

My trip to the home of Tai Chi

By Ian Deavin

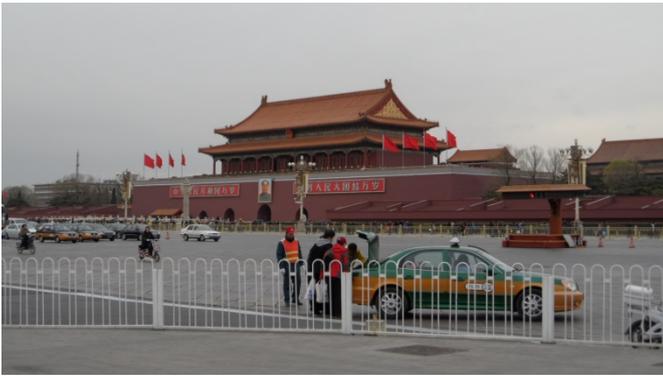
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Many looking at the plethora of Tai Chi styles, forms etc. forget or may not be aware that all Tai Chi started in one place – the Chen family village at Chenjiagou in Henan Province – central China. It was here in the early 1600s that Chen Wangting created exercises and forms which became known as Tai Chi and it was here too in the house of Chen Dehu that Yang Luchan lived while he learned Chen Style Tai Chi from Chen Chanqing, later transposed into Yang Style and taught widely – so leading to the development of the other Tai Chi styles, including Wu, Hao and Sun styles.

I therefore seized at the chance to visit this historic place – with some romance and a sense of coming full circle from my early days of martial arts in the 1970s. The trip was organised by Patrick Wan (London) who first introduced Master Chen Xiaowang to the UK and was kind enough to extend an open invitation to accompany him to a by now annual one week international training seminar with Master Chen Xiaowang in the Chen Village Taijiquan school at Chenjiagou run by Chen Ziqiang.

The trip took in nearly 3 days in Beijing before travel by sleeper train to Zhengzhou. I was delighted to find travel around Beijing quite easy since many maps were available (courtesy of Patrick's forethought on the internet) and underground (and other) signs were subtitled in English. We each took in various of the tourist venues from the Forbidden Palace, Great Wall, Tiananmen Square, Olympic Birdcage, street food, antiques area, calligraphy area, an unintended walking tour of the Embassy district (!), as well as the Palace of Heaven and some typical local cuisine at one or two specialist restaurants.

An overnight trip by soft sleeper (4 persons per compartment) was quite comfortable and saw us arrive at Zhengzhou in the early morning with a bus arranged to take us on the 1 hour journey to Chenjiagou. The rate of change all around here was phenomenal with a complete new underground system going in and much clearance/new development all around. Perhaps the most impressive being our introduction to a very loose interpretation of any form of driving protocols. From the number of people possible to be transported on an electric scooter/motorbike – answer – we counted 4 on a number of occasions – to the choice of passing on the left or right (vehicles drive on the right by convention if not always by practice) – and the unflappable way that drivers would overtake on the “wrong side” of a 4 lane carriageway – sometimes two abreast on the “other” side against oncoming trucks. But all took this quite casually, and everybody made room with no accidents to be seen. Horns were tooted extensively – but as information rather than demands.



Forbidden City, Beijing



Tiananmen Square, Beijing



The Calligraphy district, Beijing



Courtyard behind Antique Shop in Beijing



Inside Antique shop in Beijing



Tea house, Beijing



Shopping area off Tiananmen Square, Beijing



Crowds at the Temple of Heaven

Chenjiagou turned out to be very much a rural village with the Tai Chi school a major feature of the market square. Within an hour we were approached by a variety of students trying out their English, joking with us, sharing backgrounds and inviting us to join their classes.

We had a couple of days to fill before Master Chen's workshop begun – which we used with a visit to the Shaolin Monastery and next day a trip to the Buddhist Centre at Longmen Caves by the River Li.

Our diet was largely vegetarian – with a significant tendency to lots of chillies (!) interspersed with restaurant meals of fish, various meats, dumplings etc. Personally I ate loads and still lost 5 lbs. – which was great since I could well do with it!

Training with Master Chen Xiaowang for the first 3 days covered Loajia with demonstrations and explanations. Then we learned the new Chen 9 step form with 5 styles of silk reeling and push hands practice for the following 3 days.

In the long breaks for lunch and in the evenings we were fortunate to share time and training with resident students at the school who were generous to a fault in sharing their knowledge of Tai Chi and in practicing with us – demonstrating clearly the development possible if you start at 6.00am and finish at 8.00pm six days a week.

In a country so full of contrasts and paradoxes it was refreshing how simple and practically Tai Chi was held by all that we met. In addition to the workshops I was personally most fortunate to meet Chen Bing at his new school on the outskirts of town. He was kind enough to agree to a one-to-one lesson for an hour (I wish I had more time available before we left). We spent the hour working on my push hands – a lesson I think will take a long time for me to unpack!

Our return to Beijing was from Zhenzhou East Station – a vast new building with some 20 platforms where a Bullet Train seemed to depart every 20 minutes to some far flung part of this vast country. So, at 300kph – 187mph – we reached Beijing (with stops) in 3 hours and back to our hotel with 2 days to spend in the city before we left.

Two days in which we explored the shopping malls and street market as well as the silk market. Oh, and fulfilled a unanimous need for a burger!

Departure reminded us of a constant factor in the Chinese experience on this trip – i.e. the pollution – with smog so thick I could not see the tops of skyscrapers, could rarely see the sun or stars and the moon was invariably yellow even in the rural areas around Chenjiagou.



Entering Chenjiagou



Training area at the Chenjiagou school



Training hall at the Chenjiagou school



Entrance to the Chenjiagou Tai Chi school



Courtyard at Chenjiagou with statue of Chen Wangting



Garden of the Chen family ancestors



Pagoda at the Shaolin Temple



Courtyard at the Shaolin Temple

I should perhaps mention that Chenjiagou itself is changing greatly with a major Tai Chi related development adjacent to the Tai Chi historic gardens and museum. A development which appears to include hotels, arena, residential accommodation and a school.

So much packed into 2 weeks and I haven't even mentioned meeting the other visitors on the workshops – the Australians, Spanish, Italians, Bulgarians, Rumanians, Japanese, Russians and I'm sure others I was not directly aware of. Nor have I mentioned – but definitely should – the huge martial arts schools we passed on our way to Shaolin – and the number of these schools – of which I lost count. In comparison the many Tai Chi schools of Chenjiagou are small – but of massive value and a clear example of Tai Chi as a martial art – interestingly also much talked of by a number of students for the physical, emotional, stress relief and other health benefits which come from its practice.

People, it seems, go to Chenjiagou for martial arts training of the highest level, for physical and emotional development, for care and grounding – I certainly found all these and more – with an abiding memory of many wonderful, friendly, open, sharing, generous people.

A long way to go – yes. Expensive – actually not so much given all the side trips and Beijing tourist time we had. Worth it – definitely – if you practice Tai Chi it is somewhere you can really find out what Tai Chi is about – but you'd better take an open mind!



The Buddhist caves at Longmen



Chen Bing Martial Arts Academy



The "learning place of Yang Luchan"



Tai Chi cultural exchange development at Chenjiagou



Warm up



Disciple ceremony with Master Chen Xiaowang



Tai Chi class in the yard



Ian with Master Chen Xiaowang



Ian posing for fun



Bullet train arrives at Zhengzhou



Street market Beijing style



Tai Chi in the Park - Beijing