

On Politically Correct Treatment  
of Myths in the Chinese Martial arts  
by  
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There is a rising trend in the “Occidental” world of “Oriental” martial arts – the number of “scholars” who, in spite of making pretenses to upholding “academic standards”, are displaying no small amount of intellectual compromise by acting as apologists for the myths surrounding the Chinese martial arts. They do this in a manner which gives one the impression that they somehow feel that to expose these myths is an irreverent act, harming the sensitivities of the Chinese people and insulting to pseudo-intellectual Occidentals seeking a New Age refuge in Oriental mysticism or, worse yet, causing them to lose interest in a subject about which these “scholars” delight in composing involved, ambiguous treatises.

The major myths, which ascribe the origins of Chinese boxing to the Indian Monk, Bodhidharma, in Shaolin Monastery, and the origins of *taijiquan* to the Daoist hermit, Zhang Sanfeng, on Mount Wudang, were thoroughly debunked by the Chinese martial arts historian, Tang Hao (1897-1959), in the 1930's [1]. Charles Holcombe's criticism of what he claims is a mistaken American "...modern materialist impulse to tear aside the veil of myth to uncover the real martial arts beneath" [2] appears to be misdirected (as it was Tang Hao, not Henning, who first debunked the myths). This is a reflection of the current level of understanding of the Chinese martial arts in America, which equates to the Chinese level of understanding during the 1920's.

The real root of the problem is revealed in an article by Michael F. Spiessbach, where he refers to contemporary martial artists' perception of the Bodhidharma myth as "... a time-honored martial arts Way which can claim fifteen hundred years of development." [3] Unfortunately, the origins of this myth cannot be traced back earlier than its appearance in the popular novel, *Travels of Lao Can*, written between 1904-1907 [4], and there is no indication that it was ever a part of a "...time-honored martial arts way..."!

The Zhang Sanfeng myth of the origins of *taijiquan* can be traced back no earlier than to a hand written copy of a hand written boxing manual by Li Yiyu (1832-1892), dated 1867. [5] It was never part of the tradition of Chenjiagou village, where *taijiquan* originated, so it appears likely that it was started by Wu Yuxiang (1812 ?-1881?), Li Yiyu's teacher. Douglas Wile, whose writings show that he knows better, appears obligated to lay out a carpet of flowers before the Zhang Sanfeng myth by saying, "Legend is as enlightening in its own way as 'objective' history, and often more so in communicating the inner essence of experience." [6] He then goes on to quote Chen Gong (Yanlin), who wrote in 1943 that, although it was not possible to determine whether it was Shang Sanfeng or someone else who invented *taijiquan*, it was undoubtedly an ancient Daoist with the highest level of wisdom and no ordinary man. [7] Perhaps Professor Wile is deferring to his teacher, Zheng Manqing, whose writings reflect the customary Yang style attribution of the origins of *taijiquan* and even portions of Wu Yuxiang's writings to Zhang Sanfeng.[8]

It is not the myths themselves, but the stories behind them, which can be enlightening. But, if one interprets the myths as reflections of religiosity, as Holcombe apparently does, then one is doomed to remain the proverbial frog-in-the-well, a prisoner of misguided faith. He is apparently using his interpretation of the relationship between Chinese boxing and popular religious sects during the last 150 years of the Qing dynasty as a template in which to force nearly 3,000 years of boxing history. [9] Even Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilization in China*, held up as a paragon of Sinology, has ignored both the historical evidence against and lack of positive evidence to support its rationale for categorizing the Chinese martial arts as essentially Daoist practices. [10] In doing so, Holcombe is relying to heavily on English language sources, some of which can be highly misleading. For instance, Thomas Cleary's

prodigious outpourings must be individually scrutinized with great care to ensure accuracy of translation, and their general lack of scholarly backup makes them of dubious value for serious research. [11] Holcombe should heed the words of Simon Leys (Pierre Rykmans), who says, “The Chinese are our first guides and teachers in the exploration of their culture and history; fools who ignore this evidence do so at their own risk and pay dearly for it.” [12] On the other hand, one must carefully scrutinize Chinese sources as well. The following partial translation of the statement of purpose of the Chinese Martial Arts Publishers, organized in 1970 by some of the most respected men in the Taiwan martial arts community, serves as a warning: [13]

“...most of the printed works on the market have been tampered with, titles of books have been changed as has content, and even authors’ names. Furthermore, there are false works claiming to be the writings of past masters to cheat and take advantage of those who love the martial arts. Not only is it hard for beginners to distinguish between the real and the fake, but even those familiar with the martial arts are often fooled. Mistakes are passed on to be studied afterwards, confusing researchers and hindering the revival of the martial arts...”

Wang Xinwu, one of Holcombe’s key Chinese sources, is real enough, but, if he had read the Chinese Martial Arts Publishers reprint edition, he would have learned that Wang’s book is, among other things, one of the most complete repositories in print of the legends and myths surrounding taijiquan. Unfortunately, Wang presents them as fact! Wang even admits this in passing in his preface to the Hong Kong (1968) edition.

Continuing to adhere to the myths only perpetuates a distorted view of the role of the martial arts in Chinese society over the centuries. It has apparently resulted in overemphasis of their association with religious mysticism as opposed to their actual function as military skills and role as part of a citizen soldier concept of bearing arms, which dates to the early imperial period (3d cent. B.C. – 10<sup>th</sup> cent. A..D.). [14] The greatest misunderstandings have arisen as a result of the myths surrounding the origins of various styles of Chinese boxing. Based on probable references in the commentaries (c. 400 B.C.) to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* [15] and Sima Qian’s *Historical Records* (c. 90 B.C.) [16], Chinese boxing (then known as *bo*) dates back to approximately the same period as *pankration*, a similar skill popular in ancient Greece. [17] In the military, Chinese boxing served primarily as a form of basic training for use of weapons and, alone, only as a weapon of last resort. It likely took on a more prominent role, albeit still secondary to weapons, in local militia and law enforcement activities. Its importance as a basic military skill decreased with the greater use of firearms toward the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but its popularity as an individual skill practiced throughout society by militiamen, bandits, rebels, monks itinerant performers, and even intellectuals, continued unabated throughout the Qing (1644-1911). The martial arts (boxing and weapons) were practiced by heterodox religious groups such as the White Lotus Society, secret societies, and the Boxers United in Righteousness (1900) for essentially the same reasons that cults such as the Branch Davidians and militias in America today stock firearms.

The bottom line is, polite deference to the myths surrounding the Chinese martial arts is not only unwarranted but also unworthy of serious scholarship. It is high time that self-styled American martial arts “scholars” took a big step forward out of the 1920’s and up to the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Notes

Tang hao (Fansheng), 唐豪 (范生) (1930) , *Shaolin-Wudang Research* 少林武當考, Hong Kong: Unicorn Press, 1969; Tang Hao, (1935) *Internal School of Boxing Research* 內家拳的研究, Hong Kong: Unicorn Press, 1969; Master of the Studio of Self Respect 尊我齋主人 (1915) , Taipei : Zhonghua Wushu Press, 1971, critiques by Tang Hao and Xu Zhedong (Zhen) 徐哲東 (震) , c. 1936, appended.

Holcombe, Charles, “Theater of Combat: A Critical Look at the Chinese Martial Arts”, *Journal*

of *Asian Martial Arts*, Vol. 1, No. 4, October 1992, 64-79. Quote on p. 69; also, see note 33, p. 75.

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Liu T'ieh-yun (Liu E) *The Travels of Lao Ts'an*, trans. By Harold Shaddick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985. See chapter 7, especially p. 73.

Gu Liuxing 顧留馨, *Pao Chui: Chen Style Taijiquan Second Set* 炮捶：陳家太極拳第二路, Hong Kong: Haifeng Press, 1985. See annex 14, p. 324.

Wile, Douglas, *T'ai-chi Touchstones: Yang Family Secret Transmissions*, New York: Sweet Ch'i Press, 1984. Quote in introduction (7 pages, no numbering).

Chen Yanlin (Gong) 陳炎林 (公) (1943), *Combined Taijiquan, Knife, Sword, Staff and Freestyle* 太極拳刀劍桿散手合編, Taipei: Zhonghua Wushu Press, 1971. Statement on p. 1a (Chinese folio-style pagination).

Zheng Manqing 鄭曼青, *Zheng's Thirteen Chapters on Taijiquan* 鄭子太極拳十三篇, Hong Kong: Dongya Press, 1957. Wu's writings attributed to Zhang on p. 108. Wu's writings unattributed on pp. 110-111 (except for Hand Pushing Verse on p. 111, which is reworked version of Chen Clan material).

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A good example of problems one can encounter when reading Cleary's translations is found in Thomas Cleary, translator and editor, *Mastering the Art of War* (Boston: Shambala, 1989), 43-44. Here, Cleary translates the opening line to Zhuge Liang's (181-234 A.D.) exhortation on training a, "Soldiers without training cannot stand up to one out of a hundred opponents, yet they are sent out against a hundred each." This is a garbled version of a well known phrase which is more clearly rendered as, "When an army does not train, one hundred [soldiers] cannot stand up to one [opponent], but when employed with training, one can stand up to one hundred." For the original Chinese version, see *Zhugé Liang Jì* 諸葛亮集 (Zhuge Liang Anthology), Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974 (3d edition), 87.

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