Tai Chi

The True History & Principles
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Over the last 100 years Tai Chi has become increasingly popular in many parts of the world and it is practiced by both young and old. Tai Chi was created as a fighting system, but its unique way of strengthening the body and the mind also makes it popular with people who have no interest in fighting. Wisdom from Daoist philosophy was blended with the best fighting techniques to create an art form that was very different from mere violence. The old masters had exceptional skills and this inspired other people. Tai Chi became popular in broader circles and many people have benefited tremendously from the art as it was originally created.

A recent discovery of old texts, the Li Family Martial Arts Manual, has changed the history of Tai Chi radically. Previously we had a few hints which indicated that the so-called Tai Chi classics were written by Wang Zongyue. As for the three main styles of Tai Chi, Chen, Yang and Wu, we knew that Chen Wangting’s great-great-grandson, Chen Changxing, taught Yang Luchan, but we weren’t really sure who taught Wu Yuxiang and his brothers. Furthermore, we knew nothing about who taught Chen Wangting in the first place.

However, we now know for certain that Tai Chi was transmitted from the Thousand Year Temple in the Henan Province. And, best of all, we have the original principles of the art in the writings by members of the hitherto completely unknown Li Family. The material we already had access to wasn’t too far off the mark, but now we are able to precisely determine the essence of how Tai Chi should be practiced. The names and postures may vary a bit in different styles, but there is really only one thing that can define how the movements should be performed and that is the words of the earliest texts about the art. The old masters practiced and transmitted a truly unique martial art for building a healthy body and a serene mind and we now know, without a shadow of doubt, that this art was based on Daoist philosophy.
I want to thank Donald B. Wagner who has given much advice, and also Stella Sørensen and Chi Yin Ho for correcting the manuscript.

All Chinese words, except names, are transcribed with pinyin. T’ai Chi Ch’üan is the old Wade Giles transcription, while in Pinyin the name is written Taijiquan. However, in daily use most people know the art simply as Tai Chi, and I have used this name throughout the book.

‘Taiji’ refers to the philosophical concept which the art is based on.

All translations are my own.

You can find additional material on
www.thetaichiworkshop.dk
Tai Chi Literature

Tai Chi has been taught publicly for around 100 years and there exists a large amount of literature about it. The first publications in the West were important because Tai Chi was not very well known and there was a need for basic information. In fact, even in China not many people knew much about the history and original principles of Tai Chi because the country had gone through a turbulent period and much old information was lost. Tai Chi was promoted by the Chinese government after 1949, but the philosophical aspects were promoted only to a small degree. We have to acknowledge, though, that what made Tai Chi famous was the old masters all of whom who had wonderful skills based on philosophical principles. There are still masters who possess genuine knowledge but they are, unfortunately, far outnumbered by the sport-like approach that Tai Chi has turned into in many places around the world. This is why the discovery of the Li Family Manual is so very important because the written material from the old masters is really the only source that can truly define the nature of Tai Chi.

The first written material about Tai Chi is just a handful of texts which we call the Tai Chi classics and now we have the handwritten originals in the Li Family Manual, but many other valuable texts were written later on. The classics are translated in this book, if you wish to read translations of other old texts you can find them listed with references to translations (if any) at the back of the book.

Printed Literature in Chinese

The first publication of a book containing the Tai Chi classics was in 1912 when Guan Baiyi 關百益 published Taijiquan Jing 太極拳經. Xu Yusheng followed with Taijiquan Shi Tujie 太極拳勢圖解 in 1921. Then came Chen Weiming’s Taijiquan Shu 太極拳術 in 1925, Xu Zhiyi’s Taijiquan Qianshuo 太極拳淺說 in 1927 and Chen Xin’s Chen Shi Taijiquan Tushuo 陳氏太極拳圖說 in 1933. All were about Yang Style, except Chen Xin’s which was about Chen Style. However, these books were far from giving a complete picture of Tai Chi. Yang Cheng Fu and Tung Ying-Chieh published 楊澄甫 Taijiquan Shiyong Fa 太極拳使用法 in 1931 which provided a much more complete explanation of the art and it included important versions of the classics. Another important book was Taijiquan Jiang Yi 太極拳講義 by Wu Gongzao 吳公藻 published in 1936. It consisted of 40 small, but invaluable, texts by the famous Yang Banhou. It was Tung Ying-Chieh who published Yang Chengfu’s book and he and Tian Zhaolin were listed in the book as the two main disciples of Yang. Tian Zhaolin did not publish a book, but Tung Chieh’s book Taijiquan Shiyi 太極拳釋義 from 1948 added more information and more classics. Also Yang Chengfu said himself that his postures had improved over the years and these are reflected in Tung Ying-Chieh’s book because he learned with Yang until his death.

--- PREVIEW ---
The History of Tai Chi

The majority of the 1300 people in the Tang Village in China’s Henan Province descend from the Li Family 李氏. In 2003 it was decided to compile a genealogy of the Li Clan and the Tang Village, and Li Libing was given the task to research for material. Li Libing was told of an elderly man by the name Li Chenghai 李成海 who was said to possess some material and this was true; above the door in his house was a small room where old records of the Li Family were stored. Li Chenghai was, at first, very reluctant to let anyone see his family records. The reason was that, although he was illiterate, he knew that the genealogy recounted a story of a family member, Li Yan 李岩, who was a general in a rebellion army at the end of the Ming dynasty. Li Yan is considered a hero today but Li Chenghai didn’t know that and saw no reason to disclose information about a traitor in his family to anyone. However, after several attempts Li Libing was given permission, and the bunch of worn papers was indeed interesting. It had been stored there for 300 years and included the family genealogy written by Li Yuanshan in 1716, deeds and other interesting things, but the most interesting was an old martial arts manual with content going back to 1590. This manual had dated and signed copies of the oldest existing texts on Tai Chi and Li Libing realized at once the importance of the discovery.

The history of Tai Chi has been the subject of a great deal of research and many books have been written about it. The research is clear on most points from around 1900 and on, but with regards to the origin of Tai Chi and the so-called Tai Chi classics it has been difficult to make reliable conclusions because the available material was scarce and left many questions unanswered.

The effort and talent of the old masters, who knew the original principles for this art, made Tai Chi famous. Hundreds of thousands of people in the West, and millions in China, have been practicing Tai Chi for many decades and certainly will do so for a long time to come. For this reason, it is, of course, very important to be clear about what the original principles and techniques of Tai Chi really are.

The Li Family Martial Arts Manual

The entire text of the Li Family manual is reproduced and translated in the chapter on the Tai Chi classics. There are texts on the philosophy, principles for internal energy as well as names of the Tai Chi slow set, push-hands, sabre, long broadsword and lance. The texts are dated between 1590 and 1787 in the Ming dynasty. The first texts that relate to Tai Chi were written by Li Chunmao 李春茂 (1568-1666) over 400 years ago.

The martial arts manual was found together with the Li Family Genealogy written in 1716 by Li Yuanshan 李元善 (1642-?). The genealogy is important for historians
because it gives important clues about a famous rebellion and migration history, but only the part about Chen Wangting and his two cousins is of any importance in this particular context. The Martial Arts manual is a bunch of different papers, the oldest from 1590. The oldest are probably just copies, but they are seemingly flawless without copying mistakes as there are in the Yang and Wu family versions.

The two philosophical concepts Wuji 无極 and Taiji 太極 are closely connected and one of the texts Li Chunmao wrote was called Treatise of the Health Preserving Boxing System of the Endless Void or 无極養生拳論—Wuji Yang Sheng Quan Lun. The text praises the beneficial effects of the Wuji-exercises. It does not mention fighting techniques directly, but the word quan in the title 拳 means fighting, so the system must have had fighting movements or at least a purpose related to fighting. This system, however, was not created by Li Chunmao. A rubbing of a stone tablet from the Thousand Year Temple 千載寺 was also found with the Li Family manual and it recorded that the Wuji Yangsheng exercises were created in the Tang dynasty by Li Daozi 李道子 (614-?). The stone tablet was called The Stele of the Biography of the Monk Ten Powers of the Thousand Year Temple 千載寺唐僧十力传碑, Ten Powers was another name for Li Daozi. It was originally erected in the Thousand Year Temple and Li Daozi was a monk and abbot of the Temple in the Tang dynasty. The Thousand Year Temple was a temple in the Tang Village originally built in the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 C.E.). It was a very large temple, 36 hectares, with many departments and many buildings and pavilions. It was sadly demolished in the 1950’s when spirituality became a crime, and all buildings, libraries and more than 100 stone tablets with historical records, philosophy and poetry were destroyed.

A detail of a map of the Thousand Year Temple in Tang Village with Taiji Hall, Taiji Gate and Eight Trigrams Gate.


**Stele Biography of Li Dao Zi**

**The Account of the Tang Dynasty Monk Ten Powers of the Thousand Year Temple** - Author of the stele text Pu Guan.

In the Great Tang Dynasty, a true Daoist came into the Li Family. His given name was Ru Zi, his adult name Dao Wu, his assumed name Ten Powers and his monk’s name Dao Zi. He was born in Henan North of the Yellow River on the second day of the second moon of the tenth year of Emperor Da Ye of the Sui dynasty (614).

He became a disciple in Three Teachings Gate of the Henan Wuji Temple, in the era of Shen Long, Xiang Fan, Ma Lan Cao and Mother Dan.

He was talented, and studied the rich arts of literature and martial art, medicine, *Yi Jing* and the *Nie Pan She Thesis* and he was well versed in the *Yellow Emperor’s Classic*. He brought honour to the harmonious blending of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism.

On the basis of the *Da Ming Du*, the *Wuji Classic*, the *Yijin Jing*, the *Dao De Jing*, the *Huangting Classic*, the *Qianjin Yifang*, Daoyin and Tunei he created Wuji Yangsheng Wugong.¹

He studied thousand years of secret knowledge about medicine and preserving health.

His martial arts abilities were extraordinary, he was given the art in a dream and his abilities amazed the martial arts circles.

An imperial edict called him to reside in the capital, and a statue of him was built on the Western Mountain.

Hiding his fame under another name he transmitted the art in Dongquan, and travelled to Yangzhou to teach medicine with great clarity to able persons.

He taught in Lushan and he was a role model for the Shaolin. In his later days he went back to educate disciples in the temple.

The Master said: “The Three teachings are fair and just and they are strict rules guiding the way in martial arts practice: ‘Non-action when dealing with bad people, and only teach martial arts to help people’. Apply soft against hard. Give up and follow people. It is not a way to get success, it is a way of no fame. The Blue Dragon raises its head, after thousand years we meet again”.

Transmitting the great story of the monk Ten Powers, about his ability to preserve health with the magical powers of *Liu Xun Ji Xi*, *Shiba Tian Ri*, *Jiu Jiu Chong Yang* and *Fanlao Huan Chong*.

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Time line of Tai Chi History

67 C.E. The Thousand Year Temple was built in the Eastern Han dynasty.
Ca. 650 Li Dao Zi creates *Wuji Yangsheng Quan Gong* (assuming he was 45).
1716 Pu Guan writes the stele about Li Dao Zi.
1590 Li Chunmao writes *Wuji Yangsheng Quan Lun*.
Ca. 1630 Li Zhong, Li Xin and Chen Wangting becomes disciples in the Temple.
Ca. 1650 Li Zhong writes *Xinggong Xinfa Bian* (assuming he was 50 years old).
1787 Li Helin writes *Dashou Ge* and *Taijiquan Lun*.
Ca. 1810-20 Yang Lu Chan studies martial arts with Wang Chang (assuming he was 10-20).
Ca. 1820-30 Yang Lu Chan studies with Chen Chang Xing (assuming he was 20-30).
Ca. 1840- Yang Lu Chan begins to teach Tai Chi in Beijing (assuming he was 40).
Ca. 1840 Wu Ruqing obtains the classics in the salt store (assuming he was 50).
Ca. 1875 Yang Banhou writes the “40 chapters” (assuming he was 40).
1912 Beijing Physical Culture Research Society is founded.
1912 Yang Chengfu starts to teach in Beijing.
1921 Xu Longhou writes the first published book on Tai Chi (Yang Style).
1925 Chen Weiming writes the book with Yang Chengfu’s first set of pictures.
1931 Tung Ying Chieh writes the book with Yang Chengfu’s second set of pictures.
1930-33 Tang Hao research all available material on Tai Chi.
1933 Chen Xin writes the first book on Chen Style.

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The Tai Chi Classics of the Li Family Manual

There exist a number of older texts with relation to Tai Chi and the oldest are usually called the Tai Chi classics. However, this subject is not so simple because there exist many other old texts with connection to famous Tai Chi masters. Furthermore, the texts exist in different versions and have been ascribed to different authors. The oldest styles – the Chen, Yang and Wu family styles – each have their own distinct ways of executing movements and energy even though the postures often have similar names. The common theme is that they imitate the principles of the Taiji symbol and that the movements are slow and continuous. In push hands practice and fighting application, there should never be hard against hard and sensitivity and flexibility before issuing power is the main principle when engaging with a partner.

These few common principles can be found in many of the old texts, and therefore they are important to us. But, of course, it is the Li Family texts that are the most important because they are the oldest. They are genuine and very nearly flawless. Best of all is that the authors and dates are given for most of them.

The Li Family Martial Arts Manual is very close to the texts handed down in the Yang and Wu families. There has been much research into the authenticity of the Li Family Manual and the conclusion seems to be that it is not a forgery. There are still unanswered questions, but there can be no doubt that the Li Family manual is the oldest version of the classics. However, it is quite clear that martial arts were widespread in both the Ming and Qing period and we must not forget that there can be other old texts and systems that have had influence on these texts.

This book will mostly cover the oldest known versions of the classics in the Li Family Manual and, to this end, I have translated the entire manual.

If you want to compare the Li Family texts with the Yang and Wu versions found in many other Tai Chi books I have prepared an overview in a separate chapter that includes many old Tai Chi related texts.
無極養生論

無極養生功者，人未練之先，無思無意，無形無象，無我無他，胸中混混沌沌，一氣渾論，無所向意者也，世人不知有逆運之理，但斤斤於天地自然順行之道，氣拘物蔽，昏昧不明，以致體質虛弱，陽極必陰，陰極必亡，於此攝生之術，概乎未有諸也。惟三教融易，聖人獨能滲透逆運之術，攬陰陽、奪造化、轉乾坤、扭氣機，於後天中返先天。復出歸元，保合太和，總不外乎後天五行八卦之天理矣。一氣伸縮之道，所謂無極功能生一氣者是也。吾練功探感之無極養生功乃人之無意無形，聯先天極妙之主體，沖和之本始，陰陽動靜之初源也。萬物之生負陰抱陽，人之真元所從而來，靈明所從而抱，無極生太極矣。於此而與五行八卦元通，通則變，完全人身之陰陽而保此靈明者也。永人之天年，暢達人之血脈筋骨，欲從後天返先天，而衛生之術無極養生功者也。苟以異端目元遠矣，無極養生功有百益而無一害，雖以之強吾氏族也，謂世裔賢徒大功練而遠矣。謹此無極養生論焉。

大明萬歷庚寅年歲次春月於太室祠傳拳訓論
李葉蓁
TREATISE OF THE HEALTH PRESERVING BOXING SYSTEM OF THE ENDLESS VOID

Before people start practicing the Wuji Yangsheng Gong they have no thought and no intention, no form or shape, no sense of self or others.

The mind is utter confusion, all is but muddled ideas and the mind has no direction.

Common people do not know that there is a reason for unlucky fate, they merely witness Dao running its natural course in everything.

Their qi is limited, their material circumstances are shabby and they are dim and ignorant.

The result is a weak constitution and poor health.

Extreme yang must be [balanced towards] yin, extreme yin must be gotten rid of. In this art of conserving one’s health how could we not be well aware of this?

Only the doctrine of The Three Teachings blend and exchange [the best from each school], only the wise person can decipher the mechanisms of bad luck.

Embrace yin and yang. Strive to create good fortune.

Interchange Qian and Kun. Turn the qi so it changes from After Heaven and returns to Before Heaven. Come back to the origin and keep the unity of the Great Harmony.

After all, was there ever anything but the Heavenly principles of After Heaven, the Five Phases and the Eight Trigrams?

That the Way is at one time expanding and contracting is the same as when we say Wuji Gong can create complete qi.

We do the Wuji Yangsheng exercises to explore the sentiments so people’s lack of intention and form can connect to the larger perspective of the great wonders of Before Heaven which is the original beginning of the dual harmony — the very start of yin-yang movement and stillness.

The creation of all things bears yin and holds yang, humanity’s true origin thus comes from this.

When the spirit is clear it can grasp ’Wuji creates Taiji’. In this there are also the Five Phases and the Eight Trigrams which are the very first that comes through [from Wuji to Taiji], [after] they have come through then
they change to become the yin-yang of the complete body and keep the mind high-spirited.

It perpetuates the lifespan of men and it cleanses the blood vessels, flesh and bones.

If we want to shift from After Heaven to Before Heaven then [use] this art of health, the Wuji Yangsheng Exercises.

If you carelessly apply false methods, the purpose will be far from the original.

Wuji Yangsheng Gong has 100 benefits but not a single harmful effect. So I employ it to strengthen my clan. We can now say that many devoted disciples of our fine clan have trained this great exercise [and have come] far.

Therefore, I sincerely present this treatise of the Health Preserving Exercises of the Endless Void.

The second spring moon of the Geng Yin year (1590) in the reign of Great Ming Dynasty Emperor Wan Li. Instructional treatise first time presented in the Great Hall of the Ancestral Temple.

Li Yezhen (Li Chunmao)
十三勢行功歌

十三總勢莫輕視，命意源頭在腰隙。變轉虛實須留意，氣遍身軀不少滯。靜中獨動動猶靜，因敵變化是神奇。勢勢存心揆用意，得來不覺費工夫。刻刻留意在腰間，腹內鬆靜氣騰然。尾閭中正神貫頂，滿身輕利頂頭懸。仔細留心向推求，屈伸開合聽自由。入門引路須口授，工夫無息法自修。若言體用何為準，意氣君來骨肉臣。想推用意終何在，益壽延年不老春。歌兮歌兮百四十，字字真切已無遺。若不向此推求去，枉費功夫贻嘆息。

大明萬歷庚寅年歲次春月太室祠創傳十三勢拳歌訓論
李春茂

Poem on the practice of the Thirteen Movements
The set of the thirteen movements should not be taken lightly
The fountain from where its purpose well, is in the waist.
Carefully pay attention to the shifts and turns of empty and full,
Qi must be in the entire body without the slightest deficiency.
In stillness on your own moving like you were still,
but the opponent shifts and vary so this is a marvel.
Each and every move has design and purpose,
but it will not come without consciously spending time and effort.
In every moment keep your mind on the waist,
Be relaxed and quiet in the abdomen, then the qi will rise.
Hold the lower regions centred and straight, then the spirit passes through to the top of the head.
The whole body light and sharp, holding the head as suspended from above.
Give full awareness to that which you want to learn.

--- PREVIEW---
The Philosophy of Tai Chi

The Tai Chi classics talk about circles, yin and yang, Taiji and about the thirteen basic movements which corresponds to the Five Phases and the Eight Trigrams. To know where these concepts arose from, we have to go far back in China’s history. Reading the Tai Chi classics, it is obvious that Tai Chi’s textual tradition has been inspired by Neo-Confucianism. But certainly also by ancient Daoist classics like the Dao De Jing. Besides the concept of The Way (Dao or Tao), both traditions have at their core a narrative of the creation of the world — how everything came from a single common core that evolved into everything under the sky through myriads of transformations. This can be understood as a cosmological explanation of the universe, but it can also be seen as the internal rise and transformation of the life force of human beings.

An explanation of Taiji 太極

Please note that in this book ‘Tai Chi’ refers to the art of Tai Chi Boxing, whereas ‘Taiji’ refers to the philosophical concept which the art is based on.

The Taiji symbol 太極圖, sometimes called the “Double fish symbol”, is without doubt the most well-known symbol from Chinese philosophy. In both China and the rest of the world it is known as the symbol of the duality of all things. In the West it is often mistakenly known as the Yin-Yang Symbol. Duality is found in every aspect of life: There cannot exist dark without light, soft without hard, male without female and so on and so forth because nothing can be defined without a contrast.

The origin of the diagram is unknown and there exists no original explanation of it. Most people associate it with yin and yang, but that is only a part of the explanation because there are also the two dots and the circle itself to consider.

Everyone agrees that the two “fish” are the dualities yin and yang, but it is much harder to find an explanation of the two dots and the circle. I find it logical to assume that “the eye” is a tiny new seed that appears from nothing and becomes the one side of a new Taiji where the duality is between the dot and the fish which together form a new Taiji.
Now the symbol can be divided into two independent Taiji symbols which again can be further divided indefinitely. This fits well with the traditional Chinese cosmology where everything under the sky is coming from one source and still carrying the original duality as described in this chapter.

Another explanation of the two dots is that nothing is only yin or only yang. This also fits well with the above idea, that everything has both yin and yang in itself, and can split and create more of itself.

The name T’ai Chi Ch’üan, or Taijiquan, means a boxing system based on the idea of the concept of Taiji. Therefore, it is a paradox that older books on Tai Chi do not write much about it. A simple and logical explanation is found in Yang Chengfu and Dong Ying-Chieh’s book where it says:

太極圖之義陰陽相生，剛柔相濟千變萬化。
太极拳即由此而出也。推手即太極之圖形。

The meaning of the Taiji symbol is that yin and yang produce each other. Soft and hard benefit each other by their endless changes and transformations. The name Taijiquan comes from this. Push hands exercises thus have the shape of the Taiji symbol.¹

In fact, the explanations about what Taiji means are quite different and so, for that reason, it is interesting to know the origin of the concept: The two earliest texts where Taiji occur are the Zhuang Zi (around 300 B.C.E) and the Ten Wings of the Yi Jing (assumed to have been compiled at the last part of the Warring States period ca. 475-250 B.C.E.). Otherwise, the word is rarely found in texts from before the Han dynasty. Taiji had cosmological connotations already in the Han dynasty, but it did not have any great importance before the Song dynasty where it was widely used in metaphysical and cosmological context in texts on meditation.²

Taiji occurs in Zhuang Zi in the chapter Da Zongshi which is considered to be written by Zhuang Zhou 周 around 300 B.C.E. The sentence in question is an explanation about Dao:

夫道...在太極之先而不為高，在六極之下而不為深.
The Traditional Methods of Training Tai Chi

The old texts written by true masters of Tai Chi are the only sources that can define traditional Tai Chi. The reason is, of course, that the old masters were those who made Tai Chi popular by demonstrating and teaching their superior skills. They impressed people with their skills and the people who practiced the traditional exercises got stronger and healthier. There are many other systems than can be impressive, they can just not be called Tai Chi. Tai Chi has a set of unique principles that are clearly defined in the old written texts. Anyone teaching Tai Chi today must adhere to these principles otherwise what they teach is not Tai Chi.

Tai Chi is a combat training system that strengthens the body and mind. In that regard it is different from Qigong 氣功 that simply means “energy exercises”. It is also different from most fighting systems because the techniques are never hard against hard. The very name and the core principle is embodied in the Taiji symbol which illustrates that yin and yang must be in harmony in circular movements. If an opponent is putting up weak resistance you can just push a little bit and it’s all over. But if the opponent is on a par with you in strength you can get the upper hand by being soft, sticking to and following the direction of the force until it loses its momentum, then you can move with moderate force without losing balance. In this way you can even choose not to hurt your opponent, and there will be a much better chance of friendship as well as much less chance of injury. The main thing is to be very sensitive to your opponent’s intention, so you can react in time. These principles are clearly described in the Tai Chi classics:

If you ask what the principle for the body is, the intention and qi are the rulers, bones and flesh are the subjects. If wondering about the final purpose, it is to prolong life and stay youthful.¹

The other is hard, I am soft. This we call going away. Then I follow along on the outside. This we call sticking. If the movement is quick, I respond quickly. If the movement is slow, I respond slowly.²

No matter how much strength he gathers to strike me, I lead his movement so four ounces will deflect a thousand pounds. Lure him to come forward and let him fall into emptiness, close him off and apply force. Stick to him, stay with him and follow. Not losing contact, not resisting. Whether hard or soft quick or slow I have the upper hand.

If the other does not move, I do not move. If the other moves the slightest, I move first.³