

The Academy Travels to China, Land of the Dragon — Chief Instructor Brett Wagland

In the last few months, I was fortunate enough to visit China twice. The first visit was with 14 students in October 2017 and the second was with Fontane in January 2018. Both trips were enjoyable and rewarding in different ways.

Every two years, we have been taking a group of students to train in some of the most unique places on earth. Fifty-eight percent of China is covered with mountains. Some of these mountains are sacred to the Taoists and/or Buddhists. On this trip, we were blessed with good weather and beautiful scenery. It is very hard to do justice on paper to what it is like travelling and experiencing China. This is because **the country is full of life, fantastic food, variety, stunning scenery and a very long history of civilisation.** We had a great group of travellers. Some people knew each other already from class or they all have something in common, in terms of an interest in Wu Dao Gong or Tai Chi and the Chinese culture in general.



We began our tour in **Shanghai**, staying in a boutique hotel which was cute and had a sumptuous Chinese and western style breakfast. Nearby was a park that was once the training ground for the famous martial artist **Huo Yuan Jia**. He was a co-founder of the Jing Wu school of martial arts in Shanghai around 1909. Jing Wu was one of the first public martial arts institutes in China. Huo was famous for his many victories against foreign fighters. Huo's kung fu style was called **Mi Zong Quan** (Lost Track Fist). His life story has been immortalised in movies with Bruce Lee portrayed as one of Huo's students in "Fist of Fury" and Jet Li portrayed as Huo in "Fearless." This park was a great place for our morning training. We visited lovely gardens and many wonderful landmarks and saw Shanghai dressed in its splendid neon lights on our evening cruise. Shanghai is a very prosperous and sophisticated city, well worth visiting.

From Shanghai, we made our way to **Chengdu** enjoying its famous Wide and Narrow Street during the day. That evening, we tried a Chinese medicine food banquet. It sounds like something that would be good for you but not necessarily tasty. When the dishes arrived, we quickly realised that healthy, nutritious food can also taste great. In fact, it was a meal fit for a king! So many interesting dishes, from black sesame glutinous rice balls in a broth to black skinned chicken with white fungus and ginseng soup. Even the Chinese wine was specially brewed for medicinal benefit. Strange sounding and strange looking food but everyone wanted more. If you are getting the feeling that we ate our way across China, you are pretty close to the mark. In fact, **people have affectionately nicknamed our trips "the foodies' tour."**

Our next destination was the stunningly beautiful Yunnan Province. As we made our way to **Tiger Leaping Gorge**, we could see the looming grandeur of the snow capped mountains



which were really something special to behold. We took many photos from different angles. Everyone was in awe of such natural beauty. After stopping for lunch and driving through more amazing scenery, we finally arrived at the gorge. Again it is hard to capture the beauty and majesty of this place. We stayed at a guest house on one of the bends of the river far from the tourist buses and day trippers. We enjoyed a leisurely walk through small villages that followed the river along the canyon. On the way back, we tried some local coffee at an out-of-the-way café. The coffee wasn't bad but the views and the place itself were gorgeous. The feeling of waking up to the sound of the river rushing through the canyon and looking up at the snow-capped peaks is hard to put into words, a pretty special place to say the least. **Seeing the sunrise and the mountains come alive is unforgettable. We practised our qigong and Tai Chi in this mighty setting. What a way to start the day!** Lunch at the entrance to Tiger Leaping Gorge, its breathtaking views and the power of the water crashing through the gorge, etc. are all images we won't forget.

Our next destination was **Lugu Lake**. It was hard to imagine that the scenery of Tiger Leaping Gorge could be challenged but the ride to Lugu Lake was mind boggling. I am running out of words to describe this trip. I will say that watching people on the bus moving from one side to the other with cameras flashing for hours on end (me included) was testimony to the endless magnificence we encountered. Several hours later we arrived at Lugu Lake. When we thought things couldn't get any better, we were surprised by an idyllic town on the shores of this magical, alpine lake at an altitude of 2,685 metres, the highest lake in Yunnan Province. There are 5 islands on the lake. The area is home to the **Mosuo** people, the last matrilineal society which still practises the ancient tradition of "walking marriages". Talk about liberation! The woman would select a worthy male suiter and invite him to her



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- **Wed 11 Apr** – 6.15 to c6.45pm
Canberra College Gym, Woden
Launceston St, opp Eddison Park

Annual **Tai Chi & Meditation
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Last day of this term: Thursday 12 April. New term begins Tuesday 1 May.

home at night. However, the man will return to his own home in the morning even though the relationship might be long term. The Mosuo women make business decisions and children carry the mother's surname.

We really enjoyed the peace and beauty of this idyllic town. Tai Chi by the lake was perfect. We had a view of the mountain that protects the village. The Gemu Goddess Mountain (also known as the Lion Mountain due to its shape) was in front of us and the sparkling lake was behind us. Many of the colourfully dressed locals and tourists were watching our practice which added to the experience. We all loved our rustic yet comfortable accommodation which made us want to stay a little longer. Maybe next time!



Sadly, we had to move on and this time we were going to **Lijiang**, the place of our arrival and eventual departure from Yunnan. Lijiang has a great feel. We stayed at our favourite hotel, an old mansion that overlooks the city. Everyone was fascinated by the liveliness and old style architecture of this town. There was a lot going on : music, dancing, restaurants and many colourful locals. Some of us decided to have pizza for a change and everyone went shopping. The hotel and the rooms are great; traditional Chinese gardens make you feel very relaxed. As we had breakfast, we looked out of the window and there it was again, the snow capped mountains with their majestic beauty. Lijiang will always be a must for anyone traveling to China.

Our flight took us to **Wuhan**. This is a large city with a long history. It played a strategic role during the warring states period in China. After our check-in at an impressive five star hotel, we made our way to a nearby park to practise our qigong and Tai Chi before dinner. It was a lovely park on the edge of a lake. After practice, we all felt relaxed and refreshed, ready for the farmer's banquet, another amazing meal.

From Wuhan, it is a scenic 5 hour drive to the **Wudang Mountains**, one of our favourite places in China. This is where Tai Chi and many of the internal arts were developed. The famous immortal Lu Dong Bin cultivated himself in caves on these mountains. The great Xuan Wu (also known as the True Warrior), the patriarch of the Wudang Mountains, achieved enlightenment there after 42 years of cultivation. The famous Zhang Sang Feng combined his inner alchemy practice with martial movement, creating the now famous art of Tai Chi. Staying on the Wudang Mountains is a perfect environment for training. You naturally feel the urge to practise your Tai Chi and/or meditation in such an environment. The Chinese say that the feng shui of these mountains is very conducive to self-cultivation and the long history of practitioners here is testimony to this.



Every morning, we joined Xian Laoshi (teacher) for our Crane Qigong training. The crane is one of the Wudang 5 Animals Qigong, the others being the tiger, tortoise, snake and dragon. **Each of the animal forms stimulates different meridians pertaining to different organs** : heart, spleen, kidneys, lungs and liver. Xian Laoshi is a disciple of Master Zhong with whom we

usually train. However, this time, he had to attend to some family matters. Xian Laoshi has spent many years cultivating herself on the mountains and is also a skilful practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine. She spends her days and nights studying classical Taoist literature, practising qigong, meditation and internal forms such as the Wudang Tai Chi sword, playing the gu zheng (Chinese zither, a traditional musical instrument) and treating patients. This is a challenging life. However, she seems to be very happy and dedicated to achieving enlightenment one day.

On the Wudang Mountains, you will find many such people who have dedicated themselves to realising the Tao. **The internal arts enlighten us about our deeper nature and our connection to the natural world.** The training is a kind of map or blueprint which enables us to begin our inner journey to a more healthy and fulfilling life. This life is simple yet **rich in inner contentment** which we can experience through practising arts such as Tai Chi, qigong and Xin Yi. All of these arts have deep roots in Taoist philosophy and wisdom. As we practise, we begin to feel more of our true nature which is calm and clear, unfettered by the external environment and is always content. When our practice deepens, we have many more of these connections to our true nature, leaving us feeling profoundly refreshed and at peace with ourselves and the world. We all benefitted greatly from our training with Xian Laoshi and her gentle presence.



You can hear how enthusiastic I am about the Wudang Mountains and the Taoist practices. I hope all students of the internal arts have the opportunity to visit this awe-inspiring place.

Beijing was our final stop. Again, great food including the famous Beijing Duck, delicious large ribs at the Old Beijing Noodle House and the fabulous vegetarian cuisine, yum yum! So many historic sites to see in Beijing. It has now become a powerful, modern city with amazing contemporary architecture and, of course, the classical ancient buildings that are simply beautiful. Again, the parks are where the action is. We caught up with Master Chen Xiang, the most accomplished disciple of Grandmaster Feng Zhi Qiang, founder of our Hun Yuan Tai Chi system. Everyone was amazed at his demonstration of the Hun Yuan Tai Chi form. His skill is very deep and has become more and more internalised. We trained with Feng Xiu Qian Laoshi (daughter of Grandmaster Feng Zhi Qiang) who was just wonderful. She has so much knowledge and skill and is always so welcoming. We did a great deal practice on the Tai Chi form. It was good for everyone to train with such an experienced teacher who had spent so much time learning from her father. The morning before we left China, we had a training session in the gardens of the Temple of Heaven Park. It was a fresh, sunny, clear autumn day. What a wonderful memory to finish on!



So many great memories! We are now planning a very different trip to the southern part of China during the Christmas and New Year holiday. I am sure it will be one to remember. Hope you can join us! ☺☺☺