

TAIJIQUAN AND DAOISM

FROM RELIGION TO MARTIAL ART AND
MARTIAL ART TO RELIGION

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Introduction

The question of taijiquan's origins—and specifically whether they are Daoist or not—is no mere academic exercise but a major theater in China's culture wars for nearly a century. A recent mass-market book *Five Hundred Unsolved Mysteries in China's Cultural History* lists the origins of taijiquan as one of Chinese history's most contentious cases. In the 1930s, Tang Hao (1897-1959), China's first modern martial arts historian, was the target of an assassination plot for daring to unmask the myth of taiji's Daoist origins, and in 1999 a prominent martial arts journal, *Jingwu*, after ten years of extensive coverage, declared a moratorium on the topic. Why all the fuss?

From the middle of the 19th century to the beginning of the 21st, taijiquan has played a very public role in China's cultural life. Exponents of taijiquan were active in the self-strengthening campaigns of the late Qing Reform Movement and Nationalist Revolution; taijiquan played a leading role in the national and provincial martial arts academies of the Republican period; it was standardized and popularized for the masses during the Mao era (1949-1976); and today, taijiquan is still the site of hostile clashes between modernizers and traditionalists, even as it increasingly becomes a leading cultural export and tourist attraction. What began in the 17th century with Huang Zongxi's (1610-1695) wrapping a martial art in religion has come down in the 21st century to Neo-Zhang Sanfeng cultists wrapping religion in a martial art. This paper will explore the ways in which the construction and deconstruction of a martial arts-Daoist connection has figured in political ideology, cultural identity, and commercial interest during the past century of Chinese history.

Abstract

This study explores the ways in which the construction and deconstruction of a martial arts-Daoism connection has figured in political ideology, national identity, and commercial interest during the past 400 years of Chinese history. Focusing on the taijiquan-Daoism-Zhang Sanfeng nexus, it traces the wrapping of a martial art in indigenous religious garb during the periods of Manchu rule, Japanese occupation, and post-Mao 21st century. It concludes by reporting on a contemporary movement in China to revive the cult of Zhang Sanfeng and to cast taijiquan as a form of religious practice. In this light, taijiquan emerges as an important site of constructing "Chineseness" in the face of state appropriation and Western cultural imperialism.

CHEN STYLE TAIJI PRACTICE
ALONG WEST LAKE IN
HANGZHOU CITY.

Photograph by
Michael DeMarco.

MISTY SCENE OVER
WUDANG MOUNTAINS.
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Defining taijiquan is at least as controversial as defining Daoism itself. If there are three Daoisms—philosophical, religious, and macrobiotic—there are also three taijis—martial, meditative, and medical. Similarly, there are three stereotypes of taiji masters: recluses who perfect their art with the help of nature or supernatural forces, secret masters living in the world who reveal their art only when pressed or for righteous causes, and public masters who defend the honor of their lineage and accept all challenges. We can trace taijiquan as a philosophy or a lineage, a generic or a brand. All styles claim Daoist philosophical content, and most claim to be successors to a transmission originating with a famous Daoist immortal. The terms “Daoist” and “Confucian” function in Chinese society with roughly the same degree of precision as do liberal and conservative in the West. A Daoist is someone who gathers herbs on misty mountains and meditates in a cave; by contrast, a Confucian sits on a throne or adjudicates stacks of lawsuits. A Daoist seeks seclusion, whereas a Confucian is asked to leave. All the arts and sciences are automatically ceded to Daoism by default because of Confucianism’s “amateur ideal” and its disdain for instrumental knowledge and individualism. Hence, painting, calligraphy, and poetry are considered Daoist arts; medicine is considered a Daoist science; and even military strategy has a Daoist mystique. The rise of taijiquan represents the attempt to assimilate martial arts into high culture, and for this purpose, only Daoism will do. Methodologically, the history of taijiquan has been told by materialists and idealists. The materialist, or humanist, says that trial and error, or practice, precedes theory, and that knowledge is cumulative, synthetic, and cross-disciplinary; the idealist believes in a transcendent realm of laws or principles accessible only to divine beings or great men. Essentially, the debate in taijiquan historiography has been between creationism and evolution. Of the three kinds of masters in the *Zhuangzi*—sages, craftsmen, and freaks—the creationists side with the sages, the humanists with the craftsmen, and the freaks we will save for the end of our story.

What are the role, status, identity, and image of the martial artist in traditional Chinese society? Body guards, bandits, family feudists, militiamen, assassins, knights-errant, rebels, opera singers, and market place performers. The army had no use for martial artists, either because their skills were flowery and impractical, or because solo virtuosos did not function well in battlefield formation. The subordination of military to civilian authority in politics and the elevation of the civil (*wen*) and military (*wu*) to virtual cosmological categories has allowed the scholar to maintain superiority over the warrior.

The best known association of martial arts with religion in China is the Shaolin monks. As early as the Northern Wei (220-265), they had alternately been persecuted for participating in rebellions but at other times were enlisted by emperors to put down rebellion, piracy, and invasion. Martial arts were most likely to be officially banned during foreign dynasties, such as Mongol and Manchu, and martial arts training, together with quasi-religious doctrines and rituals, were often part of the lure and threat of secret societies. Martial dance for religious ritual and pure esthetics goes back to our earliest written records in China, but the marriage of qigong energetics with a martial art is not attested in detail until Chang Naizhou in the 18th century, a development that reaches its peak with taijiquan in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Whether we define Daoism as an institution with card-carrying members or a certain band on a perennial philosophical spectrum, there is no escaping the heroic efforts to associate or disassociate taijiquan with Daoism. Chinese thinking is often characterized as “correlative” to distinguish it from Western notions of linear causality. Analyzing

states and changes based on yin and yang, the five phases, and stems and branches is indeed one mode of Chinese thinking. However, when direct causality is employed, say to assert that the immortal Zhang Sanfeng created taijiquan, we must decide whether this is ignorance, deception, or a discursive practice that places the Wudang Mountains, Zhang Sanfeng, the Internal School, Laozi, the *Yijing*, and taijiquan in a single narrative for the same reason that traditional medicine includes the kidney, “gate of life,” foot *shao-yin* channel, ears, brain, hair, nails, anus, the color black, water, and winter, in the “kidney orb.” Is it religious faith, the mythic mind, or simply another kind of rational thought? Is building up layer upon layer of Daoist associations for this martial art a form of magical protection against predatory appropriation? This paper will explore both the ways in which taijiquan partakes of Daoist theory and the efforts to align taijiquan with Daoism. The continued outpouring of fictional accounts of taiji history in the 21st century may appear to be transparently political or commercial, but sometimes it can only be explained as the persistence of a cultural practice that refuses to conform to modern notions of “fact” and the search for a Chinese style of spirituality that retains faith in psychosomatic self-perfection and the possibility of embodied immortality.

Zhang Sanfeng and the Internal School

In the 1650s, after years of resistance to Manchu consolidation in the South, philosopher Huang Zongxi (1610-1695) gave up armed struggle and retired to his native Yuyao in Zhejiang Province, where he undertook a comprehensive reassessment of the philosophical and political roots of China’s weakness. Among his prolific writings is the *Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan*, written for a former comrade-in-arms, whom Huang praises as a great martial artist, fierce patriot, and righteous knight-errant. He describes Wang as the only living successor to a martial arts lineage called the Internal School (*neijia*) and names Zhang Sanfeng as its founder. He locates Zhang in the Song dynasty, calls him a “Daoist alchemist,” and says that Zhang invented the art by reversing Shaolin’s reliance on hardness and emphasizing the defensive and offensive advantages of softness.

Huang Zongxi’s son, Huang Baijia, himself a student of Wang Zhengnan, wrote a manual of the Internal School art, attributing Zhang Sanfeng’s inspiration to a visitation by Xuan Wu (God of War) in a dream. As set forth in Baijia’s *Internal School’s Boxing Methods*, the form bears little resemblance to taijiquan as we know it, contains no reference to internal training, and apart from its soft-style strategy is chiefly distinguished by its pressure point techniques. Moreover, Baijia says that as Wang’s only student, the transmission will die with him. The reader is left to ponder whether the Huangs uncritically recorded Wang’s account of the Internal School’s origins or used biography to encrypt a political allegory for China’s survival strategy under Manchu rule.



ILLUSTRATION OF ZHANG SANFENG TAKEN FROM THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ZHANG SANFENG (1844).

Illustration courtesy of Douglas Wile.



DRAWING OF HUANG ZONGXI DATED 1873.
BELOW AND RIGHT: ILLUSTRATION OF WUDANG FROM DAYUE TAIHESHAN GAZETTEER DATED 1922.



Contradictions abound: Huang Zongxi was one of the most sober rationalists in Chinese intellectual history and not given to myth making; he was personally opposed to alchemy and the self-delusion of immortality; there is no record of a “Zhang Sanfeng” in the Song dynasty (960-1279); and there is no mention in the Ming (1368-1644) histories or hagiographies of Zhang Sanfeng of any connection between the immortal and the martial arts, just as there are none between Bodhidharma and Shaolin gongfu in the Buddhist literature. The 19th century *Complete Works of Zhang Sanfeng* and 20th century *Zhang Sanfeng’s Secret Transmissions on Taiji Elixir Cultivation* do not contain a single credible text, let alone one on martial arts. In other words, Zhang Sanfeng, the immortal martial artist and his Internal School, appear out of nowhere in the Huangs’ *Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan* and *Internal School’s Boxing Methods* and disappear without a trace until the turn of the 20th century, when the first generation of mass market taiji publications begin to name Zhang Sanfeng as the father of taijiquan and the Internal School of Wudang as its precursor.

Lineage and Legitimacy

Lineage has been an important means of establishing political legitimacy in China from at least the time of the Shang aristocracy, and it is no less important in the arts. In the Asian martial arts, status devolves from style founder to sons of style founders to “indoor students” of style founders or their sons, and finally to public students, ranked by successive removes. The most prestigious credentials in taijiquan are personal study with members of the Chen, Yang, Wu/Hao, Wu, or Sun families. More esoteric transmissions, usually claiming Daoist origins, are traced from master to disciple, without resort to kinship ties. Lineage establishes personal credentials, but styles often invoke historical, semi-historical, or supernatural founders as totemistic figureheads for the transmission as a whole. Perhaps the only exception in the taiji world is the Chen family, who have simply mythologized their own genealogy. Rather than be left out in the cold, most styles have followed the Yang family lead and adopted Zhang Sanfeng as the patron saint of taijiquan. In keeping with the hard-soft taxonomy established by the Huangs, the terms “Wudang” and “Internal School” became generic designations for martial arts based on yielding and qi cultivation, thus allowing xingyi and bagua to be grafted onto the Internal School tree as sharing the same principles, though lacking a direct line to a Daoist immortal. Where the seams begin to show is in the inconsistency of legendary narratives and in the splicing of the legendary onto the historical period.

For the sake of convenience, and to some degree coherence, let us trace the fathering of taijiquan onto a Daoist lineage through the various styles, style founders, and authors. The first published work introducing taijiquan to the world was Sun Lutang’s (1861-1932) 1919 *The Study of Taijiquan*. Sun, student of Hao Weizhen (1842-1920) and founder of the Sun style, credits Zhang Sanfeng as the founder of taijiquan but gives no biographical details. He weaves the various creation myths of three martial arts into a chronology, starting with Bodhidharma and Shaolin, followed by Yue Fei and xingyi, and culminating with Zhang Sanfeng “of the Yuan” with taijiquan. Omitting bagua from his narrative, he specifies that Zhang created taiji as a corrective to the harmful hard-style exercises practiced by his fellow immortality seekers. Although the Sun style continues to be practiced, there are no other major books in this transmission. Hao Weizhen’s teacher Li Yiyu (1832-1892) says in his *Short Introduction to Taijiquan* that, “the origins of the art are unknown” (Gu, 1982: 376), and since the Zhang Sanfeng of the *Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan* is Song, the source of Sun’s attribution seems to be some vague body of

martial arts lore. Moving from the mythic to the legendary to the historical, he names Wang Zongyue as author of the classics and Wu Yuxiang (1812-1880) as the link to Chen Qingping (1795-1868) in Zhaobao. This geneology is remarkable for completely leaving Chen Changxing (1771-1853) and Yang Luchan (1799-1871) out of the picture. In fact, the Yang transmission, by far the most influential in the development and dissemination of the art in the last century, is never mentioned.

The second book of the modern era is Xu Yusheng's (1879-1945) 1921 *Illustrated Introduction to the Taijiquan Form*. Xu presents a two part genealogy, tracing the theoretical origins to Fu Xi, Yu, the Yellow Emperor, and Hua Tuo, and the practical martial applications to a series of obscure and largely unattested figures, beginning with Xu Xuanping of the Tang, and including Li Daoshan, Cheng Lingxi, Hu Jingzi, and Song Zhongshu. The second phase begins with Zhang Sanfeng, a name which Xu concedes is shared by more than ten figures, none of whom are recorded to have studied martial arts. Xu also gives an alternative version of Zhang's career, making him a Song figure, who single-handedly kills 500 Khitan invaders and transmits his art to hundreds of disciples in Shaanxi. Continuing, he says that during the Yuan, Wang Zongyue revived Zhang's transmission and wrote the classics. Later it was transmitted to Eastern Zhejiang, then to Zhang Songxi and Ningbo, where it was learned by Wang Zhengnan. After many more years it reached early Qing anti-Manchu rebel and folklore hero Gan Fengchi. This is the southern branch. The northern branch continued from Wang Zongyue to Jiang Fa to Chen Changxing and then Yang Luchan. Xu cites the *Prefectural Gazetteer of Ningbo* and *Lost Tales of Knight-Errantry* as his sources, but was also clearly influenced by Song Shuming's early Republican *Treatise on the Origins and Branches of Taijiquan* (Dong, 1948: 108; Wu Zhiqing, n.d.: 268-271). He calls Zhang a "Confucian" and makes no special attempt to hang a Daoist label on his lineage. Xu was an unaligned martial arts promoter, who did not name his personal teachers in the book but acknowledges the consultation of Yang Shaohou and Wu Jianquan at the Beijing Physical Education Research Institute that he headed. The book has no pretensions to critical scholarship, but Xu's work is unique in citing sources for his historical account and in offering multiple versions of taiji's origins. Although Xu's *Illustrated Introduction to the Taijiquan Form* created the formal template for future taiji instructional manuals, this aspect had no imitators.

Sun and Xu established the two prototypical origin myths that came to be adopted by virtually all subsequent writers: Zhang Sanfeng as sole creator of taijiquan, or Zhang as transmitter of an art with earlier antecedents. Exceptions are the Chen family, who had much to lose by myth and everything to gain by keeping creation under their own roof, and the Hao family, representing the Wu Yuxiang style, who did not produce their first book until 1963. The remaining and most prolific styles and writers hail from the Yang and Wu family transmissions. The first publication written on behalf of the Yang family art is that of Yang Chengfu's (1883-1936) student Chen Weiming, who in 1925 published the *Art of Taijiquan*. His very first chapter consists of a fanciful biography of Zhang Sanfeng, complete with all the standard miraculous flourishes. The text makes no reference to martial arts, except for the last sentence, which says that what is known as taijiquan began with him. His second chapter gives a general survey of the evolution of the martial arts, again naming Zhang Sanfeng as founder of the Internal School. Rather than confusing Wang Zong of the *Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan* with Wang Zongyue, however, it simply places Wang Zong a century after Zhang, but in direct line of transmission, and places Wang Zongyue in the Qing as author of the classics and teacher of Chen Changxing. He makes no special pleading for Daoism, but the last



YANG CHENGFU
(1883-1936).



chapter consists of a series of quotations from the *Laozi*, together with parallel principles in the taiji classics. The next book in the Yang transmission is third generation Chengfu's 1931 *Self-defense Applications of Taijiquan*. Probably ghost-written by Dong Yingjie, it begins with a photo gallery of Chengfu and chief disciples and a detailed genealogy from Zhang Sanfeng to Wang Zongyue. He mentions an "Eastern Branch" in Zhejiang, which "regrettably has died out," probably following Baijia's statement that Wang Zhengnan had no successors. However the Henan Branch continues with the Chen's and Yang's. This is followed by a hagiography of the immortal Zhang, and at the end of the book a highly romantic tale of Zhang's cultivation practices. In a fantastic episode, Zhang Sanfeng is lead by a display of heavenly lights to a mysterious cave deep

in the mountains. Here he encounters two golden snakes and the source of the celestial emanations: two miraculous spears. Nearby he also discovers a manual called the *Taiji Sticky Thirteen Spear* from whose principles he distills the techniques and sparring form reproduced in the *Self-defense Applications of Taijiquan*. This is perhaps the first example of the genre of pure martial arts fantasy, lacking any antecedents in the Huangs' writings or *History of the Ming* biography of Zhang Sanfeng, to be found in a taiji publication. Chengfu's 1934 *Complete Principles and Practices of Taijiquan*, probably ghost-written by Zheng Manqing, shows a bit more restraint. It contains no genealogy chart, but cites Zhang Sanfeng several times in the prefatory matter as creator of the art. Its narrative genealogy makes no distinction between northern, southern, or eastern branches, and streamlining the transmission, follows Xu Yusheng's introduction of Jiang Fa to deliver the art to Changxing. Departing from Chen Weiming, however, it does not place Changxing and Jiang Fa in a master-disciple relationship. It has no special pleading for Daoism as such.

Writing in their own names, Zheng Manqing's 1946 (published 1952) *Thirteen Chapters on Taijiquan* contains no genealogy chart, no biography of Zhang, and only two passing references to Zhang as the creator of the Internal School of Wudang, whereas fellow Chengfu disciple Dong Yingjie's 1948 *Principles of Taijiquan* contains not only genealogy chart and biography of Zhang, but reproduces Song Shuming's *Treatise on the Origins and Branches of Taijiquan*, with Dong's personal endorsement of the view that taijiquan predated Sanfeng under different names. Three decades later, undoubtedly provoked by Cultural Revolution anti-feudalism, Zheng felt obliged to defend taiji's lineage against modern-minded scholars in his *New Method of Self-Study in Taijiquan*: "Some people have indulged in wild slander, claiming that taijiquan was not created by the immortal Zhang Sanfeng. I do not know what their motives are." He goes on to recite a number of principles from the *Laozi* shared by taijiquan, concluding, "Who but Sanfeng could have attained this.... Sanfeng took the principles of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi and applied them to the martial arts. Therefore, we call it the internal system. The Buddha was from India, that is, from a foreign country. Bodhidharma was a Buddhist and, therefore, his art is called external" (Zheng, n.d.: 20). Although accepting folklore as fact cannot endear him to historians, nevertheless, Zheng's message as a cultural ideologue is unmistakable: taijiquan's status as *the* Chinese martial art is inseparable from its special relationship

with Daoism. Passing these genes to the next generation, Zheng's Chongqing era student Zhang Qixian in his 1969 *The Essential Principles and Practice of Taijiquan* gives a highly imaginative account of Zhang Sanfeng, complete with precise birth information (ninth day, fourth month, 1247 CE, following mother, nee Lin's, dream of a great stork coming from the sea). According to Zhang Qixian, Sanfeng created the art from observation of a snake's successful defense against a bird, *Yijing* cosmology, and the methods of past martial artists such as Xu Xuanping. Zheng Manqing's Taiwan era student Song Zhijian in his 1970 five hundred page magnum opus *The Study of Taijiquan*, not only accepts the Song Shuming genealogy, but offers complete biographies of all its unattested figures, and even a biography of Song Shuming himself. The trend among Yang lineage authors to magnify the mythological and Daoist trappings over time may be a deliberate counter-discourse to modernist movements on the mainland, but also thumbs its nose at deconstructionist practices in progressive Western scholarship. The scientific backgrounds of many of these authors and the amount of space devoted to legitimizing the art through appeal to Western science is also in stark contrast to their willingness to recapitulate and even embellish the most fabulous origination myths.

The next most widely practiced style is that founded by Wu Jianquan (1870-1942), whose father Quanyu (1834-1902) was a student of second generation Yang family scion, Yang Banhou (1837-1892). As with the Yang transmission, the first published book was by a non-family member, in this case Wu Tunan's 1928 *Taijiquan*, which following on his 1926 *Brief Introduction to Chinese Martial Arts* presents formal biographies of all the unattested figures in Song Shuming's genealogy. Wu's background as an archeologist did not prevent him from exceeding all others in fabricating the minutiae of Zhang's travels and contacts, but there is no mention of how he came by martial skills. Zhang Sanfeng's life is a caricature of the Daoist immortal, but there is no special pleading for Daoism itself. Contradicting the *Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan*, he places Wang Zongyue next in line after Zhang and makes Gan Fengchi the end of the southern branch. Jiang Fa of the northern branch brings the art to Chen Village. In his 1984 *Studies on Taijiquan*, Wu, nearing centenarian status, reaffirms his faith in the Xu Xuanping origination myth. In 1935, two other Wu Jianquan students, Ma Yueliang and Chen Zhenmin, published a manual with photos of Wu Jianquan, entitled *Wu Style Taijiquan*. This work takes an unusual approach to lineage. Truncating the Wu Tunan chart, it eliminates the southern branch and all pre-Zhang figures. Moreover, using an evolutionary analysis, it insists that self-defense is a natural ability of man, systematized by Bodhidharma, and refined by Zhang Sanfeng. This Darwinian analysis allows them to simultaneously acknowledge mythological origins, pay homage to the Yang family, and leave room for their own superiority as a further development on Yang. In the same year, Wu Jianquan's second son, Gongzao, published *Commentaries on Taijiquan*, which continues to prune the family tree, eliminating all charts, biographies, and any mention of Zhang Sanfeng. He pays homage only to his own father and close disciples, but this does not mean that he is turning his back on Daoism. On the contrary, he says that taiji's principles, "coincide perfectly with Daoist meditation and really constitute a Daoist practice" (Wu, 1935: 13).

With the phenomenal success of the Yang family in the 20s and 30s, Chen family standard bearer Chen Xin sought to reassert proprietorship of the family art and to buttress in the literary realm what Chen Fake (1887-1957) had accomplished for the family honor in the gymnasias and arenas. To this end, he began in 1919 and published in 1933 the monumental *Introduction to Chen Family Taijiquan*, presenting the Chen



ABOVE, LEFT AND RIGHT:
DAOIST MONKS
INSIDE A TEMPLE.

Photograph by Kipling Swehla
(www.kiplingphoto.com)
and courtesy of the
Taoist Restoration Society
(www.taoarts.com).

family form together with many pages of theoretical essays. By contrast, the traditional Chen family manuscripts discovered by Tang Hao in the village consisted of little more than lists of forms with posture names and a handful of terse training songs. Needing an ancestral progenitor, Chen Xin names Chen Bu, the first to relocate the family from Shanxi to Wen County in Henan, as creator of taijiquan. To compete with the Yang mystique, however, he still needed to establish Daoist credentials. This he accomplished in two ways: first, his book is a tour de force in cosmology and medicine, and second, he introduces a poem attributed to ancestor Chen Wangting in which the latter mentions his devotion to the *Scripture of the Yellow Court*, a famous Daoist cultivation work. He thus attempts to demonstrate, strictly within the parameters of family lineage, that it is possible to create a martial art with Daoist content and inspiration without a Daoist first cause. As we shall see later, rivals in neighboring Zhaobao effectively abandon family lineage and hitch their wagons directly to Zhang Sanfeng.

Positing historical lineages preceded by remote mythological progenitors and ancestors is a common cultural pattern among many peoples. The folkloric process may have been at work with Wang Zhengnan, but it was literati Huang Zongxi and Huang Baijia who presented it to the world. In the case of the Chen's and Yang's, the Chen's had no tradition of Zhang Sanfeng, and Yang Luchan would not have heard this in Chen Village. Even if he had been aware of the *Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan* and *Internal School's Boxing Methods*, unlikely for an illiterate peasant, he probably would not have associated this with the art he was taught in Henan so far from Zhejiang. The Huang documents are the locus classici for the Zhang Sanfeng creation myth, and derivative versions were carried in the *Ningbo Prefectural Gazetteer*, *Strange Tales from the Studio of Idleness* and *Complete works of Zhang Sanfeng*. We do not know who made the first link between Zhang Sanfeng and taijiquan, and no two versions are the same, but we do know that the promoters of this lineage were among the educated elite, including many with Western scientific knowledge, and could hardly be considered part of a folk process. Their motivations, then, must have been conscious and deserve further exploration.

The first generation of taijiquan books were written against the background of an unstable republic, warlordism, and the Northern Expedition, but not yet a strong communist movement or imminent Japanese invasion. What is interesting at the present juncture is that in spite of Tang Hao, Xu Zhen, Gu Liuxin and many other's attempts to deconstruct these invented traditions, we now enter the 21st century with claims on behalf of the Yangs more fantastic than anything these pioneering martial arts historians were obliged to explode. Although the first three generations of Yang family masters have been the object of extreme veneration and no small amount of apocrypha, they are still derivative of the Chen art, which in turn is viewed by some as a rustic retention of the exalted art of the immortal Zhang. If Yang Luchan could be linked directly with a Daoist source, this would reduce the Chen role to kindergarten and turn Luchan, whom Tang Hao determined to be a peasant bondservant, into a Daoist initiate.

Although Luchan lived in the 19th century and is the founder of taijiquan's most widely disseminated style, there is not a shred of reliable biographical information about him, in fact, while arguably the most famous son of Yongnian County, his name does not appear in the local gazetteer, either as a degree holder, or even as a martial artist. Firsthand impressions of Luchan by grandson Chengfu are seriously undermined by the fact that Chengfu was born twelve years after Luchan's death. Controversies have centered on Luchan's background (was he a peasant or literatus?), his martial arts education (did he learn in Chen Village from boyhood, or did he make the fabled "three pilgrim-

ages?”), and more recently, was he really a tutor to the Manchu princes in Beijing? Questions that might trouble sober scholars have not restrained He Hongming, a student of Li Yaxuan (himself a student of Luchan’s grandson Yang Chengfu), who reports that Li told him that on his “third trip” to Chen Village, Yang was given the “classics” written by Zhang Sanfeng and then set out to the Wudang Mountains to learn inner alchemy from reclusive adepts. This led him to eliminate the jumps, stamps, hard kicks and strikes, and uneven tempo found in the Chen form and to give taijiquan the distinctive “internal” characteristics we now associate with it (He, 1999: 34-35). Zhao Youbin, Lu Dimin, Feng Fuming, and Yong Yangren are also in agreement that Yang Luchan received the classics from Chen Changxing (Zhao, Lu, & Feng, 1989: 22-24; Yong, 89, 26-31). Although this contradicts many firsthand accounts describing the gradual softening of the form through the first three generations of Yang masters and its adaptation to the urban intelligentsia, He Hongming’s tale forges a much closer connection between the Yang’s and Daoism, making Zhang Sanfeng the author of the taiji “classics,” putting them into Yang’s hands in Chen Village, and sending Luchan himself to the Wudang Mountains to study with “Daoists.” This version also minimizes the role of the Chen family and effectively erases the Wu’s and Li’s. A similar assertion is made in a recent article by Li Shirong, “revealing” that Luchan received the classics from his teacher Chen Changxing, who preserved the Wang Zongyue manuscript of Zhang Sanfeng’s writings (Li, 2000: 26-27). Again, this flies in the face of Tang Hao’s finding no writings or oral tradition of Zhang Sanfeng in Chen Village and the absence of same in Chen Xin’s *Introduction to Chen Family Taijiquan*. While making no attempt to refute, or even acknowledge, the findings of responsible scholars, He and Li seem willing to trade in Yang Luchan’s historical role as a humble but gifted lineage founder for an invented role in the Zhang Sanfeng transmission and a Daoist initiate.

A few scholars have managed to avoid being kidnapped in either the Wudang Mountains or Chen Village. Bian Renjie (Bian, 1936: 5-9), Hu Puan (Wu, n.d.: 194), and Zhuang Shen (Zeng, 1960: 223-228) review the many mutually contradictory claims, concluding that the evidence advanced by partisans on all sides is false and credible records still unavailable. Wu Zhiqing, a 1917 student of Yang Chengfu, is able to steer clear of sectarianism and mystification, coming to the enlightened and elegant conclusion that:

Taijiquan is not a mysterious and bizarre magical art; neither is it the shallow skill of body guards and street performers. Rather, it is a natural self-defense, exercise, and health system that arises from the natural world.

– Wu, n.d.: 1

Similarly, Zhao Ximin (Zhao, 1979: 85-105), Wang Juexin (Wang, 1976: 5), and Zhou Jiannan (Zhou, 1976: 77-99), writing in Taiwan in the wake of the mainland’s Cultural Revolution, nevertheless were able to free themselves from Cold War bias to mete out praise and blame on strictly scholarly criteria. However, their writings were not available in mainland China, where they could have served to correct some of the blind spots in Tang Hao’s official view, and they were likewise ignored by overseas anticommunist cultural conservatives, just as they are today by the Neo-Zhang Sanfeng taiji religionists. In the end, these voices of reason were not able to carry the day, and one set of narrow views prevailed as the official version on the mainland, while the other became the self-appointed opposition and exclusive export model.





ZHENG MANQING LECTURED
ON TAIJIQUAN, TRADITIONAL
CHINESE MEDICINE, AND
CHINESE PHILOSOPHY.

Photo courtesy of
Kenneth Van Sickle.
www.sinobarr.com

Consonance with Daoist Philosophy

Fabricating a lineage from a famous immortal in Chinese folklore is one approach to linking taijiquan to Daoism, but taiji's claim to being the thinking man's martial art rests more securely on its theoretical consonance with Daoist philosophy. Ironically, although the "taiji classics" have many embedded quotations from the *Yijing*, *Great Learning*, *Book of History*, *Records of the Grand Historian*, Zhu Xi, Zhou Dunyi, and Mencius, there are none from the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. The first generation of modern taiji books, those of Sun Lutang, Chen

Weiming, Xu Yusheng, and Chen Xin, are similarly eclectic in their use of philosophical sources. Sun Lutang credits the *Yijing* with inspiring Zhang to soften the qigong regimen of immortality seekers, and though he himself does not cite the *Laozi* directly, the Wu Xingu and Chen Zengze prefaces are devoted chiefly to establishing the Daoist connection. Xu Yusheng says that, "Zhang Sanfeng based his art on the *Confucian* [author ital.] principle of taiji" (Xu, 1921: 2) and mentions Zhuangzi's "from skill we approach the dao," but makes no special appeal to Daoism as taiji's official philosophy. In fact, in a preface to Xu's work, Yang Chang says despairingly, "In the midst of the current difficulties, most of our educated men escape into Buddhism and Daoism" (Xu, 1921: 4). In Zhang Yiling's preface to Xu's book, he credits Japan's victory over Russia to the former's promotion of judo, which he hastens to point out is borrowed from China (Xu, 1921: 1). Like everyone else, Xu uses *Yijing* cosmology to explain the principles of taijiquan, but says, "Today, science has reached an advanced stage, where it can be anticipated that in the future, geometry and mechanics will be used to explain the principles of taijiquan, without resorting to the *Yijing*" (Xu, 1921: 3). Xu then proceeds to a detailed exposition of Zhou Dunyi and Shao Yong's *Yijing*-based cosmologies and how they relate to taiji.

Representing the Wu Jianquan transmission, Wu Tunan's 1928 *Taijiquan* adopts the Song Shuming genealogy but uses no cosmological language or references to any philosophical school. Instead it praises taijiquan as scientifically superior to both hard Chinese styles and Western calisthenics. Similarly, Chen Zhenmin and Ma Yueliang's *Wu [Jianquan] Style Taijiquan* says, "Because taijiquan appears relatively late and its history is fairly short, its system is more clearly delineated.... In all branches of learning or skill, later creations are superior to earlier...and martial arts are no exception to this rule" (Chen & Ma, 1935: 1, 3). This work also emphasizes taiji's consonance with modern science, downplaying cosmological language and debts to traditional philosophy. Representing the Yang transmission, Chen Weiming is sparing with cosmological jargon, but concludes his *The Art of Taijiquan* with a lengthy series of parallel quotations from the *Laozi* and the taiji classics. Fellow Yang Chengfu disciple Dong Yingjie provides a biography of Zhang, but no separate section of parallel quotations. Zheng Manqing, another Chengfu disciple, in his *New Method of Self-study in Taijiquan* gives no biography but provides relevant quotations from the *Yijing*, *Laozi*, and *Neijing*. Yang Chengfu's 1931 *Taijiquan shiyong fa* begins with a biography of Zhang Sanfeng, but has no extended cosmological expositions. His 1934 *Taijiquan tiyong quanshu*, however, does contain an introductory discussion on philosophical roots, and in Zheng Manqing's preface to the work, he specifically addresses the question of philosophical affinity, giving explicit priority to Daoism. Reviewing other traditional texts that countenance hardness as the natural complement of softness, Zheng finds in *Laozi* the only consistently soft-sided philosophy:

Only the greatest hardness can overcome the greatest softness; only the greatest softness can overcome the greatest hardness. The *Yijing* says, “Hard and soft rub against each other, and the eight trigrams knock together.” The *Book of History* says, “The thoughtful and imperturbable conquer by hardness; the wise and skillful conquer by softness.” The *Book of Odes* says, “He would not eat the hard or spit out the soft.” But when it comes to the application of hard and soft, there cannot be two approaches. Why is it that Laozi alone says, “The highest softness overcomes the highest hardness,” and also, “The soft and weak triumph over the hard and strong?”

– Yang, 1934: 3

For Zheng, the principle of uncompromising softness goes beyond self-cultivation and self-defense, and in national policy constitutes “the means for strengthening the nation and alleviating the people’s suffering” (Yang, 1934: 4). Zheng expresses taiji’s relationship with Daoism in this simple equation: “Taijiquan enables us to reach the stage of undifferentiated pure yang, which is exactly the same as Laozi’s ‘concentrating the qi and developing softness’” (Zheng, 1952: 6). In order to achieve this level, however, Zheng struggles with the line in the taiji classics, “Those with qi have no strength.” Parsing the distinction between strength, qi, and mind, Zheng combines Laozi’s “Concentrate the qi and develop softness” with the inner elixir formula, “Refine the essence into qi and the qi into spirit” to explicate the classics’ “The mind must be on the spirit and not on the qi; if it is on the qi, there will be blocks, and where there is qi, there is no strength; without qi there is pure hardness” (Zheng, 1952: 8). It is clear that Zheng looks to Laozi for the highest expression of spiritual attainment and that practice without enlightenment and faith in softness can never lead to “essential hardness” (*chungang*) or “spiritual power” (*shenli*). Zheng’s student Song Jianzhi continues this theme, “We cannot be certain who first created taijiquan, but judging from its name and principles, there is no doubt it was a Daoist...Daoism begins with Laozi...and his principles are precisely those governing the practice of stillness and action in taijiquan as well as inner elixir cultivation” (Song, 1959: 11). For Zheng and his disciples, the efficacy of softness could only be demonstrated after a considerable period of “*xue chikui*” (investing in loss), as only “supreme softness” will cause hardness to defeat itself.

It would be difficult to find any martial arts style during the late Qing-early Republican period that did not use Daoist language to legitimize itself, appeal to intellectuals, and contribute to the construction of national identity. It goes without saying that taijiquan shares its movement principles and inner energetics with sister arts xingyi and bagua, but soft-style philosophy was adopted even by Shaolin during this period. The *Traditional Shaolin* and *Secret Transmissions of Shaolin Boxing*, judged by Tang Hao to be no earlier than late Qing, express Shaolin’s principles in terms of hard and soft, full and empty, and the pseudonymous author consistently refers to Shaolin as “the art of softness” (Zunwozhai, n.d.: 1-2; Tang, 1986: 70). In order to further elide any essential philosophical distinction between Shaolin and Wudang, the *Traditional Shaolin* insists that the terms “internal and external,” refer not to training or tactics, but to Shaolin’s Buddhist origins. Tang Hao, who studied in Japan, also points out that the language of the Shaolin manuals sounds reminiscent of Japanese judo literature. Thus, at a time when China was under siege by Japan, China’s martial arts ideologues may well have been aware of the role of judo in Japan’s martial arts revival and in building a sense of superiority to the West and thus adopted its soft-style stance. In fact, the *Secrets of Shaolin Boxing* even attempts to adopt Zhang Sanfeng himself, characterizing him as a Shaolin master who in

his later years systematized the “72 pressure point techniques,” which he learned from a Daoist named Feng Yiyuan (Zunwozhai, n.d.; 108; Tang, 1986: 79).

No martial art has expended as much effort to establish its philosophical pedigree as taijiquan. The persistence of this view can be seen in a recent article by Ma Yuannian, entitled “Taijiquan and Confucian Thought” (“*Taijiquan he rujia sixiang*”):

It is well-known that taijiquan is a Daoist art and that its symbol is the taiji diagram....However, historically Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism have influenced and learned from each other, and therefore, although purely a product of Daoism, taijiquan has also absorbed some Buddhist and Confucian elements, especially Confucianism’s philosophy of the “golden mean.”

– Ma, 1998: 32-33

Even in an article ostensibly devoted to exploring the Confucian contribution to taijiquan’s development, the author has already conceded that taiji is a “Daoist art.”

In the *Laozi*, softness overcoming hardness, or softness within hardness, are presented both as martial ethic and strategy. However, pacifist themes in the *Laozi*, such as, “Compassion allows us to be courageous,” and “Weapon are not auspicious instruments,” are not nearly as well developed in the taiji literature as in judo, aikido, or even Shaolin. Strategically, the *Laozi*’s, “I do not dare to play the host, but play the guest. I would rather retreat a yard than advance a foot,” “Courage in daring gets us killed; courage in not killing allows us to live,” and “The sage does not contend, and therefore no one in the world can contend with him” become in taiji a defensive strategy of disarming the opponent by apparent yielding, while giving him enough rope to hang himself. Laozi’s “non-action” (*wuwei*) functions in taiji as letting others strike the first blow, neutralizing the incoming energy, sticking to it, borrowing it, and returning it. “Egolessness” (*wuwo*) in the *Laozi* corresponds to taiji’s “emptying,” so that the opponent’s force “lands on nothing.” Martial arts writers from Huang Zongxi and Huang Baijia to the present have appreciated the wider allegorical significance of martial arts’ soft-style strategy. In a postscript to a 1980 reprint of Wu Gongzao’s *Commentaries on Taijiquan* no less a figure than Jin Yong, China’s most celebrated martial arts novelist, makes very explicit the relationship between taijiquan, Daoism, and international political strategy:

Humility invites advantage; pride courts disaster—this is China’s political and personal philosophy.... Legend has it that taijiquan was created by Zhang Sanfeng, and Zhang Sanfeng was a Daoist. Taijiquan perfectly expresses Daoist philosophy. However, Daoist philosophy does not advocate pure passivity. Rather, Laozi emphasized that if you want to get something, you must first give something, and thus he said, “Great nations remain humble,” meaning that the powerful do not puff themselves up but conserve their strength, while their enemies exhaust themselves. This is the time to strike.

– Wu, 1980: 135-37

It is important to remember that in all three of the dominant versions of the Zhang Sanfeng myth, he is not a Daoist quietist but a warrior who goes forth to slay bandits. In Chinese, of course, “bandits” (*fei, zei, kou*) can refer to domestic rebels or foreign invaders. What did “Daoism” mean to turn of the century martial arts ideologues? In the late 19th century, reformer Tan Sitong strove mightily to harmonize Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity, but banished Daoism as encouraging passivity, Legalism as

too repressive, and Neo-Confucianism as too puritanical. The seminal works on taijiquan written during the 1920s and 30s obviously had a different understanding of “Daoism.” For them, the philosophy of hardness within softness, as for Huang Zongxi, was consonant with the non-confrontational political policy of appeasement pursued by both the late Qing Manchu regime and early Republican KMT (Kuomintang, 1912-1924).

Hundreds of books and articles have been devoted to establishing that taiji practice derives from the *Yijing*’s principles of hard and soft, full and empty. The majority of these are based not only on the idealistic assumption that theory precedes practice but that the *Yijing* is a Daoist work. Since the time of the *Cantongqi* and *Neijing*, cosmological language has been used to describe the internal energetics of meditation and medicine. Its earliest recorded wholesale application to the martial arts is seen in Chang Naizhou and the taiji classics. Because Confucius is traditionally credited with editing the *Yijing* and because of its importance in Song Neo-Confucianism, even some taiji exponents are prepared to concede its Confucian origins.

Others, however, fearing dilution of the Daoist association explain that although Zhou Dunyi, author of the *Taijitu shuo* was not a Daoist himself, he stole the taiji symbol and its theory from a Daoist, usually identified as the immortal Chen Xiyi. However, by far the majority of taiji writers simply adopt the *Yijing* as a Daoist work. In the Chinese popular imagination, anything expressing arcane principles in mysterious symbols is associated with Daoism.

Following the correlative logic of the Daoism-*Yijing*-taijiquan triangle, it becomes increasingly clear that during taiji’s maturation period in the 19th and early 20th centuries, to say something was Daoist was simply to say that it was Chinese. Calling it Confucian or Buddhist during the late Qing would not do, as the Manchu rulers had successfully co-opted both. Ironically, it is during times of national emergency that the Confucian theme of service to the state seems to have no rallying power and heterodox faiths promising supernatural power and a vision of the sublime come to the fore. Like these millenarian communities and secret societies, the martial arts movement of the turn of the century was not simply escapist but provided a channel for repressed nationalism, religiosity, and masculinity. The promotion of Daoism in China, wedded to the knight-errant (*xia*) tradition, parallels the resurrection of the samurai spirit for Japan’s modern army, whose officers carried swords as symbols of the Japanese soul.

Associating taijiquan with philosophy was intended to make it palatable to the intelligentsia at a time when it was imperative to overcome the “sick man of Asia” syndrome and for effete literati to put aside their disdain for physical culture. Most martial artists were not members of the gentry class, however, let alone Confucian or Daoist, and literati like Huang Baijia, Wu Yuxiang, and Zheng Manqing have only studied with and glorified them during periods of national emergency. Although 19th century reformers had pointed out that archery and charioteering were part of the classical Confucian curriculum, they could only sell the martial as an expedient for national salvation and could not turn it into something transcendent. If progressive 19th century reformers rejected Daoism as representing passivity and superstition, a subset of conservative intellectuals intuited that only Daoism could transform the martial arts into a dao.

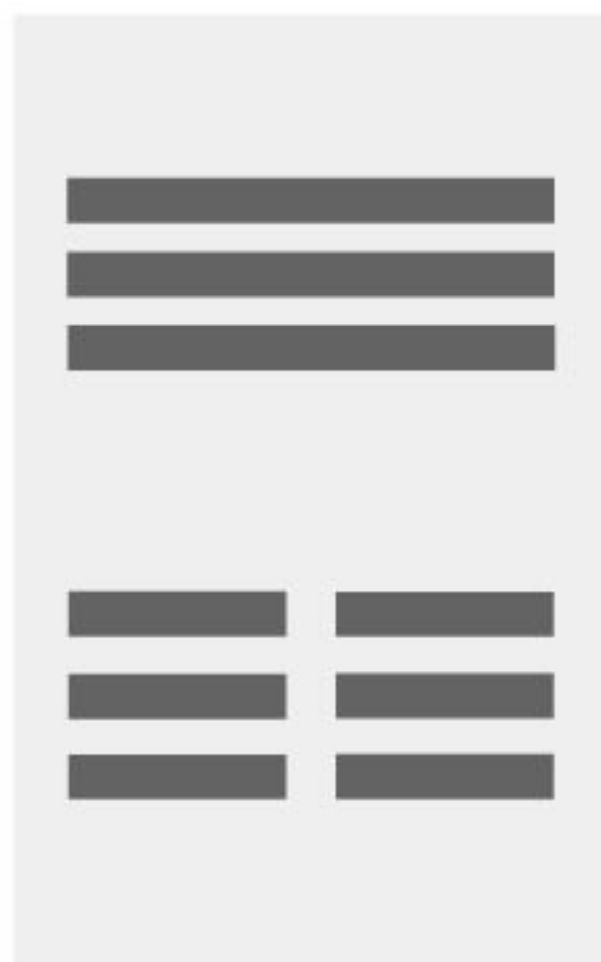




ILLUSTRATION OF ZHANG
SANFENG TAKEN FROM THE
COLLECTED WORKS OF
ZHANG SANFENG (1844).

Illustration courtesy
of Douglas Wile.

Taijiquan and Daoist Cultivation

With a Daoist lineage and Daoist principles, taijiquan has its figurehead and its philosophy, but there are many paths to Daoist realization. The story of Zhang Sanfeng deriving the principles of a martial art from observing the battle of a snake and crane is like Fu Xi abstracting the trigrams from gazing at heaven and earth. Shen Nong, the God of Agriculture, who “tasted a hundred herbs,” and master butcher Pao Ding, whose knife met no resistance and so never dulled, are the prototypes of experimentation and induction, “approaching the dao through skill.” The shamanistic aspect of Daoism may be seen in the immortal Zhang’s receiving the martial art in a dream from the god Xuan Wu. The deductive approach to the dao is seen in Zhang’s reversal of Shaolin’s principle of hardness and speed for softness and stillness. Another path is abstraction, or self-emptying and desirelessness, that allows the background consciousness, which is one with the dao, to come to the fore. Finally, there is inner alchemy, a process that seeks to transform the body’s intrinsic energies and achieve immortality through the triumph of the prenatal over the postnatal and yang over yin. It is the last of these that is chiefly the focus of self-cultivation in taiji theory. Self-cultivation, in turn, tends to be represented in two ways: cultivation as the servant of self-defense, or self-defense as a skill leading to enlightenment or the dao. In the mythic, idealistic realm of Zhang Sanfeng, enlightenment precedes the creation of the martial art, but in the historical realm of human practice, cultivation leads to mastery of the art, and mastery of the art leads to realization of the dao.



SUN LUTANG
(1861-1932).

Zhuangzi scoffed at yogic self-cultivation, as did Ge Hong, although for different reasons, and even *Complete works of Zhang Sanfeng’s* most frequently cited “*Da dao lun*” (Treatise on the Great Dao) says, “Some aspirants engage in massage and *daoyin*, breathing exercises, and herbs as methods of self-cultivation. Although these methods can temporarily relieve some illnesses, they cannot confer immortality and are considered laughable by true adepts” (Li, 1844: *juan* 3). Li Xiyue and his Sichuan circle, who forged the Zhang Sanfeng canon in the early 19th century, had no thought that this might prove to be an embarrassment to

early 21st century revivers of Zhang Sanfeng as the patron saint of taijiquan. In spite of attributing the Internal School to “a Daoist alchemist,” there is nothing in the *Art of the Internal School’s Boxing Methods* that relates to internal cultivation techniques. The Chen family material, likewise, contains no evidence of qigong importations prior to Chen Xin’s early 20th century book. We find it full-blown, however, in Chang Naizhou’s 18th century writings:

The central qi is what the classics on immortality call the source yang or what medicine calls the source qi. Because it dwells in the center of the body, martial artists call it the central qi. This qi is the prenatal true monadal qi. Spiritual cultivation produces the inner elixir; martial cultivation produces the external elixir. However, the inner elixir always depends on the outer elixir, for action and stillness mutually engender each other. Proper cultivation naturally results in forming the ethereal fetus and returning to the primordial state.

– Chang, 1932: 1

Interestingly, although Chang and the taiji classics share many verbatim and parallel passages, there are no traceable lineage links between his art and either Chen Village or

Wuyang, the alleged site of the classics' find. In the "Author's Preface" to his 1919 *The Study of Taijiquan*, Sun Lutang is very explicit about taiji's potential for self-cultivation, and in a passage that reads like a Chinese *Genesis* says:

At the dawn of the creation of heaven and earth, the original qi circulated freely. With the division and union of action and stillness, all creatures came into being, and this is the post-creation realm of form. The pre-creation original qi was wedded to the post-creation material world, and thus the post-creation substance contains the pre-creation original qi. Man, therefore, is a being who combines both the pre- and post-creation qi. However, once man acquired knowledge and desires, yin and yang were out of balance, and our post-creation qi gradually increased, resulting in the decline of yang and an overabundance of yin. Moreover, we are assailed by the six external qi—wind, cold, heat, dampness, dryness, and fire—and subject to the seven emotions. In this way, the body becomes daily weaker, and myriad illnesses appear. The ancients were concerned about this and experimented with herbs to eliminate illness, meditated to cultivate the mind, and fearing that movement and stillness would not be balanced, invented the martial arts in order to restore the subtle qi.

– Sun, 1919: 1

Except for the concluding sentence, this passage could be the opening paragraph of any of a thousand tracts on inner elixir meditation, and clearly positions taijiquan as a method for realizing the dao. Substituting the goal of supreme self-defense for immortality, however, Sun, in his *The True Essence of the Martial Arts* says:

When one's art reaches the level of uniting emptiness with the dao, which is the true mind, it is transformed into the realm of the highest emptiness and highest void. When the mind is empty and without a single object, if suddenly something unexpected happens, even without hearing or seeing it, you can sense and avoid it.

– Sun, 1924: 8

Nearly a century later, Sun Lutang's daughter, Sun Jianyun, echoes this same theme:

One of the reasons why xingyi, bagua, and taiji have flourished during the 20th century is that they allow us to become one with the dao, that is, they are martial arts that are simultaneously Daoist arts.

– Tong, 1999: 12

Radical new voices today, like Guo Tiefeng, however, are prepared to go beyond mere mystical union with the dao and boldly proclaim:

Taijiquan is one of the paths to Daoist immortality and it gives practitioners an air of spiritual otherworldliness.... Taijiquan originated with Laozi and its goal is the attainment of immortality.

– Guo, 1999: 28

This statement puts taijiquan in the service of a Daoism narrowly defined as the pursuit of immortality and is a throwback to Du Yuanhua, whose 1935 *Orthodox Taijiquan* insists,

This art is a vehicle for cultivating the elixir and gaining longevity. After long practice, it can truly allow us to achieve the state of pure yang, that is, immortality.

– Yan, 1997: 8

Although there are at least four different interpretations of the term “internal art” (*neijia*), in common usage today, taiji is considered “internal” because it works from the inside out, that is, training the qi rather than the muscles, bones, and ligaments and aims at developing intrinsic energy (*jin*) rather than brute strength (*li*). As a self-cultivation method, taijiquan has many things in common with other methods, as well as some unique features. The system almost always includes a form and usually push-hands. Like progressing from sheet music to memorization to improvisation, the form and push-hands are the scales, compositions, and duets of body mechanics, internal energy, and self-defense techniques. Ancillary exercises often include sitting meditation to focus on emptying the mind and opening the microcosmic orbit; standing meditation to raise the *yangqi*, lower the energetic center of gravity, and demonstrate how relaxation and abdominal breathing alter the perception of pain; acupressure massage to develop awareness of points and qi channels; and qigong to experience qi mobilization in repetitive single phrase exercises without the mental burden of memorization; and weapons to train qi extension beyond the body. More advanced work may include moving push-hands, fencing, free sparring, and grappling. Like sexual practices, all of these partnering exercises train coolness under fire and stillness in motion; scripts are left behind, and like dancers losing themselves in the music, one enters the realm of “soaring on the laws of the universe.”

The path of natural movement is discovered by relaxing, listening inwardly, and slowing down, all of which takes us out of our conditioned mental and physical habits and allows us to drop into the dao. The slow tempo, taiji’s most distinctive external feature, slows the mind and breath, heightens awareness of gravity, momentum, and centrifugal force, and accelerates the strengthening of the legs. The body is emptied of tension and the mind of discursive thoughts and goals. In meditation, preconceptions stand in the way of enlightenment; in taijiquan, preconceptions cause the body to trip over the mind’s intentions and prevent us from “forgetting ourselves and following the opponent.” The fusion of body, mind, and breath in a moving meditation creates the perfect balance of excitation and relaxation required for the “flow” experience, and by centering the self in the radical present sets the stage for experiencing rare moments of spontaneity (*ziran*). Alignment creates the structural precondition for relaxation and optimizes the body mechanics for neutralizing or issuing energy, while emptying the body of tension allows the qi to concentrate and circulate. With both consciousness and qi rooted in center (*dantian*), the mind and extremities are relieved of leadership roles and practitioners can enjoy the “no-mind” experience of improvisational spontaneity—effortless, egoless, just so.

Whether couched in the terms of alchemy, cosmology, mythology, or medicine, all Chinese meditation texts are based on restoring body-mind harmony, or the heart-kidney axis, by focusing the mind in the lower abdomen. The injunction to “sink the *qi* to the *dantian*” appears in virtually every text of the Li Yiyu and Yang family redactions of the taiji classics, but nowhere in Qi Jiguang’s *Boxing Classic*, Huang Baijia’s *Internal School’s Boxing Methods*, or the traditional Chen family material. The 18th and 19th centuries mark a turning point, then, in martial arts, when Chang Naizhou’s writings and the taiji classics show the absorption of cultivation concepts into martial arts practice. Chen Xin’s *Introduction to Chen Family Taijiquan* says,

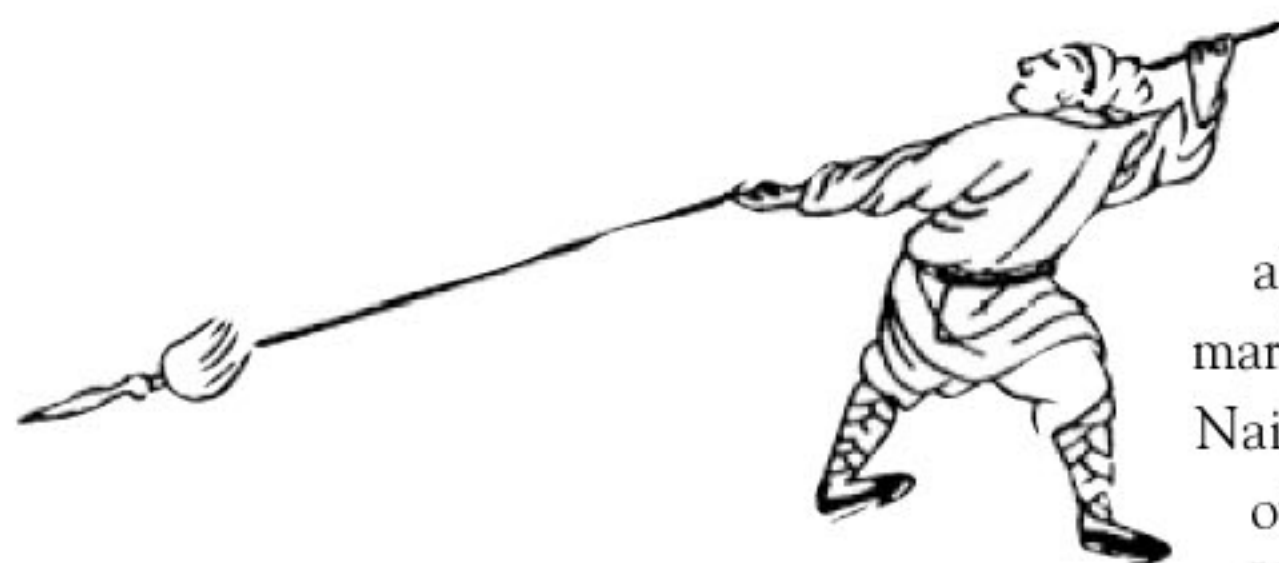


ILLUSTRATION FOUND
IN THE MILITARY ARTS
MANUAL BY GENERAL
QI JIGUANG (1507-1587)
ENTITLED *BOOK OF
EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE*.

“Maintaining the focus in the center is what the Daoists refer to as gathering the *jing* and concentrating the *qi* so that the concentrated *qi* reverts to spirit” (Chen, 1934: 139). Chen and others like Zheng Manqing go further than dantian concentration and apply full microcosmic orbit meditation, based on a continuous circuit of qi circulation up the *du* (governing) and down the *ren* (controlling) channels, to taiji practice. It is only a small step then to bringing the entire channel system into the martial arts, with focus on specific acupuncture points and the use of various macrocosmic orbits to circulate the qi throughout the entire body. Other qigong techniques are enlisted by some taiji practitioners to demonstrate supernormal powers to attack acupuncture points (*dianxue*), withstand blows (*tieyi*), protect the genitals (*macangshen*), or issue energy through space (*lingkong faqi*). For taijiquan, and to some degree all the Chinese martial arts, to have adopted the language and methods of qigong and meditation is as natural as the Japanese martial arts borrowing from Zen. Although Western athletes may make use of prayer and psychology, it is the Western dance community that has evinced far greater interest in Indian yoga, Zen meditation, and Asian martial arts.

One of the perennial debates in Daoist meditation, and more broadly in Chinese philosophy, is whether to cultivate the mind (*xing, xin*) first, the body (*ming, shen*) first, or both simultaneously. This discussion is also sometimes framed as stillness (*jing*) versus action (*dong*), or the spiritual (*wen*) versus the martial (*wu*). Exponents of taijiquan have been uniquely well situated to champion the simultaneous cultivation position. Sitting meditators have often held that the *yangqi* sprouting in *yin* stillness is the pure prenatal *yang*, but have been criticized by qigong and sexual practitioners as fostering stagnation rather than stillness. Active practitioners, for their part, have sought to generate and mobilize large amounts of qi, but have been criticized for over stimulation and relying on the postnatal. By seeking “stillness in movement and movement in stillness” taijiquan has laid claim to the Golden Mean. This is brought out in a recent article by Feng Zhiqiang:

Taijiquan is an internal martial art that simultaneously cultivates our intrinsic nature and life. Intrinsic nature and life may be called the heart and kidney....This dual cultivation through taijiquan allows us to achieve an equilibrium of water and fire and harmony of yin and yang, which promotes the goal of health and longevity.

– Feng, 2000: 18

Dual cultivation may be considered orthodox in Daoist cultivation, but “paired practices” (*shuangxiu*) have been a persistent undercurrent for more than two thousand years. Usually associated with sexual practices, in the wider sense, it also encompasses any form of borrowing or exchanging qi with a partner. The “Yang Family Forty Chapters,” attributed to Yang Banhou (1837-1892), contains a unique example of asexual paired practice within a martial arts context. Combining meditation’s concept of the mating (*jiao*) of the male/yang consciousness principle with the female/yin physical principle in the body, together with sexual practice’s concept of borrowing energy from a partner (*caizhan*) and applying this to martial arts sparring we hear:

The male body belongs to yin, hence gathering (*cai*) the yin from one’s own body or doing battle (*zhan*) with the female in one’s own body is not as good as matching yin and yang between two males. This is a faster method of cultivating the body.

– Wile, 1996: 87

In solo meditation, the mind is anchored by the body and the body energized by the mind. In the martial meditation proposed by the Yang family material, the “battle of essences” is played out in the interaction of trigrams and phases represented by the “eight techniques” and “five steps.” The text, whose title credits the work to Zhang Sanfeng, uses martial arts in the service of the “Great Learning’s” call to “self-cultivation” (*xiushen*) to uncover Wang Yangming’s “innate knowledge and ability” (*liangzhi liang-neng*) and achieve the state of “sagehood or immortality” (*shengshen*). The technical details are expressed in the language of inner alchemy, and the tone can only be called religious—a martial mysticism promising the warrior the same fruits of self-cultivation as the sage.



DEPICTIONS OF CHEN TAIJI
POSTURES AS SEEN ON A
WALL IN CHEN VILLAGE.

*Illustration courtesy
of Stephan Berwick.
www.truetaichi.com*

Contra Zhang and Officialist History

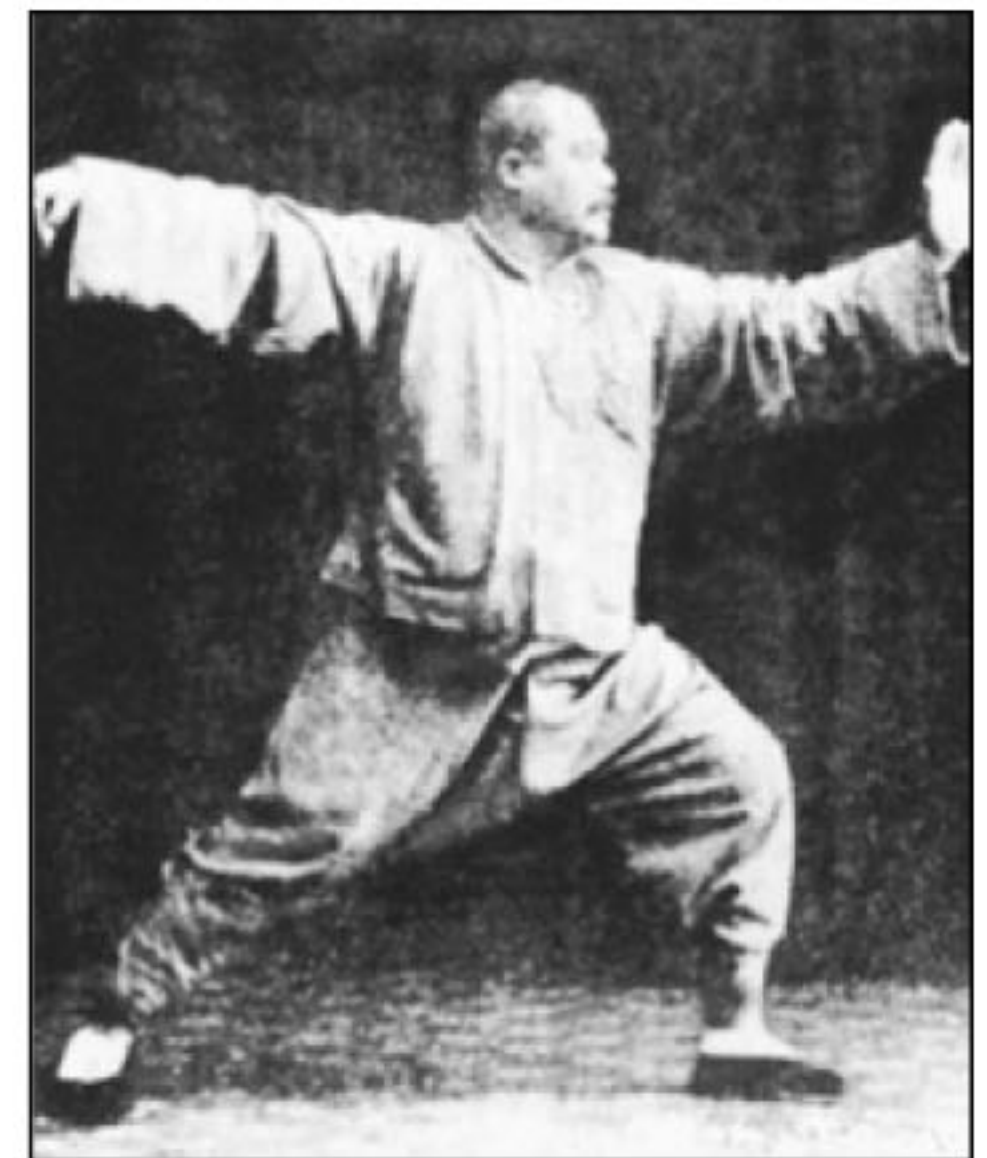
The same Nationalist government that was prepared to consign traditional Chinese medicine to the dustbin of history and allow Western medicine to win the day tacitly cooperated in the construction of a mythos for taijiquan and created an infrastructure for its dissemination. By the early decades of the 20th century, taiji had its progenitor, its philosophy, its genealogy, a proliferation of styles, a stable of living masters, and an institutional base in the national and regional martial arts academies. As long as writers accepted Daoism as the state religion of taijiquan and Zhang Sanfeng as its chief god, they were free to expand the pantheon or embellish its lore and legends. During the early decades of the Republic (1911-1949) on the mainland, the strongest voices in opposition to this invented tradition came not from hard or other internal styles, but from leftist taiji enthusiasts who resented the art’s abduction by conservative ideologues. Thus with a mission to demystify taijiquan and return it to the people, Tang Hao visited Chen Village in the early 1930s, followed by fieldwork in the Wudang Mountains to locate descendants of Zhang Sanfeng and in Ningbo to find traces of the Internal School. He found nothing in the Wudang Mountains or Ningbo, but in Chen Village discovered form manuals that were clearly successors to Qi Jiguan’s *Boxing Classic* and precursors to the Yang and subsequent forms. In the *Chen Family Biographies* and *Chen Family Genealogy*, he found entries stating that Chen Wangting, who served as a militia commander in Wen County in 1641 and retired after the fall of the Ming, was the creator of the family form, together with a poem attributed to Wangting saying that he choreographed martial arts forms in his retirement and always kept the *Huangting jing* by his side (Chen, 1933: 477; Tang/Gu, 1963: 7). Tang and collaborator Gu Liuxin acknowledge the Chen debt to Qi’s *Boxing Classic*, as seen in the Chen form posture names and the “Quangjing zongge” (Poem on the *Boxing Classic*) but say that Chen’s original contribution was the development of push-hands as a unique method of training tactile sensitivity and internal energy in sparring without protective gear. What Tang Hao found in Chen Village, then, was a copy of Qi’s *Boxing Classic* and living family members who still practiced one of the several forms recorded in the family manuals; what he did not find were the “classics” or any written or oral tradition regarding Zhang Sanfeng or Wang Zongyue.

In order to close the gap between the Chen family forms and the “classics” theory, Tang asserted that Wang Zongyue, who is credited with writing some of the texts in the Wu/Li and Yang family corpuses, must have studied in Chen village and summarized the principles of soft-style pugilism in these short compositions. Xu Zhen, also a modern-minded contemporary of Tang, could not accept that the Chen family developed taijiquan in isolation and so countered that Wang Zongyue must have been the transmitter

who brought the art to Chen village. Having discovered the cradle in Chen village and giving taiji a humanistic genesis, Tang was somewhat credulous in accepting the authenticity of the “bookstall” manuscript he found in Beijing, and whose author, “Mr. Wang of Shanxi,” he assumed to be Wang Zongyue, and the Chen family genealogy and biographies written or altered by Chen Xin. During the Mao era (1949-1976), idealistic accounts of human achievements were overturned as feudal dregs, a conspiracy to deprive the people of credit for producing knowledge with their own hands through trail and error. For Tang Hao, then, the prime mover is the masses. Qi Jiguang is a flesh and blood historical figure, and his form is a synthesis of the best features of sixteen popular styles he collected among the people. The Chen family is a flesh and blood grass roots family, and their family form is based on Qi’s *Boxing Classic*. There is no need to kidnap a Daoist immortal and turn him into a martial artist and a patriot. Qi’s credentials are impeccable: a patriotic general, a military reformer, a student, synthesizer, and standardizer of popular martial arts styles, and the most influential military mind since Sunzi. The changes—softening of the form and the addition of theory—in the transmission from Qi to Chen to Yang can all be explained by evolution.

Tang Hao’s views held sway through the fifties, when the torch was passed to Gu Liuxin, who promoted Tang’s thesis in a series of books, martial arts dictionaries, and even the *Chinese Encyclopedia*. Successors to Tang, Xu, and Gu still exist, but serious scholarship has been so marginalized by sensational historical fiction that, for example, a prefatory note by the editors of *Wuhun* to Mo Chaomai’s *Study of the Late-Qing Manchu Princes* apologizes for the “dryness” of the article, that uses the *Draft History of the Qing Dynasty* to overturn the long held Yang family legend that Luchan taught taijiquan in the palace and garrison of a Manchu prince (Mo, 1997: 43). Wu Wenhan uses legitimate historical documents, such as *True Record of the Taiping Rebels’ Attack on Huaiqing Prefecture* and *Diary of the Defense of Huaiqing Prefecture* to demonstrate that Chen family accounts of the time and success of Chen led militia in repelling the rebels was exaggerated (Wu, 1995: 17). Yan Han calls for putting aside subjectivity, emotionalism, and sectarianism and a return to Marx’s admonition: “Do not be concerned that your research conclusions fail to correspond to your subjective desires or popular theories but only that they reflect objective laws and historical fact” (Yan, 1999: 10). Pan Jianping compares the claims of the Neo-Zhang Sanfengists to the theory of “the divine right of kings” and restates Tang’s gradualist approach in these words: “The formation of taijiquan is a synthesis of Ming dynasty martial arts, especially the thirty-two postures of Qi Jiguang’s *Boxing Classic*, together with ancient qigong practices, channel theory, and proto-materialist yin-yang and five phases theory” (Pan, 1999: 51).

The pace of retiring errors in received wisdom is proceeding at a far slower rate than new fantasies are being churned out. In a strange convergence of Western orientalism and Chinese self-orientalization, many practitioners East and West would rather believe that they are participating in a practice with divine origins than a “synthesis” analyzed by intellectual historians; they would rather be part of something more romantic than mere human history, and so the voices of rationality grow smaller and smaller in a marketplace where fantasy is the ultimate product. Taiji religionist Li Zhaosheng’s assertion that taijiquan cannot sustain itself without Daoist trappings and the promise of immortality takes the experience of the art out of the practitioner’s sensorium and locates it in the realm of religion.



YANG CHENGFU
(1883-1936) IN
SINGLE WHIP POSTURE.

DAOIST MONK GAZING
OVER NATURE'S TERRAIN.

Photograph by Kipling Swehla
(www.kiplingphoto.com)
and courtesy of the
Taoist Restoration Society
(www.taoarts.com).



The only expressed opposition to Mainland officialism during the 1950s through the 1970s came from cultural conservatives in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese communities. The formula of most early 20th century taiji ideologues was patriotism, popularization, science, and mystification. The Communists eliminated only the mystification, using modern scholarship and science to explain taiji's history, theory, and practice. Myth deprived the people of their proud history, and lineage monopolized the knowledge that could benefit the whole nation. The psychosomatic state of relaxation in action induced by taiji practice is not described in terms of spiritual attainment but medicine and psychology. Conservative exponents of taiji believed that taiji's principles were consistent with Western science, but Western science was too crude to explain all of taijiquan. For this, a knowledge of traditional medicine and meditation was necessary. In effect, this amounted to the essentialist position that you had to be Chinese to grasp the secrets of taijiquan. If science and history could explain all of taijiquan, then anyone could master it, and it could no longer function as an ultimate refuge for Chinese identity. The thrust of arguments by cultural conservatives was that Chen Village was too marginal and the Chen family too undistinguished to create something as sublime as taijiquan—it could only have been created by an immortal. In the Chinese language postscript to Huang Wenshan's 1974 *Fundamentals of Tai Chi Chuan*, the author confesses to having been carried away in his youth by May Fourth Movement anti-feudal rhetoric and doubting Zhang Sanfeng, but after several decades of reflection has shaken off the May Fourth hangover and is coming home to Zhang (Huang, 1974: 515). If he was pushed one way by the May Fourth Movement, it is likely he was pushed the other by the Cultural Revolution. A reverse example is Wang Xinwu, whose 1930s *An Exposition of the Principles of Taijiquan* followed Song Shuming's fabricated lineage, but in the prefaces to his 1959 mainland and 1962 Hong Kong reprints allows that these tales were merely "myths" (Wang, 1959: n.p.; 1962: 2). Nevertheless, in communist and conservative, we see two different paths to national salvation: give the people faith in divine assistance or give them confidence in their own two hands.

Yang family spokesmen never denied their debt to Chen Village, but at the same time were at pains to construct a supernatural genesis for taijiquan. Chen Xin, for his part, strove to return the honor to his family by doctoring the family records and writing a book displaying encyclopedic mastery of medicine, cosmology, and meditation. Later generations of Chen family exponents obviously were comfortable with the official history of taijiquan and in so doing renounced any future claims to connection with Zhang Sanfeng. In exchange, they were allowed to glory in their ancestors. In the 1980s, Chen Xin's vision of the Chen family taking its rightful place in taiji history has been realized by a generation of Chen family members who have turned the village into a Mecca for training and competition and have made Chen style taijiquan the fastest growing style on the international circuit. Neighbors and rivals in Zhaobao, however, have taken the opposite tack and have thrown in with the Wudang camp. Thus we can see that Cold War era taiji sectarianism, with divisions primarily along ideological and cultural lines, has given way today to the reemergence of lineage and free markets, with a return to family businesses and the rise of taiji tourism.

The Wudang-Zhaobao Axis

Until the recent Wudang revival, it was impossible for Daoism to reach out to taijiquan. Taiji was a lived practice, officially promoted for health and sport, although stripped of its feudal trappings of lineage, discipleship, and mythology. Daoism, however,

which in the popular imagination had meant chiefly exorcists, recluses, talismans, idols, and elixirs, and in the Mao era smashed temples and defrocked priests, had no voice to reach out to taijiquan. Huang Zongxi's Zhang Sanfeng was "an alchemist from the Wudang Mountains" who "slew more than a hundred bandits," thus uniting the wizard and the warrior. The Shaolin monks may have practiced martial arts, but this was by no means typical for Buddhist monks. Our earliest records of shamanism depict exorcists brandishing weapons in a dance-like ritual to drive out demons, but the power here is magical and not technical. Likewise, Daoist immortal Lü Dongbin is pictured as a great swordsman, but this is an operatic caricature, having more to do with the romance of the sword than the fusion of qigong with martial arts. The unleashing of free market forces has now made it possible for the "Wudang" brand, formerly exploited by the Yang's of Hebei, to be brought back to its homeland in Hubei. As a center of Daoist activity, the Wudang Mountains, located in the northwest corner of Hubei Province, reached its peak in the early Ming but gradually declined, nearly disappearing by the late Qing. The Wudang Mountains are traditionally considered the site where Xuanwu (God of War), associated with the seven constellations of the northern sky and with the tortoise and snake, engaged in Daoist practices and attained immortality. He was elevated to the status of a celestial "emperor" (*di*) during the Yongle reign (1402-1424) of the Ming and thus became the logical choice to visit Zhang Sanfeng in a dream.



ILLUSTRATION OF ZHANG SANFENG TAKEN FROM THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ZHANG SANFENG (1844).

Illustration courtesy of Douglas Wile.

DAOIST MONK IN FRONT OF THE "EIGHT IMMORTALS' PAVILLION."

Photograph by Kipling Swehla (www.kiplingphoto.com) and courtesy of the Taoist Restoration Society (www.taoarts.com).

Tang Hao's investigations in Wudang and Ningbo found no successors to Zhang Sanfeng or his Internal School. Recently, however, a number of practitioners have come forward claiming to be just that. It was not until after Mao's death that dissenters to the official view began to surface, and in 1980 the National Martial Arts Exhibition held in Wuhan featured a demonstration by Jin Zitao of a style allegedly preserved in the Wudang Mountains. Jin was subsequently invited by the Wuhan Physical Education Committee and the Hubei People's Publishing Company to teach in Wuhan and publish a book on the form whose name was shortened to *Wudang taiyi wuxingquan*. Jin moved to Danjiangkou, the nearest city to Wudang, and began to teach there. In 1982, the Wudang Martial Arts Research Association was founded in Danjiangkou, and by 1989 a coalition of Hubei martial arts groups, physical education institutes, research associations, and publishers petitioned the National Physical Education Committee for permission to research the "origins, varieties, and characteristics of Wudang martial arts." As a result, the topic was included as a panel in the academic conferences held in conjunction with planning for China's participation in the 1990 Olympics. They published their findings in a monograph entitled *Studies on Wudang Boxing* in 1992. Their conclusions may be summarized as follows:

- 1) Zhang Sanfeng was an historical figure;
- 2) he created a martial art;
- 3) the martial art he created is unique in its theory and technique;
- 4) the development of the Wudang School split into many paths, many levels, and many personalities; and
- 5) the theory that "Zhang Sanfeng did not exist" and that "The Wudang Mountains produced no martial art" is untrue.



Although the authors explain the paucity of credible records as, “Those who have realized the dao conceal their traces,” nevertheless, they are prepared to assert that Zhang Sanfeng’s birthplace was Yizhou and his dates 1247-1464, arriving at this by the same method that establishes the age of the world by adding the generations since Adam. That the state-run Beijing Physical Education Institute Press would put their imprimatur on a work that unflinchingly announces that Zhang Sanfeng lived 217 years shows how far we have come since the days of scientific socialism. The quality of the evidence marshaled for this study does not justify a claim that Zhang existed, let alone that he lived 217 years, but the study’s sins go beyond mere wishful thinking to outright intellectual dishonesty. In Chapter Five, the very first expert witness called in defense of the Zhang Sanfeng theory is none other than Xu Zhen. The editors disingenuously quote from his 1930 *Introduction to Chinese Martial Arts*: “The southern styles of martial arts originated with Zhang Sanfeng of the Wudang Mountains, and of these, taijiquan is the most important.” Of all the sources cited in this chapter, Xu alone possesses credentials as a martial arts scholar; however, the authors of the *Studies on Wudang Boxing* commit a serious sin of omission when they fail to mention that Xu completely reversed himself and publicly disavowed the Zhang Sanfeng theory in his more mature 1936 *A Study of the Truth of Taijiquan*:

The martial arts abound in misrepresentations, but none surpass taijiquan in this regard. Originally, I failed to study the matter carefully and simply followed the view of one school as if it were fact.... The Chen family documents say nothing about Zhang Sanfeng creating taijiquan, and neither do the Wu family writings. In fact, Li Yiyu clearly states that the creator of taijiquan is unknown.... Zhang Sanfeng only appears in the Yang family writings and was clearly added by their followers.

– Deng, 1980: 112



The tactic of quoting from Xu’s earlier work was previewed in Wan Laiping and Yan Mei’s 1989 *Wudang taijiquan* (Wan, 1989: 1), published in Hubei under the sponsorship of the Hubei Physical Education Committee, and in fact, Wan’s father, the famed Wan Laisheng’s 1943 *Introduction to Original Taijiquan* was one of the pioneers in promoting the idea of a transmission independent of the Chens and Yangs. The three research associations who signed onto the publication of the *Studies on Wudang Boxing*, its 29 authors and editors, and the press who published it cannot have been unaware of Xu’s retraction. Nevertheless, this is but one example of the egregious dishonesty that characterizes a book that is now the intellectual cornerstone of a commercial empire to capitalize on the Wudang mystique. These include the journal *Wudang* and the Danjiangkou Wudang Martial Arts Research Association, whose training facilities, guest accommodations, art gallery, and public relations center serve to “propagate Wudang culture at home and abroad.” Independent origination of other martial arts with well-developed qigong internals is not impossible, as Chang Naizhou’s form and writings amply demonstrate, but too many of the new pretenders are simply Yang wine in Yang bottles with antique Daoist labels. The undated early Republican *Zhang Sanfeng’s Secret Transmissions on Taiji Elixir Cultivation*, showing a figure in ancient Daoist priest robes performing Yang Chengfu’s form is a perfect example.

Jealous of Yang family success, the Chen family has mounted a more than eighty year campaign to gain market share of taiji glory and profits. More recently, neighboring

Zhaobao Town has made a bid to enter this market with capital based on the survival of Zhaobao taijiquan, a close cousin of the Chen style, and the account of taiji history put forward by Du Yuanhua (1869-1938) in his 1935 *Orthodox Taijiquan*. Du was a student of Ren Changchun, who was a student of Chen Qingping (1795-1868). Du traces a transmission that extends all the way from Laozi, whom he credits with creating taijiquan, to contemporary Zhaobao masters. Accounts of Zhang Sanfeng variously place him in the Song, Yuan, or Ming dynasties, but interestingly Du allows only five generations between Laozi and Zhang. Of the immortal Zhang, he says:

Zhang Sanfeng perfected this martial art to the level of the miraculous and his skill surpassed all others at that time.... His accomplishment in the martial arts is comparable to Confucius' in the realm of letters and sagehood.

– Yan, 1996: 10

According to Du, Zhang's transmission was brought to Zhaobao by Jiang Fa, a shadowy and controversial figure in Chen and Yang folklore. Du paints Jiang as a native of Wenxian County, born in 1574 near Zhaobao, who went to study with Wang Linzhen in Shanxi and returned to found a lineage whose seventh generation master was Chen Qingping, the man whom Wu Yuxiang is said by Li Yiyu to have studied with for a month after his initial introduction to taijiquan by Yang Luchan. Placing Zhaobao in a direct line from Laozi, Zhang Sanfeng, and Jiang Fa effectively invalidates every other version of taiji history and every other lineage or style. Moreover, Zhaobao proponents have recently published a manuscript purported to have been copied in 1918 and containing writings on taijiquan from the first three generations of Jiang Fa's transmission. One of the texts is attributed to Jiang himself and is essentially identical with the *Treatise on Taijiquan* attributed to Zhang Sanfeng in the Yang family redaction of the classics. The rest are original, though whether they are of the vintage and authorship claimed is another matter (Yuan Baoshan, 1996: 3-5). If they are genuinely of the 16th and 17th centuries as claimed, they would be by far the oldest received documents on taijiquan and would supplant the existing "classics," which only exist in Li Yiyu's hand from the late 19th century. Zhaobao promoters point out that Zhaobao Town has been a prosperous commercial crossroads for over 2,500 years, and all of the texts have the name taiji in their titles, but they do not explain why neither the art nor the name were known to Qi Jiguang or Huang Zongxi, or how it dared to violate the imperial name taboo of the first Manchu emperor, Huang Taiji.

During the 1930s, national salvation was uppermost in the minds of Chinese intellectuals, and few failed to appreciate that spiritual resources would be as critical as material in determining China's fate. Qi Jiguang had already pronounced martial arts largely irrelevant to mass warfare in the 16th century, how much more so in an era of bombers, submarines, and nerve gas? A shared theme of all the martial arts publications from the 1930s through the 40s is that martial arts, in general, and taijiquan specifically, can promote the health of the nation and kindle a spirit of confidence and resistance. Some, seeing a deeper spiritual vacuum, presented it as a Daoist path to enlightenment. Du says, "The purpose of taijiquan is to cultivate the elixir and to demonstrate to the world that practicing this art can promote longevity, and after long training, allow us to attain pure yang, or immortality" (Yan, 1996: 11). This points out very vividly how far the inner alchemy vision of spirituality through self-deification differs from the Western worship of God or the Confucian worship of ancestors.

Zhang Sanfeng in Our Time



ZHANG SANFENG.

For sheer contentiousness, the Zhang Sanfeng case can only be compared to issues of racism, sexism, abortion, and homosexuality in American culture. At the dawn of the 21st century, the pendulum has once again swung towards the myth-makers. Western practitioners of taijiquan, with their monotheistic, atheistic, or “only begotten son” backgrounds are apt to view Zhang Sanfeng as simply an historical figure with some innocent Daoist embellishments. They are not likely to understand China’s culture wars, polytheism, or embodied immortality. As a counterpoint to the dour Confucian scholar, the Chinese folk and artistic imaginations have populated novels, operas, and temples with sword slinging heroes like Sun Wukong, Guan Gong, and Lü Dongbin. Moreover, the custom of attributing the creation of martial arts to figures like Bodhidharma, Yue Fei, and Emperor Taizu of the Song

makes it not surprising that Wang Zhengnan credited Zhang Sanfeng with creating the Internal School art.

The construction of the cult of Zhang Sanfeng during the Ming, the naming of Zhang as founder of the Internal School in the early Qing, the revival of the Zhang cult by the Sichuan Sect of Daoism in the mid-19th century, and the crediting of Zhang as creator of taijiquan in the early 20th century have all been noted by historians of Daoism and the martial arts. Now in the 21st century, we can report a renewed push, not simply to reassert Zhang’s paternity in the taijiquan realm, but to refurbish his cult and to promote taijiquan as a religious path. What contemporary scholar Huang Zhaohan said in the 1970s and 80s of Qing dynasty Zhang Sanfeng cult promoters Wang Xiling (1664-1724) and Li Xiyue (c. 1796-1850) has proven to be surprisingly prophetic in the 1990s and beyond. In surveying the authenticity of works in the 1844 (reprinted 1906) *Complete works of Zhang Sanfeng* compiled by Wang Xiling, Huang finds six forgeries, seven self-serving propaganda pieces for Li Xiyue’s “Western Sect,” and four pieces produced by planchette. He concludes that it would be a mistake to judge them by modern scholarly standards and offers the following perspective:

Their research methods were uncritical, and they indiscriminately collected all materials whether historical, legendary, apocryphal, or mythological.... Only if later scholars are careful to use these materials critically will they arrive at the correct conclusions.... Regardless of Wang’s research methods, they nevertheless show a tremendous expenditure of time and effort.... Because the object of their study was a Daoist and belongs to the category of Daoism, we cannot avoid the judgment that these are religious activities and that they were leading religious lives.

– Huang, 1988: 110

This characterization applies perfectly to today’s Neo-Zhang Sanfengists: their “research methods” are precisely the same, and their religious discourse every bit as ardent. Modern martial arts historians were once faced only with the task of extricating taijiquan from Zhang Sanfeng and scholars of the history of religion with showing the inauthenticity of the *Complete Works of Zhang Sanfeng*. The Neo-Zhang Sanfengists,

however, require us to do both all over again. In his *Summary of Zhang Sanfeng's Inner Elixir Theory*, Yang Hongling plainly states: "As a kind of religious thought, Zhang Sanfeng's Daoist inner elixir theory is the product of social and historical conditions, together with Daoist theory and his own thinking and culture" (Yang, 1997: 28). The critical word here is "religious." Although containing no mention of martial arts, the reproduction of key *Complete Works of Zhang Sanfeng* meditation texts in today's martial arts journals, along with copious annotations, colloquial translations, and biographies of lineage successors fishes for converts to the cult of Zhang Sanfeng in a pool already familiar with his name.

It is obvious that the outpouring of religious sentiment toward Zhang Sanfeng that fills the pages of today's martial arts magazines is part of a broader "roots seeking" and "cultural reflection" movement in China. The basic message of the Zhang cultists is that socialism killed China's soul. One of the most passionate spokesmen for Zhang Sanfeng fundamentalism is Li Zhaosheng, who begins from the premise that Daoism is China's soul:

Emperor Yingzong of the Song declared the fifteenth day of the second lunar month, Laozi's birthday, to be True Primordial Source Holiday. That is to say, it is only with the birth of Laozi that the Chinese people have a soul. This is the most ancient 'soul of China.'

– Li, 1998: 6

The equation, then, is that Daoism is the soul of China, and taijiquan is the vehicle for its realization. Being a religion, though, health or ethics are not enough: we must have miracles. Therefore, Li Zhaosheng, who proclaims himself an 18th generation successor to the *Xiantian taijiquan* (Primordial taijiquan) style recounts an anecdote of his teacher Cai Xiang: Master Cai was collecting ginseng in the mountains when he spied an heroic figure in flowing robes performing a sword form among the trees. Spellbound, Cai continued to observe him from afar for several days. When he ventured to ask the personage his name, he was told that his surname was Zhang. Later, the figure appeared to him in a dream and revealed his true identity: the immortal Zhang Sanfeng (Li, 1998: 7). A Zhang Sanfeng sighting in the 20th century, reported with absolute credulity on the eve of the 21st is the nicest capsule of post-modernism anyone could ask for. Although Li Zhaosheng himself does not claim to have seen Zhang Sanfeng, it has been his lifelong ambition as an artist and a Zhang devotee to create a worthy iconography for the immortal's veneration. Criticizing previous efforts as either too barbaric or too effete, he proposes to create a portrait combining traditional techniques, the principles of physiognomy, and even the best of Western influences to capture the otherworldly aura of the immortal. Portraiture as an act of piety, according to Li's description, then, has nothing in common with life drawing or photography, but involves seeing with the inner eye of faith.

The Confucian state had always viewed martial artists as trouble-makers, but the Chinese Communists took up the self-strengthening theme of the 1890s and May Fourth Movement, giving state sponsorship to the martial arts as part of a national health and recreation program. In exchange for mass promotion, the martial arts were to give up secrecy and superstition. Nationally standardized and simplified forms replaced family transmissions, and training moved out of courtyards and backrooms into parks and gymnasiums. Though martial arts have joined the free market since the early 1980s, Li Zhaosheng resists any effort to secularize taijiquan, saying:

Taijiquan, like other arts at that time, was transmitted by alchemists and recluses and later spread among the masses.... A martial art that seeks only to promote health is immature and cannot sustain itself.... "Internally upholding the way of inner alchemy" means that we can sprout feathers and ascend to heaven, attain life everlasting, cure the sick and infirm, and save all living things; "externally showing the point of the weapon" means that we possess the ultimate martial art technique and take killing evil people as our motto.... Those who say that everything is created by the laboring masses seem to be intelligent but on careful examination are not.

– Li, 1998: 6

太極拳

TAIJIQUAN.

Li's explicit opposition to the official policy of promoting martial arts for health, and his appeal to restoring them to the traditions of inner alchemy and knight-errantry, is essentially an anti-modernist position. In fact, his standard for historical validity is, "Only the descendants of the lineage are qualified to tell the story of its origins" (Li, 1996: 8). This flies in the face of modern scholarly notions of objectivity and the well-known tendency of styles to exaggerate their own lineages, while imposing an elitist and occultist definition on Daoism. However, at the same time as he champions Zhang Sanfeng as the creator of taijiquan, he denies the origination legends of xingyi and bagua, using opposite arguments. Xingyi, he says, was not created by Yue Fei, and bagua does not qualify as a true martial art because it cannot point to an immortal creator who preceded historical founder Dong Haichuan. In the end, he goes so far as to say that even taijiquan in its present form does not qualify as "a method for realizing the dao through the martial arts" because it "does not follow the acupuncture channels," as does Li's own style, the *Jouzhuan bapan youlongzhang* (Li, 1996: 9). Li insists that only the superficial aspects of the elixir teachings are made public through the martial arts, just as medicine is but a diluted version of the knowledge held by Daoist adepts and immortals and dispensed out of compassion for the masses. Li is thus willing to sell out taijiquan for the sake of promoting the new cult of Zhang Sanfeng. Fellow cultist Zheng Qing also holds that taijiquan is simply a debased version of a secret Daoist art:

Taijiquan originally consisted of the external postures of the Daoist's "*Taijimen jiugong taijishou*," which included standing, sitting, and reclining postures. Because it features the internal principles of movement arising from stillness and advocates training through non-action, when the qi channels within the body are activated, there is an internal power produced with movement. Practitioners will experience the sensation of a flow of qi that propels the body as it moves. This action is accompanied by a feeling of advancing with circular movements, and thus it is called "taijiquan." However, Zhang Sanfeng of the Ming felt that "Taijimen's" emphasis on non-action and the esoteric nature of the internal training, its secrecy among the five branches of Daoism, together with its requirement of open qi channels, spiritual enlightenment, and long dedication made it difficult for people to understand and accept. Therefore, he eliminated the difficult training and secrecy and presented some of the external postures of "*Taijimen jiugong taijishou*" to the world.

– Zheng, 1998: 40

It is difficult to know at this stage whether these efforts to pull taijiquan back into the shadows is a sincere religious impulse or simply cynical brandsmanship in a market that has reverted to family or Daoist lineage as a test of legitimacy rather than physical education diplomas or tournament trophies. Today, anticommunist progressives are still looking West, while anticommunist conservatives are still looking to Daoism. The government seems sensitive to progressive criticism but tolerant of reactionary, as long as it refrains from politics.

Li Zhaosheng's ingenuity as a marketing strategist is truly astonishing. He understands that some of the genies released by the communist government will be very difficult to put back in the lamp: the simplified characters and the Twenty-four Posture Taiji Short Form, for example. Recognizing that tens of millions of people already practice this form, Li has attempted to appropriate it for his own purposes, writing a manual (*pu*) in the archaic seven character rhymed couplet style, with all the old flowery language of inner alchemy, and declaring that its purpose is, "Using the *Yijing* to penetrate the great mystery and realize the dao; using the martial arts to illuminate the True and achieve enlightenment" (Li, 1997: 24). Li has thus not only created a counter-discourse but boldly appropriated the state's productions and recast them in an ancient mould, like dragging pottery in the dirt to create instant antiques. Evidence of fissures in the cult's consensus have already begun to appear, however, as Zhang Jie, who believes that Zhang Sanfeng is the reviver of a still older tradition rather than the creator of taijiquan, is taken to task by Li Shirong and Wu Tierong for weakening the Zhang genesis position and for accepting as authentic the transparently spurious *Zhang Sanfeng's Secret Transmissions on Taiji Elixir Cultivation*. They correctly point out that this counterfeit collection includes a supposedly ancient form that is identical with the Yang form in Chen Weiming's *Taijiquan shu*, and its *Treatise on the Necessity of Cultivating the Spirit and Concentrating the Qi in Practicing Taijiquan* was authored by Wu Tunan and published in his 1931 *Taijiquan* (Li & Wu, 1998: 26-27).

So far we have examined attempts to link taijiquan with Daoism based on bald assertions and simple articles of faith. Another more sophisticated approach, however, deploys pseudo-scholarly methods, riddled with weak links and unwarranted leaps, to defend the paternity of Zhang Sanfeng.

Lu Dimin and Zhao Youbin use textual techniques, teasing out the seven character mnemonic verses embedded in the classics, attributing these to Zhang, and assigning the rest to Wang Zongyue's commentary or Wu Yuxiang's notes (Lu & Zhao, 1992: 7). Li Shirong supports this analysis but is careful to admit that Chen Wangting is indeed the creator of the Chen style, which he accepts as valid but derivative of the root "Thirteen Postures" transmitted by Zhang Sanfeng. He does not bother to refute the Li Yiyu "Postscript" assertion that the Wu brothers found the classics in a salt shop in Wuyang, Henan, but does insist that Yang received the complete version first, obliging Wu Yuxiang to copy some portions from Yang (Li, 2000: 10-13). Teasing classic from commentary is a standard scholarly procedure, but it cannot turn Zhang and Wang into bona fide historical figures or prevent Wu Yuxiang and Li Yiyu from writing the "classics" themselves, as some scholars have proposed.



CHEN WEIMING
(1881-1958).



In a 1999 article, Li Shirong, again attempting to appropriate the enemy's rhetoric, characterizes his own scholarly method, saying: "Its logic is consistent with dialectical materialism" (Le, 1999:6). Using this method he correctly challenges Tang Hao's assumption that the "Master Wang of Shanxi who lived during the Qianlong reign of the Qing" and authored the *Yinfu Spear Manual* is the same as Wang Zongyue. However, the basis for his skepticism is not the high probability that the *Yinfu Spear Manual* and accompanying biography found by Tang in the Beijing bookstalls is a forgery, but because to accept it would be to deny that Zhang Sanfeng and Wang Zongyue were both Ming figures. Again, asking the right question for the wrong reason, he calls Tang Hao's contention that Wang Zongyue received the four-line "Sparring Song" in Chen Village and elaborated it to six lines "pure nonsense." Certainly, too much of Tang's case rested on the shaky assumption of Wang Zongyue's historicity and Chen Wangting's creation of taijiquan, but Li Shirong's chief complaint is that Tang's dating would make Wang Zongyue two centuries too late to receive a direct transmission from Zhang Sanfeng. To weaken the Zhang Sanfeng authorship claims, Tang and Gu had cited the many parallels between the taiji classics and Zhou Dunyi's *Explanation of the Taiji Diagram* and the fact that this work was not published until 1757, too late to have influenced a Ming Daoist. Li, however, counters that Zhou received the interpretation of the taiji symbol from the Daoist immortal Chen Xiyi, and that it was independently handed down in Daoist circles until it reached Zhang Sanfeng, who was then inspired by it to create taijiquan. As further proof, he cites a diagram attributed to Wang Zongyue's student Jiang Fa and reproduced in handwritten manuscript form in a 1990 issue of *Wudang* magazine. He does not attempt to explain why this "Ming" manuscript is written in simplified characters. The release of old handwritten manuscripts attributed to the likes of Chen Changxing (Luchan's teacher), Wang Zongyue, and Jiang Fa is another aspect of the pseudo-scholarship phenomena. These are written in classical Chinese and contain large doses of Daoist jargon and channel theory, but the appearance of Western biomedical terms such as "blood pressure" (*xueya*) does not inspire confidence in their authenticity. If they were authentic, however, it would require us to throw out the existing corpus of "classics" and accept a whole new canon.

In the end, all of this can teach us nothing about the true origins of taijiquan, but a great deal about the contemporary intellectual milieu in China. Sima Nan, who has made it his personal mission to expose qigong cults, referred to the leader of one such cult as the "patriarch of a new religion," and Zhang Honglin refers to the qigong craze as "heretical cults." Taijiquan, at least, has had the decency to deify its invented ancestor and not a living exponent, but even socialism was not immune to the "cult of personality." Since it is difficult to use a capitalist discourse to undermine a "communist" regime that is privatizing everything in sight, and democracy is not perceived as a sure cure for poverty and corruption, it seems that only a religious movement can rally sufficient passion and numbers to challenge the regime. Taipings and Boxers are good examples from not so distant history, and the new Zhang Sanfeng cult shows that Falun Dafa (lit. "Great Law of the Wheel of Law"; also, Falun Gong) is not an isolated case. Paralleling the emergence of ethnic and provincial localism, defining "Chineseness" is no longer exclusively a monopoly of the state, but can be contested by special interests. Daoism wedded to taijiquan is once again resurrected as a carrier of Chineseness in an era of global economic integration. Instead of seeing this subculture as appealing to those who are left behind in the race to the modern, it may be that spiritual aspirations based on the work ethic of earned immortality through strenuous effort, and conferring a profound and

secure sense of Chinese identity, may comport with the new entrepreneurial spirit in China in the same way that the Protestant ethic supported the rise of capitalism in the West. Certainly, for the subculture of Zhang Sanfeng cultists, the reconstruction era image of the proletarian “iron man” has given way to the myth of the Daoist immortal/warrior. Daoist chauvinism should never be underestimated, and we need only remind ourselves that some Daoist apologists have claimed that Buddhism sprang from seeds planted by Laozi when he rode westward on his ox.

Conclusion

The little old ladies in China’s parks today, with their taiji swords, sly smiles, and twinkling eyes, probably care little about taiji’s role in national self-strengthening, reviving the martial spirit, surviving Manchu, Western, and Japanese imperialism, post-modern religious fundamentalism, the ultimate fighting art, taiji tourism, cultural exports, identity politics, or the construction of masculinity. The martial arts politics of hard versus soft, of idealist versus materialist, and of scholarship versus religion will not trouble them. They probably never have fantasies about Zhang Sanfeng or dream of the God of War.

For non-Chinese practitioners, many of these concerns will likewise be irrelevant, but that does not mean that they do not have preconceptions of their own. Chinese ideologues have thought of taiji as a secret weapon in the epic struggle of civilizations; Western practitioners are more likely to think on the scale of the schoolyard or mean streets. Chinese martial arts missionaries and merchants in the West may see taiji as a vehicle for raising respect for Chinese culture, but Western practitioners are more likely to see their involvement in purely personal terms, consciously or unconsciously caught up in warrior dreams, the search for surrogate father figures, intentional community building, physical therapy, orientalism, or alternative spirituality.

Practitioners East and West have been polarized by the issue of whether taijiquan is essentially a fighting art or a moving meditation. Some are deadly serious about taiji as a fighting art, and some feel that taiji is to fighting what dance is to sex: ways to play with aggressive or erotic energy without going over the top. The Daoist-taiji connection in China was painstakingly constructed, and fiercely contested, but presented to the West as a *fait accompli*.

Leaving politics and scholarship aside, is taijiquan a good vehicle for exploring Chinese culture, and in particular Daoism? In China, the question has always been what did Daoism do for taiji, but in the West we can also ask what did taiji do for Daoism? How does it compare with language, history, literature, the arts, and travel as ways of exploring Chinese culture? To the extent that letting go, non-action, relaxing, egolessness, and no-mind must be actualized to perform the solo form or succeed in self-defense, dabbling in literature and philosophy cannot compare. Performance with the body is the essence of ritual and the reason why taijiquan can be such a powerful delivery system for the insights of Laozi, Zhuangzi, and the inner alchemists. As a theoretical model for explaining why taiji succeeds, Daoist philosophy is a perfect fit, but that does not mean that Daoism invented taiji—Pao Ding the butcher was not a Daoist.



THE FALL OF BEIJING CASTLE

PAINTING BY
KASAI TORAJIRO
DEPICTS ALLIED ARMIES
CONFRONTING THE
BOXERS IN 1900.

Photograph courtesy of
the Library of Congress.
Lot 10595 LC USZ62-45084



Bian Renjie	卞人傑	Ningbo fuzhi	寧波府誌
caizhan	採戰	Pan Jianping	潘建平
Cantongqi	參同契	Pao Ding	庖丁
Chang Naizhou	長乃周	Qi Jiguang	戚繼光
Chen Changxing	陳長興	Qingshi gao	清史稿
Chen Fake	陳發科	Quanjing	拳經
Chenshi taijiquan tushuo	陳氏太極拳圖說	"Quanjing zongge"	拳經總歌
Chen Qingping	陳清萍	Shaolin quanshu mijue	少林全數秘訣
Chenshi jiapu	陳氏家譜	Shaolin zongfa	少林宗法
Chenshi jiasheng	陳氏家乘	Shao Yong	紹雍
Chen Wangting	陳王庭	Shen	神
Chen Weiming	陳微明	Shengshen	聖神
Chen Xin	陳鑫	Shen Nong	神農
"Da dao lun"	大道論	Shou Huai shilu	守懷實錄
dianxue	點穴	shuangxiu	雙修
Dong Yingjie	董英傑	Sun Lutang	孫祿堂
Du Yuanhua	杜元化	Sun Wukong	孫悟空
Feng Zhiqiang	馮志強	Taijimen jugong taijishou	太極門九功太極手
Gan Fengchi	甘鳳池	Taijiquan fa chanzong	太極拳法闡宗
Ge Hong	葛洪	Taijiquan kaoxin lu	太極拳考信錄
Gu Liuxin	顧留馨	Taijiquan jiangyi	太極拳講義
Guoji lunlue	國技論略	Taijiquan shi tujie	太極拳勢圖解
Guo Tiefeng	郭鐵峰	Taijiquan shiyi	太極拳釋義
Hao Weizhen	郝微真	Taijiquan shiyong fa	太極拳使用法
He Hongming	何鴻明	Taijiquan shu	太極拳術
Huang Baijia	黃百家	Taijiquan tiyong quanshu	太極拳體用全書
Huangting jing	黃庭經	Taijiquan xue	太極拳學
Huang Zongxi	黃宗羲	Taijiquan zhengzong	太極拳正宗
Jiang Fa	蔣發	Taijiquan zhi yanjiu	太極拳之研究
jin	勁	Taijiquan zixiu xinfa	太極拳自修新法
jing	靜	Taijitu shuo	太極圖說
li	力	Taiji zhannian shisan qiang	太極沾黏十三槍
liangzhi liangneng	良智良能	Tang Hao	唐豪
lingkong faqi	凌空發氣	Wan Laiping	萬賴平
Li Shirong	李師融	Wang Xiling	汪錫齡
Li Xiyue	李西月	Wang Xinwu	王新午
Li Yaxuan	李雅軒	Wang Zhengnan	王征南
Li Yiy	李亦畬	Wang Zhengnan muzhi ming	王征南墓志銘
Li Zhaosheng	李兆生	Wang Zongyue	王宗岳
Lu Dimin	路迪民	wen	文
Lü Dongbin	呂洞賓	wu	武
Ma Yuannian	馬原年	Wudangquan zhi yanjiu	武當拳之研究
Ma Yueliang	馬岳梁	Wudang taijiquan	武當太極拳
ming	命	Wu Jianquan	吳鑑泉
Neijia quanfa	內家拳法	Wushi taijiquan	吳氏太極拳
Neijing	內經	Wu Gongzao	吳公藻

Wu Tierong	吳鐵融
Wu Tunan	吳圖南
Wu Wenhan	吳文翰
Wuyang	武陽
Wu Yuxiang	武禹襄
xin	心
xing	性
Xu Yusheng	許禹生
Xuan Wu	玄武
"Xue taijiquan xu lianshen juqi lun"	學太極拳需煉神聚氣論
Xu Zhen	許震
Yang Banhou	楊班侯
Yang Chengfu	楊澄甫
Yang Luchan	楊露禪
Yang Shaohou	楊少侯
Yijing	易經
Yue Fei	岳飛
Yuefei fan Huai shilu	粵匪犯懷實錄
Zhang Sanfeng	張三豐
Zhang Sanfeng quanji	張三豐全集
Zhaobao	趙堡
Zhao Youbin	趙幼斌
Zheng Manqing	鄭曼青
Zhengzi taijiquan shisan pian	鄭子太極拳十三篇
Zhuang Shen	莊申
Zhuangzi	莊子
Zhou Dunyi	周敦頤

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