

The History of Tai Chi

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The story of Tai Chi is often conceived as beginning with Chang San-feng - generally regarded as a mythical monk in the tradition of the I-Ching and Taoism— perhaps living around 1368 onwards. He is credited with blending existing health exercises, fighting styles and his own observations (including natural animalistic movements) and strategic thinking into a synthesis which later grew into what we now refer to as Tai Chi. Whether or not Chang San-feng existed it is clear that these many complementary precursor elements were current in Chinese culture over a long period and almost waiting to come together – perhaps just needing the right time, place and person/s to pull all the pieces into one codification. There are many candidates and it may be that no one person is solely responsible – rather perhaps that many interacted and added to the work of their predecessors – these include Chang Sung-chi, Wang Tsung-yueh and Jiang Fa.

However the historical record is clear that in the 1600's a retired Chinese military officer named Chen Wangting (9th generation member of the Chen family) was the focal person who put the whole package together under the umbrella label of Tai Chi Chuan. At that time the family already had a powerful martial reputation and their own successful style, derived from the legendary Chen Bu 1st generation of the family, who lived in the late 1300s and brought that style to Henan from Shanxi when the family moved there (Shanxi province is also the traditional origin of both Bagua Zhang and Xingyi Chuan). This original family style may also have some relation to Shaolin since the Chen village is apparently quite close to the Shaolin monastery.

Chen Wangting is credited with the creation of a number of Tai Chi Chuan forms which were then practiced by members of his family/village who went on to develop what is now known as the Laojia form. The new Tai Chi style he created was integrated by Chen Wangting from the existing family style with martial theories from the 36 postures described by General Qi Jiguang in the Chuan Ching (Boxing classics) section of his Military handbook and ideas from Jiang Fa – a skilled martial artist/prisoner/friend of Chen Wangting – into five routines of Tai Chi Chuan, plus 108 form Long Fist and Cannon Fist form. He is also credited with creating push hands drills and silk reeling as well as emphasising mental/physical relaxation, intention training and balancing slow with fast moves and many other aspects.

It seems that the work of Chen Wangting and work by others that followed, was primarily focused on Martial use but incorporated many ideas and practices from the I-Ching and Taoist thinking as well as from Traditional Chinese Medicine including health exercises from Daoyin and from Qi Gong together with much knowledge about the anatomy and vital points of the human body, and of course made use of the concept of Chi and ideas of chi flow. In a similar way Tai chi seems to have integrated Chin na - joint locks – apparently already ubiquitous in martial arts all around the world, but given new meaning in Tai Chi which provides unique opportunities for both application and for generating power in use.

This period is thought of as a time when personal and family defence were a high priority and brutality was common – members of the Chen family for example are thought to have been involved in both trading in herbs and in guarding caravans and personnel. Consequently it may be imagined that the practitioners of the time were interested in

dealing with brutality as efficiently as possible – and taking Chen Wangting as an example, were already capable fighters looking for a better way of dealing with aggression. In addition it seems also likely that many of the experienced fighters would be looking to continue their abilities into older age and perhaps able to work from a perspective of experience in Traditional Chinese Medicine. Thus giving rise to the twin faces of Tai Chi and Tai Chi Chuan – health and martial application. Equally the Taoist lineage brought with it an intellectual approach to observing and thinking about the world both practically and philosophically, thus enabling a thoughtful way of approaching the development of a martial art.

This martial/health dichotomy is exemplified by the story of Yang style derived from Yang Luchan who is said to have learned Chen style covertly while living in the village in the early 1800's – but to have been accepted as a student when he demonstrated his ability against various family members.

Yang Luchan was the first outsider to learn the original form of what we now know as Laojia when he was taught by Chen Changxing. He left the Chen village after many years practice and travelled around China taking on all comers and was unbeaten – thus earning the title Yang the Invincible – a very martial beginning for the family style. He eventually went to Beijing as tutor to the Emperor's guard and taught his Tai Chi Chuan to his family. It seems that his form diverged as it passed from him through his descendents, becoming focused on the health benefits via his grandson Yang Chen Fu –who wished to spread the benefits of Tai Chi more widely in order to improve the health of the nation - this is the style most popularly known today.

I have trained with Mai Lee Yang (the granddaughter of Yang Chen Fu) in Hong Kong and she still viewed Tai Chi practice as a martial art – indeed the form still retains many aspects that are of martial value and it may be that Yang Chen Fu himself and possibly some close students continued to practice a more martial version of the form. Indeed it was my own experience that it greatly added to the effectiveness and application of the Karate which I also practiced at the time. However it seems widely accepted that most Yang style today is practiced primarily for health and it is clear that in the west at least Tai Chi is seen in the mainstream culture as almost entirely health related. So from Yang Luchan to modern day global Yang style (until recent years “The” global Tai Chi style) we have seen a complete conversion in the space of around 200 years.

There have been many Yang style spin-offs over time – one well known being that of Chen Man Ching who initially trained under Yang Chen Fu and then went to the USA where his form has become very popular for it's softness.

While this spreading and diverging of Yang Style Tai Chi was going on around the Beijing focus the original Chen style was itself undergoing change, notably by Chen Changxing 14th generation and teacher of Yang Luchan, who is also credited with codifying the “old frame” Laojia form. At the same time Chen Youben, also 14th generation is credited with devising a new small frame form called Xiao-jia. This was followed by 16th generation member Chen Xin who wrote the first book on Chen Style “Illustrated Explanations of Chen Family Taijiquan” based around the Xiao-jia form, although not published until 1932. From a personal perspective it is clear from even a cursory look through this book that Tai Chi was being studied in a huge depth of detail and confirms the constant references back to the I-Ching also to Taoist ideas of how the world works as well as the theory of Chi which were clearly fundamental in developing the intellectual model that has driven the physical style.

Then at around the same time as Yang Chen Fu – in the period of the late 1800s/early 1900s Chen Fake 17th generation also went from the Chen village to Beijing as an instructor where he acquired a significant reputation as a fighter and developed what is now known as the Chen Xinjia form.

Stemming from this there are many other family derivatives of the Chen and Yang mix including Wu style, Wu (Hao) style and Sun style – these are generally considered the big 5 and are all traceable through relatively few practitioners who often knew or were related and trained with each other or with a connected lineage bearer.

Wu style derives from Quan You a leading student of Yang Luchan and his son Yang Pan Hou – the Wu family style originating from Quan You's son Wu Jianquan.

(Old) Wu (Hao) style derives from Wu Yu Xiang (1812-1880) who also studied with Yang Luchan for many years and then in the Chen village for 3 months under Chen Ching-ping. His family style was derived from this experience and is often referred to as Hao style after the Hao Wei Zhen – the second generation successor. The first generation successor Li I-yu also went on to form his own style now differentiated as Li style.

Hao Wei Zhen went on to meet and pass on his Tai Chi to Sun Lu-tang – an experienced practitioner of Xingyi and many other martial styles. Sun Lu Tang was known as a proficient fighter who went on to produce his own Sun style of Tai Chi.

I learned Sun style from Sun Lu Tang's daughter Sun Jian Yun at the Beijing People's University. She described her father in strong terms and the form as primarily martial in intent. I was impressed by the compactness and obvious short range application of Sun style. Discussion with one of Madam Sun's students also revealed a knowledge of acupuncture/vital points along with Tai Chi.

The core of Tai Chi is therefore quite interlinked – nurtured for 200 years by the practitioners of the Chen village and then in the past 200 years going from Chen to Yang to Wu and Hao to Sun - all now growing in parallel and still splitting off yet more variants.

The University in Beijing under Professor Li Deyin is much involved in what has developed as a sport side to Tai Chi with many competitions taking place both nationally and internationally around the world. These include forms, sparring and push hands. Sport forms of Tai Chi are judged on visual technique and on rule based competitions with expert judges awarding points for observed skill. The University training is often quite akin to gymnastics/acrobatics with students learning first a number of "hard" Kung Fu styles and then Xingyi, Bagua and Tai Chi. I believe that the background martial understanding is retained at the university and certainly teachers such as Wang Yang Ji who have come out of this system can demonstrate a good level of martial skill.

Tai Chi in the parks of China appears to have been incorporated into a social melee of health and leisure activities alongside Qi Gong, religious meetings, stretching, running, ballroom dancing and rock-and-roll. It is often taken up by men and women when they approach retiring age or if they have a health problem such as arthritis. Typically these practitioners spend a couple of hours or more first thing in the morning exercising and in their 60's 70's and 80's are often delighted to share and demonstrate their skill.

It is likely that word of Tai Chi found its way to the west by the transmission of travellers who visited China from the early 1900s onwards and brought back their understanding –

sadly they were few in number and perhaps limited in their understanding by the short time it was generally possible for them to stay. They did lay valuable ground work and generated visibility such that when I started training in martial arts in 1970 Tai Chi was known of in the west and a few books were available. Although good teaching was not widespread in the UK – primarily only in London. Later I was introduced to Yang style by my Karate teacher Hirokasu Kanazawa who learned 24 step Yang style in Japan from a Chinese teacher in exchange for Karate instruction.

The world wide spread of Tai Chi was promoted in parallel by the emigration of teachers from China after the communist revolution, again in the period after the 2nd World War and later after the Cultural Revolution. These teachers gave the rest of the world its first taste of genuine home-grown Chinese internal martial arts. They have more recently included those now encouraged by the Chinese government to visit the west for promotion of Chinese martial arts and culture in general.

Emigrant teachers include people like Chu King-hung who came to London from Hong Kong to teach Yang style in the Yang Chen Fu tradition and Chen Xiaowang 19th generation head of the Chen family who now travels around the world as ambassador for Chen style.

In recent years Tai Chi focused organisations have successfully promoted the sport side of Tai Chi both inside China and worldwide, such that competitive forms and sparring of many sorts are now highly visible and give a counterpoint to the health/meditation aspects seen widely in popular media.

Consequently Tai Chi of many variations is now hugely popular all around the world and each tradition continues to grow and “spin-off” new shoots. In recent years perhaps the most significant development however has been the dramatic growth of the oldest style of all – Chen style - resulting from the efforts of Chen Xiaowang (grandson of Chen Fake 17th generation) and the three others of the quartet referred to as the “Four Buddha Warrior Attendants” from the Chen village i.e. Chen Zhenglei, Wang Xian and Zhu Tiancai. Having so long nurtured the traditional martial root of Tai Chi Chuan these Chen village teachers are giving us the opportunity to return to that root and fully appreciate the value of a style that being true to its core values still contains a full and balanced martial synthesis.

These travellers and emigrant teachers have seeded the establishment of a “Tai Chi culture” in the west. This has now developed it’s own highly skilled teachers such as Karel and Eva Koskuba – who having met and trained under Chinese teachers in the UK or elsewhere, then sought to further their training in China itself – thus developing the maturity of Tai Chi outside China.

In the UK at least, Tai Chi now has quite a high profile as a “brand”, especially within the alternative health and leisure market, where it has gained increasing popularity as a “wrapper” for stress reduction/health/mobility exercise classes. Consequently we see a repetition of the established Martial/Health/Sport balance seen elsewhere in martial arts around the world. This blossoming of the martial art of Tai Chi, which once encompassed all these facets in one discipline, is now becoming fragmented into many different aspects each with its own adherents, lineage and history – a reflection of the globalisation process seen elsewhere.

On reflection we can see the history of Tai Chi as a historical “way” or “path” of development over time in the association of ideas derived from the early natural sciences

and philosophical thinking with health/medical practices, coming together with the practical fighting styles – a cross linking perhaps fuelled by the needs of injured warriors to repair and of healthy ones to strengthen their bodies and to enhance their abilities. These practical ideas synthesised by a relatively few individuals, over quite a short period of time, went beyond the straightforward external fighting styles into something more complex and sophisticated – perhaps because many martial people were/are also intelligent thinkers. Also, perhaps because we can observe a historically common path from warrior to healer, the fighting style and the contributing health/philosophical etc practices continue to be intimately intertwined, indeed it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between them. This path has continuously developed a powerful fighting art over some 400 years and 19 generations with each transmission through another mind/body adding or subtracting a little at each stage. However the 20th century process of globalisation has also seen practitioners move away from its martial origin to pursue Tai Chi for other objectives and in a sense we have come full circle – where once the art brought other disciplines together now it is being used to propagate them.

So what of the future for Tai Chi? – with the energetic activities of Chen Xiaowang, his co-teachers from the Chen village and direct lineage students around the world, it is to be hoped that we will be able to retain a true transmission of the traditional art whatever other developments and blending of cultures takes place.

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Appendices:

- The role of other internal arts in understanding the history and development of Tai Chi.
- Diagram of the Family lineage of Tai Chi
- List of sources

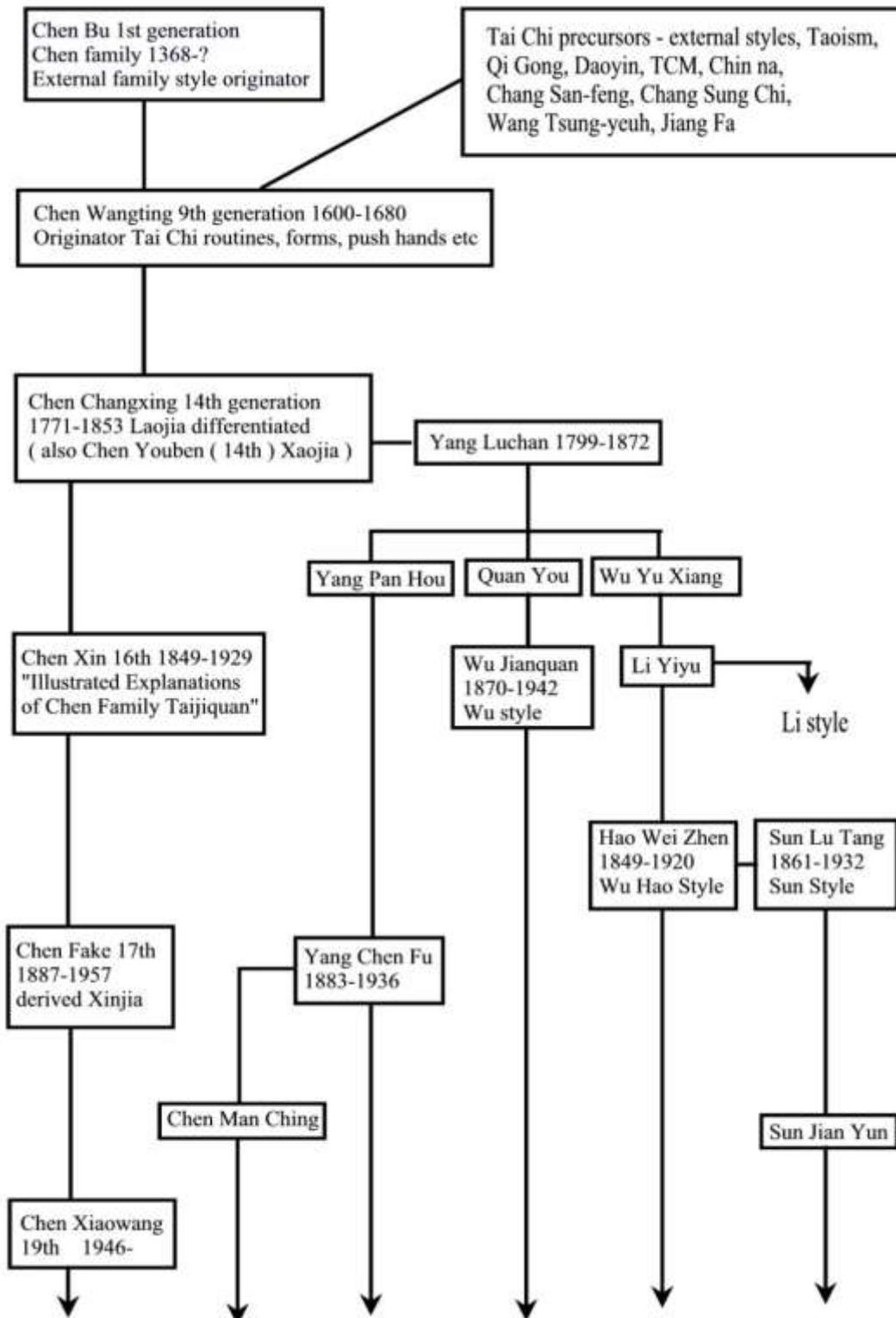
The role of other Internal arts in understanding the history and development of Tai Chi – the co-linear developments of Xingyi, Bagua and Yiquan

In understanding the history and development of Tai Chi it is useful to look at the parallel paths of the other internal arts of Xingyi, Bagua and Yiquan. In the case of Xingyi it has its roots in the early 1100s with the historical figure of General Yue Fei (1103-1142) although it is said that the earliest reliable evidence refers to Ji Long Feng (early 1600s) of Shanxi province (origin of the Chen family) who used his expertise with the spear to develop “Heart Mind Six Harmonies” boxing for protection in times of peace. This concept utilises the linkage between mind and body to develop a style beyond what is possible with body alone – this is analogous to the intention training with which Chen Wanting is credited. Indeed Xing Yi Quan is translated as “form-intent boxing” alternately “mind-body boxing” and was originally called “Heart Mind Six Harmonies Boxing”. Like Chen Wangting, Ji Long Feng also lived in the early 1600s and his style shares some ideas, such as the six harmonies and chi concepts and clearly came out of the same social/philosophical milieu, but followed a structure based much more on animalistic characteristics and traditional martial ideas around the expression of power. Xingyi too has gone through lineage diversification of styles as it has spread geographically although it is probably true to say that like the style itself it has been more linear in adhering to a strictly martial tradition.

Baguazhang on the other hand is traced back to Dong Hai Chuan living in the mid-1800s (contemporary with Chen Changxing and Yang Luchan) whose ancestral lineage is also traceable to Shanxi province – although he is said to have learned his style from a Taoist monk called Dong Meng-Lin. The Taoist input is most obviously noticeable in the circle walking based on the meditation practice of the Taoist Quan Zhen sect, which is characteristic of Baguazhang and the use of the 8 Trigram Bagua from the I-Ching as an intellectual structural concept for the style – thus defining the mental intent (mantra) of the training. Bagua too has experienced a geographical spread but like Xingyi seems to have attracted primarily the martially inclined.

Yiquan – the fourth and most recent internal style comes out of the Xing Yi Quan lineage from its creator Wang Xiangzhai (1890-1963) who trained in Xing Yi Quan and spent many years researching martial arts. This led him to simplify the training process by removing what he considered as the unnecessary physical forms and to focus much more on the mental training, coupled with simple Qigong like exercises. He therefore dropped the “xing” (form) from the name Xing Yi Quan and called his system Yi Quan, where Yi refers to Mind or Intent. This perhaps best exemplifies just how far the development of internal arts can go and does appear to be the one defining factor of these arts – the use of the mind in training to develop bodily power and skill.

Family lineage of Tai Chi



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