

Ignorance, Legend and Taijiquan

By

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As one who has floated on the periphery of the martial arts community since I studied Yang-style Taijiquan in Taiwan back in 1970, I relish this opportunity to come forward and "toss some bricks to entice some jade," and I am particularly pleased that my "reappearance" can at last take place on the pages of a serious journal dedicated to high standards in Chinese martial arts research. This could not have happened even in the most recent past, and it is still an exception to the norm as we approach the 21st century!

It was precisely because of the appalling state of ignorance I observed surrounding the history of Chinese martial arts that I first published an article titled, "The Chinese Martial Arts in Historical Perspective," in the December 1981 issue of *Military Affairs* (now *Journal of Military History*). I selected a scholarly journal to ". . . hopefully extract them [the Chinese martial arts] from the realm of myth and pave the way for placing them in the realm of reputable historical research." [1] I selected a journal on military history to emphasize the fact (not opinion) that the origins of the Chinese martial arts, including boxing, are rooted in military (not religious) practice.

Now, 13 years later, I notice that ignorance still appears to be the rule rather than the exception. Why is this?! After reading Paul Crompton's *The Art of T'ai Chi* (Rockport, MA: Element, Inc. 1993), I realized that at least part of the reason for this state of affairs is because the phrase "ignorance is bliss" is not merely a saying but a fact for some people. After admitting that the Zhang Sanfeng story is probably myth, Crompton says that, "True or not, the very existence of the legends tends to elevate T'ai Chi and make it something to be striven for." [2] Now, isn't that a meaningful endorsement! In other words, the prestige of Taijiquan rises with hot air!

I feel reasonably confident that subscribers to this journal are not striving for Taiji based merely on the existence of legends, as Crompton describes, but that they might be interested in learning the facts and possible motives behind the legends associated with Taijiquan. To do so, however, requires one to view the subject from two levels of thought, one from a martial arts perspective and one from the broader social milieu in which the martial arts are but one element.

Actually, the Zhang Sanfeng legend can be viewed as having three phases: **phase I** (prior to 1669) merely claims that Zhang was a Taoist immortal; **phase II** (after 1669) claims that Zhang originated the "internal" school of boxing; and **phase III** (post 1900) claims that Zhang originated Taijiquan.

The Zhang Sanfeng legend evolved during the Ming period (1368-1644), based on the close association of early Ming rulers with Taoism and Taoist priests, whose prophecies had supported the founder of the dynasty. Little is known about Zhang except that he is described as an eccentric, itinerant hermit with magic powers, who died once but came back to life, and whose life, based on varying accounts, spanned a period of over 300 years. Emperor Chengzu (1423-1404) spent considerable funds to reconstruct war-torn monasteries on Mount Wudang, Zhang's favorite haunt, and it is said that a 13 year search he initiated to find Zhang was actually part of an elaborate cover story for a more urgent effort to locate Emperor Jianwen, the victim of a coup staged by Chengzu. Neither Emperor Jianwen or Zhang were ever found, but finally, in a move which Paul Crompton would no doubt applaud, Emperor Yingzong canonized the elusive Zhang in 1459. Throughout this formative phase of the Zhang Sanfeng legend there is no mention of Zhang's involvement with martial arts.[3] This lack of comment is significant as it was common practice to include this type of information in dynastic history biographies.

The earliest reference to Zhang Sanfeng as a boxing master is found in the *Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan* (1669), composed by Huang Zongxi (1610-1695 A.D.) but, as I pointed out in my 1981 article, the real significance of this piece at the time lay not so much in its reference to boxing but in its anti-Manchu symbolism. The *Epitaph* is the first reference in the history of Chinese martial arts to describe boxing in terms of a Shaolin or "external" school versus an "internal" school of boxing, originated by the Taoist immortal from Mount Wudang, Zhang Sanfeng.[4] While the *Epitaph* accomplishes its intended purpose of eulogizing Wang Zhengnan, it conveys two additional messages as well, one reflecting trends in thought on boxing and the other political defiance.

The major trend in thought on boxing reflected in the *Epitaph* is emphasis on the concept of "stillness" overcoming "movement" or the mental in relation to physical aspects of boxing. This was not necessarily a new concept. Yu Dayou advocated it in his manual on staff fighting (1565),[5] and its basis can be traced to Sun Zi's *Art of War* (c. 476 B.C.)[6] This concept involves taking advantage of an opponent's movement and thus might be perceived as a defensive approach to countering offensive action. This more disciplined "military" approach was at variance with some of the more "individualistic" and "flowery" movements which characterized many popular styles, which were conveniently described as "Shaolin boxing" in the *Epitaph*.

While Shaolin was the ideal symbol to represent the more numerous, popular styles of boxing, this gave rise to serious misunderstandings and, as a result, later works, beginning with Zhang Kongzhao's boxing manual (1784),[7] attributed the origins of Chinese boxing to Shaolin Monastery, (there is no mention of Bodhidharma until much later - c. 1900). At the same time, the mythical Zhang Sanfeng, blessed with sainthood by a Ming emperor, provided the ideal counterpoint to Shaolin boxing. After all, since Zhang himself could not be proven to have ever existed let alone anything he was claimed to have done, it could not hurt to claim he also invented a style of boxing.

One could say that Huang Zongxi's composition of an epitaph for a boxing master was, in itself, an act of thumbing his nose at Qing authority, which he refused to serve, but the symbolism of the "internal" school of boxing represented by Zhang Sanfeng versus the "external" Shaolin school was the ultimate act of political defiance through literature. The "external" school and Shaolin Monastery represented foreign Buddhism, which symbolized the Manchu aggressors, while the "internal" school and Zhang Sanfeng represented indigenous Taoism, which symbolized the Chinese, who would overcome their oppressors. The full extent of Huang's anti-Manchu sentiment is revealed toward the end of the *Epitaph*, where Wang Zhengnan's birth and death dates are recorded with the character combinations of the traditional 60-year cyclical calendar rather than the customary imperial reign title which, if used, would have indicated recognition of Qing rule.[8] A noted historian, Huang even included a disclaimer as to the accuracy of the content of the *Epitaph* by explaining that he wrote it based on a request from, and input provided by a Mr. Gao Zhensi.[9] Based primarily on this piece, more symbolic than factual, an entry was made in the 1733 edition of the *Ningbo Gazetteer* on Zhang Songqi, a Ming Jiajing period (1522-1566 A.D.) master of the "internal" school of boxing[10] and an entry was made in the *Qing Historical Manuscripts* on Wang Zhengnan.[11] Both these entries include the Zhang Sanfeng story of the origins of the "internal" school of boxing.

In 1727, Emperor Yongzheng promulgated an edict which directed local officials to strictly prohibit individual teaching of "boxing and staff", as the martial arts were called.[12] Emperor Qianlong (1736-1795 A.D.) directed a severe literary inquisition which destroyed many writings from the period 1550-1750. An anthology of Huang Zongxi's writings containing the *Epitaph* was proscribed and designated for destruction, but it survived to become a major source of controversy in the history of Chinese martial arts.[13] Ever since, boxing styles have been arbitrarily labeled as being either of the Shaolin or "external" school, or the Wudang or "internal" school and, ultimately, Taijiquan was labeled as an "internal" style and identified with the Zhang Sanfeng legend.

Some sources claim Li Yiyu (1832-1892 A.D.) had referred to Zhang as the originator of Taijiquan in a hand copied manuscript dated 1867, but that he dropped the reference in a later manuscript dated 1881.[14] This later manuscript, which Xu Zhedong first published in 1935, merely states that the originator is unknown.[15] The temptation to identify Taijiquan with the "internal" school of boxing and the Zhang Sanfeng legend is understandable; however, at the time, it could have been too risky to identify too closely with a well known legendary figure favored by Ming rulers and associated with the writings of the Ming patriot, Huang Zongxi. The ferocity of Emperor Qianlong's literary inquisition kept writers more or less in check for nearly a century beyond his reign. Even the name "Taijiquan" was suspect and may not have been mentioned outside a small circle of practitioners until after the revolution of 1911. Qing Emperor Taizong (1627-1643 A.D.) styled himself "Emperor Taiji", and there were strict taboos on using the names of emperors.[16] Evidence that this may have been the case can be seen in the lack of any mention of Taijiquan in the *Qing Unofficial Categorized Extracts* (1917), which devotes an entire volume (196 pages) to stories about martial arts masters and

styles.[17] The first ever *History of Chinese Physical Culture* (1919) also fails to mention Taijiquan among 69 of the better known contemporary styles.[18] Most of our knowledge of Taijiquan dates to the efforts of Tang Hao (1897-1959 A.D.) and Xu Zhedong during the 1930's.

Many boxing masters were illiterate but most information was reduced to rhyme, memorized, and passed on by word of mouth in spite of Qing restrictions. Some who were literate, such as Wu Yuxiang (1812-1880 A.D.) and Li Yiyu, produced closely held hand written manuals, some of which came to light by the 1930's and were published for appreciation by a larger audience.

The first openly published work associating Zhang Sanfeng with Taijiquan was *Taijiquan Classics* (1912), edited by Guan Baiyi. According to Tang Hao, Guan edited this for Xu Longhou, who had established the Capital Physical Culture Research Association following the revolution of 1911.[19] Xu included this material in his *Illustrated Explanation of Taijiquan Forms* (1921). The flagrant alteration of details in this book taken from existing sources reveals a conscious effort to arbitrarily force the Zhang Sanfeng legend into Taijiquan history. The most transparent part of this effort is reflected in the substitution of Wang Zongyue (Qianlong period), who is customarily credited with writing the most important Taijiquan treatise, *Taijiquan Theory*, for Wang Zong (only lacking the third character), who is listed as a mid-Yuan period disciple of the "internal" school of boxing in Huang Zongxi's *Epitaph*. [20]

Xu Longhou studied under Yang Jianhou (1839-1917 A.D.), whose father, Yang Luchan (1799-1872 A.D.), had first taken the secrets of Taijiquan outside Chenjiagou village in Henan to Beijing (c. 1860), thus Xu's book, as the earliest widely available source on Taijiquan, placed the Yang Style to the forefront at a time when national leaders were strongly endorsing physical culture programs as part of the overall effort to strengthen national resolve against imperialistic incursions into China. His book set a precedent of sorts and those which followed, particularly Yang Style books, tended to copy the Zhang Sanfeng story of the origins of Taijiquan. In fact, they even went beyond the call of duty by attributing portions of Wu Yuxiang's writings to Zhang Sanfeng.[21] After all, what self respecting founder would fail to pass on a few pearls of wisdom? Wu was merely the founder's ghost writer. Anyway, who would know? Actually, the most important Yang Style "classics" are from Wu's writings, except for Wang Zongyue's *Taijiquan Theory*, and there are some who believe Wu even penned it as well as coined the term "Taijiquan" around 1854, but that is another story! [22]

Why does there appear to be such concern to associate Taijiquan with the Zhang Sanfeng legend between 1912 and 1921, over 60 years after the style of boxing practiced in Chenjiagou village had been given the name "Taijiquan" and exposed to the big city? The answer may lie in a combination of events which began with the earliest reference to "The Dharma" or Bodhidharma as the originator of Shaolin boxing in a widely popular novel, *The Travels of Lao Ts'an* first published in *Illustrated Fiction Magazine* between 1904-1907.[23] This was soon followed by a book titled *Shaolin School Methods*, which appeared as a series in a Shanghai newspaper in 1910.[24]

This book, of unknown origin but written in an anti-Manchu secret society tone, expanded on the Bodhidharma story and, in 1915, was altered further and published as *Secrets of Shaolin Boxing* under the pseudonym, Master of the Study of Self Respect (probably an allusion to anti-Manchu and anti-imperialist feelings).[25] According to Tang Hao, this book was so popular that nearly 30 printings had flooded the market by 1919, and it has influenced other authors ever since, beginning with Guo Shaoyu's *History of Chinese Physical Culture* (1919), which was the first popular Chinese book on this subject.[26] It is not difficult to see how Taijiquan masters may have felt hard pressed to compete for popularity against such a publicity blitz in an increasingly commercialized environment. Under these conditions, Zhang Sanfeng was a made-to-order counterpoint to Bodhidharma.

The Zhang Sanfeng legend clearly has popular appeal and, at first glance, even some plausibility for the man on the street. This public relations aspect combines with the fact that Taijiquan, unlike many other styles, appears to have responded more effectively to the changing demands in society over the past century, and thus has evolved from a little known fighting art practiced in a country village to a worldwide phenomenon.

A lot of the information necessary to make intelligent statements about the origins of Taijiquan and other aspects of the Chinese martial arts is out there but, even more importantly, it needs to be interpreted with a discerning eye and more knowledge of the social environment in which the martial arts have flourished.

## REFERENCES

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[2] Crompton, Paul, *The Art of T'ai Chi* (Rockport, MA: Element, Inc., 1993), p. x.

[3] Seidel, Anna, "A Taoist Immortal of the Ming Dynasty: Chang San-feng", in W.T. de Bary & The Conference on Ming Thought, eds., *Self and Society in Ming Thought* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1970, pp. 483-531. Most comprehensive, although not always accurate, paper on this subject in English. Provides good coverage of phase I of the legend, concluding that, "His biographies and legends lack even the faintest allusion to his being a boxing master . . ." (p. 484)

[4] Ibid., pp. 504-505, claims earliest reference is in *Ningbo Gazetteer* 寧波府志, 1560 edition has no such entry. 1733 revised edition entry is based on Huang Zongxi's *Epitaph For Wang Zhengnan* 王征南墓誌銘, c. 1669) and Huang Baijia's *Internal Boxing Methods* [內家 拳法]. p. 505, claims Zhang Sanfeng chosen as patron saint of "esoteric" school as counterpoint to Bodhidharma's role in Shaolin school. This did not happen until 20th century.

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