

The Students who would become masters

At the beginning of the 1960s the topspin game was imported to the Peoples' Republic. The Chinese learned quickly – thanks not only to sparring partners who were trained especially for this task. Today, it is the Chinese who are setting the trends.

The history of the topspin in Chinese table tennis began a few months before the World Championships in 1961. Shortly thereafter, the Chinese national team set up a “topspin group” with eight (penholder) players, who were to copy the Japanese top spin stars precisely, so that the top Chinese players could practice playing against them every day. Because of the role assigned to them, this first generation of Chinese topspin players hardly appeared on the international stage even though they were absolutely able to compete at the same level within the team.

In the following years, they began to try to systematically merge the new penhold-topspin game with the classic Chinese penhold-shot game. Pimps-inward players as well as pimps-outwards players participated in this development. It is not surprising that it was one of these players who made the switch, who made the breakthrough. At the World Championships 1971, the Chinese XI Enting lost against the Swede Stellan BENGTTSSON in the singles semi-finals – despite having had a more than comfortable lead earlier on in the match. At head coach Xu Yinsehng's repeated suggestion, a couple of months later XI finally agreed to switch from pips-out to pips-in, in order to better fully develop his pronounced top-spin strength. Such a drastic change was anything but easy for the 26-year old. However, the risk he took paid off surprisingly quickly. Just one and a half years later, XI won the singles title in the next World Championships.

At around the same time, the topspin revolution was also taking place in Europe. However, in contrast to the Japanese, the Europeans predominantly played shakehand. So in response to this fact, the Chinese started training their first shakehand-topspin players towards the end of the 1970s. And again, they did this using sparring partners for their team colleagues. In this way what they were doing went almost completely unnoticed on the international scene. One of these players was CHENG Yinghua, who later immigrated to the USA. He later also participated as the oldest player in the World Championships in 2005, being 47 years old at the time.

When a young, talented penhold-player named GUO Yuehua became a member of the Chinese National Team in 1973, he was still playing with a pips-out-rubber and based his game on his powerful shots – as did most of the penholder-players in the national team at the time.

Following the advice of his tutor, GUO followed XI Enting's example and re-trained, switching to a topspin game with pips-in. And he did so with the same sweeping success. He participated in the World Championships four times (1977, 1979, 1981, and 1983), reaching the singles finals every time. After having to drop out of the tournament because of a torn muscle in 1979, he went on to win the title in 1981 and 1983.

By the end of the 80s, the Chinese shakehand-topspin game was finally reaching a level of international competitiveness. This was the result, in part, of necessity - due to the dramatic decline of the penhold-game. In the World Championships finals in 1989 in Dortmund, the Chinese experienced a disaster against the new table tennis super-power Sweden: JIANG Jialiang, CHEN Longcan and shakehand player TENG Yi, three players, who performed with short pips out, lost to Jan-Ove



Swede Jörgen PERSSON (Photo Roscher)

WALDNER, Mikael APPELGREN and Jörgen PERSSON 0:5. Representatives of this completely helpless generation of Chinese table tennis – such as CHEN Zhibin, who is coach in Granzau today – played a shakehand-system which was surprisingly similar to the penholder-game. It was characterized by a very strong forehand, but a relatively weak backhand. This forced the players to constantly run around their backhand. As such, it was clearly inferior to the modern European table tennis game. It is common knowledge that necessity is the mother of invention. XU Yinsheng, in the meantime the President of the Chinese Table Tennis Association, came up with a revolutionary idea which he presented at the National Coach's Conference in 1988.

He suggested using the backside of the racket with the penholder grip in order to overcome the extreme vulnerability of the backhand side. They began this ambitious experiment with players from the Junior National Team – such as LIU Guoliang and FENG Zhe.

Parallel to this, the Chinese shakehand-topspin game continued to be developed. New players such as MA Wenge and WANG Tao entered the stage. These players had a confident backhand, and brought new variability to the topspin-strokes. In this way they were able to break the domination of the Swedes and announce the comeback of Chinese table tennis.

In the course of the past decade, China has established itself as a worldwide pioneer in terms of the development of the topspin game. Among those who play with the shakehand-grip we find styles ranging from KONG Linghais' agile elegance to WANG Liqin's athletic appearances. Among penhold players, the range goes from MA Lin's dizzying unpredictability to WANG Hao's



Chinese MA Wenge (Photo Roscher)

unique penholder-backhand-topspin across the table. Naturally, we do not know what the next generation will bring. One thing is for sure, however, the future of table tennis will surely not cease to be interesting and full of surprises!

by Enry JAMES

"Extract from the monthly magazine *Tischtennis* (table tennis), authorized by Philippka-Sportverlag, Münster, Germany".