

By ZHANG ZEFENG

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# Devoted to preserving kungfu

Young martial arts practitioners across China cherish this intangible cultural heritage and strive to promote its values

Every day from 9 am to 5 pm, Liu Yi is busy at work as a human resources specialist with a State-run company in the Chinese capital. The demands of his job, which include preparing regular career assessments, are much like those of many white-collar workers around the country.

But out of the office, the 28-year-old leads a life that few of his colleagues know about — the Beijinger is a serious Chinese martial arts practitioner. He specializes in the Three-Emperor Cannon Fist technique.

“Nowadays, fewer young people love what they do. They seldom cherish things because they believe nothing truly belongs to them,” said Liu. “The Cannon Fist has become an integral part of my life.”

Liu started training in traditional martial arts at the age of 5. He now spends at least two weeknights honing his skills. On weekends, he meets with his 53-year-old master, Wang Qi, to learn new techniques at the Temple of Heaven.

Their fighting skills are based on three legendary Chinese emperors — Fuxi, Shennong and the Yellow Emperor. Liu has been practicing the Cannon Fist, which focuses on speed and bursts of power, for nearly two decades. He said he still has a lot to learn.

Many of his fellow disciples stopped attending classes due to social commitments and the pressures of modern life, such as work and marriage, but Liu persevered. He spends his spare time collecting and organizing written and video material related to traditional Chinese martial arts. He is widely expected to be Wang’s successor.

Liu is aware that certain types of kungfu, especially the lesser-known styles, are in danger of becoming extinct amid China’s rapid economic development and the social transitions of the past decades.

He considers himself among the young people across the country who are not professional kungfu practitioners but who try to devote as much time as possible to preserving and hopefully passing on the intangible cultural heritage.

A video clip of mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter Xu Xiaodong knocking down self-proclaimed tai chi master Wei Lei within seconds went viral in April. The incident sparked a huge discussion in China about the merits of its traditional martial arts.

The Chinese Martial Arts Association later responded to the incident, saying that such “arranged private fights” are a violation of the law as well as “the morals and values of martial arts”.

Liu said: “Traditional Chinese martial arts are not just about fighting skills. In modern society, imparting and inheriting these arts and the values attached to them are much more important than using them to fight.”



Daniel Huang, from Taiwan, established hostels on the Chinese mainland to promote martial arts. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

The value of martial arts lies in the philosophy, discipline and health aspects behind them, said Zhang Zehao, a Beijing-based TV and movie production manager.

Unlike many young people, who enjoy modern forms of entertainment such as computer games, Zhang spent most of his holidays during primary and secondary school learning kungfu.

“It was an important form of entertainment for boys of my age back in the northern countryside,” the 38-year-old recalled.

Zhang later focused on *tanglangquan* (mantis fist), a fighting style inspired by the namesake insect’s movements.

“Traditional Chinese martial arts are an irreplaceable part of our culture,” said Zhang. “Fighting is only a part of it.”

For example, in contrast with some Western heroes, who save the world with science or supernatural abilities, Chinese prefer to entrust heroes with unparalleled kungfu and its admirable values so that they can overcome evil, he said.

Zhang tries to adhere to traditional Chinese martial arts’ values, such as humility and respect for others, in his daily life.

“Kungfu is an accumulation of the time and thought invested in pushing one’s limits,” he said. “You might not be invincible and beat all your competitors. But you benefit from the self-improvement that comes with the discipline of practicing it over the years.”

Compared with combat sports like MMA, which adopt scientific training approaches carried out within

a specific, concise framework, traditional martial arts seem to have developed into a more complex and — some claim to a degree — redundant system.

“Traditional martial arts contain too many variations. That’s what many practitioners were actually proud of,” said Liu Zhongyi.

The 36-year-old is a descendant of masters who practiced the Seven-Star Praying Mantis, a well-known, traditional northern-style kungfu.

“But if you want these arts to be efficient, they need to be more concise,” he said.

Liu Zhongyi is a financial director in a State-run company in East China’s Shandong province. He spends about 90 minutes every morning practicing traditional martial arts.

“It has been my long-term habit,” he said. “I love kungfu from the bottom of my heart.”

Liu said he began to realize that there were some gaps in kungfu after training for about two decades. The mantis fist encompasses several different styles. His kungfu master also modified the techniques he learned.

“Certain skills in the Seven-Star Praying Mantis are only useful in my own circle. They are not applicable to other traditional martial arts,” he said.

Liu decided to search for more “universal kungfu skills” that could be applied to other traditional martial arts and even such fighting styles as MMA.

Liu said he hopes to find the original and most efficient skills within the mantis fist. “I want to have a clear view of my system that will be easy to teach and learn.”

Many kungfu practitioners also worry about the obstacles to reviving traditional skills brought about by modern lifestyles and technology, with more people accessing martial arts information online at the expense of practical learning.

“We live in an era where knowledge far outweighs skills,” said Daniel Huang, a 36-year-old kungfu practitioner from Taiwan.

“People know a lot about traditional Chinese martial arts, but that doesn’t mean they can master them. There is a huge difference.”

Huang grew up in Canada. His enthusiasm for traditional Chinese martial arts started in high school. Since his early 20s, Huang has been learning Chinese martial arts with Adam Hsu, a Taiwan master and educator specializing in traditional northern-style kungfu.

Hsu’s kungfu possesses a distinctive beauty after years of practice, said Huang.

“If you describe it in terms of Chinese calligraphy, his strokes (or moves) would be very elaborate, rather than flamboyant.”

In 2011, Huang established three hostels on the Chinese mainland to promote traditional Chinese martial arts. He regularly flies back to Taiwan to continue his training under Hsu.

“We want to find and preserve the origins of traditional Chinese martial arts,” said Huang. “It’s like finding their stem cells, so that they can continue to evolve over time.”