

Li Zi Ming's Ba Gua Zhang Method

by Vince Black

After having studied in four different Ba Gua systems over a period of fifteen years, I finally came upon Li Zi Ming and his Liang Zhen Pu style of Ba Gua which, to me, was far more complete in its systematic approach than any other system I had studied. This system takes the practitioner from a basic foundation to a high level in Ba Gua without leaving gaps in the forms and movements and introduces all of the subtleties and nuances which this art contains in a

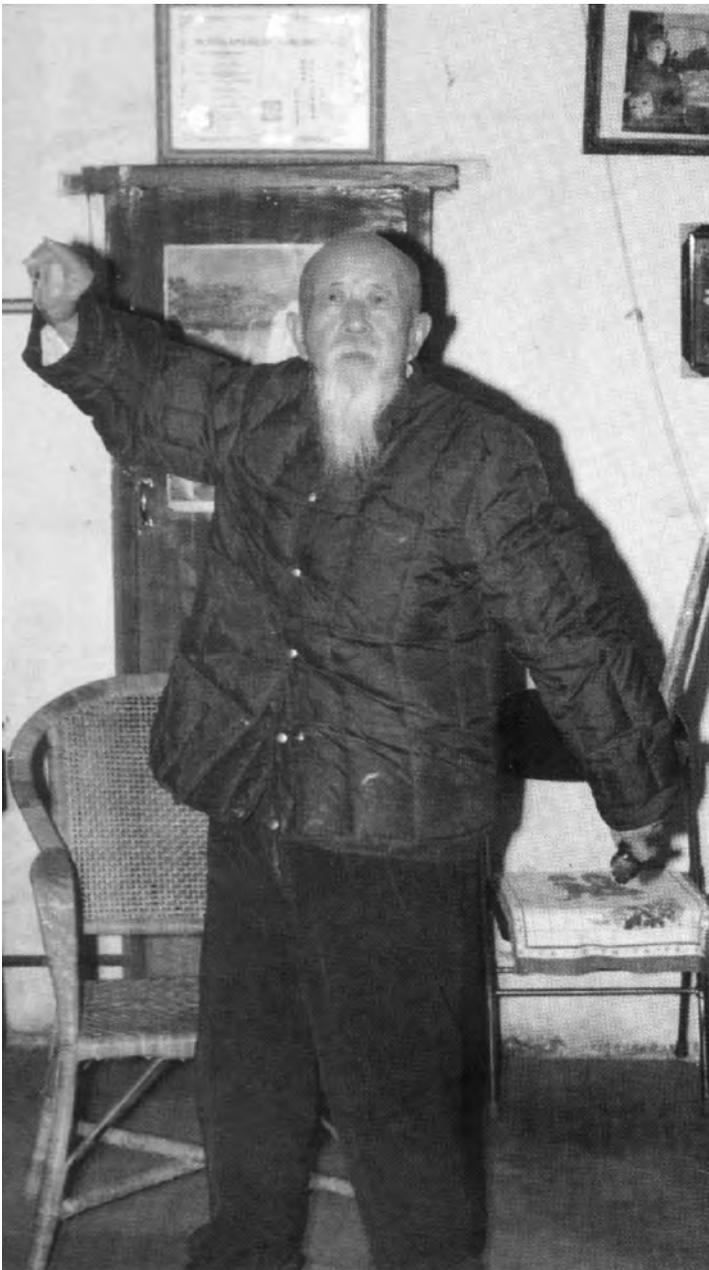
progressive manner so that they are easily grasped. The reason I feel it is more complete is that the system is comprised of more clearly different levels of training and different types of exercises than any of the others that I had previously studied.

Fundamental Skills

(Ba Gua Ji Ben Gong - 八卦基本功)

The system starts with a set of fundamental training exercises. We call them "warm-ups," but they are far more than a routine designed to simply stretch and loosen the body. These exercises are a comprehensive series of movements that condition the hands (striking various parts of the body with the hand), loosen all of the joints of the body, stretch out all of the muscles, and improve balance, coordination, and overall agility. Some of the body striking serves to loosen different parts of the body by hitting specific acupuncture points that serve to open that particular part of the body (for example the hip or the shoulder joint). Then subsequent exercises involve more focused movement in those specific areas so that in the end the whole body is extremely limber and supple. The basic "warm-ups" are followed by exercises which are more specific to actual fighting applications of the system. While striking the points, rotating the joints and loosening the body, we are also developing a tendency of the body to generate the force up through the body, starting in the feet and finally out the hands. This power is manifest in a very loose, natural manner, which is the way you would have to use it when applying this particular style of Ba Gua in a spontaneous defensive situation.

These exercises provide a deeper and broader understanding of the Ba Gua power base and are essential in achieving a higher level of performance in the shortest possible time.



Li Zi Ming poses in his home in Beijing in front of the certificate appointing him as the head Ba Gua Zhang advisor to the North American Tang Shou Tao Association

The "warm-ups" prepare the body by loosening and softening the joints and then further condition all the parts to work in a concerted sequence as one movement to direct the force from the feet to the hands. We then proceed to very specific movements which have precise martial applications and provide insights to techniques that appear later in the forms. Almost all of

our warm-up exercises have some martial application, however, some are more abstract than others.

In going through one full session it is not difficult to see how the practice of these exercises leads to very realistic application of the martial technique. All of the slapping and striking of the hands on the body, arms, legs, and on each other, serve to condition the edges of the hand and the palm because those are the same striking surfaces we will be using to hit the opponent. So in many of the exercises we strike our own body in various places to develop the timing and actual striking surfaces and thus we tend not to use bags, punching boards or any of that kind of thing.

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Following the basic loosening exercises, which include striking and kicking, we progress to a series of exercise sets, containing three or four complex movements in each set, which work from a simple to a more complex level of performance. Each set uses the same line of movement in the body and the same type of whipping of the body, or coiling of the body, or bracing of the body for a particular kind of strike and development of a particular type of power. There will usually be three or four exercises in a sequence and they build one upon the other so that one can see the foundation and how there is a systematic progression from one technique to the next. It is the same kind of power, or same kind of body movement, which generates the force in each exercise in a given set. After several of these sets, which include lateral movements, frontal movements, frontal to lateral, and lateral to frontal types of strategies we later take that kind of flowing connected motion and application of power into the forms themselves. These exercises provide a deeper and broader understanding of the Ba Gua power base and are essential in achieving a higher level of performance in the shortest possible time.

**Circle Walking Nei Gong
(Ding Shi Ba Zhang - 定式八掌)**

After refining the warm-up drills and power development exercises as described above, we move on to circle walking exercises. Some of these are just simple ways of stepping and moving on a circle to



Li Zi Ming showing students how the Ba Gua Zhang sword techniques can be used against a spear

build leg strength and balance. This leads to the fixed posture walking, or the Ba Gua nei gong (内功) eight postures (also called Ding Shi Ba Zhang). These particular exercises form a foundation of moving in a circular manner and holding the upper body in a fixed posture while the lower body continuously moves. The purpose of holding the upper body is to open the tendon-muscular meridians of the back and the sides so that the flexibility of the body increases and enables one to move quickly from one of these postures to the next as well as to other postures from the “old eight palms” and Li’s “dragon palms” and other forms in the system. The practitioner learns how to change from one strategy to the next very quickly to adjust to the moves of the opponent.



Vince Black executes a throwing technique from the "Old Eight Palms" form on his student Chris Quayle

**The Old Eight Palms
(Lao Ba Zhang - 老八掌)**

After opening the body and achieving a stable foundation through the practice of the warm-up exercises and the *nei gong* palms practice, we go to practice the "old eight palms" form. This form starts to integrate the upper body changes. In the *nei gong* palms we hold the upper body static in fixed postures to "open it up" while developing stability in the lower body and power in the waist from the stepping and leg movement. Execution of the "old eight palms" adds the upper body movements which then results in whole body changes. These eight changes are basic in design, however they have sequences and combinations of fighting strategies woven into them that may not be apparent to the casual observer. In the "old eight palms" practice, the linear movements of the warm-up exercises tie in with the *nei gong* palms and start to become a whole body strategy or whole body technique on a circular format. So we first study the straight line movements of the warm-up exercises and then execute the circular movements of the *nei gong* palms

and then start to combine all of these things on a circular format where the body is beginning to execute more complex martial strategies.

**Ba Gua Continuous Linking Palm
(Ba Gua Lian Huan Zhang - 八卦連環掌)**

After working with the "old eight palms" to the point where the practitioner is somewhat proficient, we add some other intermediate forms, such as *lian huan* (continuously linked) Ba Gua Zhang, which is a particular series of exercises that combine high and low attacks, left and right attacks, forward and backward attacks, moving upward attacks and coming over the top attacks. We string all of these things together very smoothly so that people can use these links, like master links in a chain, to break off from one strategy and smoothly flow into another. Direction, application, and strategy change according to the opponent's actions. On developing our grappling aspect, of which Li was always enthusiastic to demonstrate, we introduce students to the basic premise of lock and throw with a two person drill known as "chain of hands," six links or eight links. This exercise develops direction of stepping, weight shifting, and the fine points of the locks themselves to build proper response patterns for inside fighting.

**Elbow Training
(Ji Ben Zhou Fa - 基本肘法)**

After the *lian huan ba gua zhang* we then go to forms such as "thirteen elbows" which offer some training and possibilities when applying Ba Gua at an elbow striking range. This training uses linear as well as circular movements to achieve a practical understanding of the inside fighting scenario. Training also includes tactics of moving in to and out of the close range positions. After the student learns how to perform and apply the elbow striking form, we then teach the 64 linear postures.

The 64 Linear Postures

The 64 postures of the linear system came to us through Guo Gu Min, who was one of Li Zi Ming's senior brothers in Liang Zhen Pu's Ba Gua. These attacks are very specific in strategy within the details of the hand positions, locks, throws, breaks, and point attacks. These attacks are sequenced in logical patterns of progression that predict an opponent's move if he were able to escape the first move. In other words, each move of the sequence is a counter to an opponent's escape from the previous move. We learn to stay on the opponent in a very aggressive manner so that we never give the opponent a chance or an opening after we initiate our first attack. The 64 postures are

in sequences of this manner. They can be practiced against each other and recombined in other similar two-person practice.

The Dragon Palm **(Ba Gua Long Xing Zhang - 八卦龍形掌)**

Following the sequence of the 64 postures, we then go to the complex and comprehensive forms such as Li Zi Ming's dragon palm. The dragon palm combines elements of all of the other forms onto the circular format. It is a quite extensive form which combines the greater percentage of the whole system into one complete format. While this form has a quality all of its own, it also takes everything back to the flavor first experienced in the warm-up exercises.

We also have numerous two-person practice sets in Li Zi Ming Ba Gua that one will practice to varying degrees of intensity depending on your skill and your partner's skill and amount of time you've worked together. We begin by walking very casually through movements in a soft style manner where we move through different types of locks and positioning ourselves for different kinds of throws. It is kind of like a Ba Gua push hands exercise, but it is more than push hands because it is more free form. There is not a limited list of locks, throws, or techniques. This exercise is without limit as to what you can be practicing. It gives one insights into how to develop subtlety and hide your intention as you set people up for different kinds of tactics.

Ba Gua Weapons

In addition to the solo forms and two-person exercises, we also have weapons sets such as the large Ba Gua broadsword and the large Ba Gua straight sword. While there are very applicable straight sword and broadsword fighting maneuvers one will learn in the execution of these forms, training with these heavy weapons also conditions strengths and strategies applicable to unarmed combat. We use these weapons to provide something like a resistance training or weight training type of method to develop greater strength and more proper connection as we move through the postures.

When compared to the large straight sword movements, the movements of the large broadsword are typically executed with the weapon extended farther away from the body. By having the extended weight outside our own body's reach and having to accommodate that resistance, the grip of the hand gets very strong and the shoulder connection develops. But even beyond that, practice with this weapon gives us a more finite way of focusing on precise foot movements. When we are moving through a form and we have the kind of resistance that this weapon provides, it can simulate someone having a hold on our wrist or arm,

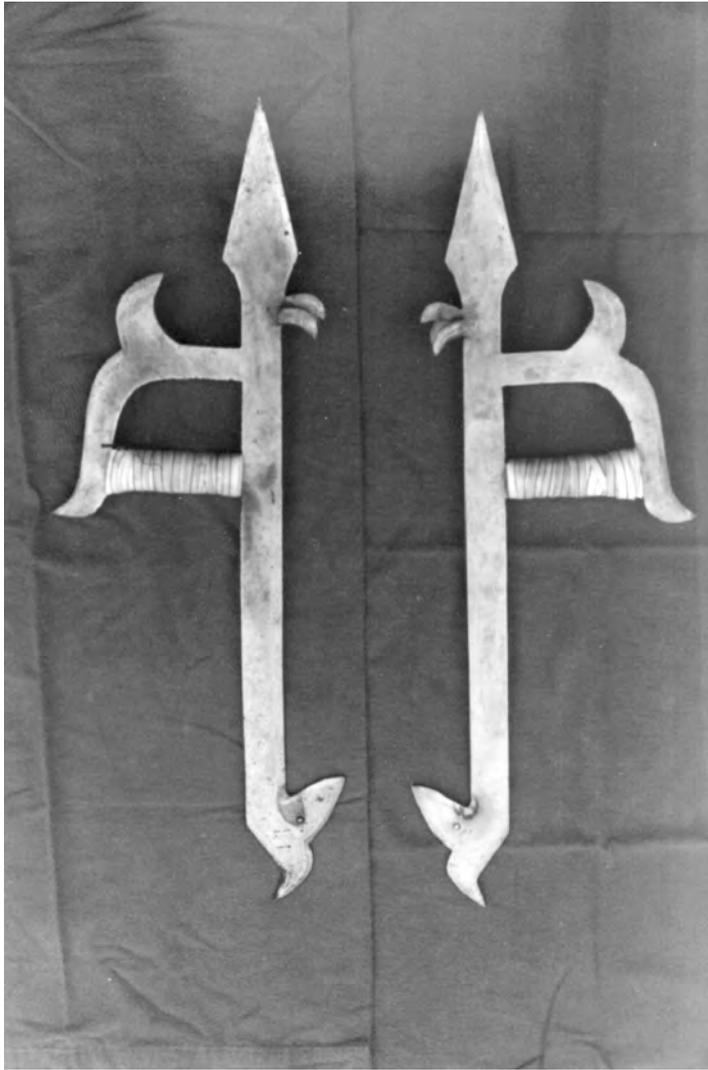
or our holding someone else, and we begin to develop a "feel" for the limits of our own movement, stability, and balance in terms of our body's relationship with our foot position and the position of the opponent. It gives us insight into how to consolidate our whole body movement in regards to our footwork.

Our sword work for the large double edged sword is similar in design. The movements related to the sword are much more "inside" as they work close to your own body and entail more intricate twisting and turning. This set also develops more of a countering nature. In other words, this sword set develops the strengths and strategies of breaking free of an opponent who has grabbed you. When they seize you, you can learn to walk out of their movements and get in a position for counterattack. The sequence of the form dictates that you be conscious of correctly moving clear of the opponent's ability to continuously lock you as you evade. It develops a kind of movement that requires

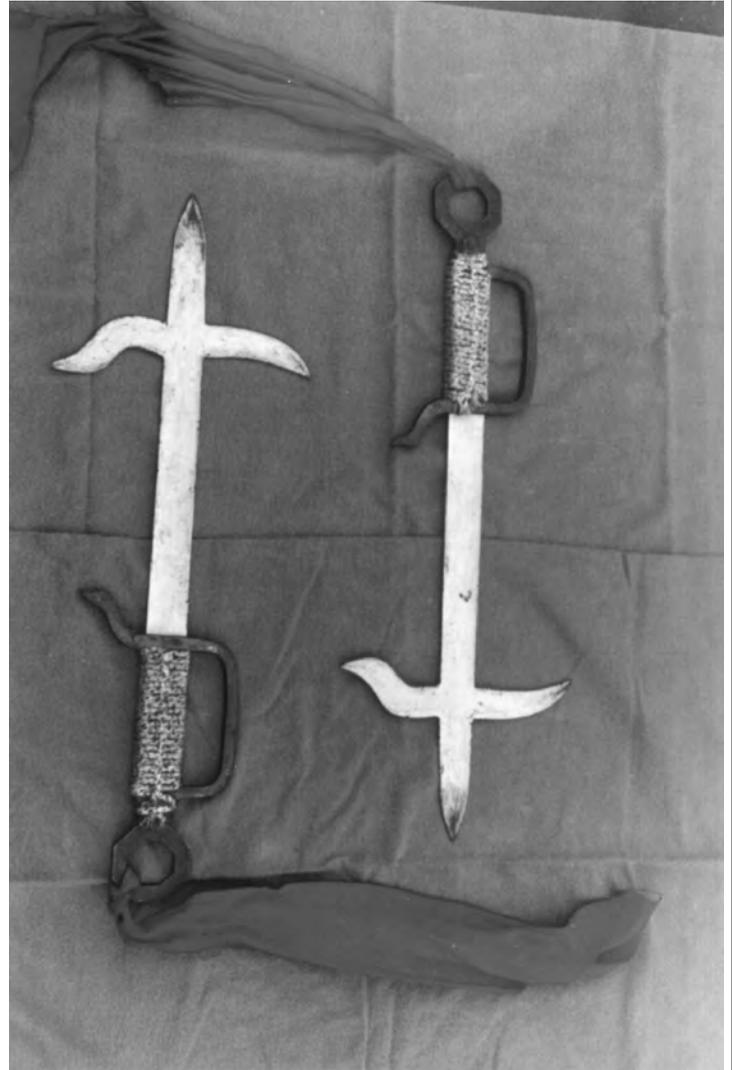


Li Zi Ming Ba Gua practitioner Chris Quayle works with the large Ba Gua Broadsword

Li Zi Ming Style Ba Gua Specialty Weapons



The Rooster Knives



The Chicken Claw Knives

The Rooster Knives and the Chicken Claw Knives are two of the specialty weapons used in Li Zi Ming's Ba Gua. Each system of Ba Gua Zhang has small double knives of this nature, the most popular being the crescent moon swords and the deer horn knives. Small double knives with many cutting edges facing in numerous directions are effectively employed in combination with Ba Gua's tight circling and turning motions.

you to be mindful of where your body is in relation to the blade because you have to walk in and around the blade as you move throughout the form. Since you also are required to control this heavy blade in a precise manner during execution of the form, the form develops your wrist strength to a great degree.

There are many more exotic weapons in Li style Ba Gua both long and short, double and single. However, the most distinctive and practical are the double knives we refer to as the "rooster knives" and an adaptation of them called the "chicken claw knives." The rooster knives have an interesting history. These knives were basically unknown until someone plundered Dong Hai Chuan's tomb around 1910 and his original knives were stolen and sold in a pawn shop at the antique alley in Beijing. At that time, no one publicly recognized

the weapon or knew how to use them. Later, a man named Chang Jie Miao (常傑淼) identified the weapons and while he couldn't use them himself, he brought them to public notice by writing about them in his book *Yong Zheng Jian Xia Tu* (雍正劍俠圖), a book about a Qing dynasty sword hero. While he didn't mention Dong's name, he referred to his weapon as the *Zi Mu Ji Zhao Yuan Yang Yue* (子母鷄爪鴛鴦鉞), or "Mother and Son Rooster Claw Paired Axe." Liang Zhen Pu referred to this weapon as a Rooster Claw Yin Yang Blade (鷄爪陰陽鉞 - *Ji Zhao Yin Yang Rui*). The rooster knife was a favorite of Liang Zhen Pu and both he and his student Guo Gu Min had their own variations of this weapon (Guo Gu Min's was the "chicken claw knives") which apply the same basic 24 moves as they were enumerated by Dong Hai Chuan and integrate them in

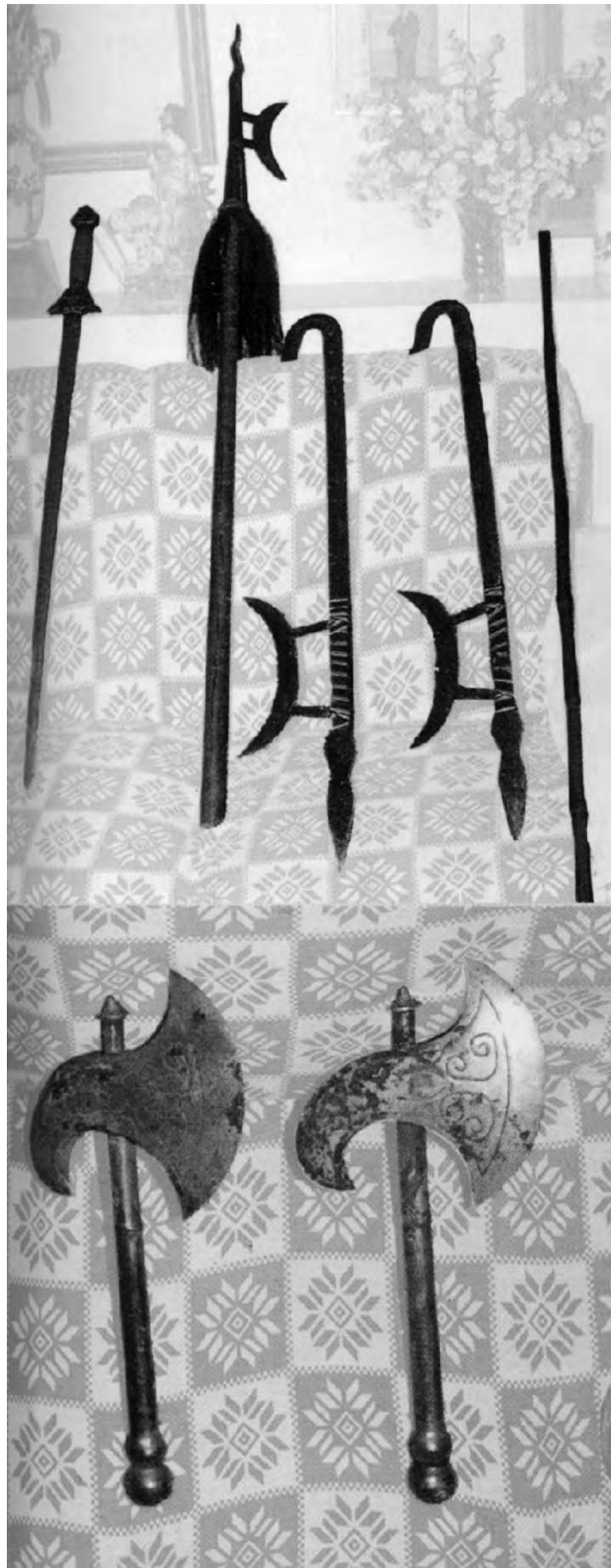
various sequences in the advanced forms.

The rooster knives were developed for fighting and visually one can see that they are very dangerous weapons to wield. They have little spots that were intended to be dipped in poison, they have hooks to draw people in, and numerous cutting edges. Beyond their practicality as fighting weapons, both the rooster knives and the chicken claw knives also train various strengths that are utilized in unarmed combat.

The rooster knives were developed for fighting and visually one can see that they are very dangerous weapons to wield.

The rooster knife is held much like a tonfa, running up the forearm and behind the elbow, and it has many cutting edges, catching edges, hooks, and spear tips that obviously make it a very good inside fighting weapon, but for training purposes it works the triceps and forces you, because of all the sharp edges, to get your arm rotations very correct when you move through your form. The heavy weight of the weapon itself develops strength in the pronating a supinating aspect of the forearms. The grip of the wrist and the fingers and the flipping action executed with the weapon for stabbing with the rear end of it also works the wrist in a back and forth manner and develops punching power because you are extending and flipping around seven or eight pounds of weight. It works to develop the characteristic upward cutting motion of the upper arm and shoulder that is so prevalent in the Liang Zhen Pu style of Ba Gua. You see it when going upward from the bottom and circling over the top and cutting down. It is the action of the triceps and the shoulder rotation together that create this kind of power. The rooster knife, being very heavy, helps you to synchronize all of those joints and then the fact that there are many cutting edges, stabbing edges, and hooks in the weapon itself forces you to be very precise in your footwork and body work, especially since you are wielding two of these weapons at the same time. If you only pay attention to one of these weapons at once it would be very easy for you to hook yourself with the other.

The chicken claw knives, which were Guo Gu Min's favorite weapon, are held more like a regular short knife with a handguard and a small blade hook to catch the opponent's weapon. You also have a tomahawk like head at the end of the sword blade that extends 16 to 18 inches. You have three tips out at the end of the sword so that you can hook, grip, or deflect the opponent's weapon. There are lots of hooking and stabbing actions. This knife works a lot of circular actions with the wrist and thus develops the wrist more than the rooster



Some of the Qing Dynasty Era weapons in Li Zi Ming's weapons collection are shown above



Vince Black poses with the Chicken Claw Knives

knives, which work more of the triceps muscle and elbow joint.

Each of the weapons, while they have very excellent fighting applications, are not that practical in the 20th century in America and in a civilized society, however, they still serve to develop strengths and movements that are characteristic in our style of Ba Gua. While we also have various other fighting weapons in the Li system, I feel that those mentioned above are the important training weapons.

Supplementary Training

In addition to the above mentioned training methods, Li Zi Ming also had some special supplementary training that was given to students on a individual basis. For instance, Li had an “iron palm” method, however, he did not teach it to many people. This is not because it was secret or because it was only reserved for his top students. It was because Li did not strongly advocate this practice and therefore only taught it to those he felt needed it to overcome some training barrier. Li felt, as did many of my other teachers, that “iron palm” was not a necessary practice for the internal martial artist. The abilities that one attains

in “iron palm” training can be developed naturally in the regular training process. A strong resilient body and powerful palm strike can be achieved simply by executing your internal boxing properly. Li gave me his “iron palm” herbal formula and his training method, letting me copy his personal notebook as he had copied it from his teacher before him, so that I could teach students who needed such training. However, like Li Zi Ming and my other teachers, I do not emphasize this method because that kind of training is not necessary in internal boxing.

Li Zi Ming also thought that practicing the Ba Gua system itself was sufficient to developing skills that supplemental *qi gong* (氣功) practice might develop, however, when we discussed *qi gong* he did offer several different types of seated and standing *qi gong* that one might practice. He and his wife practiced a few simple *qi gong* exercises. He did not feel that it was important to have lots of different *qi gong* exercises but rather to practice consistently was absolutely crucial. He advised to do *qi gong* in the morning and to wash the mouth with salty water prior to commencing the exercise.

Vince Black teaches Li Zi Ming style Ba Gua Zhang at his school in Tucson, Arizona and in seminars at various locations throughout the country. For more information about his Ba Gua Zhang program see the listing on the back page of this issue for his address and phone number.



Vince Black poses with the Rooster Knives