

# Tai Yi Tai Chi Chuan

## FROM BEHIND A CLOSED DOOR

BY SHIFU WANG YUNKUO AND BRIAN CORLESS



**Tai Yi Tai Chi Chuan: A snapshot of its history as a closed-door style.**

In a conversation with Wang Yunkuo in Sydney a few years ago, Mr Gao Xiaojun, former President of the Chinese Wushu Association estimated that there were about 80 styles of Kungfu, including rare styles of Tai Chi Chuan, which were unknown to the broader Kungfu community and that a number of these had been lost to China in the diaspora before, during and after the cultural revolution.

One such style, Tai Yi Tai Chi Chuan, is practised by Master Wang Yunkuo at his Kungfu-Republic school and Traditional Chinese Medicine clinic in Sydney, Australia. Shifu Wang learned this style as a young closed-door student in his hometown in Shandong province and brought it to Australia when he emigrated in 1997. Shifu Wang said that he learned from his teacher Grandmaster Shifu Duan Yang, who was a closed-door student of Duan's father, a Kungfu Grandmaster and Doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Wendeng district of Shandong province.

According to the oral history of the style, as passed down to Shifu Wang, Duan Yang's father

was on his way home from work one day and saw a Taoist monk who was ill in the street. He took the monk home with him, nursed him back to health and in return the monk chose to pass on the tradition of Tai Yi Tai Chi Chuan to him on the condition that he only taught this martial art to one closed-door student, as had been the tradition for over 30 generations of this style. The father, in turn chose his son, Duan Yang as the student to pass on the secrets of Tai Yi Tai Chi Chuan and he, in turn selected a young Wang Yunkuo as the next generational lineage-holder because of Wang's skills and commitment to Kungfu.

Wang Yunkuo began his journey in Kungfu at age 6 under the tutelage of his grandfather, a renowned Kungfu master who played "painted face" characters (using his Kungfu prowess) in a Chinese Opera troupe. A young, energetic Wang soon developed a passion and talent for Kungfu, and at around 11 years of age his grandfather introduced him to one of his closest friends and Kungfu brother, Shifu Duan Yang, and thus began Wang Yunkuo's journey in Tai Chi Chuan.

Shifu Wang recalls "Shifu Duan Yang taught me a completely different approach to practise, and his actions sometimes seemed as soft as cotton in spring and sometimes like a hammer hitting a rock. His movements were tough and extremely fast, like lightning". He adds, "When we trained at night in the moonlight, Master would wear a white cotton gown, and he took on the aura in his boxing, like seeing the gods of the ancient stories descend to earth, which for a youngster like me, was truly amazing."

In traditional Kungfu culture, being a closed-door student can have two meanings. One meaning is that when this student is selected, the door of that lineage is closed to anyone else and that student becomes the generational lineage-holder into the future. A second, more obvious meaning, is that the student is taught behind closed doors and out of sight of others. Both meanings applied to Wang's tuition in Tai Yi Tai Chi Chuan and his lessons took place every night behind closed doors as Duan Yang wanted to



protect the secret of this art from others. Shifu Wang was told not to perform this martial art in public or show it to anyone else, including his Kungfu training brothers, until he was at least 50 years old, and after turning 50 he began teaching Tai Yi Tai Chi Chuan to students in his school in Sydney. As there is no single student to carry on the tradition in his school, Shifu Wang, now 60 years old, does not want his style lost to antiquity and has opened up his teaching to the broader Tai Chi community.

Wang Yunkuo is also a 6th generational lineage-holder of Seven Star Praying Mantis from Shifu Chen Dejing (陈德敬师父螳螂拳), the 5th generational teacher, and from Laoshi Liuxue Hai (螳螂拳师爷名叫刘学海) the 4th generational teacher of this famous Shandong style. Shifu Wang remembers Shifu Duan Yang as a highly skilled martial artist who also excelled at Praying Mantis Kungfu and Changquan and even when he was over 70 years of age he could still train in Tai Chi Ball using a 15kg ball.

Shifu Wang clearly recalls seeing an incident where one of his older Kungfu training brothers secretly arranged for an Eagle-style Kungfu master to challenge Shifu Duan Yang to test Shifu's skills. Duan Yang learned of this and was angry that the brother had arranged this test behind his back, and agreed to meet the challenger, but before the challenger could lay

a hand on him, Duan Yang grabbed him in the abdomen, near his liver, and the challenger fell to the ground vomiting. Shifu Duan Yang revived the challenger by having him "drink a mixture of cigarette ash and water" and the challenger was amazingly revived and left.

Afterwards Duan Yang was still very angry with the training brother and said to him: "If you want to know my abilities, I'll teach you right now". With that, he placed his hand over the brother's scalp, as if gently grabbing the rim of his head with his fingers and applied what seemed like only a little downward pressure for a few seconds, and then told the brother to go and not come back. Shifu Wang saw the training brother the next day and could see that the brother's neck and spinal area was severely bruised and discoloured from his Shifu's touch. Duan Yang agreed to help treat the injuries but would not take the brother back as a student again. To this day, Shifu Wang, who has trained in both Western and Eastern medicine, does not understand, nor can he explain the power of what he saw, nor how a touch on the scalp left such visible bruising on the brother's neck and spine. Shifu Wang said that at the time, he was too scared to ask his Shifu how he did this, for fear of also making him angry.

Of course, this style was not always known as Tai Yi Tai Chi Chuan, and even the term Tai Chi Chuan is relatively recent in Kungfu nomenclature. According to its oral history, the traditional name of Shifu Wang's style was Huà Yuán (画圆) or in English, "drawing a circle" because of its focus on the internal cultivation and expression of qi according to Taoist principles. An example of this is in the opening movement of the Tai Yi Tai Chi Chuan form where the focus is on qi sinking in the dantian and the separation of qi into yin-yang components allowing "rising energy" to move towards the crown of the head and "falling energy" to move towards the feet, with the spinal column (阴阳柱) experiencing qi as if drawing a "bowed instrument".

Shifu Duan Yang identified this style as a form of Tai Chi Chuan after seeing a performance of another (government-approved) style of Tai Chi Chuan and by identifying the principles and tenets of both as being the same. More recently, Professor Jiang Bailong of Wuhan Sports University, an eminent figure in Chinese martial arts, observed Shifu Wang's performance of Tai Yi Tai Chi Chuan and complimented him on his high level of Tai Chi Chuan skills.

Shifu Wang says "...my master told me that



this style was taught over 30 generations and that there was only one student chosen each generation to carry on this style in secret.” However, much of its history is lost in the oral tradition of closed-door teaching and from his recollections of conversations with his Shifu and from his own research, Shifu Wang believes that this style has its ancestry in the Taoist tradition from writings in the I-Ching (易經), Yin-Yang (陰陽) theory, Bagua (八卦), Wu Xing (五行), Hetu (河圖) and Luoshu (洛書) charts. Interestingly, Shifu Wang says “I can tell you 100% though, that my master told me that his style of Tai Chi Chuan did not originate from the Chinese government recognised styles such as Chen, Yang, Wu, Sun or others”, which suggests a separate, parallel history to the other more common styles of Tai Chi Chuan that we see today.

#### **Tai Yi Tai Chi Ball: Training for martial arts and better health.**

An important part of training in Tai Yi Tai Chi Chuan is the use of a ball which has also been a traditional training method in other Chinese martial arts throughout history. As part of the Taoist tradition, and originally known as “揉圓功”, “團圓功”, “揉球功” (English transl. ‘rub or kneading circle work’ or ‘rub ball work’), these Tai Chi Ball exercises became popular training drills for Tai Chi Chuan and were often taught in secret to advanced level students who had attained a high degree of competency. This high-level training also applies to other Kungfu skills and when added to other Tai Chi Chuan training exercises such as Tui Shou, Sanda (Sanshou) and Chin Na drills, yields excellent results.

Shifu Wang says that Tai Yi Tai Chi Ball exercises and forms are based on ancient Chinese philosophy and Yin-Yang (陰陽) theory, where “...holding a ball in both hands and using the

waist as hub, while tracing the steps of the Bagua (八卦) reflects the ancient Chinese concepts of holding the universe in your hands”.

According to oral history, Tai Yi Tai Chi Ball exercises are said to have developed in China in the Song dynasty (960-1279) by Taoist monks who practised techniques to promote longevity and better health. Shifu Duan Yang was a skilled practitioner of Tai Chi Ball and made it an integral part of his Tai Chi Chuan training. Shifu Wang recalls seeing a 30kg metal ball in his Shifu’s home which his

Shifu used for training when he was younger. As he aged, Duan Yang continued to train in Tai Chi Ball into his eighties using a lighter clay or pig’s bladder ball filled with soybeans which was easier and less strenuous for him.

In traditional Taoist Tai Chi Ball training there are two main types of training methods: yin and yang training. In Tai Chi Ball practise, yin training uses a light ball with slow movements, whereas yang methods use a heavier ball with fast movements using force, including throwing and catching the ball. In ancient times, male practitioners of Tai Chi ball mainly used yang training methods involving applications of force, whereas female practitioners used yin training methods often with an inflated pig’s bladder which was tied at each end and allowed slow soft movements with the ‘ball’, that required more use of the dantian. Male practitioners traditionally used a clay ball that was hollow and often filled with soybeans to add weight and enhance force







generation. Often the soybeans would fall out of the ball onto the floor which made training more difficult as students needed to have a lower posture, stronger legs and upper body and better grip to train on the slippery floor, thus enhancing their skills. Other training balls have included metal, stone and wooden balls.

In history, Tai Chi Ball training was a more advanced training method for advanced students who already knew the Tai Chi Chuan forms and were ready to have a deeper level of understanding of qi and its applications in the training forms. For the Tai Chi Chuan enthusiast, Tai Chi Ball techniques are valuable in deepening an understanding of qi and applying the eight methods of Tai Chi Chuan, viz.: pēng, lǚ, jǐ, àn, cǎi, liè, zhǒu, and kào. Shifu Wang says that Tai Yi Tai Chi Ball exercises are also for self-defence and martial arts applications, "...they are not just to make the body stronger and develop *qi*, but to develop techniques for self-defence applications". For example, "...the way that you hold a Tai Chi Ball in the hands should be the way that you hold your hands and body when dealing with an attacking opponent". It is a technique for fighting, not just for better health. Shifu Wang is proficient in Chin Na, having been a self-defence instructor in the Chinese Army for 10 years, and says that Tai Chi Ball is a great training exercise for Chin Na techniques.

Nowadays, anyone can learn Tai Chi Ball and there are many good demonstrations that you can see, but according to Shifu Wang, many people want to learn Tai Chi Chuan quickly without understanding the deeper level of knowledge of Tai Chi Ball training. For them, Tai Chi Ball

training may be difficult, and it is important to learn and be competent with the basic foundation exercises of Tai Chi Ball with a suitable size and weight of ball.

Shifu Wang says that in order to practise Tai Yi Tai Chi Ball, the style that he teaches, it is important to choose the right ball for you so that you engage internal energy (qi) and not rely on muscle strength alone. A ball that is too large in diameter and/or weight can cause injury and a ball that is too small will not provide a sufficient training effect. For the young, physically active exerciser a ball weighing between about 3kg (7lbs) and 10kg (22lbs) with a diameter of about 30cm (12in) (range: 28 to 32cm) is suitable. The beginner can choose a lighter ball to get used to the exercises and learn the first Tai Chi Ball form.

The size of the ball can also be determined by measuring the approximate distance between the Lower Dantien and Tangzhong acupoint so that the ball is neither too small nor too large to rotate. As a rough guide, Shifu Wang recommends that serious practise of Tai Yi Tai Chi Ball needs to happen for a minimum of six times per week beginning with about 36 to 60 repetitions of each stationery foundation exercise. He says "...when you begin to introduce footwork into your Tai Yi Tai Chi Ball practise, take nine steps back and forth initially adding an extra step after each 2 weeks of practise." Practising the Tai Yi Tai Chi Ball Form can be repeated as often as needed to complement your Tai Chi Chuan practise. Shifu says, "...in my style, my master told me that the Tai Yi Tai Chi Ball Forms must follow the principles and movements of the Tai Yi Tai Chi



Chuan Forms so that each training complements the other.”

As well as its martial arts applications, Tai Yi Tai Chi Ball exercises and forms have several health benefits for practitioners of all ages and levels. One benefit is described as “ten fingers linking the heart and mind to muscles and strength”. Regular practise of Tai Chi Ball requires the hands and fingers to control the ball as the ball rotates. This requires flexibility and strength in the tendons, muscles and joints of the fingers and hands to coordinate the fine motor movements required to move the ball with the body. There are over 100 acupuncture points in the hands and rotating the ball in the hands in Tai Yi Tai Chi Ball exercises provides a means of massaging these acupuncture points and enhancing the flow of qi in meridians.

Training also requires good upper and lower body posture and the coordination of force directed from the feet through the knees, hips, waist, and spreading to the shoulders, elbows, hands and fingers to rotate the ball for a whole-body exercise. By following the circular movements of the ball, the muscles, tendons, joints and bones work in a curved, spiralling direction in the body. Through regular practise and by gradually increasing the weight of the ball, increased muscle strength, joint stability and flexibility will follow. Careful practise of Tai Chi

Ball with an appropriate weight is required to prevent injury to ligaments, muscles, joints and bones.

Secondly, another benefit that he describes is “*harmonizing the inner organs.*” This is an effective training method that involves all of the body’s physiological systems, and in particular the respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, nervous and skeletal systems. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, rotating the Tai Chi Ball in the hands while breathing naturally and following the Taoist principles of yin-yang theory and meridian qi flow will allow the five internal organs to have great vitality and longevity. In western medicine terms Tai Chi Ball enhances cardiovascular and cardiorespiratory function by strengthening the heart, blood vessel and lung function and in the interactions between the cardiac, respiratory, hepatic and nervous systems. Through improved blood flow, Tai Chi Ball exercises also improves liver function, muscle, joint and ligament function, and in conjunction with improved endocrine functioning, also aids the immune system responses. Other organs to gain benefit from Tai Chi Ball exercises include the spleen, kidneys, stomach and digestive system, and the reproductive organs which makes it a complete exercise package for all.

*\*\*Shifu Wang Yunkuo is a Doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine who trained and worked in hospitals in China before emigrating to Australia where he runs the Kungfu Republic Academy and Live Well TCM Clinic in Sydney. Apart from his high-level of Kungfu and Tai Chi skills, Shifu Wang is proficient in Chin Na, Hanging Baskets, Iron Palms, Iron Arms, Duck Rings and a range of Kungfu weapons. Brian Corless is a Clinical Psychologist and student of Shifu Wang.*

*Shifu Wang has published a Manual and DVD on Tai Yi Tai Chi Ball Foundation Movements and Form #1.*

*For more information about Tai Yi Tai Chi Chuan and Tai Chi Ball, and obtaining a copy of his book/DVD, email Shifu Wang at [enquiry@kungfu-republic.com.au](mailto:enquiry@kungfu-republic.com.au) and/or have a look at his website at: <https://www.kungfu-republic.com.au/>*