



ZHAN ZHUANG

THE ART OF NOURISHING LIFE

YU YONGNIAN

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PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

THE END OF AN ERA OF SUPERSTITIONS

China enters the twentieth century, and its last dynasty is in turmoil. On the one hand, international pressures are increasing, foreign countries aim to increase their influence on China; on the other hand, popular discontents increase while the house of the “Son of Heaven” falls apart. The end of the last monarchy marks the beginning of a period of civil wars. The turmoil eventually puts a tragic end to the emperor’s heavenly power.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF MARTIAL ARTS

The present concept of *martial arts* appeared recently. The appearance of firearms, dating from the eighteenth century, precipitates the decline of martial arts practiced by the elite in charge of the interests of the ruling class.

The association of martial arts with philosophies and religious doctrines developed during the last two dynasties. Curiously, it is largely the appearance of firearms that promoted this movement.

Under the Qing Dynasty (1616-), hand- and knife-combat became less popular and were considered as a mean to improve one’s health or as a spiritual path, i.e. Taoist calisthenics and certain Buddhist practices. Under the late dynasty, many books dealing with martial arts circulated freely. Most of them dealt with “mysticism” and proclaimed that Zhang San Feng or Bodhidharma were the fathers of most martial arts schools. Stories in which the spirits of these characters protected schools members to the point of immunizing them against firearms ran rampant. Thus, martial arts became a national symbol that was under heavenly protection.

The Rebellion of the Boxers, in the early twentieth century reflected the ideology.

Just as much, the Society of Fists for “justice and harmony” called *the Boxers* by the British, was a secret society founded on the north coast of Shandong. Their members were, for most, farmers and peasants deprived from their land by floods. In despair, they mostly held opium trade, European colonizers and Christian missionaries responsible for their situation. The Boxers believed themselves to be invested with supernatural powers derived from martial arts and calisthenics practices. Pretending to be invulnerable to guns, bullets and Western weaponry and armed with rifles and swords, the Boxers fought against “white evil”. It was believed that millions of warrior spirits descended from heaven during the battle to help cleanse China from foreign invaders.

On June 16th, 1900, the widow Empress Ci Xi, called a hearing with the senior officers to decide whether the empire should support or suppress the Boxers. Some officers were skeptical about the veracity and efficiency of their self-proclaimed “supernatural powers”, to which the Empress replied:

“Perhaps, we do not have to rely on their magic to defeat the enemy... However, can we deny the faith and spirit of these warriors? Today, China is weak. What is left standing between the colonizers and the Empire is faith. If we do not support this movement and lose hope, who will help the country?”

REINTERPRETATION OF ART IN REPUBLICAN CHINA: THE GUO SHU ERA

During the Republican period up until 1947, martial artists promoted their art with a deep military mindset. After 1947, the vision and use of martial changed to become simpler and more efficient.

CENTRAL NATIONAL ACADEMY OF ARTS OF NANJING

The Guan Zhong Yang Guo Shu was developed during the Republican period to promote *Kung Fu*. During this period, the purpose of practicing martial arts was to eradicate superstition, give up its aesthetics aspect, unnecessary elements, redefine the essential, and deepen roots. This era was called Guo Shu or “National Art.”

WANG XIANGZHAI

Wang Xiangzhai (1885-1963) embodies the spirit of this reform, which was materialized into what was called *internal art*. It redefined the relationship between movement and stillness, where stillness took over from movement. Following a long journey through China in search of the ancient roots of martial arts, Master Wang developed a new training system called *Yi Quan*. The new system reinstated the practice of Zhan Zhuang [phonetic pronunciation: Djan Djuang] (lit. Pillar Practice, Standing Like a Tree). It became the new training's central axis. Moreover, it put an end to the old system and traditional routines and strongly condemns the semi-slavery-like traditional relationship between master and disciples. It promoted a more natural relationship whereby the teacher and the disciple were on a same level. “Knowledge should not be mysterious or subject to speculations and manipulation, but rather openly disclosed and discussed without reservation, all for the good of humanity.”

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA: THE WU SHU OF SPORTS AND HEALTH

After the defeat of Japan, the civil war between Guo Ming Tang and Tang Gong Chang (Communist Party) was revived. On October 1st, 1949, Mao Zedong proclaimed China's first People's Republic. To the world of martial arts, it had a profound impact. Under this new regime, most critics argue that the new forms lost their original

energetic spirits to become purely aesthetic disciplines.

Martial arts then took two different directions: health, and competition. Tai Chi [phonetic pronunciation: tai tchee], stripped of its *internal* and martial aspect, became part of a campaign to strengthen national health. *Wu Shu* (lit. Martial Arts) and the *Sanda* were considered as sports and were sought to be integrated as Olympic disciplines.

THE RESEARCH ASSOCIATION OF CHINESE KUNG FU IN PEKING: ZHONG GUO QUAN XUE XIE HUI

Under the People's Republic of China, as "comrades shouldn't fight amongst themselves", martial arts were banned in public places, which forced Wang Xiangzhai and his students to change the purpose of their art into a healing practice. They subsequently founded the Association for Research on Chinese Kung Fu, which perpetuated the revisionist spirit of the previous era. Determined to preserve martial arts and at a time when the practice was doomed to disappear, Wang Xiangzhai worked underground towards enriching it by bringing the latest discoveries in biodynamic, reflex conduct and new evolutionary theories that appeared in China at the time.

YU YONGNIAN 于永年: THE ART OF INTENTION

Yu Yongnian was born under the People's Republic of China regime. He studied at Harbin, and during his years in Japan obtained a graduate degree in 1941 at the University of Odontology in Tokyo.

He began his practice in Beijing, at the Train Hospital. After long years of study Dr. Yu Yongnian was physically worn out. He decided to practice Tai Chi. At the time in Beijing, many people were speaking of Wang Xiangzhai. His appearances in the press and rumors of his unusual talents aroused Yu Yongnian's curiosity. In 1944 he began training with Master Wang.

The core's training was to stand as still as a statue for an extended

period of time, i.e. Zhan Zhuang. That process challenged the very core of Yu's understanding of martial arts, which caused him to give up training on several occasions. In 1949, after the proclamation of the People's Republic of China, Master Wang changed his training methods towards prevention and treatment of disease. As such, many patients began to practice Zhan Zhuang. The number of patients kept increasing.

Dr. Yu witnessed unusual quick recoveries. Deeply impressed, he brought Zhan Zhuang as an experimental treatment to the hospital where he worked. Results were surprising. Dr. Yu could not comprehend how staying in one position could cure serious illnesses. The young Dr. Yu took this fact as an intellectual challenge, which drove him to study in depth the physiological mechanism by which these *miracles* occurred.

... There is no reason to blindly believe old superstitions. Today, we have very useful tools to understand internal mechanisms and discriminate the real from the unreal...

There was yet another challenge: understanding the origin of the *internal force* from a scientific and rational standpoint. Dr. Yu studied in depth Classical Chinese texts as well theories from Einstein, Darwin, Pavlov, among others.

If we associate the theory of relativity of Einstein and the theory of evolution of species, we obtain the Tao De Jing of Laozi.

The result of Dr. Yu's search eventually materialized into a unique art, Zhan Zhuang, an art that combines physical as well as mental trainings.

The road to recovery leads to obtaining the Wu. The Wu is the vector of consciousness. One perceives Tao De Jing very differently when one has the Wu...

The art of nourishing life through Zhan Zhuang allows us to discover the common denominator of all *internal* arts. It leads to the development of *Nei Jin* (internal force), called *Wu* (Substance).

We now know that there is a concrete path to reach the inner strength, which is what we call “voluntary exercises of the second type.”

The link between the mind and body exists in within us.

This ends the duality which was called “Returning to the Tao, or merging with the One.”

Karim Nimri

INTERVIEW WITH DR. YU YONGNIAN

INTERVIEW WITH DR. YU YONGNIAN

THE POWER OF PEACE

☯ Professor Yu, why have you started practicing martial arts? From what I read, after finishing medical school, your physical condition deteriorated. Is that why you started practicing?

Initially I studied Tai Chi and Xing Yi Quan. Around 1944, I had already completed my medical studies and I was already working in the dentistry department at the hospital. It is true that my health was not very good; during the winter, I would catch a cold easily, and in the spring it would not improve much. For one reason or another, I would always catch something...

☯ And why choose Tai Chi or *internal* martial arts?

In China, in the medical field, there is the idea that people who exercise regularly and develop their body, muscles, will inevitably cause their circulatory system to deteriorate. The heart and blood circulation will be affected by excess, leading to a shortening of life. However, when someone assiduously practises gentle and slow exercises, their circulatory system strengthens and lengthens their lives, which is why people that practice Tai Chi tend to live longer. If we think of the animal kingdom, the lion or the tiger possess spectacular strength, but their life expectancy is rather short. However, the elephant and the tortoise, animals which move rather slowly, live over a hundred years.

And if we compare the animal and vegetable kingdoms: How many years can a tree live? In Beijing's parks, there are many



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ZHAN ZHUANG

THE ART OF **NOURISHING LIFE**

Zhan Zhuang, The Art of Nourishing Life is the exploration of an ancestral practice: Zhan Zhuang, the practice of physical and meditative postures. Through this practice, a continual process of adjustment, learning, and purification takes place; it is a process by which the mind and body mutually integrate, triggering the unification of the self and its surroundings.

It is through this form, which in ancient China was named symbiosis—a process by which the mind and body merge together with the Tao—, that an infinite field of possibilities opens to us, both in the treatment and prevention of diseases, and at the level of development of latent potential within us.

In *Zhan Zhuang, The Art of Nourishing Life*, Dr. Yu Yongnian not only unveils the heritage of martial and purifying arts—previously available only in an unintelligible language—but also translates them into an accessible form that reveals the laws governing the body and the mind.



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