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Tai Chi Chuan History.

I am not a historian. I present this brief history here mostly so you can find other better works. I do not know of any good books on the history of Tai Chi Chuan. I suggest some books on the history of karate under "books". They can give you suggestions on the history of Tai Chi.

I first learned Tai Chi from Steve Harrigan and Philip Ho in Ann Arbor, MI in the middle and late 1970s. See the document on my background. I rely on comments from Mr. Ho.

"Tai Chi" should be called "Tai Chi Chuan". The full "real" name is "Tai Chi Chuan" but Americans, and now most people in the world outside of China, call it simply "Tai Chi".

The pronunciation varies depending on the dialect of Chinese. In the modern Peking standard, "Tai chi" is written and spoken roughly as "Taiji". "Chuan" is spoken as "juan". So, in full, "Tai chi chuan" is "taijijuan" or "tai ji juan". What was originally written as "ch" now is also written as "j" or "q". So "taijijuan" also comes out "taiqiquan", "taiqijuan", or "taijiquan". I do not know when "j" or "q" is best.

Mr. Ho translated "Tai Chi Chuan" as "grand ultimate boxing". I asked a native Mandarin speaker about the meaning of the particular words. "Tai" is ordinarily used only in a compound with other words. It means "big", "superior", or "above". In combination with another root, it means "the Sun" as in "Sol the sun of our system" because Sol is the grandest biggest light in the sky. In the phrase "Tai Chi Chuan", the sound-word "chi" is NOT the mystic force "chi"; that force does play a role in Tai Chi Chuan practice but not in its name. Here "chi" means "best" or "ultimate". "Chuan" means "hand" or "closed hand", thus "fist", thus "boxing", and so all "martial arts". In Asia, it is common to use "hand" or "fist" as a synonym for all martial arts. So altogether "Tai Chi Chuan" means "grand best martial arts"; which is about what Ho said. I would guess that "Tai" in Chinese is cognate with Korean "Tae", and "Chuan" is cognate with Korean "Kwan", in "Tae Kwan Do".

Tai Chi is part of the Chinese internal soft martial arts family that includes Pakua (Bagua) and Hsing I ("zing", "xing", or "jing" and "ee" or "yee"). To get the history of Tai Chi, and of the different styles, you should consult a book on the history of martial arts or consult a book about Tai Chi that has a chapter on history. Most Tai Chi books have one. Most are not very good. Dr. Yang Jwing Ming (spelling?) has written many books on internal Chinese martial arts, and he often includes history.

Briefly from memory: Contrary to myth, Tai Chi is not several thousand years old in its present form. Mr. Ho said Tai Chi likely arose from an attempt to synthesize Pakua and Hsing I. As far as I can tell, Pakua and Hsing I are about 300 years old, perhaps only about 200 years old in their present forms. So, if what Mr. Ho said is true, then Tai Chi cannot be more than 300 years old.

As far as I can tell, the Chinese martial art "White Crane" influenced Pakua, Hsing I, and Tai Chi. White Crane is about 500 years old, although that might age be an exaggeration. If Pakua, Hsing I, and Tai Chi

were all influenced by White Crane, they are younger than White Crane. I believe White Crane also shaped such hard arts as Okinawan and Japanese karate, and Korean Tae Kwan Do.

All Asian and European martial arts have roots that are at least 2500 years old, including Greek boxing and Western boxing; but it is not accurate to say that Tai Chi, Pakua, or Hsing I, in themselves, as distinct arts, are that old. Chinese martial arts were influenced by: (A) martial arts styles that came from South India about the time of Jesus and are still practiced in South India; (B) Buddhist ideas that came from several places, especially after about 500 AD (CE); and (C) Taoist ideas that were indigenous to China and are at least 3500 years old. The fact that the Taoist ideas are at least 3500 years old does not mean Chinese martial arts are that old, and especially does not mean any particular modern Chinese martial art is that old. The modern Chinese internal martial arts likely have roots in ideas that developed about 400 to 500 years ago in China, based on a mix of traditions, including non-Chinese traditions, but definitely Chinese in character.

In its present state, Tai Chi dates back to the Chen village-and-family in China from about 300 years ago (middle 1700s). The basic Chen practice form is about 250 steps long. Not all the steps are different, so there is repetition. I think there about 35 basic "moves". The Chen style is clearly distinct from all the Tai Chi taught in the West today. To me, from what I have seen, it has both internal and external aspects; it goes slowly sometimes and fast other times; and it uses a lot of "whipping" motions, throws, and locking moves. The form teaches strategy as well as moves. Few people still practice genuine Chen style but it is not dead yet. Mr. Ho had seen the Chen form often and he knew much of it; but he did not practice it; and did not know anybody in the US at the time (middle 1970s) that did practice it well. Chen style is now going through a fad revival in the United States. I hope the revival turns into something good. I saw somebody demonstrate a portion of a Chen form in 2013, and it did not seem good to me.

About 1800 in China, Mr. Yang learned from the Chen family, and then adapted their form according to what he saw as the essential principles, moves, and tactics. How Mr. Yang learned is the subject of much amusing myth, and I don't repeat it here. The basic Yang practice form now is 108 steps long. It also has about 35 distinct "moves", so there is repetition. The Yang form that most people know now was not the form created by Mr. Yang himself. The Yang form that people know now was created by one of his sons; I forgot which son. I don't think the two forms differed much.

The repetition in the Yang form is partly for artistic-mystical reasons so that the form has 108 moves in total; 108 is a lucky number than indicates completeness. Originally the basic Yang practice form might have had 128 steps but it still only had about 35 distinct moves. Despite the mysticism, I think repetition mostly is in the form so the form can begin with simple basic moves and then can go to complex moves, can teach the feel of going from move to move, teach how to open up your body, how to link internal feelings with external moves, and how to link moves in strategy.

In addition to the 108-step solo form, Yang style also has an 88-step two-person combat form, and has some interactive exercises called "tui shou" or "push hands" or "join hands" and "san shou" or "join legs". I think Mr. Yang and his sons personally developed the 88 step two-person combat form and some two-person short training exercises but I am not sure. The 88-step two-person form is rarely taught in the United States; I was very lucky to have learned it. Sometimes the 88-step form is called the "two person dance" although it is possible some other forms are called by that name too.

It is important to know that Mr. Yang had three sons, and the whole family traveled around China offering, and accepting, challenges with other martial arts schools. As far as I know, over several decades, they were never defeated. Contrary to modern misconception, Tai Chi originated as a martial art and should be taught as a martial art even if it also has other benefits. It is hard to get the other benefits if you do not also have a feel for it as a martial art.

The Yang 108 step solo form now is done at the same slow speed throughout and it looks soft-internal throughout. Mr. Yang originally did not do it that way although he did not do it quickly and hard as in a form from karate or Tae Kwan Do. Nobody is entirely sure how the first Mr. Yang did his form. Mr. Ho said Americans do the 108 step solo form too uniformly, too softly, often too slowly, and that some parts, such as the kicks, should be done more quickly and sharply. Except when doing Tai Chi with the class or showing a piece of the 108, Ho did not do his Tai Chi all at the same speed, and sometimes he would do a given sequence fast and whippy. The 108 step form can be done very slowly by advanced practitioners as a particular training and meditation exercise. It can be done very slowly to learn power or balance, and to learn connections such as from inside to outside. But that is not what Americans do when they do it slowly. Americans do the form slowly and uniformly as part of a mistake about Tai chi, chi, mysticism, and health. Ironically, doing the form only slowly in the American way might inhibit the health benefits that Americans seek. The 108 step form also can be done quickly, for example to learn balance and transition.

In the middle to late 1800s, in China, a person named Mr. Wu learned Tai Chi, I think from one of Mr. Yang's sons. Mr. Wu saw that there are really only about 35 moves, so he boiled down the Yang 108 step form to a form of about 35 moves with little repetition. His version served as the basis for rapid learning of martial applications of Tai Chi for some military and police in China. I think the Peking Guard used Wu style. I have heard Wu style called "northern" in contrast to Yang style, but I cannot comment. Along with Mr. Wu, other Chinese people adapted Yang style to their ideas, almost always shortening the form, but I don't recall their names or the features of their styles. Wu style is found all over the world. I see nothing wrong with it. In practice, a Wu "move" often incorporates several Yang "moves", so the Wu form really is not much shorter or much different than Yang style.

Yang, Wu, and related styles came to the United States with Chinese immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s, especially to New York City and other major cities.

When Americans think of Tai Chi, they think of a style that is very soft, internal, yielding, flowing, uniform in speed, uniform in effort-intensity, defensive, meditative, emphasizes chi for health, and is done mostly for bodily health and spiritual health. Sometimes you can barely recognize punches, blocks, and kicks. You cannot see any grabbing, throws, or joint locks. The form goes from statue-posture to statue-posture like a ritualized magic dance. It is not clear what connects the postures. Comedy sketches on TV satirize this Tai Chi. Almost certainly, the original Yang form was not done like this. Ho did not do the form like this and did not like the form done like this. I don't know when Yang style evolved into what we see now. I think the change began in China as part of a health movement in the late 1800s, and then progressed more along these lines when it came to the US.

For the comments in this paragraph, it helps to see the movie "The Last Samurai" starring Tom Cruise and (I think) Ken Watanabe (Wa-ta-na-bay); it is one of their best. The spread of firearms made obsolete traditional hand martial arts and tactics in large parts of the world in the middle 1800s. That is one reason for the switch from martial art to health art and mystic art in Tai Chi. Still, traditional hand martial arts are quite appealing apart from any practical use. People like to do them. If people like to do anything, people like to have reasons for doing, even if the reasons are somewhat flighty and even if the reasons are not entirely true. If you don't really need hand martial arts for military uses, but want to do it, then you can use health and mysticism for reasons. Besides, health-as-a-reason is true, although not in the way it is usually sold. I belong to this trend of doing martial arts because I like them and finding reasons for why I should do them. So I see not much wrong with this rationalization as long as people are accurate about what they do. Unfortunately people are not accurate about what they do.

Although the spread of firearms made hand martial arts not nearly as important as they used to be, they are still not obsolete for practical combat uses and self-defense. The extent to which they are still useful, or are a more useful way to spend time than other exercise such as golf or swimming, is another issue altogether that I don't take up in this note.

The first clear instance I know of the current common way of doing Tai Chi began in New York City with Mr. Cheng Man Ching (spelling?) in the 1950s. He taught what most people now think of as distinctly Tai Chi. His style was soft, flowing, and graceful. He stressed exercise, health, inner benefits, and the flow of chi. Of course, his personal style had Chinese roots but I don't know them. Like Mr. Wu, Mr. Cheng developed his own short variation on the Yang form that was based on the fact that there are only about 35 distinct moves. You can learn Mr. Cheng's version from his books or the books of his students such as from Petra and Toyo Kobayashi. His students stressed that Mr. Cheng was an adept, and sometimes forceful, martial artist. Once a student learned the slow version of his form, Mr. Cheng gave him-her solid training in fighting. Mr. Cheng stressed that Tai Chi has no secrets, secret power, and secret techniques, and it has nothing that cannot be learned by any dedicated person. He is correct, and I admire him for saying clearly this because it contradicts the silly mysticism that has grown up. Mr. Cheng's ideas about health, and his students' ideas, spread around the US. Even in places where people did not begin with Cheng's style (such as Mr. Ho and Mr. Chin in Ann Arbor), and might never have heard of Mr. Cheng, his style affected what students expect. As a result, you can see his style in Tai Chi groups all over America. You can see it in the difference between Bruce Lee on the one hand versus David Carradine on the other.

There is nothing wrong with the current meditative-mystic-healthy way of doing Tai Chi, unless it is done woodenly, as long as people know it is not the original Tai Chi, know it is not "real" Tai Chi, and know there is much more to Tai Chi. I like teaching Tai Chi as a slow healthy meditation movement sometimes. But it is still important to know the origins of Tai Chi as a martial art, and, if possible, to do it both ways to get full benefits. I like teaching Tai Chi as martial art best.

I cannot do Tai Chi in the original full internal style with full use of chi and internal energy. My Tai Chi is a bit like judo done standing up, and a bit like Aikido. In this way, I do not do "real" Tai Chi or "full" Tai Chi either. But at least I have a better sense of the roots of Tai Chi and of its full character than the watered-down unrealistic fake mystic Tai Chi that is usually taught.