

A Short Biography of Late Master Li Luoneng

by Wu Dianke and Cheng Suren

Part I

Li Laonong, also called Li Nengran, was born in 1807 and died in 1888 at the age of 81. He was born in Shen County in the province of Hebei. As a young man he was naturally good at martial arts. He excelled in the arts of Tongbei and Gongli Quan. He grew to be big and strong because of his constant practice. He was an honest, sincere man and never spoke ill of anyone. In 1845, when he was 38 years old, he sold his land, divided up his family property, and moved to Qi County in Shanxi province. He arrived at the Xiao Han village with the purpose of finding a new martial arts teacher.

Why would Li Laonong travel so far just to learn martial arts? In the Xiao Han village there was a family that made its living as bodyguards for the rich and influential. The heads of the household were Dai Wenxiong and his son Erlu. They were the successors of Dai Longbang, the founder of Hebei Style Xingyiquan.

At that time in Qi County, around the area of Taigu, the people were very prosperous. Many rich people moved to the area and the bodyguard business was doing well. Because of his great skill in the martial arts, Dai Erlu became a bodyguard and escort. Soon his reputation spread far and wide.

One time, Dai Erlu passed through the Cang Prefecture. He wanted to test the top martial arts master there. This master was so famous and feared that escorts wouldn't announce themselves publicly as they passed through for fear of being challenged and beaten. However, Dai Erlu intentionally broke all custom and paraded through the Cang Prefecture with his banners out and his servants loudly calling out his name. Sure enough, the martial arts master was soon there to block Dai Erlu's way. They fought at three different times and in three different places. Each was so impressed with the skills of the other that they became friends. After this Dai Erlu's reputation was greatly increased. The reason Li Laonong traveled so far was to study with the famous Dai Erlu.

Li Laonong arrived at the Xiao Han village and he repeatedly requested to be taken on as a student, but each time he was told, "Dai Style Xinyi is not taught to outsiders". However, Li could not return home and had nowhere else to go. He kept asking. He begged with all his heart and even offered to pay 100 double silver

pieces, but still he could not get in. Finally, needing food and shelter, he offered to manage a radish field that lay outside the village walls. He stayed there for one year and everyday he could be seen selling radishes from a cart provided by the Dai family. Wind and rain didn't hinder him and the villagers began to see his honesty and tolerance. Out of respect they began to call him "Laonong" which means "Old Farmer".

The steward for the Dai family was a man named Guo Weihan. Each month he came out to the fields and checked the accounts. Li always ready with the money he had collected and turned it over to Guo on time. At the end of the year, Guo, feeling that Li Laonong had worked very hard, invited him to a party. There, over a cup of wine, Guo tried to give Li his wages for his year's work in the radish fields. However, Li firmly declined to accept the money, saying instead that he only wanted to learn fighting. At this impasse, Guo went to Dai Erlu's mother. Mother Dai soon knew all the facts of the case and felt moved. She ordered Li to return in exactly one month, when her son was due back from a job. Then they would see what could be done. Li was very happy. In one month there was a large ceremony at the village gate. Mother Dai ordered Erlu to teach Li Laonong, and as Erlu was a dutiful son, he could not refuse. However, he only agreed to pass on a few skills and to be a teacher in name only. What he taught Li was dun dantian (collecting qi into the dantian), she dantian (shooting qi from the dantian), pi quan, and beng quan. Li returned to the fields and practiced daily. He hung a ball from a tree to practice his striking and spent much of his time developing his skills in issuing power and cultivating true qi in his dantian. In one year, because of his severe discipline in training, he achieved a profound understanding of his art.

Part II

Time passed quickly, and two years were gone in a flash. During this time, Dai Erlu was mostly away from home on his escort business. On those when he was at home, he was, kept busy with odd jobs. Because of this Li Laonong never had the opportunity to get instruction on the finer points of his art.

Mother Dai's 80th birthday was coming. Two weeks beforehand, Li arrived at the family house to help out with preparations for the event. He worked very hard day and night. Mother Dai saw that he was hardworking, diligent, and sincere. She decided to reward him with a new suit of clothes. On the day of Mother Dai's

birthday all the students gathered to demonstrate their skills. Their shouts were like thunder, each one flaunting his power and prestige. They were like tigers coming down from the mountains, fighting hand-to-hand and with spears and sabers. Each was trying to win Mother Dai's smile as a blessing. Dai Erlu sat near Mother Dai nodding his head in approval at his students' efforts. Li Laonong was in the back of the courtyard. He was worried because the senior students feared that he was not good enough and refused to let him onto the training ground. However, he knew that he was missing an opportunity that might not present itself for another two or three years. He was feeling confused and unsure of what to do. Finally he stepped out into the lineup and knelt down in his place.

Dai Erlu was taken aback as he recognized Li. He was not pleased and signaled to his students to have Li Laonong removed. Mother Dai noticed that Li was being passed over and ordered Li into the practice yard. Dai Erlu didn't dare offend his mother and gave the orders for Li to step out and demonstrate.

Li Laonong stepped to the middle of the practice yard. He was wearing Mother Dai's gift of new clothes: a black suit with a white overcoat, a special broad sash of red silk to denote martial skill wrapped around his waist, and new shoes. He stood there in the center of the practice yard, towering like a small mountain. He started first collecting qi in his dantian and then shooting it out. Everyone saw, as his upper garment, at first hanging straight, began to tremble. The trembling was the result of the gathering and issuing of qi from his dantian, which is the standing internal power practice in Xingyiquan. This form is like a crouching monkey watching the sea. Both hands are placed evenly on the thighs, both eyes slightly closed. Practiced a long time, the hands and feet give off heat, and the qi descends to the ground creating a root. Li Laonong arduously practiced this skill. The qi from his dantian was in his feet and he could issue qi from his dantian and extend it throughout his body. The intensity of this caused his clothes to tremble. Not many men ever achieve this and Dai Erlu was surprised. Li was no longer afraid. Slowly he stepped up and did beng quan. He did many lines of beng quan, inwardly calling up skill from his dantian and issuing power from his four limbs. Everyone saw the fists going out and heard the penetrating crack as his sleeves cut through the air. As his feet dropped to the floor, the bricks cracked and split. The students were awed by the power and spirit Li displayed and Dai Erlu had to admit to himself that Li Laonong was really good.

When Li finished his demonstration, he knelt down and requested that Dai Erlu point out his mistakes so that they could be corrected. Dai Erlu was greatly pleased. He stepped out into the practice yard and helped Li to stand up. First, he had Li describe his practice methods to the assembled group, then he called on all

of his students to emulate Li Laonong. Mother Dai then stood up and called for a halt of the demonstration and Dai Erlu agreed with pleasure. After this, Dai Erlu invited Li to move into his house to live. There Li Laonong trained his martial skills day and night. He was even more diligent in his training and his skills advanced even more.

Part III

One time, years later, when Li Laonong was about 43 years old, an important event occurred. Dai Erlu had an old rival on Taixing Mountain in the Niu Family village. Dai Erlu was passing through the area and stopped at an inn outside the village walls. It was the middle of the hot season and Dai Erlu became ill. While Dai Erlu was sick, the village leader came and stole Dai's escort wagon. Dai Erlu could do nothing and he had to suffer this man's schemes. Thinking of what this would do to the heroic reputation he had earned, he was both saddened and infuriated. The Niu Family village is in the south pass of Taixing Mountain, the north face overlooks the Fen River in a remote part of Shanxi. The village had high walls with four gateways; each gateway guarded by a tower. The terrain around the village was perilous and steep. Also there were four martial experts, one to guard each gate. Dai Erlu's escort troops attacked the village many times but were not successful in retrieving the wagon. The local authorities were all taking Niu Family bribes and paid no heed to Dai Erlu's entreaties for aid. The Niu Family village leader was full of arrogance and not only threatened to discontinue the bribe money but threatened the authorities physically with his favorite weapon, a flying bullet which he could throw from his hand with devastating effect.

Before long, Li Laonong arrived on the scene. He had come to handle Dai Erlu's affairs and make arrangements for Dai to return home. As soon as he knew of the situation he took his Double-hand Snowflake Saber, grabbed a handful of throwing knives from a nearby table and ran at top speed for the Niu Family village. Just by chance, the Niu Family village leader and his four martial experts were in one of the towers drinking wine and celebrating their victory. Suddenly, they saw a large man coming from afar. Li came as fast as a horse; his feet were flying. He jumped across the village moat, raised his hand and drove a throwing knife into the wall. Li made a ladder out of his knives and climbed over the wall. The four martial experts rushed out to answer the challenge. In a few moments, one after another suffered defeat at Li's hands. The village leader saw his predicament and shot out a bullet at Li Laonong, but Li reached out his hand, caught the bullet, and sent it back where it came from. The bullet hit the village leader's left ear and knocked him down. As

blood poured from his ear, the village leader begged for mercy and that his life be spared. Li Laonong ordered him to go to the inn, kneel down and ask Dai Erlu to forgive his crime. If he did that, Li would release him. After this event Li followed his teacher in his travels to protect the escort wagon.

In 1855, because he was getting old, Dai Erlu formally made Li Laonong his successor. Li traveled everywhere north and south of the Long River, beyond the Great Wall, and to the high plateaus. Because of his fame many students came to learn his skills. In 1856, when Li was living in Qi County near Taigu, he accepted his first disciple, Che Yonghong. Then came Song Shirong, Song Shide, Li Guangxiang, and He Yunheng. In Hebei, his students were Guo Yunshen, Liu Qilan, Zhang Shude, Liu Xiaolan, Li Jingzhai, and Liu Yuanheng. In Jiangsu, there was Bai Xiyuan and in Yunnan, there was Meng Laorong. The Xingyi style was not limited to just one location. Schools sprung up like bamboo shoots, each one striving for excellence, until Xingyi had spread everywhere, with each school developing its own characteristics.

Part IV

Li Laonong worked to develop and improve Xingyiquan. He was innovative and made many major contributions to the art. The original name was Xinyi (Xin means heart and Yi means will). Li said, "The heart and will are at the center, the limbs and body form the exterior. The form (xing) is determined by the will (yi)". He changed the name of the art to Xingyi or 'Form of the will boxing'. He encouraged dun dantian and she dantian practice. He improved the Santi form, adding it to the beginning and end of each boxing routine. He advocated the exercise of standing on stakes to increase the functional value of the forms. He added the "Coiling root stepping method" and improved the practice of the Unicorn knives, the Phoenix Wing striker and other peculiar weapons. He also influenced his students to continue to be innovative and raise the excellence of the art. Che Yonghong's work on the double set "An Shen Pao" is the heart of Che Style Xingyiquan. Song Shirong and Song Shide's forms had a skillful use of qi development that caused them to vibrate and shake as they issued power. This is the hallmark of Song Family Xingyiquan. Guo Yunshen, already an expert of Shaolin quan, added a smooth grace, like floating on the wind, combined with rigorous short quick movements. These helped to shape the Hebei and Shanxi styles of Xingyi Quan.

When Li Laonong was 79 years old, he returned to Taigu in Shanxi to see his students' major achievements in Xingyiquan. He was pleased at what he saw and told them, "Good! You must persevere. Then I will be able to set my mind at ease about the future of Xingyiquan." Then he said, "There is to be one firm rule: You must break down the differences that are forming between you. Martial virtue must come before all." Li then encouraged the students to mutually exchange their knowledge and skills. The great teachers of Xingyi Guo Yunshen, Liu Qilan, Li Cunyi, and Sun Lutang all went to Shanxi and the Shanxi students went to Hebei to visit. They would question and trade back and forth. Because of this interchange, the double styles of Hebei and Shanxi expanded, grew, and built a solid foundation.

A story was told by Li Laonong's students, of his meeting with Dong Haiquan and Yang Luchan. Dong Haiquan was the founder of Baguazhang and Yang Luchan was a great master of Taijiquan. Li Laonong visited the capitol and became friends with the two men. One day, Li arrived at Dong's house. Dong offered Li a cup of tea, but as Li reached out to receive the cup Dong refused to let go. Li realized that Dong wanted to test his skill and strength, and therefore he took the teacup and pushed it back toward Dong. The two men laughed together and compared their strength. At that moment Yang Luchan arrived. He also reached out his hand to push the teacup. The three men were each using their skill, internal power, and their palm strength. Their hands were moving together and the cup started to rotate like a ball. When they finished, not one drop of tea had been spilled from the cup. The three men admired and respected each other and had succeeded in achieving the ideal goal of "three combining to become one". Afterwards, the three men frequently met to exchange views. Thus the three arts: Xingyi, Taiji, and Bagua were joined and the principles and foundations for the goal of "three fists becoming one" were laid down.

Li Laonong eventually returned to Taigu in Shanxi, satisfied that he had worked hard to sow the seeds of Xingyiquan. The art was full of vitality, growing, and would be handed down from generation to generation.