Introduction

As we languidly listened to the fan beat back the oppressive tropical heat, the doctor casually asked me, “So how would you guard your back?” I had studied various martial arts over the previous ten years, and my instructors had often addressed this topic. Nonetheless, I was taken a bit off guard. Thinking quickly I replied, “Well, you could use the light and watch shadows to see if someone is sneaking up on you. You could use your ears.” Warming to the topic I added, “You could look at reflections in windows as you walked along. . . You could appear to drop something and turn to pick it up. You could position yourself so that your back would be shielded.” His eyes twinkled with delight. “Aha! You’ve got it!” he proclaimed. “You’ve really mastered it.” I leaned back and smugly thought, “So many grueling hours of study have finally paid off.”

However, as we enjoyed a moment of shared pleasure I began to have some doubts about my “mastery.” Finally, I couldn’t stand it any longer. “Dr. Xia,” I asked meekly, “how would you guard your back?” “Ah,” he smiled. “An excellent question. The way to guard your back is to act in such a manner that the people about you love you so much that they would never allow you to be attacked from behind.” That was the hook by which my teaching-father captured me.

In 1972 I went to Taiwan ostensibly to study the Chinese language, but my real agenda was to find a martial arts teacher. In the United States I had studied judo, tang soo do, Shaolin temple boxing, and various other martial arts styles. All the while I had earnestly probed my instructors for the inner “secret” that would unlock the mystery of the “art.” Every time I was disappointed.
Finally it occurred to me that, while these teachers all knew of secrets, they did not know their content. In fact, it seemed that there might be no “secret” at all. Yet the few seemingly reliable martial arts books all seemed to hint at a deeper meaning that conferred potency and wisdom. I decided that the only solution was to go to the source. I decided to go to China.

At that time mainland China, still in the midst of the Cultural Revolution, was extremely xenophobic and barely open to foreigners. Due to restricted contacts with nonofficial Chinese, the few Chinese-language students on the mainland spent most of their time talking to each other. In contrast, Taiwan, the Republic of China, was open, hospitable, and inexpensive. By the summer of 1973 I was a confident Chinese speaker. I had spent the prior year establishing solid language skills that I was eager to use. However, I had been singularly unsuccessful in finding a martial arts teacher. Although I had had some hopeful encounters with “masters,” it was usually soon obvious that, even at my tender age, I knew as much about the fighting arts as they did. So I passed the time studying tai ji quan (shadow boxing) with Li Can of Sichuan Province.

One day Teacher Li introduced me to Bruce Holbrook, a graduate student from Yale. Several years earlier, Bruce had studied Chinese boxing with her husband. This time he had returned to research Chinese medicine, the topic of his doctoral dissertation. We quickly became friends, and he led me to the clinic of Dr. Xia Bo-yan, a physician of traditional Chinese medicine. The door of Dr. Xia’s clinic was right on a busy alley leading to the bus station. Spartan but tidy, it could not have been more unassuming. His office was no more than eight by ten feet. Several low, wooden chairs lined the peeling walls. Buses rumbled by, shaking the whole building and often drowning out conversation.

Dr. Xia was solidly built, warm, and charming. He spoke with an animated intensity. The first thing I noticed about him was that he did not display the usual curiosity about my foreignness that colored most of my encounters with Chinese. Even more amazing to me was that he seemed to have an acute sense of my linguistic abilities. Occasionally he would pause mid-sentence and say, “You don’t know this phrase (or word),” then proceed to explain words or expressions with stories and jokes that invariably led to more words and stories and jokes. His patients and lingering friends would join
in these digressions from the central theme (if anyone remembered what it was), adding tales and personal histories and no shortage of personal opinions that might last late into the night. The tiny room would be filled with people, mostly mainlanders with thick, earthy accents, their faces often obscured by a fog of tobacco smoke. They would ornament their comments and stories with dramatic gestures, escalating embellishments, and snatches of Chinese opera. I was so captivated by these delightful forays into Chinese society that I found myself returning to his clinic daily, often neglecting my formal studies at the language institute, which had become far less interesting and informative than these casual dialogues.

During our conversations, I revealed my interest in the martial arts to Dr. Xia. When I told him of my prior studies, he generously complimented the skill and prowess of my teachers and obligingly regaled me with stories of wandering swordsmen and martial heroes. Yet I had little hint of his knowledge or status until he threw his bait into the water. After several months, I summoned the courage to ask him to be my teacher.

I discovered that his father, Xia Zi-cheng, was a renowned physician with clinics in Xu Zhou, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Beijing. The youngest of four brothers, Dr. Xia Bo-yen had never attended school. Once, when some of his friends were comparing their pedigrees, one asked him, “Old Xia, where did you go to college?” He laughed and replied, “I went to Home University, and graduated from Society’s Graduate School.” At the age of eight, Dr. Xia began the study of Chinese medicine under his father and the study of martial arts under Jiang Da-fu, a middle-school principal in Nanjing. At the age of sixteen, he was caught with a band of guerrillas blowing up Japanese airplanes. “Apparently,” he told me, “the Japanese had no sense of humor.” He was severely tortured and left for dead. His father nursed him back to health, but decades later he is still wracked with pain from his beatings.

His father died in 1947, a year of terrible turmoil and civil war. In 1951, a year and a half after the Communist takeover of mainland China, he and his elderly mother left their hiding place in Shanghai and painfully made their way south to Hong Kong. From there they were eventually able to get to Taiwan. Within several years he had married and hunkered down in his tiny clinic, determined to remain invisible.
Each afternoon, while the rest of Taiwan slumbered through its tropical siesta, Dr. Xia would pull out the daily newspaper and I would pull up a stool. We would peruse news stories as they presented themselves and examine their history, significance, possible outcomes, the players, how similar events had transpired and been resolved in the past, and, for me, the most important lesson of all: what the words *really* meant. There was no topic too big or too small to escape our net. Thus the bias of my training is inclusiveness, which also turns out to be the central theme of this story. I have been trying to write this book for over twenty-five years. It was not for lack of material that I founndered, for there was no topic or event too remote to be pulled into Dr. Xia's instructional net, and he had generously thrown me huge chunks of raw meat. However, my earlier attempts at writing had collapsed under the weight of this spiraling helix of inclusiveness. I could not imagine how to establish limits on the theme of the martial arts, which by self-definition is limitless. Fortunately, my subsequent experiences have helped me contain this subject in words. This book, then, is an assimilation of all that I have learned and an eclectic collection of what I like. It is also a reflection of the way I was taught—not linear and focused, but broad and wandering.

A few years ago I attended a lecture by Ori Soltes of the National Museum of Jewish Art. Professor Soltes' topic was Jewish art and architecture in the Middle Ages. During his presentation he made a dramatic point: “What do we mean by ‘Jewish art?’” He showed a picture of a mezuzah, a small box that holds a prayer or blessing and is placed at the entrance to a home. “Jewish art?” he asked. It was perfectly executed. Yet it had been created by Arabic, not Jewish, artisans. Next, he showed an Arabic wedding ensemble. It, too, was stylistically flawless but had been made by Jewish silversmiths. Was this an example of Arabic or Jewish art?

This conundrum is central to my deliberations about the origins and meaning of Chinese martial arts. What do the words “Chinese martial arts” mean? There is a real blind-men-and-the-elephant quality to this question. The meaning of “Chinese” seems straightforward, but it becomes murky with even the most casual examination. Similarly, “martial” and “art” are words that convey common assumptions, but our Western understanding of these words carries baggage different from that of the Chinese terms. Furthermore, our
use of language is fluid and often informal. For example, in this age of postmodernism, “art” has connotations different from those of only fifty or one hundred years ago. So we have changed the contents without changing the labels. No wonder there is confusion!

Throughout this work I will define what I mean by the categories that I discuss. It is not my intention to act as the definitive authority of these broad social topics, but rather to define my terms as I use them and as they were presented to me. The rationale behind these definitions and descriptions will not only clarify the nature of the Chinese martial arts, but also demonstrate the amazing linguistic integrity of traditional Chinese culture and show how language was deliberately used as a tool to promote this culture.

Western (and Asian) understanding of the Chinese martial arts is an accumulation of fact and fiction. The student confronts a bizarre amalgam of the possible admixed with the improbable. Reference works seldom demonstrate the clarifying union of historical scholarship and practical understanding. Sometimes allegedly authoritative texts provide neither. A similar phenomenon occurs in the treatment of Chinese medicine. For instance, one myth that has been elevated to the status of fact is that in order to maintain modesty, traditional Chinese physicians did not physically examine their patients. Consequently, they invented pulse diagnostics, performed through a silken veil, as a means of minimizing physical contact. Yet a healer of any tradition knows this is patently ridiculous. What physician, called to the bedside of a woman in a troubled labor, could diagnose and assist the delivery without touching the patient? How could a physician extract an arrow or mend a broken limb without contact? This same type of naive thinking occurs with the martial arts. Despite the fact that combat is grounded on the hard realities of injury and death, martial arts literature is replete with the most amazing and impractical statements imaginable.

I have had the privilege of conversing with a dinosaur. Dr. Xia is a remnant of a China long gone, and I write of a China that no longer exists. The instruction I received from my teaching-father—and he from his—was spoken, not written. These painfully acquired and painstakingly preserved lessons are the memory of our disciplinary line. Yet even as I write this I am violating a trust, because
in this book I have illuminated some information that was passed to me with the express understanding that it would be conveyed only within our disciplinary lineage ... not for public consumption. My justification for revealing this information is that Chinese culture has suffered injuries that could never have been imagined even a hundred years ago. For thousands of years the Chinese social milieu supported the transmission of esoteric traditions, and in times gone by this book would have been a gratuitous revelation of an occult discipline. But now the world has changed, and society has no further use for such apparently nonproductive extravagances. So before the memory of this tradition is lost forever and replaced by modern inventions, I hope to establish a guidepost for sincere future scholars of the Chinese martial arts. My purpose is not to provide a comprehensive summary of Chinese culture or a detailed examination of the manifold expressions of the Chinese martial arts. Rather, it is to preserve the immeasurable depth and richness of the discipline.