

# THE LONG AND SHORT OF LAN SHOU

## Does Long Range Style Have Shortcomings?

by

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It must have been about ten years ago that my kung fu teacher, Sifu Adam Hsu, gathered us together in the Panhandle of Golden Gate Park to welcome a guest. Sifu George Xu was, according to Sifu Hsu, "The highest level Northern style practitioner I've seen since coming to America." Now, we often had guests drop in on our class, and Sifu was invariably polite, but he was almost never effusive about the skill level of our company. This particular day was an exception.

On that bright sunny day Sifu Xu performed lan shou, xing-i liu he quan and Chen style taiji quan. We'd all seen Chen taiji quan, since our Sifu was teaching it to us. However I don't recall anyone there that day who had ever seen xing-i liu he--although some of us knew of this "other" xing-i--and certainly none of us had ever heard of lan shou. After the performance Sifu Hsu suggested that some of us might like to study with Sifu Xu. If we were interested in any of the three styles we'd seen, he urged us to seek out the young sifu from Shanghai and learn from him.

### International Recognition

Ten year later, Sifu George Xu is an internationally known martial artist whose picture has appeared on the front covers of martial arts publications from here to China. He has traveled all over the world teaching and promoting traditional wushu. In addition, he has also benefited the American kung fu community by bringing some of China's living treasures to this

country to conduct classes and workshops. Among them were Master Yu Hua-Long (xing-i liu he and cha quan), Master Liu Wan Fu (lan shou and taiji quan), and Sifu Ma Hong (Chen taiji quan), all of whom have been awarded special honors by the Traditional Wushu

Association for their exceptional service and achievements in their arts. (See *Celebrated Mountains Journal*, Vol. 2, #3; & Vol. 4, #3 & #4)

These visits have a two-fold purpose: to teach the general public, and specifically to teach Sifu Xu. Unlike many teachers, Sifu Xu is not afraid to humble himself before someone and ask to learn. Raised during the Cultural Revolution, he is audacious, outspoken and disregards many of the more formal conventions of martial arts etiquette. But he has a sincere hunger for knowledge and goes after it with an

admirable, single-minded intensity. He is constantly looking for someone, or some new way, or some hidden secret that will raise the level of his skill and provide the key to broaden his understanding of martial arts

### The Long and Short of It

During his early years in America, Sifu Xu seemed to love lan shou a little bit more than other two styles that he taught. Xing-i was a very close second, with taiji quan certainly lagging far behind. In class he would often say that there were many things to learn from taiji quan, but you couldn't really use it to fight. Other styles were much more efficient. So, it was surprising to see him quoted recently as describing a taiji person,



Sifu George Xu applies Lan Shou's "side power."

Photo by Sally Larsen

"...like a missile with smart technology compared to a cannon." I wondered if his love for lan shou had been overtaken by a new, deepening love and understanding of taiji quan.

We got together to talk just after his return from a sojourn in Europe where he'd been teaching in Italy, Germany, Norway and Denmark. On his trip to Europe Sifu Xu primarily taught seminars involving fighting of one kind or another: tui shou (push hands), chin na (seizing and grabbing), and sparring. He described a lot of his workshop participants as very high level in their respective arts. "Some of them were boxers, champion wrestlers, even some ninjas!" I asked if he found taiji quan effective for fighting against these types of opponents.

"Actually," he said, "with these types of fighters, lan shou works better because they won't let you get close! You know, taiji quan is more of a waiting style. If I'm using taiji quan, I want to wait for you to go first. But experienced fighters are patient--they will wait; they'll try to feel you out. They want to see what you're going to do first, then they'll respond. But, that's OK, because one of lan shou's strong points is counter attacking. I may attack to draw them out so I can counterattack."

He went on to describe Western style fighters as having more in common with weapons like the spear or sword--those that are likely to attack a precise point. "Lan shou works against this kind of strategy because lan shou is like the guan dao, or guen (staff). Those weapons use turning from side to side to attack you. They're really hard to defend against. That's what lan shou uses so well. We call it side power."

Some years ago, in an old article, Sifu Xu recounted a boast of the old lan shou masters: "My arm is long--your life is short!" Yet now he is quoted as saying, "A long distance punch is not as effective as a short punch and an error of one centimeter is magnified by the distance the punch travels." How does he reconcile that statement with the long range attacking style of lan shou? "Well, you have to understand," he explained, "any long movement can be short. It may look long in the form, but in reality, if your long attack fails, your fist can turn into an elbow, and an elbow can turn into a shoulder attack--you have to be flexible when you fight." Each joint is like a ball that can roll, turning until it presents another weapon to use to attack an opponent. Sometimes you cannot get close to your opponent. At those times you better have weapons to launch from long range.

### Lan Shou Specialties

Sifu Xu said that lan shou has three primary strengths: side power, covering, and footwork.

### SIDE POWER

Side power is lan shou's favorite tactic for issuing power, positioning the body, and avoiding an attack. Most styles have a simple, straight basic punch of some kind. Lan shou's basic punches all involve turning the



Lan shou master Qin Zhong Bao

*Courtesy of George Xu*

body to the side, stepping to the side, or using the back of the fist delivered from the side angle. Sometimes lan shou's side power is combined with leaning. This leaning, one of the characteristics that make the style easy to identify, can be mistaken for a weakness--but Sifu Xu said it is not. "Even though we lean in lan shou, we still maintain the six direction power." He explained that you can go up, down, front, back and side to side. To maintain balance and equilibrium you must have all six of these directions contained in each movement. "Our leaning in lan shou is completely balanced. We may look like we're leaning forward, but our leg goes back balancing the forward. Our punch goes to the side--the opposite arm pulling to the other side. The energy from my head goes up, balanced by the energy in my legs which is sinking."

### COVERING

The Chinese character for "lan" can actually be translated as covering. All of the style's attacks are preceded by a covering/blocking that paves the way for the attack which follows directly behind. Sifu Xu said, "Lan shou is a 'covering' style." Your body is covered not just because of your blocking, but because you are rotated in such a way as to turn your body away from an oncoming attack. Covering and attacking are analogous to yin and yang: cover/yin, attack/yang. The reverse can also be true, attack/yang, cover/yin because the attack may come first and not succeed, then it turns smoothly into a defensive cover in preparation for the next attack.

## FOOTWORK

Lan shou's footwork is very lively. It can go in any direction and is always helping to gather power. "Lan shou footwork makes it look like you're leaving," according to Sifu Xu, "but really, you are gathering power for an attack." This very changeable step enables the lan shou practitioner to effectively shift the angle of attack to gain the advantage. This returns us full circle to lan shou's first strength, side power, most effectively delivered from the unexpected angle.

## The Mental Angle

He compared the mental aspect of lan shou with taiji quan, by talking about dong jing--understanding energy. "In taiji quan you learn how to use your yi (mind/intention) to move your qi. Your body harmonizes with your energy and your mind. You make your mind strong enough to control and direct your body--you raise your spiritual energy to force your body to do what you want, even if your body is telling you, 'No, I can't do it.'"

All martial artists are familiar with this phenomenon during training. You are holding a posture, your muscles are screaming for oxygen. You know your legs will give out unless you stand up. But you don't. And you find you can go on for longer than you thought. Non-martial artists have had the same type of experience in crisis situations. When your mind is strong and in command, your physical force is more relaxed, therefore, more effective.

Sifu Xu compared lan shou's power with that of a car, "If I hit you, you'll feel like you've been run over. There is this tremendous acceleration." He says the lan shou fist feels like a body. He admitted that lan shou's power is less complex and less changeable than taiji quan, but he said the mental part is the same. The three energies are the same (mind/body/spirit.).

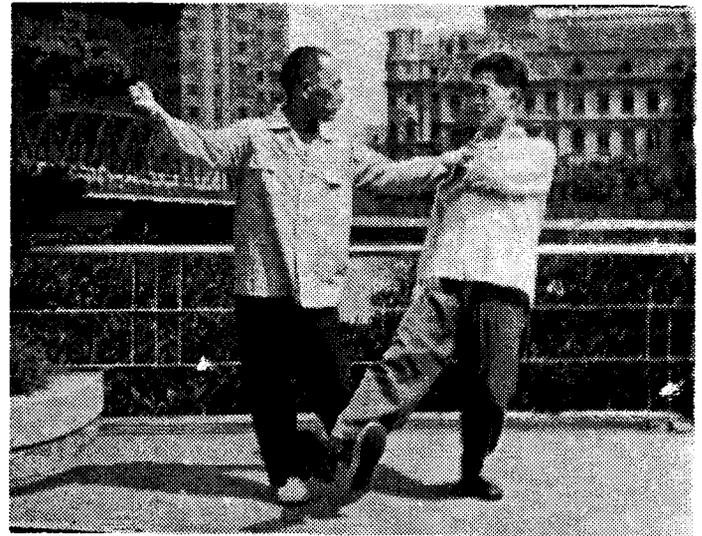
He said his lan shou mind is only on his opponent, not on himself--especially not on his hand or fist. He likened this idea to having a well-trained dog. "If you know your dog, know it is perfectly obedient, know that it walks without a leash and will not leave your side unless you let it--then you don't watch it or pay any attention to it when you are walking down the street. You know it's there without looking. You don't have to call it, or check on it--it's just there walking with you. You know this because you trained the dog. In fighting it's the same. I don't think about where my fist or foot is. I know they will be where they need to be, and I know they will go where I want them to go when I command them to go. My mind is free to go to my opponent."

He said he is only just beginning to understand the wisdom of da quan master Wang Xiang Zhai who said, "Without your body you have nothing. Stay in your

body, you still have nothing." He used to be perplexed by these cryptic sentences but he now realizes what Master Wang meant: Without the physical ability to do what you want, you are unable to carry out a battle plan, or much of anything else. However, if your body is capable of carrying out whatever you desire, but your mind is still in chains--then it doesn't matter how great a physical athlete you are because you still are unable to act. Sifu Xu was sure that, "If your mind can go, you know your body will follow its command."

## Snake Vs Tiger

Perhaps because of his practice of xing-i liu he--a style based on the movements of ten animals--it is almost impossible for Sifu George Xu to discuss martial arts without using animal images to illustrate different points he's trying to make. Comparing taiji quan and lan shou brought out the inevitable animal representations. "Taiji," he declared, "has a kind of continuous power. It



Lan shou in action with Master Cha Zhu Yong

*Courtesy of George Xu*

sticks and follows you. It's very changeable. It's like a snake. A snake can wrap around you, adhere to your body--choke you to death. Or," he asked, "have you ever seen a snake eat something? You know, they can adjust their mouths so they can fit anything inside. Then they use their whole body to sort of suck the victim inside. That's what push hands is like. Your body becomes my body--I suck you in, then you are mine."

And what animal is lan shou like? A wild gleam appeared in Sifu Xu's eye. "Lan shou is like a tiger. You know, when a tiger kills a monkey, it grabs it and tears it apart. Sometimes it will just shake it, just keep shaking and tearing at it until the monkey is dead. That's lan shou power."

## Principles of Kung Fu Fighting

But snakes and tigers aside, he assured me that lan shou can do anything taiji quan can do. It's just the

way to do it is a little different. All the famous rules in the taiji classics, he admitted, apply to any good martial art. The things that work in a fight are pretty universal and can be boiled down to five basic rules:

1. Practitioners of any system must have the ability to attack continuously. Never hit just once and let go.
2. Each joint can be used either as a weapon or as a tool to redirect an attack. Use your joints like balls to redirect and return power back to its source.
3. Cover yourself before and during an attack. Always protect yourself first, then continue and attack.
4. You must have three dimensional power (side, up, forward) and complex jing.
5. Your footwork must be alive, fluid and adaptable. Constantly rotate your body and step. Don't just go back and forth; dance in a circle.

#### **Full Circle**

As the interview concluded, he held up the magazine from which I quoted during our talk. "See this? I'm already past all of this. My thinking is already moving beyond what I said there. Maybe even what I said today. You can't ever let your mind stand still. You have to keep moving, trying to deepen your understanding."

Shanghai lan shou and taiji quan master Ye Xiao Long will be the guest instructor this year at Sifu Xu's upcoming Taiji camp. He will also be teaching several workshops prior to camp. You can be sure that Sifu Xu will be there to learn all he can from Master Ye. We would probably all do well to follow his example.