusiasm of the young Kung Fu master I met in the sword shop.

“Your story may not have such a happy beginning but that does not make you who you are, it is the rest of it – who you choose to be.” (Kung Fu Panda 2)

In regards to the political turmoil in the Gulf Region involving Qatar, I can again only quote the masters: "Your mind is like this water my friend. When it gets agitated it becomes difficult to see. But if you allow it to settle, the answer becomes clear." What I saw in Qatar was a beautiful land with amazing futuristic development and a very diverse population living together harmoniously.

Notes

Al Furusiyya at Qatar Digital Library

https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000000044.0x0003ca

Arabic Clothing:

<http://istizada.com/arab-clothing-the-ultimate-guide/>

<http://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/198705/the.fabric.of.tradition.htm>

Tribes of Qatar: <http://priyadsouza.com/powerful-families-qatar-al-thani/>

Linda Aarts' contact information is on her website:

<http://www.taichiqatar.com/contact.html>

Rainbow Continent Kung Fu Friendship Tour Part 1

Welcome Home to Ethiopia, AKA the Land of Cush and Abyssinia, the Amazing 3-million-Year-Old Lucy, the Kung Fu of Master Teshome and the Art of Life



Painting in the National Museum

Silk Roads and Trans-Saharan Trade Routes

Introduction to a new series of Kung Fu Magazine exclusive articles

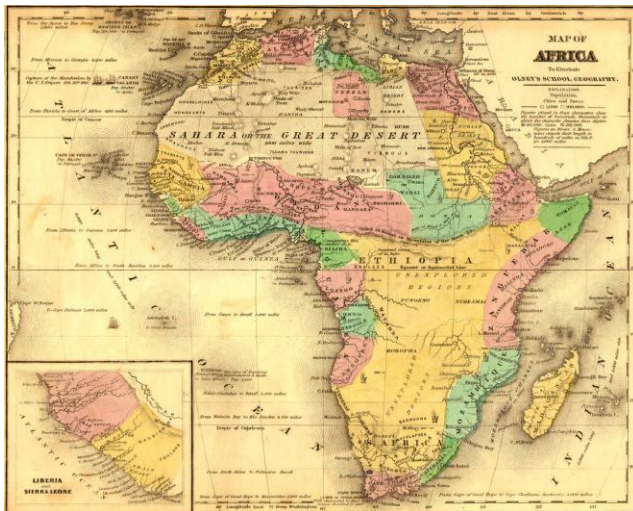
During the past three years I've traveled pretty much of the land Silk Roads, including China where I've lived for the past 10 years, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Last summer even made it to the beautiful Maritime Silk Road nation of Qatar, visiting, photographing, interviewing and sometimes training with their masters and students of Kung Fu.

Welcome to Amazing Ethiopia

The Silk Roads and Trans-Saharan Trade Routes meet in several places including Ethiopia. In 1900 Ethiopia was much larger and included almost all of the Horn of Africa and that is, in many ways the origin of all roads, for that is where humanity as we know it began.

And thus, we are all African people and Africa is *the* motherland for *all* humankind.



Map of Africa in 1840 – Note the size of Ethiopia compared to now.

I'm a long way from finishing my land and maritime Silk Road travels, however all kinds of good news coming from Ethiopia recently caught my attention. I read Ethiopia has a new Prime Minister - Abiy Ahmed - who, in April, became the first Oromo (Ethiopia's largest ethnic group) to be elected to that post - and subsequently introduced a number of reforms including ending a long-standing war with Eritrea, the release of jailed dissidents, the unblocking of websites and introduced numerous policies to liberalize the economy.

Digging a little further back in time I found out the Tigray region in the north of Ethiopia is the original home of The Queen of Sheba, who as everyone knows married King Solomon in Jerusalem.

They produced a son named Menyelek who after traveling back to Jerusalem as a young man carried off the Covenant of the Arc back to Tigray where it remains to this day in a treasury near the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion, in the extremely ancient capital city of an enormous ancient empire called Axum. Wow! That is unusual!

My research also showed that Ethiopia along with Sudan was once called the Land of Cush (yes, of Biblical fame) with "Cush" meaning "Black" and the name was changed to "Abyssinia" by of all people, the Greeks. As if all that wasn't enough to lure me back to our collective motherland during summer vacation, I also read that our great, great, great, etc. grandmother Lucy - a most excellent three-million-year-old lady was to be found residing in the national museum of Ethiopia, in Addis Ababa. The frosting on the cake however was the discovery that Ethiopia is on a most ancient road system called the Trans-Saharan Trade Route, which may actually be millions of years old as pre-humans wandered west and north out of the Horn of Africa long before our earliest human ancestors did a mere 60,000 years ago.

Coming Home

I arrived in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia about 7:00 am July 22nd. For those not familiar with this exceptionally lovely nation it is located in the Horn of Africa with Somalia and Djibouti to the east and northeast, Eretria and Sudan to the north and northwest, South Sudan to the west, and Kenya to the southwest. It's a mountainous country that was not colonized along the rest of Africa in the bad old days, and today for whatever reason appears to have some of the happiest people I've ever seen anywhere in spite of the challenges of a relatively high rate of poverty.

I arrived on Ethiopian Airlines from Singapore aboard a "Boeing 787 Dreamliner." Ethiopia is the first African nation to use this - the newest most luxurious commercial - aircraft that features more cabin space, larger overhead compartments, the "largest windows in the sky," more leg room, controlled humidity - a little more moist than other airplanes that have notoriously dry air - and state of the art on-demand Audio and Video services with 15.4 inch IFE screens and 85 channels in Cloud Nine and 80 different channels(!) so it was a smooth, comfortable entertaining flight, and yep, basking in immense luxury I even slept pretty good. That was only the first of many surprises on this trip.

Immigration was easy because Ethiopia has visa on arrival for people from a whole bunch of different countries. I was a bit nervous when it came to customs because I had 20,000 Chinese Yuan which is about \$3,000 and three crisp new one hundred US dollar bills, which just put me over the cash limit and I had to declare my cash.

Luckily the customs officer didn't seem worried about it and simply gave me some official receipt paper and invited me to have a good vacation!

Why carry such a vast fortune in cash? I was planning on going up north to some more rural areas in the ancient Tigray region where they might not accept MasterCard. One hundred dollars by the way is enough to get a rather huge stack of Ethiopian Birr, their money by the way, which does sound rather a lot like “beer.”

Stepping outside the airport in the early morning I was pleasantly surprised because it was deliciously cool out, maybe 60 degrees or so.

Even though Ethiopia is just slightly north of the equator, Addis Ababa is in the highlands about 1.4 miles above sea level making it blissfully cool.



It rains briefly every day this time of year and is partly cloudy the rest of the time, a big relief for me because Beijing was experiencing record breaking blistering heat and steamy weather this summer.

The hotel I booked was close to the airport and has free airport pick-up so I checked in only about 20 minutes later. Wow! I am back home in Africa, so cool! Back home? That's a no-brainer really.

If there's an Eden, this is probably it. Most of us westerners think of Ethiopia in regards to droughts and starving people but I traveled around the country quite a bit and saw nothing but green landscapes, carefully terraced mountains and hills for farming, lovely villages with stone houses and apartment buildings, shops of all kinds and mostly happy and spiritual people.

This is not to say poverty isn't a problem there, it certainly is, Ethiopia does experience periodic devastating droughts and is also host to around a million refugees from 19 different countries, including South Sudan (48%), Somalia (28%), Eritrea (18%) and Sudan (5%).

Most villages still don't have electricity and consequently most Ethiopians don't eat meat except on special occasions.

And yet, driving around in taxis I took hundreds of photos and the percentage of smiling people I saw was nothing less than astonishing.



I was in a taxi in Addis Ababa approaching a red light. The fine gentleman on the right there saw me seeing him and raised his arms in a big hug. A van passed between us yet he held that pose and all three beamed with good will. This gentleman and his friends appear to have mastered the Kung Fu of Oneness – and that is appreciated by all humans of good will.

True, there are beggars especially around the new downtown area...



Edna Mall is at the heart of the new downtown area in Addis Ababa

...but still on the average, based on a random sampling of photos from taxis and just walking around most people appear to live with quiet dignity and for the most part appear pretty happy.

Ethiopia is a deeply spiritual country; it became a Christian country in the 4th Century, that is before Roman Emperor Constantine and has a devoutly religious philosophy usually called Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Christianity though about 19% of the people belong to other Christian denominations principally Protestant.

About 34% of the people here are Muslim with most being Sunni. Really all three major Abrahamic religions have deep roots in Ethiopia, though most of the Jewish community left around the founding of the modern Israel.

Though Rastafarianism (also considered to be an Abrahamic religion) started in Jamaica it became quite popular in Ethiopia during the reign of the still popular Emperor Haile Selassie (1930 - 1974) in spite of the peasant's revolution that eventually overthrew his government. Wow! Life is pretty complicated, but like the Chinese perhaps, Ethiopians seem to be able to see both sides of things and people. Incidentally Rastafarians are given free residency cards here. Ethiopia is a truly diverse and amazing place!

Kung Fu In Addis Ababa

My first introduction to the wonderful world of Wushu Kung Fu in Ethiopia was via a most excellent gentleman named Adisu, who is the coach of the National Taekwondo Team and founder of the WTF Federation but started his martial arts training here some 30 years ago with Wondemu Belehu, the Grandfather of Kung Fu in Ethiopia.

It seems the top martial artists here pretty much all know each other and are pretty good friends. Everybody helps each other which is really nice. Ethiopian people - based on my short time here - are very friendly and easy going.

Adisu gave me the phone number for Tofik, one of the Ethiopian Wushu Federation's coordinators who was so kind as to meet me at my hotel and take me to lunch at Bella's Italian restaurant on a small unassuming nearby street. There we met another instructor Teshome (pronounced "Te-Show-Mei") and I got to learn about the thriving Wushu scene here in Ethiopia.

With over 300 clubs around the country, and an average of about 50 students per club, it appears they have around 15,000 students nationwide.

I know virtually every small town here has a Wushu club because I traveled in rural areas and visited some rather small towns and villages, and met, for example Master Seyo in a small dot of a village called Wukro. He was easy to find because of the large color signs on the village main street advertising Kung Fu classes.

They have national Wushu Kung Fu tournaments in Ethiopia annually but don't compete in International competitions much simply because of a lack of money. Here in the Capital city they have 25 clubs each with their own head instructors though only Tofik is a registered international referee.

He's been to China twice, with the first-time attending Shanghai Sports University and the second Zhengzhou Physical Education University for six months. Those familiar with Songshan Shaolin will recognize Zhengzhou as the nearest city to the famed Shaolin Monastery, home of Bodhidharma - called "Damo" in Chinese. Consequently, he had time in China to study several different styles of Kung Fu including Shaolin and Yang style Tai Chi.

During the past five years some 35 coaches from Ethiopia have gotten scholarships to train in China and they have more than 100 Level I and Level II national referees. (International referees are ranked A, B and C). I learned that Tofik is 43, married and has two children, a girl 17 and boy age 12, whereas Teshome is 35 and not married yet. Both look like super athletes, slim and powerfully built also both have a good sense of humor and kind hearts. During our chat Tofik wrote a list for me illuminating the lineage of great African Kung Fu masters in Ethiopia:

- Wondemu Belehu (wrote at least one book and is now living in the U.S.)
- Maru Zeleke
- Ferehinot Shetaye

- Ephrem Assefa
- Elias Zemedkum

The Kung Fu Club of Master Teshome

After lunch I went with Teshome to his club which operates in a large older gym in a school about a 20-minute drive away. I asked if they had any clubs closer to the new downtown area where I'm staying, but alas, the rent is too high here.

Getting there first we went to his small office located under some stairs where he pulled out his notebook computer and put some great photos of his club members on a USB for me which is very helpful. Then we went into the large older gym and found about 35 kids aged 8 to 15 and a few adults all ready for class.

Like usual I volunteered and then led a warmup stretching exercise from Yoga I'd learned that is great for martial arts because it includes stretches for the whole body including left, right and center splits and then we did some Wushu kicks including crescent, spinning crescent, and jumping spinning kicks which I really enjoy and have found useful from time to time here and there. The students ranged from relative beginners to some really talented and well-trained kids. They are highly enthusiastic students!





Then I turned the class back over to Teshome and took photos as they continued doing different Wushu techniques moving across the large gym floor. I gotta say on the jumping kicks those students flew.

Their strength to weight ratios is amazing and they really appeared to fly when doing those kicks. This was followed by Taolu exercises and then weapons practice. A few of the boys did a little sparring, but this class is geared more for taolu than Sanshou.



Brotherly love at Master Teshome's Kung Fu Classes

The sun was starting to set when the class was over and Teshome had one more class to teach so he kindly called a taxi to take me back to my hotel. He paid the taxi driver too. He reminds me of the gentlemen warriors of days gone by. We also made arrangements to meet at 11 the next day for coffee and lunch.



That evening I typed up these here fine notes, got an incredible dinner at my hotel, went to my room, laid down just for one second (in theory) and that was it!

Waking at 5:00 am as always, I skipped my usual thousand kicks and punches because I thought maybe today, I can visit another Wushu class, and instead did a little photo editing...

At 11 on the dot I met Teshome for coffee downstairs and got more details about Wushu in Ethiopia.

Before long it was off to Bellas again where we met with Tofik. I shared with them what I knew of an exciting UNHCR program to teach martial arts to a “mixed population” of children in Addis Ababa which has tens of thousands of refugees mostly from conflicts in nearby countries.

As mentioned earlier Ethiopia has many large refugee camps and is one of the top three nations in the world for accepting refugees and they seemed eager to participate.

Tofik also told me some things about the Wushu Federation president’s background including that he’s a lawyer that represents some of the Chinese companies doing business in Ethiopia and can speak Amharic (the most common language in Ethiopia), English, Chinese, Arabic and the language of his hometown being from the Beni Shangul Tribe in the northwest. I was quite pleased to meet him my last day in Ethiopia and have a splendid chat for more than an hour which is briefly described in Part II of this new series.

After lunch we had coffee again and I got to learn a little about - the history of coffee! Unbeknownst to most people coffee is indigenous to Ethiopia and I gotta say they’ve made an art form of it.

The story Tofik told me is that one day an Oromo farmer in the South of Ethiopia noticed one of his goats eating some beans from the ground and the goat appeared “very happy.” The farmer tasted some and found it too bitter but after experimenting discovered that after roasting they produced a fine drink.

There are of course many legends of the discovery of coffee, but this one is unique, humorous and eminently possible so I thought I'd include it here. He told me this story while in a franchise coffee shop named *Kaldi*, which he then told me was the name of the 9th Century goat herder. From Ethiopia the now ubiquitous coffee drink went to Yemen and throughout the Middle East and Turkey. When first introduced to Europe it was called the "Moslem alcohol!" For a most amusing history of coffee one can read "Suave Molecules of Mocha - Coffee, Chemistry, and Civilization."

Below is a short quote:

"In 1511, the Meccan governor Khair Beg tried to again ban coffee, fearing that it fostered opposition to his rule by bringing men together and allowing them to discuss his failings. However, Beg was executed by command of the Sultan himself, who further proclaimed coffee to be sacred! Less than a century later, coffee was proclaimed sacrosanct by the Vatican. In 1600, Pope Clement VIII was petitioned by priests to ban coffee, which they called "the devil's drink". The Pope tried a cup, liked it and proclaimed it "so delicious that it would be a pity to let the infidels have exclusive use of it." He went on, "We shall cheat Satan by baptizing it."

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110322043749/http://www.newpartisan.com/home/suave-molecules-of-mocha-coffee-chemistry-and-civilization.html>

More about coffee in Part 2 of this story, as I was ever-so-fortunate to visit a real traditional Café with the most authentic coffee in the world.

One natural food I especially love in Ethiopia is called “Belas,” or in English Prickly Pear which is the fruit of a cactus. It’s deliciously sweet and famous traditional medicine for diabetes and a host of other ailments. Luckily, I was there just when they were in season.



Street vendor in Addis Ababa selling Belas fruit

Probably the most typical ethnic Ethiopian food is Injera, a spongy fermented flat bread served in every household and restaurant made of teff flour. Most Ethiopians appear to be vegetarian most of the time for several reasons, one, meat is expensive, and two, most people are rural and don’t have electricity for refrigerators to keep meat. So, Injera, chickpeas, lentils and collard greens are a major part of their diets.

Their orthodox Tewahedo Christian religious practice also has many days of fasting - up to 55 days of abstaining from meat continuously - and while I was there they were just starting a two week fast - thus vegetarian foods are very popular and the people do remain beautifully slim.

All this may seem far afield from Kung Fu in Ethiopia, but not really. The term “Kung Fu” really refers to acquired skill - through high level discipline - over time, and I’d argue that learning to live life simply and with virtue, including cutting down on meat, and surviving in the hardest of times, like famines, war and extreme poverty - is one of the highest levels of Kung Fu.

Yes, Ethiopia is ranked 21st poorest country in the world with an average per capita income of \$1,916 per year, but that includes the “rich folks,” which if subtracted out, leaves most people surviving on less than a dollar a day. Yet, they survive, and still, based on my research and photos, mostly seem pretty happy. That is an acquired skill and Wushu masters like Tofik and Teshome help make that possible. I salute them and all masters that teach the life skills necessary to mold “everyday people” into masters of their own destinies.



In Part II of this new series I visit Tofik's Wushu school and explore a variety of other parts of life in the truly ancient and splendidly modern nation of Ethiopia.

Rainbow Continent Kung Fu Friendship Tour Part 2

The Kung Fu of Master Tofik, the Beautiful University Town of Mekelle, the Ancient Cities of Nejashi and Axum and Interview with Ethiopian Wushu Federation President Abdurahman Alakil, Museums, Suri Stick Fighting and a Hilarious Music Video

Master Tofik's Chinese Wushu School



Tuesday, July 30th 2018 - On this fine day I had the great pleasure to be invited to Master Tofik's Club in a slightly older part of town. He told me this was the main downtown area about 10 years before the new downtown area was built.

He picked me up at my hotel about 6:15 pm and as we entered his neighborhood 30 minutes later I saw literally hundreds of people in the streets of all ages, some merchants selling vegetables and fruits or household items, children playing, couples strolling, older folks relaxing and I gotta report the over-all feeling was one of blissful peace and harmony.

Driving there Tofik told me it was called the Italian part of town because a lot of Italians used to live there. I had that “time machine” feeling like I was transported out of the modern world into a simpler time of happy peaceful village life in spite of the appearance of an urban middle-class neighborhood.

When we got to his 3-story school it looked like maybe a 1980s guest house or small hotel with tall trees and attractive low brick wall with wrought iron above - around the yard that had pine and other trees pointing gracefully to the sky.

As we entered the gate and walked into the building area first on the left in a covered veranda area, I saw four or so well-used pool tables with 15 or 20 teenage boys hanging out and casually playing. When we entered the building proper on the right, I saw a filled-to-capacity medium small gym with lots of free weights and some weight machines, running machines with folks running pretty enthusiastically and a small free exercise area on the left. Just inside the door on the right behind a desk was about the sweetest little old lady I ever saw who I guess is possibly in charge of collecting fees.

First Tofik introduced me to four people sitting on a bench just inside on the left, and because Amharic names are a bit difficult for me, I can’t remember them for sure. I can however report one was a very nice lady with three men being in their 20s and 30s. These Tofik told me were some of his superstar Kung Fu players, national champions in fact, and I could tell also good friends. They welcomed me warmly and I instantly felt at home and comfortable.

After this Tofik had a couple of his guys demonstrate taolu in the free exercise area, both empty handed and with sword. They were superb and almost everyone in the gym stopped to watch and applauded enthusiastically at the end of each performance.

After about 15 minutes in the 1st floor gym we went upstairs and it appeared a taekwondo class was just finishing. Just a few minutes later another started along with ours so two martial arts classes were running at the same time on different sides of the gym.

True to form I had volunteered to lead the class for the first 15 minutes or so starting with a stretching routine followed by some warm-up kicks, followed by some three and four kick/punch combinations.



After that - like usual I turned the class back over to Tofik to see the master instructor at work. I gotta say he teaches with passion and precision. He knows how to motivate everyone to exceed their limits.

First, he demonstrated a combination, slowly, then at speed, and the students follow suit. When it comes to speed, he knows how to get them cooking! He's a great teacher I gotta say.

Following about 30 minutes of training like this he had them practice pair sparring techniques, again, first very slowly, then with speed.

I pitched in here and there helping students see where they were leaving openings (like dropping guard while attacking). I also introduced a few other combinations I like and have used in competitions.

Here I should mention that anytime the students saw something they really liked, they clapped. They can't be fooled I think and definitely recognize and show appreciation for skill. All this was hugely fun for me, working with such great and enthusiastic students.

After all that Tofik asked me if I'd like to do anything else with the class and I chose one talented student to practice a slow-motion sparring exercise I learned in my first Kung Fu classes some 45 years ago.

In this exercise one person is the attacker and the other the defender, and the defender cannot move his back foot. He can only evade, block or counter-attack into the attacker. I explained that anytime someone attacks they leave an opening and the skill/art is to recognize that opening and kick and/or punch into it. I showed them you don't need blocks, only precision guided attacks along the centerline. This works best in slow motion at the beginning but with experienced students can get quite fun later on when some speed is added.

First, I took the defense role and showed what I meant by counterattacking up the centerline. It's not so different I think from Bruce Lee's "intercepting fist." Then after five minutes of that I took the offensive role and showed how I use slow motion attack combinations to create openings. Within about two minutes I found a combination that worked three times in a row, even at very slow speed and the class applauded. We humans are creatures of habit and some of those habits do lead to vulnerabilities that can be exploited, thus the need for careful examination of all our habits!

My Kung Fu teachers back in the early 70s called this slow motion sparring the “chess of sparring.” It teaches us to detect and take advantage of openings in the attacker, recognize where we leave doors open when attacking and how to use combinations to open doors when attacking. Probably most Kung Fu teachers still teach this, I don’t know, but we all had fun with it.

This was about the end of the class and Tofik invited the students around and invited them to relax while he and I relaxed against the small wooden stage. He asked me if I could say a few words to the students about persistence in training. That was easy for me because being in my 60s I know well the ultimate value of always training, especially when you don’t feel like it. I also talked a little about nutrition introducing it by asking one young man how many pieces of fruit he’d eaten that day. I know from being a high school teacher that people - especially youngsters often forget to include enough fruits in their diets and kind of pushed the “rainbow” diet philosophy of eating three or four *different color* fruits and vegetables every day. We all laughed a bit when I apologized if I sounded like their moms. The young man of course hadn’t eaten any fruit that day. Not enough money? Possibly, however this was an upper middle-class neighborhood by Addis Ababa standards I believe.

I know kids of course, having been one for an overly long time. I also shared some insights about training, for example when you don’t feel like it – it is probably when you need it most. This may seem counter-intuitive, however stresses add up and fatigue the brain, while the body hungers to back to its roots with physical activity. Our bodies are engineered with a capacity for enormous physical activity, but modern post-industrial society crushes that in most of us. The end result? A tired brain and a body that needs exercise.



Like always I asked Master Tofik to please share my Facebook name with everyone and invite them to send me invitations. Then we took some group photos and alas it was time to go. Such practice with different clubs is really the most fun thing I do.

People thank me and I so honestly thank them back because it's the students' enthusiasm that makes teaching into a meaningful and pleasurable experience.

Driving to my hotel I asked Tofik a few questions about the economics of being a Wushu teacher here in Addis Ababa. So, he explained. He said he paid 3,000 birr per month to rent half the upstairs hall three evenings a week and the tuition of his 30 or so students basically about paid the rent with nothing left over.

He did however earn some money from the gym downstairs. This is enough for him to support his family with not a lot left over. In spite of what must be a limited income, he's a happy healthy Sifu, and clearly respected and valued in his community and I gotta say, by me.

Mekelle – Great Kingdom of North Ethiopia

Incredible history, beautiful culture and people and the educational capital of this fair land

A couple of days later I took a bus up to a town in the far north of Ethiopia called Mekelle, the capital city of Tigray Province, and economic, cultural, and political center of northern Ethiopia.

The population there is about 200,000 and they speak an ancient language called Tigrinya.

By African standards it's quite a new town dating back to only the 13th Century, when it was known as Enda Meseqel.

Mekelle was actually quite comfortable without the hustle and bustle of the capital city Addis Ababa. Instead it's a peaceful small/medium sized university town with clean streets and a well-educated relatively modern population.

Nejashi - Oldest Islamic Settlement in Africa

From there I took a bus to Wukro, about 45 km. away and then a taxi to Nejashi to visit the Nado Adi Masjid, the home of the most ancient Muslim settlement in Africa.

Upon arrival I met Idriz a local guide that speaks English and also some Turkish engineers and workmen that built an exquisite small masjid near the site of the ancient one, and constructed a highly decorative mausoleum housing the tombs of 15 of the original settlers, and were in the process of building other structures for a more complete community.



New Masjid in Nejashi

Upon meeting the Turkish engineers, I asked them if they knew of the location of the original masjid.

They didn't know.

Then I asked the local tour guide I met there explaining that I was sure it was somewhere around there.

At first he didn't understand, but then the light went on and he led me into the hills behind the new masjid and showed me the original.



Remains of the original Masjid at Nejashi

This was one of those spiritually defining moments in life. The guide seemed to know quite a bit about the original Muslim settlement some 1,500 years ago, and then showed me the living quarters for the Sahaba (Companions of the Prophet Mohammed SWT) in the hills beyond the remains of the ancient masjid. Incredible!

The town around this ancient Muslim settlement is 95% Christian these days, but the people of these different faiths have lived harmoniously together for over 1300 years. Ethiopia has been a model of religious harmony at least since companions of the Prophet Mohammad were granted sanctuary here in the 7th Century ACE.

On the bus back to Mekelle I met a young Ethiopian American lady that had just finished a two-year Peace Corps stay in Nejashi where she'd worked as a teacher.

She filled me in on the life of the regular people there as she'd lived as a regular person, e.g. without electricity and associated amenities, and consequently like the regular people - only eating meat on holidays.

She is a truly admiral lady indeed - and happy I believe to return home to the USA. How fortunate most westerners are to have such an option.

Axum – Ancient Capital at the Heart of Ethiopia

Back in Mekelle I stayed one more night and visited one more museum and then headed to the bus station where I decided to try a “big bus” instead of the ubiquitous white minivans one sees all over the country.

What I didn’t know is that the big busses are much older and cheaper. So, I got the feel of the real Ethiopia sitting alongside regular people, none of whom spoke English, except the young man I happened to sit next to named Filimon, who I quickly learned is a student at Mekelle University.

He speaks excellent English, came across as quite bright and studies engineering. To compliment this good luck, he’s really from Axum and knows the history, for this ancient city was once the capital city of a great ancient empire on par in many ways with Greece, Rome and Egypt in regards to arts, culture, science and trade volume.

Its origins date back to about the 1st Century BCE and it reached its zenith between the 4th and 7th Century A.C.E.

The bus ride was through lush green mountainous territory virtually all of which was cultivated farm land, in many cases with terraced irrigation systems to preserve the rainfall - essential in Sub-Saharan African which occasionally does suffer from droughts.

What I saw was simply beautiful. Along the roadsides I also saw village and farm people walking often with donkeys and wooden carts not different in any way from a couple of thousand years ago, except perhaps one in a hundred of the people there might have a smart phone which were pretty much useless anyways as there was no signal anywhere around. Good riddance to all that (!) I thought.

When we arrived in Axum Filimon and I were met by his friend KB Miller, his longtime buddy who is another brilliant young man and student at Mekelle University except he studies IT. For the next few days these gentlemen were my best friends and tour guides to the stunning history and contemporary culture of this historically fabulously rich town. Places we visited include:

- St. Mary of Zion Church Complex - the most important church in Ethiopia and said to be the home of the Ark of the Covenant. Inside the circular dome are brightly colored murals, brilliantly illuminating the original ancient Ethiopian Tewahedo Orthodox (Christian) Church histories, and one can see locals praying in the traditional way.



It was interesting to note Ethiopian Christians pray mostly on the floor in a way not so different from Muslims, e.g. touching forehead on the ground. This is not so surprising because Ethiopian Christianity came directly from the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, not via Rome.

Across from the church is the building housing – many believe the Covenant of the Arc.

They shall make an Ark of acacia wood," God commanded Moses in the Book of Exodus, after delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. And so, the Israelites built an ark, gilding it inside and out. And into this chest Moses placed stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments, as given to him on Mount Sinai.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/keepers-of-the-lost-ark-179998820/>





Small chapel behind St. Mary of Zion Church believed to house the Covenant of the Ark

The story is told in the *Kebra Negast* (Glory of the Kings), Ethiopia's chronicle of its royal line: The Queen of Sheba, one of its first rulers, traveled to Jerusalem to partake of King Solomon's wisdom; on her way home, she bore Solomon's son, Menelik. Later Menelik went to visit his father, and on his return, journey was accompanied by the firstborn sons of some Israelite nobles—who, unbeknown to Menelik, stole the ark and carried it with them to Ethiopia. When Menelik learned of the theft, he reasoned that since the ark's frightful powers hadn't destroyed his retinue, it must be God's will that it remains with him.

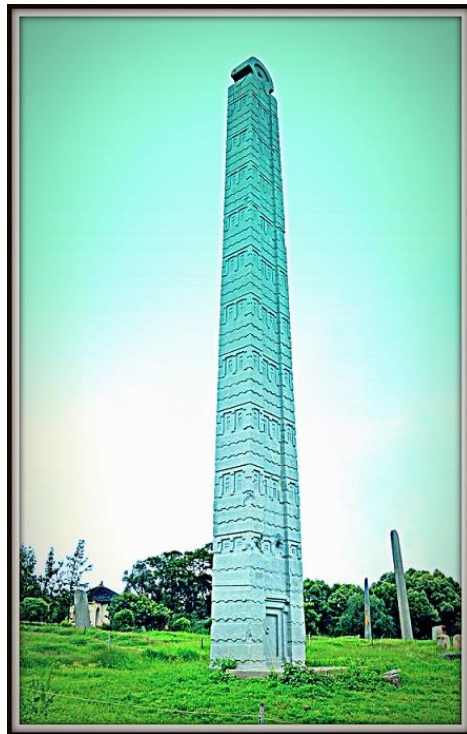
ibid

In Addis Ababa I bought a copy of the Kebra Negast and found they present several different sets of circumstances under which Menelik brought the Ark back home to Axum. It's a fascinating series of adventures under all circumstances.

In another version God told Menelik to take it himself, and in another he took it in defiance of God and Solomon.

There is a lot to see in Axum and it deserves a lot more attention as a capital of the ancient world. The following are just a few of the places my friends showed me.

- Ancient Obelisks at the Northern Stelae Field right across from St. Mary's, under which are or at least were secret tunnels my friends told me which once led to the Palace of the King of Sheba





Writer and K.B. Miller in the Stele Field

- Palace of the King of Sheba



This is just a small part of the formerly huge Palace of the King of Sheba

- Several underground tombs in which one may explore, also King Balkan's Tomb said to have been one of the 3 Wise Men at Jesus' birth
- The incredible Ezana Stone, named after King Ezana who ruled the Kingdom of Axum from 330 to 356 ACE, with script in Ethiopian Semitic Ge'ez, South Arabian Sabaean, and Greek, and is in some ways rather like the Rosetta Stone. This same King Ezana was converted to Christianity by his slave tutor Saint Frumentius, and later on King Ezana went on to bring down the ancient Kingdom of Kush. The writings on the Ezana Stone are praises to God and commemoration of victories in battles against the Nubians.



Filimon and writer in front of the Ezana Stone

I stayed in Axum for three days and Filimon and KB were most excellent companions. In addition to the above most famous places they also took me to a small alleyway café where the lady roasted the beans for each cup and made coffee in the true traditional way. It was an absolutely heavenly brew!



They also showed me some videos they'd made at their university, one of which was shown at the 9th All Africa University Games 2018 hosted by Mekelle University July 1 - 8. (Oh! Just missed it!) Their video was masterfully done for university students and hysterically funny so I'm including a link at the end of this story to the YouTube location where it can be found.

There are Kung Fu clubs in Mekelle but I had 2,000+ years of history to catch up on in this capital city of an ancient empire and only a few short days to grasp it all so alas I didn't hook up with them. If anyone wants to find Kung Fu clubs anywhere in Ethiopia just contact Master Tofik as he's one of the main coordinators with the Ethiopian Wushu Federation. His contact information can be found at the end of this story.

This is a huge country and it has so much to offer, wonderful people, delicious foods, places to see and things to do. But alas my time there was so limited and so I flew back to Addis from Axum Airport.

The African Union headquarters are located in Addis Ababa in a huge compound that also houses a lot of - but not all of the United Nations offices.



Headquarters of the African Union

Due to my wide interests I also visited one of the UNHCR offices and OCHA (Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs).

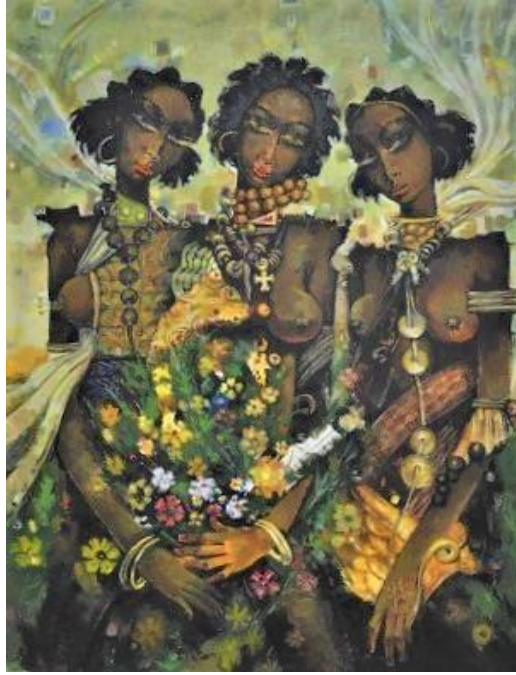
In Addis the National Museum of Ethiopia is a “must see” location, wherein one can visit many of our pre-human ancestors including the highly acclaimed Lucy resting peacefully near quite a number of other ancient links along the long dusty road to humanity.



Rest in Peace grandmother

It is a large collection that includes some of the first photographs taken in Africa, as well as traditional and contemporary art.





A visit there is a journey through the entire history of humankind.

August 8, 2018 - Interview with Abdurahman Alakil

My last day in Ethiopia I was honored to have the opportunity to meet and interview one of the most extraordinary masters I've ever met, the Ethiopian Wushu Federation President Abdurahman Alakil.

Unlike many Wushu Federation Presidents Federation President Alakil has an extensive martial art training background.

His first Wushu training was many years ago with Tofik, and since then he trained at the Shaolin Monastery on Songshan and several other places including Tianjin and Beijing for differing lengths of time.

His forte however is law and he attended the prestigious Renmin University in Beijing to obtain a Chinese Law degree in addition the law degree he earned here in Addis Ababa. No doubt mastery of law is a very powerful branch of Kung Fu which he applies by representing Chinese companies doing business here in Ethiopia. Abdurahman's mastery of six languages, law and martial arts makes him a singularly unique individual - a master worthy of respect in any land.

Asked about the development of Wushu in Ethiopia he said: "We have clubs in every city and small town in Ethiopia now. Also, we have regular instructor training programs and I'll be going to China August 28 this year to find out how to get Chinese instructors here to upgrade our judges training programs and certifications."

I asked what kind of help he's been getting from the Wushu Federation and he enthusiastically reported the Chinese Embassy in Ethiopia has been very supportive as well as the Ministry of Culture. On the subject of their champions getting to international competitions however I found out they still can't afford it and their national team has only attended one in recent years. For now, they're building a solid, well trained national base and when they do get the financing together there's no doubt in my mind they're going to make a huge impression on the international circuit.

During our hour interview we touched on many subjects including teaching Kung Fu to "mixed population" groups (refugees and under-privileged children) here in Addis Ababa in coordination with UNHCR. That however is still in the planning stages and hopefully may be implemented this fall.

Given the end of the war with Eritrea in the north, and the even more recent return of the Oromo peoples in the south, the future for Ethiopia is bright indeed.

With a lot of planning and some help from upstairs hopefully more money can be invested in youth sports and I'm confident that Master Abdurahman has the will, community-oriented mind and social networking resources to do it. After our interview I felt good about a brighter future here in this ancient and supremely beautiful land.

One thing I really wanted to do was visit the Surma (Suri) tribes in the south that are famous for stick fighting, but didn't have time.

At harvest time they have inter-village competitions, and sometimes inter-male competitions within villages, mainly I heard to settle disputes and sometimes just for the opportunity to catch the attention of some special young lady. I was told in most - but not all cases there's a referee to ensure rules are followed. Google by the way has lots of photos. Next time I visit this lovely ancient and modern country I've got to visit the south. Its warmer there I heard and that's where they grow most of the fruits and vegetables for the whole country. I've heard its truly Eden-like.

I also wish I'd had time to take a nature tour in Awash National Park where I was told one can see the large antelope Beisa Oryx, Soemmerring's Gazelle, dwarf antelopes called Dik-Diks, Warthogs, Vervet monkeys, crocodiles, and the rare black and white Colobus Monkey - that for whatever reason, have no thumbs.

All that said, I obviously have to go back. Fifteen days simply isn't enough.

Lastly and I gotta say most sincere thanks to all the most excellent people I met during my short visit to Ethiopia.

This includes Masters Tofik and Teshone, and TDK Master Adisu who hooked me up with these fine gentlemen, all the fantastic Kung Fu students I met at each of the clubs I visited, President of the Ethiopian Wushu Federation Master Abdurahman, Fili and KB there in the truly ancient Tigray region, the great people at Trinity Hotel in Addis who made me feel right at home, especially General Manager Getahun Tsegaye who really selected an incredible staff, other fantastic people I met along the road like Idriz in Nejashi, Awet in Wukro, the Peace Corps lady named Niwot Daniel, a Chinese engineer I met in Addis at a gym near my hotel named Steve Wu, and so many other people who helped me out on busses and the streets.

Leaving such wonderful people is always difficult, but I feel better knowing I'm sharing some of their lives with the readers in Kung Fu magazine and I hope you all plan a vacation soon to visit this magical unbelievably ancient land with such vibrant kind-hearted people. Life can be challenging indeed sometimes but the people of Ethiopia seem to know how to deal with it and still exude a warm-hearted happiness that embraces all who come here. Could I live here? Yes, very happily. A place is just a place but people make it special and I found many very special people here. I love Ethiopia!

Welcome home.

Contacts

- Tofik Shumie - Ethiopia Wushu Coordinator E-mail: tofikShumie@yahoo.com
- Filimon (Actually: Fili Renger Campton) - A lighthearted example of comedy/dance video by some Mekelle University students: "New Mekelle University Vines of 2018 [Part 2] - Camera Photographer KB Miller with Filimon as one of the actors/ dancers.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6Rf-yAKDBA>

Part 23 Wushu Federation in Vietnam



National Men's Sanda Team of Vietnam



National Taolu Team of Vietnam

Hanoi and Loc Yan - Interview with Vietnamese Wushu Federation Secretary General Hoang Quoc Vinh, visits with three of their national teams, to the ancient Thang Long Citadel, National Museum of History, and the beautiful neo-Gothic style St. Joseph Cathedral

Wednesday December 26, 2018

The vacation schedule at my school changes every year and this year I got a two-week vacation during Christmas and New Year's holidays.

Given the 30 below zero weather in Beijing I decided to go someplace warm and sunny, possibly tropical and not too far away – and the answer was... b-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l Vietnam!

Though like the legendary martial artists of old I usually travel alone, this time I brought my trusted friend, companion and sometimes translator Miao Hui with me. There's nothing wrong with being accompanied by a beautiful lady and it's always nice to have a friend there to share new experiences and adventures.

We arrived in Hanoi's modern airport Wednesday afternoon and had arranged an airport pickup to the tune of \$18 which is pretty good for the 45-minute drive to the hotel.

Naturally I picked up a local sim card which fortunately one can do at their international airport though it's surprising how even one's home country sim cards still usually work on roaming, but for GPS accuracy and speed, local sim cards work best.

On the way to the hotel I got the driver to help me learn a little Vietnamese – like for example I found out “hi” is – or at least sounds like: “She Chao,” “thank you” is or at least sounds like: “ga-moon.”

I also got him to teach me the numbers 1 – 100,000, and how to say: “How much?” Which sounds like “*bao-niu*.”

Old-Town District of Hanoi

Then we spent the evening exploring just some of the small streets in the Old-Town district called Hoan Kiem in which one can find Hoan Kiem Lake, Truc Bach Lake and West Lake, as well as the National Museum of History, and a whole lot of other amazing museums, the Temple of Literature, many ancient pagodas, the Ancient Citadel, and wow so much more.

There are lots of tourists in the winding maze-like streets of the Old Town, mostly Europeans but also people from all over Vietnam and Asia giving the area around our hotel a real international flavor. There are thousands of small shops and restaurants and we couldn't resist first diving into bowls of "Pho" which is a lightly fragrant ultra-delicious beef (or chicken) noodle soup with some light green leafy added. A squeeze of lime makes it even more heavenly.



Pho – National dish of Vietnam

The day before I'd e-mailed the Vietnam Wushu Federation Secretary General Hoang Quoc Vinh who ever so kindly got back to me only an hour or so later and that night I sent a text message so we had an appointment for 3:30 at his office in the Vietnamese Sports Administrative Headquarters here in Hanoi.

Late the next morning around 11:35 we got to the National History Museum just after it closed for lunch so we had till 1:30, and - yep - it was time for lunch! Walking down a small street I saw some guys eating something that looked terrific so I stopped and asked 'em what it was, so I tried something called "Gong Zao" which turned out to be the perfect combination of rice, green leafy and lean beef. Again, it was out-of-this-world delicious. So far Vietnam is batting 1000 in my gamebook of great food!

Most restaurants here are on the sidewalks and people eat sitting on little stools with small tables. It's quite comfortable and cheap - remarkable really given the healthy high quality, well-balanced, low fat food. My kind of place!

National History Museum of Vietnam

After that it was time for the National Museum to open and it was a spectacular tour through history. The artifacts there go back to prehistoric times in 30,000 BCE, and included things like farming equipment, jewelry, clothing, swords and knives, lots of stone dragons, and stone and wood Buddhas.



The whole collection was really amazing!



Later one can see a little bit about their long anti-colonial wars – though practically nothing really about what Americans call the “Vietnam War.” That tragic part of history was near the end of a much longer anti-colonial war against the French. The struggles for the independence of the Vietnamese people really started in 1858 and continued till 1945 which was followed by thirty years of war against foreign invaders from 1945 to 1975.



There are other museums that have a lot of things about the “Vietnam War,” including the “Hoa Lo” Prison, what Americans call the Hanoi Hilton, but I don’t know if I’ll have time for all that as I never cared much for the 20th Century in general, and am much more interested in ancient history and Vietnam as it is today – a bustling, prosperous really very exciting and international place.

Vietnam's Wushu Federation Headquarters



After the National Museum of History, we hopped a taxi for the sport administration complex to meet Master Hoang. Lucky, we got there about 30 minutes early which was just about enough time for some spectacularly delicious – no – not food this time – coffee! Oh yes, they have great super-coffee here.

By then it was 3:20 so we strolled across the street, entered the gate of the stately compound and asked the security guard where to go to meet Mr. Hoang Quock Vinh. (Luckily, I had his name written down in Vietnamese because my pronunciation of all things Vietnamese is unquestionably barbarous and completely unintelligible.)

The security guard brought us right to his office which was nice because we probably wouldn't have found it ourselves and he politely introduced us to Master Hoang who was obviously extremely busy though he invited us to sit on his comfortable couch surrounded by lots of plants several of which I think were carnations though I'm no expert on flowers.

At that point I got the idea that Master Hoang is more than just the Secretary General of the Wushu Federation as the competition season is over for the year and he had pretty many people coming in asking for signatures, advice and so on.

So, when a few minutes later they all cleared out - after we exchanged name cards and pleasantries - the first question I asked was: "Are you maybe, in charge of some other sports too, besides Wushu?" and indeed I was right.

"Yes, now I'm taking care of 10 plus sports including Judo, Karate, Silat, Wushu and some others..." I also found out his Chinese "Putonghua" is really very good, better than mine in fact.



I then asked him about his affiliation with Wushu and found out he has a 15-year history with the Asian Wushu Federation and he was for many years the Vice President of the Asian Martial Arts Federation. He's also trained in Wushu, Nanquan specifically and Taolu in several places in China with the longest stay in Wuhan explaining why his Putonghua is so fluent.

His first real martial art training however was in boxing and he was on the National Team from 1983-1986 so he's a real fighter, as well as a gifted Taolu master and top administrator, and I found out an International Referee too. An amazing gentleman to be sure!

"Wushu didn't really come to Vietnam until 1997," he said. I found out since then every year they bring a team to China for training both for competition and judging/refereeing and at this time they have two certified international referees for Shanshou and two for Taolu.

For some odd reason at this point I got a little curious about his age and found out he's 51, which surprised me a bit because he looks more like late 30s or maybe early 40s.

I asked him about how many Wushu students they have now in Vietnam and found out it's more than 10,000 just studying Tai Chi around the country implying the total number is much greater than that, and when they have national competitions the best from each of the 32 provinces participate which adds up to around 400 or so competitors.

"So," I asked "how are your teams doing in international competition?"

"Very good," Hoang answered enthusiastically. "We're ranked usually about 4th or 5th in the world, behind China, Hong Kong, and Macao, and rank about equal with Iran."

"Yep," I agreed, "across the Silk Roads everyone has respect for Iran's martial arts teams."

“They’re very, very good,” he added.

This is something I learned back in the mid-1990s at the first international martial competitions I attended in South Asia. Iran’s Karate, Taekwondo and Wushu teams are nothing short of spectacular.

I asked about some of his champions and he first mentioned Duong Thuy Vi. She started her international competition career doing Taolu back in the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou where she came in 4th. Not too shabby indeed! Every year since then she’s been coming in first or second in the World, Asian and/or Southeast Asian (SEA) Games. He also mentioned Mui Ziang who in the 52 Kilo division has been winning big-time in international Sanshou competitions, and a few other superstars of the international Wushu competition circuit.

Before long Hoang had more business to attend to and called the General Manager of Wushu teams to bring us over to their training hall so we could meet, photograph and interview some of these great young athletes.

National Wushu Training Center

Their national training center is a bit older but obviously serves its function well judging by the results from their competitions. On the first floor is a swimming pool; the Taolu team practices on the third floor and Sanshou training is held on the 4th floor.

First, we met Nguyen Van Chuong who is the General Coach and is usually called something like Zhang Jiaolien which means Coach Zhang. Fortunately, most of the top competitors and coaches with the national teams speak Chinese fairly well.



They have several lady coaches with two coming from China, one being Ju Jin Yi, from Chenyang. She I found out was on the Chinese National Team from Shanxi Province.

Later in the evening I met another lady coach named Nguyen Hi usually called My Duc who mainly teaches Changquan or Long Fist. She trained at Shichahai (the national training center in Beijing) and I found out one of her teachers was the legendary Wu Bin! She's teaching the juniors these days with no doubt the same vigor and skills she learned in China's National Training Center. Now she's married with an eight-year-old daughter, and teaches P.E. during the days at a private international school in Hanoi. But back in the day she was the SEA Games champion five times, won bronze in the Asian Games in 2002, and two golds in 2004. My Duc's introduction to Wushu came when she was eight years old. Her parents decided she was just "toooo thin!" and so brought her to a Wushu club to strengthen her up. She speaks English fairly well.



My Duc training the Junior National Taolu Team

At their National Training Center on this amazing Thursday we got to meet some of their top Taolu competitors, including two amazing young ladies, "Vi" (Duong Thuy Vi), and Hoang Thi Phuting Qiang as well as a young man Pham Quoc Khanh all of whom demonstrated precise, powerful and beautiful technique.

After taking a few photos of their and other team member's training I was fortunate to get at least brief interviews with these very talented Taolu master competitors.

Vi's record I briefly summarized above yet was curious about how and why she got into Wushu in the first place. "My cousin is very overweight," she said, "so his parents sent him to Wushu classes to lose weight. I went with him just for fun. He dropped out after a month but I loved it so much I just didn't want to stop."

The next afternoon we came back to visit the Sanshou Youth Team which was divided into roughly three groups. I had the great honor to be allowed to lead a stretching routine, teach some kick-punch combinations and then introduce slow-motion sparring to them. It was huge fun and they're all very good-natured young men.

That evening we went out with My Duc, her husband and daughter for coffee as she has friends in Luk Yen, a small-town brimming with precious stones, (spinel, sapphires and rubies, tourmaline and garnets) we were planning to visit later on in our adventures in Vietnam.



My Duc, her family, writer and Miao relaxing in Hanoi cafe

Across the street from the Starbucks we went to was the lovely neo-Gothic style St. Joseph Cathedral completed in 1887 by Monseigneur Pigneau de Hehaine.



About 12% of Vietnamese are Buddhist, and 6.2 million or about 7% of Vietnamese are Catholic. Vietnam is very pluralistic as houses of worship of all major religions can be found here though the most popular belief systems are folk religions which include Gods, Goddesses and ancestor religions.

Saturday December 29, 2018

Today Miao had to study for exams at Beijing University so I flew out solo and discovered that Vietnam does have a “winter” of sorts. The weather changed from a daytime sunny 78 degrees to about 45 and it rained pretty hard. Fortunately, I’m an outdoor sport guy too and it’s still heck a lot warmer than Beijing.

Thang Long Citadel

On this day I visited Thang Long Citadel – the Capital City of the Great Viet during the Ly, Tran and Le Dynasties, 11th – 18th Centuries and also High Command Center during the anti-colonial wars.

For a long time the histories they'd uncovered at the Citadel only went as far back as the year 1010 when King Ly Cong Uan moved the capital city from Hoa Lu to Dai La which was then renamed Thang Long, but in 2002 workers found archeological remains under the new National Assembly building going back to the 7th Century. The Citadel once was a fortified city within a city with three concentric walls; the outer wall defined the fortress; the middle wall housed the Imperial Citadel and the inner wall protected the "Forbidden Citadel."



Touring inside one can see archeologists at work meticulously brushing away the centuries from even more ancient ruins underneath, and be invited to drink water from one of the ancient wells as wooden ladles are provided. This location is literally a time capsule into the most ancient Vietnam.

Every day in Vietnam unfolded new vistas of human experience for us and this story of Wushu in Vietnam will be continued in Part 24 of The Silk Road Friendship Tour.

Part 24 Nam Hong Son Bac Ninh Martial Arts in Hanoi

*Interview with Bui Dang Van, Master Instructor of
Nam Hong Son Martial Art in Hanoi in Quan
Thanh Temple and a trip to Luc Yen - a gem
mining and trading town in the far north*

January 2nd 2019 - It was a cool cloudy afternoon when we arrived for our interview with one of the masters of Nam Hong Son martial arts.

Nam Hong Son martial arts

Before describing this experience a few words for travelers. When you travel you really should keep your eyes and mind open to everything local. To go to Vietnam and only look for Chinese Wushu might seem a little odd, perhaps even rude, and in my opinion, stupid. I always look for local martial arts to learn about the indigenous traditions, arts, philosophies, history and so on. I did research before coming here and found several which I contacted on Facebook and it was Bui Dang Van Master Instructor of Nam Hong Son Martial Art that got back to me first, early one morning, so that's the master I interviewed.

First, before anyone showed up at the appointed time and place, we were fascinated by the beauty and power of the ancient temple where Master Bui Dang Van suggested we meet.

According to legend the Quan Thanh Temple was built around 1018 during the reign of Emperor Ly Thai for the purpose of honoring Tran Vu, the Taoist deity of the North. Tran Vu's symbols are the serpent and turtle. It was one of four temples built to protect Hanoi, with the other three being the temples of the South, East and West.



Though the temple has been rebuilt several times some of the stone artwork there is original, and yet the power shines through the 1,000 years of history like a beacon of light through the darkness of time. It's an awesome place surrounded by tall wide tropical ancient trees in a fairly upscale but busy neighborhood in Hanoi.

There was no mistaking the master when he showed up right on time at 4:00 pm as he was dressed in the traditional Vietnamese martial art uniform and walked lightly with a distinct spring in his step, in spite of his obvious great strength.

He invited us to a tea/coffee house next to the temple and with the help of google translator we had a short interview. I found out his style teaches both traditional Vietnamese and Chinese martial art Taolu; the traditional Vietnamese martial arts he practices use about 50/50 kicks and punches, specializes in counterattacks via quickly stepping around and into or under attacks, and uses throws, but rarely. They also train with a variety of weapons.

I asked how many practitioners of Nam Hong Son martial art they have in Vietnam and Master Bui Dang Van said “about a million.” It was developed in Hanoi by Master Nguyen To and then continued by his son. They also have several schools in Germany.

After a short while another gentleman arrived at the tea shop, Master Pham Minh Tuan, a brother martial artist from the same school who speaks English quite well. I also learned their art trains with about 42 different Taolu, 60% of which are Chinese in origin with the others being traditional Vietnamese Taolu. In other words, it appears they may mix styles in competition, but retain the traditional forms of both Vietnamese and Chinese styles at least in training.

Pretty soon after this we went next door into the lovely Quan Thanh Temple and the two masters did demonstrations of their forms and several one-step sparring routines.

It seemed to me Master Bui Dang Van often countered along the centerline into attacks, and either struck the attacking limb with an elbow, evaded or blocked leading into an instantaneous counterattack.



Then came a demonstration with twin maces called Chui in Chinese. Chui trace their ancestry back to very ancient China and are almost always used in pairs. Incidentally Vietnam was part of China for about a thousand years.



According to the most ancient histories the first ruler of Vietnam was Hung Vuong who founded the nation in 2879 B.C.E. Back then Vietnam was called Nam Viet. It was part of China from 111 BCE till the 10th Century. (The Mongolians invaded Vietnam a few times in the 13th Century, temporarily taking the capital but were quickly driven out again.)

After the demonstrations and taking many photos, we gave many thanks to Master Bui Dang Van, walked to a different tea shop located on the busy intersection with Master Pham Minh Tuan who then gave me a ride on his motorcycle to buy some coffee beans from a specialty shop. It was quite exciting really, weaving back and forth through the flood of motorcycles during rush hour in the old city. Then we came back to the temple to pick up Miao who was having tea with a lovely older Vietnamese lady, and that was about it for the day.

On this trip to North Vietnam we had one other great adventure and that was a journey to Luc Yen, a gem mining and trading village. Actually the trip to this gem of a village was before our meeting with the masters of Nam Hong Son Bac Ninh martial arts, and occurred over the (western) New Year holiday, which by the way isn't much of a holiday in Asia as they have their own lunar New Year's holiday which is a much bigger celebration.

Another note for travelers: When you travel get OUT of the big cities and explore the "real" country. This is not to suggest that those big cities aren't "real" but rather the majority of people in most of the world live in villages and farms and that's where the traditional culture and real roots of the nation live on into today.

Luc Yen Village - Gem Capital of Vietnam

One of Miao's hobbies is gem trading and jewelry design and Luc Yen Village, 225 kilometers northwest of Hanoi was/is the place to go.



Nestled in the Tien Phuoc District in the north central province of Quang Nam, Luc Yen is an idyllic village with some classically beautiful stone houses more than 200 years old, lovely mountains and forests, small streets with fantastic real traditional restaurants - not fancy or expensive, just plastic tables and incredible local garden fresh food - gardens checkered with rice paddies nearby and very friendly people reflecting the tranquility of the peaceful harmonious background.

Getting there involved a seven-hour bus ride from Hanoi on a large "sleeper" bed bus, which naturally enough had beds rather than bus seats (a bit like in Kazakhstan). That was interesting.

Do make sure you get someone from your hotel to make reservations first or you might end up sitting on the floor, which was a bit crowded during our ride to Luc Yen. Getting over the people on the floor at the bus stop for refreshments was interesting.

Fortunately, I'm half monkey so I found it quite entertaining. Someone could rent a private car to get to Lok Yen from Hanoi, but miss all that cool cultural experience? Ha! No way!

Our hotel rooms were large, comfortable and clean and had a view of the mountain across the one main street.

We arrived at night and the mountain had some very bright lights on it and I thought maybe they were gem mines, but found out the next morning when the sun rose, they were really marble mines.

Locals in Vietnam by the way can all go out gem mining whenever and wherever they feel like it, and so many people in the town are in the gem business.

Walking along any path in the mountains one may pick up a ruby or emerald. It's a kind of dreamland by my standards!

But it was the market we were interested in. Luckily a lady at our hotel - the daughter of the owners named Lili spoke English and we asked her to accompany us to the market the next day to show us the way and help with translations.



We stopped at a few of the booths and after about 45 minutes of bargaining and testing some of the gems I noticed a tea shop across the street with quite a number of local gentlemen apparently sitting around quite enjoying themselves.

Before coming to Vietnam I'd done at least a little research and read that in rural areas often the women worked while the men sit around, smoke cigarettes and drink tea. And, on first glance that's what it looked like.

However, after ordering some tea and chatting a bit - sort of - with the guy who ran the place, another man came along with a rather big stone of some kind. It was interesting to see how the pulse of the place quickened as the discovery was passed around for appraisals. In some cases, most of the men would get up and form a circle out in the sunshine to evaluate a new stone.



One gentleman in particular appeared to be a leader of sorts in that he wore a fine suit, had a gold watch, seemed especially knowledgeable and people showed him quite a bit of respect. His pronouncements on the stones seemed to settle matters when it came to new gemstones fresh off the mountains. Later on, I found he was the manager of the market.

Pretty soon I learned it was the men that evaluated the big stones when they come in from the mines. The ladies across the road in the market take care of the small cut and polished stones, while the men evaluate the large rough stones. Some of the larger stones are multi-million-dollar gems, but it takes a keen eye and a great deal of experience to differentiate the great stones from the average especially in “rough” (uncut and polished) form. A little cloudiness, almost invisible fractures, etc. can be the difference between a fortune and failure.

Another interesting thing about the market is that the men sometimes passed around a bamboo bong. Yes, a bong. They offered me a “hit” and at first, I waved it off, but pretty soon curiosity got the better of me and I tried it. Omg! The tobacco they put in it was pretty coarse and I did cough a bit... They laughed merrily and so did I, between coughs.

Before long, drinking tea and chatting in my limited way I started to feel accepted and relaxed in the pleasant little shop with the local guys. The next day I tried the bong again after watching how they modulated their inhalation so I didn’t cough.

Later on we started to run out of cash and had to get an ATM that would accept one of our cards, settled some deals quickly, packed quickly, gave a gift to Lily in the hotel who’d been so helpful translating, and waited on the main street for the bus back to Hanoi. Incidentally in Hanoi there is a gem certification laboratory where one can get certificates for gemstones in just a few hours.

Not the ending

Our flight back to Beijing was in the middle of the night so we only got a couple of hours sleep before heading to the airport where I happily ate a last bowl of Pho, because... it was just that great.

People think traveling is all fun, and mostly it is. But the way I travel I spend long enough in new places to start to feel at home. Then! OMG! I have to leave. Leaving a new-found love is not easy. The Wushu people here were welcoming, helpful and kind, the hotel staff most excellent, the people we met on streets and in restaurants wonderful. But this is the traveler’s life.

In sum Vietnam appeared to me to have a thriving economy, sincere, hardworking friendly people with great humor and joy of life, the food was delicious and healthy, the scenery lovely, and I found it to be all good. True, some realities can and never should be forgotten, but on the other hand at some point we have to leave old stereotypes behind and recognize things as they are today, here and now in reality. Vietnam is a beautiful land with beautiful people; we're both going to miss it, and will (God Willing!) come back soon. To know Vietnam is to love Vietnam.

Part 25 Wushu in the Land of the Rising Sun

Interviews with Japan Wushu Taijiquan Federation Officials and National Team Coach Sun Jian Ming, Extraordinary Martial Histories and Silk Road Sites



Tokyo skyline with Mt. Fuji in the background taken from the Tokyo Skytree
(東京スカイツリー) Photo by M. Hui

January 28, 2019 - Tokyo - I've been to Japan a few times before some 10+ years ago when I was a teacher in Korea and had to do "visa runs" to Japan to renew my Korean visas. But that was Fukuoka and this is Tokyo, the capital city since 1869 at the beginning of the Meiji Restoration and the end of the *Pax Tokugawa* Shogun Era.

Though officially Tokyo has “only” 13 million people, if one includes the suburban areas it’s actually much larger. In any case Tokyo is a huge city and the heart of one of the world’s most dynamic economies and greatest martial art cultures.

Once again, I was traveling with friend Miao Hui. Though she can’t speak Japanese, the written language is mostly the same as Chinese which I can’t read very well. Never underestimate the value of being able to read, or the presence of a good friend. She’d actually arrived a week before me for the International Jewelry Tokyo (IJT) exposition. Always the thrifty one she’d rented an apartment in Shinjuku District near the Shinto Hanazono Shrine - which by the way has offered divine protection to the Shinjuku area of Tokyo for many centuries. It seems everything in Japan has significance not to be underestimated.

The same afternoon I arrived in Tokyo I called the Japan Wushu Taijiquan Federation (JWTF) Office and to my surprise got an interview for the very next morning. Luckily Miao had already scouted out the subway system and we found the Federation headquarters easily. Subway really is the best way to get around huge cities and Tokyo, like Beijing has an entire city under the city with shopping malls, restaurants and everything else along with the ultra-modern, clean, quiet and safe subways.

How is it different from China in this regard? Japanese have taken courtesy to stratospheric levels; beyond anything I’ve ever seen. Certainly, in Beijing people are very polite and helpful. But in Tokyo for example on escalators everyone stands on the right side in case someone else is in a hurry and has to rush up or down quickly. Everyone follows the social rules. Everyone. On the subways nobody talks on the phone as it might disturb other passengers, though of course all subways have highspeed internet connections.

Japan Wushu Taijiquan Federation

Arriving about five minutes early for our interview we were greeted by young Mr. Kodai Kato who helps coordinate things there in their offices. He showed us to a comfortable room and invited us to sit on the couch. Within a few moments the JWTF Executive Director Hiroo Kawasaki, International Exchange Committee Vice-President Seiichi Agarihama, and their media director Kazumasa Nagae came in and introductions were made. This of course included an exchange of name cards so naturally we all dutifully examined each other's name cards which actually is a useful kind of habit because they usually explain pretty much about who is who. I also love name cards because they help make sure I spell everyone's name correctly and get official titles correct. (In different places and times, I've had people say: "Oh, just check the internet." Trust the Internet? Oh, please no!)



Japan Wushu Federation Officials Left to Right Kodai Kato,
Federation Secretary General Hiroo Kawasaki, writer G.B., Seiichi
Agarihama and Kazumasa Nagae

First, I asked Executive Director Kawasaki about the origin of the JWTF. His English is pretty good but International Exchange Committee Vice-President Seiichi Agarihama helped out here and there to ensure clear smooth translations.

“In 1987 the Wushu Association started in Japan with the help and guidance of Mr. Muraokyuhei. At that time there were so many Wushu groups in Japan, though he’s not a Wushu enthusiast himself. Instead at that time he was the Japan-China Friendship Association (JCFA) Executive Director, and after he became president of the Japan Wushu Federation. Back then there were very few open channels with China and Wushu helped to bring the countries together.”

“Martial arts uniting the world again,” I thought with some deep appreciation of this statement. Though the casual observer may find this paradoxical, it is the foundation of my motivation for the entire Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour series.

As the Chinese say: 不打不相识 (bù dǎ bù xiāng shí) - which means “Out of blows, friendship grows,” or literally translated as “Don’t fight, don’t know.” Martial arts are indeed a very powerful way to bring people and cultures together. Does anyone remember Rocky IV? That was 1985 - six years later the walls came tumbling down and it was all bro-hugs and Kumbaya between the U.S. and Russia for a couple of decades at least.

1987 saw the inauguration of the Wushu Federation of Asia (WFA), an international Wushu organization founded September 25th in Yokohama, Japan. Its goal is to enhance the corporation and friendship of Asian Wushu, to improve Wushu technique and to promote the development of Wushu in Asia. Eleven countries joined including China, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand, Philippines, Nepal, Malaysia, Macau, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia.

Thus, I can presume Wushu helped “open channels” all around Asia, and yes that is a vague allusion to the “*qi*” (sometimes spelled “*chi*”, or in Japanese “*ki*”) energy channels so critical to health in Chinese medicine and power in martial arts.

In regards to next year when Tokyo will hold the 2020 Olympics, Executive Director Kawasaki mentioned “In 2020 the JWTF will hold the 3rd Taolu World Cup in Tokyo.” He added that “In 2018 the 2nd Taolu World Cup was held in Myanmar with 21 countries and 80 athletes participating.” Japan also sent a team.

At this point I asked about his Wushu background. In response I learned that in 1976 he went to Beijing and studied Wushu full-time, specifically Tai Chi Chuan Tuishou (pushing hands) and sword arts.

Also, at Nankai University in China he studied Yang style Tai Chi with a Chinese traditional teacher.

Seeking to learn about the current development of Wushu around Japan I asked: “How many Wushu clubs are there around Japan at this time?”

“There are 47 prefecture federations in Japan and each has annual Wushu competitions with the winners coming together for national competitions. The winners of those are most often from Tokyo and Osaka. And there is the Japanese Students’ Association, and many university martial art Tai Chi associations.”

“How many nationally and internationally certified coaches do you have here?” I asked.

“We have 35 high-level trained in China including 4 Chinese master coaches,” JWTF Executive Director Kawasaki responded.

It seems to me that many countries have several Wushu teams, e.g. women's, men's, juniors, Paralympics, etc., so I asked how many teams they have. "We have just one national team practicing Taolu, Nanquan, and Tai Chi Chuan."

"How about Sanshou(?)" I asked.

"Oh yes, they are practiced here too, with Sanda training centers in Tokyo and Osaka."

About how many International competitions does your national team go to every year?

In 2018 we competed in several international competitions, like the -

- 7th World Junior Wushu Championship in Brasilia, Brazil,
- 1st World University Wushu Championships held in Macau in August, the
- 2018 Asian Games held in Indonesia August 18th to September 2nd the
- Taolu World Cup competition this past November and the
- First Asian Traditional Wushu (Kung fu) Championship in Nanjing, East China in November, 2018.

How many athletes does your team usually send?

"It depends on a lot of things, but for example we sent seven athletes to Myanmar," JWTF Executive Director Kawasaki answered.

Who pays for your team's attendance at international competitions?

"The Federation pays for some competitions but it depends on the competition."



公益社団法人 日本武術太極拳連盟
JAPAN WUSHU TAIJIQUAN FEDERATION

Does the Federation pay your national team members?

“No, we don’t pay athletes,” he said with a chuckle, “they have their own jobs; we don’t have a professional team. We do offer them a place but they don’t live here.

“What percentage of federation costs does the government pay?” I asked.

“Almost nothing,” JWTF Executive Director Kawasaki answered adding “Some companies like Asics pay an advertising fee in our monthly newsletter and that helps.”

So, you have a sponsor list? I asked, “Yes, but it’s a local list and very short really.”

It was around this time that JWTF Executive Director Kawasaki was called away for other business and we chatted with International Exchange Committee Vice-President Seiichi Agarihama for a while. I asked if he could share some photos from his team’s competitions and he asked media director Kazumasa Nagae to show us to some offices where several people were working. Mr. Nagae fired up a computer and, in a minute, or so showed me some files with lots of great photos, of which I picked out a dozen or so to share with readers of Kung Fu magazine. Before long we bid our adieus but not before arranging to visit later on in the day to meet with the national team and some of the coaches.

Visit with Japan's National Wushu Team

We got back to the training center about 7 pm and went to the second floor where at least part of the national team was training and first met and chatted with legendary Head Coach Sun Jian Ming.

Having worked on this series of articles for a few years now I've met quite a number of head coaches but this was the first time I met a real movie star. Head Coach Sun Jian Ming was a student alongside with Li Lianjie known in the west as Jet Li. "Back in the day" they were students of legendary Chinese coach Wu Bin. Head Coach Sun Jian Ming went on to become a movie star in many - then blockbuster movies in China in the 1980s including *Xia Jiang Yiyong* (1985) and *Shan Zhong Liu Zhu* (1987).

Naturally he's a good friend of Yi Lian Jie (Jet Li) and many other luminaries in the martial arts world.

He first came to Japan some thirty-three years ago to teach Wushu and clearly likes it here. Because of his contributions to Japan of his expert Wushu instruction the Japanese government even offered him a Japanese passport, but he said, he politely declined, as his roots and heart are in China. Needless to say, his Japanese language is very good. During the day I found out he teaches at his own clubs, and in the evenings comes to the JWTF national training center to coach the national team.

Head Coach Sun Jian Ming was very kind during our visit and even did a little Tuishou with me later on the evening. During the training session he managed to keep an eye on all team members' training simultaneously and it seemed to me he had "eyes in the back of his head" the way he could offer instruction to all and any team member even with so many practicing at the same time in different parts of the large gym. The bond between coach and team members is always a close one and I could see why this team has done so well in competitions.



During our visit to the national team training center I also did a short interview with one of their rising star Taolu champions, Tomohiro Araya.



Tomohiro Araya

At age 24 Tomohiro has had a steady climb in the Wushu world in Asia. Thus far he's competed in nine international competitions. At the 2017 World Cup he took first place in Tai Chi Sword and in the 2018 Asian Games he came in second which is pretty good going up against many of the toughest competitors in the Wushu world. I asked how he got into Wushu and like several other champions I've met he followed his older brother, however in his case his brother didn't quit later (like most do) on but instead went on to a successful career coaching. I asked Tomohiro if he'd trained in China and he said yes, every year over the New Year holidays he goes to train with the Fujian (south China) provincial team.

Just an incidental note here, in Japan they celebrate the Gregorian calendar New Year holiday, that is January 1st, and have since the Meiji Restoration. This actually worked out well for me because if Japan celebrated the Lunar New Year like in China, I wouldn't have been able to accomplish half of what I did in Japan because this year's Lunar New Year landed in the middle of my vacation in Japan.

Miao asked Tomohiro "which is harder, learning Tai Chi or Chinese language?" and he laughed answering "Tai Chi is more difficult." Most of the interviews this evening by the way were conducted in Chinese.

Before long we asked Head Coach Sun to help set up a group photo and then had to leave as it was getting late.



In the second part of this Kung Fu Friendship Tour - Wushu in Japan, Kung Fu Magazine roaming reporter Greg Brundage explores some of Japan's most sacred, beautiful and historic locations culminating in visits to the Samurai Museum as well as the world headquarters of Judo, the Kodokan where he did randori – like Judo sparring with some unbelievably great players – where he was very fortunate not to get squashed like a bug, and then the next day a very famous traditional Kendo school where he trained and competed with some of the world's finest sword masters – and was very fortunate not to get chopped into liver pate. Japanese courtesy and attention to exacting detail is lovely indeed and allows for the development of skills otherwise unattainable.

For those who care to learn my principles of combat strategy, follow these rules in observing the Way.

1. Think never to veer from the Way
2. Train unremittingly in the Way
3. Acquaint yourself with all arts
4. Know the Ways of all vocations

5. Discern the truth in all things
6. See the intrinsic worth in all things
7. Perceive and know what cannot be seen with the eyes
8. Pay attention even to trifles
9. Do not engage in superfluous activities

Quote from “The Earth Scroll” (8)

The *Book of Five Rings* and Other Works

By Miyamoto Musashi (1643) Translated by Alexander Bennett, Tuttle Publications (2018 Ed.) P. 80

Notes

Japan Wushu Taijiquan Federation

Tel: +81 3 6231 4911

URL: <https://www.jwtf.or.jp/>

Email: jwtf@jwtf.or.jp

The China Japan Friendship Association

<http://en.cpaffc.org.cn/content/details28-672.html>

Wushu Federation of Asia: <http://wfa-asia.org/en/page-01>

The Olympic Council of Asia also has lots of fascinating events for the sports-minded

<http://www.ocasia.org/>

Part 26 Wushu in the Land of the Rising Sun Continued



In Part 26 of this series the intrepid Silk Roads Kung Fu reporter Greg Brundage continues his adventures in Japan exploring some of Japan's most sacred, beautiful and transcendent locations including the imperial palace, two magnificent ancient Zen Temples, the totally awesome Himeji Castle and Samurai Museum, culminating in visits to the world Judo headquarters the Kododan and one of Japan's more illustrious traditional Kendo schools where he trained with some of the world's finest martial artists.

One of the reasons I wanted to visit Japan was to see an old family friend Professor Fujimoto who I lost contact with for thirty years, then he found me on the internet and we've been corresponding for the past few years.

A retired physics professor now, he's been active in tourism development for several years.

One of the unique things about Japan is that one can see a lot of older people doing all kinds of jobs, largely because Japan has a negative population growth of 0.19%, ranking 214th in the world.

In any case old friends are the best friends and I was quite eager to reconnect with one of my most enlightening mentors when I was a teenager.

So not long after leaving Tokyo we went to Takamatsu City in central Kagawa Prefecture on the island of Shikoku to visit him. That was a heartfelt reunion for me because he had been like a member of my family - an older brother - for many years back in the 1970s while he was in Graduate School.

He ever so kindly volunteered to guide us around Kyoto - the old capital of Japan, and Nara - the even older capital of Japan and major Silk Road trading center during our visit.

Our mode of transport outside Tokyo was the Shinkansen, sometimes called the “bullet train” as they travel around 200 miles per hour and are very comfortable and quiet with USB ports for every seat, food and other comforts of home. We spent our first night at Professor Fujimoto’s home and the next morning set out early for Kyoto.

Kyoto Imperial Palace

Surrounded by mountains Kyoto has a physical and spiritual essence like no other place.

One can wonder if the gently sloping hills shaped the calm and peaceful nature of the people that have lived there since the tenth day of the tenth month of 794, when the 50th Emperor of Japan Kammu moved to his new capital.

The palace we visited like many buildings in Japan was destroyed by fire and rebuilt several times and the structure there today combines the minimalist simplicity of Japanese traditional arts with ancient design, and the final result is almost ultra-modern with clean simplicity, natural wood beams and white plaster walls.



Hall for State Ceremonies

Strolling through the lanes in front of the various administrative buildings I first really noticed the Shishinden, or Hall for State Ceremonies, “The most important building in the Kyoto Imperial Palace.”

The royal residences I noticed had one building called Araumi-No-Shoji which the sign said was described in “The Pillow Book,” written by Sei Shonagon during the Heian Period. That’s an interesting read for those over 18!

Not far away was a manicured gravel yard with a sign saying: “Playground for Kemari.” And what, pray tell is Kemari? Simply put a kind of football that came from China to Japan during the Yamato period approximately 1,400 years ago.

There are no winners or losers in this game and the goal is to kick the ball from one player to the next while keeping it off the ground.

Though originally a sport for royalty, warriors played this game enthusiastically during the Kamakura Period (1185–1333). All in all, it looked like the Emperors and their families had a pretty good time. Though I could easily spend a few years exploring all facets of life of the royalty in ancient Japan, it was off to our next stop, Kyoto Ginkakuji Zen Temple

Ginkakuji Zen Temple



Though I've traveled widely, Ginkakuji Zen Temple is one of the most serenely simple, natural, peaceful places I've ever experienced.

In 1482, Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa built this Temple as a retirement villa on the grounds of today's temple, modeling it after Kinkakuji (Golden Pavilion), his grandfather's retirement villa located at the base of Kyoto's northern mountains.

It was converted as per his directions into a Zen Temple upon his death in 1490, two years before Christopher Columbus sailed the oceans blue.

The main building called the Silver Pavilion is the main hall, and there are only half a dozen other smaller structures. Most of the "temple" consists of the softest delicately colored moss gardens and ancient forests on the surrounding hillsides which we strolled for more than an hour.

Though it was still winter in early February, there were bright greens and flowering trees. It's really quite astonishingly beautiful - an awakening unto itself.

Unlike his grandfather's Kitayama culture which was restricted to aristocratic circles, Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa promoted many contemporary arts that influenced all of Japan, including tea ceremony, flower arranging, Noh Theater, poetry, garden design and architecture. Thus, Ginkakuji Zen Temple represented a kind cultural epicenter for a renaissance period in Japan's history - all of which was and remains perfectly harmonized with nature. Just for the record, the words "Kung Fu" really refer to the transcendent skills needed for all of these arts.

As the sun was majestically descending towards the horizon splashed with gold and pinks against the azure background, we moved on towards the train station where we set course for Nara, the ancient capital city before Kyoto and at one time the major Silk Road center in Japan.

Silk Road Nara's Horyuji Temple



The next morning, we hooked up with Professor Fujimoto right after breakfast as he'd stayed the night with a friend in Nara.

Then it was off to Nara Horyuji Temple. Professor Fujimoto introduced this temple as the world's oldest surviving wooden structure which meant a lot to me as it wasn't a reconstruction but rather then real thing from the most ancient times, specifically the year 607.

It was built by Prince Shotoku, one of the earliest promoters of Buddhism in Japan. Before entering there is a small bathtub shaped well with a dragon looking on with bamboo cups above.

Professor Fujimoto asked us to wash our hands as this is an ancient tradition at the temple. Upon entering we were greeted by Japan's two oldest statues of Kongo Rikishi, a pair of quite muscular guardian deities looking as fresh as ever in spite of their enormous age.



Besides the spiritual uplift of this most ancient monastery, from art history and cultural transformation points of view it's quite fascinating as one can see the evolution of the Japanese Buddha from the more Indian appearance of the most ancient statues to the transformations during the Heian Period (794-1185) to a more Japanese appearance.

For me this is especially interesting as in Afghanistan I saw the Indian Buddhas transformed by Hellenic influences due to Alexander the Great's artisans, and how those later on in history transformed into more Chinese versions.

Indeed, it seems by visiting Japan I've reached the Eastern end of the Great Silk Roads and witnessed the melding of artistic and cultural influences through most of those great roads west and east.

Yes, Japan is most certainly part of the Maritime Silk Roads, and most especially the ancient port city of Nara, yet ultimately all are connected by culture, spiritualism of one kind or another, and arts of all kinds endlessly permutating to harmonize the great beliefs that bond all people regardless of race, religion and geographic region together.

Incidentally Horyuji Temple is only one of several most incredible ancient sites located in Nara Park. In addition to the fabulous history, art, culture landmarks in Nara Park one can buy some special crackers and feed the local deer. For some real entertainment bow to the deer before giving the crackers and the deer will bow back, if he or she feels so inclined. It's quite endearing.

Fujinoki Tumulus Tomb

Only 400 meters west of Horyuji Temple we visited an ancient tomb located within a burial mound called the Fujinoki Tumulus Tomb with earthenware, bronze saddles, harnesses, and "war related materials" including swords and other artifacts from ancient Balkh - Afghanistan - and China. Though the tour guide wasn't specific, it appears the occupant of that ancient tomb was probably a wealthy trader, ambassador or other VIP of some kind. Here indeed was proof of the ancient Silk Roads. I was no less astonished to find out that my dear friend Professor Fujimoto's ancient clan didn't get along too well with the Fujinoki clan! Omg! Though we couldn't get into this burial chamber, there was a small museum/research center nearby and got to see mostly (quite real looking) replicas of the artifacts found within. The artwork in for example the gilt bronze saddle fitting was quite exquisite, though I kept my praise to a minimum at the time to spare my dear friend's feelings. And then there were the prickly leaf-shaped harness pendants, the gilt bronze crown, the huge gilt bronze shoes and yes, quite an amazing heavy and decorative sword. Wow!

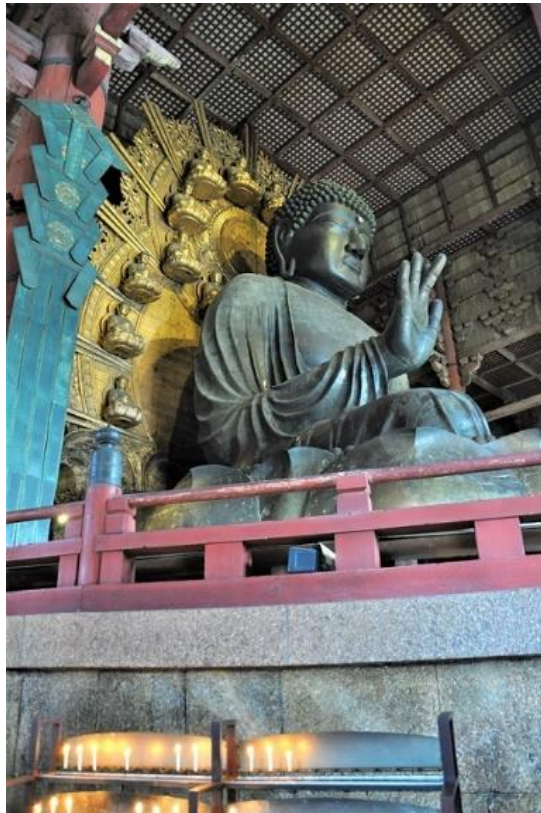


Ancient sword in the Fujinoki Tumulus Tomb

Todai-Ji Temple (also in Nara Park)



Its' Great Buddha Hall called Daibutsuden houses the world's largest bronze statue of the Buddha Vairocana called Daibutsu in Japanese. The original temple was built in 728, then promoted to become the administrative head of Yamato Province and the head monastery of all the provincial monasteries. In 743 Emperor Shomu ordered the construction of a Great Buddha and it was completed in 749.



Practically the whole place was burned down and rebuilt a couple of times at least.

One quite unique artifact that caught my eye at Nara's Todai Ji Monastery was the wood statue of Pindola Bharadvaja, renowned for being the "Master Healer."



People believe that by rubbing a part of the very smooth wooden Arhat (a perfected person/disciple of the Buddha) they would be healed in the corresponding part of their body. What struck me looking at this figure is that he's such a happy looking human sort of fellow in spite of being wood and three hundred years old. In any case I was impressed by his cheery demeanor, a silent lesson to be learned by all those in the health professions. One will not find a better polished Buddha anywhere in my opinion.

All that done but never finished we headed back to the Shinkansen and Takamatsu dazzled by the day's experiences. We slept at Professor Fujimoto's apartment one last night and in the morning had to say farewell to my dear friend. In spite of being 70 years old I must say he's very spry moving along quicker everywhere faster than Miao and I; up earlier in the morning and never seemed to get tired in the least. He's really a remarkably healthy happy guy with seemingly endless energy, good will, a happy smile rather like Pindola Bharadvaja in fact, and terrific sense of humor.

Himeji Castle



Though we were really heading back to Tokyo, there was one other stop we absolutely had to make, at “Himeji-jo,” or “White Heron Castle.” Though once a Feudal stronghold of immense proportions, these days it gazes down benignly upon the town of Himeji with silent awesome, impenetrable, reassuring power.

In ancient Japan most towns were castle towns as feudalism was the normal state of affairs at least till the shogun era. Himeji-jo however may have been the grandest of all and remains one of the world’s most impressive martial structures. Simply put, this castle is a killing machine. It’s so deadly nobody ever even tried to conquer it.

Built between 1581 and 1609 the castle is constructed with a maze pattern of fortified walls and gates with a six-story massive tower at the center. The whole structure is surrounded by multiple defensive walls built to catch any invader in cross-fire. And then there's the double moats and there were two outer walls that have since mostly been demolished.

Even in the inner keep, hidden wooden paneled windows open to allow shooters hiding in the walls to kill any invaders that might have made it in (which never happened). The whole place spells death to an invader. Touring it one quickly figures out why it was never taken in battle. It's a death trap from the outside in, inside out and from every angle. Not only did it survive untouched through numerous wars, it even survived the Meiji Restoration when most castles were dismantled and WWII unscathed. Likewise, Himeji Castle shrugged off the Hanshin Earthquake of 1995 without a scratch.

Like most great castles Himeji-jo has some pretty awesome ghost stories, most of which are based on fact. Take for example the story of Princess Sen, born "Senhime" in 1597 the first daughter of Tokugawa Hidetada. At age seven she was married to Toyotomi Hideyori as a political gesture of goodwill as the two clans had been at war. Thus, her married life was "not comfortable" and she was in fact a hostage.



In 1615 when she was 18 the clans fought again for control of Japan in Osaka. Though Tokugawa won, she stayed with her husband till Shogun Ieyasu sent a man to “rescue” her, promising him her hand in marriage if he succeeded, which he did. Ever the loyal wife, she begged the Shogun to forgive her husband; he refused. Hideyori then committed ritual suicide.

Princess Sen however absolutely did not want to marry the warrior that kidnapped her from her now disgraced and deceased husband, and instead married the handsome Honda Tadatoki moving in with him at – Himeji Castle.

This was a happier marriage as she actually loved the handsome and gallant Honda Tadatoki. They had two children however her son died when he was three. Princess Sen at that time was only 25.

Her husband Tadatoki died of tuberculosis five years later, so by the age of 30 the noble princess had lost two husbands and a son.

She then went home to Edo, had her hair shaved and became a nun living a quiet life of contemplation till the age of seventy.

Would she haunt the castle? I seriously doubt it, but ghosts in the castle? Lots no doubt as even the massive outer protective walls have even more ancient stone coffins built into them purloined from graveyards for the construction process almost 500 years ago.

After that for us it was a straight shot back to Tokyo where we checked in at a hotel.

The next morning, we visited the Samurai Museum which was totally excellent, provided one wasn’t on the receiving end of one of those Samurai’s swords “back in the day.”



One of Miyamoto Musashi's Swords – Price? Priceless!



Kodokan - World Judo Capital

In the afternoon one of my lifelong dreams came true when I got to go to the world headquarters of Judo, the Kodokan and do randori (judo sparring) with the masters.

Incidentally the word Judo is composed of two words from Chinese, *róu* (柔) meaning soft / flexible / supple / yielding and *dào* (道 Tao) meaning road / path / principle / truth / morality / reason / skill / method.

I started with about the biggest strongest looking black belt there just because I thought after him everyone else would be easy and I must say I'm lucky he didn't squash me like a bug because I'm sure he could of easily.



Writer practicing randori with a 6th or 7th Dan master

Fortunately, he's a real gentleman and I had the pleasure of at least trying to throw him. I think I may have almost slightly surprised him once with a double O-kuri-ashi-harai foot-sweep however he countered my initial attack immediately with the same attack and then I countered his counter with the same attack but it didn't work anyways, even if he was maybe, slightly surprised.

I was the state high school and Junior Olympic gold medal winner in judo in 1973, but that was a long time ago!

Doing randori with him was like trying to throw Mount Fuji, it just wasn't going to happen. He did manage to throw me once, but he seemed to think it was no more than a *wazari*, or half point. In any case it was great fun and I did randori with half a dozen other black belts after that and my theory was correct, they seemed easier in comparison! All in all, it was a joy and dream come true to work/play with the masters of judo in the Kodokan!

Kyumeikan - Kendo Dojo

The next afternoon I found a traditional Kendo dojo on the internet, called them up and made arrangements to train with them in the evening. Called the Kyumeikan Kendo Dojo I was really happy to find most excellent Sensei teaching under the second-generation patriarch Akira Kubo, who holds a 7th Dan ranking - one Dan below 8th which is the highest. There I received classic Kendo training and a terrific workout. I'd brought my Kendo uniform and armor with me from Beijing (which I'd brought to China from Korea) and dearly wanted to have a good Kendo connection in Japan and consider myself fortunate indeed to have found this traditional, yet international dojo which has branch schools all over the world.

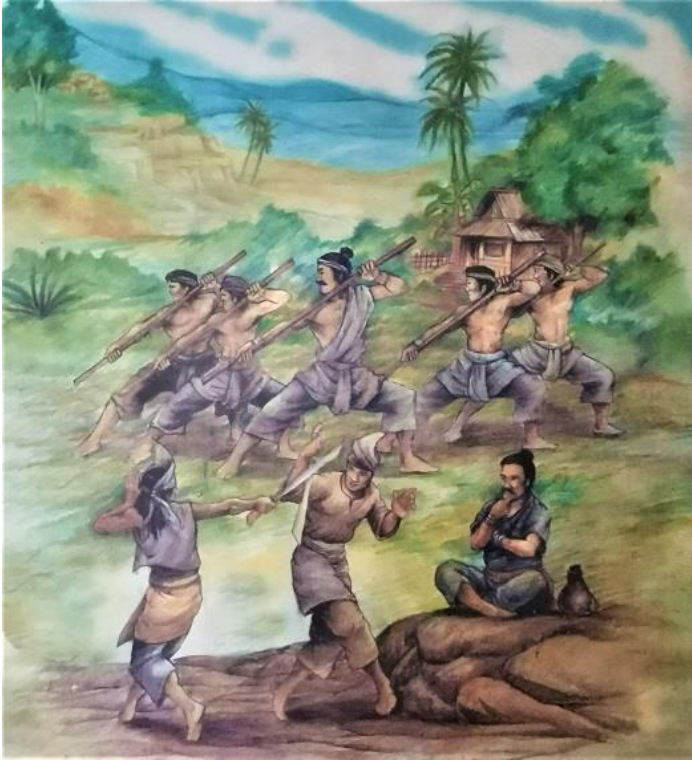
After training I had a short time to interview Master Kubo who said among other things that Kendo is the apex of the martial arts world.

In a way I understand what he means. The mind can cut, separating this from that and unify bringing things back together. I would very much enjoy exploring this topic further with him the next time we meet.



In any case, it was a brilliant and meaningful conclusion to our Wushu journey in Japan and like always I must give thanks to so many people we met along the road in Tokyo, Kyoto, Nara, Himeji-jo, and most especially my dear professor Fujimoto in Takamatsu. We will - God willing - meet again. Japan? I love it. It's clean and beautiful, minimalist in important ways, highly disciplined and organized. It's a good place to live and I believe I could be quite happy there.

Part 27 Kung Fu in Indonesia



Visit with the National Wushu Team in Jakarta, Meeting Hobbits, Buddhas and Hindu Gods in the National Museum, Introduction to Pencak Silat and Journey up Kawah Putih, or White Crater Volcano

At the nexus of Oceania and Asia and our own little blue planet's massive tectonic plates lies a string of 17,500 tropical paradise-like islands, all formed from volcanos, with some 7,000 of them remaining free of human habitation.

One group of islands in Indonesia formerly known as the Maluku or Spice Islands were part of the Maritime Silk Roads at least since the 4th Century when Arab traders introduced cloves to Europeans. At that time, nutmeg and cloves – indigenous to the Malukus were worth their weight in gold.

It was in Jakarta however, the bustling capital city of Indonesia with 10 million plus people on the northwest coast of Indonesia's largest island Java that we woke up Friday July 19, 2019. Those who follow these Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour series of articles already know these days I'm often accompanied by my companion Miao Hui, who dabbles in gems and jewelry along the fabled Silk Roads.

National Museum of Indonesia

Hooking up with a Wushu Federation usually takes a few days, so for me it was a “day off, and to me a “day off” means a trip to the National Museum which in Indonesia is known as the “Elephant Building” (Gedung Gajah) where the roots of indigenous cultures can be found, and indeed in such museums I usually meet up with the most unlikely of old friends, in this case the original Hobbits.

“Remains of one of the most recently discovered early human species, *Homo floresiensis* (nicknamed ‘Hobbit’), have so far only been found on the Island of Flores, Indonesia. The fossils of *H. floresiensis* date to between about 100,000 and 60,000 years ago, and stone tools made by this species date to between about 190,000 and 50,000 years old.”

<http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/species/homo-floresiensis>



Homo floresiensis AKA the 'Hobbit'

The collection there is a magic teleportation through time for example upon entry I was met by a colossal 4.5m (14.7 foot) stone image of a Bhairawa (Hindu Tantric deity; manifestation of Shiva) king from Rambahan (possibly Nepal) found in Sumatra (3rd largest of the Indonesian Islands), who was calmly standing upon an alter supported by human skulls.



And then there were all manner of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, not to mention fabulous clothing belonging to the ancient high and mighty, Chinese porcelain, weapons, and in fact the full panorama of human endeavor and international civilization one might expect to find in an extremely ancient maritime Silk Road nation.



Brahma 10th C Central Java

Indonesian National Wushu Training Center

On July 23rd, we had the honor and privilege of visiting the Indonesian National Wushu Training Center and the opportunity to interview the coaches and some of the team. First, we talked with Assistant Coach Anatjhan who in his day was three times Asian Games and SEA Games Champion. He's a successful Chinese Indonesian whose grandfather moved here from China. He was very helpful during our visit - from my first phone calls and throughout our stay. Also helpful is the fact his English is very good. He trained in Wushu in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Fujian, specializing in spear and sword.



Indonesian National Team Coach Zhang Yue Ning

He then introduced us to Iwan Kwok, Deputy Secretary General of the Indonesia Wushu Association, Technical Committee Member of International Wushu Federation and FISU (Fédération Internationale du Sport Universitaire) Technical Delegate for Wushu Sport. I asked him about Wushu's popularity in Indonesia and he said there were about 30 Wushu clubs in Jakarta, 20 - 30 clubs in Surabaya and others around the country.



"Former athletes retire and open new clubs," he said, "with some teaching at a few clubs." I also found out the taolu team trains every year in China whereas the Sanda team trains in Iran. This doesn't surprise me as Iranian teams have some of the best coached and spirited fighters in the world - in all martial arts.

I asked about his Wushu background and he said he started at age 16 in 1995, which he reported "really is too old." He first started learning Wushu in North Sumatra. His first teacher he described as a "normal person," but good enough to help him get selected for the provincial team. Then, tragedy struck and he needed eye surgery, though he kept practicing. Two years ago, he trained as an International Judge and earned certification. He said Indonesia currently has six coaches certified for judging international taolu, and five for Sanda.

I asked about the Technical Committee of the International Wushu Federation and found out the Wushu Federation in China in 2018 started working on standardizing the grading and promotion systems, a development most will agree is a worthy task indeed. Researching the Wushu Federation Technical Committee, I found there are only 11 members in the world and thus Mr. Kwok is at the vanguard of developments in the Wushu world.

I asked about the stars of the Indonesian team and heard about Lindswell Kwok, who though now retired was many times world champion. Any relationship to Iwan Kwok? Yep! His sister who reported he was her first teacher. According to IWUF's Internet site:

“When Taiji athlete Lindswell steps onto the carpet a certain magic falls over even the biggest arena. With a combination of ethereal grace, precise yet soulful technique, and dynamic power, this young Indonesian star has risen to the top of the international podium numerous times to take home the gold...”

<http://www.iwuf.org/2019/06/15/indonesias-lindswell-the-soul-of-taijiquan/>

I've been interviewing officials from national Wushu federations for several years now and was quite surprised at the answer when I asked about funding for the Wushu team. Iwan informed me that President Joko Widodo, usually called “Jokowi” who won reelection for a second term this past May, is very supportive of sports and their teams can afford to compete in international competitions as they come along. Wow! Not too many national federation officials can say that!

After the highly informative interview with Coach Iwan we got to talk with the National Team Head Coach Mr. Zhang Yue Ning. He started training in Nanjing city in Jiang Su Province in 1972. He was a national champion in China in the 1970s and 1980s and team leader of the Jiang Su Team for six years. He was the National Team Head Coach in Singapore from 2003 – 2008, the Head Coach of the Hong Kong team 2009-2010, and Indonesia Wushu Head Coach from 2011 to the present. His list of accomplishments as a competitor however are far from over and he was the winner in the Tai Chi division of the Asian Games 2018. This interview was in Chinese language by the way, many thanks to Miao for help in translations.

Before long I walked to the far side of the gym and got a chance to talk with Sanda Coach Mukhlis. He's been a national coach for four months now. Previously he was the head coach of the Java Wushu team for two years. I found out his first martial art training was in Taekwondo then Karate. During my time in Indonesia I found out most seasoned martial artists here started their martial arts careers training in Karate-do.

Sanda Coach Mukhlis was the national champion for four years from 2010 to 2014 and won gold in the SEA games in 2011. He's a soft-spoken coach that really knows how to motivate and train his team with detailed precision. He's a very bright young man, soft-spoken and powerful that speaks English reasonably well.



In sum, Wushu in Indonesia is strong and getting better. They've got a great team, great coaches and government support. That's what I call a winning combination.

Pencat Silat – Indonesian Martial Arts and a Spooky Volcano

Kawah Putih, or White Crater Volcano lies 50 km south of the flower city of Bandung in West Java, Indonesia. It's only a four-hour drive from Jakarta to Bandung, and a couple more hours to the base park of Kawah Putih. We'd bargained with a local taxi driver named Dutu, who spoke good English and together come up with a very reasonable price.

Duti turned out to be a very interesting person indeed(!), though he said he learned everything he knew from talking to people while driving a taxi.

We left Jakarta about 10 pm and that's when my Pencat Silat education began.

A Truly Wise Taxi Driver

First, he reported all evolved martial art systems have a spiritual base and moral backbone defined by where the martial art system comes from. "Without those things it will be dangerous for everyone in the community," he said. "The moral philosophy and spiritual dimension work together in Nusantara," he added, with Nusantara referring to an Old Javanese term for the Indonesian archipelago. "Intertwined noble mind and character" are the goals of Silat training. He also talked at some length about faith and devotion to God, gratitude to God for being alive, and the requirement that Silat practitioners pursue peace and friendship. This moral philosophy he explained harmonizes with three teachings of the Noble Mind, asih (loving), asah (developing) and asuh (protecting).



He mentioned examples from history, and that there are more than 800 styles of Pencak Silat. "All styles of Silat have some other things in common too," he added like four sets of techniques, positioning, stepping, attacking and defending.

Often related but different styles of Pencak Silat are like most traditional martial arts, passed down through families. Consequently, Pencak Silat styles in West Java for example are divided into many streams. Among them are Cimande, Cikalong, Syahbandar and many other schools.

Silat Chimande - Initially the Cimande Silat was created and popularized by Abah Kahir in the 17th Century. He lived on the banks of the river Cimande, Bogor, West Java. According to legend, Abah Kahir created movements based on the movements of a monkey and tiger. Cimande martial arts are comprised of movements made by a warrior that utilize the components of the human body as a gift from God. This school teaches in the sky there is still another sky higher. At the top of the mountain, there is a higher mountain peak. As great as any human being may be, there must be another life entity who is more powerful. It is on this philosophical basis that Cimande's Silat teachings lead one to distance himself from the nature of arrogance.

Silat Chikalong - Like Tai Chi; they look for the weakness in the opponent

Silat Beksi - which looks a lot like Chinese Wushu

In West Sumatra (Padang) he told me there was a style called

Silat Pariangan - sometimes called the "Mother' of all Silat-styles." The Sumatran Minangkabau tribe is one of the oldest and most influential tribes in Pencak Silat.

Tige Berantai - The Three Chains School, which he said uses ultra-rapid repeater punches. He also said this was a very popular style in Jakarta too, and further popularized in the movie The Raid 2.

And he mentioned many other styles all too fast for my rudimentary notes in the taxi speeding along the highway in the very early morning.

Duti told me Silat is not about ability so much as attitude. He explained that in Indonesia a holy man is called a “Kyai,” and when I asked for an example, he mentioned Abah Anom, who I later found out followed the Naqshbandi path, a major Sunni spiritual order of Sufism. I’ve met Naqshbandi brothers before, notably in Turkey. Just from what I observed they appear to live heart and soul as social workers without the money. In a way they remind me of Chan (Zen) Buddhists in that they appear to experience God (or the Oneness of all) directly and have very high levels of empathy, respect and help for all living things. Say what people will, I respect that. Duti was a most amazing teacher. “Never blame, never be selfish,” he concluded. “Wow” I wondered, did he ever read B.F. Skinner? Yeah, I’m trained as a scientist, but Duti spoke to the inner heart and came to the same conclusions as the greatest scientists. People are the way they are because of their learning (and blaming them for bad learning usually doesn’t help much) and the task of good people is to try to educate those who we can when we can and that loving kindness in the end bonds our humanity into something greater than material spreadsheets can measure. Yes, our dichotomous minds are wonderful at separating this from that, and so how easy it becomes to forget how much all us living beings have in common.

Duti explained that being “holy” was founded on having good basic character. “A winner is the man who can make a friend of his enemy. Students are not taught to win, but to win the hearts of their enemies. Don’t use power to hit but to overcome the struggle within,” he said.

Interestingly Duti never referred to “God” using the Arabic “Allah” but rather the simple English word. Why? It was my impression all around Indonesia no one wants to impose any sort of cultural chauvinism on anyone. Indonesia is a diverse country where all can participate on an equal footing. I was curious how all this might be communicated if an atheist wandered through, though I suspect some sort of transcendent meta-cognate might have sufficed for communicating a greater good or higher power in the universe (beyond the human ego).

The six-hour drive to the volcano was enlightening. We also talked about many other things too on our way to Kawah Putih Volcano near Bandung

He told me about the Grasberg mine which is the largest gold mine in the world and the second largest copper mine in the world located near Puncak Jaya, the highest mountain in Papua, and one amazing thing after another.

Kawah Putih Volcano

July 24th - When we reached the park around 3:00 am the gate was closed, but we convinced Duti to park nearby. And then we started walking, up, up and up the small winding road through the heavily forested quite cold mountain. The temperature was about 45 ° - 50° Fahrenheit by my reckoning, pretty darned cold for late July in Indonesia! On the other hand, the cool was definitely better than burning hot! We moved fairly quickly because we wanted to see and photograph the sunrise at the top, and of course, the lake in the center of the volcano! It was only a five-kilometer walk (three miles maybe) but it was a steep incline and seemed longer perhaps, maybe because we were in a hurry. I also briefly wondered if the gravity was simply stronger there.

The long hike was worth it however when we got to the top and saw the sun rise above the clouds on the horizon.



Then we walked a couple hundred meters further up to the rather unusual lake in the center of the volcano.

It was whiteish and blueish, smoking a lot, and smelled strongly of sulfur. It was spooky. Even the sand and rocks surrounding the lake were bleached into whitish colors from the highly acidic (pH 0.5-1.3) lake water. Skeleton-like small black dead trees were all around the shore of the lake. Transitioning from the beautiful forested mountain to the acrid bubbling smoking lake in the middle was like going from heaven to hell.



A lot of things made the lake spooky besides the smoke, including the deep particularly smelly mine caves dug into the hills alongside the lake which were first dug by Dutch colonialists and later expanded during World War II by the Japanese military for extracting sulfur presumably for firearms. (In making gunpowder sulfur and charcoal act as fuels while saltpeter is the oxidizer.)

Miao and I remained at the eerily beautiful smoking volcano pit lake for about an hour walking around and taking photos, but the acrid air was nauseating and on the way out saw a sign at the entrance saying for health reasons it's best not to remain near the volcano's lake for more than 15 minutes. Oops! Missed that somehow.

Uphill from the volcano lake the air was forest clean and fresh again and we took a little nap on the soft grass in the cool morning air, a quiet blissful relief from the fires, history, smoke and gasses connecting to the earth's molten core. We then hitched a ride on the back of a water truck and bumped our way down to the parking lot at the base area to enjoy a spot of Indonesian coffee at a pleasant rest area with food stalls, strawberry sellers and so on. By the way there are rumors of wild eagles, owls, monkeys, mouse deer, forest pigs, panthers, leopards and pythons living in the nearby forests. Come to think of it the forest was a bit noisy during our climb.

Further down the mountain there are some splendid tea farms where visitors are permitted to wander, take photos and enjoy the beauty and tranquility of the surrounding landscapes.



Stay tuned for our second installment of Wushu in Indonesia, where we are treated to an extraordinarily beautiful and powerful Pencat Silat festival on the island of Kalimantan, visit, dig, and pan in the traditional ways in Indonesia's second largest diamond fields at Cempaka and then stayed a few peaceful beautiful days at Indonesia's largest Pencat Silat Training Center in South Jakarta.

Part 28 Kung Fu in Indonesia

Continued

Visit to a countryside Pencat Silat (martial art) School in South Kalimantan Island in Indonesia, dig and pan in the traditional ways in Indonesia's second largest diamond fields at Cempaka, followed by a spectacular Pencat Silat martial art festival, and then a few beautiful days at the National Pencat Silat Training Center in Jakarta called Padepokan Pencak Silat Indonesia.

Call me crazy (you won't be the first!) but I think the heart of a nation lives in the countryside.

Pencak Silat in Banjarmasin Town

To find the real Pencat Silat I figured we had to get out of hyper-busy Jakarta. Fortunately, this coincided with my partner Miao's need to visit a real diamond mine. And so, we flew to Banjarmasin, the capital of South Kalimantan Island and then took a bus to a town called Banjarbaru a mere 22 miles to the southeast. Travel was made easier in Indonesia as I learned the language (more or less) living in Malaysia some 25 years ago. Upon arrival in Banjarbaru we first met with a diamond specialist named Danial who among other things told us there was a Silat school nearby which we visited later that day.

July 26 - It was on a school playground area in the late afternoon that I first saw real Pencat Silat in person. The teacher was Kaka Pahrain, with "Kaka" meaning older brother in Indonesian language.

Before the class Kaka Pahrain told me there were about 20 Silat schools in the area and their style is called Perguruan Seni Bela Silat, which is the Green Dragon school. I also learned that forms (taolu) in Silat are called Tungguh, sparring is called Ganda and he's been teaching for about 15 years.



Banjar Baru Green Dragon Kaka Pahrain and 11-year-old Mohammad Bahrul

The class engaged in a variety of prearranged attack and defense sequences which were in most cases executed with precision as this was a mixed level class. Silat isn't just an artistic style, the positioning of every finger and toe has multiple functions; in general, the stances are mostly quite low. Often attacks come from the ground and they use throws equally with hand and foot strikes. This is a holistic art like I've never seen before. We saw a wide variety of very creative (leg) scissors throws attacking different parts of the defender's body. In all it was beautiful to watch.

After pair-work students performed solo Tungguh (taolu) which were very well done. I videoed some of these because they were so unbelievably good.

Then there was a short break and I interviewed a couple of the young Silat practitioners.

First there was 11-year-old Mohammad Bahrul. His Tungguh was very professionally done and I found out his father and grandfather were Silat teachers in another province, albeit of a different style. And what does he want to do when he grows up? “Be a Silat teacher” of course!

Then I interviewed a remarkable 18-year-old young man named Muhammad Azihia. His Tungguh was nothing less than spectacular and I’m sure he could already go on a world tour teaching Silat and be hugely popular. He started training at the age of 12 after watching a friend practice Karate. Then thought to himself: “I want to learn Silat!”



The phenominal Muhammad Azihia is back row left.

After this short intermission some groups moved from the cement playground onto the real floor for Silat, the earth, a short distance away. Here they trained in small circles and the creativity of their pair work increased a lot. Silat I think is best performed on the earth as there is such extensive use of the ground, throws that involve falling and rolling, and attacks from the ground.



Too soon it was over and after a few group photos off we went to have dinner with Danial and his aunt, one of Indonesia's foremost authorities on diamonds. We also made arrangements to visit Cempaka diamond fields the next day which is only about seven kilometers from Banjarbaru.

Cempaka diamond fields

Danial was so kind to give us a ride and arriving in the early afternoon we first drove by some small rather rustic wooden houses where it appears some of the workers and longer-term residents live.

We could see two or three “digs” from a distance, that is earthen hills with wooden framework slides down which muddy water pours exposing diamonds other precious stones or gold that may happen to be in the sludge. At the bottom of this traditional rough-hewn contraption is a hole filled with the sludge with workers up to their waist panning to find the precious stones.



That just looked like too much fun to pass up, and Miao was the first to jump in and start panning much to the amusement of the crowd that soon joined us. Workers happily shared the right techniques with her and before long she found, yes, lots of sandy mud.

After a while of that I moved on to a rather large pile of what looked like refined semi-dry sand workers were shoveling into a truck and that's where I had my fun, borrowing a shovel and getting right down to work.



Yep! That is the intrepid martial arts reporter there digging for diamonds!

Oh! I almost forgot to mention there were some workers with little plastic bags with gems for sale, most agates, but also small diamonds. Not being a professional they all looked so wonderful to me so heck yeah, I bought a few bags full. After a while of that I decided to wander off to the small rustic outdoor café and enjoy a cup with the lovely people there. A few field workers, and lady and her daughter working the café were stimulating company for half an hour or so while I did my best to resist buying any more agates and diamonds. The man selling them was very polite and persuasive though and I got his phone number just in case at some future date I might come back or have a sudden need for agates and diamonds. Who can know about such things? Life is full of wonder and amazing things.

Again, as always on these adventures time passed so quickly and we had to say goodbye. Walking away the little girl was shouting: "Bye, bye..." which I couldn't resist echoing with heartfelt loss at saying goodbye to my newfound friends. I would love to have stayed in that land of water, sand, hopes and dreams.

Before leaving we visited another much larger sand/earth hill, mud slide and pit where rather more serious workers toiled in the late afternoon sun. It was really something awesome. Enough wealth to buy a condo in Jakarta, a fleet of Jaguars and a dozen businesses is only a second away for the fortunate worker, though most found, like Miao, lots of sandy mud.

We stayed in Banjarbaru another couple of days exploring the gem market called CBS, meeting gem dealers and so on. Also, our hotel, "Favehotel" a large franchise was really excellent which helps persuade one to stay on a while. The manager became a friend and we felt at home there.

Pencak Silat festival

Our last day in Banjarbaru there was a large Pencak Silat festival with several hundred participants and that was a show I'll never forget. Time stopped while I watched and took photos and videos. Their consummate skill, good natured joy of life and love of their arts captivated everyone there. There were serious dramas, humorous combats, playful tricks, elaborate martial role-plays and so on. Each school was identified by their uniform and belt color; thus, belt colors signify not rank but adherence to a style.



I was asked to take photos with a lot of the youngsters and some teachers and felt like a real movie star. They were all so kind it was really touching.



But time marched on and I had to get back to Jakarta to pick up my passport with the new visa for China, and with no small reluctance we had to leave very early the next morning.

Back in Jakarta Miao wanted to revisit the large gem market while I was set like an arrow in flight to find the large Pencat Silat headquarters school I'd found on the Internet. There was very little information about it in English, but I was certain it was there.

We both got our wishes as I found the headquarters "Padepokan Pencak Silat Indonesia" had a large hotel on the grounds and we divided the rest of our time in Jakarta between the huge really beautiful school and the gem market.

One interesting thing about the gem market is it's also the best place in town to buy a Kris, the legendary traditional wavy knife of Pendat Silat, which of course I did, as well as an Akar Bahar root bracelet made from Bahar root taken from the depths of the Laut Sea. These bracelets are said to absorb toxins and enhance power. Besides that, they are really cool looking I have to say.



Kris - Indigenous traditional weapon of Indonesia



Akar Bahar bracelet from Laut Sea

It seems every Indonesian knows these legendary tools for health and strength. I got a lot of thumbs up from random people everywhere when I wear one and feel quite good! Where is the Laut Sea? It's the sea located between Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia inhabited by nomadic sea gypsies, the true masters of the sea. The incredible Bajau Laut 'Sea Nomads' have no nationality, homes or money and live on boats known as lepa-lepa. Some of the most interesting experiences in life are its absolutely fascinating tangents.

National Pencak Silat Training Center

Padepokan Pencak Silat Indonesia (PnPSI) is a national and international training center which was officially opened by President Suharto on April 20, 1997.

We arrived at the headquarters school just as the Vietnamese Pencat Silat team was leaving but were lucky enough to meet with the Filipino team at the end of their last day of training. They're all getting ready for the 2019 Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) to be held in the Philippines November 30th to December 11th 2019 with some preparing for the 2019 World Police and Fire Games held August 08, 2019 in Chengdu, China.

I did have a chance to chat with the Filipino Silat Coach and International Referee Christopher Yabut, and found out he too started his martial arts career with Karate and Taekwondo, and was a real Silat champion in his day, winning Gold medals in the World Championships in 2004, 2005 SEA Games and the Paris Open in 2005. I also chatted for a while with Alex Patano, Head Coach of the Filipino National Silat Team, and again, he is an engaging, highly intelligent and interesting martial art brother.



Highly enthusiastic Filipino National Pencak Silat Team training at the national headquarters in Jakarta

Later on, Miao and I were walking along in the administrative building of the huge Pencat Silat school and saw a sophisticated looking older gentleman coming along the other way. Who do we have here(?) I wondered to myself, and naturally immediately introduced myself as this gentleman had an undefinable “gravitas” that couldn’t be missed.

Before introducing him, a little background on Pencat Silat:

According to the silatindonesia.com site:

Pencak Silat is a compound word. Pencak and Silat have the same meanings and are parts of the culture of people of Malay race, that is, the ethnic group who are the native inhabitants in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam.

The word Pencak is commonly used by people in Java, whereas the word Silat is commonly used by the people who live in the other regions of Indonesia as well as in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam.

The combination of the words Pencak and Silat into a compound word was made for the first time when an organization of the unity of Pencak schools and Silat schools in Indonesia was founded in Surakarta in 1948, which called Ikatan Pencak Silat Indonesia (The Indonesian Pencak Silat Association), abbreviated as IPSI. Since then, Pencak Silat has become the official term in Indonesia. This term is also used by the schools in many different countries which teach Pencak and Silat derived from Indonesia.

In the international communities, Pencak Silat has become the official term since the international federation organization was founded in Jakarta in 1980, which was called Persekutuan Pencak Silat Antarabangsa, abbreviated as PERSILAT, (The International Pencak Silat Federation). Nevertheless, people use the words Pencak and Silat separately as a single word due to the dialectic habit.

<http://www.silatindonesia.com/2009/08/ipsi-indonesia-pencak-silat-federation/>

Pencak Silat Grandmaster Bambang Anggono

So, who was this gentleman? No less than Grandmaster Bambang Anggono, Vice Chairman of The Executive Board of Indonesian Pencak Silat Association who was so thoughtful as to invite Miao and I to his office for tea. We chatted for about an hour and his wife joined us as well. It was certainly an illuminating conversation wherein I learned quite a lot about his background and dreams for the future of Silat.

Among other things I learned that he lived in Yokahama for six years earning a Master's Degree in Market Finance and earned a 1st Dan in Karate before embarking on his Silat career. His father was in the military police and brother is a retired Chief of Police of all Indonesia. In all he came across as a polite gentleman with a passion for developing Indonesian martial arts throughout the world. He envisions Pencak Silat as a future Olympic sport, and passionately believes that the spirit of peace inculcated in Indonesian culture and especially Pencak Silat can be shared with the entire world. Miao and I were deeply moved by his sincerity.



August 6, 2019 The next morning Miao and I were out wandering the large training center and happened upon a private class led by an extraordinary teacher named Cun Cun Wahyudi who was teaching Cimande Style to his Saturday student Ardi Sunardi. He ever so kindly allowed us to join and soon we were learning new sweep/block or grab followed by instantaneous counterattack sequences. They were precise, powerful and smooth though we soon felt the demands of working out of lower stances in our legs. Also, excellent! After half an hour of training we relaxed a bit and had a chance to chat. I learned that Cun Cun grew up in a Silat family and usually trained at night, after 9 pm with no lights. They often trained in mud to promote greater stability. He has five brothers yet he's the only one to go on to become a Silat teacher. They don't use the word "master," but clearly, he is one as was demonstrated by his well-honed precise skills and super-speed harmonized with incredible power and fluidity.

I asked about stances and found Cun Cun doesn't focus so much on stances per se, but rather on what he called "base control," a fluid series of stances capable of withstanding attacks without sacrificing attack and countering capability.



Center three left to right are guru Cingkrik Goning, Writer, and Cun Cun (with black hat)

Training with the Masters

While we were training an older very highly respected Cimande guru (teacher) named Cingkrik Goning came along as he had a small class too that morning in an adjacent area and after our class we all sat around on the earth in a growing circle and chatted for a while. It was a very pleasant and highly informative session, rich in the fabric of the legends and history of Silat.



Soon it was lunch time and we parted – with Miao and I wishing we could stay a few more days at least, but time marches on.

Padepokan Pencak Silat Indonesia is an incredible training center and at any one time of the day or night there were three or four classes running simultaneously in one area or another. The hotel was huge, and the food in the restaurant was great. The “Taman Mini Mall” is only a 10-minute walk away for those desiring some more diverse cultural experiences. Right next door to the National Training Center is the architecturally splendid Agung At-Tin Mosque from which the melodic calls to prayer can be heard five times a day. It’s really very beautiful all around.

The next day we had to fly back to Beijing but will always carry the wholesome friendliness, cheerfulness, health and beautiful mind/spirit of Indonesia with us.

So many thanks to so many people for making this stop on the Maritime Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour especially meaningful and fun for the both of us. God Willing - we will return soon.

Notes

Padepokan Pencak Silat address, Jl. Raya TMII I, Jakarta

If you're taking a taxi, just say "Taman Mini" and "Padepokan Pencak Silat" and they'll know the place. It's on the south side of the city and so a lot more spacious and quieter than downtown Jakarta.

<http://www.silatindonesia.com/2009/08/ipsi-indonesia-pencak-silat-federation/>

PERSILAT website:

<http://persilat-ipsf.org/home/tentangkami/sejarah.html>

For a great site with additional history, some useful Pencak Silat vocabulary, Code of Conduct, and names of weapons, see:

<https://factsofindonesia.com/indonesia-pencak-silat>

For some videos of Cimande Style Silat type: "CCW Silat" into YouTube

Part 29 Shanghai 15th World Wushu Championships



Held in the Minhang Gymnasium in Shanghai, October 20-23, the 15th World Wushu Championships would have pleased Yao Shu (1201 - 1278) and Liu Bingzhong (1216-1274), and that's saying a lot.

There is a history to great martial arts competitions unknown to most, and it was the above mentioned gentlemen that encouraged Kublai Khan at the dawning of the Yuan Dynasty in China to collect the world's finest martial artists for grand tournaments held at Songshan Shaolin to find who were the greatest martial artists of all time, and also led to a revitalization of martial arts at Songshan and worldwide.

Over the last 55 years or so I've been to maybe 500 or more martial arts tournaments in a variety of countries and yet never could have imagined the kind of spectacular events I witnessed at this four-day competition in Shanghai.

The Opening Ceremony displayed a startling new level of harmony between martial arts and techno-savvy, with wushu artists flying in like Asparas from the ceilings of Mogao Caves, 3-D sections of floor appearing out of thin air to form a bridge between wushu masters, supernovas of light and sound synced with brilliantly colored Chinese philosophical symbology, phosphorescent dragons and flowers, series of highly artistic beautifully choreographed group taolu accentuating masterful center-stage performances with and without weapons all ebbing and flowing across the landscape of mind and the stage without missing a beat.



How that many people can perform so perfectly in harmony with the music and technology is beyond me, however the creators, directors, writers, techno-wizards and performers really should all get medals for that show.

All the typical adjectives used to describe breakthrough events like “spectacular,” “amazing,” etc. just don’t do this Opening Event justice.

Yi Lian Jie, also known as Jet Li was there too and made an inspirational speech that brought goosebumps to many.

Before looking at the competition particulars it’s useful to know that in August 2018 the IWUF Executive Board led by President Yu Zaiqing met in Macao to make some changes intended to reduce the possibility of bias, resulting in some changes in this year’s World Wushu Championships.

For example, in previous World Wushu Championships the Head Judge had the ability to change scores. No more. The Head Judge of the B group was removed altogether, making for a more level decision-making process while the number of B-Group judges was increased from 3 to 5, again intended to increase objectivity.

Just as or more important the Jury of the Appeals was made independent of the judges, again, designed to ensure fairness.

The IWUF Executive Board also came up a brilliant addition to Wushu taolu competition specifically a “Creative Group Event,” which was held the last day of this history making event.

As most Wushu Kung Fu people know there are two main branches in training and competition, Taolu, or forms, and Sanda, which is fighting.

Taolu



Myat Noe Eain from Myanmar

On the morning of the first day of competition I started in the Taolu Hall and basked in the radiance of world class performances by all.

In the beginning I really didn't envy the judges being forced to made decisions regarding which were better as all appeared so good.

During my competition years I only competed in the fighting competitions before the word “Sanda” was introduced to the world’s vocabulary yet simultaneously learned many Taolu in classes as they contain the essential techniques and philosophies of the styles I learned.

In the previous paragraph I wrote “In the beginning I really didn’t envy the judges...” simultaneously it’s true pretty quickly I was able to make my own judgements because I’d read the scoring criteria the night before.

Scoring Criteria

In brief competitors are:

“...required to perform with standard movements, correct methods, full force flowing smoothly to the right points, good coordination between hands and eyes, between body and steps (between apparatus and body for events with apparatus), distinct rhythm, conspicuous style, and unison between movements and accompanying music. All these elements should be taken into consideration in grading the technical execution of a competitor’s routine”

Points are added for the “degree of difficulty” of the movements, and points are deducted for errors in regard to the structure, composition and musical accompaniment of the routine when music is used.

This all seems quite straightforward, but it gets a little complicated given that these Wushu Taolu performances are not traditional Taolu, but rather creative innovations of the competitors.

Still, right is right, and inefficient and/or misplaced techniques stand out boldly for those familiar with the essential elements of the traditional styles

For example, I watched Myanmar's Myat Noe Eain's Taolu and was stunned at the perfection and difficulty of her movements yet was very surprised at the comparatively low scores she received compared to other competitors whose movements were not nearly so difficult or – in my opinion – perfectly executed. Maybe there were some compulsory moves absent from her routine? I don't know about that because I'm not a qualified international judge, but it seems unlikely as her coach surely would have caught that during preparation for this competition. Am I writing that I think the judges were biased or made mistakes? No, I'm really not an expert in Taolu, whereas the judges are. Her final placing in this event, Women's Taijijian was 15th of 22 competitors which disappointed me, and I'm sure her as well. She scored 12th in the FOP 2 Group 2 with a 9.370.

Talking later with some of the Federation Presidents I heard that judging was/is complicated by the fact that the judges have to make decisions regarding “standard movements” and “correct methods” (as noted in the rules above), which is complex given vast array of Taolu within most styles.

I was also disappointed that Elif Akyuz of Turkey only placed 4th in the Women's Shuangjian division, as I thought her performance was perfection itself, but again, I'm not really an expert.

At the World Wushu Championships in 2017 she scored 4th in the Women's Shuangjian division also. Her performance in this competition can be found on:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qx4ab57FNsw> starting at 26:41.

Her aerial into a cartwheel split was splendidly executed. The narrators thought her performance good enough to “break into the top three,” but alas it was not meant to be. The technical deduction for balance seemed just ridiculous to me, but again, I’m not an internationally certified judge.

The gold medal winner’s performance immediately followed Elif’s Taolu and the reader is invited to compare the two and make up their own minds. The narrators complimented her wrist dexterity and suggested she too could make it into the top three places.

The Turkish team is a bit controversial in some ways.

Turkey opts out of European Wushu due to ‘headscarf ban’

“Turkey will not participate in any event organized by the European Wushu Federation because of its ban on women wearing headscarves, says Turkish official”

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/sports/turkey-opts-out-of-european-wushu-due-to-headscarf-ban/52371>

I can’t help wondering if Sikhs must shave their beards as beards are obligatory in their religion and if Yogis are forbidden to do yoga as it is a religion for some people. Likewise, I wonder if those who make a religion of health and fitness must cover all their muscles and those who worship money should be banned from eating pizza because it is expensive!

I try to just laugh at idiots (discreetly) instead of get upset. Why? That way I avoid getting upset every day. "The best revenge is living well," as they say (Quote from George Herbert, a 16th century poet).

Elif shouldn't feel too bad however as at the 8th World Kungfu Championships held in Emeishan, China, in June this year she won Silver in the Women's Group D Other Types of Traditional Styles, Silver in the Women's Group D Other Traditional Double Weapon and again Silver in the Single Type Weapon Group Routine.



Master Elif Akyuz of Turkey – Not exactly the slavish western stereotype of a Muslim woman

In other words, it appears she places higher in International Kung Fu competitions than in international Wushu competitions. There can be a variety of reasons for this.

I suspect in the future someone will write a computer algorithm programmed for objective analysis of Taolu performance based on refined criteria and 4-D kinesiological analysis to add another voice to judges' decisions in all world-level sports competitions.

In the meantime, I'm going to be practicing that aerial cartwheel into a splits position as I think it will sufficiently intimidate any would be muggers provided, I don't scream when I hit that full side-splits position. Ouch!

Taolu Divisions

For those not familiar with the broad range of Taolu styles and competition event in international Wushu competition categories please refer to the International Wushu Federation's website page <http://www.iwuf.org/sport-wushu/taolu/> which has succinct descriptions of the vast array of styles most people learn and are competition events.

Though most readers of Kung Fu Magazine probably already know these broad categories, I'm listing the names below because some do not and personally, I dislike being left "out in the cold" by "experts" who can't condescend to enlighten the uninitiated!

- Changquan (Long-range boxing; CQ)
- Nanquan (Southern-style boxing; NQ)
- Taijiquan (Taiji boxing; TJQ)
- Jianshu (Swordplay; JS)
- Daoshu (Broadsword play; DS)
- Qiangshu (Spear play; QS)
- Gunshu (Cudgel play; GS)
- Taijijian (Taiji swordplay; TJJ)
- Nandao (Southern-style broadsword play; ND)
- Nangun (Southern-style cudgel play; NG)
- Duilian (Dual events; DL), subdivided into duilian without weapons; duilian with weapons; and duilian with bare hands against weapons.

- Jiti (Group events; JT)

There were/are a few categories I was/am especially interested in including broadsword, and noted the results at the end of this 15th World Wushu Competition (WWC):

Men's Daoshu (Broadsword)

1st place: Zhao Hua Wu of China - Didn't participate in the 2017 WWC

2nd place: Ilias Khusnutdinov of Russia - 8th in 2017

3rd place: Si Wei Jowen Lim of Singapore - 3rd in 2017

In other words, there isn't a strong correlation between past and current performances in International Wushu competitions on a personal level, though on a team basis, some teams reliably do better over the years. It also happened in several divisions that competitors who never participated in World Wushu Championships before won gold, while 2nd and 3rd places went to more seasoned practitioners proving the truism that anything can happen in sports.

Lastly in regards to Taolu, specifically the creative group Taolu, the winners were: China, Taipei, Hong Kong, Ukraine, Malaysia and Brunei. I was happy seeing these latter three groups doing relatively well. A few years ago, I got to spend time with the Ukraine Kung Fu team, specifically I took them swimming at a lake near my house in Beijing. In regards to Malaysia I lived there for several years "back in the day" so naturally I like to see them do well, and in regards to Brunei, they're such a small country to make it into even the top six appeals to the Irish in me that always enjoys watching the less renowned teams perform very well.

Sanda

In regards to the Sanda competition I noticed not so many good kicks, but a tendency to move quite directly to wrestling after brief boxing displays sometimes accompanied by clinches.

This got me wondering if most of the competitors are watching too much MMA and not spending enough time stretching their legs. This is a similar observation I made watching Muay Thai a couple of months ago in Bangkok.

Simultaneously I have to give the judges credit for breaking fighters out of clinches very quickly and minimizing time spent on the mat. That said the takedowns and throws were sometimes quite excellent.



The Winners

In my opinion everyone who shows up and competes is a winner, though it is nice to perform exceptionally well and bring home a nice medal of some kind.

In Sanda the big winners were China, Iran, Vietnam, India, and Lebanon. That China should place first isn't surprising for a dozen good reasons, and Iran second again is not at all surprising to me, having noticed them soundly defeating practically everyone in most international martial arts competitions since the early 1990s. Vietnam, likewise is not surprising coming in the top three, as I learned visiting their lovely nation earlier this year, they have extraordinary leadership and teams of coaches and athletes. India fielded the best Sanda team I've seen from there yet. Praveen Kumar beat Russel Diaz of Philippines in the 48kg category after his defeat of Uzbekistan's Khasan Ikromov 2-0 in the semi-final to become the first Indian man to win wushu World Championships gold. Also, from India Saidi Yasmina came in 3rd in the women's 65 Kg. division.

One of the most entertaining Sanda fighters was a young lady named Hoi Lan Tsang from Hong Kong who just relentlessly battered her opponents with mostly turning kicks, straight kicks, and flurries of punches. Eventually she lost to Yumei QI of China, but put on a great show through every one of her matches.



What is bad luck in Sanda? Competing against China or Iran in the first or second round. (Ha, ha, but usually true in fighting arts competitions I've learned over the years.)

Overall Medal Counts

Not surprisingly China scored first in this year's 15th World Wushu Championships with 14 gold, one silver, and one bronze medal for a total of 16 medals. Two years ago, in the 14th World Wushu Championships they earned fifteen golds.

Iran came in 2nd with nine gold, two silver, and one bronze medals for a total of 12 medals, and Hong Kong came in third with five golds, four silvers and one bronze for a total of 10 medals.

In the 14th World Wushu Championships the same countries took first, second and third, respectively.

<http://14wwc.iwuf.org/medal-standing/>

Fourth, fifth and six places in the overall medal counts were Indonesia, Macao and Malaysia. Indonesia is understandable, given what regular Kung Fu Magazine readers know about their top-notch coaches, training and leadership. That Macao should come in fifth is pretty darned good given that the total population there is only 622,000 people, yet they were competing against entire national teams. Malaysia only does a complete census every 10 years, but as of 2010 the number of Malaysians of Chinese origin was a little less than six and a half million, slightly less than Hong Kong which has a population of seven and half million. In any case, Chinese Malaysians have a proud cultural heritage to celebrate and Kung Fu/Wushu is a bastion of that heritage.

The USA came in at 23rd place this year with three bronze medals out of 38 international teams. It seems they reliably do better in international Kung Fu competitions than Wushu competitions.

Stay tuned for Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour Part 30 – Shanghai and the 15th World Wushu Championships – beginning with interviews with presidents, coaches, athletes and journeys to the ancient Maritime Silk Road Port in Zhenhai District of Ningbo City in Zhejiang Province (just a hop across the bay from Shanghai), Moon Lake, the Intellectual Center at the Hub of China's Silk Road Maritime greatest East Sea port for a thousand years or so, and a trip really far back in time some 7,000 years to the archeological site of Hemudu where some of the most ancient domesticated rice in China was found.

Part 30 Shanghai 15th World Wushu Championships Continued

Interviews with Wushu Federation presidents, coaches, athletes and journeys to the ancient Maritime Silk Road Port in Zhenhai District of Ningbo City in Zhejiang Province (just a hop across the bay from Shanghai), Tientong Temple that passed the torch of Zen to a major branch of Japanese Buddhism, and back in time some 7,000 years to the archeological site of Hemudu where some of the most ancient domesticated rice in China was found.

As competitive athletes know competition is really exciting. There's an exhilaration, a supercharged feeling that goes along with challenging yourself and other competitors to do your best and win. There's another really positive side to sports competitions, specifically the social benefits of mixing with like-minded and spirited people. Sports people tend to be cleaner, happier and healthier than most people. A really positive mind-set is required to push one's self beyond self-imposed limits in every workout and competition.

So, even though I wasn't competing in this World Wushu Championship I was definitely looking forward to meeting with coaches and other Wushu Federation people because many were/are like me, former competitors who hang in the game for the love of the arts and the people that do them. Meeting the athletes is also hugely fun because they're really at the top of their game, hopeful, energized and ready to challenge the world with their hard-earned skills.

But hooking up with people at an event like the 15th World Wushu Championships posed certain logistical challenges. For example, security at this event was extremely tight. There were facial recognition cameras at the entrances for everyone. This isn't some local competition where people can wander in and out freely, where a photographer can "work the room" seeking out the best angles for every Taolu performance or Sanda fight. Nope! Nothing like that. In fact, there was a bit of uncertainty amongst security where I was allowed to go as I wasn't an IWUF photographer and yet I had media credentials. All photographers at both Sanda and Taolu venues were stationary and apparently not allowed to move. I was, after the first 15 minutes of the first day assigned to sit in a specific place amongst the audience, which made meeting coaches and federation people a bit more challenging! Ah ha!

Coaches and Athletes

What to do? That's obvious really, leave a few minutes before lunch break and hang around outside the sports competition areas and meet people on the way to lunch which is exactly what I did first hooking up with some members of the Spanish Wushu Federation except, there is no Spanish Wushu Federation, except there is, sort of.

They - several honorable gentlemen and a couple of ladies were looking for a restaurant accompanied by the team coach from Hong Kong and where uncertain where to eat.

Eager to be helpful I mentioned I'd seen several groups of Chinese from the sports competition heading up this street following their phones to food, which is the way most people do things these days around here in China.

Phones seem to know (almost) everything these days and one can get great coupons for restaurants, GPS directions and then pay for everything with one's phone.

After 10 or so minutes the Hong Kong Coach seemed to think one restaurant in particular looked good. I cordially asked if I might join them for Almuerzo, lunch in Spanish, my second and maybe best foreign language, and so I got an invitation to lunch and into the curious situation in Spain and Europe.



Writer with Spanish officials

Chatting with my new wushu friends first I learned in Europe they don't make a separation between Wushu and Kung Fu Federations.

Second, I learned that Wushu in Spain is relegated to being a subsidiary of the Judo Federation rather than having a Federation of its own, because that's the way the President of the Judo Federation likes it.

Apparently in Spain Wushu is hugely popular with some 10,000 players, many more than Judo or Karate, but it appears the vicissitudes of life have interfered with its natural development. In response the Wushu federation that isn't a federation tried various things like changing itself from a federation to a coalition union of associations to no avail which reminds me why I always loved Spain so much:

"When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams — this may be madness. Too much sanity may be madness — and maddest of all: to see life as it is, and not as it should be!"

— Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote*

There is a Zen-like quality to Spanish thinking that cuts to the core of things directly such that one has no choice but to laugh about the absurdity of life sometimes.

Seated at the table with me were real Wushu people who collectively had a century or more experience, with Juan Carlos from Valencia the President of the Wushu/Kung Fu Coalition there as well as Pablo Ortega, former Sanda Coach who seemed to really understand the incompressibility of life sometimes. Our merry party of six or seven had a great lunch and then back to the Games!

The next day I met with some members of the Turkish Federation I'd met at few years ago in Ankara, specifically the patriarch of Wushu in Turkey, Abdurrahman Akyuz who had come with a large team of Taolu and Sanda competitors and several assistants, coaches, a doctor and so on.

We all quickly became good friends and we chatted for a while on various topics including one young gentleman working on a research project into US, Turkish and Chinese trilateral trade, how that works to promote international peace and the role of international law in all this for his dissertation. Very cool topic. And then, back to the Games!



Turkish Officials

Also, on the road to lunch I met a lovely older married couple from Germany, Roland Czerni, President of the German Wushu Federation and his wife on and first found out they'd brought seven taolu people, two coaches and five players as well as one Sanda competitor. Chatting about my Silk Road exploits for a few moments I found President Czerni was from Duisburg in Germany, and that Duisburg is actually the western end of the new Silk Roads with a rail connection between metropolis Ruhr in Germany and the megacity Congqing in China.



Roland Czerni, President of the German Wushu Federation and his wife

Funny how this works as I was also in the process of planning my post competition Silk Road travel to the major port at the eastern end of the new Silk Roads in China from the Song Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty in a city called Ningbo. In any case it was an idyllic conversation on a beautiful early autumn day with a lovely couple from Germany bringing back happy memories of my childhood on what were the best playgrounds in Europe at that time in Germany.

People sometimes ask me why I work on the Silk Roads Kung Fu Friendship Tour and one major reason is to encourage everyone to travel more, especially meeting like-minded martial artists and other friends with whom to share this path or Tao of life.

Every day I met enthusiastic athletes and 20-year-old Halim on the Tunisian team is a supercharged young Sanda man who was inspired as a boy by the likes of... who does he mention first? Bruce Lee of course, Jackie Chang and Jet Li.

A member of one of the larger teams Halim did pretty well winning his first two bouts but lost on points in his third match against Russian Rustam Kakraev.

But hay, even making it into the quarterfinals in this crowd is pretty good in my opinion. In any case the Tunisian team was one of the most enthusiastic groups at this competition and we spent half an hour or more chatting about this and that.



Next, I found myself sitting next to Hong Kong Team Leader and Honorary Deputy Treasurer of the Hong Kong Wu Shu Union Kent Hong who brought 10 taolu and four Sanda people with him to the Shanghai 15th WWC.

I have to say his Sanda people stood out as great fighters, and I was particularly impressed by young Hoi Lan Tsang who was just a cool tempered kicking and punching machine out there winning battle after battle against some very tough opponents especially the Thai fighter Suchaya Bualuang who also put her heart into it.

There's a reason the Hong Kong team came in third in the overall medal count: Their athletes are all just amazing and their coaches obviously have to be as well.

After that I met Priscilla from Switzerland. Age 34 she says she doesn't have time for a husband as she's too in love with sports, and sitting there we got to watch her coach and Federation President Sami Ben Mahmoud – with one parent from Tunisia - battle it out on the Sanda floor. Even though his opponent was quite a bit taller, Sami not just held his own but managed to dominate for just about all of the fight and he competed in Men's Nanquan as well. Quite an amazing athlete and coach!

Then I noticed Grandmaster Sayed Rahman Youresh, President of the Wushu Federation of Afghanistan sitting practically in front of me. He brought a team of at least five and certainly knew all the federation people quite well I noticed as we were seated between the officials and the back-stage area. He told me about some of his champions including Jamshid Ebram, a Taolu player and 90 Kg. 24-year-old Khaled Omar Noor. I also heard they have a great training center in Kabul these days.

Taking a walk to go over to the Taolu competition in the next-door stadium I happened by the Mexican Team led by Coach Pedro Garcia Mascorro and couldn't resist stopping for a while to get to know them a bit as they were such a lively and happy competitor group.

I found out they brought six Sanda and seven taolu people with them.



Every group of competitors and coaches I met at this competition invited me to visit their nations' training centers and this team was no exception. After a pleasant relaxing conversation, I took a photo of their inspirational team and was off to the Taolu competition.

The last morning of the competition I was lucky to have a few minutes to meet Sherif Mustafa, Vice President of the International Wushu Federation and President of the African Wushu Federation. From Morocco he started his martial arts career in Judo, and then Wushu training in 1986. During his illustrious career he's accomplished an amazing array of things including becoming an International Judge and Chief Referee, working in Egypt, working as the Vice President of the African Wushu Federation's Technical Committee, and is currently in the process of finalizing the standardization of the ranking (duan) system for Africa and a thousand other things at least.

And then I had a very brief time to chat with Mohamed Adel Zahra, Vice President of the African Wushu Federation and Adjunct Treasurer of the Tunisian Olympic Committee. Wow! This was my golden day. He started Wushu back in 2005 and his background as a bank director must be very useful indeed for the Olympic Committee in Tunis and African Wushu Federation. Money may not make the world go around as some assert but it does help a lot now and then to be sure.

I consider myself very fortunate and honored to meet with such excellent individuals and groups and all the above people certainly exhibit the highest levels of Wushu culture, inclusiveness, friendliness and being real people. And the above were not all - not even half of the most excellent people I met, interviewed and liked during my four days in Shanghai. But, as George Harrison noted, all things must pass and next I was on a new mission, yep, the Silk Road Express.

I stopped at the hotel, picked up my bags and hoped a train for Ningbo - yep, last train for Ningbo - ALL ABOARD!

Ningbo - China's Key East Asia Silk Road Port and a Jolly Good Old Ship

Ningbo is a medium sized absolutely beautiful very modern Chinese city and location of one of the oldest trading ports in the world. The name Ningbo is composed of two words, "Ning" which means serene, and "Bo" which means waves. Ningbo is the southernmost city of the Grand Canal of China and the junction between the canal and the Maritime Silk Road.

Located along the Yong River in Zhenhai District of Ningbo City in Zhejiang Province, just across the 100 kilometer wide bay from Shanghai in fact, surrounded by grass and commercial shipping enterprises one may find the dot-like scant remains of what was the Northern Song Dynasty's (960-1127) greatest port, a stone's throw from the East China Sea, though in fact this port's history goes back to the 3rd Century BC.



It was from this ancient port that ships from China sailed to Korea and Japan and as far as Africa. So much history, culture and expertise poured through this ancient gateway to East Asia in addition to commercial items like porcelain, fashion clothing and accessories, precious oils, spices and other herbs, and teas. Likewise, Chan (Zen) Buddhism, Shaolin Kung Fu, infrastructure building skills and a thousand other things flowed through this gateway to the east.

The south gate of Todaiji, a UNESCO listed world heritage site in Nara, Japan was built by Ningbo craftsman Chen Heqing in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), who traveled through the Maritime Silk Road from Ningbo to Japan.

Getting off the bus and walking a couple miles along the busy coastal road I found what I was looking for, specifically an old ship and an old gate. There I met a relatively younger man (compared to me at least) named Zhu Xuen Bin. After chatting for while outside about history, he invited me into the small house-like building for a cup of tea. The following is part of what he told me (in Chinese of course).

“In the northern Song Dynasty what we now call Ningbo city was called Mingzhou.

“All of the Silk Roads of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1279) started from Zheng Haikou. In the Northern Song Dynasty there were nine shipyards in China. The ships made by Zheng Hai in the northern Song Dynasty were 109 meters long, which was the largest ship in the whole central plain’s region of China at that time...

“We are thinking the government proposes to set up a Silk Road Art Gallery or museum here and show some of our exports from the Northern Song Dynasty.

“At this time the conditions here are not good enough. As you can see, we have a small space in a large commercial shipping area. As a promotion of our East Asian cultural heritage, culture and commerce restoring this area to its former glory will be good for everyone.”

I couldn’t agree more Mr. Zhu! An ancient port like that needs to be reconstructed in its entirety to celebrate the huge cultural heritage it represents.

No doubt the reconstructed Ming Dynasty Ship was impressive looking especially after dark all lit up with different colored lights, and I especially enjoyed the group dancing that took place right alongside just after the interview with Mr. Zhu.

Still, I'd love to see and experience the glory of the Song Dynasty Silk Road Port. For those wishing to visit the scant remains, or want to dance by the side of a reconstructed Ming Dynasty ship actually built by an art professor in 1906, try typing "Shen Zhou Gu Chuan" into the Gaode maps app you can download in China.

Intellectual Center of Moon Lake

Moon Lake - the traditional intellectual center in Northern Song Dynasty, the oldest biggest private library in China and the Song Dynasty Ningbo Mosque

Imagine a lake that attracts the wise for over a thousand years of history.

Once called the West Lake and Jian Lake, Moon lake has been the center of educated society in East Zhejiang Province since the mid-Seventh Century. It first appeared in the Golden Age of China's cultural history, the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and flourished through Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties. Even today it gathers the wise from around China and the world.

In 1047 the illustrious Wang Anshi was transferred to be the head of Yinxian County and he hired the "Five Masters of the Qingli Period" to work by Moon Lake further elevating the academic excellence and reputation of this great school of scholars. In 1117 an official named Lou Yi built a guesthouse there for Korean envoys and it became a diplomatic center and shining pearl on the Maritime Silk Roads.

Because Hangzhou was the capital of the Southern Song Dynasty, and Mingzhou quite near, many high officials gathered here. Poetic societies, schools and libraries flourished in the area.

Then between 1561 and 1566 in the Ming Dynasty the Tianyige Library was established on the western bank of Moon Lake. Having stood for more than 450 years this is the oldest existing library in China. Founded by Fan Qin this library had a collection of 70,000 volumes of classic books. Fan Qin's story is unique. He was born in Ningbo in the Ming Dynasty and passed the Imperial Exam in the 11th year of Jiajing. However, he offended a lofty court member - whose name practically nobody remembers - and was assigned to be a lowly director in Yuanzhou. After 27 years of this he went to work in Jianxi and the next year was asked to be the Senior Minister of War. He wrote the Tianyi Pavilion Collection, and amassed the largest library in China at that time.



The story of Moon Lake continues up through the centuries, for example Huang Zhongxi a founder of the East Zhejian School and one of the three most respected thinkers in the late Ming Dynasty (1368) and early Qing Dynasty (1644) gave lectures to large numbers of students along the banks of Moon Lake. Moon Lake became a place for Ming Dynasty adherents to poetically mourn the loss of identity associated with the founding of the new Qing Dynasty.

The school also espoused a belief in the equal roles of artisans and merchants which led to the formation of the Ningbo Group, China's first such commercial association.

Unfortunately, only 13,000 volumes remained in this great library at the time of the foundation of the PRC in 1949 because a great many of them were taken by the various bureaucracies, stolen or fell into decay.

None-the-less the library survives until today and the precious remains are stored in a safe secure hermetically sealed environment available to scholars from around the world.

And the lake? Still reflecting the moonlight off its shimmering still waters, attracting the wise from around the world.

About a five-minute walk from Moon Lake and the Tianyige Library is the Ningbo Mosque build with exquisite Song Dynasty design and attention to detail.

The tranquility and peace permeating the entire area fits perfectly with the peaceful beautiful prayers and people that have been attending the Friday prayer there the last 1000 years I found out.



Tiantong Buddhist Temple

One evening after a two-hour bus ride out of Ningbo I made a stop at 1,700-year-old Tiantong Buddhist Temple located at the foot of Taibai Mountain in Yinzhou District. Like ascending towards a jewel in the crown of that mountain, I was blessed to hike up a long mountain road on foot during the brilliant early autumn twilight.



Tiantong Buddhist Temple is the original source of one of the largest traditional Zen sects in Japan, the Sōtō School founded at the massive Eihei-ji (Temple) transmitted from China to Japan by a group of Japanese monks led by Daoyuan (1200-1253). Fortunately, a good monk at Tiantong Temple very kindly gave me a tour of the main halls. As it was long after dark by the time we finished, I thanked him kindly, bid farewell, walked down the mountain, found a restaurant, joined a party, called a taxi to take me to the nearest subway stop and then walked to my hotel in Ningbo again! A glorious evening of time traveling with the enlightened mind of a Buddhist monk and history stimulated by the forested mountain and other new friends!

There was one more stop I had to make before heading back to Beijing, and that were a small town called Yuyao and then an archeological site called Hemudu which is in Yuyao County and led to all kinds of fascinating discoveries about ancient China.

First of all, Yuyao have a straight up fantastic very modern museum stocked with everything from a Bubalus Mephistopheles skull (an extinct species of Water Buffalo) to seven-thousand-year-old domesticated rice grains and even etchings of rice grains artistically carved into ancient pottery shards excavated from the Hemudu site.

Hemudu archaeological site and ancient rice

Thinking I'd found the oldest domesticated rice in China, I researched this and found an article published by the Chinese Academy of Sciences Headquarters that reported even older cultivated rice had been in a nearby archeological site called Shangshan, also in Zhejiang Province.

That rice was radio carbon dated at about 10,000 BC. Domesticated rice can be differentiated from wild by the number of rice kernels on each stalk, which scientists call fish scales, with domesticated rice having more than nine.



Apparently rice in China and wheat further west in Mesopotamia evolved nearly simultaneously with the warming of the earth during the Holocene Age the last 11,700 years* of the Earth's history — the time since the end of the ice age.

Ah ha! The domestication of rice and wheat both happened around 10-12 BCE because of the end of the warming planet and the end of the last ice age. Incidentally, *wars between humans only started after the rise of the agrarian (farming) age*. Why? Before that there were no rich and poor. So, this issue is intimately related to the history of martial arts.

So! At the next party you go to you can ask your friends: "When did Chinese start eating rice?" This can lead to a more interesting conversation than one finds at most parties.

Even if the Hemudu site wasn't the location of the first rice farming in China, it was a major Neolithic hub of the Yangtze River region and its architecture with pile-dwellings represented a great leap forward in human constructed habitation. Their lacquer-ware was the first of its kind and the wooden structured well is the earliest found in China thus far.

Right after the Museum in Yuyao I headed out to the archeological site and found another museum adjacent. Walking inside I met a young lady that was a guide, spoke English quite well and showed me around first inside the museum then through the archeological site itself.

I was really astonished at the high tech they had so early in history, which included a portable clay oven used for baking, presumably rice cakes! That they also had what appears to a steamer was a big surprise also.

An intricately carved bird shaped ivory dagger really rocked my world; as the sophistication and precision work dated back 7,000 years.



I asked the guide if they found any evidence of inter-tribal warfare or anything of that nature and she said no. Warfare is considerably different from personal protection and the daggers from the Hemudu site I saw in the Shanghai, Ningbo, Yuyao and Hemudu museums didn't look like military weapons but rather unique person items.

One does never know when a deranged water buffalo with Mephistopheles-like horns is about to attack, and having an intricately carved bird shaped ivory dagger can really save the day!



Excellent English-speaking tour guide at Hemudu. Note the bird design on the huge stone behind us. That's a replica of one found in the site; a symbol of Hemudu.

From the Hemudu archeological site I got a taxi, then a high-speed train, and another train, and another, then a subway and I was home in Beijing. Wow!

Again, as always, so many thanks to so many people that made this Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour an exciting, enlightening fun and education filled journey I'll never forget, because it's the people that make it special and I was so fortunate to meet so many kind and wonderful people along these ancient and modern Silk Roads in Southeast China's Shanghai, Ningbo, Yuyao and Hemudu archeological site.

Note

Chinese Academy of Sciences Headquarters, Radiocarbon dating of phytolith traces rice domestication to 10,000 years ago, June 2, 2017

https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2017-06/caos-rdo_1060217.php

Part 31 Kung Fu in Thailand

Iconic sites in Bangkok, Muay Thai kickboxing at Rajadamnern Stadium and a visit to ancient Silk Road gem mining and trade center of Chanthaburi, to be followed by Part 32, interview with the Wushu Federation of Thailand Secretary General Mr. Blue, and unique aspects of Buddhism in Thailand.



Bangkok Skyline

Maritime Silk Road Capital of Siam

When most people think of Thailand, visions of beaches merging into emerald green water and brilliant rainbow red, orange and golden sunsets come to mind, juxtaposed next to the image of Bangkok as an incredibly huge megalopolis with endless opportunities.

Like most countries there have been intrigues in the capital and struggles for power, but these days stability has returned and a brighter cleaner Thailand is emerging.

Thailand is an ancient land with at least 6,000 years of seafaring culture making it a major hub of the maritime Silk Roads since time immemorial. Archeological excavations in Thailand uncovered gemstones from Taxila in Pakistan, glass beads for jewelry from the Mediterranean and coins from the Middle East.

Thailand is unique in that unlike other Asian nations it was never colonized by Europeans. During the colonial era – that is the past 500 years – it was a buffer between Myanmar and Malaysia which were British colonies, and Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam which were colonized by France. But that isn't half the story. In fact, Thais have their own unique spiritual and diplomatic methodologies and devastating martial arts. Their diplomacy included ceding parts of their non-Thai-speaking lands, e.g. parts of what is now called Malaysia to the British, and Laos and Cambodia to the French. Thai diplomacy won what was then called “Siam” an unparalleled level of independence during the most difficult centuries of colonialization.

As the land Silk Roads reached their twilight due to colonial domination of the port cities around Asia, Bangkok (called “Krung Thep” in Thai language) - due to its strategic location near the mouth of the Chao Phraya River - gradually rose to prominence beginning in the early 1400s. It became the capital city under the rule of King Rama I, in 1782.

Day 1 – Thursday September 26th (Thursday)

We arrived at Bangkok’s Don Mueang International Airport usually called DMK, or “the old airport” (because it started operations in 1914) early in the morning.

As usual these days I was accompanied by good friend Miao Hui who has accompanied me through many adventures around China and Asia.

Around seven am we took the metro downtown. As always, I was hungry and though we had rented an Airbnb apartment, we couldn’t check in till 3:00 pm so we went to have breakfast on Khaosan Road.



For the past 30 to 40 years or so Khaosan Road has been famous as “the backpacker’s center” of the city. We didn’t see too many backpackers, but it’s a lively street with breakfast places that open early and lots of colorful people.

Generally speaking, the street is a bit upgraded since the 1980s, but still pretty much the same. A better bet for those with goals besides partying is nearby Soi Rambuttri Street, only a few minutes away from Khaosan Road as it’s cleaner and quieter, has reasonably priced places to stay, restaurants and bookshops.

After breakfast we took a walk along the length of Khaosan Road as there was in the early 1990s a small but great Muay Thai school at one end called Jeddi Gym, or something like that where I used to train and sleep but alas, it’s gone now.

Majestic Wonders

Still, Khaosan Road is a good first stop as it’s right next door to several of Bangkok’s most iconic historic sites mostly found along Ratchadamnoen Avenue – a very old road in Bangkok which links the extraordinarily beautiful Grand Palace adjoining the Wat Phra Kaew (Temple of the Emerald Buddha) to the Royal Palaces in Dusit Garden.

Don’t be sidetracked by any “polite gentleman” who offers a “tour of six temples for only 60 baht” along with tons of other “great information” about Bangkok as it’s an old but “evergreen” scam. It’s best to walk as the most majestic of Bangkok’s historical sites are all nearby.

Our stroll through time and the majestic wonders of ancient Bangkok ended at Wat Intharawihan with its 32-metre tall standing gold-plated Buddha bathing the neighborhood in beatific tranquility.



Completing our walking tour, I quickly checked the Rajadamnern Stadium online schedule. The oldest and most illustrious Muay Thai kickboxing venue in Thailand, Rajadamnern Stadium has been the road to fame and glory and/or the agony of defeat for thousands of young men – Thai and foreign – since its founding in 1945.

I found fights scheduled every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday evenings. Not knowing where we'd be Sunday night, I decided there is no better way to spend one's first evening in Bangkok than at live Muay Thai combat in the sanctum sanctorum of Rajadamnern Stadium.

Muay Thai at Rajadamnern Stadium

These performances have to be experienced to be believed. They begin with the Ran Muay, a personalized dance-like prayer performed by the fighters honoring parents, school and masters that incorporates some simple stretching and fighting movements. They wear a unique headband called Mong Kon, which likewise has deeply spiritual significance.



The live orchestra has two drums and two pee java flute players (sometimes cymbals).

The flutes play melodies not so different from ancient middle-eastern Silk Roads music giving the whole experience the flavor of the exotic.

If the action in the ring gets a bit slow, the ensemble will quicken its pace to encourage the fighters, and they definitely reach crescendos with the fight action so it's an interactive system of music and fighting.



In the Muay Thai system there are five rounds with two-minute breaks between. I was a little surprised by a couple of things. First, I didn't see any turning kicks to the head like I used to back in the 1970s. Their boxing skills have improved though forming the first battery of attacks, and knee attacks while in clinches formed the second battery. "Back-in-the-day," turning kicks to the head were the number one KO techniques but I didn't see them at all this evening. My second surprise was to find Miao totally into the multi-sensory action, cheering along the fighters and totally absorbed in the ancient martial rituals.



After the fights one can take a photo with one of the winners and it's a nice idea to give them a little good luck tip to reward them for their hard work.



Day 2 - September 27, 2019 (Friday)

On this beautiful day we went to the National Museum Bangkok, “free for Buddhist monks and priests and children not older than 12,” the sign said at the ticket office. This Museum isn’t like any other museum. It is actually the Phra Ratchawang Bowon Sathan Kongkol, or, for those who don’t speak Thai so well, “The Palace of the Front” built in 1782 during the early Bangkok period.

It looks like a palace and indeed was a palace – specifically the residence of the five Viceroys, AKA Deputy Kings, mostly younger brothers of Great Kings and oldest son of the Second King Pinklao.

Just to prove all things must pass, it was abolished as an official palace and then deserted in 1887, and in 1926 His Majesty King Prajadhipok better known as Rama VII donated all the buildings to become the National Museum Bangkok.

And oh, what a museum it is, for within one can find the origins of art and culture in Thailand and follow the traditional arts up through the ages. Probably the first building one visits is the Buddhaisawan Chapel which houses the Phra Buddha Sihing, containing one of if not the most gorgeous alters to be found in the world.



On the walls one can find ancient murals from the early Bangkok period recording Buddhist and even martial endeavors. It's amazing how many ancient places of worship contain art with decidedly martial themes, e.g. Mogao Caves in Gansu province China.



Across from that on the left side of the lane one finds the Audience Hall called the Red House, made of fine polished teakwood with a glorious collection of artworks within, and up the path a way one finds the Throne Hall and oh so many other masterpieces of Thai architecture, culture, history and arts. The intricate, bright and beautiful workmanship that went into every tiny detail of everything in this complex is mind bogglingly, stunningly awesome. It seems practically everything there is gold. There is even a Royal Funeral Chariots Hall; with the chariots being huge gold funerary vehicles, certainly the most splendid in the world.



All in all, there's something like 614 locations within this time-capsule of a divinely artistic world. It would take a hundred lifetimes to appreciate all the intricate details in the history, architecture, paintings, huge gold artifacts and other display pieces, most of which have been perfectly preserved down through the ages. The murals in the splendid Buddhaisawan Chapel reveal so much about ancient history, culture, humor, enlightenment, and military arts. There were a few sections that have faded, and some small sections missing but enough is there to bask in the flow of ethereal world.

That all took a few timeless hours and within my mind a more splendid world than I've ever experienced unfolded.

It was just starting to rain as we were leaving; September is the rainy season here and we went to the street to catch a taxi to the Jewelry Trading Center (JTC) Thailand, housed in one of the tallest buildings in Bangkok.



With 59 floors of gems and gem related equipment it's a global landmark. Bangkok is one of the world's most famous centers for gem trading, and precious and semi-precious stones here are often or usually sold cheaper than in the countries from which the gems originally come. How that works I have no idea, but I hung out with quite an assortment of traders and that's one thing everyone agreed on.

Suddenly it was time to check into our next luxury condo for a whole \$52 a night, with a swimming pool on the 45th floor, fitness center, etc. Not my usual humble abode, but hard to resist as I love swimming and the location is good.

Ancient Silk Road Gem Center of Chanthaburi

Day 3 – September 28, 2019, Saturday

Stone tools unearthed in the town of Chanthaburi in southern Thailand are estimated to be about 2,000 years old, though it wasn't until the 12th century that it appeared as a town. By the 15th Century however it was quite famous for rubies:

“A hundred li (twenty miles) to the southwest of this Kingdom there is a trading place, Shang Shui, which is on the road to Yun hou-men, [thought to be a canal between Chanthaburi and Trat Provinces in eastern Thailand]. In this place there are five or six hundred foreign families who sell all kinds of foreign goods; many Hung-ma-sze-ken-ti stones are sold there. This stone is an inferior kind of ruby, bright and clear like the seeds of the pomegranate.”

Ma Huan, 1408 AD

Ma Huan incidentally was one of four officials who accompanied legendary Chinese explorer Zheng He during his seven voyages into the Indian Ocean, 1405 to 1433. Ma Huang spoke Arabic and Persian and thus acted as an interpreter.

We got to Bangkok's Eastern bus terminal called “Ekkamai” around noon and left Bangkok 12:30 arriving in Chanthaburi about 5 pm. Chanthaburi is only a few kilometers from the Gulf of Thailand and Cambodia.

After arrival we walked a couple of kilometers to KP Grand Hotel, then after dark walked to the traditional food stall street and had a huge super-delicious vegetarian dinner accompanied by - a Chinese opera, much to my surprise.

Chanthaburi, Miao told me isn't only famous for gem trading, but also the smelliest fruit in the world, durian, which Miao loves, so after dinner it was off in search of this pungent delicacy. We met a grandmother in the main-street market who gave us directions through smaller streets to find the illusive fruit.

Fifteen minutes or so later we finally found the durian and another amazing show, specifically a Chinese acrobatic show which started with the highest human pyramid I've ever seen supported by a 30-foot central pole held up by some of the acrobats. Then a spectacular florescent glowing dragon appeared out of nowhere that danced happily around the town square for a while before appearing to climb the huge stack of acrobats who were tied to the pole. When he got to the top fireworks came roaring out of the dragon's mouth as he danced enthusiastically. This was all very amazing for me and the hundred or so families that had gathered around the small-town old central plaza fountain.

Day 4, September 30, 2019

In Vietnam we visited the gem mining town of Loc Yan; in Indonesia we visited the diamond mines in Cempaka, and so one would think we'd be prepared for the gem trading town of Chanthaburi. But, in fact, every gem town has different cultures and procedures and one can always expect surprises. For example, though there is a sizable Chinese descent minority in Chanthaburi many of the biggest traders are Pakistanis.

Located on Trok Kachang street the gem market – if given just a quick glance - looks a lot more like a restaurant street than a gem market. There are lots of shops with tables and chairs, but very little food is to be found there.



Whereas one might think sellers would sit at the tables in a gem trading center (like in Loc Yan, Vietnam), instead in Chanthaburi mostly it's the buyers that sit at tables and the sellers go from table to table in the different houses.



Though there are also some sellers.



We spent the whole day there and we got to know one of the trading house managers quite well. Known simply as Badshah, this gentleman is a large jolly fellow from Peshawar Pakistan and frequently travels between Thailand, China, Japan, Pakistan and a dozen other places buying and selling rather large quantities of precious gems. He's reached the point in his career where he never needs to carry money or gems but has networks of friends and relatives that carry on the business leaving him to make decisions. Indeed, for the rest of our time in Thailand we hung out mainly with him his friends and were honored to enjoy a lovely dinner at one of his homes.



At the trading house he operates in Chanthaburi he doesn't so much do trading but rather operates as house manager. How does he profit from this? I learned there's a 14% commission from the broker that sells the stone, with 6% going to the manager, and 8% going to the buyer. The manager however is responsible to ensure the gems are or at least can be certified as the real thing, and must negotiate between the sellers and buyers when there is a discrepancy. What's really amazing is he's only been in the gem business and Thailand for five years, yet speaks Thai reasonably well, in addition to a half dozen other languages including Chinese and English.

Next, we will head back to Bangkok and hook up with the President of Wushu Federation Mr. Blue and other adventures!



Part 32 Kung Fu In Thailand Continued

*Buddhism in Thailand, Interview with Wushu Federation
Secretary General Mr. Blue and Monkey Mind vs Sabbai*



“When I was nineteen years old, Khun Sam Chon, the ruler of Muang Chot, came to raid Muang Tak. My father went to fight Khun Sam Chon on the left; Khun Sam Chon drove forward on the right. Khun Sam Chon charged in; my father’s men fled in confusion. I did not flee.

I mounted my elephant, named Bekhpon, and pushed him ahead in front of my father. I fought an elephant duel with Khun Sam Chon. I fought Khun Sam Chon's elephant, Mas Muang by name, and beat him. Khun Sam Chon fled. Then my father named me Phra Ramkhamhaeng because I fought Khun Sam Chon's elephant."

Face 1 The inscription of King Ramkhamhaeng the Great (1292)

<http://www.thaibuddhism.net/face1.htm>

Thailand Brief Overview

King Ramkhamhaeng the Great is known as "the Great" for several reasons. He was a valiant warrior, a gifted scholar and diplomat and established Buddhism as the religion of Thailand. He also invented the Thai alphabet and a stone stele – quoted above – was built elaborating just some of his accomplishments.

Thailand is a Buddhist country and like Buddhism itself is tolerant of other beliefs and religions so in Bangkok one can find several churches, mosques, Hindu temples and so on.

Though many tourists on for example Khaosan road and the beaches can and do wear shorts, tank-tops and so on, around Bangkok and the country it's probably better to wear long loose pants and at least a T-shirt just to maintain some minimal level of respect.

Naturally Thais have their own very unique norms, cultures, traditions and beliefs.

I've known foreigners visiting Asian countries with the proud attitude that the locals can just "get used to it" – whatever "it" is - but such individuals never fare well or last long in these countries as they tend to attract the more negative elements in those countries.

Buddhism was first introduced to Thailand a thousand years before King Ramkhamhaeng the Great in about 250 BCE during the time of Indian Emperor Ashoka, another very interesting character in history. At first Emperor Ashoka ruled his empire much like his grandfather, with infinite cruelty.

Even 900 years after the emperor's death Chinese Silk Road traveler and holy monk Xuan Zang heard stories about Emperor Ashoka's infinitely cruel prisons. And yet, after the particularly bloody slaughter of a feudal state called Kalinga in 261 BCE in present day Odisha in eastern India, Emperor Ashoka for whatever reason issued an edict regretful of the ultimate suffering he had caused, renounced war and his name became renowned along the Silk Roads as a great patron and propagator of Buddhism.

Thus, since ancient times most Thais have been and remain devoutly Buddhist with about 95% of the population today identifying themselves as Buddhist. Most boys join a monastery for a day if a family member passes away; most young men join a monastery for at least a few months, and almost all men have lived in a monastery for some time. Most companies allow Thai men three months leave for monastery life if they choose that path for a time.



Those who study Buddhism usually divide the major denominations into Theravada (the doctrine of the elders) and Mahayana (the Greater Vehicle).

Theravada represents the more traditional older teachings, most widely practiced in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, as well as in the Islamic nations of Indonesia and Malaysia.

Mahayana in some ways represents a more streamlined “modern” understandings of the teachings of Buddhism and is most widely practiced in Tibet, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Mongolia.

Theravada philosophically is relatively unified, while Mahayana traditions are generally more diverse, though both schools get along well together at least these days. Incidentally Chinese “Chan” (Zen) Buddhism is a branch of Mahayana and China has the largest Buddhist population in the world with some 245 million Buddhists.

Now, 800 years after King Ramkhamhaeng the Great, the vast majority of Thais still follow the Theravada system which is based on the Tipitaka:

1. The Vinaya Pitaka which has all 277 rules which Buddha laid down for monks and nuns
2. The Suttanta Pitaka which contains the Discourses
3. The Abhidhamma Pitaka containing the psychological and ethical teachings of the Buddha

If a foreigner visiting Bangkok wishes to learn about Thai Buddhism, Wat Buddhapadipa (monastery) is known to have English language teachers that can instruct visitors in meditation and other basic teachings of Buddhism, up to and including ordination if the visitor has the spiritual inclination, self-discipline and time to follow the Buddha’s teachings.



Just for the record, there is no doctrine in Buddhism that I know which states that one must or even should “worship” the Buddha like a god. Indeed, many regular Buddhists and monks speak of God, and don’t confuse Buddha with God. Buddha simply taught the steps and stages to enlightenment, the great Nibbana (Nirvana: “never born again”) where one can be freed from the illusions of this temporary life.

True, Buddhists bow to the image of Buddha, but in Korea and Japan people bow to each other and in many Asian countries, children kowtow to parents and other respected elders on special holidays, with none of that implying worship, just deep respect.

All that aside many Buddhists do worship Buddha and that’s fine too for them.

Thai Wushu Federation Secretary General Mr. Blue

October 1, 2019 - We've been in Thailand for almost a week now and today got to meet the Secretary General of the Wushu Federation here Mr. Blue.



He's a lively gentleman, and though he's seventy years old he looks and acts at least 20 or 30 years younger. He speaks Thai and Chinese quite fluently and English very well also.

Why? One reason is he's a 3rd generation Chinese Thai, which means he's Thai, speaks Thai fluently as it was his first language, but he also has roots in China. I asked how he learned Chinese and found out he started studying Chinese in primary school - two hours every morning and two hours every afternoon.

How did he learn English? "During the 1960s and early 1970s during the Vietnam war there was a large U.S. military base here and so the schools were teaching English."

He started learning Wushu at age 12 here in Thailand.

Curious about the history of the Wushu Federation of Thailand I asked specifically who founded the federation and wasn't terribly surprised to find out he was one of the founding members back in 1989. He's also done extensive traveling in China, studied and trained with various masters and even the legendary Wu Bin was one of his teachers. For those not familiar with Master Wu Bin he trained more champions than any other teacher in China, including several superstar movie actors like Jet Li and National Wushu Team Coaches like Japan's National Team Coach Sun Jian Ming, and in Vietnam Nguyen Hi, usually called My Duc. Currently Wu Bin is the president of the Beijing Wushu Institute, Director of the Beijing Wushu Team, works closely with the Chinese Wushu Association, Asian Wushu Federation, International Wushu Federation, and the World Fighting Martial Arts Federation (WFMAF).

Over the decades Mr. Blue has seen the huge growth of Wushu's popularity around Asia and the world. For example, the 1998 Asian Games were held in Bangkok and that was the first time Wushu was included as a competition sport in those games. Wushu's development in Thailand however is not without its challenges as Muay Thai kickboxing is THE national sport here and training in Wushu might seem a bit unpatriotic to some Thais. "There is a lot of Chinese culture celebrated here, and people do enjoy it, but Muay Thai is special," Mr. Blue said.

He's certainly right about both points as we learned during our week here. On one hand China and Thailand are like brothers, on the other hand people are - naturally enough - sensitive about protecting and promoting their own unique culture and cultural arts.

I asked how the Thai Wushu team has done in international competition and he reported: “Not very well. We have a very limited budget and don’t send teams to many international events. Of course, we’re working on funding, but for the time being we do the best we can.”

When all is said and done there are certain practical realities that must be dealt with. I certainly hope more funding can find its way to the Wushu Federation of Thailand because I’m sure with the martial and artistic excellence of the Thai people and culture, they can excel in Chinese wushu or any martial art they so desire.

In any event, Mr. Blue did treat us to a fine lunch and was even so kind as to give us a ride back to our hotel after the interview.

Incidentally at the 15th World Wushu Championships Shanghai Thailand did send a great team, and I have to mention they had a particularly notable squad of lady Sanda competitors. Bravo Mr. Blue!

The heart of a nation and peace

In the first part of this two-part story on Wushu in Thailand I briefly mentioned beaches and Bangkok, but saved the best for last, as the “real” Thailand is not likely to be found in either location, but rather in the rural countryside where tourists don’t usually go.

There one will find the majority of people working in farming, mostly potentially back-breaking hard rice farming but also possessing genuine smiles, not the forced smiles of so many of those who work in Thailand's large tourist industry. Also, in the rural countryside one will find monkeys, lots of them, busily going about their monkey business which sometimes includes some of the more aggressive adult males taking people's bags and, in some cases, even biting them.

The "monkey mind" is described by Phra Peter Pannapadipo in his book about becoming a monk in Thailand, as "the mind that must be trained to stop its constant movement before it can know real peace."

And so, it is also in the countryside that one is more likely to discover what the Thais call *sabbai*:

"I felt totally at peace and perhaps for the first time understood the much-used Thai word, *Sabbai*. It can mean healthy, well or comfortable, depending on the context, but it can also mean much more. It can be a deep inner feeling of wellbeing and contentment, being at peace with oneself and with the environment..."

Phra Farang, An English Monk in Thailand, by Phra Peter Pannapadipo, 1997, 2005

Also, in this book he wrote:

"Of course, generosity should not be restricted within denominational limits and they remain the same virtuous acts whether they come from a Buddhist heart, Christian heart or Muslim heart, and to whomever they are extended..."

*Phra Farang, An English Monk in
Thailand*, by Phra Peter Pannapadipo,
1997, 2005

Good governance

Good governance has a long history in this part of the world.

“In the time of King Ramkhamhaeng this land of Sukhothai is thriving. There are fish in the water and rice in the fields. The lord of the realm does not levy tolls on his subjects. They are free to lead their cattle or ride their horses to engage in trade; whoever wants to trade in elephants, does so; whoever wants to trade in horses, does so; whoever wants to trade in silver or gold, does so. When any commoner or man of rank dies, his estate — his elephants, wives, children, relatives, rice granaries, retainers and groves of areca and betel — is left in its entirety to his son. When commoners or men of rank differ and disagree, the King examines the case to get at the truth and then settles it justly for them. He does not connive with thieves or favor concealers of stolen goods. When he sees someone’s belongings, he does not covet them; when he sees someone’s wealth, he does not get envious. If anyone riding an elephant comes to him to put his own country under his protection, he helps him, treats him generously, and takes care of him; if someone comes to him with no elephants, no horses, no men or women, no silver or gold, he gives him some, and helps him until he can establish a state of his own. When he captures enemy warriors or their chiefs, he does not kill them or beat them.”

Face 1 (continued) The inscription of King
Ramkhamhaeng the Great (1292)

<http://www.thaibuddhism.net/face1.htm>

In the first part of this story about Wushu in Thailand, interpreter Ma Huang, and Maritime Silk Road explorer and diplomat Zheng He were briefly mentioned.

Unknown to most, Zheng He's extensive diplomatic voyages were sponsored and directed by Third Ming Dynasty Emperor Zhu Di (1402 to 1424) also called the Yongle Emperor. He was an extraordinary international diplomat and worked consistently to lift the burdens from ordinary people. Zhu Di ordered local officials not to accumulate money by unfair means or launch battles at will. He often sent officials to inspect people's living conditions, to examine the magistrates and to punish officials who arbitrarily increased the people's burden. He developed empire wide land reclamation and reform and greatly developed and promoted domestic and international trade and commerce.

The three examples of benevolent leaders mentioned in this article, Thai King Ramkhamhaeng the Great, Indian Emperor Ashoka (after he "saw the light") and Chinese Ming Dynasty Emperor Zhu Di were included partly because of the teachings of a Chinese friend I knew back in the early 1970s (Chin Lin) who taught me that a Kung Fu practitioner should also learn medicine to maintain the balance of Yin and Yang.

How do benevolent leadership and medicine relate to each other? I've noticed a growing cynicism among people these days, and even heard that the "world has always been governed by the 'laws of the jungle.'" Cynicism I see as a disease which can be treated with reality-based hope, and the three great leaders mentioned in this article also demonstrate that there have been great leaders in history that promoted peace and trade, especially along the ancient Silk Roads. Thus, the "law of the jungle" has not always ruled and if history is any teacher, it reminds us of the old proverb: "You catch more flies with honey than vinegar."

In sum, it's best to keep an open mind and a good clean heart when ruling and/or traveling, for one never knows what one will find – even possibly very good things, maybe even *Sabbai*.*

"If everyone in the world will love universally; states not attacking one another; houses not disturbing one another; thieves and robbers becoming extinct; emperor and ministers, fathers and sons, all being affectionate and filial -- if all this comes to pass the world will be orderly. Therefore, how can the wise man who has charge of governing the empire fail to restrain hate and encourage love? So, when there is universal love in the world it will be orderly, and when there is mutual hate in the world it will be disorderly."

Mozi (470 – c. 391 BCE)

NOTES:

www.thaibuddhism.net

<http://palicanon.org/>

<http://www.watbuddhapadipa.org/>

<https://www.goldenbuddha.net/do-buddhists-worship-buddha-statues/>

Phra Farang - An English Monk in Thailand, by Phra Peter Pannapadipo, published by Arrow Books, 2005

* I think the Thai word “*sabba*” may be “*dama*” in Indonesian/Malaysian languages. Both may be loan words from Sanskrit or Pali.

Part 33 Ancient and Modern Roots of Kung Fu Legacy in Hong Kong



I started the official Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour at the Bell Tower in Xi'an, the old capital of China, traveled north as far as Almaty Kazakhstan, Japan to the east, south to Indonesia, west to Qatar and oh so many thousands of road and nautical miles in between. During these adventures I explored civilizations, countries, great cities, villages, archeological sites, museums, libraries, mausoleums and so on along shining new and ancient dusty roads, on busses, trains and even camels.

But somehow, I managed to miss Hong Kong? How is this possible? Suddenly it became glaringly obvious, this situation had to be rectified! I had somehow skipped over the hometown and proving grounds of Li Xiao Long, yes, Bruce Lee and his legendary Sifu, Yip Man. Consequently, this article and the next in this series looks at the ancient and modern backgrounds and forces that shaped both men who blazed dramatic new frontiers in martial arts history and one of Sifu Ip Man's most excellent disciples, students, co-instructors and friends.

Hong Kong and the Silk Roads

Hong Kong has traded with mainland China for thousands of years and Hong Kong was certainly part of the Maritime Silk Road, also known as the "Marine Porcelain Road." From the late 16th to mid-17th centuries until today, European, Southeast Asian, and African countries traded with China via Hong Kong.

To get in touch with the ancient collective and individual spirits that govern the minds and actions of the past and today's world theaters, I typically make my first stop in any particular location at the best museum in town.

I approach museums like an artist appreciating the evolutionary processes, the sublime greatness, illuminating wisdom and beauty of a civilization and a crime investigator trying to figure out what went wrong, causing the conflicts that invariably bring those great civilizations down in the immutable cycles of birth, growth, decline, death and rebirth.

Following the advice of the venerable sage Lewis Carroll and a king he once knew: "Begin at the beginning... and go on till you come to the end: then stop," I started at the beginning.

Where did it all begin? Like everything else in the Tao it began with the mysterious and inconceivable, infinitely huge mind shattering Big Bang about 13.8 billion years ago and much later an average second-generation star surrounded by cosmic goop that coalesced into planets whose compositions were determined by gravitational forces from that star, one of which collected considerable ice possibly from comets, while burning like hell in a cauldron of fiery rock.

Hong Kong Museum of History

Though the Hong Kong Museum of History doesn't go quite as far back as I always do, Hong Kong did begin in the fiery volcanic geological period starting about 400 million years ago and the visitor to that museum is first led through primaeval forests with specimens of now extinct birds, reptiles and mammals chirping, roaring and grunting which are familiar sounds to most because some things never change.



Traditional clothing of ancient Hong Kong

Those who knew Bruce Lee or even just saw his movies know well a part of the primordial had indeed awoken within him. Was his Kiai more like a cat or a bird? All of that circuitry can be found in the more ancient parts of every human brain waiting only for the right or very, very wrong environmental circumstances to bring them back into wakefulness.

Continuing right along in the museum one finds the first-generation inhabitants of Hong Kong were the Yue people from the south of China. The second-generation wave of ancient immigrants to Hong Kong perhaps 4,000 years ago came from central and northern China. How did I learn this? A brochure, a 4,000-year-old ceremonial knife and a cup of coffee.

So, you walk into a museum and what's the first thing you do? My answer is by politely asking where to get a map of the museum and then snap up everything else they have in English.

Then, head to the coffee shop to sit, memorize the map and read everything you could get so you know what the museum director thinks is most important in the collection on display and what to keep an eye out for.

Museum directors are right at least half the time in my experience, so it's worth the price of a cup of coffee which by the way feels pretty good going down too because even finding the right museum in a big foreign city can by itself be quite an odyssey.

All primed and ready to go one must relax into the next adventure because time is an infinitely deep ocean and the ancient spirits suspended in the infinity of time are patiently waiting for someone to breathe life back into them again.

First, what did the brochure say?

“The people who inhabited South China from prehistoric times were the Yue people.

From the Qin and Han dynasties, however, the Han people of Central China migrated south, bringing with them advanced culture and technology...”

And then, walking through and photographing everything on display I found the “Yazhang Blade.”

The sign adjacent to this curiously shaped knife said this:

“...To date, 23 sites in East Asia have been known to have yielded 150 pieces of Yazhang blade, which could have emerged around the Huanghe River (Yellow River) Valley about 4,000 years ago.

To a certain extent, the discoveries of Yazhang blade in Hong Kong can be inferred as the ritual objects used in the North China ceremonies had been readily adopted by the ancient inhabitants of Hong Kong.

This provides academic significance in the study of the tie between the ancient history of Hong Kong and that of North China.”

Ah ha!



Yazhang Blade

A museum of history in Hong Kong also has to celebrate their history as a sea faring people and indeed there was a life-sized junk that visitors were invited to board and look around, as well as a number of miniatures; all very cool!



A smaller replica of the ubiquitous “junk.”

What, some might ask, is a “junk?”

“Nor then is the voyage undertaken, except in vessels of the three descriptions following: the greatest is called a junk, the middling sized a zaw, the least a kakam.

The sails of these vessels are made of cane-reeds, woven together like a mat; which, when they put into port, they leave standing in the wind. In some of these vessels there will be employed a thousand men, six hundred of these sailors, and four hundred soldiers.

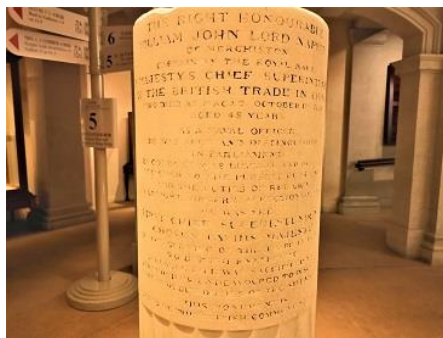
The Travels of ibn Batuta 1325-1354,
Translated by Reverend Samuel Lee, 1829

Moving right along I'm going to jump into the 18th Century.

Colonialization

William John Napier (1786-1834), AKA the 9th Lord Napier, AKA Baron Napier was a British Royal Navy officer and trade representative in China. It was he who first suggested that the British “take possession” of Hong Kong.

“Lord Napier distinctly recommended that a small British force 'should take possession of the Island of Hongkong, in the eastern entrance of the Canton River, which is admirably adapted for every purpose.’” (Eitel, E. J. 1882)



The notorious “Napier Column”

The conspiratorial curse of opium

“Every purpose” came to include importing thousands of tons of opium into China. Due to the military superiority of the British Navy in 1842 the Chinese had no choice but to surrender Hong Kong to the British, and it along with Guangzhou (Canton) quickly became the massive centers of opium distribution in China.

The second Governor, Sir John Davis, once remarked that almost every person in Hong Kong in possession of capital and not connected with government employment was employed in the opium trade. In fact, few of the leading firms in Hong Kong were not connected with the discreditable but profitable traffic in opium.

https://www.mardep.gov.hk/theme/port_hk/en/p1ch3_4.html

In sum, the very unequal relationship with the British was disastrous for China which was in the middle of a revolutionary war to overthrow the corrupt foreign supported Manchu Qing Dynasty in which at least 50 million Chinese were killed.

No doubt the Chinese must have been furious about being conquered by the British Navy, forced to give up Hong Kong and subsequent insidious opium addiction and deaths of millions of Chinese from this disease, and this no doubt fostered an environment where Fists of Fury would naturally evolve and gave rise to the caricature of the “sick man of Asia.”

Thus, it should be of no great surprise that some Chinese may view some foreign visitors with just a tad bit of suspicion, or more. This of course goes way back in history, and a quick reading of Ibn Battuta's writings about China in the 13th Century confirms this.

"The people of China are, in other respects, the most skillful artificers. In painting, none come near to them. Of what I myself witnessed was the following: I once scarcely entered one of their cities: some time after, I had occasion again to visit it; and what should I see upon its walls, and upon papers stuck up in the streets, but pictures of myself and my companions! This is constantly done with all who pass through their towns- And should any such stranger do anything to make Bight necessary, they would then send out his picture to the other provinces; and wherever he might happen to be, he would be taken.

It is also a practice with them, that when a vessel leaves China, an account, as well of the names, as of the forms of the men in it, is taken and laid up. When the vessel returns, the servants of the magistrates board it, and compare the persons in it with the descriptions taken; and if one should happen to be missing, the commander of the vessel is taken, unless he can prove that the man has died by some sickness or other circumstance, or that he has left him, with his own consent, in some other of the Chinese provinces.

The Travels of ibn Battuta 1325-1354,

Translated by Reverend Samuel Lee

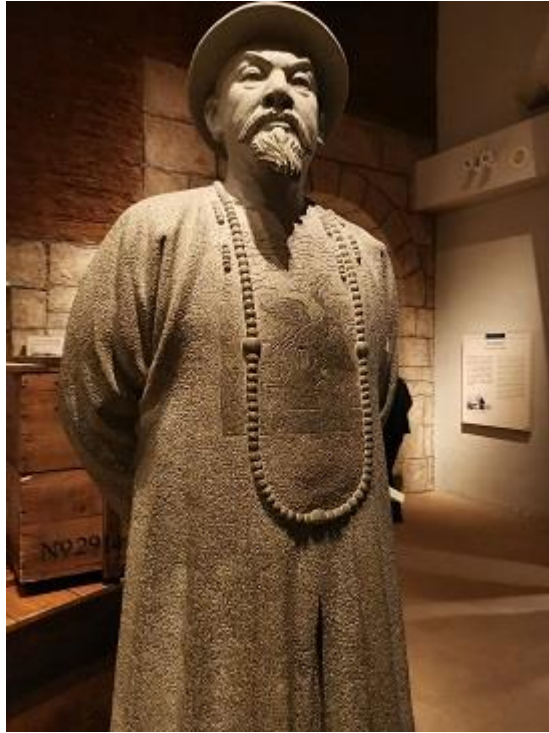
Ibn Battuta marveled at the wealth and sophistication of the Chinese but viewed their security precautions as a form of oppression. This isn't surprising because China was many centuries ahead of every other nation when he visited in regards to immigration policies. Whereas outsiders tended to think of China as a great fat watermelon ripe for the picking and eating, Chinese saw and still see China as their home and didn't appreciate foreigners coming in to carve up and exploit their beloved homeland.

Before moving on it is essential to mention one extraordinary Kung Fu master in the early 19th Century, specifically the High Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu. In 1839, the eighth Emperor of the decaying Qing Dynasty, Emperor Minning, also called the Daoguang Emperor refused both British and domestic demands to legalize and tax opium and appointed his viceroy Lin Zexu to end the opium trade completely.

Lin Zexu fought with his mind, body and soul in a way no Chinese had before against the most formidable weapon of the colonizers, initially by drafting strict laws against opium importation and sale. He then sent a courteous but firm letter to Queen Victoria in 1839 in which he presented an abstract of a new law about to be enacted in Hong Kong:

“Any foreigner or foreigners bringing opium to the Central Land, with design to sell the same, the principals shall most assuredly be decapitated, and the accessories strangled; and all property (found on board the same ship) shall be confiscated...”

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1839lin2.asp>



High Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu who vigorously fought against the importation of opium into China and use of Hong Kong as the trading center for that purpose.

Fight for freedom

That letter, though graciously written threw down the gauntlet and began China's efforts to defend itself against the single most formidable weapon (opium) of the world's greatest colonial superpower (the UK).

In the short term enforcing that law led to many martial encounters on the docks of Hong Kong, Canton and great and smaller rivers in China and Commissioner Lin Zexu was at the forefront of most of them.

He was and remains a towering figure in the martial art history of Hong Kong and Guangzhou.

Unfortunately, Lin Zexu's heroic efforts directly led to the first Opium War which lasted almost three years from September 4, 1839 to August 29, 1842, ending in China's defeat by the British, the humiliating Treaty of Nanjing which among other things gave Hong Kong to the British and established the Shanghai International Settlement (in effect until 1941 when Japanese troops blasted their way in immediately following their attack on Pearl Harbor).



Replica of the Treaty of Nanjing in Hong Kong Museum

This was followed by the 2nd Opium War, October 8, 1856 to October 24, 1860 which the British won again resulting in Kowloon Peninsula and Stonecutters Island being taken by the British as part of Hong Kong and Outer Manchuria being taken by the Russian Empire.

All this was simultaneous to the Taiping Revolution (1850 to 1864) and others in China led by the starving farmers and slaves against the corrupt nobility and emperors of the Qing Dynasty in which at minimum 50 million Chinese were killed.

The Chinese farmers were largely inspired by the American Revolution (1765-1783) to free itself from British colonial power and the French Revolution (1789-1799) to free itself from the very high taxes and moral decay of the corrupted monarchy (just like China at the time).

The revolution in China continued until the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 which was followed by the Warlord Era (1916–1928; Songshan Shaolin was mostly burned down in the last year of this horrific series of feudal wars), which was followed by Japanese invasions in 1931 (Manchuria), and 1937 (Beijing, Shanghai and on through large parts of China), which were followed by another foreign financed and armed Civil War that lasted until 1949.

One will find all the above in the Hong Kong Museum of History in addition to ancient clay pots, unrivaled porcelain, fantastic jewelry, coins, documents, proclamations, and treaties, paintings, photos, sculptures, etc.

Wing Chun Kung Fu and Yip Man



Thus, there were multiple complex intersecting forces at work when Wing Chun student Yip Man was growing up and his family moved from Guangzhou (Canton) to Hong Kong in 1909 at the age of 16. Moving to a British colony at that time was probably intended to spare his family the bloodshed which plagued mainland China however the British Governor of Hong Kong Mark Aitchison Young surrendered the colony of Hong Kong to Japan on December 25th, 1941 after fierce and losing battles against the Japanese invaders.

There was simply no escaping foreign aggression for any Chinese, even in the British colony of Hong Kong.

One might wonder if the fiery passion of Bruce Lee was at least partly inspired by the seemingly endless abuses and humiliations Chinese were subjected to.

In Part 2 of this Silk Road adventure in Hong Kong I interview a disciple and assistant instructor of Yip Man in Hong Kong who was also a legendary Hong Kong street fighter “back in the day,” is one of if not the most internationally famous and successful Wing Chun Kung Fu masters in Hong Kong and the world today, and a darned nice guy, Sifu Sam Lau.

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Wikimedia Foundation (www.wikimedia.org) – Chart: Opium imports to China 1650-1880, Philg88; Wikimedia Foundation (www.wikimedia.org) [CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)]

Part 34 Hong Kong - Interview with Wing Chun Sifu Sam Lau

November 29, 2019 - On the 22-hour very cheap (434 Yuan) train to Shenzhen from Beijing I searched the internet on my phone for Wing Chun Kung Fu in Hong Kong and found the Ving Tsun Athletic Association Ltd, with its martial art family tree going back to the originator of this legendary internal centerline style, Buddhist nun Ng Mui.

Wing Chun Kung Fu Master “Sam Lau”

Looking on their “Schools in Hong Kong” page I found about 50, including one at a place called Alpha House, 27, Nathan Road, in Kowloon. I chose this one because of an extraordinary master called Sifu Sam Lau, a first-generation disciple and assistant instructor of the legendary Yip Man, the Wing Chun instructor of Bruce Lee.

Naturally I had called ahead and had an appointment for 10 am but got there half an hour early because finding places in Asia is sometimes a bit of a challenge.

It took a few minutes to find, but eventually revealed itself across from iSquare, a huge mall on Nathan Road. I found my way to the 4th floor and was told that Master Lau would appear shortly which indeed he did.

We had a few minutes to chat when he let me know he had to leave for Macao rather urgently and he asked if I could meet with him the next day. I assented and he graciously offered to let me stay in the dormitory of one of his hostels.

It turned out he owns several properties, including apartments, a couple of travel agencies, several Wing Chun schools and hostels in Hong Kong. Eager to get to know this unique locale better I happily said thanks. He asked one of the secretaries at the travel agency he owns to escort me to one of his hostels. I was not really surprised that the hostel had a Kung Fu training hall in the main center room. It looked like heaven to me. I shared a dorm room with a young man from Mozambique and a gentleman about my own age from Taiwan.

The next day I met with Sifu Lau again and had the chance to ask some questions about his martial art career and Sifu Yip Man. Fortunately like most people in Hong Kong Sifu Lau speaks English quite well.

First, I asked about how he came to meet the venerable master Yip Man and his early years of training.

“It was about 1966 and I was waiting in a barber shop with an older bald man sitting next to me. The barber told me the man was Mr. Yip Man who taught such great martial arts.”

Fortunately, Sifu Lau and Yip Man were practically neighbors on Tung Choi Street.

“He didn’t have a gym back then,” Sifu Lau continued, “but I asked him to teach me and he said: “First, you must call me Sifu and there is a ceremony you must attend.”

I asked Lau Shifu about the ceremony called "*Bai-si*." This ritual I found out forms a bond, like a son and father and the master gauges the potential student's attitude and background. If found worthy, the student bows to the master and offers tea along with a formal letter stating a desire to study with the master and the reasons for that desire. In olden times there would be quite a number of attendees at this solemn ceremony, though in the relatively liberal 1960s the attendance of local dignitaries, family and other masters was not required.

"If accepted the master then gives the student "lucky money" and the student in turn gives the master "lucky money."

First Yip Man introduced Sam to his disciple Moy Yat and Sam stayed with him for several months. To test his learning Sam went out hunting for colorfully dressed gangs to fight near Kowloon Tong. Usually he won, but not always.

"We didn't use many rules back then, just no eyes, no groin and no killing," Sifu Lau recalled.

Whenever he learned a new skill he would go out and test it on the streets. Later on, Sifu Lao reports he felt he had acted stupid, rude and cruel provoking all those fights.

Over time more and more students from other Kung Fu schools challenged him. Finally, he started declining saying he had to prepare for the Hong Kong School Examination. After the exam though he was fighting a lot again. He confided his situation to Sifu Yip Man who got together his disciples Chan Kin Hei, Wong Ming and others who trained him with "Long Extended Arms and Wide Spaced Steps" and similar fighting skills.

He was being prepared for a big fight to end some of the street fighting. The big fight was scheduled to take place on the roof of Ho Kwong Restaurant and Sai Yee Street. Wong Wing was the Judge, Chan Kin Hei with the nickname "Chizhou Chap" was the instructor, Yip Chun, Yip Ching and others were in the audience. It was a long and difficult fight but finally Sam Lau was the winner.

Sam Lau continued his study with Sifu Yip Man, was invited to start teaching Wing Chun and also did some training in western boxing with Ramsey Bucks. This probably seemed like a break with tradition, and may have inspired the young Bruce Lee to also incorporate other styles into his own system.

Sifu Lau then went on to become an instructor at several respected martial art associations.

One story Sifu Sam told me in some detail was about his taking part in the Jieshou Cup Martial Arts Competition in Taiwan in 1974. Going against the advice of Mr. Tang "the King" he went anyway, alone. His opponent was a judo champion of the Navy Marines Hwalian who also had a 20-kilo weight advantage. Sam led with punches but his opponent dodged them and threw him to the ground several times with Sam losing the first two rounds. "In the third round though, I changed my strategy and started to use hook punches and knee kicks. I won that third round he noted with satisfaction. Officially he lost the fight because of the first two rounds, but "at the end most people thought I won."

I asked Sifu Lau if he knew Bruce Lee. "Not really. I first met him at the funeral for Yip Man. In fact, his Wing Chun was said to not have been very good." It appears Li Xiao Long (Bruce Lee) was not in Yip Man's inner circle, yet fortunately he developed other skills and talents that carried him to the pinnacle of the pantheon of martial arts stardom.

Before our interview Sifu Lau gave me a small booklet that contains his martial art biography and he certainly did compete a lot and participated in many famous events and has been and is the leader in many highly esteemed martial art associations. He even worked as a Kung Fu reporter for a while and in 1991 was appointed to be the Chairman of the Yip Man Martial Arts Association. His accomplishments are so many they cannot be summarized in a short article like this.

I asked: "Did any of Yip Man's sons follow in his footsteps to become Wing Chun masters?" Sifu Lau responded, "In the beginning no. His youngest son was working in a factory, and one son worked as my accountant for a while. Later when they realized the true value of their inheritance, they changed their minds and started to teach."

Curious about Wing Chun practice I asked about *Qi Sao*, as compared to real fighting to which Sifu Lau responded: "*Qi Sao* is a form of response training of the hands, arms and body. It's different from sparring which is called *Mai Sun Jong*."

Around this time, I asked Sifu Lao to show me how they were different and we stood up. He was "game," and ready for anything, but I'm respectful of a master like him and of course didn't try anything stupid because I'm not an idiot. All I can say is his technique is very strong indeed. He has the ability to move into any attack and "lock" the attacking limb as part of a direct centerline devastating counterattack. I noticed his Wing Chun is a bit different from I've learned before because he always moved in very quickly the instant, I started any attack.



His movements were so quick and powerful I was and remain hugely impressed, especially by the “Tickle Attack.”



The “tickle attack!” Warning: Do not try this at home. It can cause laughter!

I had noticed in some of Sifu Lau's brochures that his Wing Chun was "unique." I asked how it was different from others. He said: "We lean slightly forward and protect and attack at the same time." That fit well with what I observed playing with him.

I asked how many Wing Chun Taolu there were and he responded: Many Kung Fu styles have many Taolu. In Wing Chun we have only three. The first is Sil Lum Tao."

Simplicity is the height of elegance and note Sifu Lau's style appears simple enough, but am well aware it's the result of centuries of refining, plus more than half a century of his own street, sports competition and teaching experience. All in all? Very impressive indeed.

Walking back to his office I asked his age. He looks about 10 years younger than I so I was again very surprised when he told me he's 73. I couldn't believe it but it does fit with his biography and he even showed me ID.

In sum, I was profoundly impressed by this great Wing Chun Kung Fu master. He's a walking talking and teaching real live legend in Hong Kong that appears to me to be very healthy and as powerful as ever; maybe even better.

His son, Max by the way is carrying on the family tradition. I trained very briefly with him before the second meeting with Sifu Lau.



Max Lau, carrying on the family tradition with style

I had to get back to Beijing in kind of a hurry for several reasons and Sifu Lau informed me that to write a good story I needed to stay a few more days. I very much wanted to, but my obligations in Beijing could not be delayed or ignored. Instead I hope very much to return and train more diligently than I did on this first visit.

Polite Travelers

Readers might be wondering: “What about the riots going on in Hong Kong?” Actually, the two schools of Sifu Lau I visited, one in Mirador Mansion (58 Nathan Rd) and the other in Alpha House (27 Nathan Rd.) are both only a few hundred meters from the big “Central” to which thousands of students and adults – mostly wearing masks – did go on my second day there Sunday December 1. I was a bit surprised at the huge rivers of people mostly wearing masks walking past on that lovely sunny Sunday afternoon. Naturally I politely ignored them and they politely ignored me. It’s my feeling that a polite guest in another person’s house or city does not get involved in domestic disputes.

COVID-19

In early December 2019 the COVID-19 epidemic in China was getting pretty serious and travel restrictions started. I managed one additional quick trip to see a friend in Hong Kong again in late December and that that was the end of my travels until the date of this writing, June 2020. Many countries in the neighborhood still have travel restrictions.

Summary

My final assessment of the Legendary Sifu Sam Lau and his Wing Chun? I want to go back(!) and live and train there for a while. I very much like the city, the people, the food, the atmosphere and everything. In addition, I made a lot of friends outside the Kung Fu world as well, and feel I have a home there now. Hong Kong is a fast paced dynamic very modern city. Sifu Lau is a legend for a good reason. His Kung Fu is very precise and powerful – unstoppable I’d say.

I'm very grateful to him, his son Sifu Max, other people working with him and the kind good people in Hong Kong for an excellent, entertaining and educational visit.

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Epilogue and Khuda Hafiz!

"Khuda Hafiz" literally means "May God be your Guardian." But it's used by non-Muslims too in many Silk Road countries to simply mean "travel safely." *"Khoda,"* is Middle Persian for God, and *"hafiz"* is from Arabic (*hifz*) and means "protect."

In China they might say: *"Yī lù píng ān"* (一路平安!) again meaning: "Have a safe (peaceful) journey."

Most of the Silk Road countries are Muslim countries and knowing a few words in Arabic and/or Persian can help from time to time.

Likewise, on the land Silk Roads knowing a few words in Russian can be very helpful and most people in former Soviet countries speak Russian. So, research where you are going before you go and learn a few useful words in the languages most people are likely to speak before you go.

This is part of an ancient honor code that shows some respect for the traditions and cultures of the lands we visit. Even if our pronunciation is terrible, humor is often or usually the best defense when nothing else works. Indigenous people will usually respect a traveler just for making the effort to learn some of the local language. Really terrible travelers are arrogant people who expect everyone to know English. That's ridiculous!

The travelers' life especially along the Silk Roads is endlessly astonishing and infinitely beautiful and yet there are dangers.

So please, when traveling don't talk very loudly or allow yourself to be carried away by passion. In Asia especially people are measured by their ability to maintain a cool (and often well-humored) detachment from merely physical things and events. Travelers may be tested. In two words: "Be cool," or maybe: "Rise above."

Other tips for travelers include: Don't take photos of "just anything."

One time in China a few years ago I was walking along with a lady friend who asked to see my Nikon. I gave it to her. A moment later a helicopter flew overhead and "click, click, click" she took some photos of it. Inwardly I groaned, but every so suavely asked: "Can I see the camera for a second please?" Naturally I immediately deleted the photos of that helicopter! Why? Taking photos of helicopters is what spies do. The last thing I want on my camera is photos of a helicopter! If there is a group of soldiers in front of some building, don't take a photo. Why not? It's probably some high security area. This can be in any country. Spies take photos of high security areas. Especially these days, and especially Europeans and Americans are often or usually suspected of being spies.

Stay away from trouble. When I was up in the Tigray region of Ethiopia during the summer of 2018 my local friends Filimon and KB Miller carefully steered me away from some demonstrations going on. Why? They knew I'm not looking for "cheap thrills" of other people in distress. Most countries have some unfortunate things happening somewhere and I'm not looking to exploit them. In my opinion foreigners should mind their own business and not get involved in other people's domestic disputes. Things are almost always more complicated than foreigners understand and thrusting oneself into the middle of some domestic dispute is extremely dangerous and again, another good way to get labeled a spy (or killed). All the greatest martial arts skills and brilliant sense of humor cannot protect one from justifiably angry (and possibly paranoid) secret police or a mob of angry locals. Common sense and avoiding trouble usually can offer that protection.

Definitely I'd love to visit Mali! That was the center of the Trans-Saharan Trade Routes for millennia, one of the richest most beautiful places on the planet. But... it's simply too dangerous these days. The last time I chatted with Saqib – from Pakistan, he was in Mali helping to build a mosque. I asked for some photos, but he politely declined. Why? Read above again! Keeping a low profile, especially in conflict zones is the only way to survive and taking photos of this, that and the other thing raises a person's profile.

Someone might ask: Trans-Saharan Trade Routes? That's not Silk Roads! Actually, they do connect in several places in East and North Africa. All roads connect. All roads are One.

With the above in mind, I highly encourage everyone, young and old, martial artists and poets, painters, musicians, gem hunters and accountants, engineers, acrobats, circus clowns, and everyone else to research your passions and hobbies along the Silk Roads, check out the visas of the countries you'd like to visit with their "ministry of foreign affairs" (MFA) on the internet and/or their embassies, develop some local contacts via Facebook perhaps, make some hostel, hotel, Air B&B, or Couch Surfing reservations and GO! Yeah Baby! GO!

To that I'd add, take notes. Memory is a funny thing. Without notes I wouldn't be able to remember 5% of the details of what I experience while traveling. Traveling can bring on a sense of "information overload" very quickly and then memories start to blur. Taking photos of course is great (most of the time) but they don't record feelings and many details you might find very useful later on, like for example notes on some useful local words and phrases in their indigenous languages. (When taking a bus or taxi into cities from airports, I often start making a true local vocabulary list. Why not earlier? What people actually speak on the ground is sometimes very different from what one finds on the internet.

I'll always remember shortly after first moving to South Korea. I was sitting in a small local restaurant and tried chatting with a local guy. I asked: "Dangsin-ui ileum-eun mueos-ibnikka (당신의 이름은 무엇입니까)?" like my phrase book said, meaning: "What is your name?" He laughed and said in English: "Did you get that from some phrase book? Ha!" Usually people just say: "Idum mo-ya?"

Welcome to the travelers' life!

If I have learned anything during these past five years of travel along the Silk Roads, it is the affirmation that Kung Fu is not just kicks and punches, not just martial arts, but the skill and discipline required to live and perform well in a mutually beneficial and respectful way. This is also called "Tao," the basis of the word morality in Chinese.

道德

Dàodé (virtue / morality / ethics)

And so, the martial arts (social) circles (武林 wǔlín) expand in harmony with nature and society.

All that said, I'll say again: "*Khuda Hafiz* brothers and sisters of the martial circles and Great Roads of life! I hope we can meet along the Roads one day and perhaps share some conversation and *Qabeli Palaw* in Kabul, *Lanzhou Niurou Mian* (兰州牛肉面) somewhere in China, maybe some *Pho* in Vietnam, or skewered *Sis Kebap* in Turkey! Yes, yes, the roads are "longish" but all meet in the end.

Finally, again "Thanks" (Shukran in Arabic, Xièxiè in Chinese) for sharing the ancient and modern roads with us on these marvelous adventures. Like pearls on a necklace each stop along the Silk Road is a kind of natural perfection. Enjoy the roads and be safe.

一个世界-一个梦想!

Yīgè shìjiè-yīgè mèngxiǎng

One World - One Dream!

出入平安

Chūrù píng ān

Come and go in peace

And don't forget to read Kung Fu Tai Chi Magazine!

<http://www.kungfumagazine.com> to follow my latest adventures along the Silk Roads!



As of this writing (May/June 2020) Kung Fu Tai Chi magazine has temporarily suspended publication due to COVID-19 restrictions. Hopefully things will be back on track in the near future. Peace and blessings upon the good people in the USA. Get well soon!

Finally, look forward to ***Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour - Volume 3*** - coming out in a year or so (*Insha'Allah* - God Willing)!



The Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour Volume 2 picks up where Volume 1 left off, meeting and often training with the masters of Wushu Kung Fu, while exploring ancient histories and modern cultures of the world's preeminent trade routes of the Silk Roads. This volume starts in Pakistan in December 2017 and travels from north to south, Islamabad through Lahore and ending in Karachi. This was followed by visits to Gansu Province in China, Qatar in the Middle East, Addis Ababa and the Tigray region in Ethiopia, Vietnam, Japan, Indonesia, Shanghai, Ningbo, and Yuyao in China; then Thailand and finally Hong Kong in late November and early December 2019. The book concludes that Kung Fu is not only martial arts but also the skills and disciplines required to live and perform well in a mutually beneficial and respectful way. This is also called "Tao," the foundation of the word and actions of morality in Chinese: "*Daode*" (道德 virtue / morality / ethics). And so, the (武林 *wulin*) martial arts (social) circles expand.