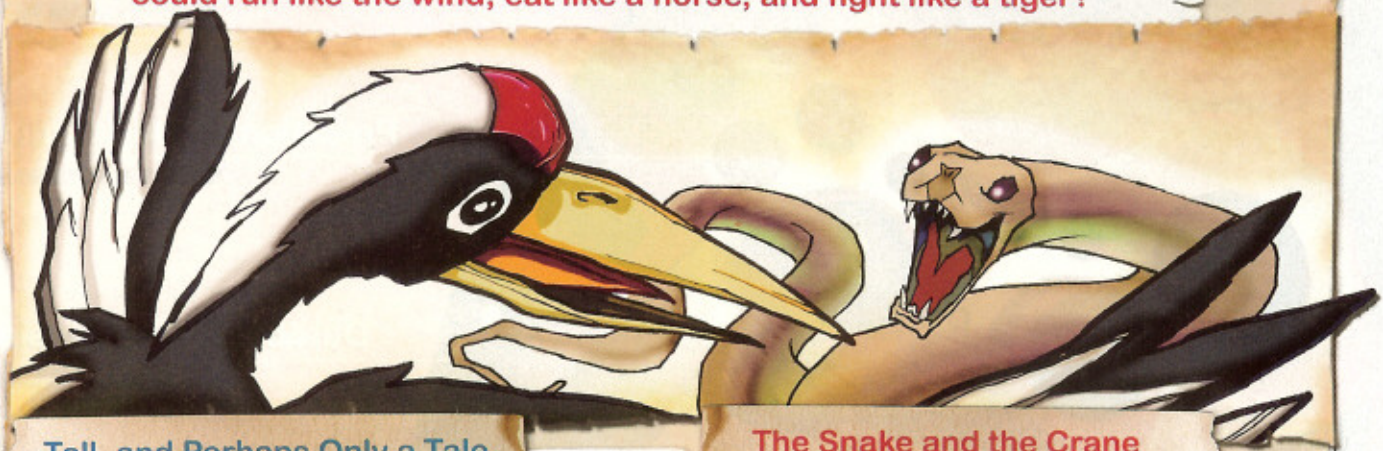


LEGENDS & HISTORY

The origins of Tai Chi

Written by William DeRooy | Illustration by Jeremie Lederman

Was the founder of the gentle art of Tai Chi a towering figure who could run like the wind, eat like a horse, and fight like a tiger?



Tall, and Perhaps Only a Tale

Chang San-Feng, the legendary founder of Tai Chi, was a Taoist priest who may have lived in the 13th century A.D. Supposedly, he was quite extraordinary—he could climb so fast he seemed to fly up the sides of high mountains and he could eat 100 pounds of food in one sitting. Though he was frighteningly tall, with enormous eyes and ears and a huge beard, he was good-natured and whimsical.

The Snake and the Crane

The story goes that Chang had mastered all the martial arts styles but found them to be too "hard," or too reliant on physical strength. One day he looked out the window of a monastery and saw a snake and a crane fighting. Whenever the crane would stab at the snake with its beak, the snake would wriggle out of the way; whenever the snake lunged at the crane, the crane would sweep it aside with its mighty wings. Neither animal could win, and eventually the crane flew away. That night in a dream Chang San-Feng realized that the soft, coiling movements of the snake and the slow but powerful movements of the crane could be the basis of an effective style of self-defense. He combined these movements with principles of Taoism—such as harmony with nature, maintaining a balance of forces, the power of "soft" to overcome "hard"—and created Tai Chi.



Internal Martial Arts

Tai Chi is known as a "soft" or "internal" martial art. While "external" arts like Kung Fu and Karate train the body for power and speed, **internal martial arts focus on breathing, mental aspects, and internal energy** or chi. Ancient writings say Tai Chi makes you "solid as a mountain, supple as a willow, and fluid as a great river." Although it is sometimes practiced more for its health benefits and as a meditative activity, Tai Chi comes from a fighting tradition and the slow, relaxed moves of its forms (hsing) have been demonstrated to be effective against attackers. Tai Chi can even involve sparring and weapons forms.

The “Real” Tai Chi

Chen Wangting (1600-1680) was a respected army general who fought many battles. After he retired, this veteran warrior wanted to lead a more peaceful existence. Chen wished to invent and practice a “soft” martial art for the benefit of mind and body that was also a good general exercise. He combined combat techniques with elements of Chinese yoga: deep breathing and the focusing of internal energy. He also borrowed wisdom from the Taoist philosophy of yin and yang, Chinese medicine and physical therapy. Chen created a complete system of exercise in which the practitioner’s mental concentration, breathing and actions were closely connected. His children learned it, and so did their children. More than 300 years later, in the village of Chenjiagou, the descendants of Chen Wangting still practice **Chen-style Tai Chi**.

Yang “Looky” Lu-Chan

In the old days it was important for people to protect the secrets of their martial arts. For many generations, Tai Chi stayed almost exclusively inside Chenjiagou. Then came **Yang Lu-Chan (1799-1872)**. Yang was from Guangping. As a young man, he wished to learn the secrets of the Chen family’s martial art. He knew they would never agree to teach him, so the clever and enterprising Yang dressed like a beggar and pretended to collapse upon a doorstep in the Chen village. He was pitied and given a job as a household servant. Yang then learned Tai Chi by secretly observing Chen family members through a crack in a wall late at night while they practiced. He soon became a highly skilled practitioner. When it was discovered he had been spying on them, the Chens were so impressed with Yang’s Tai Chi skill that they formally accepted him as a student.



Chen style is defined by low stances and lots of twists and turns.

Tai Chi Takes Off

Yang later traveled to the Chinese capital of Beijing. He met many challengers from other styles of martial arts, but he remained undefeated, earning the nickname **Invincible Yang**. One day he was challenged by the head of the Imperial Guard. On one hand, if he lost, his reputation would be damaged; but if he won he would make an enemy of these powerful, high-ranking warriors. Yang was able to avoid disaster, however, by fighting only well enough so that the head of the Imperial Guard could not win, and the match ended in a draw.

Yang was then ordered to instruct the emperor’s family and the Imperial Guard in Tai Chi. He did so, but in order to maintain a certain secrecy, he left out some of the Chen family techniques from his teachings.



Taoism (pronounced “dow”) began as a mix of psychology and philosophy. It evolved into a recognized religion in 440 C.E.

China holds 20 percent of all the people in the world—more than 1.3 billion!

There are seven major dialects in the Chinese language. More than 70 percent speak Mandarin.

Ancient Chinese Secrets

Many people learned Yang-style Tai Chi. It slowly gained popularity in China and eventually spread to other countries. Yet the Tai Chi we know may be only part of a more complete system still guarded by an ancient Chinese family, the Chens. If people around the world have found that practicing Tai Chi daily can reduce stress, aid in recovery from and prevention of illness and injury, make them stronger, and help them find harmony, can you imagine what secrets this martial art might still hold?