

Fall 2006

Climbing the Limitless Mountain: Daoism and the Internal Martial Arts

Sophie Kerman
SIT Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection



Part of the [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kerman, Sophie, "Climbing the Limitless Mountain: Daoism and the Internal Martial Arts" (2006). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 297.

https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/297

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

Climbing the Limitless Mountain: Daoism and the Internal Martial Arts

By Sophie Kerman
SIT Independent Study
November 2006

Sophie Kerman
SIT Independent Study
November 2006

Climbing the Limitless Mountain: Daoism and the Internal Martial Arts

Of the many religions practiced in China, Daoism is the only one which is indigenous to the country - yet it is one of the least written-about and least understood of the world's major religions (Wang, 1). The term "Daoism" can, in fact, be misleading, because it can be used to refer to two different practices: Daoist philosophy, *daojia*, and Daoist religion, *daojiao*. Although the two are often taught and practiced side by side, *daojia* and *daojiao* have separate roots. Daoist philosophy is studied and followed by many who know little about *daojiao*; and Daoist religion includes a multitude of sects with entirely different practices and sets of rules. While religious Daoists often share the goal of reaching immortality, the paths to this goal range from the strictly monastic to the highly secular, and practices may include anything from solitary meditation to chanting of scriptures, from alchemical experimentation with herbs and minerals to the internal alchemy of qigong, from the writing of talismans to the writing of poetry.

One such practice is the internal martial arts, most often *taiji quan*, *bagua zhang*, or *xingyi quan*. Because Daoism is well-known as a non-aggressive philosophy, it seems paradoxical to use martial arts, or *wugong*, as tools for attaining the Dao, yet Daoists have been training and developing their arts for hundreds of years. In order to investigate the apparent paradox of Daoism in martial arts, and to piece together the connections between the two practices, I spent the month of November 2006 at Cabin Dao, an approximately 40-minute walk up the mountainside from Dali. There, I trained in Wudang gongfu, Sanfeng taiji, and a very small amount of xingyi quan. My instructor was Xiao Yun, a Daoist who spent his teen years at Wudang Mountain, studying

martial arts and Daoist philosophy. At Wudang Shan, martial arts and Daoism were taught separately, so Xiao Yun had to piece together the connections on his own, just as I did. After leaving the mountain, Xiao Yun continued to pursue both intensive martial arts training and the study of Daoism. Because he has integrated both concepts into his own life, he was able to help me understand how the two can be connected. Without a background in both Daoism and the martial arts, however, it is impossible to explain the ties between the two.

Daoism

The roots of the philosophical side to Daoism are much easier to trace than those of the religious side. *Daojia* grew primarily out of two periods of Chinese history: the Spring and Autumn Period, from 770-476 BC, and the Warring States Period, from 475-220 BC. Laozi, the founder of Daoist philosophy, was born sometime during the Spring and Autumn Period. The exact years of his birth and death are unknown, and his birth is surrounded by legend; it is said that he was the product of an immaculate conception, and was born as an old man, already able to walk and talk. Laozi, as a historical figure, most likely did exist. He was born Li Er and was a minor official who became disillusioned with the government and left his post. It is said that he later reached enlightenment. When he left his native state of Chu, a gatekeeper asked him to write down some of his philosophy, and the resulting work was the *Dao De Jing* (or *Tao Te Ching*), a Daoist classic of only 5000 characters.

Daoist philosophy went through several changes in emphasis over the course of the following centuries, for the *Dao De Jing*, aside from being a profound philosophical work, is a reflection of its time. During the Spring and Autumn Period, China was divided into five large states, all of which were in the process of strengthening their rule and consolidating power. Laozi's work is

therefore relatively optimistic. The *Dao De Jing* provides advice to monarchs on the assumption that their highest goals are the peace of the state and the freedom of its citizens. The Dao, in the *Dao De Jing*, is a benevolent force which is accessible to all.

During the Warring States Period, in which there were increasing military clashes over power and territory, interpretations of the Dao became more cynical. Zhuangzi, who lived from 355-275 BC, wrote of a less benevolent Dao than did Laozi. His work portrays politics as a dirty endeavor and does not allow for the possibility of a benevolent ruler. Even the best kings in Zhuangzi's works realize at some point that they ought to get out of the political arena and refuse to allow worldly affairs to distract them from pursuit of the Dao. Those with the most integrity, according to Zhuangzi, will not seek to reform the system but will rather retreat from public life and practice the Dao in the solitude of a hermitage (Wong, 21-29).

Despite changes in practical emphasis, the basic tenets of *daojia* have remained more or less the same. According to the Daoist theory of evolution, says Xiao Yun, in the beginning, there was nothing. There was no sun and no moon; it was like the Chinese character for "one" (一). Then, the universe slowly separated into heaven and earth; it was like the character for "two" (二). People and animals gradually evolved from this split, but the important thing to remember is that everything originated from that "one," which later divided into two, then four, then 10,000 things.

The name the Chinese have given to this originating force is the Dao.

The Great Dao without shape gives birth to heaven and earth.
The Great Dao without name nurtures the 10,000 things
The Great Dao without emotion regulates the cycles of the sun and the moon
It has no true name, but the people call it Dao.

- Chinese saying, quoted by Xiao Yun

The "Dao" translates literally as the "way" or, more usefully, as the "course of nature." Daoist philosophy teaches that one should follow the natural way in all things. When following a natural

path, one doesn't try to force a result or strive for high achievement; instead, one waits until the right course of action becomes clear. Because the Dao follows its own path, the universe is essentially beyond our control, so any attempt to go against the natural way will only result in failure. One does what is necessary and then steps back; when one can see the correct path, the desired results will come easily.

Do you have the patience to wait
Till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
Till the right action arises by itself?
The Master doesn't seek fulfilment.
Not seeking, not expecting,
She is present, and can welcome all things.

- *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 15

The idea of being present is common throughout the *Dao De Jing*. Where other religions teach of an afterlife through faith or good works, Daoism is very much a philosophy of the now. We cannot put off seeking a connection to the Dao, because the Dao exists in every one of our actions. Daoism can be seen as a way of putting each of our actions into perspective, a way of seeing which of our actions run contrary to nature and are thus unhealthy. In order to attain that perspective, we must return to the "origin of things" – the Dao – and apply its universal model to our individual lives.

Seeing into darkness is clarity.
Knowing how to yield is strength.
Use your own light
And return to the source of light.
This is called practicing eternity.

- *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 52

"Practicing eternity," the concept of living in accordance with the neverending laws of the Dao, is an interesting precursor to Daoist religion. *Daojiao* can be traced back to two sources: primitive ancestor and nature worship, and the concept of immortals (Wang, 2). Because Chinese

religion did not traditionally have visions of an afterlife, the pursuit of immortality has long been a part of Chinese culture. Beginning as early as the turmoil of the Warring States Period, kings have sought to ensure their longevity through the use of *fangshi*, mystics who possessed techniques of divination and healing. These *fangshi* gained in numbers when China became unified during the Western Han Dynasty, from 206-8 BC, because the feudal lords' former advisors turned to mysticism as a new source of employment (Wong, 32). Although the pursuit of immortality seems to run contrary to the idea of following the Dao, the natural way, Xiao Yun explains that there is a different Dao for all things: there is a Dao of Heaven, of Earth, of People, of Ghosts, of Plants, and so forth. The practice of *daojiao* is the pursuit of the Dao of the Immortals. If the practitioner can successfully walk that path, the aging process will supposedly cease altogether.

Though there have been many sects of religious Daoism in the past, only two broad categories have survived in any meaningful form. The earliest is the Zhengyi School, which has its roots in the first form of Daoist religion, the Five Bushels Sect (founded by Zhang Daoling in the 2nd century CE, and so named for the mandatory entrance fee of five bushels of rice). When the Five Bushels Sect grew and absorbed other Daoist sects, it became the Celestial Masters School and later evolved into Zhengyi, or Orthodox Unity, Daoism. Early Daoist religion was popular among peasants because of its emphasis on political equality; however, this idea led to many failed political uprisings, and Zhengyi Daoism and its promises of immortality became a favorite of nobles and intellectuals. The practice of Zhengyi Daoism is on external alchemy and talismanic magic: the creation of pills to grant immortality, and the writing of charms to banish ghosts or bring luck. Zhengyi Daoists do not have many strict commandments; they can marry, eat meat, and live outside of monasteries if they so choose.

The Quanzhen, or Complete Reality, School of Daoism developed much later, in the 12th century. It was founded by Wang Chongyang in response to an increase in minority migration and the spread of Buddhist and Confucian philosophy (Wang, 49). Quanzhen Daoists seek to unify the teachings of all three philosophies, because they are all reflections of different sides of the Dao. By combining Buddhist emptiness, Confucian ethics, and Daoist longevity, we can better connect with a universal reality:

The Buddhists say, “Clear the mind and see original nature.” Only in stillness can the mind be cleared and original nature seen. The Confucianists say, “Know the depths of your nature through reason.” Only in stillness can reason reach the depths of your nature. The Taoists say, “Cultivate your true nature and clear your heart.” Only in stillness can the heart be tamed and true nature cultivated. Therefore, the cultivation of stillness is the foundation of the Three Religions.

- Seven Taoist Masters, 74

In order to practice this stillness, Quanzhen Daoists lead a monastic life similar to that of the Buddhists. Rather than practice the external alchemy of their Zhengyi predecessors, Quanzhen Daoists’ quiet, regimented life is the backdrop for the process of *internal* alchemy, the cultivation of what are known as the Three Treasures: *jing* (essence), *shen* (spirit), and *qi* (energy). The idea behind internal alchemy, or *neidan*, is that before birth, we are one with the Dao, but as we grow from a fetus to an adult, our minds and bodies gradually separate and our energy weakens. *Neidan* attempts to fuse the disconnect between yin and yang, mind and body, and *jing*, *shen*, and *qi* through such practices as meditation and qigong. Through the internal alchemical process, the body can regain its energy and achieve immortality from the inside out.

Internal martial arts stem from Quanzhen Daoism, though they are now practiced by other schools of Daoism as well (Xiao Yun was trained as a Zhengyi Daoist). The practice of martial arts had several purposes. One was as an aid to the internal alchemical process; the use of martial arts

for internal alchemy is called *neigong*. Another purpose was, in Xiao Yun's words, to "calm your heart down" in order to prepare for the intense focus required for meditation and qigong practices. The internal martial arts also had practical applications in warding off bandits and defending monasteries and traveling monks from outside attack. Different forms of martial arts had their sources in different places, and were used for different purposes, but the internal arts are closely linked to Daoist practice, both historically and philosophically.

Martial Arts¹

Wugong, a general term which refers to the traditional Chinese martial arts, began as a set of techniques for hunting and self defence, not as a planned and structured form of martial training. As society developed, however, these techniques evolved into military combat strategies. As early as the 21st century BC, China's armies were using martial arts both offensively and defensively, and even involving the use of bronze weapons. The systematization of martial arts did not occur until the Tang and Song Dynasties, from 618-1279 AD, when *wushu* – performance-style martial arts – began to be used as a morale booster and training exercise for the armies. Because of military demand, *wushu* gained in legitimacy and structure over the course of the following 750 years, and has finally evolved into an official competition sport, complete with its own set of forms which are specific to competitive settings (Wu, 12-17).

The military history of *wushu*, however, lacked avenues for creative development and variation in martial arts techniques. This development was left up to the individual; over the course of many centuries, a plethora of different styles of *wugong* have emerged, each suited to different circumstances or different philosophies. The founding of gongfu, for example, is

¹ There is disagreement about nearly every aspect of Chinese martial arts, particularly when it comes to the identities and the dates of their founding. Though many others may disagree, the following history has been drawn from the most commonly agreed-upon accounts.

attributed – although this story has been disputed – to Bodhidharma, an Indian monk. Upon arriving, in the year 520 CE, at Shaolin Monastery in Henan Province, Bodhidharma found the monks to be so emaciated and unhealthy that he taught them 18 movements to help improve their physical condition. This system was later expanded to 170 movements, which have been divided into five styles of Shaolin gongfu: tiger, crane, leopard, snake, and dragon (Lewis, 39). These styles, however, are external arts, focused on warding off attacks and strengthening the monks for their long hours of meditation.

Daoist styles of gongfu are traced to Wudang Shan, in Hubei Province. Even before the arrival of religious Daoism, Wudang Shan was the home of many occult masters. It later evolved into a center for internal martial arts, “taking defense as purpose, attacking only when threatened, and relying completely on inner energy” (Wang, 127). The martial arts practiced at Wudang include gongfu (practiced with internal, rather than external, energy) and the three Daoist martial arts: *taiji quan*, *xingyi quan*, and *bagua zhang*.

One source cites four different possible origins of taiji quan, but the most frequently reported of these histories is the story of Zhang Sanfeng, a 13th-century Daoist monk at Wudang Mountain. As the story goes, Zhang’s inspiration came from a battle he witnessed between an eagle (some say a crane) and a snake. Neither animal could gain a clear advantage: when the eagle attacked, the snake would wriggle and outmaneuver its foe, but when the snake attacked, the eagle would fly away to the safety of a tree. In this duel, Zhang saw the natural truth that one cannot always rely on superior force to win a battle; rather, the best way to overcome an attacker is save one’s energy and not to fight at all. Using this principle, Zhang developed the first system of taiji, which later split off into many other styles (Chen, Yang, and Wu being the three most famous).

Bagua Zhang and Xingyi Quan did not emerge until much more recently, and their ties to Daoism are more tenuous. Bagua was founded in the mid-1800's, most likely by Dong Hai Chuan, and was based upon the Quanzhen Daoist practice of walking in eight-sided circles while reciting mantras. Bagua practitioners are known for their ability to apply techniques while in constant circular motion. Xingyi quan, alternately said to have been founded in the 12th century by General Yue Fei (Reid, 62) and the 17th century by Ji Jike (Wu, 55), is the most aggressive of the internal arts and the only one of the three Daoist arts to have been used on the battlefield. Xingyi consists of a series of strikes practiced in a linear fashion at close range, and was partially made famous by Guo Yunshen, who, during a prison sentence for murder, was able to practice nothing but beng quan, a xingyi strike.

All three arts – taiji, bagua, and xingyi – are considered a part of Daoist martial arts repertoire, because they were traditionally practiced by Daoists. More importantly, though, all three involve the practice of *neigong*. This brings us to the heart of the connection between Daoism and *wugong*: the distinction between an internal and an external martial art. When thinking of internal martial arts, you may at first think of taiji: a slow, semi-meditative series of movements that is currently practiced more for its health benefits than for its practical combat value (though, as we have seen, this hasn't always been the case). In fact, other martial arts are considered internal while still possessing the traditionally "martial" qualities of sharp punches and fast kicks. To the observer, these internal arts may not look very different from external arts such as Shaolin gongfu. Both styles require strength, speed, flexibility, and agility. What makes them different, and why have Daoists overwhelmingly preferred internal over external styles?

The answer is in the source of the martial artist's power. External martial artists power their

movements with, not surprisingly, their external strength: tendons, bones, and skin. Because external arts focus on strengthening the outside of the body, those who practice them are often bigger and more muscular. In contrast, the internal arts power their movements with qi, natural energy flow. Where external arts are more offensive, internal martial artists will rarely throw the first punch. Rather, they will transform the energy from an incoming attack into an effective counter-attack. Like Daoist internal alchemy, internal arts start from the inside and work their way out; or, to put it another way, the practitioner must first understand the workings of qi, and upon achieving that understanding, the right responses to an attack will flow naturally and powerfully.

Because internal martial arts involve energy transformations, we can define the internal arts as *any martial art if it also involves neigong*, Daoist internal alchemy. But this is where the line between internal martial arts and Daoist martial arts becomes blurred. Just because an art is internal doesn't mean that it is considered part of the Daoist tradition. For example, the mantis style of gongfu is internal but not Daoist. Taiji, xingyi, and bagua are considered Daoist, but even so, many non-Daoists also learn these arts, and many Daoists also train in other styles. Because the Dao is an all-encompassing concept, everything one can do, if it flows with the natural order of things, can be thought of as a Daoist art. The "Daoist" martial arts are historically connected to Daoist practice and can be used as internal alchemical tools, but the ties between Daoism and martial arts are less because of an overlap in practice than because of an overlap in philosophy.

Daoism and Wugong: Philosophical Connections

One parallel between training in Daoist philosophy and martial arts is the importance of learning on your own. When Xiao Yun began his martial arts training, he would start by copying his teachers in order to get a solid foundation. Later, his teachers would start to mention things to

him, concepts that he would have to think about and work on his own to physically actualize. For example, he was taught that he should always have a clear vision of his intentions and how each one of his movements could relate to another person's body in a combat situation. This type of focus and clarity was equally applicable to meditation, which requires a similar intensity of concentration on breath, energy flow, and mental activity. Similarly, Xiao Yun's Daoist practice began with the basics – recitation of scripture – but progressed to an understanding of the logic behind the practice, and later to an integration of that logic into the ability to clearly see the natural and correct course of action. Neither the physical clarity of martial arts nor the mental clarity of Daoism could be taught directly; only through long periods of self-study can this type of skill be truly learned. Xiao Yun has mentioned that all good martial artists do the forms a little bit differently because of their own personal understanding of the meaning behind the movement. *Seven Daoist Masters* explains it well: “The intelligent will come up with a way that will work for them. The stubborn will stick to existing methods even though they are inappropriate” (p. 111).

Daoism and martial arts also share similar approaches to the idea of progress. As Laozi wisely says:

Success is as dangerous as failure.
Hope is as hollow as fear.

What does it mean that success is as dangerous as failure?
Whether you go up the ladder or down it,
Your position is shaky.
When you stand with your two feet on the ground,
You will always keep your balance.

- *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 13

This is not a philosophy of non-doing; rather, it is a philosophy of not forcing what is unnatural.

When you approach the learning process with the goal of achieving a concrete result, it is easy to lose touch with the true reasons behind the pursuit of that goal. You go to school to gain

knowledge, but when you spend all night cramming to get an A on a test, how much of that knowledge will you retain? Or, to use a martial arts example, if you train solely in order to get as good as your teacher, then when you have reached that goal, what next? Your training is over. This is the shaky ladder of success: if you aim for the top, when you get there, you can only go down.

Instead, both Daoists and martial artists would advise you to climb, as Xiao Yun says, a “limitless mountain.” By “limitless,” Xiao Yun does not mean that we should strive for impossible things. He means that learning should be unending, and we should keep a clearer head and a simpler perspective towards our goals. If the mountain is limitless, there is no reward waiting at the time, you will not climb it unless you want to – who would voluntarily climb an infinite mountain they didn’t like? And because you will never reach the top of the mountain, there is no need to force yourself past your limits or try to climb it all in one day. No matter whether or not you reach the peak – or whether the peak exists at all – since it is a mountain you want to climb, the more you climb, the happier you will be. This is what Laozi means when he asks us to stand with our two feet on the ground. The trick is to follow a natural path without forcing progress.

He understands that the universe
Is forever out of control,
And that trying to dominate events
Goes against the current of the Tao.

- *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 30

The idea of moving forward while still keeping our feet on the ground also prevents the practitioner from falling into the trap of doing a good deed solely in order to reap the benefits. *Seven Taoist Masters* opens with the following statement: “If you display compassion in order to show others your virtue, then your actions are empty of meaning” (p. 1). For example, if someone performs a favor for you, you feel grateful, but if that person then rubs their good deed in your face, your sense of comfort will disappear. Doing good deeds in order to win others’ respect won’t

work: their discomfort cancels out their admiration. The same applies to Daoist or martial arts practice. Practicing Daoism with a goal in mind runs contrary to every sense of the Dao: if you paddle too hard along the current of the river, you aren't really *following* the current at all. Over-training in martial arts in order to prove your strength or ability is similarly self-defeating, because you will end up injured or over-fatigued. If you rest a day or two, you can come back to train with vigor and enthusiasm, but if you over-train with a goal in mind, you will burn out: you will no longer feel that the mountain is worth climbing. When you enjoy the journey – whether it is through martial arts training, Daoist philosophy, or anything else – the destination becomes unimportant, because you won't be able to keep yourself from continuing down the road.

So far, one could apply Daoist philosophy to any martial art, internal or external. There are many passages in the *Dao De Jing*, however, which make Daoism particularly compatible with the internal arts and run contrary to the external arts. For example, compare these three passages:

For every force there is a counterforce.
Violence, even well intentioned,
Always rebounds upon oneself.
- *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 30

Men are born soft and supple;
Dead, they are stiff and hard.
Plants are born tender and pliant;
Dead, they are brittle and dry.

When two great forces oppose each other,
The victory will go
To the one that knows how to yield.
- *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 69

Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible
Is a disciple of death.
Whoever is soft and yielding
Is a disciple of life.
The hard and stiff will be broken.
The soft and supple will prevail.
- *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 76

The sense of these three passages is visible in many aspects of life. For example, an oak tree, when struck by lightning or a strong gust of wind, may crack and fall, but reeds and grasses will bend and rebound from the assault. The concept of remaining yielding even when confronted by

an aggressor may explain why Daoists tend not to practice external styles of martial arts. Think of the legendary battle between the snake and the eagle. If the two were to rely solely on brute strength, the eagle would surely win the fight. The snake, however, is supple and hard to break. The external martial arts have their practical uses, but the internal arts, with their emphasis on evasion and internal power, may be more versatile when your opponent's physical strength is greater than your own.

In his commentary on the *Dao De Jing*, Stephen Mitchell quotes Emilie Conrad-Da'oud as saying, "Suppleness is really fluidity. It transcends strength and weakness. When your body is supple, it feels like there's no barrier in you, you can flow in any direction, your movement is a complete expression of yourself" (Mitchell, 91). This was written in reference to Daoist philosophy, but it could be applied in its entirety to the internal martial arts. When one is supple in life, one can adapt with ease to one's surroundings and bounce back from life's many blows. When one is supple in the martial arts, it is possible to absorb attacks from even much stronger opponents and react to their movements with intuition and natural ease. The external martial arts do not have the same type of emphasis on fluidity; they rely on strength to win their fights.

The *Dao De Jing*'s statements on the sources of power are also useful in describing *neigong*:

Knowing others is intelligence;
Knowing yourself is true wisdom.
Mastering others is strength;
Mastering yourself is true power.

- *Dao De Jing*, Chapter 33

Daoism encourages self-mastery and self-knowledge, because this kind of knowledge brings us closer to being able to follow a natural course of action. Practitioners of Daoist religion do not rule kingdoms: power over others will not put you on the Path of the Immortals nearly as effectively as some good *neidan* practice. The internal martial arts, too, are a form of self-mastery. While the

external arts require strength and discipline, their emphasis is on the ability to quickly, powerfully, and efficiently subdue the enemy. When one practices *neigong*, however, the power source is internal, and the object of training is not only to win against an opponent but also to control the martial artists' own flow of *qi*. Mastery of the internal arts and the manipulation of *qi* may be more difficult, because it involves both physical and mental practice, but, as the Dao teaches us, it is ultimately a more potent weapon than brute force.

Current Changes

The practice of both Daoism and martial arts, over the past two millennia, has gone through many changes. Recently, the two have undergone some unfortunate alterations, both related to political and economic changes. Daoist religion, in particular, has been heavily affected by the Chinese government, not least of all because Daoism has historically been the catalyst for peasant uprisings. The current priority is, it seems, to get fewer people to believe in religion and more to believe in Communism; the view of the government is that religion is entirely superstition and is not a valuable aspect of culture. This is not helped by the tourist industry; because temples are quickly adopted as tourist landmarks, the monastic lifestyle has adapted to incorporate increased cash flow and publicity. Xiao Yun cites a popular saying in Southern China: "A poor person may be laughed at, but no one laughs at a rich prostitute." The lack of concern about sources of income, and the cultural destruction that may go along with this greed, is practiced more and more in the temples by those who are more interested in making money than in preserving traditional culture.

The focus of martial arts, too, is shifting. With the increase in competitive *wushu* and the potential money to be made, more people are concerned with the beauty of the movements than with their functionality. Visually impressive or acrobatic movements draw a crowd and work well

in competition, but they often break with *wugong*'s strong practical roots. The traditional arts are still practiced by people like Xiao Yun, but some are concerned that they are fading out. Because it is common for a teacher to save his most advanced techniques for only one or two disciples – or not to teach them at all, if appropriate students aren't found – some fear that competitive wushu will inhibit the survival of some of the older martial arts.

As always, though, the Dao has something to say about these potentially tragic turns of events. According to Daoist philosophy, when anything goes to a certain extreme, it will change directions and move towards its opposite. In a nutshell: what goes up must come down. Right now, people are less and less interested in the traditional and more and more concerned with the superficial, but Xiao Yun has voiced his certainty that this situation will reverse itself, and there will be a renewed interest in the original practices of both martial arts and Daoism.

Conclusion

The more I learned about Daoist theory, the more I became convinced that it is applicable to every aspect of life, if we allow it to be. Leading a lifestyle in accordance with the Dao is certainly harder in our usual, busy lifestyles; it is much easier to live according to Daoist principles when your life consists mainly of eating, sleeping, and martial arts training. But we also cannot ignore the ways in which our lives are dictated by nature and forces outside of our control. I found that one way of appreciating our own lack of power is, paradoxically, through martial arts training. When injuries kept me from practicing my kicks and gongfu forms, I had no choice but to take a cue from the *Dao De Jing* and allow my body to heal in its own time, without forcing progress. This very action made me realize the truth of the limitless mountain: had I been staying at Cabin Dao in order to become a master of the side-kick, my hopes would have been dashed by a torn

muscle. But the mountain I was climbing had no peak; I was there to learn what I could because I enjoyed the process, despite natural limits of time and ability. We often forget the lessons of the Dao in life's daily frustrations, but if the combination of Daoism and *wugong* can teach us one thing, it is to find a path and stay on it: every road has its trials and tribulations, but if you like the scenery and let your legs carry you just as much as they want to go, the journey can only get better.

Bibliography

- Anonymous. Seven Taoist Masters. Eva Wong, trans. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2004.
- Lao Tzu. Tao Te Ching. Stephen Mitchell, trans. New York, NY: Harper Perennial Classics, 1988.
- Lewis, Peter. The Martial Arts: Origins, Philosophy, Practice. UK: Prion Books Ltd., 1996.
- Reid, Daniel. The Tao of Health, Sex, and Longevity. London: Simon and Schuster, 1989.
- Wang Yi'e. Daoism in China. Zeng Chuanhui, trans. Adam Chanzit, ed. China Intercontinental Press, 2004.
- Wong, Eva. Shambhala Guide to Taoism. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1997.
- Wu Bin, Li Xingdong, & Yu Gongbao. Essentials of Chinese Wushu. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1992.

Xiao Yun was my primary project advisor; he supervised all of my martial arts training and generously agreed to be interviewed about the philosophy behind Daoism and martial arts, two subjects about which he knows a lot. My main interview took place on the afternoon of November 10, 2006, but our other conversations have informed my understanding of Daoist philosophy.

Julie Baecker was also an invaluable asset to my research, both as translator and friend. Any quotations I have taken from Xiao Yun are by way of Julie's translation. Both she and Xiao Yun would make great advisors for any future SIT students, and I am extremely grateful to them for their friendship and guidance throughout my month at Cabin Dao..

Itinerary

I went with the group on the bus to Dali, and walked from there to Cabin Dao. I spent 25 days there, training 6 days a week for 3.5-4 hours a day (2500 kuai, including room, lunch and dinner). The rest of my time was spent eating, sleeping, reading, and studying Chinese. Every once in a while, we walked into Dali for dinner and a movie, or to buy fruit and yogurt for breakfast. On November 27th, I took the 9 AM bus back to Kunming, which took 5 hours and cost 75 kuai. I stayed in the dorms at the Shifan Daxue for the remainder of the ISP period, a total of 100 kuai. Other expenses included clothing and Chinese books (~ 250 kuai), as well as some meals in Dali (~300 kuai).

Subjective Account

As with many intense experiences, it is easiest see how much I learned now that I am in Kunming, thinking back on my time at the cabin. The mere experience of living there was very rewarding. It isn't often that we get the chance to pare life down to its essentials – sleeping when it's dark, finding sunny spots to relax in, not needing to worry about much more than the basic necessities of life. That, in itself, was a Daoist experience for me. Learning about a philosophy of following the course of nature is much different in a classroom – full of worries about tests, papers, and other concerns which are ultimately trivial – than in a setting such as Cabin Dao, where responsibilities are easy to take care of and problems are easily and simply addressed.

The training itself was challenging and unfamiliar, and a series of leg injuries prevented me from training as much gongfu as I had initially planned. On the other hand, the frustration of

having to treat my body more carefully resulted in my learning a lot – both in the practical sense of having studied a lot of taiji, which I loved, and some basics of xingyi, which I hadn't even known about before coming to Cabin Dao, and in the more mental and emotional sense of having learned to keep a positive attitude through injury and being strong enough to respect my own physical limits. Because I was motivated to train in spite of injury and fatigue, I re-discovered how much I enjoyed the simple act of training in a martial art. It was a “limitless mountain” I wanted to climb, and so all the frustration ultimately didn't interfere at all with my love of the journey.

Future ISP Topics

- Daoist meditation, Qigong, and Internal Alchemy
- Current Daoist monastic life, and its evolution in reaction to tourism and economic growth
- Shaolin gongfu and its connections to Buddhism
- The three Daoist martial arts – taiji, xingyi, and bagua – and how they relate to each other