

A New Perspective on the Origin and Different Styles of *Tai Chi*

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Abstract: This article explores the multifaceted nature of Tai Chi, a unique physical exercise deeply rooted in Chinese civilization. Despite its global popularity, there is ongoing controversy surrounding its origin and founder. The article delves into historical perspectives and challenges the conventional notion of assigned founders, proposing a cultural approach to understanding Tai Chi's evolution. It reviews the brief history of the five most popular Tai Chi styles (Chen, Yang, Wu, Wǔ, and Sun) and discusses the contemporary development of Tai Chi, including its standardization, global spread, and recognition as a competitive sport. The article emphasizes Tai Chi's cultural significance and its role as a symbol of Chinese culture on a global scale.

Keywords: Tai Chi; Cultural evolution; Tai Chi styles; Standardization; Global development

1. Introduction

As a unique physical exercise method and a life perspective among Chinese people, with its roots in the fertile soil of Chinese civilization, Tai Chi is highly appreciated all over the world for its distinct value in health maintenance, self defense, education, and art. According to some statistics, the number of people practicing Tai Chi globally has reached 300 million, which means Tai Chi has become the world's number one sport^[1].

Despite its growing worldwide acclaim, there has been a lot of controversy over the origin and the founder of Tai Chi. Some claim it was created by Laozi in the Spring and Autumn Period of the Zhou Dynasty (771-476 BC), but others have concluded that it was created by Han Gongyue during the Southern and Northern Dynasties. Still others have made claims that Tai Chi's founder was Li Daozi or Xu Xuanping in the Tang Dynasty, by Zhang Sanfeng (张三丰) in the Song Dynasty, by Zhang Sanfeng (张三丰) in the Ming Dynasty, by Chen Wangting and Wang Zongyue in the Qing Dynasty^[1]. More recently, we have seen even more opinions; some people believe Tai Chi was co-founded by Li Yan, Li Zhong and Chen Wangting^[2]. As another example, the famous master, Mr. Wu Wenhan observed that Tai Chi spread from Yongnian, and it has its history dates back less than 200 years.

The reason why there are so many different opinions about Tai Chi's origin is not only because of its large number of practitioners and its worldwide growth, but also due to the fact that *“firstly, practitioners in the past were generally illiterate and so cautious that they preferred to pass its history down by mouth; secondly, they often fabricated some fantastic stories deliberately in order to highlight Tai Chi's preciousness; and thirdly, practitioners tended to claim themselves as true disciples of Tai Chi and forged its history.”*^[3] In any event, neither academic nor the lay people have so far formed a consensus or a unified understanding on the origin of Tai Chi. As the saying goes, “If the name is not right then speech will not be in order, and if speech is not in order then nothing will be accomplished.” So, the “disorder” surrounding the issue of the origin of Tai Chi not only restricts further and wider study of it by academics, but also imposes many of constraints on its development and practice. One of the most important reasons why the application was rejected several times for Tai Chi to be included in the list of human oral and intangible cultural heritage^[4] is precisely because there has been not any unified, generally accepted view and expression on the basic history of Tai Chi. Thus, the problem cannot be put off any longer.

With the continuous development and evolution of Tai Chi and the growing number of styles being discovered, the familiar notion that there are only five styles of Tai Chi, i.e., Chen-, Yang-, Wu(武)-, Wu(吴)- and Sun-style, has long become outdated and cannot answer some commonsense questions about Tai Chi. So, it is necessary to clarify Tai Chi's origin and understand the various styles of such a popular sport.

2. A New Perspective on Tai Chi's Origin

The ongoing discourse surrounding Tai Chi's origin intricately weaves through its multifaceted nature. External influences spotlight individuals who have championed Tai Chi for personal motives, while its internal essence encapsulates profound values like Yin and Yang

dialectics. Beyond being a mere martial art, Tai Chi eloquently embodies cultural ideals such as the delicate equilibrium between hardness and softness, the art of yielding, and the triumph of the weak over the strong. This evolution positions Tai Chi as a 'Big Culture,' resonating not only with the cultural ethos of the Chinese people but also finding resonance in the hearts of people globally^[5].

Despite this expansive evolution, there persists a myopic perception of Tai Chi as solely a Chinese Martial Art or Wushu style, often accompanied by the misconception that it can be attributed to a single creator. Drawing parallels with cultural phenomena like traditional Chinese opera and Traditional Chinese Medicine, the text challenges the conventional notion of assigned founders, prompting readers to contemplate the origins of concepts like indoor living, agriculture, economics, and politics, where founder attributions remain elusive.

Opinions about the structure and stratification of culture vary greatly in academic circles. We can divide culture into many categories, such as monism and multi-culture, highbrow and popular culture, upper-level and lower-level culture, elite culture and mass culture, and so on^[6]. This exploration extends to the realm of cultural categorization, referencing the influential three-layer cultural theory presented by Pang Pu. Delving into material, theoretical institutional, and spiritual culture layers, the theory offers a nuanced lens through which to perceive various cultural phenomena^[7]. However, challenges arise when applying this framework to diverse elements such as medical science, Traditional Chinese Medicine, and artistic expressions, prompting a deeper examination of the intricacies involved. After extensive review by scholars, the Pang Pu theory is now widely accepted among Chinese cultural theorists as the three-layer cultural theory of material, institution, and spirit. This framework facilitates a clearer understanding of cultural phenomena, such as categorizing clothing under material culture, dress style under institutional culture, and moral values under spiritual culture. However, the application of this theory encounters challenges when classifying medical science, Traditional Chinese Medicine, anaesthetic powder, art, traditional Chinese opera, The Peony Pavilion, and Chinese cuisine. Binary division or the three-layer theory falls short in addressing these diverse cultural elements, necessitating a different perspective.

The scope of cultural items varies, with medical science, art, and diet representing large-scale culture, Traditional Chinese Medicine, traditional Chinese opera, and Chinese cuisine as mid-scale culture, and anaesthetic powder, The Peony Pavilion, or "Braised Dongpo Pork" falling into small-scale culture. It is essential to define them by the term "scale" rather than "form" as it captures the breadth of culture, whereas the latter only describes their shape.

This exemplifies Pang Pu's Tripartite Method^[8], asserting that all systems can be described in three dimensions. Within cultural scales, the question of Tai Chi's founder illustrates differing perspectives. Large-scale culture dismisses a specific founder, mid-scale culture suggests none but is prone to naming one without factual confirmation. Recognized founders symbolize culture, yet their legitimacy is subjective, as seen in Traditional Chinese Medicine's varied attributions to Qibo, the Yellow Emperor, or Tong Jun.

Confusion about Tai Chi's founder arises from misusing cultural scales, often due to subconscious categorization as a small-scale culture. This leads to the establishment of a founder to validate personal positions, driven by the misconception that Tai Chi, as a type of Wushu, inherently falls into this category. However, Tai Chi's extensive practitioner base and influence categorize it as a mid-scale culture. Each Tai Chi style within this culture has a distinct founder, such as Chen Wangting for Chen-style Tai Chi and Yang Luchan, Quan You, Wu Yuxiang, and Sun Lutang for other styles. Approaching the origin of Tai Chi from a cultural perspective, rather than a historical one, is recommended, as wisely suggested by a senior Wushu activist with a background in philosophy.

When reexamining Tai Chi through the "three-scale" cultural perspective, a redefined Tai Chi emerges. The traditional attribution of Tai Chi's founder to Zhang Sanfeng, known for promoting Taoism and establishing the Wudang School^[9], has historical merit. Zhang uniquely embodied both the spirits of "Tai Chi" and "Wushu" more comprehensively than any other individual in Chinese cultural history. This coincides with some scholars' studies from the perspective of Semiotics and the conclusion drawn by them that Zhang Sanfeng is the founder of Tai Chi^[10].

Tang Hao, however, challenged this view through textual research and proposed Chen Wangting as the true "founder" of Tai Chi. While valid for asserting Chen as the founder of Chen-style Tai Chi, the cultural positions of Zhang and Chen differ significantly, making it inappropriate to label Chen as the founder of Tai Chi overall. Unlike the consensus regarding Qibo and the Yellow Emperor as founders of Traditional Chinese Medicine, the realm of Tai Chi does not equate to such clear dual founders.

The origin of Tai Chi is unique, evolving over time through the contributions of generations of Wushu practitioners. Unlike rapidly created styles of Wushu, Tai Chi, akin to Traditional Chinese Medicine, Tea Ceremony, and Calligraphy, developed through long periods of interchange, experimentation, and the dedication of countless Chinese masters. Yu Zhijun aptly emphasizes that the founder of Tai Chi is the entire Chinese nation, and its birthplace is the fertile land of China.

Applying the "three-scale" cultural theory, Chen Wangting emerges as the founder of Chen-style Tai Chi, a representation of small-scale culture. For Tai Chi as a medium-scale cultural entity, lacking a definitive founder, cultural attribution is often ascribed to Zhang Sanfeng due

to his prominent status in Chinese cultural history. Zhang's cultural embodiment reflects the wisdom of past Wushu masters, emphasizing that Tai Chi's creation is a dynamic, culturally transformative process unfolding across various places and periods.

3. Brief history of the most popular Tai Chi styles

3.1 Chen Style

In the early Ming dynasty, Emperor Hongwu ordered people in Hongdong County, Shanxi Province to immigrate to Huaiqing. Chen Bo from Dongtu village of Zezhou also went to Huaiqing to avoid the famine in his hometown, and settled down in Changyang village of Wenxian county. Later generations of the Chen family made the village prosperous, and they named the village Chenjiagou. Chen Wangting was born in 1600 nine generations after Chen Bo. Chen Wangting was raised in central China and was influenced by the local culture. He practiced Wushu well. He combined the Wushu forms he had learned from his family and other Wushu forms, creating a new form of Wushu with his own ideas. This new Wushu form got its theoretical and cultural essence from the traditional cultures of Chinese Medicine and Taoism. The new Wushu form was called Chen Style Tai Chi and was taught only among Chen families until the 14th generation, when Chen Changxing (1771-1853) passed his teachings down to Yang Luchan from Hebei Province.

3.2 Yang Style

Yang style Tai Chi was created by Yang Luchan (born 1799). Yang was born in Hebei province and was introduced to Chen Changqing by the manager of Taihe Pharmacy in order to learn Wushu. Yang studied hard and became one of the top students among all the disciples in Chenjiagou. He later began to teach Tai Chi in the capital city of Beijing. Because many his students were from royal or rich families, and their bodies were quite weak from lack of physical work, they could not tolerate training hard. Also, these people were accustomed to wearing chang shans, which are almost floor-length garments, which would interfere with training movements. So Yang Luchan simplified Chen style Tai Chi, making it suitable for people wearing longer attire to practice. Later generations in Yang's family kept revising the form and gradually founded Yang Style Tai Chi.

3.3 Wú Style

Wú style Tai Chi was first created by Quan You, who initially learned Tai Chi from Yang Luchan. The Tai Chi he practiced was further developed by his son Wú Jianquan. In 1912, while Wú Jianquan was teaching Tai Chi at The Beijing Sports Academy, he removed some repeated moves from the old form, and refreshed it with more practical moves, forming his own style. In addition to Wú Jianquan, Quan You had another disciple, Wang Maozhai who later taught Tai Chi in Shanghai. The two of them came to be referred to and respected as South Wú and North Wang.

3.4 Wǔ (different pronounciaton from Wú) Style

Wǔ style Tai Chi was created by Wǔ Yuxiang (1812-1880). Wǔ originally learned Tai Chi from Yang Luchan and later studied with Chen Qingping. Chen was a great master, and he gave Wǔ a hand written manuscript of Tai Chi. Wǔ practiced very hard and he improved what he had learned from his masters and the manuscript, finally developing his own style Tai Chi, Wǔ Style Tai Chi. Wǔ style was being promoted in Beijing in the early 1900s and later spread to Nanjing and Shanghai, as well as other locations. Wǔ Yuxiang taught his Tai Chi to his nephews Li Yishe and Li Qixuan; Li Yishe passed the teaching to Hao Weizhen, and Hao Weizhen passed it to Hao Yueru.

3.5 Sun Style

Sun Style was created by Sun Lutang (1860-1933). Sun learned Xingyi from master Li Kuiyuan and later learned Baguazhang from master Cheng Tinghua. With this foundation, Sun had good Wushu skills even before he began practicing Tai Chi. In 1912, Sun met Tai Chi master Hao Weizhen and they exchanged Wushu skills. Though Sun's Wushu skill was a little better than Hao's, Sun still respected Hao as his teacher, because he wanted to learn Tai Chi from him. In 1918, Sun Lutang combined the Tai Chi skills he learned from Hao Weizhen with Xingyi and Bagua, which resulted in the creation of his own style of Tai Chi, which was later titled Sun Style Tai Chi.

Aiside from the five most popular styles, there are other styles of Tai Chi, such as Zhaobao Tai Chi, He Style Tai Chi and Hulei Tai Chi.

4. Review of the contemporary development of Tai Chi

Tai Chi was spread outside China into countries in Southeast Asia and the USA in the 1930s by Tai Chi Masters, such as Dong Yinjie, Cheng Man-ch'ing, and others.

Tai Chi bloomed more colorfully as a rare flower in the Wushu area after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Its first appearance for a big occasion was at the 1953 National Sports Performance and Competition Convention. Because there are so many styles of Tai Chi, each having numerous forms, the art was difficult to unify and standardize.

In order to make it easy to learn and practice, and to encourage nationwide health promotion and body strengthening, many experts and

Tai Chi Masters were convened by the former National Sports Commission of China (later called the General Administration of Sport). They created the Simplified 24-form Tai Chi and the 48-form Tai Chi. They then revised some Wushu and Weapon Routines, such as the Yang 88-form Tai Chi, the 32-form Tai Chi Sword-play, and the Push Hands Exercise. From the perspectives of athletic competition, communication, and the passing of traditional forms to future generations, the competition routines of the most popular five major styles, i.e. Chen-style, Yang-style, Wu(吴)-style, Wu(武)-style and Sun-style Tai Chi, were created and compiled under the organization of the National Sports Commission of China. The aim was to boost athletic interaction and to maintain of traditional Wushu. What's more, experts created the competitive routines of the 42-form Comprehensive Tai Chi and the 42-form Sword-play for athletes to follow in the national Wushu championship competitions. The creation and compilation of the Simplified 24-form Tai Chi has made Tai Chi step into the realm of worldwide fitness, and has been an important milestone in the history of Tai Chi's development.

Historically, prior to the standardization of Tai Chi, individual practitioners may have studied it for health, fitness, or to learn fighting skills, but they always included the historical and philosophical essence of Tai Chi in their studies and practices. However, after the unification of Tai Chi forms by government organizations, these more intangible but culturally important aspects of Tai Chi got diluted. Therefore Tai Chi standardization had actually become a double edged sword. Fortunately, there are still many Tai Chi enthusiasts who stick to the tradition of Wushu. Yet, the diversification of Tai Chi continues on an unstoppable trend in the modern era of globalization.

The first national Wushu Contact Sport, Free Combat & Push hands Demonstration Match was held in Beijing in 1982. Since then, Push Hands has been introduced into athletic contests as a new contact sport. In 1986, the National Sports Commission listed Tai Chi, Sword-play and Push Hands into formal national competition events, and decided to hold a match for them every year. This made Tai Chi come to be the first type of Wushu to have its category^[11]. At the First Asian Wushu Championship held in September 1987 in Yokohama, Japan, Tai Chi made its first appearance as a formal competition event in international games. Then 100 Tai Chi enthusiasts under the organization of the Japanese Wushu Tai Chi League, which has extensive influence in Japan, visited Beijing and participated in the Sino-Japan Tai Chi Competition and Exchange Conference in April, 1988. Japan has grown to be the second country after China in which Tai Chi is the most popular sporting event. In 1990, the International Wushu Federation was established, and a year later, Tai Chi was listed as an official competition item. After that, Tai Chi was introduced into Wushu Tournaments held in all over the world^[12].

After China's *Outline of the Nationwide Physical Fitness Plan* was enacted in June 1995, Tai Chi had caught up with other sporting events and became the most popular physical training exercise among all people. In October 1998, the General Administration of Sport of China, the Chinese Wushu Association and several other institutions jointly organized a magnificent Tai Chi show performed by ten thousand people in Tian'anmen Square, the heart of the country, which impressed all of society. The Executive Committee Conference of the International Wushu Federation held in 2000 passed a resolution naming each May as "World Tai Chi Exercise Month". This resolution was warmly welcomed by the countries and regions that are members of the International Wushu Federation, showing that Tai Chi as a culture had become a well recognized treasure transcending sports and national boundaries. As many large regular events are held and continue to develop, such as the Jiaozuo International Tai Chi Communication Contest, the Yongnian Tai Chi Exchange Conference, and the World Tai Chi Health Conference in Sanya, Hainan, there is evolving a vigorous world-wide campaign for Tai Chi exercise. Tai Chi has increasingly become a vivid symbol and the "hologram" of Chinese culture^[13], and has embodied not only the culture of the Chinese nation but also the common aspiration of people who love peace and advocate harmony in the world.

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