

WHAT INCREDIBLE CHANGES ARE TAKING PLACE IN CHINA!

Yokohama, October 2004.

I could have never imagined what I'd seen during my last trip three years ago!

In Zhengzhou there are trendy girls and neon signs just like in Tokyo, Toyota and Volkswagen dealers, Armani stores! The opening ceremony of the Festival itself (which was held in a fabulous stadium) was astonishing, almost Olympic.

Until not long ago, Wushu events used to be structured in a way that would attract only interested experts in this sector. However, the 2004 festival was a social and cultural show, including firework displays, opera-like choreography with the use of images taken from successful (past and present) Chinese cinema projected on modern design giant screens, and the participation of well-known Chinese drama singers and pop stars.

All in all, this was a great change in mentality of world standards! Today, China's revival of its past heritage is running at the speed of light.

This was the greatest festival I'd ever seen: it was held in two indoor stadiums and lasted four days, with the participation of more than 2,000 athletes from all over the world. The largest delegation was the one from Japan, including up to 13 teams; our team was the biggest in number with 38 athletes, followed by the USA with 11; China took part with 23 teams from Hong Kong and 25 teams from the People's Republic! To my satisfaction, Italy was present with 5 teams, i.e. more than other major countries, such as Germany, France and England, just after Canada.

I had the satisfaction of seeing some of my athletes being awarded medals and of obtaining myself two gold medals in group C with Shaolin Luohan Quan and Shaolin Chang Quan. Moreover, what a joy I had competing with some of the most famous Shaolin Masters, including Shi Deyuan, his Master and Cheng Xinying (who had been my trainer for one month in 1995!); they themselves were awarded gold, whereas Shi Dechen took silver, with Master Shi Demeng attending the event.

However, the Festival was special not so much because of the competitions (whose organization was the same as in Zhengzhou International Shaolin Wushu Festival over the past few years); rather it was special because of its overall organization as a social event. In 2001 there had been only one show, which was held in Dengfeng after the traditional street parade of Wushu schools. In fact, this year there were many more events.

During the morning event after the opening ceremony, besides the excellent champions I had the opportunity to enjoy the wonderful performance of groups from amateur associations; they designed extremely interesting sequences of healthy exercises, which were taken from traditional Wushu but were reinterpreted and proposed in a way to be easily understood and helpfully used by everyone. This was surprising to me, as I viewed this kind of approach more consistent with the needs of

the West, whereas it seems to be considered equally useful in the country where Wushu originally comes from and at a higher level due to the great competence of Chinese masters. Until not long ago, in China amateur practice used to be performed by groups of people without the guidance of any master, but now it seems to be also organised by schools.

Notwithstanding this whole whirl of events and travelling (sleeping just 5 hours for 3 nights) which resulted in a headache during my competitions, I was able to find some time for myself, for the spirit. The day before the competition, while everybody else was going to visit Bodhidharma's cave, I found solace at Chuzu An's, the small nunnery on the hills behind Shaolin. There I spent two marvellous hours talking to one of the nuns and enjoying the calm and fresh air of the countryside.

I asked the nun to show me the frescos in the nunnery and she was very kind in showing me also the nice stone pillars located in the pavilion. Out in the garden, she then showed me a 1500 year old tree, in a place visited by the sixth Patriarch Hui Neng. I paid homage to the tree and asked for a favour, i.e. having strength for the competition. After hearing that, the nun immediately recited a psalm for me. Then, I explained her who my master was and when I mentioned venerable Liang Yiquan she added some more words of help.

Therefore, I must thank her immensely for this result (when I go back there I won't forget to do so), as well as I must thank my mother, as she had done the same in Italy, and my father for making my stay in Shaolin in 1994 possible.

I was also delighted to talk to people in Zhengzhou's parks. During one of my training sessions, an old gentleman came to me to congratulate for my performances and asked me some questions. I myself asked a question to him and he told me he worked in a company. Then I resumed my training, but I realised that he too had started to exercise, thus showing his qualities: nice movements and an excellent balance; then he sat on the ground (he was wearing a suit) and placed one leg behind his head! What a great encounter! By this time, the hostile and hard times I experienced in my first stay in Shaolin 10 years ago are far off!

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