

Liangong in 18 Forms – Massage in Motion

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The Journal of Traditional Eastern Health & Fitness (Summer 2002)

For centuries martial artists have known that their forms and training regimes help relieve stress and provide medicine through movement. Central to many disciplines both internal and external are health exercises for developing both strength and qi. However, what's still lacking is scientific evidence to support the many benefits of such exercises or scientific testing which focuses on the precise development of specific exercises to combat more modern forms of stress.

Beginning in the 1960's, Dr. Zhuang Yuan Ming (1919 -), a prominent Doctor of Traumatology (a Traditional Branch of Oriental Medicine that focuses on healing external and internal discomfort and stress) and a top student of the famous wushu (kung fu) master, Wang Zhiping, began developing a set of exercises which became known as Liangong in 18 forms. The original 18 exercises (now there are 54) focused on combating and overcoming acute pain and stress in the neck, shoulders, back, legs, joints and connective tissue. Liangong's roots are based in traditional Chinese qigong and wushu. While it may be relatively new in America, Liangong has garnered an international audience, with the largest body of practitioners outside China residing in Japan. But what do the Japanese and other martial arts practitioners world-wide see in the practice of Liangong in 18 forms?

While the development of Liangong may officially have begun during the 1960's, Dr. Zhuang's curiosity for health and healing began over 25 years prior as a student of the legendary Wang Zhiping. Using exercises he studied with Wang, known as the "20 Exercises", and the ancient exercises of Daoyin (Breathing Exercise), Baduanjing (Eight Pieces of Brocade), and Yinjinjing (Muscle Change Classic), Zhuang tested all these exercises in a prominent Shanghai hospital on patients with a variety of stress related conditions to determine how effective these exercises were clinically, and what modifications, if any, could be made to bring about more favourable results in the treatment of stress related problems and diseases.

As a student of Wang, Dr. Zhuang saw his teacher use a variety of massage techniques and exercises to heal a variety of afflictions. Wang may have had a reputation as a tough, no nonsense guy, but Zhuang relates how Wang was probably more fixated with health and healing than with dismantling someone.

By 1974, Dr. Zhuang unveiled Liangong in 18 Exercises to the public in Shanghai. A quarter of a century later, Dr. Zhuang with his son, Zhuang Jian Shen, have expanded the original 18 exercise to 54 (from one set of 18 to 3 sets of 18), and are responsible for spreading Liangong's influence world-wide. Sports enthusiasts, as well as martial artists and those suffering with stress related conditions as well as debilitating, life threatening conditions, have benefited from Liangong's specific stress release exercises.

However, what makes Liangong in 18 forms so therapeutic exactly, and why it has become one of the most popular health exercises in Japan, Asia, and gaining more popularity world-wide?

In this article, based on exclusive interviews with Dr. Zhuang Yuan Ming and his son, Zhuang Jian Shen, as well as information derived from their publications and studies they have conducted, the two speak freely about Liangong's development, the intricate practice methods of Liangong, and the future of this captivating system of health exercises.

Liangong's Development

Dr. Zhuang Yuan Ming first became involved with therapeutic health exercises during the 1950's while studying with the legendary, Wang Zhiping. Dr. Zhuang paints an entirely different picture of the legendary Wang, as depicted by Deng Ming Dao in his popular book, *Gateway to a Vast World*. According to Dr. Zhuang, Wang Zhiping was a tough, no-nonsense martial artist, as Deng suggests. However, Dr. Zhuang witnessed a more sensitive side of Wang, committed to applying the many healing benefits of traditional practice.

By many accounts, Wang Zhiping was a legendary wushu master and was adept at traditional Chinese medicine, tuina, and massage. Dr. Zhuang relates how Wang's twenty exercises were not only a blue print for strengthening muscles, but had an almost miraculous effect on relieving suffering associated with pains in the neck, shoulders, waist, and legs. Dr. Zhuang became as much interested in the exercises and manipulation of muscles and bones to optimize health, as he did in the practice of Wang's Lost Track fist style of wushu (a synthesis of Long Fist, Five Animals, and the internal arts of Xingyiquan, Baguazhang, and Taijiquan).

Under Wang Zhiping's direction, a young Zhuang Yuan Ming blossomed and grew into a strong martial artist and healer. According to D. Zhuang, Wang was big on each of his students being called at a moment's notice to "defend the school" in an all out brawl, heal a person injured severely (even with broken bones), or demonstrate an incredible feat.

Wang Zhiping taught a young Zhuang Yuan Ming a miraculous feat called, the "Flag". This became Zhuang's signature form, that he would be called upon at a moment's notice to demonstrate, or to teach to younger prospective students. "The Flag" consists of the practitioner lying on their side flat on the ground next to a flag pole, gripping the pole, and quickly ascending the pole with legs extended out horizontally, and then holding their legs out horizontally like a flag until called down. Once called down, the practitioner quickly descended the pole with legs continually outstretched horizontally as well.

According to Zhuang, it was the demands of the teacher Wang that made him demand more out of himself. As agonizing as "The Flag" exercise was for a young Zhuang in the beginning, Dr. Zhuang persisted because the teacher, and the camaraderie of his fellow students, challenged him to do it. Wang demonstrated to Zhuang his ability to do it with such great flexibility and ease, and questioned why a younger man, like Zhuang, half his age couldn't do it.

Zhuang persisted in the practice and in 1953 he was recognized publicly and awarded a gold medal for the most outstanding single demonstration at both the Shanghai Area Preliminaries held in the Hong Kou Stadium in Shanghai and the First Eastern China National Sports Competition held later that year in the city of Tianjin. The first of its type of competition and exhibition after the 1949 conflict. Both Zhuang and the team assembled by Wang Zhiping were recognized as the most outstanding at both events.

Zhuang's demonstration was one of many that the team did including demonstrating wushu forms and free fighting. According to Zhuang, Wang's high standards helped their team surpass all other teams. As a healer and a martial artist, Wang's expectations achieved magnificent results. These expectations challenged all of the students equally, challenging themselves and each other to go beyond what they, on the surface, thought that they were capable of doing.

It was a commitment to going beyond that spurred Dr. Zhuang, he feels, to go beyond the exercises that he was introduced to by Wang Zhiping, and develop Liangong in 18 forms. "I wanted the exercises to benefit more people than just martial artists. So when I was afforded the opportunity to develop and test Liangong in 18 forms at the Don Chan Hospital in Shanghai, I kept an open mind about my preconceptions of what would or would not work. I was confident that exercise would be effective in the healing process, but was unsure as to what degree or effect exercise would have. I wanted to move beyond a one size fits all concept. I knew what had worked in my experience. Both as a receiver of the healing benefits of exercise, and a giver of hands on healing methods. My goal wasn't really to create a new set of exercises, as much as it was to fine tune my knowledge. That's why it was important to keep specific records of what had worked and what didn't. Then regularly a variety of modifications were added to the traditional exercises to determine what would actually lead to more feeling or complete alleviation of a problem."

During the infant stages of Liangong's development, Zhuang became fascinated with ancient drawings, that had recently been unearthed from Han Dynasty tombs on the outskirts of Changsha, Hunan Province by archaeologists. These silk scroll figure drawings were of exercises known as Daoyin (or, breathing exercises). One of the first things Dr. Zhuang noticed was the similarity between these ancient drawings and the "20 Exercises" he had studied with Wang Zhiping.

Other useful concepts that influenced Dr. Zhuang during this period in Liangong's development were drawings contained in classic texts covering various ancient exercises known as Yinjinjing (Muscle Change Classic), Wuxinxi (Five Animal Play), Baduanjing (Eight Brocades), and traditional massage methods. These pictographs also peaked Zhuang's interest, and he infused the movements and healing concepts from these disciplines as well. All the while assessing, modifying, and determining how much more effective exercise would be in providing both immediate and long term relief from injury and stress.

Massage Through Movement

Dr. Zhuang has used the postures of the exercises themselves as positions for massage, and to gently apply pressure to manipulate the patient's target area. However, through the years of testing, Dr. Zhuang has become more and more convinced that Liangong's effects are longer lasting when the practitioner moves their own body by them self. As the practitioner practices the form they themselves benefit from the process as well as what each exercise does for them.

Zhuang Jian Shen, Dr. Zhuang's son and inheritor of his father's healing arts and practice, says that when a practitioner is able to develop their own skill and heal them self, they are both mentally and physically stronger. Students, who may have once been a patient, once trained correctly in the complete application and methods of Liangong are then able to lay hands on to heal. Hands on healing doesn't necessarily mean massage, but by correcting the postures of students, they are able to help other practitioners optimize their movements for greater benefit.

Liangong in 18 forms is an exercise that is, in itself, a self massage through movement. In the development of Liangong, Dr. Zhuang not only introduced methods of self massage in the practice, but throughout the various movements of the exercise he incorporated eight points of Chinese traditional massage that was transmitted to him from Wang Zhiping. These eight points are as follows: pushing, seizing, pressing, rubbing, rolling, kneading, scarping, and slapping.

Traditional Chinese health massage trains the practitioner in both digital and palmer pushing. For example, digital pushing incorporates the use of the thumb or a finger to hone in on a specific point, while palmer pushing promotes blood circulation by pressing an area or a body part and pushing the muscle or region in one direction. According to Dr. Zhuang, the Liangong exercises themselves utilize both digital and palmer pushing. In the second and third series there is acu-meridian and acu-point massage applied to the face, hands, and torso utilising digital pushing mostly with the middle finger, and also the fingernails, the thumbs, and the whole hand.

Seizing is strong stimulation characterized by holding a particular area of the body emphasizing continuous gentle and continuous force, progressing from light to heavy. It's often used in traditional Chinese massage to eliminate pain associated with hypertension, spasms, or cold or aching muscles. In Liangong, some of the movements in all three series involve holding certain postures in an initial warmer, then turning into an area to squeeze muscles or groups of muscles, thereby wringing out stress from them.

Pressing is similar to digital pushing but involves holding the penetration or twisting to cause penetration. Pressing is a significant technique used in some of the series two self massage techniques and in the series three, yi qigong. Pressing is not the same as kneading. Pressing involves a holding of pressure or a twisting like a screw while kneading involves a back and forth pressing synthesized with a gathering up of muscles.

Rubbing involves long motion covering the entire arm for example or the entire leg. However, rubbing can move from left to right or up and down. One of the best examples of rubbing in Liangong is exercise five, in which the front of the body is massaged from the base of the throat down to the lower abdomen with the thumb, and then the heel of the hand is pressed outward on the lower abdomen, then the palm is used to massage the ribs.

If you hold the distal part of the joint with one hand and the proximal point with the other and gently rotate you would be using the technique identified as rolling. Liangong has many exercises in which the neck, shoulders, waist and hips are carefully rotated. Dr. Zhuang points out that many of the exercises he developed do not advocate looking down too often without providing proper neck support.

Support may come in the form of the upper arms squeezing inwards at the ears when bending over, or keeping the neck turned up when bending at the waist to the ground. His research has concluded that bending over and letting the neck freely suspend is stressful to the neck and ultimately on the spinal cord.

Kneading in Liangong is more prevalent in the series three, or yi qigong. Kneading, as previously discussed involves a back and forth pressing, synthesized with a gathering up of the muscles.

Interestingly enough though, Liangong utilizes movement and the turning of the joints in a broad manner to produce an effect similar to kneading on the body.

Scraping involves using the edge of the hand or the fingernails to gently massage directly into the tissue or the muscles. In the second series of Liangong, I was surprised to learn from Dr. Zhuang just how much the fingernails are used to scrape the tissue or the skin. The effect is so popular that it is the current trend in legitimate massage clinics and day spas all over the city of Shanghai.

Slapping involves being the fingers together or making a loosely clenched fist to strike the body at specific points in a gentle, firm, and rhythmic manner. In the third series of Liangong the technique of slapping in posture 9 to lightly but firmly strike the zhongfu point with one fist and the gongyu point on the back with the other.

The application of massage both through movement as well as in the practice of self massage in Liangong, reminded me of water massage techniques such as Wasu. While massage in water uses the gentle, powerful force of water to aid in applying pressure through resistance specifically, Liangong uses the specific postures themselves to create a resistance and apply what Dr. Zhuang refers to as internal force. This naturally persistent, yet calm application of force is what makes Liangong an unique “massage in motion”.

Liangong’s Unique Method of Practice

According to Dr. Zhuang, it’s important to practice Liangong in 18 forms correctly and specifically. As in the practice of many Chinese martial arts the practice needs to be specific and correct, and Liangong is certainly no exception. In fact, what I have learned from him is completely different and unique from what I have ever been exposed to before. Moreover, the method of breathing and stretching in Liangong is certainly different from what may be taught in the study of traditional wushu or taijiquan for example.

Accordingly, the movement’s shouldn’t be done in a “comfortable and easy way” necessarily. Instead, when the movements are done correctly, the practitioner will sense soreness and warmth as if receiving deep, penetrating massage. Adverse to what I had known before, concerning health exercise (was that you relax initially, then tighten as you turn into a position), the movements in Liangong tend to have a tightness or locking up of certain joints at the beginning of each exercise. Then, with an ample amount of oxygen, the exercise is executed, and the body is relaxed during the stretching time as the students turns into a position to apply pressure on a particular point, meridian, or muscle group.

According to Dr. Zhuang, special attention was given to all major groups of bones and muscles and joints of limbs in the development of Liangong. The back, especially the lower back, received great consideration. For instance, in the exercise, known as “Take a Bow Step and Thrust Palm,” the practitioner steps out into a bow stance, then thrusts the opposite hand forward from the waist, slightly upward on an angle. Then the back is slowly arched, as the hand reaches forward more. Arching the back (not twisting it) strengthens the muscles of the low back to help ward off or relieve aches or stress, and helps develop more strength; especially for the martial artist interested in strengthening their kicking or sweeping potential.

This careful development has helped many practitioners strengthen and utilize their joints, and bring more of an awareness to the practitioner of how the joints need to be more fully activated in order that stress, especially deeply held stress, can be released and managed.

When the movements are practiced correctly, the practitioner should sense an internal force or resistance. This does not mean that internal force is confined to a psychological process only, or that something is done with a lack of force. Rather, specific movements are able to isolate certain joints or target areas, and when accompanied by slow, deliberate motion can be more exact. The character of internal force comes when the practitioner is able to isolate their joints and use natural forces such as gravity and momentum to exercise or release stress from their joints.

That's why, according to Dr. Zhuang, why the theory of massage plays an important role in how Liangong is practiced. Traditional Chinese massage holds that the key element in massage begins with the various manipulations of specific aspects or parts of the body. Manipulation must be gentle, even, forceful and persistent, so as to achieve a penetrating action. This penetrating effect is what the practitioner should feel as a reaction to the practice of Liangong, in other words, "a good sore."

In Dr. Zhuang's research a muscle is made up of many contractible fibres. There are many nerve endings in the muscles; those controlling the contraction of the muscles are called motor nerve endings, each of which controls 100 to 300 muscular fibres. Each nerve ending and the muscular fibres it controls make a motor unit, and there are many motor units in a muscle, which are not all in a state of excitation and contraction at a given time. With a change of movement, these two types of motor units change too. The contracted fibres become shortened while the relaxed fibres lengthen.

This is why at the beginning of each of the postures there may be a tightness exerted by the practitioner, followed by a preparatory movement added while maintaining some of the tightness or force. Then the practitioner turns into an isolated area to apply pressure on this given area. That which is locked in then relaxed, to enable a more beneficial stretch during a twist or turn, or to create a more stable position to turn or move into. Ultimately creating a climate for change among participating nerve fibres, and releasing stress at specific points.

Correct breathing is also extremely important. But as outlined in his books when in doubt breath naturally and never hold the breath. However, he advocates when the student is able to, inhaling in the first movement (which is often a tight time), and exhaling when moving into the target area (usually the more relaxed time) is the most optimum. Furthermore, Dr. Zhuang recommends lifting the chest cavity when inhaling and exhaling from the lower abdomen throughout most of the movements of all three series.

This lifting of the chest cavity keeps a constant stimulation on the internal organs, which in turn creates a natural resistance. Dr. Zhuang compares this natural resistance to much the way water creates buoyancy and can be applied for deep penetration in water massage. Furthermore, Dr. Zhuang feels practicing outdoors early in the morning in the fresh air is viable and will naturally make warmth and comfort positive modalities that can further optimize the therapeutic success of Liangong.

When practicing, Dr. Zhuang says that the range of movements are also important to Liangong's success. The larger the movements from the joints and limbs, the more beneficial the results. However, the parts of the body that remain still so as to isolate specific joints, joints, connective tissue, or muscle groups must be strictly adhered to or the parts that emphasize the movement will be wasted. Furthermore, such unfocused exercise would ignore the scientific development and testing, which is the basis of Liangong's existence.

Like martial arts practice, patience and perseverance are important in Liangong. Dr. Zhuang advocates practicing at regular hours on a daily basis. According to Dr. Zhuang, sports practitioners who are aware of the benefits of Liangong, often utilises the exercises to effectively warm up the body before beginning a competition or intensive training. Dr. Zhuang has overseen the effective application of Liangong for stress reduction in the workplace both in China and Japan. While Liangong has been applied effectively in the workplace, Dr. Zhuang's observation of Liangong for stress reduction or to overcome injuries have as many differences as there are similarities.

While the practice of Liangong can show immediate effects in stress reduction, injuries can take a long period of time to heal, and it is perseverance that helps the injured move towards alleviating the problem and returning to their everyday life. Likewise, while stress relief may be an immediate by-product of practice, stress will continue to recur until the exercises are practiced more regularly. Furthermore, while Liangong can be an effective supplement to comprehensive medical treatment, the effect of Liangong depends on each patient's desire to completely restore bodily functions.

Liangong's popularity is growing world-wide. Every other year, for the past eight years, Liangong organizations internationally have come together for an international exchange. Novices as well as long time practitioners of Liangong are invited to attend, observe, or participate in various events.

The annual convention consists of demonstrations of a wide variety of cultural arts that often include an opening ceremony, a competition which focuses on precision of movement as well as health benefits from practice, and an international closing party that features a wide array of cultural flavour. All in all, most participants come to have a deeper understanding of the true, specific practice of Liangong, and the opportunity to make new international friends.

In the future, Dr. Zhuang feels that more rigorous testing is needed. Since he first started his research more than 30 years ago, he and many others have become more aware of the infinite applications exercise has in treating stress and injury. The future of Liangong, according to Dr. Zhuang, lies in the process of the practitioner them self realising the infinite power the body and mind have, and a constant reflection on the effectiveness and application of research as a vehicle for self healing.