

## T'ai Chi's Ancestors – The Making of an Internal Martial Art by Douglas Wile (Extracts)

There seems to be a political allegory in the “Epitaph’s” assertion of the superiority of the Internal School over Shaolin as a coded strategy for China (internal) to overcome Manchu (external) rule.

The word ch’i does not appear once in the Huang’s writings on Wang Cheng-nan and the Internal School, yet it is both central to Huang’s philosophy and to our conception of what makes t’ai-chi ch’uan and the internal art unique.

Keeping his focus chiefly on Wang’s prowess and character, Huang omits any reference to health benefits in relation to Internal School practise, but again, this does not mean that he ignored the issue in his other writings.

Huang gives qualified endorsement to Taoist body/mind disciplines for the purposes of health maintenance, but rejects the notion of immortality. Again, he is a true Confucian in supporting self-cultivation that strengthens us for social engagement, but condemning those practises that lead to fantasy and obsession.

The *Art of the Internal School* is short on principles and internal energetic, but one can see from this passage (*Wang’s Archery Method*) that there was an awareness of whole body mobilization, eye-hand coordination, and discrete energies for different part of the body.

Huang had antipathy to alchemy, so what are we to make of his naming the “Taoist alchemist” Chang Sanfeng as the progenitor of the Internal School? He may have simply reproduced the genealogy related by Wang Chen-nan and recorded by Kao Ch’en-ssu, who drafted the biography that formed the basis of the “Epitaph”, or he may have fabricated or altered the raw material to allegorically express his strategy for surviving and eventually defeating the Manchus.

The promoters of t’ai-chi ch’uan in the late Ch’ing and early Republican period were also good Confucians, responding to political and social realities. It is perhaps safe to say that Huang adopted Chang San-feng as a symbol of Chinese culture and nationalism. In the Epitaph, at the very least we can see that Huang, or even Wang for that matter, were not promoting or practicing Internal Boxing for “Taoist” reasons.

We need to separate the issues of the philosophical orientation of the art, which has definite Taoist leanings, from the historical motivation for its practice. With the collapse of the social imperative in China at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Chang San-feng has re-emerged, but in the current incarnation it is for commercial or cultural rather than nationalistic propaganda purposes.

The Art of the Internal School emphasizes that freedom flows from skill, and skill flows from training. Huang’s view on skill is consistent with his anti-Taoist, anti-intuitionist philosophy. Huang feared that Taoism and Ch’an Buddhism encouraged disdain for social responsibility and led to self-indulgence. He could not accept the view that the pursuit of wisdom or skill was simply a matter of deconditioning, or social deprogramming.

The Epitaph for Wang Cheng-nan is the earliest source on the cleavage between internal and external schools and was adopted by late Ch'ing-early Republican t'ai-chi exponents as their "Genesis" on origins and genealogy. Previous historians have either accepted or denied the notion of a linear transmission from the Internal School down to t'ai-chi ch'uan.

What the late 19<sup>th</sup> century framers of t'ai-chi ch'uan took from the Internal School was a lineage (Chang San-feng, et al), a strategy (softness overcoming hardness), and an ideology (Chinese nationalism). Early t'ai-chi ideologues (i.e. Cheng Man-ch'ing) all spliced the Internal School and t'ai-chi lineages together. The name Chang San-feng does not appear in the Ch'en family or Wu/Li/Hao family manuscripts and is thus a product of the last days of the Ch'ing or early Republican period. In both t'ai chi and the Internal School there is a self-conscious attempt to distinguish themselves from the hard school.

Huang Pai-chia tells us that the Six Paths was used to train strength and the Ten Sections Tapestry was used to train softness. This dual training also seems to have been a feature of Ch'en family training and even of early Yang and other styles. The "Epitaph" initiated the concept of two great schools –the external and the internal- and t'ai-chi ideologues in the late Ch'ing period seem to have revived and consciously associated themselves with the Wu-tang camp. This line may not have been so clearly drawn in the mind of Ch'en family practitioners. There are many political elements in the construction of the Internal School, and politics played a role in its adoption as progenitor for t'ai-chi ch'uan.

The Internal School may or may not have been the biological parent of t'ai-chi, but t'ai-chi reached out to embrace the Internal School as an adopted parent. The Internal School, as projected by the Huangs, was Confucian in its nationalistic stance.

Huang's account of the Internal School has also sparked scholarly controversies that have lasted from the beginning of modern historical research in Chinese martial arts in the 1930s down to the present. Second only to the Chang San-feng wars is the issue of the meaning of the "internal-external" dichotomy. The "Epitaph" is far from unambiguous: "Now there is another school that is called "internal", which overcomes movement with stillness... Thus we distinguish Shaolin as "external".

The 3 most common interpretations of the distinction between "internal" and "external" in the martial arts are: 1) Chinese versus foreign, 2) monks versus laymen, and 3) ch'i cultivation versus muscular development. As outlined by Huang Tsung-hsi, the Internal School was a revealed and discreet transmission, but it was adopted in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a general framework for distinguishing hard and soft styles.

We may ask whether Shaolin is "external" because legend has it that Bodhidharma brought it to China from India, because Shaolin monks are "outside" of the family, or because the external school emphasizes an offensive strategy based on strength and speed.

The 3 primary sources on the origins of the Internal School, its characteristics and transmission, in chronological order are: Huang Tsung-hsi's 1669 "Epitaph for Wang Cheng-nan", Huang Pai-chia's 1676 "Art of the Internal School", and Ts'ao Ping-jen's 1735 Ningbo Prefectural Gazer's "Biography of Chang Sung-hsi".