

## Tai Chi Trip.##

A Glimpse of the Hidden China – an outsider's view of Tai Chi.

When we stepped off our little bus into the school courtyard, we were greeted by smiling faces that glistened in the humidity. Around us students of all ages, even babies and grannies, were practising the age-old art of Tai Chi and we were about to join them. Our group – all members of the Irish Tai Chi Chuan Association – was led by teacher Stuart Breen and we had just arrived in the sleepy, remote and entrancing village of Chenjiagou, or Chen Village, the spiritual heart of Tai Chi. The village was founded by the Chen clan, who can trace their ancestry way back beyond ninth generation Chen Wang Ting (1600-1680), a general in the Ming Dynasty and founder of Chen-style Tai Chi. There are many versions of Tai Chi's beginnings, but most believe it was first practised by a Taoist monk, Chan San Feng over a thousand years ago. Legend has it the idea came from watching the movements between a snake and a crane and the ensuing slow motion exercise has been practised in China ever since.

Our day-long journey had taken us from the teeming metropolis of Beijing, whose modern skyscrapers, hotels and shops had dazzled us into a false sense of not being in the Orient at all. We left the manic preparations for the Olympics in full swing and flew south from Beijing to the spanking new airport in Zhengzhou, where we were met by the teacher himself, Chen Zi Qiang (the Chinese put their surname first) and his five-year-old son, Ronald. For several hours, our small bus was the only vehicle on a manicured six-lane highway, apart from the occasional lorry carrying construction materials. It brought back fond memories of the early days of the M50. We drove through lush agricultural land and mountains dotted with caves, from where we caught our first glimpse of the Yellow River, so wide, it looked like the sea as it disappeared into the mist.

A seemingly endless bridge took us across the river and away from the mountains to the flat and fertile plains of Henan Province, where we reached the large rural town of Wen Xian, which doesn't feature on the usual tourist trails, so you won't find it in any guide books unlike its nearest neighbour, Chenjiagou, which is world-famous among Tai Chi aficionados. Some of the group had previously been taught by Grand Master Chen Xiao Wang, who visited Ireland under the auspices of Donegal teacher Gill Keogh. Our teacher Chen Zi Qiang is the Grand Master's nephew. He and his beautiful wife, Cui Bing (pronounced Twee Ping!) were our wonderful hosts along with their children, the aforementioned Ronald, who turned out to be a real character and his baby sister Yi Yi.

Accommodation in the village is fairly basic, though there are dormitories available in the school, but we opted for the comfort of the Yin Yuan Hotel in Wen Xian, which smelled of pickles, had a Victorian feel and absolutely no concession to Westerners. We quickly adapted to breakfasts of fried tofu, noodles and dumplings, eaten with chopsticks and washed down with a bowl of warm soya milk or jasmine tea. Some enthusiasts of the group practised a bit of Tai Chi in the hotel courtyard, during spare moments, while others availed of a very strident form of massage provided by two blind practitioners who came specially from the village.

Each morning, as we left Wen Xian for the school, it seemed the entire citizenry were practising Tai Chi outdoors, on pavements, in parks, outside offices, some waving swords. In the misty dawn of the countryside, we passed corn laid out to dry on the road. Workers, sleeping with the corn in makeshift plastic tents on the road were unperturbed by the proximity of the traffic: hordes of bicycles and three-wheelers, men sedately pedalling, their wives sitting on the back and the odd van or car.

There is something magical about the Chen Village, with its' wide street of courtyard houses, offering tantalising glimpses of daily life through gaily-coloured gateways. A large pond throbs to

the sound of hundreds of frogs. The main street, housing the Tai Chi School and the stunning ancestors' temples and cemetery, is bounded at either end by huge pagoda-like tower gates. Locals sit on doorsteps, eating and chatting or pedal by in the sultry heat, at the slow pace of a bygone age.

The school has a courtyard, gardens, practice hall, dormitories, refectories and schoolrooms, while a large pagoda structure is almost complete and will be the new practice and exhibition area. About 200 children study here. Many attend daily, but some – as young as five – board here for up to five years, only going home once a year for the Spring Holiday. One of the older students, Xie Ya Lin, whose English name is Shirley, had heard of Ireland and told me that Westlife is her favourite band!

From early morning, the group, in comfortable black and white uniform, studied under Zi Qiang. They moved in the harmony of a slow dance, with occasional explosive moves called *Fa Jin*. The practice hall had many windows and inquisitive, doe-eyed children peeped in at us. I should mention that I had never practised Tai Chi; I was accompanying my husband, Mick Dunne, another teacher who has become an expert over the years under the tutelage of Charles Thackaberry, so as the group sweated it out in the practice hall, I wandered off down the back lanes with, Alison's other half, photographer Damien Maddock (also an accompanying spouse!) making friends with the inhabitants and watching the workers husk the corn. Every available spot of earth was used for growing vegetables. We found runner beans scrambling up walls on the main street and tiny rows of onions on the kerbside! The heat was unbelievable, so we often returned to the shade of the practice hall to watch the ballet-like movements of *laojia* and silk reeling. We even joined in occasionally.

When the children were on a break, they crowded around us eagerly, writing their names and teaching us a few Chinese words. One gorgeous little boy, Yangchen, became my shadow and mentor in Mandarin. That's him featured in the photographs in the horse stance, while his friend Wanzheng brandishes two swords. We were even more popular with the children after a visit to the sweetshop and a large bag of sweets thanks to Esther, Irene, Fidelma, Marian, Ann and Phil!

After a week without tea or coffee, some of us were suffering, so Cui Bing took us to a teashop, where we found a single dusty box of Liptons teabags. The owner invited us to a tea ceremony and firmly refused to let us pay. At night, in local restaurants we dined like kings, from hotpots to dumpling banquets. Tipping is a new concept in China and we had trouble getting waiters to accept anything. If we left a tip on the table, they would follow us down the street trying to return it.

We had quite a few hardy ladies with us who had cannily brought their own Barry's teabags and who stoically survived the very basic open-plan toilet facilities when the almost inevitable bad tummies struck. Ethel even got to sample the dubious delights of the local rural hospital, following an allergic reaction.

It wasn't all Tai Chi, of course. Being Irish, we located a few bars along the way and had a couple of good nights having a beer or two with Noel, Ena, Robert and Sheila, in fact, on our very first night in Beijing, Stuart, Damien, Joe, Mick and I were trapped for several hours by torrential rain in a little bar near our hotel. I really like that excuse and it's true!

One scorching afternoon (temperature 42 centigrade!), the Chens took us to the deserted banks of the Yellow River, its' muddy ochre waters thick as emulsion paint, its' banks crawling with ants, which had me hopping in my open sandals. While some people preferred the shade of trees on the riverbank, a rusty boat slowly ferried the rest of us to an island where we found a welcome breeze, a peanut farm and thankfully no ants.

The experience of the village had a profound effect on us all and quite a few of us were in tears as we left our new friends in Chenjiagou to return to Beijing and visit the tourist haunts. However, the

wonderful peace we found in Chenjiagou stayed with us for the rest of our trip, as we climbed the Great Wall (a lifetime ambition for some, particularly Damien Hickey who climbed higher than any of us) and visited the Forbidden City and Terracotta Army. One of the highlights for me was an exhilarating trip on a tandem along the ancient walls of Xian City, with Robert Dowdall, who is blind. While the others practised Tai Chi on the walls, we cycled away, with Robert doing most of the pedalling work, while I described the sights. Thanks Robert! Whenever the group practised Tai Chi outdoors, Chinese people spontaneously joined in. With all this immersion in Tai Chi, as an outside observer, I couldn't help but be impressed. Chinese people have asked me do I "play" Tai Chi and I must say, I like that description, it sounds more user-friendly than "practise". Maybe I will.

Everywhere we went in China, we encountered genuine warmth and friendliness – even the police, who paid a polite visit to management in our hotel in Wen Xian asking us not to take photographs, not wanting to offend us by asking us directly, though this was quickly sorted out by Cui Bing. But, a reminder all the same of the regime we were visiting. Remember it's a rural town unused to tourists. We could snap to our hearts' content everywhere else. But it was the village which captured our hearts. Down by the pond, giant concrete feet stand ready to hold up a fly-over and the bones of a new motorway have cut a swathe through the land beside Chenjiagou. The villagers are pleased with this progress. I hope it doesn't kill the magic.

Finally, I'm sure I speak for everyone (including, Jane, Liz and Marian's brother Davey, who I haven't already mentioned) when I say a big thank you to Stuart for organising this wonderful trip, even down to the teeshirts, bags and caps and for taking care of us all the while, especially during some rocky patches like when our flight to Zhengzhou was cancelled along with forty others at Beijing Airport, due to severe flooding. He calmly made his way through the mayhem and throng of shouting Chinese people, locating lost luggage (even Dan's, which took a week) and sorted everything out. Take a bow, Stuart!

- Ann Dunne