



I was always attracted to China. It was mysterious when my Mom dressed in Chinese gowns and brought home incense after she and my Dad went out for News Year Eve. It was mysterious for me as a student at the School of Chinese Gung-Fu when I read a paper published by our school written by Bruce Lee. The mysteries came with new symbols like dragons and the taichi. Alan Watts wrote that to study Taoism “*we must begin by being in the frame of mind in which it can be understood. You cannot force yourself into this frame of mind anymore than you can smooth disturbed waters with your hand.*”

Learning and practicing Chinese Gung Fu systems like Sui Wan gung fu was like reading the Taoist classic principles. They came to life in practice. Gung-fu is defined as contemplative practice and the martial artist Lee wrote beautiful prose of water- being soft as rain and as hard as a ice. He wrote of the oak tree toppling in a powerful wind while the willow seemed to thrive on the gusts. He wrote about what we were practicing, an ancient tradition that transformed nature’s animals into martial arts. Horse stances. White Crane Gungfu. Northern Praying Mantis style. In the center of my new world was the Shaolin Temple’s Tiger and Crane and Wing Chun styles. Our martial art movements mimicked the animals’ movements in a system where the White Crane Style consisted of the dragon, leopard, tiger, snake and crane. We practiced in wing chun, a meditative and solitary set of exercises aimed at balance – where the ying and yang disappear in the emergence of the tao or “way”. Five on one multi-man attacks with knives and clubs floating on a rich ancient philosophy of nature. I loved it.

After reading, Bruce Lee’s *The tao of gung fu: a study of the Way of the Chinese martial arts* [1] I read the Tao te ching [2] and Chuang Tzu [3]. I was drawn to China’s prolific Spring and Autumn Periods (770BC-476BC) and the Warring States Period that followed them. The Zhou dynasty’s collapse forced King Ping to move the capital of Zhou to Luoyang in Henan Province. There, the aristocracy of the Zhou dynasty ended. The Zhou ruler: Son of Heaven and his ruling arms disappeared. In the remnants emerged the arts and sciences and a new book for me- I Ching [4]. I was 15 years old and it felt that each kick, leg sweep or short punch was grounded in ancient Henan Province.

I dreamt about the founder of the Zhou Dynasty, King Wen and his imprisonment on a hillside prison. I imagined his meditations as he expanded the eight hexagrams to sixty four hexagrams. His “King Wen Sequence” is well known as a random number generator used for divination, but, we can only barely perceive of the change in consciousness it brought forth in the age of Confucius, Lao Tzu and the writers of the Chuang Tzu. Exhausted from a night of calisthenics and gungfu, I dreamt so hard I thought I was there, watching King Wen drawing hexagrams in the soft dirt with his staff.

The scriptures of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods reinforced our Gungfu practice and the lessons were as plentiful as the vernal blossoms of Spring. For me Spring was arising everywhere, as a teenager, in the SF Bay Area's Summer of Love, in the training of the Chinese School of Kempo and Gungfu and in ancient Chinese scripture. I was raised with notions such as certainty, permanence and fame, and, they all faded as my training at the School of Chinese Gungfu and ancient scriptures introduced me to natural notions like spontaneity, conservation and emergence. A passage from Chuang Tzu comes to mind.

*"The duck's legs are short, but if we try to lengthen them, the duck will feel pain. The crane's legs are long, but if we try to cut off a portion of them the crane will feel grief. We are not to amputate what is by nature long, not to lengthen what is by nature short."* [3]

The moral of the story became an important one for me. Anything we do to change nature causes of pain and suffering. And, this is how we do what we do whenever we supplant nature with our own clever notions, models or abstractions. Once again, the ancient Chinese wisdom was synchronistic with a young 15 year olds question of his gung fu sifu. I asked, "*Sifu, when will we learn to break a stack of boards with a karate chop like others?*" "*When we are attacked by wooden boards.*", came the quick reply.

We started each class with a Christian prayer for guidance in practicing to create more healthy bodies, minds and spirit. Our workouts began with hard calisthenics. Twenty five jumping jacks, push ups, fifty toe touches, another twenty five sit ups – we were just warming up. We ended the calisthenics laying on the linoleum floor "belly up". On our Sifu's instruction we lifted our feet 4-6" above the floor and were to hold the position until he told us to put them down. It took only seconds for our thighs and calves to begin to quiver before they cramped in pain. I learned that diverting my thoughts away from my aching muscles would alleviate the pain. But the generations of generations of Grand Master's had passed down wise council to Sifu Al.

With our leg muscles burning, Sifu Al would seem to come from nowhere and punch us in the stomach saying, "*Kiai!*" That would tend to break the concentration and if you didn't kiai, a yell that tightens your abdominal muscles, you would roll over in a writhing ball. But still, we were just getting started. Now, the heat began to rise and the sweat was pouring. The linoleum floors turned into a slip and slide. Without a break, we kept warming up. Now we were in repetitions of punches, kicks and blocks. Kicks within kicks – straight kicks, snap kicks, round house, reverse kicks the moves went on and on. If you were attracted to the muscle burning leg lifts, you'll enjoy another lesson in pain. A basic stance in karate or gung fu is the horse stance. With legs spread to shoulder width, you bend your knees as if you are sitting down. But, you aren't. You stop with your thighs parallel to the ground, back straight, eyes straight head and you hold the position. Again, the pain eventually comes in waves and again to distract us and remind us of the unexpected, Sifu Al would randomly punch the top of someone's thigh or come down on it with a swinging club or staff. *Kiai!*

After practicing the punches, kicks and blocks, we took a short break. When we returned, we practiced forms or dances. As beginners, we practiced karate monkey man katas and as we advanced, Sifu Dascascos added sil lum and sui wan gung fu forms from Shaolin. The gung fu forms were beautiful, ballet like, dances that when slowed down are tai chi forms. Finishing our work out, we fought. We had one on one sparring matches, multi-man attacks (we called them this even though our fiercest class mates were women) and multi-man attacks with clubs and knives. We closed the workout with a prayer and made our way to the locker room with some limping and wincing. Sifu Dascascos had one more surprise in store for us. One evening after our workout, I changed into my street clothes and walked across the workout room to use the toilet. When I came out all was quiet in the school. A few steps later pandemonium broke out. My advanced class classmates attacked me and although I defended myself, it wasn't before Teddy broke my nose. Sifu Dascascos was taking our practice into our daily living. Fused with ancient Chinese lessons we learned that Gung Fu is as much about doing nothing and letting the world come to you, as it is about acting out on the world we wish to change. This, for me, was the Chinese lesson of wu-wei, acting in harmony with nature or action from non-action. Instead of acting from a space of control or governance the practice is to observe what is happening spontaneously. Sifu Dascascos reminded us of this – the first and most important gung fu movement- do nothing but observe what's happening. So, if we saw an ominous character walking on the sidewalk towards us, we were taught to cross the street.

When we act from a desire to control others even the most beneficent plans fail because we subordinate what is naturally happening to our own ego's desires. We might build a model for improving wellbeing only to find that we need to sell, cajole or push our model on others. At the School of Chinese Gung Fu, I learned that energy flows best when I do nothing, or act in harmony. The idea being that it takes less energy to move *with* someone, versus moving against someone. In social terms, this translates to doing things *with* others versus doing things *to* others.

Thirty-five years later, my flight was landing in Beijing. I was founding research member of the Society of Organizational Learning and in China to practice social action research. I invented social action research after spending ten years in community service for people with developmental disabilities and managing research grants at the University of Oregon studying the social and financial effects of employing people with developmental disabilities. As far as a practice goes, social action research is as related to my Gung Fu training as it is to my academic studies. It is a contemplative social action – that's why I call it social action research. I ask people if they will teach me how they generate wellbeing – social, biological or financial. Social action research begins when two things happen. The first is that I have a sponsor who will pay for my time, travel and lodging. The second is that a group of people accepts my invitation knowing that I am sponsored. It had been a pleasure to participate with our Chinese sponsors in a way that such an inductive and passive practice like mine was accepted.

When I landed in Beijing, I had no idea what would happen next. I had asked our Chinese sponsors to make all of the arrangements and do all of the planning. In my hotel that night I realized that I had no idea where I was going or what I would be doing in the

morning. I just knew that I had to be down stairs for breakfast by 8am. When the morning came, I enjoyed a breakfast and meeting Mr Fan, a senior manager of ACBC, a company specializing in the manufacture of TV picture tube glass. Soon, Mr Fan, my translator and I were in a car leaving Beijing. We drove for hours through the fertile North China Plains that lie between Beijing and our destination. My mind foggy from jet lag and hours on the road, I had no idea where we were headed but I was ecstatic when I checked into my hotel and could sleep. My mental fog had me miss my first clue as to where I was. even though it was right in front of me, printed on the hotel's packaged soap – Anyang Hotel. Deep sleep came as soon as my head hit the pillow. Tomorrow's work would start early with a breakfast with Mr Fan before we headed off to the ACBC factory.

I awoke early, peering out my hotel room window. I was in China! A dream was coming true. But, where I was, what I would do and how we all would do what we would do was still a mystery. It had been 25 years since I was introduced to the mysteries of China and now the notion of such a mystery held more excitement for me than angst. It had also been seven years since I had begun my social action research practices. Early in development, I would worry before beginning a social action research study. Arriving at a location without any preparation other than having an open beginners mind, I would wonder. What if the group I was visiting had nothing to share with me? What would I do if everyone rejected my invitation to teach me how they created social, biological and financial wellbeing? What if wellbeing was not an experience others could share with me? By 1992, these trepidations began to disappear in the emergence of a feeling of excitement and anticipation. What would I learn here in China? How might my new learning relate to the learning of an awkward 15-year-old practicing Chinese Gung Fu and studying ancient Chinese texts and contemporary commentaries from authors such as Alan Watts?

After breakfast and a short drive, we arrived at the ACBC (Ancai) factory. On the roof of the administration building was the purpose of Ancai - **Make contributions to the civilization of mankind.** Upon our arrival, I was warmly welcomed by the President and General Manager of Ancai. Over tea, I was presented with a gift that revealed the special community I had been brought to. The gift was a replica of an “oracle bone”, a tortoise shell with engravings used for divination. Later in the week my hosts, would take me to the banks of the Huan River in Anyang. It was along this river that the oracle bones were discovered and the engravings were the earliest examples of the emergence of Chinese writing. My Chinese sponsors had decided to take me to one of the ancient capitals of China and oldest cities in the world dating back to 5,000BC.

Mr Fan kindly accepted and supported my interest in learning about Ancai. As to where to start, Mr Fan suggested that we begin with a tour. The Ancai facility was huge and it took the better part of two days to walk around it and learn about the work being done there. In the factory, we would visit rooms with portraits of Chairmen Mao on the wall and visit the stations where molten glass was poured into molds of picture tubes. It was September and the hot summer temperature of the North China Plains lingered. This combined with the intense heat from furnaces used to melt glass was almost intolerable as we continued with our tour.

About half way between the melting of glass and the packaging of glass bulbs, a familiar feeling came to me. I have found that whenever we wish to learn about organizational performance we can simply follow the path to joy. We were visiting a group of workers operating a slurry process. The slurry was a mixture of fine mud and water and was used to polish glass bulbs. Despite the rather mundane manufacturing process, the workers joy was palpable. Besides joy, another quality of wellbeing is openness. When people are proud of how they do what they do their social network is open to all who wish to learn and collaborate with them. This too was the case. I wanted to learn more and asked the slurry process workers if I could learn more about how they did their work. My translator and I found a small meeting room close to the line and invited each worker to come and teach me about their work.

It was my third of five days at Ancai and the workers blew my mind. One by one, they told me of their concerns for their co-workers. Caffeinated soft drinks had recently become popular with the workforce. But, the workers didn't realize that the ingredients of caffeinated sodas high in sugar content would not hydrate them the same way water would. In the hot factory workers began to complain about having headaches and feeling faint. The slurry operators saw an opportunity to support their co-workers. It was a solution with many desirable outcomes. The slurry workers focused on recycling the water they used. Going much further, they asked management to support a project that would not only recycle waste water but *purify it* so they could supply the Ancai workforce with pure drinking water.

Having spent time learning about Anyang's antiquity reaching back 3,000 years I thought, *What else would you expect from a water department?* The contributions of the slurry workers expanded and I began to think of them as the workers of the water department at Ancai. This awareness is always a delight for me. We live many cultures that generate the multiple worlds we experience. Those workers who follow their desires for a sustainable biology by justifying their work by showing the positive financial impact were teaching me that they were indeed creating *social, financial and biological wellbeing*. My lessons soon grew from Ancai's slurry process to new lessons about waste water recycling and water purification. Water Department workers showed me how they collected waste water from drain basins, toilets, production processes and even their roof's downspouts and then purified it. I learned that they had collaborated with water department workers from Anyang and other industrial water reclamation projects. I was inspired and wanted to learn more. Then came the interruption.

My translator was an Ancai employee reporting to Mr Fan. Like many Chinese who know the westerners struggle with pronouncing their names, she introduced herself to me as Layla. I was in the middle of my social action research. Having found out about the water workers contributions on Wednesday, I had two more days to complete the social action research and present it to the company's management team. I find this to be true of my social action research practices. On the first few days, I know nothing, and, sensing this others begin to fill the void by telling me about their accomplishments. One by one they visit with me and I take note of what I am hearing being led deeper and deeper by

my listening and their explanations. Mid-week my listening is trance like as I find what is common to everyone's lessons on wellbeing. The mid-week point is when the whole culture emerges for me, and a network of conversations so much grander than those happening in the traditional organizational chart happen.

The interruption came from Layla. *"Mister Dennis, we go to show you our jail now."* I took no time to consider her invitation. *"No, thanks Layla. I think I'll stay here and study my notes from the water department."* *"No, Mister Dennis, this is China's oldest prison."* *"Layla, I am not interested in seeing prisons right now."* Layla would have none of this. *No, Mister Dennis. The car is waiting for us and we go now!"* Layla's insistence was overpowering. *"Fine."*, I said in my most indignant voice which had no effect on Layla. Leaving the factory, I tried to express to Layla how important it was to me to learn about her company and the fine work being done. She just smiled, obviously delighted that she had gotten me into the car. We didn't drive very far. We were minutes away from the factory and never left Anyang although it felt as though we were on the fringes of the city.



Turning off the main road, I saw that we were approaching a small open-air market place. I looked around for a western style jail or prison across the lane from the market place. I was in shock. I recognized this place immediately, as if I had visited there many times. We parked in front of what looked to be a temple and standing 30' tall next to our car was a statue of King Wen. Layla, had taken me to the very hillside where King Wen was imprisoned and where he expanded the I Ching from 8 to 64 hexagrams. *"You have got to be kidding me! I cant believe this!"* Layla, looked at me with a wry smile as if to say, *"I knew you would like visiting China's oldest prison!"*

The architecture of China's temples is obviously a work of art. I found that there are at least two gates one passes through to reach the inner sanctuary. Upon crossing the threshold of the second gate, it not only was noticeably quieter but I could almost feel a change in the air pressure. As we began to walk up the hill, I instinctively turned to my left expecting to find what I found - it was the vomitorium I had read about as a teenager. King Wen was imprisoned by King Zhou of Shang who resented the love and admiration showered upon King Wen. Legend tells a tale of King Zhou killing King Wen's son and feeding his remains to King Wen. Once he realized this had happened, King Wen vomited his meal, hence the vomitorium. It was just like the picture I had in my mind's eye. We spent the afternoon there walking about the serene hillside and taking in the art and artifacts of the very place the I Ching was developed into the divination system it is known for today. It all occurred to me there. I was in the birth place of Chinese civilization and where the Spring and Autumn and Warring Periods

sprung to life. This place along side the Huan River on China's North Plain was also where the Chinese culture was transformed by Lao Tzu, Confucius, Chuang Tzu and King Wen. My heart raced like a 15 year olds when he was about to face his first Gung Fu opponent. All of the pieces fell into place and came together at the sacred site of China's first "prison".

The water department workers served their company, community, colleagues and nature. Perhaps some, or many, of them had ancestor's going back to the time of first etchings on tortoise shell. It all felt so fluid. The ancient wisdom seemed present in the souls of the water department workers. Their service ultimately served themselves by becoming the source of their collaboration and social wellbeing. This is how they lived well together.

Back in the factory, I offered a toast to some of the water department workers. We smiled and enjoyed their own bottled water reclaimed from waste water. We enjoyed tea around the long emerald conference table and I shared my learning with them. They all seemed happy to hear my appreciation for their work and were eager to share more with me. I learned through their wastewater recycling program their water consumption dropped 290,000 tons even as they supplied drinking water throughout the company. The decrease in consumption resulted in a 33% decrease in costs. These cost reductions were augmented by a 20% increase in productivity. I also learned that the company employed people with developmental disabilities and funded the YinDu experimental school where Chinese children learned to speak English and other languages while learning academic subjects, art and music. Perhaps, the measure that brought more smiles to the water department than any other was the percent of the total wastewater they recycled. The first year I was there, they recycled 83% when I returned later the Department had grown and they were recycling 86% of their waste water.



It's been almost 50 years since I first walked in the School of Chinese Gung Fu. The world has changed, as it will. From 2005 to 2014, one of China's largest glaciers, the Mengke Glacier, has retreated an average of 54 feet per year. Dr Qin, a research scientist studying the glacier commented on the change in nature caused by climate change. *"In the 1970's, people thought glaciers were permanent. They didn't think that the glaciers would recede."* These glaciers in the Himalaya's are all receding and threaten China's water supply. China's scientists estimate that the 46,000 glaciers of this region help to sustain 1.5 billion people living in 10 countries. Villages are flooding and permafrost is disappearing from the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau. Chinese communities must turn to drilling deeper wells to tap their water, with unintended consequences [5]. Beijing is sinking at a rate of over 4" a year due to this practice [6]. There are no climate deniers among top Chinese officials.

There in the ancient city of Anyang, a bicycle's ride from where King Wen perfected the I Ching, water department workers have been solving the emerging water crisis. From

management's perspective, these workers were manufacturing workers polishing glass. This was their economic value. For me, they had become my teachers of sustainability. Back in Beijing, the night before leaving for Oregon, I found a copy of the Tao Te Ching translated by the scholar Ren Jiyu [7]. Chapter 34 reminds me of my friends in Anyang.

道

*The great Tao is like a river overflowing,  
It can go left, it can go right.  
All things owe their existence to it,  
But it never interferes with them.  
When its work is accomplished, it is unable to say where its credit is.  
It protects and nourishes all, but it does not claim to be master over them.  
Always without its desire, it may be called small.  
All things come to it as their home,  
And yet it does not pose as their master.  
It may be called great.  
It is precisely because it never claims to be great, that it can achieve its  
greatness.*

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4. Legge, J., *I Ching: Book of Changes*, ed. C.u. Chai and W. Chai. 1964, New York, NY: University Books. 448.
5. Wong, E., *Chinese Glacier's Retreat Signals Trouble for Asian Water Supply*, in *New York Times* 2015: NY, NY.
6. Zurko, R., *Beijing is sinking under 20 million people: Drops 11cm or 4.3 inches per year*, in *Hartford Top News Examiner* 2016: Hartford, Connecticut.
7. Jiyu, R., *The Book of Lao Zi*. 1993, Beijing, China: Foreign Languages Press.

Additional resources

[A mathematical explanation of King Wen's 64 hexagrams](#)

[Tao Te Ching](#)

[Chuang Tzu](#)

[I Ching](#)

[Sui Wan Gung Fu](#)

[Sil Lum Gung Fu](#)

Wing Chun and Wu-wei

Sifu Al Dacascos

Sifu Al Dacascos and Wun Hop Kuen Do