

# Liu Fengcai's Gao-Style Bagua

Although relatively young by martial arts standards, Gao-style bagua zhang is an example of the finest internal traditions

BY JOHN GROSCHWITZ

The art of Gao-style bagua zhang is, in relative terms, a newcomer in the martial arts world. The youngest of the major bagua lineages, it reached its final stages of cohesion and systematization only in the 1920s. Yet this art's youth belies both its practical refinement and theoretical sophistication. The complete Gao system incorporates not only the traditional bagua weapons, moving post standing, "pre-heaven" circular palms and eight animal forms, but also 64 individual "post-heaven" linear palms and their accompanying two-person forms, known as separating palms. The Gao system evidences the clear influence of Hebei-style hsing-I and traditional shuai chiao, incorporating select aspects of these arts into both its pre- and post-heaven forms. Yet each component of the system is organized to accord fully with the theory of the *Book of Changes*, while still retaining its specific developmental and practical function. A unique synthesis of health-building techniques, practical fighting applications and traditional Daoist theory, Gao-style bagua zhang is an example of the finest internal arts traditions. Despite its growing popularity both in America and abroad, the complete Gao system, as taught by Liu Fengcai's lineage, is rarely seen outside Mainland China. To understand why this is, we must look back to the art's beginnings and early dissemination so that we can see how the art evolved and spread.

## The Origins of Gao-Style Bagua

Born in 1866 in Shandong province, Gao Yisheng began his martial training with the Hong-style boxing taught by his

family. In 1896, at the age of 30, Gao moved to the north where he was defeated in a fight by a bagua practitioner named Zhou Yuxiang. Realizing the unique quality of Zhou's art, he immediately asked to be accepted as Zhou's disciple. Zhou, however, was nearly the same age as Gao and thus refused to accept him as his own disciple. Instead, he introduced Gao to his own teacher,

while also supplementing his training through lessons with Zhou. By the time of Cheng's passing in 1900, Gao had acquired the fundamentals of the art, and began teaching bagua that year.

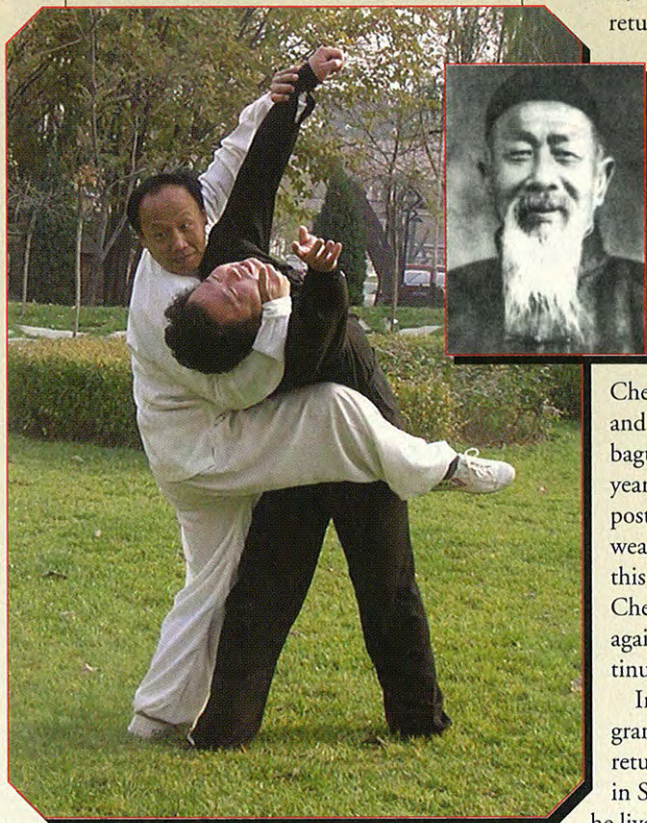
Over the next several years, Gao continued his study with Zhou Yuxiang to further refine his art, and it was during this time that he also met and studied with noted hsing-I practitioner Li Cunyi.

In 1911, at the age of 45, Gao returned to live in his hometown in Shandong province. At this time, the custom in his village was that anyone who had studied martial arts elsewhere and then returned home should test their learning against that of the local practitioners. Gao easily defeated several famous local martial artists, firmly establishing himself as a skilled

Cheng-style bagua practitioner, and subsequently began teaching bagua there. For the next five years, he transmitted the moving posts, pre-heaven palms and weapons forms, yet his art was, at this time, very similar to that of Cheng Tinghua. In 1916, Gao again moved north, where he continued to teach and refine his art.

In 1926, at the request of his grandnephew Liu Fengcai, Gao returned for a second time to live in Shandong. From 1926 to 1936 he lived and taught at Liu's home,

imparting his complete bagua system. The art that he now taught, however, was far different than anyone had seen before. Not only did his pre-heaven circular palms and other forms have a much more distinct style than before, Gao now also taught 64 linear post-heaven palms and accompanying two-person exercises known as separating palms. In addition,



Li Xueyi performs palm change No. 8. (Inset) Gao Yisheng.

Cheng Tinghua, the renowned student of Dong Hai Chuan. Gao was officially accepted as Cheng's disciple and began learning Cheng-style bagua. For three years, Gao traveled to Beijing several times a year to learn directly from Cheng,



Gao had adapted his forms to accord completely with the theory of the *Book of Changes* in several ways. Like other bagua styles, both Gao's pre- and post-heaven palms were arranged according to the Fu Xi and Wen Wang pre- and post-heaven bagua diagrams. Now, however, each of his pre-heaven palms, known as the eight big palms, was comprised of eight moves each, corresponding with the 64 hexagrams, and each of the 64 separating palms was comprised of six movements, corresponding to the 384 individual lines of the 64 hexagrams.

Gao now also taught his students that, "The pre-heaven palms are the basis of the post-heaven palms; the post-heaven palms are the application of the pre-heaven; without the post-heaven palms, bagua zhang has no foundation; without the post-heaven palms, bagua zhang is incomplete."

During these 10 years in Shandong, Gao Yisheng documented his system and its theory, compiling the "Bagua Boxing Manual." First published by Gao in 1936, and re-issued in 1991 (in Chinese) as "The Cheng-School Gao-Style Eight Diagram Boxing Manual," the present version combines Gao's original writings on bagua practice and application with detailed diagrams of both the eight big palms and the 64 post-heaven palms. The book also describes how Gao evolved his bagua into its present form. In his preface to the 1991 edition, Liu Fengcai writes:

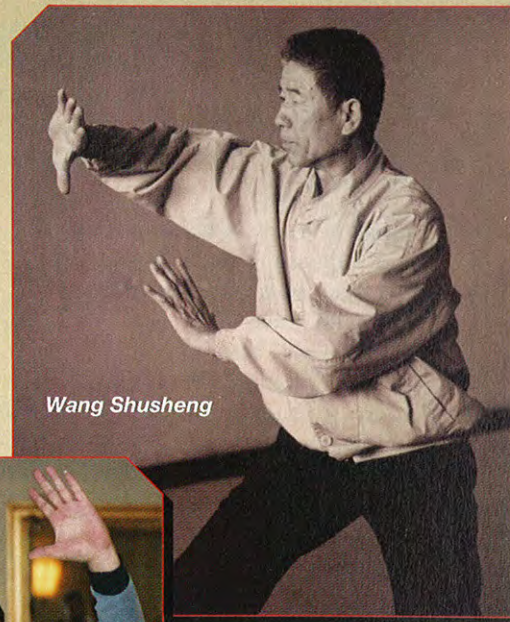
"After Gao returned to Tianjin (in 1936), he once told me that, during the period when he was teaching in Dashan (1911-1916), one day someone who

became quite close. Yiren explained, "What you [Gao Yisheng] have learned from Cheng Tinghua and Zhou Yuxiang is the pre-heaven aspect of bagua, and I [Yiren] have learned the post-heaven techniques of bagua." Gao politely requested instruction and studied from Song Yiren the post-heaven applications. Later, he combined the all these with the applications taught by Cheng Tinghua and Zhou Yuxiang and created the 64 post-heaven palms.

Whether or not the tale of "Song Yiren" is to be believed, it is clear that by 1926 Gao's art had fully crystallized, drawing together many influences to combine into a new and exciting art. He taught this art to Liu Fengcai and others in Shandong from 1926-1936 and then moved to Tianjin.

### Expansion of the Gao-Style Lineage

Tianjin, China, has long been known for its strong martial traditions. For hundreds of years, well-known practitioners of many styles have honed their skills there alongside ruffians, gangsters, bodyguards and soldiers, and there was seldom a shortage of students for skilled teachers. It is not surprising then that it was there, in 1936, that Gao Yisheng



Wang Shusheng



Liu Shusheng

practitioner Han Muxia, was one of the first well-known boxers to test Gao upon his arrival to Tianjin. Teaching openly at the sports stadium—and for the rather high price of one tael, or roughly 1.2 ounces, of silver per lesson—was

a bold statement for any martial artist, so when Wu heard this, he decided to go in person to investigate.

According to Liu Fengcai's grand-nephew, Liu Shuhang, currently the last fifth-generation Gao-style practitioner and the senior authority on Gao-style bagua, "Wu Mengxia went to the stadium to learn more of this new style. He introduced himself and said he'd like to have a test of their two arts, and Gao Yisheng agreed. Wu quickly attacked with splitting fist, but the old man dodged and threw Wu to the ground. Surprised, Wu got up and asked for a second try. Again the old man agreed and again he threw Wu to the ground. This time, Wu rose only to his knees and, kowtowing, begged to be accepted as a disciple. Gao Yisheng agreed and for the next 10 years he would teach Wu and many other students the art that would later become known throughout China as Cheng-School Gao-Style Soft-Body Connected Palm, or Gao-style bagua."

In 1946, at 80 years of age, Gao Yisheng retired from teaching. However, during his 10 years in Tianjin, Gao spread his art widely, ensuring that it

## "This art's youth belies both its practical refinement and theoretical sophistication."

looked like a beggar came to call upon him, and when pressed for his name refused to give it. Instead he broke into song, singing: "Don't ask my place of origin; We are family you and I; There is no end to learning in martial arts; I am Song Yiren, who has studied the complete art, and now transmits it to all worthy gentlemen under Heaven; Transmitting without holding anything back; Only this can be called pioneering; Therefore just call me exceptional."

The two subsequently talked excitedly of their arts and gradually their interaction

began to widely teach his art. The 70-year-old Gao was finally ready to spread the art that would later bear his name, and which had reached full maturity only a dozen years before. He began teaching publicly at the sports stadium in the English colonial concession district and soon gained a reputation as a skilled bagua practitioner and teacher. For roughly 10 years, Gao would teach his art to numerous students, including many already accomplished in other styles, such as Wu Mengxia and Zhang Junfeng. Indeed Wu, a young student of the famed hsing-I



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would not be lost to future generations. Today, different branches of the Gao-style bagua family can now be found not only in Mainland China, but also in many countries around the world.

Of Gao's many students, Guan Fangfa, An Jihai, Li Yunzhang, Zhang Junfeng, Xu Mingqiao, Liu Fengcai, Qu Kezhang, Yan Peilin and He Kecai were considered his best disciples, and most of today's Gao-style practitioners trace their art back through one of these practitioners. The majority, in fact, can be traced through one of three main lineages—that of He Kecai, Zhang Junfeng and Liu Fengcai. While all branches of the Gao bagua family share the same basic material and training methods, small stylistic differences can be seen. This is because of two main differences between Liu Fengcai and Gao's other students. First, only Liu Fengcai began his bagua training without previous martial arts experience. Gao's other disciples all came to him as accomplished practitioners of other styles, and he taught them accordingly. Only Liu Fengcai can be said to have received a pure version of Gao's system, unaltered by outside experience. The second factor influencing stylistic variation in today's practitioners is that, as his grandnephew, Liu Fengcai, studied with Gao considerably longer than any of his other students—nine years—and through living with him had much more opportunity for detailed instruction and correction. While all of Gao's top disciples attained proficiency in the pre-heaven palms and weapons sets, as well as the post-heaven palms, not all completed their training of the separating palms, which Gao considered an integral part of his complete system. As Liu Shuhang notes, "I have traveled to several countries around the world to teach; I've taught students from America, Taiwan, Europe, Japan, Australia; I have seen Gao-style bagua practiced by many people. More often than not, however, what I see is only partial knowledge. It's not that these people are not practicing Gao bagua; it's just that their art is incomplete.

"If their complete system accords with what is in our book ["The Cheng-School Gao-Style Eight Diagram Boxing Manual,"

published in 1991], with what has been recognized officially as Gao bagua, then they can say they have the complete system. But you can't just create a style, or material, or claim you have inherited it. What you have must be evaluated by professional criteria, by lineage records, by other practitioners. The Gao-style bagua system passed on to me by my granduncle Liu Fengcai has been researched and validated by the Chinese Martial Arts Research Institute in Beijing; by specialists in martial arts history. I cannot pass judgment on what others may call Gao style unless I see it, but if I see it, I can immediately tell whether or not it is true Gao-style bagua."

It is through Liu Fengcai's lineage that the Gao bagua system was researched and categorized by the Chinese Martial Arts Research Institute, and today the lineage descendants of Liu are recognized as the senior members of the Gao bagua family. While other branches have spread across Asia and around the world, Liu Fengcai's lineage is still the source from which all practitioners should seek instruction and guidance, for theirs represents the most direct and unbroken link to Gao Yisheng's original art.

## Liu Fengcai's 64 Separating Palms and Training Theory

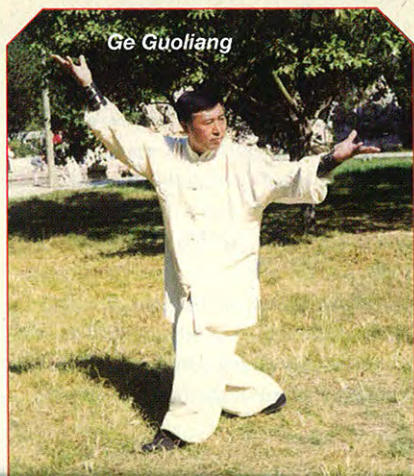
Two main distinctions set Gao style's 64 linear palms apart from those of the other major bagua lineages. First, the Gao system contains 64 individual palms, as opposed to the eight sets of



**Presentation of Gao Yisheng's manuscript.**  
From left: Ge Guoliang, Liu Shuhang, Li Xueyi and H. Vincent Black.

eight linked movements seen in other styles. These 64 techniques vary from single movements to short linked forms, each training a specific movement quality, and many showing the clear influence of shuai chiao in the set-up of sweeps and throws. Secondly, each of these palms has individual two-person form—or separating palm—designed not only to train the specific application, but also sensitivity, correct angles, fluidity and timing. Practiced in a repetitive and ever-changing series of engage-neutralize-withdraw, the separating palms allow both practitioners to learn the attack and defense for each palm and build a large repertoire of techniques from which to draw on in a fight.

Training in the separating palms is the third stage of development in the Gao bagua system. Students begin with training correct stepping and body mechanics by learning the circular pre-heaven palms. Once strength, stamina and flexibility have been developed with the circular forms, the second stage of training is the 64 post-heaven palms. These forms refine the individual techniques, and elucidate the movements of the circular forms as they pertain to fighting. Practice of the post-heaven palms provides an introduction to the angles and timing needed for actual combat, as well as the vocabulary to link various sequences and lay the foundation for training the separating palms. The third stage of training, the separating palms combine the





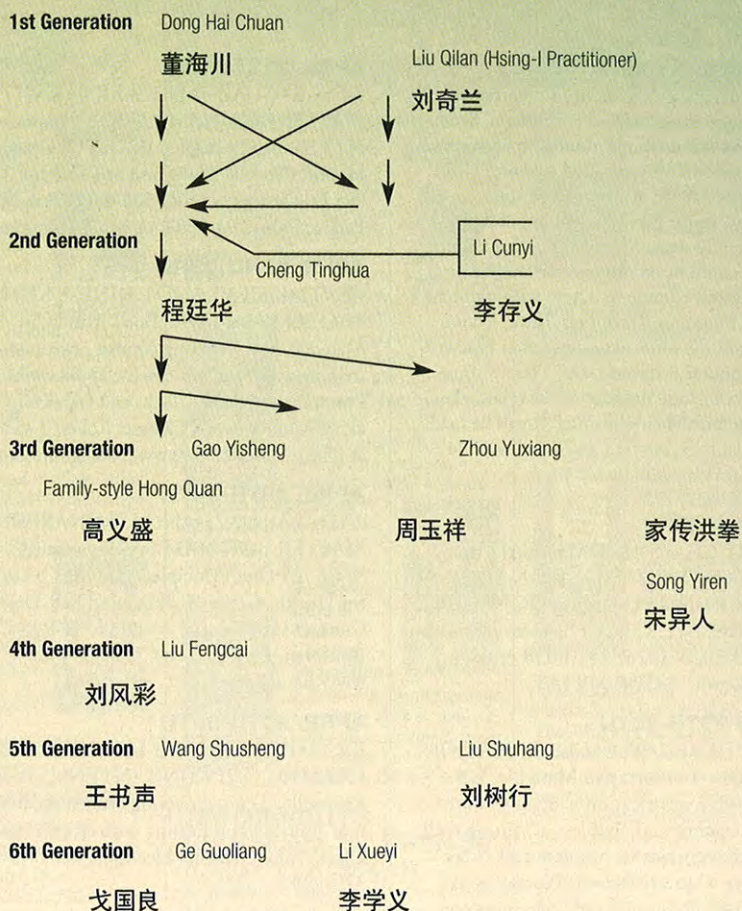
development of the circular forms with the applications of the linear palms and provide practitioners with a complete and comprehensive combat and health-building martial system.

### Liu Fengcai and his Inheritors

Liu Fengcai was born in 1908 in Shandong province. He began his bagua training at the age of 9 and at 19 was officially accepted as an inner-door disciple of Gao Yisheng. For the next nine years Liu received undivided instruction from Gao and being naturally gifted, a quick learner and a diligent student, had already achieved a high level of boxing skill after only a few years instruction. Liu often accompanied Gao when he traveled to other locations and also assisted his granduncle in teaching and transmitting bagua. In 1936, he moved to Tianjin with Gao, and continued to assist him in teaching bagua zhang there. After Gao Yisheng retired, Liu Fengcai remained in Tianjin, where he continued to teach bagua for the next 37 years.

From 1962 to 1966, he served as instructor of extracurricular martial arts at Nankai University where he taught numerous students. In 1983, at age 76, Liu retired from teaching martial arts and

## Cheng-School Gao-Style Bagua Zhang Lineage Chart



### Gao-Style Bagua in America

In October 2003, at the request of the North American Tang Shou Tao Association, Liu Shuhang, Ge Guoliang and Li Xueyi traveled to the United States for the first time to continue the dissemination and promotion of Gao-style bagua outside Mainland China.

Seminars on all facets of the Gao system, including the circular palms, linear palms and separating palms, were conducted in multiple cities over a four-week period. During their visit, Liu, Ge and Li also recognized the North American Tang Shou Tao Association as their official representative body in the United States. The North American Tang Shou Tao Association is hosting masters Liu, Ge and Li again in April/May 2006 for several open seminars around the U.S. Anyone interested in learning more about the Gao-style bagua system or these seminars can contact the Association at P.O. Box 36235, Tucson, AZ 85740 or [www.natsta.org](http://www.natsta.org). Seminar dates and locations include Washington, D.C. metro area, April 21-23; Tucson, Ariz., April 28-30; and Oakland, Calif., May 5-7.

returned to his hometown. During his time in Tianjin, Liu Fengcai taught well over 1,000 students. His most outstanding disciples were Wang Shusheng and his grandnephew Liu Shuhang.

Wang Shusheng was born in 1920 in Hebei province. In his early years he studied both shaolin and eight poles boxing. In 1948 he became a disciple of Liu Fengcai and concentrated on the study of Gao-style bagua, quickly attaining a complete understanding of its principles. Wang was skilled not only in demonstra-

tion of the bagua forms, but also in their application. He never once lost a match and his quick hands and clever technique earned him a wide reputation in martial arts circles. He began accepting bagua students in 1960 and in 1983 began teaching bagua at the Nankai Martial Arts Academy, where he continued to teach until late in life. In 1987 he was also invited to Japan to teach Gao-style bagua. Wang Shusheng died in 1995 at the age of 76. His students are numerous and, among them, his most outstanding

disciples are Ge Guoliang and Li Xueyi.

Liu Shuhang was born in Tianjin in 1947. In 1962 at age 14, he moved to the residence of his granduncle Liu Fengcai and began his bagua training alongside Liu's own grandson. After Liu's grandson died in his late-teens, Liu Shuhang became the sole member of his family to carry on the Gao bagua lineage. He trained intensively with Liu Fengcai until 1976, and has taught bagua in Tianjin since 1984. In addition, Liu has conducted extensive research into the origin, development and synthesis of Gao-style bagua. With the aid of professor Kang Gewu of the Chinese Martial Arts Research Institute in Beijing, he has exhaustively traced all branches of the Gao-style bagua family within Mainland China and, in 1991, assisted his granduncle and Wang Shusheng with the re-publication of Gao Yisheng's boxing manual. Liu currently resides in Tianjin, where he continues to research and teach Gao-style bagua.

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## Martial Arts in Media

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It was the work of director Ryuhei Kitamura, who also made new waves with his gangster/samurai/sci-fi/splatter/zombie comedy "Versus" back in 2000 (and has since gone on to helm "Godzilla: Final Wars," which is now also available as a Sony DVD). "Azumi," however, had a much bigger budget, allowing for glorious photography, impressive set decoration, sumptuous costuming and a sword-swinging cast of hundreds. The idea couldn't be simpler: Japan, beware of a pretty, pouty female teenager with a sword. The plot is equally easy to grasp. A bunch of really attractive teen ninjas are trained to assassinate a bunch of really slimy bad guys. The bad guys hire wave after wave of maniacal, homicidal, crazed, kinky, rapist killers to stop them. Throw in razor sharp blades. Stir.

The result is a feast for the eyes and guts, although it has very little to do with the brain. Chief among the eye candy is Aya Ueto, who plays Azumi with all the abandon that her fascinating face, killer smile and great legs will allow. Her, and most of the cast's, less-than-amazing sword-wielding skills require gobs of directorial flourishes, but that appears to be Ryuhei's goal anyway, so everyone acquits themselves admirably.

In fact, "Azumi" has been a much-sought-after fan favorite for years now, so, since the U.S. rights were snapped up by the good folks at Urban Vision ("Vampire Hunter D," "Ninja Scroll the Series") we, of the anti-bootleg brigade, have been breathlessly awaiting its appearance. And waiting. And waiting. But, finally, Urban Vision's new division AsiaVision is putting out "Azumi" the way it should be seen: on the big screen.

Look for it in a city near you right about now, and save your shekels for its legal, first-rate DVD in the spring. Then hold your breath for the AsiaVision theatrical run of "Azumi 2: Death or Love," directed by Shusuke Kaneko (the man who beautifully resurrected "Gamera") and featuring not only the lovely Aya but Chiaki Kuriyama (Gogo of "Kill Bill") too. But hopefully you won't turn blue and Urban Vision won't wait three years on the sequel. You know what they say: While the legal copyright holders are away, the bootleggers will play. 🍷

*Ric Meyers writes a monthly movie and entertainment column for Inside Kung-Fu.*

## Liu Fengcai's Gao-Style Bagua

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Ge Guoliang was born in 1947 in Tianjin. In July 1964, at age 17, he began studying shuai chiao and three months later placed first in the Tianjin Municipal Shuai Jiao Tournament. He continued to train shuai chiao for four years, achieving the recognition and approval of many in the local martial arts circles. In 1968, Ge was introduced to Wang Shusheng and began training bagua shortly thereafter. Impressed by the directness and sophistication of Gao-style bagua, he gave up shuai chiao and devoted all his energy to training with Wang Shusheng. In 1984, Wang Shusheng was invited to teach bagua at the Nankai and Zhenhua Martial Arts Academies in Tianjin and Ge began to assist Wang in teaching classes. In 1999 Ge was invited to teach martial arts at Nankai University, where he continues to teach today. Ge Guoliang is currently president of the Tianjin Martial Arts Association's Special Committee on Bagua.

Li Xueyi was born in 1948 in Tianjin. In 1970 he was introduced to bagua through his classmate, a student of Wang Shusheng. He paid a visit to Wang's house and after having several clever applications applied on him by Wang, immediately asked to become Wang's student. He trained continually with Wang until the latter's passing in 1995. In 1984, Li also began assisting Wang in teaching bagua at the Nankai and Zhenhua Martial Arts Academies in Tianjin. In 1999 he was invited to teach martial arts at Nankai University, where he continues to teach today. Li Xueyi is currently the vice president of the Tianjin Martial Arts Association's Special Committee on Bagua.

The three most senior practitioners of Gao-style bagua in Mainland China, Liu Shuhang, Ge Guoliang and Li Xueyi, are recognized by the Chinese Martial Arts Research Institute as the official lineage descendants of orthodox Gao-style bagua zhang. It is the hope of all three that the number of Gao-style bagua practitioners continues to grow worldwide. 🍷

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## Open Your Energy Gates!

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**"Although standing is recommended, these exercises can be done sitting in a chair."**

### LESSON 3 Stand and Settle In

Before you can really work with the exercises described in this article, you need to settle down and be fully present so that you are focused on feeling your body.

As you stand, focus on your breath. Put your tongue on the roof of your mouth and feel your breath as you inhale and exhale. Make it smooth, relaxed and balanced, with no gaps between each exhale and inhale. Do this until you can easily focus on your breathing. Next, breathe into any part of your body that feels numb or tense until it relaxes.

After a few minutes, you should find that relaxation is easier and you are more easily able to focus on what is happening inside your body. Turn your attention to your alignments. While standing, start with the top of your head and work down to your feet. Use your mind to gently go through the alignments mentioned earlier in this chapter. As you focus on the major alignments, feel whether they are in or out and use your best effort to adjust your body position until they feel more correct and stable. Breathing into an alignment that is out makes this easier and more effective.

Remember the 70 percent rule and don't attempt to force an alignment into its proper position. If you do not rush, your body will slowly realign itself, particularly as you learn the fundamental standing techniques, which use these alignments. The realignment process will continue throughout your learning of chi gung and other Taoist energy practices and gradually all the alignments will become more comfortable and stable.

This settling-in process can take as long as 10 minutes until you become more experienced. With practice, settling in will rarely take more than a few minutes, unless you are starting with a very high stress level. 🍷