

# Teaching the art of relaxation

Tai chi masters of Central China's Chenjiagou are adept at rejuvenating the mind and body

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**T**he birthplace of tai chi has transformed itself from a poor village into a pilgrimage and tourism hot spot. An ancient farmyard and old streets paved with black bricks greet visitors as they reach Chenjiagou, in Wenxian county, Central China's Henan province.

Trees stand in a line along a river and shops with green tiles and crimson roofs wear consistently designed plaques.

The shops offer catering, wine, clothes and martial arts training, all of which have elements related to Chen-styled tai chi, created by Chen Wangting in the 1600s.

The martial art features the flexible use of soft and hard, slow and fast movements and focuses on a relaxed body and a calm mind.

Teenagers practice handstands in a courtyard of the gym owned by the family of Zhu Xianghua, who is a 40-year-old tai chi master.

His father, Zhu Tiancai, was one of the famed four masters in Chenjiagou who helped to popularize tai chi worldwide.

"Almost everyone in the village knows tai chi," said Zhu. "Local children here have learned tai chi and some have become professional trainers."

However, trainers need more than just skill. "You need to understand the meaning of tai chi culture and the theory and know how to explain them," said Zhu.

Wenxian county was named the cradle of Chinese tai chi by the China Martial Art Association in 2007.

Recalling his link with the art, Zhu said: "There was nothing else to do but practicing tai chi after school."

He majored in tai chi at Henan University in 1996, then traveled across the country and overseas to teach the art.

"Foreigners are fascinated by our culture, in which tai chi is a significant symbol and name card," said Zhu, who has been to Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and northern Europe. "Once I do a few moves, people immediately recognize them and show an interest in learning."

Once upon a time, Chenjiagou faced severe hardship. Poverty and inaccessibility to the outside forced many local tai chi practitioners to leave home in the 1960s and 70s.

"They then had to make a living by teaching tai chi in the four corners of the world," said Zhu.

But this helped the art's development. And as tai chi's popularity grew, Chenjiagou came to the notice of its enthusiasts.

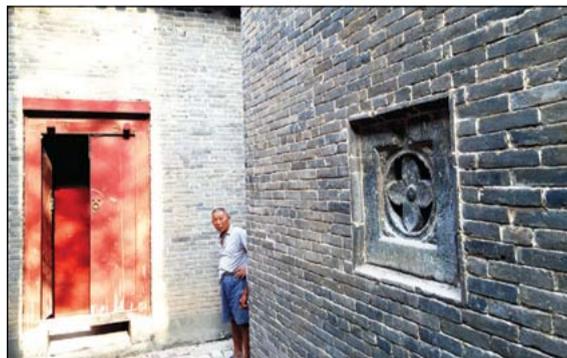
Now, an increasing number of tai



An old wooden doorway in Chenjiagou, in Wenxian county, Central China's Henan province, remains a witness to the hardships of the people. PHOTOS BY YANG FEIYUE / CHINA DAILY



Tablets commemorating different styles of tai chi stand in an ancestral hall remodeled in 2004.



A local resident observes tourists coming to Chenjiagou, which has become a hot destination as tai chi's popularity has grown over the years.

chi masters have returned to the village and set up shop. A tai chi school was built in 1980 and has been running ever since.

There are two arenas in the school gym — one for wrestling, and the

other for free combat.

There are now roughly 40 private gyms offering tai chi education in Chenjiagou, and Zhu runs one of them.

He had his father's old house reno-



A palace in an ancestor hall commemorating tai chi masters in Chenjiagou.



The tai chi museum with stunning stone sculptures, tai chi's history and theory opened to the public in 2009.

ated in 2005 and began to take in students in 2007. Some come to learn tai chi to become masters, while others do it for health reasons or to experience the culture.

Typically, adult visitors spend

between one week to a month in the village practicing tai chi, he said.

Zhu's house can accommodate roughly 30 students and his class is usually fully booked over the May-November period, with 500-800 students every year.

Meanwhile, many of the 3,000 locals have also benefited from the tai chi culture, and some make a living from training. In addition, approximately 200 local trainers teach abroad, making \$100-\$300 an hour.

Besides teaching tai chi, many have seen their income increase by offering catering and accommodation and selling tai chi costumes.

Zhu said that the village's prosperity is mainly due to the government's efforts.

The Wenxian government began to tap into the significance of Chenjiagou back in 2004 when stone-paved roads were built and a grand stone gate was erected.

The county then invested 33 million yuan (\$5 million) remodeling an ancestral hall for tai chi masters.

Now, well-manicured trees line the courtyard leading to the hall, with buildings on three sides. A sculpture of Chen tai chi founder Chen Wangting stands tall in the front and tablets commemorating other styles of tai chi are on the sides.

To date, the hall has seen more than 1.1 million visits by tai chi enthusiasts from home and abroad.

A tai chi museum covering an area of 2,800 square meters opened to the public in 2009. The museum sits in a grand plaza with stone sculptures showcasing tai chi moves. Visitors can access tai chi history and theory, as well as tai chi masters' life stories in the museum.

And a lot of construction is currently in progress. A water diversion canal, toilets and lighting are now being built.

Yuan Shuai, a local government official, said: "We plan to build Chenjiagou into a world-class place for tai chi."

As part of the grand plan, a tai chi town will receive 60 million yuan in investment. Also, many national tai chi events, including competitions and seminars, are held in the village.

With these changes, Zhu said more visitors will come to sample tai chi in future.

"Unlike physically demanding sports, tai chi is suitable for people of all ages," he said.

Speaking about the benefits of tai chi, Zhu said that it has helped him to find inner peace.

"The key to practicing tai chi is to find a balance of movements and the mind," he said. "You get an insight into Chinese culture which really calms the mind and frees you from earthly worries."