

Interview with Zhong Xuechao

Interview with Zhong Xuechao, a martial artist and *gongfu* instructor at the Wudang Shan Daoist Martial Arts Academy.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little about your background?

Zhong Xuechao: I'm twenty-nine years old and have been here first studying, then teaching, *gongfu* for the last twelve years. I grew up in the Hubei Province town of Huangshe located outside of Wuhan. After I finished school there in 1992 I came here to study and train *gongfu*.

Interviewer: I've heard from a representative of the Wudang Shan Special Administrative Region Government Office that one major aspect to their overall promotion of the Wudang Shan area is *gongfu*, especially through trips around China and overseas. Have you personally participated in any of these trips?

Zhong Xuechao: Yes, In fact I've gone overseas twice for such performances. But our purpose was more to demonstrate our *gongfu* skills than promote tourism on the mountain.

Interviewer: This same government representative at least seemed to think you have a primary role in promoting tourism on the mountain. Were they able to assist in your travels?

Zhong Xuechao: No, actually not at all. The private groups that invited us handled all the finances.

Interviewer: He said they facilitated your papers/documents?

Zhong Xuechao: No not that either. The first time we went, the Wudang Shan Daoist Society arranged our papers for overseas travel and the second time it was Wudang Magazine.

Interviewer: Did you enjoy the experience and would you do it again?

Zhong Xuechao: This is my personal opinion, but I really enjoy traveling overseas. It gave me the opportunity to communicate with people from different countries and come into contact with new cultures and environments. For me, showing others our *gongfu* really wasn't as interesting as seeing new places. It's funny, people in the US and Europe see our *gongfu* and think it's really good, but we know our level actually isn't sufficient.

Interviewer: You stated that traveling overseas gave you the opportunity to "communicate with people from different countries and come into contact with new

cultures and environments”. How much time did you get for this during your busy touring schedule?

Zhong Xuechao: Actually we had no time for direct contact. Even during our free time we had scheduled tours, banquets, etc. Our escorts made sure to keep us under constant surveillance.

Interviewer: On a different subject, have you seen the booklet entitled *Trustworthy People of Wudang* (Chengxin Wudang Ren)? And if so, have you read it?

Zhong Xuechao: I have only read the part on learning English phrases, but I'm still familiar with some of the other parts. I think that teaching people to be civilized - English and hygiene - is necessary for the development of Wudang Shan and a requirement if we hope to give a good impression to tourists.

Interviewer: Can you tell me some of your impressions of the transformation you've observed in Wudang over the last twelve years?

Zhong Xuechao: Some things have changed abruptly and profoundly since the area was opened up, while other things have primarily remained the same. The transformation of Laoying may be one of the most visible changes - it's grown significantly in size and is much cleaner than when I first arrived.

Interviewer: What about numbers of tourists and pilgrims?

Zhong Xuechao: There's probably about the same number of tourists these days, but most of these tourists come from far away places, rather than the local vicinity. Today there are far fewer locals [i.e. people from the surrounding areas such as Shiyan and Danjiang Kou] and pilgrims visiting the mountain.

Interviewer: What factors do you think could have influenced such a change?

Zhong Xuechao: Although the cost of transportation is about the same as it was, the entrance ticket is at least five times as expensive [thirteen to seventy-one kuai]. Since they fixed the public road last year the demographics of mountain inhabitants has shifted markedly. Most of the houses along the old road as well as some of the villages connecting the ancient footpaths have been dismantled. The village next to Purple Cloud Temple has been torn down as well.

It used to be that every patch of level ground on the old road, the pilgrim path, to Golden Summit would be occupied by people selling incense, trinkets, noodles and the like. Now they are no longer allowed and have been gradually moved out. At Crow Ridge people used to set their blankets on the side of the road to sell their goods. Now such people are strictly regulated and only those with the proper permits are allowed to open shop in one of the strings of booths lining the road to the parking lot.

Interviewer: You have mentioned places alongside the main road. What about places off the main road, i.e. the ‘ancient road’ and the many zigzagging footpaths around the area?

Zhong Xuechao: Places off the main road like Five Dragon Temple haven’t undergone quite as large a transformation being so hard to access for the average tourist. At a five-hour walk from any paved road, these types of places receive far fewer tourists.

But there are nonetheless some instances where the transformation has been great. For example, my first time to Five Dragon Temple several years ago I stayed in a villager’s house, ate with them and slept in their guestroom. They asked for nothing from us in return. Back then you gave what you felt appropriate, however much you had or whatever you felt was fair. It wasn’t the money, but the merit incurred from housing pilgrims that let this practice continue for the poor villagers. These days they’ve received more and more tourists and have begun to charge set fees for food and lodging. It’s no longer on a voluntary basis.

These villagers are nonetheless very enthusiastic about sharing meals with visitors and welcoming them to stay the night. Of course this change only applies for those places that have not yet been opened up. The majority of tourists still stays in hotels along the main road and eat in restaurants in their hotels or alongside the main parking lot.

Interviewer: Have you noticed any perceptible difference in the protection efforts of the environment or any general changes in the environmental situation?

Zhong Xuechao: No not really. The environmental situation hasn’t changed very much. There’s still about the same amount of litter strewn about. The garbage service hasn’t changed much but there are at least more garbage containers in the more heavily toured areas.

Interviewer: Earlier you mentioned people moved in the relocation program for mountain inhabitants. Do you personally know any of these people? If so, where have they gone and what are they doing now?

Zhong Xuechao: Yes, since I’ve lived here I’ve gotten to know almost all of the residents moved from Purple Cloud Village. I’m not as familiar with residents of other villages around the mountain though. I’m honestly not really sure how they’re doing these days. I see them in town every once in a while and have heard them talk about the commotion of city life, missing their homes and that sort of thing. I’m not positive on their economic situation.

Interviewer: Have you heard of the relocation for hermits and squatters living throughout the forest?

Zhong Xuechao: Oh yes. There used to be many forest inhabitants, be they Daoist hermits, beggars and even convicts. But when the government opened the area to tourism they feared these homeless people giving the tourists a bad impression. So one day they went throughout the forest in search teams, gathered them all together, put them

in a bus and sent them somewhere in Sichuan Province. It seems that they haven't returned, though I'm not positive since they mostly live deep in the woods.

There is this one guy though who's truly amazing. He was deaf and mute, with no money or knowledge of the roads yet he somehow found his way back to Wudang Shan from Sichuan in a matter of a few weeks. No one knows how he did it, it's truly miraculous.