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The History & Origin of T'ai Chi Ch'uan

THE HISTORY AND ORIGIN OF T'AI CHI CH'UAN - PART I

This is the Third in a series of Articles originally written by Master Jou, translated by T.T. Liang into Chinese, retranslated back into English, edited by Paul Galagher, and re-edited by Mark C. Bassell.

THIS ARTICLE APPROACHES THE ANTECEDENTS OF TAI CHI CHUAN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ITS BEING A MIRROR WHICH CAN ACCURATELY REFLECT THE NUANCES OF OUR EVERYDAY LIFE.

Some say that Tai Chi Chuan has been in existence in excess of a thousand years. There are others who claim it originated in the 17th Century. The length of time of its existence is of secondary importance to me. Most importantly, we must believe that a clear and correct definition can be elucidated scientifically, through verification of detail. For if the preponderance of detail and evidence is not believable, who can believe the conclusions?

Theoretically, a state of Tai Chi is derived when the 8 trigrams are embraced in the hands and the feet step through the pattern of the 5 elements. There is a "reliance on the body of Latter Heaven to cultivate the spirit of vitality, and the Chi of earlier Heaven, so tranquility is sought through movement in order to reach the realm of divine transformation." The above is rather poetic in terms of its description, but since this language is "Classical" in its usage we will not make an attempt to "transliterate" everything, for fear of losing content. If someone verifying the source and history of Tai Chi Chuan does not begin from this above cited "definition," he will have the frustrating experience of "hunting for fish in the trees," and wasting his time. The study of Tai Chi seems to attract a lamentably casual approach. If the investigator is bereft of knowledge of the I-CHING, and cannot differentiate between Yin and Yang, but only knows how to practice Tai Chi Chuan as a memorized sequence of movements, his practice will be devoid of worth. Should it be that his knowledge is derived only from books or tapes, without diligent practice of the

postures, and he claims to be an expert "researcher," he will not be able to avoid "the slightest divergency leading far astray." For even though there may be a wealth of knowledge, and many erudite and sensitive allusions to elementary theory. The other side of the coin is that the progressive changes in one's internalization of Tai Chi Chuan, brought about by constant practice, will come to resemble a mirror reflecting our daily life, and reflecting our constant need to refine and renew ourselves. We certainly cannot rely upon legendary exploits of ancient masters.

In the biography of Chang San Feng it was written: "In the first year of The Emperor Yuan Yu of the Yuan dynasty, at the age of 67, he left to stay in the Chung Nan Mountains, and began to cultivate the Tao. Here he met Huo Lung, (fire dragon?) the spiritual Master who taught him the way of Immortality. He then changed his name to Hsuan Shu and was also known as Hsuan Hua. He thus acquired the combined name of Hsuan Hsuan Tze, and the nickname K'un Yang.

Master Chang remained in the Mountains for four years. Although he achieved little he did not become disheartened. In the Spring of the Year Chia Tze of the Emperor T'ai Ting he journeyed south to Wu Tang Mountain and meditated there for nine years. It was there he achieved inner perfection. It is said, "If we could emulate the spirit of incessant work which Chang San Feng possessed, we would never despair of attaining the highest achievement" If it is possible for an Immortal to exist in this world, Chang San Feng can certainly qualify! Yet anyone can emulate his example by becoming completely sincere and practicing earnestly.

Another example of this type of development can be found by analyzing the manner in which Yang Lu Ch'an learned Tai Chi. When he was young he went to the Honan Province to the Chen Chia Kou Village seeking instruction from Chen Chang Hsing. At this particular time the only people being instructed were all members of the Chen Clan. Outsiders were not allowed to participate. Yang Lu Chan was not allowed into the inner circle. But he did not give up! He stayed in the vicinity of the village for several years, always seeking entrance to the training grounds. One night he woke up and heard the characteristic "Heng-Ha" training sounds coming from the adjoining courtyard. So he arose and stealthily crossed over the wall, and saw several buildings from which the sounds emanated. He then opened a small crack in the wall and peeped through it. He saw Chen Chang Hsing teaching his disciples the Tai Chi techniques of neutralize, hold, and hit. This was a pleasant surprise. From then on Master Chen had a secret student. After spying he returned to his room and practiced with his entire being. His practice became vastly superior. Sometime later Master Chen ordered Yang to engage his disciples in a match. Much to his complete amazement Yang Lu Chan defeated all of them. Master Chen accepted Yang as a genius, and began to teach him everything he could. Yang Lu Chan was able to

make a breakthrough because of his sincerity and determination. His will could not be altered until his objective had been attained.

Many years later, after returning home, Yang Lu Chan set about training his sons. He was extremely strict in his teaching and did not allow them to rest at all. He flogged them with a whip, and compelled them to practice all day long in the heat and the snow. At one point Yang Pan Hou could no longer stand it and tried to run away. Yang Chien Hou was so totally exhausted that on several occasions he tried to shave his head so he could enter a monastery. Yang Lu Chan always discovered these "plots," and would not allow his sons to leave.

So what was the final result? Pan Hou excelled at free hand, (sparring). At the first light touch he would injure his sparring partners and leave them covered with bruises. The person he struck was often thrown more than 20 feet away. Chien Hou was able to develop the hard and soft energies in perfect equilibrium and became peerless. It is exactly as stated by Mencius: "Before Heaven grants Man special power, first it tests the mind, sinews, and bones. It will expose the body to hunger, and subject him to poverty. It will confound his understanding. By these methods the mind is stimulated, the nature is tempered, and his competencies are assured."

If, in verifying the source and history of Tai Chi Chuan we merely record the year, month, and dates, the names of people and places, all we have done is created a martial travelogue. We have cast aside the real events of real people, which is rich in educational value. This would be a great loss to Tai Chi Ch'uan.

If we wish to further investigate the origin and evolution of Tai Chi Chuan, the book of Li Yi Yu, one of the progenitors of modern Wu Form, (Shiao Jar), is one of the most important. He was a native of the Yung Nien District of Hopei Province, as was Yan Lu Chan, and also lived not too far from Chen Chia Kou. Since his lifespan, (1832 to 1892), occurs right in the middle of these pivotal evolutionary changes, what he saw and heard concerning the ongoing investigation of T'ai Chi Ch'uan is more accurate and more profound. It is also less mixed than many of the changes which began to take place later, and so represents a "pure" strain of T'ai Chi. In his preface to T'ai Chi Ch'uan it is stated: "The originator of this art cannot be traced. Wang Chung Yueh's TAI CHI CHUAN TREATISE is most subtle and ingenious, and is an accurate and detailed record of T'ai Chi principles. Afterwards, the Art then passed to the Chen Clan in Chen Chia Kou. Within any given generation only a few people were able to master the Art."

These few sentences demonstrate that although the lineage had to some degree passed on, and was now developing outside the Chen Village, that the connection with its past

was still charged with a recognition of its antecedents. These few simple sentences demonstrate that: 1.) Wang Chung Yueh's TAI CHI CHUAN TREATISE was then recognized as an orthodox Classic, and, 2.) T'ai Chi Ch'uan was not considered, at that time, to have been created by Chen Wang T'ing of Chen Chia Kou, but was transmitted to him from somewhere outside of the village. 3.) There was no allusion to Chang San Feng.

I have already explained in my essay, "The Master Key to T'ai Chi Ch'uan," that before the time of Chang San Feng there had existed a great many Masters who had created many different styles of Boxing which could be described as T'ai Chi. There was the San Shih Ch'i, created by Hsu Hsuan P'ing. There was Hsien T'ien Ch'uan, by Li Tao Tze. There was Hsiao Chui T'ien, by Han Kung Yueh. Huo T'ien Fa, (The Method of Latter Heaven), by Hu Ching Tze. The validity of these earlier descriptions is not possible to verify and some people consider all of the stories to be counterfeit, and without factual basis. So they threw out the baby with the bathwater. As a matter of fact, we honor Chang San Feng and consider him the Patriarch of Tai Chi because we regard him as a Harvester of all these existing principles and internal styles, as developed by these earlier Masters, and formulating a theory and a practice which enabled T'ai Chi Ch'uan to proceed from clear and precise definitions. He desired all people with heroic spirits to acquire a practice which would prolong and enhance a vigorous life, with actual combat dexterity being of secondary importance. He can be compared to Confucius, who revised the book Chun Ch'iu, and whom we honor as its author. Or to Homer, who revised ancient Greek History, and created poetic sagas, and compiled them into a Book of mythic greatness. In both the East and the West, and in ancient and modern times, such examples are numerous. But we cannot rely on them any more than on the legends of the exploits of ancient Masters.

Let us examine the record and see if we can deduce what kind of a man was Chen Wang T'ing. According to the Chen Family Album: He was a military graduate, and well schooled. He was regarded as a first rate Military leader, and was called an "able hand" in Shantung because he had made a clean sweep of a band of more than one thousand robbers, and because he was the progenitor of a Chen Clan martial art that included forms for the Broadsword and the Spear. Because of the manner with which he wielded the Broadsword he was considered a natural born martial art hero. Why did investigators in the 1930's call him the founder of T'ai Chi Ch'uan? An interesting fact is that after the overthrow of The Ming Dynasty he dwelt in seclusion and cultivated an attitude of passive resistance. In his latter years he created a martial art form for his own amusement, and to teach his disciples, and his family. He left us this poem:

THE VERSE OF GENERAL CHEN WANG T'ING

My youth and vigor have vanished into memory
I have lost more than armor and sharp weapons
Many was the time I eagerly confronted the enemy

And victorious returned to public acclaim
Showered with Imperial blessing
My vanity still makes remorse a current event

The present finds me fighting the infirmities of time
My companions are healing Mantras for prolonging life
When I am listless I compose combat forms
Then the harvest comes and I gather crops
In my spare moments I teach my children's children
I pass down the ancestral heritage of martial art
They too can become dragons and unicorns

The taxes I owe I must pay to the Authorities
Private matters I can settle at once
I do not find profit in arrogance and egotism
Endurance and flexibility are my new standard bearers
But if you think I am simple minded or crazy
Search my internal spirit and find constant motion

I do not need to dress like a sacrificial victim
It finds the surface veneer amusing
The politicians and the bourgeoisie
These people are always cautious and apprehensive
Their mind is like a barrel filled with broken glass

My mind is always open like the Moon over water
I do not wish the public to know me well
It is I who long ago learned the ways of the world
It is always a projection of an anonymous problem
When I fish alone along the riverside I can drink carefree
And wander unchained through the mountains and rivers
The state of the union is not my concern

If I can live my life without an overseer
If I can live quietly and in harmony with the planet
If I can live placidly, without perversion or bootlicking
Do I need to concern myself with what I cannot affect?
I do not concern myself with success or failure
I have become an Immortal, have you?

Chen Wang T'ing is considered to be heroic in traditional Chinese literature, "whose head touches Heaven and whose feet stand firmly on the Earth." He is credited with creating the First Fist Set, Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Fist Set, the Second Cannon Fist Routine, Long Boxing, Short Hit Boxing, San Sou, (free hand sparring), Red Boxing, and various weapons sets. However, he did not use the name T'ai Chi Ch'uan or the 13 Postures. The postures and names of these sets have been derived from the Chi Chi Kuang and the Ta Hung Chui, (Big Red Boxing), and the Pao Chui, (Cannon Fist), from Shaolin.

This article will be continued in the next Tai Chi Farm Newsletter.

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