

Walking the circle

**Andrea Mary Falk, *A Shadow on Fallen Blossoms, The 36 and 48 Traditional Verses of Baguazhang.*
Review by Malcolm Davy-Barnes**

These verses have survived from the late 19th and early 20th century, an age when many Chinese internal martial artists did not often write things down. The translation by Andrea Falk is scholarly and contextual.

The book presents the traditional 36 verses and the 48 verses of bagua-zhang. They are attributed to Dong Haichuan (1813-1884), generally acknowledged as the founder of bagua-zhang, with probable contributions from the first generation of his disciples.

Dong brought his art to Beijing having synthesised his previous martial training with meditative circle walking that he learnt, most likely, from the Dragon Gate sect of Daoism. Employed initially as a servant in an imperial household, he gained favour for his martial skills, becoming a bodyguard, instructor and tax collector for the dynastic family. It is known that he took on disciples, teaching each according to their previous martial skills and character.

The verses presented reflect this in that they are general enough to cover differences in styles. They are written in the form of four line verses that could be memorised by practitioners and transmitted orally. Falk suggests that the verses employed rhyming, a length and a beat which allows for the possibility of lines used for qigong chanting. The author provides pinyin translation for the lines and the adventurous would-be chanter.

Energy structure

The verses were probably written down by Zengqi (1862-1951), who was a Manchurian scholar and a disciple of Yin Fu, Dong's first student. Not openly published in China until the 1980's they became known by some as the Liang lineage verses, partly as they were a gift by Zhenqi to Guo Gumin and published by Li Ziming; both students of Liang Zhenpu, founder of the Liang style. Although there is some cross-over, the 36 verses are more about body and energy structure and co-ordination whilst the 48 verses are more tactical.

Andrea Falk may be known to readers through an interview in the TCUGB magazine (issue 36), from her previous translations and *Falk's Dictionary of Chinese Martial Arts*. In this book she not only translates but brings the text to life using her knowledge gained through her training in bagua, xingyi, tai chi and wushu in China. There is much contextual material in this book drawing on Chinese linguistics, philosophy, history, and sociological aspects. Previous translations into English have appeared but this is the first book to be dedicated solely to the traditional verses. Researching in China and comparing a number of different versions, Falk offers a definitive translation whilst also giving us the divergences in the versions along the way. There is an introduction and helpful background, illustrations, a glossary and a quick guide to pinyin pronunciation. The verses themselves are

presented with the original characters, pinyin and an English translation. There is a meticulous commentary on each line with supplementary information and discussions. The author does not shy away from controversial aspects such as the relationship between bagua-zhang, the martial art, and the bagua of the yi ching.

The title of the book comes from a composite image from two of the verses that give a flavour of the translated verses. From 21/36:

*When you have gone to the fullest you must turn the body,
Shed the body and trade it for a shadow without leaving a
trace.*

*How we change unpredictably is all in the footwork,
Going in and out, back and forth – the waist first extends.*

*When the original qi is full then you can walk without
boundaries,*

*The truth of the eight trigrams is in our school.
Every single technique comes from changes in the feet,
If you stand still you are like fallen blossoms.*

Qi cultivation

One of Falk's comments to this latter verse is that original qi cultivation in Baguazhang is achieved through circle walking in postures. Qigong training is in the circle walking itself. She notes also to stand still suggests the stopping of the mind, not just the feet. Bagua is not only about change but continuous change.

Like the Taiji classics, this isn't a step by step guide to learning bagua, but rather the verses are there to remind the practitioner. For anyone interested in baguazhang it is a treasure to be consulted alongside one's own learning. For Taiji and Qigong practitioners it offers insights regarding posture, breathing, connectedness etc. Moreover for internal artists Falk's book, through the commentary of historical and social contexts, we get invaluable glimpses and an understanding of the milieu that Dong Haichuan, Yang Luchan, Guo Yunshen and their contemporaries lived in. ☯

