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SCOTT RODELL

The Modern Cutting Edge of Ancient Chinese Arts

BY RUEBEN MARLEY

've been lucky enough to share a couple of hours, talking to a world-class kung-fu master. He's also a globally recognized expert who specializes in the study of traditional Chinese swords. He's the Center Director of the Great River Taoist Center (GRTC), which has been providing all manner of martial arts training to students living in the greater Washington D.C. area for nearly 30 years. There are five other GRTC centers around the world, from San Francisco to Russia. He has spent a very impressive proportion of his life traveling to countries around the world, to teach, and to be taught, by martial artists from all walks of life. He's also got about 20 years of Taijiquan experience under legendary masters Wang Yen-nien, T.T. Liang, and William C.C. Chen.

And where music is concerned, he's a big fan of The Ramones, which for me, instantly brought everything full circle, and into perspective. After all, most of us can't say that we are skilled swordsmen, but almost everyone can hum a few bars from, "I Wanna Be Sedated."

Contrary to what many people think, Scott Rodell doesn't adhere to the imaginary Hollywood-movie kung-fu master's daily schedule of rising before daybreak, so that he can perform his forms atop a craggy cliff. He's way too busy for that stuff, given his lifelong pursuit of knowledge. He's on a mission, and his life's goals have not quite been realized yet. As a father, he enthusiastically supports his son's martial arts training, and attends intense foil and epee fencing matches to cheer his young prodigy on. He explores other related forms of martial arts, like Manchu archery, in his spare time. He's also in search of the best manufacturer of the Chinese *jian* - the traditional sword from the Tang and Song Dynasties - and he's still not satisfied with what he's found. Here's an excerpt from our conversation, about his quest for a Chinese-made blade that cuts the mustard.

These days everybody wants to be a teacher. Nobody wants to be a student any more. Scott pauses for the briefest of moments, to convey the gravity of the situation, as he expresses his frustration at the lost art of crafting practical, historically accurate, and effective swords in China. When I asked why this is the case, he continued by telling me that one of the biggest problems in the world today is that sometimes people just become way too successful in light of their endeavors, robbing the whole experience of any discipline or passion that was the reason for the journey in the first place. Scott recalls a teacher he once had who shared insight that remains with him to this day. How can you call yourself a teacher, unless you're at least 50 years old? You haven't even lived half your life and you're trying to teach something before then? He laughs, and continues making his point by asking me if I would rather learn piano from a teacher who spent six weeks doing intensive training, or from somebody who spent years training at Juilliard. For me, it's a no-brainer: I want the best. Of course, I'm not dealing with something requiring the kind of focus swords do, but as a devotee of high-caliber kitchen cutlery, I can appreciate what he's trying to say. When it comes down to it: quality counts.

There's actually one major problem in the world of martial arts today, continues Scott, and because of it, it's very hard to stamp out inconsistencies. The phenomenon of Saturday morning cartoons as history lessons prevails, and has erroneously shaped our notion of what life was like for the ancients, which can be pretty funny if you think about it. Swords and sword fighting have been a part of modern-day entertainment ever since the moving picture became fashionable; and ever since then, there have been some

'He explores other related forms of martial arts, like Manchu archery, in his spare time. He's also in search of the best manufacturer of the Chinese *jian*.'

terribly uninformed people directing the action. For someone who is serious about learning it, the sword is not something that should be taken lightly, and Scott lays

the groundwork for me. People fail to understand the ones who came up with this stuff didn't do it because it was fun, or therapeutic. It was a matter of life or death for them. They were under a military structure, and they probably didn't even want to learn any of it, but it was the only way to prevent land takeovers, invasions, and other issues the people of that time had to contend with. So they had to learn it, and it's easy for us to forget that when we're practicing the arts for our own personal pleasure. A lot of people believe that the ancients were all equipped with swords and other weapons, which is ridiculous if you look at it from a realistic point of view. Most Chinese villagers could barely afford to buy clothing during ancient times. Metals were expensive and amassing a cache of swords wasn't economically viable for a village of fishermen or farmers. It's like an average American barely making a living, earning minimum wage, and suddenly buying a customized match-grade target pistol, just so that he can say he has one. Not gonna happen, quips Scott.

So here's my Big Question for Scott: Why Chinese swords? Aren't Japanese swords the only game in town?

Scott laughs and says he could always just give the canned response, saying it was simply fate.





He was always interested in Japanese swords, but while in college, he found an inspirational Taiji teacher who gave him something new to think about as he was introduced to the weapons of Taiji. This sparked a very deep interest in Scott, back in the early 1980's. He was really excited to find out he was learning something not very widely known. It was enough to make him want to become more proficient with the mysteries of the Chinese sword. His hard work eventually paid off, because one of his favorite teachers gave him some advanced training, teaching him dangerous cutting moves with the Chinese sword. It was something he never taught anyone else. I interrupt Scott to ask if his intensity as a student was to credit for the secrets he was taught, but Scott sums up his lifetime of training bluntly, saying he would have gotten far with any other form of martial arts, because it was something he was just going to do with his life, irrespective of the style.

Scott eventually went straight to the source - China - as he wanted a more intimate look into what makes Chinese culture so unique, and to take his practice even further than he could from home. It wasn't always easy, but for Scott, giving up wasn't an option. His personality quickly made him a sort of lonesome stranger who was talking a lot of nonsense about cutting with Chinese swords. At the time, the world's consensus seemed to be that only Japanese swords were effective as cutting weapons, but he continued honing and promoting his skills, until they gained the attention of his peers. He even drew a lot of pointed criticism from Japanese swordsmen who felt his cutting techniques were not worthy,

and that he should just give it up. Scott listened to their feedback. In the end, he developed a technique that cuts as cleanly as any Japanese sword, even while using a one-handed method, and all while wielding a Chinese classical sword! The ensuing eruption in the world of sword and martial arts practitioners made him something of a local hero for the Chinese who were manufacturing blades at the time. It was recognized as a breakthrough in modern swordsmanship, because there weren't any other people doing it at all. However, while Scott's discovery was lauded as a direct challenge to tried-and-true Japanese techniques, he refuses to say one is better than the other. A cut is either a bad one or a good one; life or death.

What's the future of China's sword industry?

There are really only two kinds of swords in the world. In the industry, they're what people in the know call SLO's, or Sword-like Objects. The Chinese are getting a lot better about this, because for the longest time it was just shiny and pretty designs that resembled swords, but you were supposed to just hang on a wall and show off. Those decorative swords are made by looking at a picture, and copying the image, without any practical experience in handling them. All of that is finally changing now, but very slowly. Of course, the customers are really the motivating factor behind what the expected levels of quality will be. If people don't expect good swords, then bad swords will be the result. Fortunately, the

number of sword enthusiasts and experts who are really practicing and learning with the real things is growing rapidly around the world. This is good, because better products in the market will be the ultimate result.

To understand the future, it's important to know the past. Japanese sword making is a process that came from China, and during the Tang Dynasty there were lots of refinements made to this process outside the mainland to adapt to the soil conditions in Japan. There is a more sandy and lower-ore substrate in Japan, which requires a special method to produce steel which can satisfactorily manufacture swords that are combat-worthy. In China, the materials are far superior in terms of ore content in the soil, and the resulting metals made, even during ancient times, was far more resilient and tougher than Japanese swords. Japanese swords tend to be known for breaking under extreme stress, while Chinese swords are known for bending. Scott chimes in, "I don't know about you, but I would rather have a sword bend than break during a fight!"

You can learn more about Scott and the GRTC by visiting: <http://www.grtc.org>

Look for some of Scott's books, to discover more:
 (2008) *A Practical Guide to Test Cutting for Historical Swordsmanship*
 (2003) *Chinese Swordsmanship: The Yang Family Taiji Jian Tradition*
 (1991) *Taiji Notebook for Martial Artists*