

What is Tai Chi? According to Wikipedia *“T'ai chi ch'uan or tàijíquán, often shortened to t'ai chi, taiji or tai chi in English usage is an internal Chinese martial art practised for both its defence training and its health benefits. It is also typically practised for a variety of other personal reasons: its hard and soft martial art technique, demonstration competitions, and longevity. As a result, a multitude of training forms exist, both traditional and modern, which correspond to those aims. Some of t'ai chi ch'uan's training forms are especially known for being practised with what most people would categorise as slow movement.”*

What's with all the names in the above definition? Over the years, there have been different attempts at phonetically spelling Chinese words. The two most widely known spelling systems are called Wade-Giles, and Pinyin. In general, people are more familiar with Wade-Giles. That's why one's used to seeing the spelling “**Tai Chi**” (Wade-Giles) as opposed to “**Tai Ji**” (Pinyin). The pronunciation is also different. The “**Chi**” in “**Tai Chi**” is pronounced “**gee**” which makes more sense when one sees the Pinyin spelling “**Ji**”. More often than not the “**Chi**” in “**Tai Chi**” is confused with “**Qi**” in “**Qigong**” which uses the Pinyin spelling system but the pronunciation is “**chee**”. “**Qi**” in “**Qigong**” means “**energy**” and because of the confusion, people wrongly assumes that “**Chi**” in “**Tai Chi**” also means “**energy**”.

“**Chi**” in “**Tai Chi**” means “**ultimate**”. When combined with the word “**Tai**”, it means “**cosmos**”, and when combined with the word “**Chuan**” it means “**Grand Ultimate Fist**”. The notion of “**Grand Ultimate**” is associated with the Chinese philosophy of Tai Chi which has its roots in Taoism and the concept of *Yin* and *Yang*, a concept that predates the art of Tai Chi Chuan by many centuries. The name of **Tai Chi Chuan** was given to this martial art during the 18th or early 19th centuries. Before that, the art was referred to as “*Mien Quan*” or (Cotton Fist) or “*Hua Quan*” (Neutralising Fist). It is said that the scholar Ong Tong He watched one of Yang Lu Chan (1799-1872) matches and was so impressed by the way Yang moved and executed his techniques and felt that his movements and techniques expressed the physical manifestation of the principles of Tai Chi. Thereafter, Yang's art was referred to as Tai Chi Chuan and the styles that sprang from his teaching and by association with him was called Tai Chi Chuan.

What does “*internal*” mean when Tai Chi Chuan is defined as an internal martial art? A legendary Chinese monk, Zhang Sanfeng is credited by some modern practitioners as having originated the concept of *neijia* which literally means “*internal school*”. Zhang Sanfeng is also credited as the founder of Tai Chi Chuan. One has to be careful when trying to establish a linear lineage way back to the origins of Tai Chi Chuan though. The earliest reference to the Zhang Sanfeng legend is found in the *Epitaph for Wang Chen-nan* (1669) by Huang Tsung-Hsi (1610-1695). The Epitaph credits Zhang Sanfeng as the founder of the “*internal*” school of martial arts as opposed to the “*external*” style of Shaolin. However, this distinction has political connotations when it talks about the superiority of the Internal School over Shaolin as a coded strategy for China (internal) to overcome Manchu (external) rule, while Zhang Sanfeng represents the spirit of the Chinese people. Huang was a true Confucian. He adopted some Taoist ideas but rejected things like immortality. It is perhaps safe to say that Huang's political connotations imply an adoption of Zhang Sanfeng as a symbol of Chinese culture and nationalism rather than a true attempt to establish a linear lineage up to a legendary figure like the immortal Taoist alchemist Zhang Sanfeng.

Discuss the development of Tai Chi, its various styles and methods from early history to the present day – By Fernando G. Echeveste

when looking at the history of Tai Chi Chuan, we cannot ignore the fact that its development and evolution took place within the context of the political, economical and cultural transformations happening in China during the Yuan, Ming and Ch'ing dynasties, and later during the Republic and the Cultural Revolution, and it would be a mistake to focus only on the art itself without applying this context. The political connotation in Huang's Epitaph is one example, or when later in the 19th century Tai Chi Chuan may be seen as a psychological defence against Western cultural imperialism [Wile 1996, p26]. The Epitaph is the earliest source on the distinction between internal and external schools and was adopted by late Ch'ing-early Republican Tai Chi exponents as their "Genesis" on origins and genealogy in an attempt to give the art deeper roots and make it seem less like a contemporary creation.

When it comes to Tai Chi Chuan postures and form, Ch'i Chi-Kuang's *Essentials of the Classic of Pugilism* is a great contributor to the art. Chi was born in 1528 to a military family. At seventeen he started his military career and later became a general. It was a time when the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) was fighting threats from multiple fronts. Japanese pirates controlling coastal waters and littoral provinces, The Tartars of the North breaching the Great Wall representing a constant threat to Beijing, even threats from the West when Portugal seized Macao in 1535. The threats were growing stronger due to the weakness and ineffectiveness of the Chinese army to repel them. Motivated by a sense of shame for this weakness, Chi created a force in Zhejiang, personally trained by him and subject to a discipline and training that set it apart from other troops. General Ch'i's contribution to T'ai Chi Chuan is that he personally studied sixteen different martial arts and synthesized them into a 32 posture form intended for troop training [Wile 1999 p9].

All styles of Tai Chi Chuan today can be traced to the Ch'en family forms. However, it is not clear if the Ch'en family was the creator of the art or if it was transmitted from the outside and by whom. Some historians say the Ch'en form is derived from Ch'i Chi-Kuang's *Essentials of the Classic of Pugilism*. Wu Yu-hsiang in the 19th century attributes some of the early theoretical texts about Tai Chi Chuan to a mysterious master, Wang Tsung-yueh. In some writings Wang was a famous student of Zhang Sanfeng. One of Wang's disciples, Chen Wangting is the founder of the Chen-style Tai Chi Chuan. Given the fact that for some historians Zhang Sanfeng is only a legendary figure and Wang Tsung-yueh is a mysterious character, Chen Wangting is seen as the inventor of the earliest form of Tai Chi Chuan but due to the lack of solid records about Tai Chi Chuan in this period, this is still in dispute.

Tai Chi Chuan was transmitted from generation to generation in the Chen family. During the second half of the 19th century, Yang Lu Chan (1799-1872), the founder of the Yang style of Tai Chi Chuan learnt the art from Chen Chang Xin (1771-1853), a martial arts master from the Chen Village. It's on this period that Tai Chi Chuan branched out and evolved to different styles. Wu Yu-hsiang (1812?-1880?), discoverer of the Wang Tsung-yueh classics and writer of classics on his own, was a student of Yang Lu Chan and he's the founder of the Wu (Hao) style of Tai Chi Chuan. Yang Lu Chan senior son, Yang Pan-hou, was the formal teacher of Wu Ch'uan-yu (1834-1902) and his son Wu Chien-Ch'uan (1870-1942) who was the creator of the Wu style. The 108 Wu style form is different from Wu Yu-hsiang Wu (Hao) style. The latter is a distinctive style with small, subtle movements, highly focused on balance, sensitivity and internal ch'i development while the former focuses on hand techniques, pushing hands and other wrestling techniques.

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Another popular style is the Sun style created by Sun Lu-t'ang (1861-1932). The style is well known for its smooth, flowing movements. Sun's form of Tai Chi Chuan incorporated what he felt were the key elements of Pa Kua and Hsing-I into the framework and theories of Tai Chi Chuan. The form also has Wu (Hao) style elements given the fact that Sun Lu-t'ang was taught by Hao Wei-chen (1842-1920) who was taught by Li I-yu (1832-1892) who was Wu Yu-hsiang's nephew.

Yang Lu Chan's grandson, Yang-Ch'eng-fu (1883-1936) is the best known teacher of the Yang style. He was among the first teachers to offer Tai Chi Chuan instructions to the general public. He smoothed out the form to emphasize flow, rootedness and relaxation which is primary to the art. His method of doing the form has only few variations with Yang Lu Chan method but he spread the form so widely that his method of doing the form became the accepted standard. Cheng Man-Ch'ing was a student of Yang-Ch'eng fu and devised a short form of 37 movements. His lineage is widely taught by several masters today. In addition to these styles, there's the Chen style, known as the original style as practised in the Chen Village and all other styles described in here have a connection with the Chen style. Most recently, in the mid 20th century, the People's Republic of China promoted a new shorter form available to the masses and the Simplified Yang style form was created (24 movements). This form is the most widely practised form of Tai Chi today.

We have discussed the development of Tai Chi, some of its various styles and methods from early history to the present day. Tai Chi Chuan is constantly evolving. There are other contemporary interpretations and styles. Some of them even incorporate philosophies from other disciplines. Which style of Tai Chi Chuan is the best? Although the answer may seem like the subject for another essay, the answer is a simple one: The best style is the one that is practised on a regular basis with discipline and dedication (Echeveste 2014, ch44).

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