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▶ **To cite this version:**

Laurent Chircop-Reyes. Local Diffusion of Xinyi/Xingyiquan in Shanxi Province, China: A Living Heritage Shaped by Ancient Merchant Culture. Traditional Martial Arts As Intagible Cultural Heritage, ICHCAP, ICM (UNESCO), 2020, Living Heritage Series, 979-11-969642-2-1. hal-02986829

HAL Id: hal-02986829
https://amu.hal.science/hal-02986829

Submitted on 3 Nov 2020

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Local Diffusion of Xinyi/ Xingyiquan in Shanxi Province, China: A Living Heritage Shaped by Ancient Merchant Culture

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08

Introduction

The traditional martial art concerned here is divided into two currents belonging to the same founding lineage: *xinyiquan* 心意拳 (lit. Intention Fist [boxing]) and *xingyiquan* 形意拳 (lit. Form [and] Intention Fist). It saw significant development in northern China, especially in Shanxi Province, during the middle of the 18th century, and in Hebei Province at the beginning of the 19th century. Today, both styles are practiced well beyond China and are presented in various traditional or sporting forms. The traditional practice is composed of ritual initiations, alchemical, curative, and psychophysics exercises closely linked to the ancient Chinese concepts of cosmological thought and folk religions. The combat techniques (bare hands and traditional weapons) embody popular warlike traditions hypothetically attributed to the handling of a military spear dating back to the 12th century in Henan Province.

What is historically certain, however, is that this art was deeply influenced by the merchant culture of Shanxi Province from the 19th to the beginning of the 20th century (Liu and Qiao, 2014). Thanks to migratory movement along ancient Eurasian trade routes in late imperial China, it has progressively become an inherent part of the local knowledge of trade caravan organizations called *biaoju* 鏢局. The mutual influences between martial art and merchant culture have brought about the emergence of new social category, *biaoshi* 鏢师. They shaped local knowledge that comes in a variety of forms and contextual applications: communicative competence and jargon for cooperation (Chircop-Reyes, forthcoming), trade and veterinary sciences, handcrafts, visual capacity, hearing ability, olfactory sensitivity, and defensive skills.

This chapter aims to describe the contemporary lineages of *xinyi/xingyiquan*, striving to highlight the diachronic processes of its local diffusion. The ethnographic data (2017–18) exposed in the first section tend to assess the continuity of the chain of transmission, while the second section presents a rarely investigated weapon and its current diffusion. More broadly, this interdisciplinary approach combining history and anthropology will help to assess the current heritage of the traditions and the intangible culture related to this martial art, especially in a context of the geopolitics of heritage and the emerging patrimonialization awareness that has been taking form recently in China under the abbreviation *"feiyi"* 非遗 (Bodolec, 2012, 2014). Indeed, until 1990 just a few hundred sites benefited from heritage practices (Fresnais, 2001), but since then this field has grown continuously and now includes a wide variety of ancient local knowledge, rituals, arts, and skills, some of which are in danger of falling into disuse. Therefore, it is hoped that, despite its limitations, this chapter can serve as a preliminary study that may generate further research and contributions to the International Centre of Martial Arts for Youth Development and Engagement under the auspices of UNESCO on the project of patrimonialization and renewal of traditions in China.

Merchant Culture and Martial Art: Past and Current Main Chains of Transmission

During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), *xinyi/xingyiquan* was one of the main martial arts practiced by the escort-masters who were in close relation with intellectual circles on the one hand and the trading world on the other. Over time, and before the influence of merchant culture took hold, martial knowledge of *xinyi/xingyiquan* was progressively shaped through Daoist alchemy techniques, ethical codes, and rituals that once gave its practitioners social recognition. Indeed, important merchant families sought the protection of local escort-masters for their caravan expeditions, during which they were frequently attacked by brigands in the steppe and isolated areas that were poorly controlled by the State in northern China. The reputation of the art's defensive efficiency, and also the ancestral cult of veneration shared by martial arts practitioners and traders were factors that fostered interaction and professional cooperation between the two groups.



Liu Fuzhong 刘富中 (left) and Wang Jianzhu 王建筑 (right) © Guo Jinhua 郭进华

Traditional Chinese martial practices are structured around a logic that is essentially that of orality. Texts exist, but they are sometimes incomplete or do not allow us to investigate further, given the confidentiality of the transmission that is specific to the initiatory and ritual aspect of the exercises taught. Faced with this silence of textual sources, ethnographic interviews have therefore proved to be indispensable for this survey. The current descendants of the escort-masters are linked to their past through knowledge and narratives that they present as continuous over several generations. Making the

history of the *xinyi/xingyiquan* therefore involved investigating the current inheritors of Qing dynasty escort-masters, who continue to transmit their traditions in Shanxi Province.

The fieldwork data presented here were collected between March 2017 and June 2018 at Qixian, Taiyuan, Taigu, Yuci, and Pingyao, located in the central region of Shanxi Province. In the course of my survey, I was able to collect a number of narratives about the escort occupation in relation to martial arts knowledge. The practices concerned included rituals of initiation and acceptance within a lineage (*baishi yishi* 拜师仪式), apprenticeship of combat techniques (bare hands and sticks, swords, sabres, spears), as well as Daoist alchemy techniques (*neidan* 内丹).

I first visited the village of Xiaohan 小韩, in Qixian. Situated in the heart of a rural landscape of terraced slopes and cornfields, Xiaohan is a grid village of about ten old lanes separated by walls of bricks colored by loess clay and yellow earth, where at the western end of its dwellings stands the imposing old house of Dai Longbang 戴隆邦 (1713–1803).

Dai Longbang was a descendant of a line of anti-Qing official scholars who had served the Ming (1368–1644). He was a caravaneer appreciated by merchants and renowned among them for his mastery of warfare techniques (Chircop-Reyes, 2018). Narratives have made him a local hero, and he is still ritually revered not only by his descendants but also by the heirs of his lineage and their disciples. The house has retained its old architecture of square courtyard houses, and at the time of my visit a number of artifacts were on display and presented as having been used in caravan expeditions. These artifacts, such as one-wheeled carts or chests in which silver ingots were transported, are also found in the museums of the escort companies in Pingyao.

The Dai transmitted *xinyiquan*, which was familiarly known in Shanxi Province as "Dai's boxing," *Daijiaquan* 戴家拳. They were locally renowned as conservative, and knowledge of the family art did not, or at least would rarely, cross the walls of the residential compound, at least not until the late 19th century. Dai Longbang is said to have passed on only to his son, Dai Erlü 戴二闾 (1778-1873), and his great nephews. Exceptionally, and according to the oral tradition, the latter have passed their familial art to a martial artist from Hebei, Li Luoneng 李洛能 (1808-1890), who would have been the first non-Dai disciple. This first extra-lineage diffusion of Dai knowledge led to the parallel creation of a new style, *xingyiquan*, the name of which is close to the previous one, except that the character *xin* 心 (heart) is changed to the character *xing* 形 (form). The change of name from *xinyiquan* to *xingyiquan* is the subject of several hypothesis, but the particularly interesting one here is that it would have allowed the first school to keep its particularity related to the Dai family's mode of transmission. As for the second school, it was later widely developed in Hebei Province. *Xinyi/xingyiquan* is commonly recognized in Chinese martial arts classification as one of the three main currents of Chinese "internal [art of] of boxing," *neijiaquan* 内家拳.

The Dai eventually reformed their conservative rules of transmission: a second extra-lineage diffusion of the Dai family art occurred with Dai Kui 戴奎 (1874–1951), part of the fourth generation. Indeed, the current heir of the Dai family house, Dai Chuanzeng 戴传曾, the sixth generation since Dai Longbang, does not possess the martial knowledge of these ancestors. The Dai family no longer practices nor transmits their art: "Before, it was a family tradition, but today the Dai have almost nothing to do with martial art. In the region,

the transmission of *xinyiquan* is now mainly done by the Wang" (Dai Chuanzeng, March 2017, interview). Wang Xicheng 王喜成 is today part of the seventh generation of the Dai by affiliation. He is the grandson of Wang Yinghai 王映海 (1926–2012), a disciple of Dai Kui, and presents himself as a "conservative" and a link in a chain of transmission "faithful to the founding principles" of the Dai family.

In Jinzhong, a prefecture town in the center of Shanxi Province, *xingyiquan* is today essentially represented by the descendants of the lineage of Che Yizhai 车毅斋 (1833–1914), disciple of Li Luoneng. Bu Binquan 布秉全, son of Bu Xuekuan 布学宽 (1876–1971), is currently one of the main representatives of this lineage in Taigu District and continues to maintain the heritage of Che Yizhai, his father's master. The second great Taigu current is the *xingyiquan* of Song Guanghua 宋光华, descendant of Song Tieling 宋铁麟 (1885–1978). The Song lineage has been uninterrupted since the second half of the 19th century and the descendants still occupy the family house in Taigu. However, the Song had only a relatively weak and brief link with the escort occupation; they specialized in the watchmaking trade very early on.



Contemporary practice of xingyiquan. Pictured is Wang Jianzhu 王建筑 © Wang Tianyi 王天暘

In Yuci lives Wang Jianzhu 王建筑, one of the contemporary *xingyiquan* representatives of the Li Luoneng lineage. Wang Jianzhu was also one of my closest informants. He is a collector of ancient martial arts documents, an amateur historian of local martial traditions, and a descendant, among others, of Wang Jiwu 王继武 (1892–1992), formerly an escort-master in Renyi 仁义, a transport company operating in Shijiazhuang (Hebei). Finally, I would also mention the *xingyiquan* transmission made by Zhang Yuren 张育人 and his disciples in Pingyao. Zhang Yuren is a disciple by direct transmission of the escort-master Cao Tiyuan 曹体元 (1888–1977), and direct heir (fourth generation) of the Wang clan, Wangshi 王氏, from Pingyao, through Wang Zhengqing 王正清 (卿) (1801–77, first generation), Wang Shumao 王树茂 (1852–1937, second generation), and Wang (Yun) Yi 王芸 (n.d., third generation).



Wang Jianmin 王建民 (left) and Wang Jianzhu 王建筑 (right). practicing spear and sabre © Wang Tianyi 王天暘



Wang Jianzhu 王建筑 practicing spear technique © Wang Tianyi 王天暘

The lineages of Shanxi claim the same *shizu* 始祖—that is, the same founding master—Ji Jike 姬际可 (1602–83), a famous general known in particular for his resistance during the Manchu invasion. They thus advocate a certain conservatism concerning the rules and principles that govern them. For example, the ritual ceremonies of enthronement in a lineage (*baishi*), the rigorous respect of Confucian principles that take place within the master–disciple relationship, as well as the physiological concepts drawn from the currents of ancient cosmological thought applied to the martial art, constitute the three main invariants that can be found in the transmission implemented by the current representatives. This respect for tradition, however, does not exclude the idea, as one of the informants mentioned above told me, of "making the martial art evolve and adapt to our present time and to the needs of the new generations."

Currently, the art of *xinyi/xingyiquan* is considered a living intangible cultural heritage, part of an important project of patrimonialization. Indeed, at the time of my investigation it was the subject of attention from the local authorities in that as a tradition it occupied 798th place in the National List of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage. I had this information in winter 2017 from the Center for the Protection of Intangible Culture of Shanxi, Shanxi feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu zhongxin 山西非物质文化遗产保护中心, located in Taiyuan.

When Martial Tradition Meets Ancient Caravan Trade Culture: The Whip Stick for Camels and Mules as a Defensive Weapon

A martial tradition related to merchant culture that has been little investigated is that of *biangan* 鞭杆, also called *tuoluobian* 驼骡鞭, the whip stick for camels and mules. The art of *biangan* is composed of local *xinyi/xinyiquan* techniques, but also of other martial arts from different regions such as *baguazhang* 八卦掌, *taijiquan* 太极拳, or even styles that are related to Shaolin martial traditions. Mao Mingchun 毛明春, who gave me an interview for

my research in February 2017 in Taiyuan, is one of the current representatives of *biangan* transmission. He is a direct disciple of Cheng Shengfu 陈盛甫 (1902–96) from Wucheng District (Shandong). Cheng Shengfu was taught *biangan* by Zhang Hanzhi 张含之 (n.d.) from Shanxi. Mao Mingchun is also a professor in the Department of Sports and Physical Culture Research at Shanxi University and a representative of the fifth generation of the *xingyiquan* of the Song family of Taigu, mentioned above. He is part of the lineage of Song Huchen 宋虎臣 (1881–1947, second generation), of Dong Xiusheng 董秀升 (1882–?, third generation) from Dong Village (Taigu), and of Li Guichang 李桂昌 (1913–2000, fourth generation) from Yuci.

The *biangan* was originally a dense but flexible whip made of twisted beef tendons, about 39 inches (100 cm) long (three *chi* 尺). Nowadays, in their *biangan* training, practitioners use half a wooden stick of equal length as a traditional whip. As such, the transmission by Guo Guizhi 郭贵志 in Datong emphasizes its defensive use, the technical characteristics of which were mainly influenced by his master Yao Zongxun 姚宗勋 (1885–1917), successor of Wang Xiangzhai 王芗斋 (1885/86–1963), the founder of *yiquan* 意拳 (Intention Fist). The whip formerly used by caravaneers, however, was somewhat different and had to be thick enough to be handled like a stick. In the beginning of the Qing dynasty the *biangan* was first a tool used by merchants to make animals (camels, mules) move forward during trade caravan expeditions. Then, according to oral narratives, it progressively became a practical weapon to carry for protection against brigands' attacks. Merchants who had no escort services were logistically not able to carry swords, spears, and other weapons, which were heavy and would also likely arouse suspicion and provocation. In addition, using swords and spears required skills that merchants generally did not possess; the handling of the *baingan*, however, appeared to be easier for non-practitioners.



Wang Jianzhu 王建筑 demonstrating the standing position called santishi 三体势 © Wang Tianyi 王天暘

Once integrated by local martial artists into their equipment, the *biangan* was subject to a process of standardization—that is to say, the elaboration of codified attacking and defensive moves—as well as becoming an object of dissemination among escort circles in a number of Shanxi towns, villages, and cities. This technical evolution in the handling and use of a caravan instrument as a defensive weapon led to the development of the fencing element of Shanxi fighting arts, *Shanxi quanxie* 山西拳械. Prof. Mao Mingchun conducted a study on the different currents of its transmission in Shanxi Province (Table 1; see also Liu and Qiao, 2014, p. 96).

Table 1. Contemporary development of stick practice in Shanxi Province. Data collected during the winter of 2017 in Taiyuan (Shanxi) from a survey led by Prof. Mao Mingchun.

Areas (cities, districts)	Names of the Shanxi arts of fighting with sticks
Fanshi 繁峙(Xinzhou 忻州)	Baxianbian 八仙鞭 (“Stick of the Eight Immortals”) ; sanshi’er shou tanglangbian 三十二手螳螂鞭 (“Stick of the 32 Hands of the Praying Mantis”) ; meihua shizi bian 梅花十字鞭 (“Stick of the Ten Characters of the Plum Blossom”)
Linqiu 临邱 (Datong)	Sancaibian 三才鞭 (“Stick of the Triad Sky–Earth–Man”)
Dai 代 (Xinzhou)	Shi’ershoubian 十二手鞭 (“Stick of the 12 Hands”)
Ying 应 (Shuozhou)	Shiwushoubian 十五手鞭 (“Stick of the 15 Hands”)
Huairen 怀仁(Shuozhou)	Ershisibian 二十四鞭 (the “24 Sticks”)
Dingxiang 定襄 (Xinzhou)	Chibabian 尺八鞭 (“Stick of Eight Chi Long”) ; sanshiliubian 三十六鞭 (the “36 Sticks”)
Taiyuan 太原	Tuoluobian 驼骡鞭 (“Stick for Camels and Mules”) ; shisanbian 十三鞭 (the “13 sticks”) ; wuhuabian 舞花鞭 (“[Moves] of Dancing Stick”)
Yuci 榆次 (Jinzhong)	Panlongbian 盘龙鞭 (“Dragon Stick”)
Shouyang 寿阳 (Jinzhong)	Liushisanbian 六十三鞭 (the “63 Sticks”)
Pingyao 平遥	Bahebian 八合鞭 (“Stick of the Eight Harmonies”)
Lingshi 灵石(Jinzhong)	Luanma jueliutang 乱马撅六趟 (“Rebel Horse Prancing Six Times”)
Hongdong 洪洞 (Linfen)	Zimu shunshoubian 子母顺手鞭 (“Stick Mother–Son”)
Yuncheng 运城	Niusibian 纽丝鞭 (“Stick of the Entwined Silk”)
Qin 沁 (Changzhi)	Qimeibian 齐眉鞭 (“Stick [of] Respect Between Spouses”) ; jiulianhuanbian 九连环鞭 (the “Nine Routines of Stick”) ; tuoluobian 驼骡鞭 (“Stick for Camels and Mules”) ; qixingbian 七星鞭 (“Seven-Stars Stick”)

Conclusion

The contemporaneity of the local transmission of Shanxi's traditional martial techniques is meant to be an example of what we could consider a living heritage. In other words, the loss of its use due to social transformations has not been able to affect the cultural value attributed to it since its creation. The current masters of Shanxi maintain this relationship to the past through active dissemination and media coverage of those techniques, whose form is constantly being improved and readapted to the modern context. The main purpose of this chapter was to provide original ethnographic data that would help measure the extent of the current local diffusion of *xinyiquan/xingyiquan* and related practices.

This brief study thus provides an opportunity to address the effects of the emergence of heritage awareness in China from the direct perspective of those involved in knowledge transmission. These groups of inherited practitioners together, but also in their individuality, form a bridge that allows us privileged access to the knowledge of yesteryear. Therefore, more closely exploring the social organization of their lineage and the way they live through it will, I believe, open up new lines of investigation concerning aspects closely related to heritage issues.

The revival of interest in traditional cultural practices in China is, for example, one such aspect. Among the Chinese traditions that are the subject of heritage projects, or are likely to be so, are a set of cultural elements such as religious, artisanal, medical, artistic (theater, song, dance, painting), scriptural, and martial practices, among others. Especially in the Chinese context, studies on heritage cannot be considered separately from those on masters (*shifu* 师父) and new generations of disciples of ancient practices today. This aspect is indeed an indispensable gateway to (re)define the current Chinese social diversity, and to understand the silent transformations that are taking place, which are difficult to grasp from observation due to the intrinsic logic of the confidential rules of transmission "from master to disciple" (*shi-tu guanxi* 师徒关系). By questioning what has become of such ancient knowledge today, we will be better able to grasp the continuities or ruptures in the transmission of a given practice, and to determine its social coherence and effects on groups who live through these practices or who seek to revive them.

Finally, as the "sense of the past" has a longer history in China than the modern notion of heritage (Wu, 2010), it would be interesting to open the way for a reflection on inheritors' relationship to their history in order to deepen understanding of the past, but also to understand how the past "weighs on the present" (Noiriel, 2006, p. 4).

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