



Tai Chi's History: Model for Personal Development

(Part 1)

Jou Tsung Hwa

Some say Tai Chi Chuan is over a thousand years old; others say it dates only from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. I am concerned with the history of Tai Chi because I believe that it offers insight today into how we each might develop ourselves. In part, the history of Tai Chi defines what Tai Chi is and what it is not. Tales of early adepts show us some of what we, too, might achieve; their struggles for mastery encourage us as we strive to master daily life; the various Tai Chi styles are like tools, each useful in a different way and at a different stage in the work of self-development. The historical evolution of Tai Chi Chuan can serve as a model for our own evolution, to help us reflect on our discipline, our practice, our potential.

The life of the traditional patron saint of Tai Chi Chuan, Chang San Feng, a taoist of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, is preserved for us only in legend. Yet those who follow tradition ascribe the credit for the founding of Tai Chi Chuan to him. In the 1930's some Tai Chi players decided to look for more concrete historical evidence. Tang Hao and others concluded on the basis of their research that Chen Wang Ting, the father of the Chen family style, was the earliest recorded player of Tai Chi Chuan. Since then, New China with its pragmatic attitude has lent support to this approach. The communists could not accept the legends about Chang San Feng, such as that God taught Tai Chi to him in a dream, or that he lived three hundred years. Chen Wang Ting, general, farmer, and head of his family, is more likely to be endorsed by official Chinese historians than some Taoist recluse.

Unfortunately, the researchers in the 1930's did not know enough about Tai Chi to be qualified to investigate it. They relied on historical continuity. They were able to pick up the thread in the present and follow it back to Chen Wang Ting, but once it disappeared, they were unable to find it again on the other side of the intervening centuries when Tai Chi was in historical obscurity. Because they had no way of defining what Tai Chi is and what it is not, they were unable to recognize it in earlier arts.

From ancient times to the present, the Master Key to Tai Chi Chuan has been the way to distinguish Tai Chi Chuan from all other forms of "ch'uan." We can apply this test to determine whether we are truly tracing Tai Chi or some other art. For example, in the Tang dynasty, Hsa Suan Ming's "san hsi chi" was Tai Chi Chuan because the principles were the same. But why then credit Tai Chi to Chang San Feng if it predates him? Because like Homer, Chaucer or Shakespeare, he collected things and transformed them. In the union of earlier forms of Tai Chi boxing, Taoist breathing techniques, and the principles of I-Ching, he broadened Tai Chi from a martial art into a complete system of self-cultivation. Chen Wang Ting is the first recorded martial arts expert in the Chen family. But although the art of his family became Tai Chi Chuan before the middle of the nineteenth century, there is no proof that the "Ch'uan" Chen Wang Ting practiced in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was Tai Chi Chuan. The sole basis for the claim that he originated Tai Chi Chuan is a poem attributed to him:

"How I miss the good old days  
Of armor and arms  
Of clash and conquest,  
Life ever at risk!  
My king honored me then;  
But rank and titles are useless  
In a new dynasty.  
Nowadays, I am  
Old, weak, and short of breath;

A textbook on prolonging life  
Is my constant companion.  
When I am bored, I make up  
fist forms (ch'uan).  
In spring, I plow.  
In my spare time, I teach  
My students, my sons and grandsons:  
Perhaps someday they might become  
dragons or tigers-- That is up to them.

Though the poem mentions fist forms, we cannot be sure the forms referred to were Tai Chi Chuan. It seems clear that Chen Wang Ting created "lu," or forms. He is said to have created a 108-posture Long Chuan, five lu, and Pao Twi; but at that time they were not called Tai Chi. In fact, Chen Wang Ting's forms and posture names that have come down to us through the Chen family appear in a book, Ji Xiao Xin Xu, written in the Ming Dynasty before the time of Chen Wang Ting by Qi Ji Guang, in which he collected 32 martial forms. There is also a form in the shao lin system called Pao Twi, and many postures are the same as the Chen family's Pao Twi.

Why then do we trace all our Tai Chi back to the Chen family's first routine if it cannot be proven that Chen Wang Ting practiced Tai Chi? Because sometime between Chen Wang Ting's lifetime and Yang Lu Chan's arrival in Chen Village, the Chen family incorporated the "Master Key" into their form practice. There is a story that provides a clue to this, although some account it apocryphal. The story is told of Wang Tsung Yueh, author of a famous treatise on Tai Chi Chuan and really the first documented Tai Chi expert. He was about 50 years old in 1791, a contemporary of the father of Chen Chang Hsin.

It is said that Wang Tsung Yueh visited Chen Village and saw the Chen family practicing outside. He walked away smiling to himself as if they were just children. Some of the family members didn't like this attitude, and five of their best went after him to challenge him. Master Wang bested them, and might have explained, as in this century Cheng Man Ching has said, "You are only doing exercise, not Tai Chi." The Chen family asked him to teach them, and I think Wang Tsung Yueh shared with them the Master Key: the eight trigrams, five elements, and chi kung. Once in possession of the Master Key, the Chens might have discovered they didn't need so many routines; in any case, only two traditional routines remain; the first lu became the Chen's first routine, and Pao Twi with chan ssu chin and ch'i kung applied to it, became the second routine.

Tai Chi forms are like the clay vessels spoken of in verse 11 of the Tao Teh Ching; their usefulness depends on their emptiness, if they remain empty they are still use~~less~~<sup>ful</sup>. Form readily becomes empty through ritualistic repetition. ~~Although today you are playing Tai Chi, without the proper awareness tomorrow you may only be "doing exercise".~~ If today you are simply performing some martial postures, tomorrow through the acquisition of the Master key, your form may be transformed into Tai Chi. Tai Chi is not defined by its appearance: by postures, techniques, pace, or physical principles. Tracing the history of a particular form of movement is not the same as researching Tai Chi. Tai Chi may manifest through a form, but it is not intrinsic to any form or style. Tai Chi itself is formless: eight gates, five steps, and ch'i kung--these are the key to it. If a player has awareness of the Master Key, his "ch'uan" will be Tai Chi Chuan, while another player executing the same postures may simply be "doing exercise."

The forms associated with Tai Chi have come down to us through a kind of oral tradition in which a handful of great masters have had the strongest influence, but in which a great many lesser players have had a hand. Standardization through pictures began to play part only in the last half century or so. It is easy, then, to regard differences among Tai Chi forms as largely random: the result of individual preferences, physical mannerisms, and personality traits blurred by transmission through generations of players.

Another view is possible, however. I believe the three major styles of the nineteenth century--Chen, Yang, and the Wu style of Wu Yu Hsing--represent a clear and purposeful sequence. The forms practiced within these styles are not "better" in any absolute sense than their variants or the forms of other styles. But like a spectrum of primary colors, these styles offer the serious student a continuum along which to chart a course of personal progress toward mastery.

(Part 2 of this article will discuss this progression of styles Chen, Yang, and Wu.)

## FESTIVAL HONORS TAI CHI FOUNDER

by Marsha Rosa

Every Tai-Chi player should set aside time each year to pay respects to Chang San Feng, legendary founder of Tai Chi Chuan. Since 1973, students of Master Jou have celebrated the birth of Chang San Feng with a festival that has grown larger and more special each year. Demonstrations, workshops, discussions, and practice among students and teachers from many styles of Tai Chi makes the Festival an important event for all players to share ideas and become more open-minded about Tai Chi. The highlight of this festival is a traditional ceremony in which we all show our respect to Chang San Feng.

Most of the early Festivals were held in the Piscataway area, where most of Master Jou's students lived. Gradually, special guests from California, Boston, New York, Chicago, No. Carolina, Virginia, and even Taiwan came to give workshops, the final demonstration became a full Sunday afternoon.

Last year, the Festival was moved to Tai Chi Farm as the Grand Opening of the Farm to the public. Over 200 players visited the Farm, and several famous Masters also attended, giving workshops and demonstrating their forms. The ceremony to honor Chang San Feng is a very special time for all to consider the importance of Tai Chi's founder to our daily practice and lives.

This year, the weekend of June 6-8, the Chang Festival will provide a taste of the summer program in addition to the traditional workshops and celebration. All 1986 program instructors will be invited, and they can share their ideas with you and answer your questions. A special time will be reserved especially for Tai Chi instructors to meet together and exchange teaching methods in the open environment of Tai Chi Farm.

For more information about this year's Chang Festival or if you want to perform or help out with the festival contact coordinators Marsha Rosa, 1650 Quincy St., Piscataway, NJ 08854, (201) 968-4430, or Robert Moore (201) 795-1922.

---

Dear Tai Chi Player:

With this third issue of the newsletter, Tai Chi Farm, we have made much progress in both its content and appearance. We have tried to offer information about Tai Chi Farm and our programs here as well as substantive information. I would encourage you to subscribe to the newsletter (only \$10 for 6 issues) so we will have the necessary resources to improve not only the format and content, but also to computerize our mailing list so the newsletter gets to you in an efficient and timely manner. All the money from subscriptions stays in the newsletter fund. We welcome your comments and contributions to the newsletter.

We have also included further descriptions for courses offered this summer. With these descriptions, you can more easily decide when to visit Tai Chi Farm this year. Please send in your registration form as soon as you can. Help us to make this first year of programs successful!

This issue and the next will contain an important discussion of the history of Tai Chi Chuan and the relation between history and our daily practice. I look forward to hearing your reactions to this article, although it is not my intention to criticize other teachers and forms or to create a controversy with this discussion. Only through serious research and open discussion can we make progress toward enlightenment.

Make plans to visit Tai Chi Farm this summer. I am looking forward to seeing each one of you.

Best wishes,

Jou Tsung Hwa

### 1985 Tai Chi Tour To China - A Personal Report

by Pat Rice

The 1985 Tai Chi Tour was a fantastic experience for me. I knew it would be. Studying Tai Chi and seeing the wonders of China combined to make a very special tour. From the moment I decided to go, I was excited. I still am.

It is never possible to convey to other people the whole of a personal experience, but I want to describe portions of mine. Everything wants to come tumbling out, words spilling over each other; it's hard to discipline my enthusiasm and organize myself into tidy paragraphs. I'll try.

"What was THE most outstanding thing about the trip," is a question I am frequently asked? My answer is instantaneous: "The people." The Chinese people I met were warm and open hearted. All gave us a genuine welcome. Whether official tour host or folks casually met along the way, many performed some special service or courtesy. People were friendly and helpful even when they couldn't speak English. Smiles and sign language translated freely from one language to the other. It was easy to feel an immediate kinship as we shared small jokes and tried to tell each other a little about ourselves.

Perhaps others in our group of twelve would answer that question differently. There are many other possible "greatest experiences": visiting the Chen village and meeting the village elders and young students, being received by an active 102-year-old Tai Chi master, learning from top-ranked teachers of Tai Chi and Chi Kung, pushing hands with highly skilled players. Walking a section of the Great Wall, entering the once Forbidden City, strolling the corridors of the Summer Palace, standing with the terra cotta army in Xian. There are many precious and memorable moments to choose.

"What did you learn?" is what my Tai Chi friends ask. I'm not sure yet. I've been very fortunate to have studied in the U.S. with excellent teachers whose understanding and practice of Tai Chi is extensive and profound, and whose teachings have conveyed the essence of Tai Chi principles. Most of what I heard in China, I had already heard here. But, somehow, in China my perceptions were broadened; my ability to understand has been expanded by going on the Tai Chi Tour. My practice of Tai Chi has changed, is changing, will change. In what ways I don't know yet. The changes are manifesting themselves in my increased rooting and stability, in my balance and weight shifts, in my awareness of my body and its motion. As these are the very physical fundamentals of Tai Chi, the effects are bound to be extensive. It's enlightening and frustrating at the same time. I couldn't be happier about that.

THIS YEAR, THE TAI CHI TOUR TO CHINA WILL BE FROM OCTOBER 19 TO NOVEMBER 11, 1986. FOR MORE INFORMATION, WRITE: TAI CHI FOUNDATION, P.O. BOX 828, WARWICK, NY 10990.

PLEASE NOTIFY TAI CHI FARM IF YOUR ADDRESS CHANGES

Jay Dunbar  
P.O. Box 314  
Carrboro, NC 27510

Postman: Please Forward

TAI CHI FARM  
P.O. Box 630  
New Milford, NY 10959



POST PAID  
Permit 124  
Warwick, NY 10990

### PRE-REGISTRATION INFORMATION

The form below is a preregistration form, and it is very important to us that you pre-register for courses you plan to attend this summer. This is our first year of operation and we need to have some idea of our attendance for the summer classes in order to plan for classroom and living facilities. Your help is needed to make the first summer at Tai Chi Farm a successful one.

A deposit of \$25 will hold your place in any course. Full payment is due two weeks prior to the course beginning. If you cancel 7 days or more before the course, we will refund your full fee minus a \$10 processing charge. Other policies will be explained in the catalog.

If you want to register for more than one course, please photocopy the form and send one for each course you wish to attend. A \$25 deposit is required for each course.

Please Return This Form As Soon As Possible

\*\*\*\*\*

### COURSE FEES — 1986

		<u>Weekend</u>	<u>5-Days</u>
Tuition:		\$85	\$170
Lodging:	Cabin	\$20	\$40
	Camping	\$10	\$20

**WEEKEND WORKSHOPS** begin at 9:00 A.M. Saturday and end at 3:00 P.M. Sunday, with registration and informal gathering on Friday night.

**FIVE-DAY** seminars begin at 9:00 A.M. Monday and end at 12:00 noon on Friday, with registration and informal gathering Sunday night.

.....

### PRE-REGISTRATION FORM — TAI CHI 1986 PROGRAM

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Course number \_\_\_\_\_  
Dates of course \_\_\_\_\_  
Course title \_\_\_\_\_  
Cabin or camping? \_\_\_\_\_

I AM ENCLOSING \$ \_\_\_\_\_ FOR PRE-REGISTRATION.

I AM ENCLOSING \$ <sup>00</sup>10<sup>00</sup> FOR A ONE YEAR SUBCRIPION TO TAI CHI FARM

(please send a separate check for newsletter subscription)

SEND TO: Pre-registration, Tai Chi Farm, P.O. Box 630, New Milford, NY 10959