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Jiangan: The Chinese Health Wand

Michael Davies
Singing Dragon (August 2011)
Softcover $24.95 (176pp)
978-1-84819-077-1

Jiangan substantiates that old adage about not judging books by their covers. Seriously, who's excited by the image of a bespectacled, white guy with a goofy countenance garbed in traditional Chinese silks, holding a bamboo stick in an awkward-looking position? Well, if you're interested in the health- and fitness-enhancing benefits of one of China's least-known albeit most effective exercise methods, you probably should be. Although it can work well as a stand-alone system, the Chinese health wand exercises described in this book are compatible with, and make a great warm-up for, most other martial arts, soft and hard styles alike.

Even though jiangan was "discovered" by an American, Bruce L. Johnson, in 1945, and ultimately published in a book in 1977, it never became popular in the West. Nevertheless, the movements can help practitioners integrate body and breathing while stretching and strengthening their muscles and simultaneously improving posture, balance, and flexibility. The exercises are low impact, take remarkably little space, and require only a single implement, a simple bamboo rod, cut to the proper length based on the arm-length of the individual.

With regular practice, say twenty to thirty minutes a day, the health and fitness benefits should manifest in short order. As the author relates, "… one month after I began practicing jiangan, the muscles in my middle and lower back were firmer and my knees felt much stronger. Several weeks later I was so much trimmer and leaner that friends asked if had been training in a gym … it can be argued that similar body-shaping results can be obtained from industrious workouts in other more robust types of exercise; the fact remains that it was jiangan, the gentle internal art, that worked."

Founder of White Crane Bamboo Group, Michael Davies began studying tai chi chuan in the 1970s and is currently senior instructor with the Tai Chi Union in Great Britain. His martial proficiency lends authority to his writing, while his tai chi and qigong teaching experience adds lucidity. He is clearly accustomed to explaining these concepts to his students. Using a personable, reader-friendly style backed up by clear figures and illustrations, he communicates the materials effectively enough that one can begin practicing jiangan merely by reading the book. That's quite an accomplishment!

The contents are well organized, covering history of the Chinese health wand, the gan (bamboo pole), philosophy of jiangan, and methodology of the exercises, as well as seventeen practice routines. There is a solid question-and-answer section, a guide to practicing, and several variations, as well as advanced exercises. This information should prove useful for students and teachers of the Chinese martial arts as well as most anyone interested in healthful, low-impact exercises.

LAWRENCE KANE (July 20, 2011)

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