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# THE MANY LIVES OF YANG LUCHAN: MYTHOPOESIS, MEDIA, AND THE MARTIAL IMAGINATION

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## ABSTRACT

The life of Yang Luchan, patriarch of the Yang lineage and founder of taijiquan's most popular style, is a biographical blank slate upon which conservative, progressive, orientalist, and just plain rice bowl interests have inscribed wildly divergent narratives. Conservative scholar-disciples sought to link him with the invented Wudang-Daoist lineage, while progressives emphasized his humble origins and health benefits of the practice. His life (c.1799-1872) straddled the height of the Manchu empire and decline into semi-colonial spheres of foreign influence, while successive generations of Yang descendants propagated his 'intangible cultural heritage' through Republican, Communist, 'open', and global eras. Practiced world-wide by hundreds of millions, taijiquan's name recognition made it ripe for media appropriation, and Yang Luchan has been remythologized in countless novels, cartoons, television series, and full-length feature films. The case of Yang Luchan offers an unusual opportunity to witness an ongoing process of mythopoesis and to compare these narratives with traditional Chinese warrior heroes and Western models of mythology and heroology. If the lack of facts has not constrained the proliferation of invented biographies, neither should it discourage the quest for historical context as we sift and winnow truth from trope in the many reconstructions of Yang's life.

*To know what you know and acknowledge what you do not know,  
that is true knowledge.*

Confucius, *Analects 3: 2*

*Seek truth from facts.*

Ban Gu, *Hanshu* (History of the Former Han), 'Biography of Liu De'

*Facts are such horrid things.*

Jane Austen, *Lady Susan*, XXXII

## INTRODUCTION

Among the burning issues in *taijiquan* historiography – the creator of the art, the historicity of Zhang Sanfeng and Wang Zongyue, and authorship and provenance of the 'classics' – the role and background of Yang style progenitor Yang Luchan (c. 1799-1872) is the focus of renewed scrutiny as various 'cradles' and 'birthplaces' vie for market share of *taijiquan* tourism. The irony of Yang's absence from official records, yet enduring cultural legacy, is widely acknowledged, but the dearth of credible biographical detail has not constrained a thriving industry in creative reconstructions of his life. Late Qing dynasty (1644-1911) historiography on the local level is mainly a chronicle of degrees earned, offices held, and acts of filial piety. Thus, although recognized as founding father of the Yang style of *taijiquan*, practiced today by hundreds of millions worldwide, his name does not appear in local gazetteers, examination rolls, family genealogies, gravestone epitaphs, or correspondence – i.e., the grassroots sources that one might call the 'first draft' of Chinese history. Moreover, his prowess as a martial artist attracted the attention of the Manchu court, we are told, yet there is no mention in official Qing histories.<sup>1</sup> If dynastic histories have a vested interest in glorifying their founders, and local gazetteers in celebrating their native sons, the bias inherent in family genealogies and epitaphs is exponentially greater. Nevertheless, in spite of the 'motivated reasoning' that characterizes all reconstructions of Yang's life, it becomes a lens through which to view the forces shaping Chinese intellectual history and a cautionary tale for current students confronting competing paradigms of rationalization and mythologization.

This study traces the story of Yang's career from three sentences in a single contemporaneous 19<sup>th</sup> century source, through its invented elaborations in 20<sup>th</sup> century mass-market instructional books, to 21<sup>st</sup> century

1 Shao Baosheng presents a cogent case questioning the authenticity of the famous calligraphic couplet praising Yang's skill attributed to imperial tutor Weng Tonghe (1830-1903). Shao estimates that Yang was 66 to 73 at the time he entered the employ of the imperial household. He also disputes the oft-repeated claim that the Weng couplet was the first association of the cosmological concept of 'taiji' with Yang's art, and that Yang himself referred to his style as 'huaquan' or 'mianquan'. Shao reminds us that the 'Wang Zongyue Treatise' uses the name 'taijiquan' [Shao 2006].

novels, cartoons, television series, and full-length motion pictures. If the Wu brothers (Wu Yuxiang, Wu Chengqing and Wu Ruqing) initiated the textual tradition of *taijiquan*, it was fellow Yongnian native Yang Luchan who put it on the martial arts map and sired its most influential style and lineage. Though his literacy and that of his sons and grandsons is in question, there is a considerable body of published Yang family technical teachings, often attributed to ghost writers Chen Weiming and Zheng Manqing. Nevertheless, Yang Luchan remains the critical link between Yongnian County, Chen Village, Beijing and beyond, with an impact that spans the Imperial, Republican, and Communist eras.

## SOLE CONTEMPORANEOUS ACCOUNT

Li Yiyu's 1881 'Short Preface to Taijiquan' (*Taijiquan xiaoxu*), that accompanies his handwritten recension of uncle Wu Yuxiang's collection of 'classics', gives this account of Yang's background:

Mr. Yang from the Nanguan district of my hometown admired the art and traveled to Chen Village to study it. He applied himself with great diligence, and after ten years, had mastered its subtleties. Returning to his hometown, he demonstrated it to fellow martial arts enthusiasts. My uncle, Wu Yuxiang, was very impressed and often sparred with him, but Yang did not lightly reveal the secrets, so Uncle Wu was only able to grasp the general idea. [Gu 1983]

This tantalizingly terse account leaves ample latitude for scholarly speculation and artistic license. Each of the few details in this sole contemporaneous account has been roundly contradicted and pointedly contested in later versions. Family, educational level, martial arts background, exploits and reputation, relationship with Chen and Wu families, and life beyond Chen Village and Yongnian are all lacunae ripe for creative fabrication. The 'cults of personality' that grew up around such Chinese figures as Chiang Kaishek and Mao Zedong allowed for their images to be installed on family altars, but were constrained by norms of historiography that stopped short of claiming divine lineages and walking on water. Yang Luchan, by contrast, is a man virtually without formal history, and thus a blank slate or mirror for reflecting the values and motives of the tellers.

What follows, then, is a survey of successive generations of students and scholars whose accounts of the life of Yang Luchan set the parameters for future speculation, a process that proceeds unabated to the present.

## SCHOLAR-DISCIPLES AND DESCENDANTS

As mentioned, we have no gazetteer biographies, no family genealogy, no autobiography, and no epitaph, a situation strongly suggestive of illiteracy on the part of Yang Luchan and his sons Yang Jianhou and Yang Banhou. The next generation of Yang's descendants finds us in the midst of early Republican Era ideological battles between progressives and conservatives, with their different visions of what constitutes cultural treasures (*guibao*) or trash (*zaopo*), baby or bath water. A cohort of polymath cultural preservationists, including Guan Baiyi (1882-1956), Wu Zhiqing (1887-1951), Chen Weiming (1881-1958), Dong Yingjie (1888-1961), Zheng Manqing (1901-1975), and Wu Tunan (1884-1989), sought out living lineage holders and promoted the diffusion of native martial arts as a remedy for the 'Sick Man of Asia' image.

China's earliest mass-market publications on taijiquan are as remarkable for their sins of omission as for their fanciful fabrications. Guan Baiyi's 1912 *Taijiquan jing* (*Taijiquan Classics*) and Sun Lutang's (1861-1931) 1919 *Taijiquan xue* (*The art of taijiquan*) both propagated the myth of the immortal Zhang Sanfeng as creator and Wang Zongyue as disciple, with no acknowledgement of Yang Luchan whatever. Even grandson Yang Chengfu's recently discovered 1925 *Taijiquan yaoyi* (*Essentials of taijiquan*) adopts wild creation and transmission myths, but makes no reference to his own grandfather Luchan. Dong Yingjie's 1946 *Taijiquan shiyi* (*Introduction to taijiquan*) and Zheng Manqing's 1947 *Zhengzi taijiquan shisan pian* (*Master Zheng's thirteen chapters on taijiquan*) and later *Zhengzi taijiquan zixiu xinfu* (*Master Zheng's new method of self-study for taijiquan*), likewise devote lengthy expositions to invented lineages, while omitting, or giving short shrift, to Yang Luchan, though both were students of Yang's grandson Yang Chengfu.

By contrast, Xu Yusheng (1887-1945), student of Yang Luchan's son Yang Jianhou (1839-1917), produced the 1921 *Taijiquan shi tujie* (*Illustrated manual of the taijiquan form*), which featured line drawings of the Yang family art and the following tribute to Yang Luchan:

When Master Yang served as tutor in the Manchu garrison, there were three students who grasped the true transmission: Wan Chun, Ling Shan, and Quan You. One excelled at power, one at repelling, and one at neutralizing. We might say that each of them mastered one aspect of Yang's complete art, or the difference between sinews, bones, and skin. [Xu 1921]

Chen Weiming's 'Preface' to his 1925 *Taijiquan shu* (*The art of taijiquan*) relates that Chengfu said to Weiming: 'My grandfather learned the art from the Chen family of Henan', and the section titled 'Taijiquan shu yuanliu' ('Origins of the art of taijiquan') sets forth a genesis with Zhang Sanfeng as creator, Wang Zongyue as transmitter and author of the 'Treatise', down to the Chen family, and thence to Yang Luchan. When it comes to family background, Chen says, 'Chen (Changxing) had more than ten disciples, and Yang Luchan spared no expense to study with him' [Chen 1925]. This account merges mythological origins with the

historical Chen family and gives us an image of Yang Luchan as a martial arts enthusiast and a man of means.

Scholar and martial arts advocate Wu Tunan, born four years after Wu Yuxiang's death, and a student of Wu Jianquan and Yang Luchan's grandson Yang Shaohou (1862-1930), writing in his 1928 *Taijiquan*, introduces a novel biographical detail, providing Luchan with a hometown traveling companion, Li Bokui, and making them the first outsiders to be accepted as students by Chen Changxing (1771-1853). Going even further, Wu Tunan reveals in his 1936 *Guoshu gailun* (*General introduction to Chinese martial arts*) that Wu Yuxiang was preparing to take the military exam, practicing the traditional 'archery, horsemanship, sword, and weightlifting', and approached Yang Luchan for training. Yang Luchan was disillusioned with teaching and passed Wu off to his second son Yang Banhou. Yang Banhou was offended by Wu's arrogance, and Wu for his part did not appreciate the Yang family policy of secrecy.<sup>2</sup> A similar account is given in Huang Yuanxiu's (1884-1954) 1934 *Taijiquan yaoyi* (*Essentials of taijiquan*). Huang was a student of Yang Jianhou and says that Yang Luchan and Li Bokui learned of Chen Changxing by reputation and made the pilgrimage to Chen Village, where their sincerity moved Changxing to break tradition and reveal the secrets to the two outsiders. Luchan returned to Yongnian and spread the teaching throughout his hometown, where it was called *ruanquan* (soft boxing), or *huaquan* (transformation boxing), eventually traveling to the capital and becoming tutor to the Manchu princes.

Yang Chengfu's 1934 *Taijiquan tiyong quanshu* (*Complete principles and applications of taijiquan*) gives a more ideologically inflected account of grandfather Yang Luchan's background, informing us that he reported being impressed with the feats of Chinese street performers, whom he considered the equals of Western strongmen. China's professional code of secrecy inhibited progress, so he proceeded to Chen Village, and after proving his determination, Chen Changxing consented to teach him at night. Completing his studies in Chen Village, he moved on to the capital, where he vowed to teach all comers openly. Seeking to spread the teachings further, Luchan then traveled south to Fujian and Zhejiang provinces. Chengfu says his grandfather taught that the transmission was from Zhang Sanfeng at the end of the Song, to Chen Zhoutong, to Zhang Songxi, to Jiang Fa, whose only student was Chen Changxing. If Luchan died in 1872, and grandson Chengfu was born 1883, Chengfu's account of his grandfather must be from his father Jianhou's recollection, or coaching from ghost writers [Yang 1934].

In general, the accounts of the scholar-disciples and Yang family descendants emphasize the putative Daoist origins of Yang's art, and

<sup>2</sup> This is similar to Wu Yuxiang's 8th grandson Laixu's *Brief Biography of Grandfather Lianquan* (*Xian wangfu Lianquan jun xinglue*), which tells us that when Yuxiang learned of Chen Village masters, he was anxious to study with them, but was unable to get away, so sent Yang Luchan instead. Interestingly, both accounts have Yang withholding secrets from Wu when Yang returned to Yongnian [Wu 2013].

a willingness to historicize such figures of folklore as Zhang Sanfeng, Xu Xuanping, and Wang Zongyue. They tend to gloss Yang's family background and minimize or omit the roles of the Chen family and Wu brothers. To the chagrin of modern historians, these scholar-disciple accounts devote more space to fabricating martial arts credentials for the legendary immortal Zhang Sanfeng than to researching the real-world background of Yang Luchan.<sup>3</sup>

## SCHOLAR SKEPTICS AND RECENT REVISIONISTS

With minor variations, scholar-disciples and descendants share a common narrative of taijiquan's origins. They splice together the Huang Zongxi 'Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan' lineage of the 'Internal School', from Song dynasty Daoist alchemist Zhang Sanfeng through successive transmissions to Wang Zongyue, who wrote the 'Treatise', to Jiang Fa, who delivered it to Chen Changxing, and thence to Yang Luchan. All blithely ignore Li Yiyu's 1881 'Preface', that responsibly confesses: 'We do not know the origins of taijiquan' [Gu 1983]. Nevertheless, the former became the standard model of Yang's biography until challenged by Tang Hao, who claimed that Yang was sold as a bondservant to the Chen family of Chen Village in Wen County, Henan, where he learned from Chen Changxing [Tang/Gu 1964]. Tang Hao's 1930's field work in Chen Village led him to conclude that Yang was sold as a young boy to Chen Dehu of Chen Village, who also operated the Taihetang Pharmacy in Yongnian which was rented from the Wu family. Although Chen Dehu was a member of the prestigious Hanlin Academy, the highest academic body at the Manchu court, he patronized martial arts and allowed Chen Changxing to teach clansmen in his courtyard. When Chen Dehu died, it was considered unseemly for Yang to remain in the same household with the young widow, and he was released from bondage. Returning to Yongnian, he lived in Chen Dehu's Pharmacy, where he met Wu Yuxiang. Tang believes this version of Yang's background is confirmed in Chen Xin's *Chenshi jiasheng* (*Chen family genealogy*) and interviews with Hao Shaoru (1907-1983), fifth generation Wu (Yuxiang) lineage holder.<sup>4</sup>

3 The following is a chronological list of publications by students of second and third generation Yang family members: Xu Yusheng, 1921, *Taijiquan shi tuji*; Chen Weiming, 1925, *Taijiquan jiangyi* & 1929, *Taijiquan dawen*; Yang Chengfu, 1931 (Dong Yingjie, ghostwriter), *Taijiquan shiyongfa* & 1934, *Taijiquan tiyong quanshu* (Zheng Manqing, ghostwriter); Huang Wenshu, 1936, *Taijiquan yaoyi*; Wu Zhiqing, 1940, *Taiji zhengzong*; Chen Yanlin, 1943, *Taijiquan, dao, jian, gan, sanshou hebian*; Zheng Manqing, 1947, *Zhengzi Taijiquan shisan pian*.

4 Interestingly, the only other source to show similar restraint is the official Yang Family website, that offers biographies of second, third, fourth, and fifth generation family lineage holders, but is mute on the subject of Yang Luchan, and the name does not appear once. This is particularly telling given the family's keenness to establish legitimacy by lineage and the general cultural practice of honoring ancestors. One can only speculate that this conspicuous omission represents an acknowledgment of the lack of information and unwillingness to encourage baseless claims.

Fellow pioneer martial arts historian Xu Zhen (1898-1993) largely agrees with Tang's account, and laments the modern trend to conceal the humble origins of accomplished figures, contrasting this with examples of great men throughout history who did not gloss their origins, and citing painter Qi Baishi as a rare contemporary exception. Xu Zhen speculates that when Yang returned to Yongnian, he ingratiated himself with the wealthy and influential Wu family, who for their part, were so impressed with his skill that they were willing to stoop to studying with someone below their station. The Wus introduction of Yang to the Manchu nobility proved to be a great boost to his career and family fortunes for generations [Xu 2006]. Extrapolating from the various timeframes, Gu Liuxin calculates that Yang was born in 1799 and returned to Yongnian approximately in 1849 [Gu 1983].

Tang, Xu and Gu, riding the wave of the New Culture Movement of the early turn-of-the-century, opposed the tendency to sacrifice 'fact' on the altar of family and face, a 'feudal' retention they considered an obstacle to China's progress and modernization. Today, nearly a century later, a faction of the new post-Mao/post-Deng generation has revived the humble origins theory, originally a paradigm shift of Kuhnian proportions; but in this latest iteration, it is embroidered with dramatic details conjured out of active imaginations. Representative of this development is Zhang Shengquan, portraying Yang Luchan as an enterprising peasant boy who sold coal and vegetable oil, and also worked as a cook, but through ambition and acumen rose from poverty. During three trips to Chen Village, he offered to work as a servant for free, and was so conscientious that Chen Changxing was moved to break precedent and teach a non-family member. Returning to Yongnian after 18 years, Yang Luchan impressed the Wu brothers, and Yang enrolled his son Yang Banhou as a student with Wu Yuxiang, expecting that Wu would one day pass the *jinshe* exam and could be useful to the fortunes of the Yang family. Although Wu Yuxiang was able to compare notes on martial arts with Yang, after some years, he still could not grasp the essence. Wu then journeyed to Chen Village, where he learned that Chen Changxing had retired from teaching, but he was able to use his brother Wu Chengqing's political influence to get Chen clansman Qingping in nearby Zhaobao Village released from prison, and thereby win acceptance as a student and the gift of a copy of the 'Treatise' [Zhang 2021]. While this account contains no supernatural elements, and seems perfectly rational, there is not a shred of documentation.

Qing Fengxuan adheres to the Tang/Gu poor boy thesis, but revises Yang's birthdate from 1799 to 1797, has him learning the art by 'observing', rather than 'spying', while waiting on Chen Changxing during clan training sessions in Chen Dehu's pharmacy courtyard in Yongnian [Qing 2012]. A variation of this version appears in an anonymously authored Baidu.com entry for the Taihetang Pharmacy, which relates that the staff were from Wen County in Henan and practiced the Chen family art. Yongnian villager Yang Luchan, who used to deliver coal and provisions to the pharmacy, so impressed store manager Wang Chang that he hired him to work in the store and participate in martial arts practice. Eventually, store owner Chen Dehu asked Yang's father if he

could adopt the boy as a foster son, delegating Chen Changxing to instruct him. Ten years passed, and Chen Dehu sent Yang Luchan back to Yongnian to teach martial arts. Later, Chen Dehu and Wu Ruqing, who both made *jinshi* and were both appointed to the elite Hanlin Academy, invited Yang to the capital to teach martial arts. Finally, Wu Yuxiang traveled to Chen Village and studied with Chen Qingping, thus the Taihetang Pharmacy became the cradle of both Yang and Wu (Yuxiang) styles of taijiquan. This narrative is echoed in the commemorative plaque to Yang that hangs today in the restored Wu family mansion in Guangfu City [Anon. n.d.].

Li Jinfan (1920-1991), Li family descendent and fifth generation Wu Yuxiang stylist, offers a detailed chronology of Yang's movements and interactions with the Wu brothers. He says that Yang was born in 1799, and in 1813 went to live with the Chen family in Henan as 'a matter of survival'. In 1818, the Wu brothers began studying *hongquan* with their father, and four years later, trying conclusions with Yang, defeated him. In 1825, the Wu brothers began training at the Taihetang Pharmacy, and the following year, Yang traveled to Henan to study with Chen Changxing. After briefly returning to Yongnian to take a wife, Yang went back to Henan. In 1836, Yang returned with his family to Yongnian, and once again visited his teacher in Henan. In 1845, he finally bested Wu Yuxiang in a friendly match. After repeating that performance in 1852, Wu determined to make the pilgrimage to Chen Village, and after receiving the Wang Zongyue manuscripts from Chen Qingping, and training with nephews Li Yiyu and Li Qixuan, in 1856, he defeated Yang. Regrettably, this impressive chronology, with its familiar cast of historical characters, and presumably based on family oral traditions, is delivered without a single reference [Li 2010].

## NEO-CONSERVATIVE REACTION

The Tang/Gu 'rags to riches' narrative challenged the custom of honoring one's ancestors by inflating their backgrounds and maintaining family monopolies by 'secrets', instead emphasizing the broader national interests and the human potential residing in the masses. This became the dominant tone in Mainland martial arts scholarship until after the Deng Era reforms that opened the door for the revival of family lineages. Thereafter, in a kind of Counter-Reformation, family histories were slanted to refute the Tang/Gu claims and to bolster the legitimacy and mystique of their own lineages. These new revisionist biographies often contradict each other, but the shared impetus is to remake the image of Yang Luchan by elevating his social status.

Liu Xiwen's 2011 'Yang Luchan shenshi kunhuo' ('Confusion over Yang Luchan's background') reopens the case, bringing together many objections based on circumstantial evidence. He begins by pointing out that martial arts training usually takes place in the early morning or early evening, precisely when servants are busiest with domestic duties. Moreover, given the birthdates of his three sons, and the claim that Yang was indentured at ten and emancipated after 30 years, Liu

wonders how he could have married and had children while a servant? He replaces this scenario with the proposal that Yang was a successful trader, who simply paid tuition for training in Chen Village. Returning to Yongnian, he injured an opponent in a match, and to avoid a lawsuit, fled to Beijing, where he found employment as a tutor to the sons of Zhang Fu, a pickle shop proprietor who was an exclusive provisioner to the royal palace. Yang intervened in an incident where Zhang's life was in danger, thus revealing his martial arts prowess, and it was Zhang who introduced him to the palace and not Wu Ruqing. Incorrectly attributing the 'three trips to Chen Village' legend to Li Yiyu's 'Preface', Liu calculates that given the 28 year age difference, if Yang was 21 at the time of his first trip, Chen Changxing would have been 49. Chen was a bodyguard by profession, and a man with much experience of the world, so it is unlikely that Yang stole the family secrets by spying, or was moved by Yang's sincerity, proposing that only a man of means could undertake the three 500 km round trips and pay tuition. Liu also reminds us that Yang's eldest son Yang Fenghou died an opium addict, an expensive habit requiring considerable resources. He also wonders how, without a certain cultural level, a simple peasant could function in the sophisticated milieu of the Manchu princes, and even win the praise of imperial tutor Weng Tonghe. Taijiquan founding fathers, the three Wu brothers, nephew Li Yiyu, Quan You, Wu Jianquan, Sun Lutang, and Zheng Manqing were all men of letters, and it seems unlikely that Yang would be the lone exception. Finally, Liu points out that the Manchu garrisons in Beijing were divided into the Eastern and Western Camps – the Eastern for the fittest, and the Western for the weaker. The fittest were trained in wrestling, and the weaker were assigned to Luchan, who modified his regimen accordingly, as he had for the Manchu nobility and scholars, with their long robes and queues [Liu 2011].

One ingenious strategy for reconciling many differences (such as those between Chen and Yang styles, the absence of classics, or even the name 'taijiquan', in Chen Village, and connecting the historical Chen Changxing and mythological Zhang Sanfeng) is Jin Enzhong's insertion of a 'Daoist' *deus ex machina* into the narrative. This involves claiming that Luchan only gained a glimpse of the art from Chen Changxing, but was fully enlightened by Daoist priest Chen Yinchang [AT 2019]. Jin constructs a genealogy originating with Zhang Sanfeng and extending to Liu Guquan, Wang Zongyue, and Jiang Fa, who transmitted it to Zhaobao Village, and finally reaching Chen Village, where it was picked up by Chen Changxing and Yang Luchan. Jin admits that his version of events is vehemently denied by Chen family descendants in Chen Village today. Jin also points out that in the 'Preface' to his *Taijiquan tiyong quanshu*, Yang Chengfu states that he personally saw his grandfather – which, given Yang Luchan's lifespan (1799-1872), would be impossible, since Yang Chengfu (1883-1936) was not yet born at the time of his grandfather's death. This inconvenience is bravely reconciled by Jin's suggestion that Luchan actually died at 97 [Jin 2000].

Still other accounts cast Yang Luchan as a scholar employed in a rich man's household, where one day he drops his disguise to single-handedly rescue three household bodyguards who had been beaten and

bound by intruders. Taking an opposite tack, Ziqi Donglai insists that Yang was an accomplished hard-style fighter before going to Chen Village, and that his success in the ring may just as well be attributed to that background as to anything he learned from Chen Changxing [Ziqi Donglai 2018]. This conjecture, of course, can neither be definitively confirmed nor denied, as there are no eye-witness reports of 'Yang the Invincible' overcoming opponents using soft-style or any other techniques.

Yunzhong Gongzi has a highly novel interpretation of Yang's life, which radically recasts the whole origin and development of taijiquan. He contends that the original Chen family art was strictly external, and that it was Chen Changxing who infused it with spiritual cultivation (*xinfa*), with the goal of achieving perfect 'stillness' (*jing*), thus transforming it into an 'internal' art, with sitting and standing meditation, more like *xingyiquan*. Originally, this practice had no name, and Chen Changxing and Yang Luchan developed it as a way of deepening stillness. As neither of them were scholars, they did not record their teachings, but Yang attracted the attention of Beijing elites, who were not serious about either meditation or martial arts, but used it for amusement, stitching together poses to create forms. When the 'Treatise on Taijiquan' appeared, it gave its name to the art and shifted the focus to self-defense, so that stillness became a means to master martial arts, rather than the original intent, which was for martial arts to be a means, or side-effect, of achieving stillness. Yunzhong Gongzi asserts that taijiquan, xingyi, and yoga have all lost their spiritual emphasis and become mere empty shells of poses, although traces of the original standing meditation (*zhanzhuang*) can still be detected in the momentary pauses and palm facing postures of Wu (Yuxiang), Yang Banhou small frame, and Sun styles. He believes that the ultimate goal should be to achieve absolute mastery of our metabolism and be able to suspend breathing and hibernate. It was this paranormal ability, he claims, that allowed Yang Luchan to gain the reputation of invincibility and not the practice of forms or teachings described in the classics [Yunzhong Gongzi 2017]. This revisionist account, while posing as sober scholarship, begins to tread the slippery slope toward biographical fiction.

Poster Winrman has a creative explanation for why Yang and Chen styles are so different in spite of universal agreement that Yang Luchan spent years in Chen Village. Many assume that Yang modified the style to accommodate the new cultural environment he encountered in the capital. Winrman begins his argument by accepting the authenticity of the 'classics' revealed by members of the Li family of Boai County, Henan, which they claim to have discovered in their family genealogy and dated 1716. The reason Yang's form, terminology, and styles are identical to these texts is because Chen Wangting studied with a Daoist priest in the Boai Thousand Year Temple, and this knowledge was secretly preserved in the Chen family lineage. This is what Changxing taught Yang, along with giving him the classics, while other members of the Chen family created forms based on *tongbei* and Qi Jiguang's *Quan-jing* (*Classic of pugilism*), which is now what we recognize as the Chen style. He emphasizes the 'Daoist' origins of the art, and that Yang alone

received the form and classics from Changxing, and not Wu [Winrman 2020]. While not introducing any supernatural personages or supernormal feats, his narrative of transmission writes a wholly original script for a familiar cast. Needless to say, this decentering of Yongnian, Chen Village, and Beijing, shifting the origins to the Li family and Thousand Year Temple in Boai County, has been met with accusations of forgery and fabrication by most martial arts scholars.

These accounts are representative of a transitional stage in Yang's biographical narratives between fact and fiction. Real historical figures are granted the power to perform supernormal feats, as in Jin Enzhong's reports of Yang's ability to defy gravity by clinging to a wall like a gecko, or lifting himself off the ground by his own queue [Jin 2000]. In the next stage, all pretense of representing fact is abandoned, and Yang becomes a figure of folklore, biographical fiction, and fantasy.

## BIOGRAPHICAL FICTION: NOVELS, FILMS, AND CARTOONS

Entering the realm of biographical fiction, we find new characters, new settings, and new plots grafted onto already thin historical root stock, and a willingness to co-mingle real and supernatural characters, conflating history with myth. This phenomenon cannot be separated from the promotion of mass literacy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the explosion of print, broadcast, and film media. We are now two removes from any claim to 'history' [Lao 2020; Song 2016]. The combination of biographical blank slate and high name recognition made Yang Luchan a tempting target for fictional inscription as individuals, the martial arts, and the nation struggled to create new identities and roles in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Gong Baiyu's (1899-1966) 1940 biographical novel *Touquan* (*Stealing the martial arts secrets*) was wildly popular and opened the floodgates for future invention in the Yang Luchan saga. In Gong's version, Yang hails from a rich peasant family, but is a sickly child whose father prescribes martial arts training as an adjunct to his academic studies. Initially, Yang trains in *changquan* with security guard Li Defa, but after hearing of Chen Changxing, he poses as a mute beggar and makes the pilgrimage to Chen Village. Finally, after passing out from hypothermia at the master's gate, he is taken in as a servant. Ultimately, Chen is persuaded by Yang's sincerity and dedication to reveal the whole art to him [Gong 1940].

In the People's Physical Education Publishing House 1982 cartoon version of *Touquan*, Yang is a peasant with a weak constitution and diminutive stature, but an obsession with the tradition of righteous knight-errantry (*renxia*). Yang's father arranges for him to study *huaquan* with local strongman Li Defa, who insists that only brute strength prevails in a fight. Yang, for his part, secretly peruses books promoting taiji teachings, such as 'softness overcoming hardness' and 'four ounces deflecting a thousand pounds'. Li scoffs at this, but in a test of mettle, Yang defeats his teacher and resolves to seek out Chen

Qingping. His determination is only strengthened, when on the way, he encounters Fang Zishou, Chen's lowest ranking student, and as a result of an altercation, Fang easily defeats him [He 2018]. The original book sold in the millions, and the cartoon adaptation in the tens of millions. A poster who goes by 'Lao Lin' tells us the cartoon sequels, issued by popular demand, departed from the novel, adding episodes from oral folklore.

Once biography has morphed into mythology, and invented plots have proliferated across such modern media as novels, films, cartoons and television serials, the next stage is from myth to archetype, employing similar plot elements but with a different cast of characters, even verging on farce. An example of this genre is the 1997 film *Taiji zongshi* (*Tai Chi Master*), whose protagonist Yang Yuqian from Hebei Province, Yutian County, travels to the capital in search of martial arts masters to realize his dream. Along the way, Yang encounters *bagua* master Dong Hancheng, who rebuffs his application, but Yang continues on to Chen Jiabao in Henan, where Chen Zhengying accepts him as a disciple, and he ultimately becomes a style founder. In this iteration, the trope of 'stealing the secrets' has been dropped. The names are thinly disguised near-homophone references to characters in the Yang Luchan story that will be familiar to Chinese viewers and foreign taijiquan enthusiasts.

Even today, it is evident that the dust has not yet settled on the conservative-progressive culture wars that peaked during the 1898 Hundred Days of Reform, the New Culture Movement (1915-1925), and Cultural Revolution (1966-1975), but continue now in the new environment of globalization and commercialization. While we gain little in the way of 'facts' about the life of Yang Luchan from all of this, we learn a great deal about the fraught state of Chinese martial arts historiography and how quickly myths rush in where history fears to tread.

Finally, one is tempted to add the restored 'original residence' (*guju*) of Yang Luchan to the list of invented interpretations. Standing in Handan City in what was formerly Guangfu Town in Hebei Province, Yongnian County, it is a truly grand affair, whose recent construction in the traditional style gives it the look of a museum rather than a restoration, except for the lack of authentic period artifacts. Its scale and magnificence show proper homage to the founder, but in no way represent the still official 'humble origins' narrative.

## COMPARISONS TOWARD A CONCLUSION

What are we to make of this cacophony of conflicting accounts of Yang Luchan's life? Logically, they cannot all be true, but they *can* all be false. Of course, if one *is* true, it cancels the others. We began this investigation with the observation that there were few facts and much biography, and an inverse relationship between distance from events and detail of description. Li Yiyu's 1881 'Short Preface' is respectfully vague, but subsequent biographies became vehicles for progressive or

conservative, and finally Nationalist and Communist cultural ideologies. That is to say, the variations are not random, but colored by partisan interests.

The earliest biographies of Yang Luchan were appended to instructional manuals intended to popularize taijiquan; the second were critical tracts aimed at reforming martial arts historiography; the final projected Yang as a folk hero for mass culture entertainment. The Wu brothers, as degree holders and officials, were the subjects of numerous genealogical and gazetteer entries, as well as epitaphs, biographies, and autobiographies, which somewhat tempered hyperbole. Yang biographers, however, lacking stable biographical plot points, other than a relationship with the Wu family, a sojourn in Chen Village, and a stint in the capital, had no such constraints, as Luchan, sons, and grandsons were not degree holders, and thus did not rate official biographies.

The persistence of what common sense tells us are mutually exclusive paradigms, rife with essentialism, creationism, concretism, and magical thinking, reveals that we are not playing by the evidentiary rules of the laboratory or court of law. Nevertheless, fabrication holds a fascination of its own, and fabrication is, after all, a cultural production as interesting to the historian as fact. The final sections seek to explore more theoretical perspectives on the construction of Yang's biography in light of parallels in the historical moments that witnessed the revival of soft-style martial arts during the Ming-Qing and Qing-Republican transitions, traditional Chinese herology, and general theories of mythology and narratology.

## MORE THAN COINCIDENCE: MINING THE 'EPITAPH' FOR THEORY, BIOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

The use of the *Yijing* (*Book of changes*), *Neijing* (*Classic of medicine*), *Quanjing* (*Classic of pugilism*), *Neijia quanfa* (*Art of the Internal School*), *Sunzi bingfa* (*Sunzi's art of war*), *Daode jing*, *Zhuangzi*, and the writings of Chang Naizhou have all been extensively examined for their metaphysical and biophysical contributions to the development of taijiquan. Moreover, in hitching their history to the Internal School, the Yang family (or their proxies), they borrowed elements of the 'Epitaph' to construct an historical and theoretical lineage for the popularization of taijiquan, involving: Zhang Sanfeng as creator, Internal School movement principles, Wang Zong's rebirth as Wang Zongyue, Wang Zhongnan as virtuous and patriotic martial arts hero, and the reinterpreting of 'Internal' from a distinct historical species to a genus that includes *bagua* and *xingyi*, under the broad classification of 'internal martial arts'.

It was the progressive scholar-skeptics who exposed the culture war dialectic of the mythologizing versus modernizing interpretations of Yang's life, but whether based on fantasy or fieldwork, they both selectively mined the 'Epitaph' for their basic themes and motifs. For this reason, it may be useful to review the details and structure of Huang

Zongxi's account of Wang's life. The following excerpt from Huang's 'Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan' should suffice for that purpose:

Shaolin is famous for its boxers. However, its techniques are chiefly offensive, which creates opportunities for an opponent to exploit. Now, there is another school that is called 'internal', which overcomes movement with stillness. Attackers are effortlessly repulsed. Thus we distinguish Shaolin as 'external'.

The Internal School was founded by Zhang Sanfeng of the Song Dynasty. Sanfeng was a Daoist alchemist of the Wudang Mountains. He was summoned by Emperor Huizong, but the road was impassable. That night he dreamt that the God of War transmitted the art of boxing to him and the following morning killed over a hundred bandits.

A hundred years later, Zhang's art spread to Shaanxi Province, where Wang Zong was its most noteworthy exponent. [...] [after successive transmissions] Dan Sinan's student was Wang Zhengnan. [...] After retiring from the army and returning home, he was very secretive about the subtleties of his art. Practicing behind closed doors, even his students were unable to catch a glimpse. Wang spied on him through a hole in the floorboards and got the general idea. Dan's sons were unworthy, and he lamented that after his passing, there would be no one to carry on. When Wang heard this, he presented him with several silver goblets to be used for financing tea production. Dan was very moved by this gesture and gave him the whole transmission from beginning to end.

Wang was very cautious, and after receiving the transmission, never betrayed the slightest hint of it. He only used his art in the most dire emergencies. One night there was an incident involving a spy, and Wang was detained by the guards. He was tied to a pillar, and more than a score of men stood guard with a great deal of drunken revelry. Wang picked up a piece of broken pottery and secretly cut his bonds. Drawing a piece of silver from his bosom, he tossed it into the air, and all the men struggled to grab it. In this way he was able to escape. [...] The guards were still convinced that he was a criminal and surrounded him in great numbers. Wherever Wang struck, he left wounded.

Once during his later years, Wang was traveling alone, when he encountered some soldiers who tried to coax him to carry a heavy load for them. He begged to be excused, but they insisted. Wang waited until they reached a bridge, and then threw the load over. The soldiers drew their swords and pressed him. Defending himself with bare hands, several of the soldiers were sent sprawling and dropped their swords with a clank.

In striking opponents, Wang made use of acupuncture points – death points, mute points, and vertigo points – just as illus-

trated in the bronze models of the channels. [...] Wang was a knight-errant and would avenge wrongs only when moved by real injustice.

As a young man, Wang had an interview with Lu Haidao. Lu tested his abilities and gave him a post. [...] He carried out his duties unstintingly and was named to fill the post of company commander in Linshan. [...]

After the military disaster, Wang vowed that until defeat was avenged, he would abstain from eating meat to express his dedication to this goal. [...] Wang gave up his post and retired to his home. Those who admired his skill thought because he was poor he could easily be compromised. The high-ranking military officers all paid their respects, but he was completely unaffected and ignored them. He continued to dig in the fields and haul manure as if unaware that he possessed a skill that could earn him an easier living.

One day Wang happened to meet an old friend who shared living quarters with the garrison commander. Just then Drillmaster Yan Songjiang was instructing his troops in the martial arts. The drillmaster, relaxing and strumming his three-stringed lute, regarded Wang with his hemp headgear and coarse clothing as a non-entity. When his old friend mentioned that Wang was adept at boxing, the drillmaster, glancing sidelong at him, said, 'Is this true?' Wang modestly declined. The drillmaster, loosening his clothes and raising his eyebrows, said: 'How would you like to have a little match?' Wang once again declined. The drillmaster, taking him as a coward, pressed him more forcefully, so Wang had no choice but to respond. The drillmaster was thrown once, and when he requested another round, was thrown again with such force that blood streamed down his face.

Wang had no formal education, but was refined and cheerful in conversing with the gentry, with no hint of crudeness. Once I accompanied him to the Tiantong Temple. One of the monks, Shanyan, was renown for his strength, and four or five men could not pin his arm. As soon as Wang touched him, he jumped back in pain. Wang said: 'Nowadays, people feel that the Internal Art lacks dazzle, so they adulterate it with the external. For this reason, the art is doomed to decline'. This is why he consented to recording its origins. [Wile 1999]

These basic biographical details are recapitulated in Huang Zongxi's son, Huang Baijia's, *Neijia quanfa* (*Art of the Internal School*), along with precise descriptions of the techniques and training methods. Huang tells us that he neglected his academic studies, devoting himself instead to martial arts under Master Wang. Huang senior, however, realizing that his son was headstrong, and that the empire was thoroughly pacified by



the Manchu conquerors, persuaded him to resume preparation for the civil service examinations. Likewise, the 'Biography of Zhang Songxi', 16<sup>th</sup> century Internal School lineage holder, that appears in the *Ningbo Prefectural Gazetteer*, also attributes the origins of the Internal School to Zhang Sanfeng and praises Zhang for his humility. It relates anecdotes of Zhang dispatching Shaolin monks, splitting rocks with his bare hands, and emphasizes the advantages of defensive strategy and striking acupuncture points [Wile 1999].

The first wave of publications, those written by scholar-disciples and Yang family descendants, appropriate the Zhang Sanfeng creation myth from the Internal School and the Wang Zongyue disciple claim from the 'Treatise', but otherwise add nothing to our knowledge of Yang Luchan. Chen Weiming is the first to connect the fantastical Zhang Sanfeng of the 'Epitaph' to the invented Wang Zongyue of the 'Treatise', to the historical Chen family, and finally Yang Luchan. However, since Yang's class background is a critical point of contention between progressive and conservative partisans, it is worth noting that Wang Zhengnan presenting Dan Sinan with several silver goblets to gain acceptance as a student is echoed in Chen Weiming's, 'Yang spared no expense to study with him [Chen Changxing]' [Chen 1925].

Li Yiyu's 'Short Preface' reveals little about Yang's background or motivation for traveling to Chen Village and spending '10 years' studying. The theme of secrecy, however, is introduced in relation to his unwillingness to share the secrets with Wu Yuxiang on his return to Yongnian. Acquiring the secrets by spying on the master is another conceit debuted in the 'Epitaph' that was appropriated by later narratives. Wang resorts to spying to steal the secrets from Dan Sinan according to the 'Epitaph', and in Li Yiyu's 'Short Preface', Yang, in turn, withheld secrets from Wu, who was forced to make his own trip to the source in Chen Village. Li tactfully avoids the issue of Yang's background and does not explain Wu's willingness to indulge his amateur interests at the expense of his academic studies and career advancement.

Grandson Chengfu's 1934 work follows the 'Epitaph's' Internal School lineage, adopting Zhang Sanfeng of the Song as founder, together with the Chen Zhoutong and Zhang Songxi transmissions. This is perhaps clearest evidence of appropriation of the Internal School lineage by Yang family patrons, as it is completely foreign to the Chen family tradition, and highly unlikely that any members of the Yang clan themselves read Huang Zongxi.

What is the response of the scholar-skeptics? Obviously, writing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Huang Zhongxi could not have foreseen the later events that led to the development of taijiquan. While acknowledging similarities in movement principles, the skeptics reject the creation myth and fabricated genealogy, and attempt to set martial arts historiography on a rational course. They are eager to embrace Wang's 'hauling manure' and 'having no formal education' as the precursor to Yang's bondservant background. However, the new generation of revisionists are neither bound to the Internal School association nor to the political agenda

of the early progressives. In terms of dramatic episodes, the 'Epitaph' records four anecdotes of Wang Zhengnan reluctantly engaging attackers, but among the skeptics and revisionists, only Li Jinfan recounts a collegial match between Yang Luchan and Wu Yuxiang. Neo-conservatives take bold dramatic liberties, especially exploiting the tropes of modestly concealing and reluctantly revealing martial prowess, and foreshortening the Daoist connection, making Yang Luchan the direct disciple of a contemporary Daoist. Once Huang has deployed 'Wudang Daoist' as code for native Chinese, it becomes a point of pride to link the Internal School, and by anachronistic association, taijiquan, with a unique and superior martial art.

Both Wang and Yang had military careers, but Wang fought the Manchus, while two centuries later, Yang served them. Both found themselves in complicated circumstances, caught between crumbling dynasties, peasant rebellion, and foreign invasion. Huang's 'Epitaph' is redolent with allegorical symbolism: Daoism becomes quintessentially *Chinese*; Zhang Sanfeng is visited by a *Chinese* god, and heeding the summons of Song emperor Huizong, slays a hundred 'bandits', ultimately founding a soft-style martial art. For Huang, the irony could not have escaped him that it was Daoist devotee and esthete Song dynasty Emperor Huizong who made a fatal pact with the Jurchen tribes against the Liao invaders, only to be betrayed and overthrown, while in Huang's own time, it was the same miscalculation that brought the Manchus (descendants of the Jurchen) to power.

Huang Zongxi's 'Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan' eulogizes his comrade in arms for his martial prowess, knight-errant ethics, and last-stand resistance to Manchu takeover. However, there is a curious contradiction in Huang's 'Epitaph': on the one hand, it celebrates a hero of the anti-Manchu resistance, reason enough for Huang's works to be banned by the Qing rulers, and on the other hand, it portrays Zhang Sanfeng as an ally of the Huizong emperor for his slaying of 'bandits'. The Huizong Emperor, who summoned Zhang Sanfeng, is the same figure who in the novel *Shuihu zhuan* (*Water Margin*) is the target of Song Jiang's righteous rebellion, although eventually granted amnesty and enlisted against other rebels and the Liao invaders. The glorification of rebels in *Water Margin* caused it to suffer the same fate at the hands of Ming and Qing censors as did Huang Zongxi's works. Still, the insertion of the Zhang Sanfeng myth into the 'Epitaph' is confounding unless interpreted as a personal and political strategy of passive resistance and preservation of ethnic pride. A cogent critic of the *ancien regime*, in the end, he saw no choice but to uphold the crumbling Ming dynasty against rebels and invaders.

A century later, with Manchu power in decline, and the empire once again beset with rebellion and invasion, it may be more than coincidence that this strategy was revived by the Wu brothers as a defense against despair. But, parallels between the times gain new resonance if the 'Epitaph', now the *Ur-text* for the archetype of the internal martial arts hero, is viewed as raw material for fleshing out the biographies of Yang Luchan. Luchan, living in equally perilous times, is portrayed in

grandson Chengfu's 1934 account as determined to match the feats of Western strongmen, breaking the code of secrecy, and propagating the art to the southern provinces. This may have been a retrospective nod to the Qing government's belated self-strengthening policy, though it is implicitly contradicted in Wu Tunan's 1936 account that portrays Luchan as weary of teaching and secretive even with Wu Yuxiang.

If the credible data points for Yang's life are sparse, the historical record for the period is exceptionally rich, as it was a time of national crisis and soul-searching. Wei Yuan's 1844, 'Learn the barbarian's methods in order to control the barbarians' [Wei 1844] presaged Feng Guifen's 1861, 'Chinese learning as essence; Western learning for utility' [Feng 1861], and finally claims of the Chinese origins of all Western knowledge [Lackner 2008]. These maneuvers meant that China could preserve its sense of civilizational superiority, while adopting Western technology for purely instrumental purposes.

Why, we must ask, were martial arts placed in the category of sacred 'cultural essence' and not in the category of utilitarian methods? Even while there was wholesale adoption of Western armaments, both purchased and reverse-engineered, there were also periodic anti-foreign movements, culminating in the 1900 Boxer Rebellion. And then there's the matter of making a folk hero of someone who by all accounts served the conquest dynasty. Han defectors, from generals to rank-and-file, early on swelled the Manchu forces, eventually constituting a majority. Furthermore, native coolies were indispensable to the success of Western military engagements in China. While foreign military advisors trained Chinese troops in Western calisthenics, and the YMCA introduced Western sports, did the Chinese martial arts represent a kind of protest against Western cultural imperialism (the kinesthetic equivalent of the survival of native visual aesthetics in the practice of brush and ink calligraphy after the introduction of the printing press)?

The 19<sup>th</sup> century explosion of millenarian, utopian, anti-Manchu, anti-Western, anti opium, and anti footbinding movements have been much studied as setting the stage for revolution and the emergence of modern China. However, simultaneously, but often decontextualized, we witness the rise of internal martial arts and inner alchemy – the search for invincibility and immortality. Both hail Zhang Sanfeng as their progenitor, with Li Xiyue (1806-1856) claiming a personal encounter with Zhang and Lü Dongbin on Mt. Emei, compiling *Zhang Sanfeng quanji* (*The complete works of Zhang Sanfeng*), and founding the Western Sect of inner alchemy. Both were embroiled in theoretical debates around the issues of hard versus soft styles in the case of martial arts, and sexual versus solo practices in inner alchemy, and both have survived in the present. Unlike the more dramatic social and political movements of the era, they presented themselves as more revival than reform, a version of fundamentalism in the face of future shock. At the very least, we should not be misled into thinking they were any less the product of their times.

Zeng Guofan and Zhang Zhidong's founding of the Jiangnan Arsenal in 1865, with its translation bureau, foreign advisors, and modern

weapons manufacture (1861-1895), together with diplomatic and study missions to the West beginning in 1868, would seem logical responses to the times. But the creation of a soft-style martial art?

The formation of local militias, notably the Xiang Army (1850-64), to suppress rebellions, such as the Taiping (1850-1864), Nian (1853-1968), Dungan and Panthay (1862-1877), plus anti-foreign Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-60) would seem logical responses to an existential crisis. But a soft-style martial art?

The 1860 Treaty of Tianjin, following the Second Opium War, forced concessions like Treaty Ports, extraterritoriality, legalized opium sales, and free missionary access, eventually leading to Spheres of Influence for the Western Powers, Russia, and Japan. The Manchus and Japanese were more than respectful of Confucianism, and Buddhism had long since been indigenized, but Christian missionaries considered the Chinese unsaved heathen. Famine, disease, and natural disasters claimed the lives of tens of millions and resulted in an infant mortality rate of 42% and life-expectancy of 32 years, while a quarter of the adult population was addicted to opium, not to mention slavery, illiteracy, concubinage, and footbinding. This was the lifeworld of Yang Luchan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The systematizers of taijiquan theory (Yang Luchan, the Wu brothers, and Li Yiyu), far from being Daoist recluses, or even ordinary citizens, were habitués of the capital and intimates of the court, and could not have been unaware of such momentous international events as Japan's 1854 signing of the Treaty of Kanagawa with America, the Meiji Restoration, and almost overnight modernization.

The Empress Dowager's (1835-1908) attempts to preserve the monarchy, the empire, and the dynasty, Han elites' attempts to save the nation from Western colonialism, and popular rebellions by starving peasants are all understandable. Less intuitive is teaching taijiquan to pampered Manchu princes and to Manchu Bannerman as they prepared to face bandits, rebels, and 'foreign devils' armed with breech-loading Mausers, Krupp cannon, and ironclad, steam-powered British warships. Perhaps, if we take Qi Jiguang declaring martial arts irrelevant on the battlefield to its logical conclusion in the light of modern warfare, it represents the final phase of the separation of martial arts from military praxis. During Yang's lifetime, the challenge to native physical culture was from Western military calisthenics, during the Cultural Revolution a century later, it was the accusation of 'feudal dregs', and today it is from full-contact spectacles.

The success of the Yang family and their gentry promoters, with their Daoist alchemist Zhang Sanfeng as creator and Yang Luchan as style progenitor must have posed a great challenge and offered an unexpected opportunity for the Chen family. After all, Yang Luchan and Wu Yuxiang's study there was indisputable and at last offered the possibility of a fully historical genesis of the art. Based on his 1931 investigations in Chen Village and references to martial arts practice in the 'Chen Family Genealogy' and *Wen County Gazetteer*, Tang Hao claimed 9<sup>th</sup> generation Wen County native Chen Wangting (c. 1600-1680) as creator of taijiquan. Family standard bearer Chen Xin in his 1933 *Chenshi*

*taijiquan tushuo* (*Illustrated introduction to Chen family taijiquan*) antedated the origins all the way back to Chen Bu, the first to move the family from Shanxi to Henan. Nevertheless, for both Yang Luchan and Chen Wangting, a few short, oblique references and family legends were sufficient warp for motivated reasoners like Tang Hao and Chen Xin to weave elaborate woofs of heroic hermeneutics.

## MYTHOLOGY, NARRATOLOGY AND HEROLOGY

Why this kind of hero at the historical inflection points we call the Ming-Qing and Qing-Republican transitions? Clearly, Wang Zhengnan, Chen Wangting, and Yang Luchan belong to the warrior archetype, but what kind of warrior hero? Empire builder, righteous rebel, patriot defender, chivalrous rescuer of damsels in distress? They were not tragic heroes in the classical Western sense of possessing an *hamartia*, or tragic flaw, usually *hubris*, or pride, but they all saw their homeland succumb to 'barbarian' invaders and ended their days in humble circumstances. They also did not fulfill the classical Western condition of noble pedigree and high station, required for a dramatic fall, although conservative apologists insisted that only an educated and enlightened individual could have created (or channeled) taijiquan. In this sense, Huang Zongxi, or better yet, son Huang Baijia and Chen Wangting might be closer matches for martial arts figures with something to lose. Still, why not simply a hero who is faster, stronger, and smarter than the enemy? Why a defender who makes a last stand in a lost cause and uses stratagem not strength?

They were humiliated by 'barbarians' – Jurchens, Europeans, and Japanese – whom they considered culturally beneath them. How does one preserve a sense of superiority in defeat? Is it simply a case of Lu Xun's 'Ah Q syndrome', declaring 'psychological victory' from flat on your back, or the Spanish maquis' consolation that, 'Though he [Franco] may have won all the battles, we [the anti-fascists] had all the good songs'. Was taijiquan the psychosomatic counterpoint to the grim reality of the Qing approaching the nadir of its dynastic cycle, or in Gramsci's words, 'as the old world faded, and the new world struggled to be born'? [Gramsci 1947] Do timeless truths arise in times that try men's souls, or is it simply making a virtue of necessity, a reflexive retreat into self-cultivation in the face of forces that would not be sinicized or acknowledge China's cultural centrality? Without stooping to stereotype, it might not be too much of a stretch to suggest a shared cultural ethos that prefers philosopher-kings to warrior-kings, Confucianism to Legalism, and the 'uncrowned king' (Confucius) to 'the First Emperor' (Qinshihuang).

In creating an heroic persona for Yang Luchan within the Chinese tradition, can we look to prototypes in the popular imagination? One thinks of Hua Mulan, China's 5<sup>th</sup> century Joan of Arc, Guan Yu, loyal Three Kingdoms general deified as Guan Gong, Yue Fei, Southern Song general martyred for his patriotic zeal in resisting Jurchen invaders, flamboyant 12<sup>th</sup> century Song Jiang and his Robin Hood rebels, and wiley and irreverent Monkey God, Sun Wukong. Chinese heroes

are typically actively engaged in battles that determine the fate of the nation, either as unifiers, rebels, or defenders. They embody virtues like loyalty, patriotism, and self-sacrifice, often ending as martyrs and divinities of folk religion. Is Yang Luchan at home in this company? Certainly not an empire builder, righteous rebel, patriotic defender, or martyr, but given the practice of ancestor worship and the temple-like trappings of his 'restored residence', there is an unmistakable atmosphere of apotheosis.

Antedating and inventing progenitors like Bodhidharma for Shaolin, Zhang Sanfeng for taijiquan, or Yue Fei for xingyiquan is consistent with 'the older the better' (*yuegu yuehao*) syndrome, as is lionization of historical style founders like Yang, Dong Haichuan, and Li Luoneng. However, as recently as the 1960s, manufactured mass-culture mythology resurfaced with the figure of Lei Feng (1940-1962), a humble truck driver in the People's Liberation Army given national prominence for his wholehearted devotion to the people and the Party. Many historians doubt his very existence and consider his diary a forgery. He died in a freak accident, and not on the battlefield. Yang Luchan is neither a defender of the nation, nor a defender of the downtrodden. What then? We have no reports of taking from the rich and giving to the poor, dumping opium, or repelling foreign invaders. Wu Yuxiang's highly sophisticated and original 'Treatise' is not attributed to Yang but to a mysterious 'Wang Zongyue'. What we are left with, then, is the decontextualized image of a hero who represents the martial arts version of art for art's sake.

Zhang Sanfeng, Wang Zhengnan, Chen Wangting, and Yang Luchan all achieve archetypal, even cult, status by different routes. Imperial summons is the Nobel Prize of pre-modern China, and both Zhang and Yang were said to have been summoned to the capital for their exceptional talents. As a perennial mythical figure, Zhang transcends the specifics of family background and historical period. Wang Zhengnan, however, is very much a man of his time and a hero of history for his unbending patriotism. The lack of family lineage is more than compensated by his role as a link in the unique martial arts transmission known as the Internal School, the adopted ancestor of taijiquan. Chen is very much a man of family lineage, and the transmitter of a family art, but who stumbles into fame posthumously as no less than the officially declared creator of taijiquan.

Huang had first-hand contact with Wang, and likewise Li Yiyu with Yang, yet Li's very brief and very bland description is diplomatically vague, while Huang's is an emotional eulogy for a man after his own heart, though not of his class.

Origin tales of the art featuring gods, immortals, divine revelation, and supernatural feats may not stand the test of Popper's falsification principle, but going beyond the categories of true and false, we can acknowledge that myth-making is still alive and well in the modern age, as any Madison Avenue ad executive might attest. Plato in his *Phaedra* recognizes that *muthos* and *logos* (myth and reason) are two different modes of thought and speech. Homer's telling of the tale of Odysseus and Circe differs in many details from Alcman's version, but we naturally attribute these differences to the circumstances of public

recitation, dramatic performance, and shifting audience taste. The third century BCE Greek thinker Euhemerus famously regarded the Greek gods as originally historical men who were revered in their own day and deified by later generations. Certainly, it does not strain credulity to believe that tales of the likes of Robin Hood, John Henry, William Tell, and Johnny Appleseed were folkloric embellishments of the doings of real men. In the case of Yang Luchan, we witness this process of apotheosis compressed into a mere two generations, as biography morphs into myth, myth begets archetype, and archetype gives rise to tropes. Although typically analyzed according to left-right/true-false categories, all of the many tellings have elements of the *bildungsroman*, or coming of age tale, and echoes of Campbell's 'hero's journey'. It is Yang as Jung's 'trickster' archetype who steals the secrets by spying, and Yang the hero of the timeless 'monomyth', who undergoes the stages of separation from family, initiation by master, and homecoming, as he shares the boon of this new art with the world.

Finally, as suggested at the outset of this study, we cannot hope to establish new facts in the absence of new evidence. However, sinologists will recognize the role of warrior heroes in the Chinese popular imagination, anthropologists will recognize the perennial orientalist obsession with invincibility and immortality, and lay students of the art will be armed with a critical attitude towards dehistoricization.

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