



A Brief History of Tai Chi

The following article was originally written for the newsletter of the Golden Lion Academy – Australia’s leading Wushu teaching school. It is essentially a refined chronology of events based on researched information and is intended as a guide to the subject, not the last word on it. Much more could have been included. Strictly speaking the whole issue of Chinese martial arts history cannot be divorced from the culture, politics, philosophy and religion of the time but that would turn a short article into a book and that was never the intention.

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Before venturing too far into this subject it is important to note that anyone attempting to present a 'true' account of the history of Tai Chi is on somewhat shaky ground, especially if that person is a Westerner who has to look in from the outside of Chinese society and to rely on other people's researches and writings to present an article on 'What is Tai Chi and 'where did it come from' etc... It seems doubtful if a definitive, historically accurate and verifiable version can be written, such is the mix of fact, fiction, myth and legend that confronts anyone who reads more than one source on this subject. Certain individuals commonly appear but at different times doing different things. Their names are spelt differently, accurate birth dates are given for individuals who are then described as mythological by others. So it goes on.

Another problem in tracing Chinese history is translation. Written works are difficult to put into English because the Chinese language has many aspects that simply do not correspond to western understanding. Compounding this difficulty is the alphabet, dealing as it does with concepts where one character can encompass many words or ideas in western terms. The quest for a history of Tai Chi in particular and martial arts in general, is not helped by the fact that very little instructional and historical information appears to have been written down or if it has, it has been lost or burned. Besides, this aspect of Chinese life has long tradition of word of mouth, master to pupil teaching – often in obscure locations and behind closed doors.

One more barrier to understanding is that many of today's martial arts commentators simply ignore the broader picture, seeking only to establish the longest possible lineage for their particular variety of martial art and blending the mix to suit. Hopefully, what follows will not fall into that trap and will be of interest to all Tai Chi practitioners even if some or most of it will be open to argument.

Speculation on early martial arts development

The Chinese have, and seemingly always have had, a fundamentally different interpretation of life and the meaning of existence to what is considered the 'truth' in western civilisation. Up until comparatively recent times China was known only in terms of trade – its philosophies, religions and cultural practices were not looked upon with any great interest other than to note that it was totally alien (the same attitude applied to all other Eastern philosophies). As a consequence, large numbers of missionaries were sent there in an attempt to convert the population to 'the right path' (not realising that 'the Way' had been well understood for more than two thousand years) but little effort was put into any real understanding. More's the pity because they would have been in an excellent position to fill in some of the gaps that now exist.

There is debate as to whether ancient China, during those highly formative years between 1000 BC and 200 BC, was a truly isolated country and therefore developed its religions and philosophies independent of outside influence or that the opposite was the case. This period of China's history is important because out of it comes Taoism, Confucianism and another philosophical bent called Legalism. Of the three only Taoism is of real relevance to Tai Chi as it held to be the driving force behind its creation. Tao (pronounced "Dow") can be roughly translated into English as *path*, or *the way*. Based on the *Tao Te Ching* the Tao is basically indefinable but if a short description is needed it could be as follows:

Tao is the first-cause of the universe. It regulates natural processes and nourishes balance. It embodies the harmony of opposites – Yin and Yang. The interaction of Yin and Yang, ever changing, ever evolving one into the other, produces Chi (vital breath) the power which envelopes, surrounds and flows through all things, living and non-living. It is the duty of all individuals to follow a path which leads towards the Tao and become one with it.

There is much more to Taoism than a few simple statements but the central idea that existence is brought about and maintained by Chi, and that being one with the Tao can be achieved by harmonising Yin and Yang, quickly gives rise to the thought that an individuals actions can be helpful or harmful to the flow of Chi. If Chi is the very substance of life then it makes sense to act in ways that improve its effects, both to the ones body and the environment. Such is the thinking behind Tai Chi, Chi Kung, Feng Shui, Dim Mak and Traditional Chinese Medicine.

There is also evidence to suggest some parallels between Indian Yoga (whoes history dates back even further) and Taoist exercise routines. In 1973, Chinese archaeologists excavating the site of a Han period tomb at Ma-wang-tui in Central China unearthed a number of important manuscripts. Amongst them was found the oldest known written version of the *Tao Te Ching*, the oldest extant version of the *I Ching* and of most interest here, a silk manuscript that depicts a series of twenty eight gymnastic exercises named after animals. Yogic exercise of more ancient origin, also named after animals and very similar if not identical in pose have been found in India. As the tomb at Ma-wang-tui dates to around 200 BC it is also clear that the wisdom of imitating animal movements to promote personal health was known about in China at least five hundred years before Hua Tuo was credited with devising the Five Animal Exercises (see below).

From the year of 220 BC and into the new millennium China was re-unified under its first Emperor, having been through centuries of upheaval during the period known as 'the Waring States.' The three philosophies of Taoism, Confucianism and Legalism were firmly entrenched in all levels of society. Trade and contact with other countries along the famous Silk Road was on the increase; science was advancing and medicine had displaced a belief in evil spirits as a cause of disease with treatments that are recognisable today as 'Traditional Chinese Medicine.' Chi Kung/Yogic style exercise forms were in use to get the sick and ailing back to health but there is no evidence (so far) that any form of martial art existed other than the assumption that the imperial army must have had

some training in close quarter combat and given the ever present threat of bandits, some of the population may have devised their own methods of self defence.

From this point until the mid seventeenth century (AD) we enter a period where myth, legend, speculation, argument and a little fact take over in the hunt for the origins of Tai Chi. The information related here follows on from what has been written by others and as such traces the traditionally accepted history between year zero and the time when it is known that Tai Chi left the confines of the Chen village. Always keep in mind that all of the following can be disputed.

It is commonly accepted that Buddhism began to spread into China during the first century AD though not making any real headway until two hundred years later when the collapse of the Later Han Dynasty forced a rethink of traditional beliefs and an opening of scholarly minds to the new religion. The first significant individual (in martial arts and Chinese medical terms) to emerge from this early period is **Hua Tuo**, a highly skilled doctor, acupuncturist, surgeon, inventor of anaesthesia and great advocate of the use of exercise to promote good health.

About the year 220 AD he is generally credited with devising the physical and mental exercises that became known as *Wu Chi Kung* (Five Animal Frolic) – the first systemised martial art in China. Based on *animal movements* combined with pre-existing fighting techniques (possibly) plus Chi building methods, the Five Animal games were the first exercises devised to maintain and improve health in fit people as opposed to applying Chi Kung etc. to cure the sick. It is unfortunate that Hua Tuo was later murdered by the then Prime Minister and warlord Cao Cao and his manuscripts burned because the creation of Five Animal Frolic is also attributed to a Taoist by the name of Jun Qian. Either way, The Five Animal Frolic is an important part of the puzzle as it is thought to be the basis of later developments that lead directly to all the various forms of WuShu that we know today.

Some three hundred years later, circa 525 AD a Chan Buddhist monk named **Da Mo** (also known as **Bodhidharma**) settled at the **Shaolin Temple** in Hunan

Province. Da Mo, born an Indian Prince in 482 AD, had been travelling and preaching in China for some while before journeying to the Sung Mountain range where the temple was located. The monks of Shaolin practised long-term meditation which made them spiritually strong but physically weak. Seeing this apparent imbalance in their daily practice Da Mo set about improving matters by devising an exercise program to help the monks better withstand the demands of their isolated lifestyle and not fall asleep during meditation - or so it is said!

Nowhere is it made clear what body of knowledge was called upon to put this program together or how long it took to implement (If the temple kept any records they have long since been lost - the temple was abandoned in the mid 1800's and most of the monks were killed). What emerged was a new path to be followed on the journey to enlightenment, one that saw them become physically stronger and virtually undefeatable in combat. It would seem that for the first time, physical toughening, fighting techniques, Chi strengthening and spiritual guidance had been combined into a systemised martial art form. Later it became known as the Shaolin Fighting System or **Kung Fu**. The methods used became the basis of two classics: *Yi Jin Jing (Muscle/Tendon Changing Classic)* and *Xi Sui Jing (Marrow/Brain Washing classic)* both of which are attributed to Da Mo and printed circa 550 AD. Da Mo is said to have died in 539 AD.

Speculation on early Tai Chi development

It is worth pondering the fact that we are still no nearer discovering the origins of Tai Chi. Taoism had been in existence for nearly one thousand years, Chi Kung had been practised for the same period of time, fighting techniques presumably existed in some form or other before the developments at Shaolin. Tai Chi is and was held to be a fearsome martial art. Its philosophical light is Taoism not Buddhism. Tai Chi is translated variously as "the ultimate" or "Grand Ultimate" and practitioners seek union with this ultimate as their goal. Furthermore, Tai Chi is **internal** (*Nei Dan*) whereas Shaolin was considered **external** (*Wai Dan*). So did it develop out of the Shaolin system or did Tai Chi come from somewhere else at some other time? Enter a Taoist monk named **Chang San-feng**.

Legends surround this person, even that *he* is a legend and not real. For want of something more concrete to refer to the following an extract (with some minor alterations) from a web site concerning Classical Chinese Medicine. It provides as good a description as any of this semi mythical master:

Chang San-feng is credited with developing the Chinese internal system known as Taijiquan (Tai Chi Chuan). He was born in 960, 1247 and again in 1279 AD

A Native of I-Chou in Liao Tung Province, an external master and court official of the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), other sources state he was born earlier in the Sung dynasty (960-1279), who upon retirement retreated with disgust from the world to a Taoist monastery on Wu Tang Mountain, where he acquired his Taoist name of San Feng. He is said to have learned T'ai Chi Ch'uan in a dream, or after watching a bird and a snake fight. More likely, Chang applied the Taoist health principles and knowledge of energy circulation to his vast ability in external kung fu, thus creating something really different - a martial art that does not use muscle power as a primary source of movement, but Qi (Chi). Records available in the monastery on Wu Tang Mountain do indeed mention him. Descriptions picture him as being seven feet tall, with the bones of a crane and the posture of a pine tree, whiskers shaped like a spear, and in winter and summer wearing the same bamboo hat, carrying a horsehair duster and being able to cover 1000 Li in a day.

The crane-snake combat gave him the ideas that the coiled movement of the snake was like the Taijitu (the Yin Yang symbol) and contained the principle of the soft overcoming the hard. Based upon the transformations of the Grand Ultimate, the Yin and Yang leading to the Bagua eight Triagrams, the Triagrams leading the 10.000 things (everything), and the Wuxing (Five movements or phases) being the basis of their interaction, he developed Taijiquan, to gather the Qi, cultivate it to Jing (essence), and hence transform it into Shen (spirit); all waxing and waning, movement and stillness, action and non-action embodied in the I-Jing (I-Ching).

There are many stories of exactly when Taijiquan was developed by Chang San-feng and no one today knows the accurate story. Some of the accepted facts, however, are that

he was a very intelligent man, he studied Shaolin Chuan for about ten years and mastered it, and with the foundation in Shaolin Chuan he developed the original thirteen postures of Taijiquan.

What truth if any lies behind this person and his exploits is up to the reader to decide. Some future archaeological excavation may throw new light on the whole subject or quite probably it will remain speculation. Somewhere in the distant past of Chinese history someone or some group, maybe a Taoist monk or monks, developed a different form of martial art much as described in the above paragraphs concerning Chang San-feng. If so, the knowledge and the skills would have been passed on over the centuries, master to pupil, quite likely in monastic settings or in private in some remote village. Such knowledge would not be open to all comers, being difficult and time consuming to teach and to acquire so would be regarded as a secret.

Tai Chi leaves the Chen Village

As this knowledge was passed on it is likely that it was added to, improved on and that various styles emerged – as was the case with Kung Fu. (It should be made clear at this point that the term ‘Tai Chi’ is being used in this article in a general sense, strictly speaking it was not until a much later era that it was used to describe a combat art. Before then the various styles were known by other names). So now we come to the Chen Village circa mid 1600’s, when history becomes a little clearer – but only just.

The village was and still is very remote and again, there is debate about how Tai Chi came to be practised there, some sources even declaring that the whole Tai Chi thing was devised by a village member named **Chen Wan Ting**. Whether or not Chen was the true author of Tai Chi or that he further refined martial art skills passed down from unknown sources, his contribution was significant enough for his style to be acknowledged as the origin of **Chen Family Style** Tai Chi.

Over subsequent generations his Forms were passed on in secret through family members and further developed to

a very high level. The village prospered by developing a flourishing trade in herbs which was greatly assisted by the ability of village members to fight off attempts to steal the produce. Word began to spread about this seemingly amazing internal martial art, eventually reaching the ears of **Yang Lu Chan** (1799-1872).

At the time, Yang was already a proficient martial artist and highly motivated to improve his abilities. For whatever reason, either deciding to investigate the Chen system for himself or being advised to do so by his teacher – being the only way to advance any further – he arrived in the Chen village at some point in the early 1800’s. Because the Chen system was still secret and not taught to outsiders it is said that Yang passed himself off as a servant for many years, contriving to learn the art by spying on training sessions, only learning it properly when he was discovered and able to prove his worthiness to be taught. Whatever the truth may be he learnt very well because he came to be known as “Yang the Invincible,” being able to defeat anyone who challenged him in combat.

Yang eventually left the Chen village, began travelling and as well as proving himself invincible, taught his own style of Tai Chi to others (in private – not public). He started a family (having three sons and four grandsons – one of whom was **Yang Cheng Fu**) and eventually became martial arts teacher to the Imperial Court and the Emperor’s personal guard – a position reserved for the proven best martial artist in China. Of the three sons, one died early but the other two learnt their Father’s art and joined him as instructors in the Imperial Court. Their collective style became known as the **Yang Family Style**.

It was during Yang’s time at the Imperial Court that the Scholar Ong Tong (after watching a contest in which Yang Lu Chang defeated a series of challengers) wrote a verse that defined Yang’s technique as the physical manifestation of Taiji (Tai Chi) philosophy. Thereafter Yang’s Style was referred to as ‘**Taijiquan**’ and by association, so too were all the other styles that sprang from it.

Yang Family Tai Chi begets other Styles

Among Yang Lu Chan's earliest students (in a period before Yang went to the Imperial Court) were three brothers, Wu Deng Qing, Wu Ru Qing and **Wu Yu Xiang** (1812-1880). All three learned well, being taught what is now known as the *Old Yang Style* of Tai Chi. Many years later in 1852 Wu Yu Xiang set out to visit the Chen Village, determined to track down Yang's old teacher Chen Chang Xin – presumably to learn for himself what it was that made Yang Lu Chan invincible. He never reached his intended destination, ending up instead at the Zhao Bao village and being taught by another Chen master – Chen Qing Ping.

After a short but intense period of training Wu returned home and proceeded to modify his form, including within it the skills he had learned from Chen Qing Ping and ideas found in the then recently discovered Tai Chi Chuan Classic of Wang Tsung Yueh. Though he had few pupils Wu Yu Xiang's style of Tai Chi was dutifully passed on and is today more widely known as the **Hao Family Style** of Tai Chi after it was adopted and popularised by the Hao family. Today it is still practiced within China but largely unknown outside its borders.

Amongst Yang Lu Chan's later students (during his time at the Imperial Palace) was a bodyguard named **Quan Yu** (1834 – 1902). Members of the Imperial Guard were taught a slightly modified version of the Yang style which came to be known as the *Small Frame*. This form was devised to allow effective fighting techniques to be used while wearing the Palace uniforms which, with their long sleeves and robes, made some movements of the usual *Old Yang Form* very difficult.

Quan Yu became a skilled practitioner of the Small Frame system and was highly regarded for his abilities. When Yang Lu Chan finally retired from the imperial Court so too did Quan Yu (by which time he had adopted the surname of Wu). He continued to pass on his knowledge to many students, prominent among them being his son **Wu Jian Quan** (1870–1942). It was Wu Jian Quan who went on to further refine his Father's style and make it so popular that it is now known as **Wu Jian Quan Style Tai Chi Chuan** or simply **Wu Style Tai Chi** – second only to Yang Style in world-wide popularity.

There is yet one more Style that owes its origins to the Yang Family and that is **Sun Style**. Developed by the famous, almost legendary martial artist, **Sun Lu Tang** (1861–1932) it was a blend of his extensive knowledge of Pa kua, Hsing-I (both of which are internal forms of martial arts but not related to Tai Chi) and Wu Yu Xiang (Hao) Style Tai Chi. It is the most recently developed of the major styles and highly popular throughout the world, though not to the same extent as Yang and Wu. It has one advantage over the others in that Sun's daughter is still alive so there is a direct link to the creator of the Form.

The Boxer Rebellion and afterwards

Up until 1900 Tai Chi was taught with an emphasis on fighting and self defence. Accomplished practitioners took on an air of invincibility – nothing could stop them or so it seemed. In the dying years of the Ching Dynasty large numbers of martial artists (called Boxers by the Western press) were recruited to try and eject Western powers from Beijing but they faced an unforeseen and largely underestimated enemy – the sub-machine gun. The ensuing massacre, known as the Boxer Rebellion, shocked China into a new reality where fire-power was king and the Emperor and his realm were under the dominion of foreigners.

Much of the old way of things changed after 1900. A previously static population began to move around more, mainly because they were forced to for reasons of survival. As a consequence the way martial arts were taught also started to change when potential students became less inclined to spend the long hours needed to master a complex fighting skill. It was also obvious that no amount of training was going to stop a hail of bullets. Gradually, Tai Chi masters began to alter what they taught and further modified the forms to accommodate changing attitudes. Another trend was towards public teaching as opposed to 'indoors' or private instruction. It was plainly difficult to teach to the highest level when larger numbers of students were involved so the modifications had the added benefit of making Tai Chi more accessible even if the art became somewhat diluted.

It was in this period that the person most responsible for the popularisation of Tai Chi came to prominence. He was **Yang Cheng Fu** (1883–1936), grandson of Yang Lu Chan. Like other masters he initially taught privately but in 1925 he was invited by one of his students to teach in Shanghai and it was then that he started public classes. He made further refinements to the Yang Style, removing the strength explosions (Fa-Jing) and replacing them with the use of **Chi** to extend the limb instead. He also smoothed out the Form to emphasize its primary foundation of flow, rootedness and relaxation. This new method of practice enabled young and old alike to learn Tai Chi but it was still primarily focused on combat, resulting good health being an added advantage. Yang Cheng Fu also travelled widely throughout China, promoting his art wherever he went. As a result, huge numbers of people took to practising it, so much so that it became regarded as the standard Form and ultimately what it is today – the world’s most popular Tai Chi Style.

It was not until after the communist revolution of 1949 that any new developments in Tai Chi practice took place. The Government of the time developed a standardised routine of 24 movements (the Beijing 24 form) which was a simplified version of the original Yang Long Form and promoted to the population as a method of healthy exercise. This was in 1956. About a decade later, Mao Tse Tung unleashed “the Great Leap Forward” – a grand example of collective madness otherwise known as the Cultural Revolution. Old ways and traditions were purged from society and as a result just about all of the traditional martial arts practitioners were either forced underground, left the country altogether, put in prison or even worse, re-educated. The Shaolin Temple, already largely deserted since the mid 1800’s was burnt down and then burnt down again, just to make sure.

One bright side to this mayhem was that Chinese martial arts began to be practised and publicly noticed outside of China, though only slowly at first. One such practitioner was **Chen Man Ch’ing**, a student of Yang Cheng Fu who had fled with his family (along with a large slice of China’s population) to Taiwan in 1949. While still in China he had developed a 37 posture variation of the Yang Long Form

(108 movement) which he used to train military students in the short space of time allotted to the task. In 1964 he moved to New York where he continued to teach this 37 Form Tai Chi, becoming an inspiration to large numbers of students and further promoting the benefits of Tai Chi to Western countries. His influence could be put on par with that of Yang Cheng Fu but it is worth noting that the focus had well and truly shifted away from combat and towards health.

Kung Fu and all that!

With the death of Mao Tse Tung and a subsequent reappraisal of political thinking, life in China began to ease up, albeit slowly. No longer was life so rigidly controlled and the past was again looked upon more favourably. Martial arts began to re-emerge, an official Chinese Academy of Martial Arts was established and under its guidance the standardised Tai Chi Forms were devised. The 24 routine was already in place, next came the 48 which appeared in the 1970’s and later, in the 1980’s, came the 42 International Competition Form (both are Yang Style). As was the case with Chen Man Ch’ing, the focus of these new formats is more on sport, recreation, health and competition. Combat was now the ‘intent’ behind the Form but not the reason to learn it.

Meanwhile in the West, increased interest in Chinese martial arts had been sparked by the Kung Fu phenomena. Suddenly there was a demand for the knowledge but few were supplying it. Such teachings were generally considered to be out of bounds to Westerners. Fortunately there were a few who were prepared to teach, Golden Lion’s founder, **Grandmaster Pier Tsui-Po** being one of them. The gradual upsurge in the popularity of Kung Fu took Tai Chi along with it although Tai Chi has taken longer to really establish itself in Western thinking. These days with China more open, Tai Chi Masters are able to travel abroad and spread their considerable knowledge and Westerners are able to visit China for training. Even the Shaolin Temple is back in business, surrounded by souvenir shops and running its own fund raising tours.

World-wide today there are four major Styles of Tai Chi – **Yang, Wu, Chen** and **Sun**. There are also many others

ranging from well known (eg Hao Style) to obscure. Along side them are two other Internal Martial Art systems – **Hsing-I** and **Ba Gua Chang**.

It is a daunting thought that as Westerners we have had only had a very short exposure in time to an artform that has been slowly maturing for 2500 years. What more is there to learn?

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