

Myths and Legends

When I first practised tai chi, the story was that it is very old, dating back, perhaps, 4000 years. The man who was said to have created tai chi was a Taoist immortal called Zhang Sanfeng. Zhang is supposed to have witnessed a fight between a snake and a crane. Impressed by the soft swooping, withdrawing and avoiding, he saw the potential for a new martial art.

So far so rubbish.

In fact the earliest reference we have to Zhang Sanfeng in relation to tai chi is in the middle of the 19th century, about the time Yang Luchan was trying to establish himself as the teacher of what then would have been a new martial art.

Yang's martial art originated with the Chen family with whom he trained under Chen Ch'en Chang-Tsing for 18 years. It may be that the Chen's martial art can be traced back to the 17th century but would have undoubtedly been different to what we practise today.

The name tai chi also originated in the 19th century with Yang. Previously it had several names: Soft Boxing, cotton fist, long boxing and others. It is said that a scholar who witnessed one of Yang's demonstrations was actually responsible for naming the art.

It seems to me that the most likely role of Zhan Sanfeng was to give Yang a lineage for his art. He picked on what is, probably, an historical figure, a Taoist sage and created a back story around him. It gets better. There appears to have been two Zhan Sanfengs and somewhere along the line they got conjoined so Yang ended up with not just a Taoist sage as the founder of his martial art but one who lived for 200 years!

So the legend of Zhan Sanfeng is most probably a marketing ploy adopted by Yang Lu Cahan to attract customers to his new martial art. The story would almost certainly have appeal. Given the importance that the Chinese place on lineages, something Yang lacked, the Zhang Sanfeng story was marketing gold.

Tai chi is wound around with all kinds of baggage: rumours of 'secrets' held back from all but the most 'worthy' students. The idea that, therefore, only your master can teach you true tai chi. "Ah," say the wise heads, "but did he receive the 'true' transmission from his master?" Throwing into doubt the whole concept that you have been studying for years. ("Have I been wasting my time? Maybe what we do is not true tai chi; perhaps I should find a new master? But if I do will he have received the 'true' transmission?")

Now I have to go a bit of the way with masters/teachers not teaching everything they know. There can be a number of reasons for this. It is a complicated art and you can't learn it all at once, it will take years and it may well be that your teacher doesn't know it all – I would never claim that I do – or, he may think that if he teaches you everything you will become competition and start your own school. Or, regrettably, he may just be a charlatan only interested in your money.

There is also this idea – another of the myths – that tai chi is so special that it is not possible for students to develop by their own study, that they have to wait for the master to show them the next step. I have met such. Intelligent people, often holding responsible jobs, creative in their own world standing gob-smacked at the master's skill, waiting to be shown how. Not going to happen.

Part of the Yang Luchan legend is how he learnt by spying on the Chen family while they practised then went away to work on what he had seen. It has to be said that Yang was accomplished in

another, but external, martial art and, of course, it was his culture. But still the myth is that he learnt tai chi all by himself until he was caught and Chen Ch'en Chang-tsing made him fight his five sons. Yang beat them all so was taken into the fold and taught with the family.

Or it could just be that he trained with Ch'en Chang-tsing for 18 years. All day long, seven days a week, totally focused. I think that would do it.

John Roper
September 2020