

Second Tuesday

A Newsletter about Tai Chi Books

Hi Everyone,

I'd like to talk about the great immortal Daoist priest called Zhang Sanfeng a mythical Taoist priest of the 12th century, who is credited with the creation of Tai Chi after observing a fight between a crane and a snake.

- *“Legend has it that Zhang’s first realization of Tai Chi, came after seeing a bird fight a snake. The story runs that Zhang was meditating on his hut on Wudang Mountain when he heard a bird attack a snake. He watched intently as the snake yielded and counterattacked all the movements of the bird. If the bird tried to seize the tail of the snake, the snake struck back with its head. If its head was attacked, the snake countered with its tail. Likewise if the center of the snake’s body was attacked both the head and the tail responded. Zhang thought this was really clever and so believed that instead of utilizing the hard and unyielding movement of Shaolin Kung Fu, the martial art of Tai Chi should focus on the yielding, soft, and pliable aspects of the Snake style; the light, nimble and changeable movements of the Dragon; the intently focused, agile, and powerful traits of Tiger; the exacting, calm and expansive energy of the Crane; and to be as light, nimble, and concealed as the Leopard. ”*

This extract come from a book compiled by Start Olson that I'd like to recommend: *Tai Ji Quan Treatise: Attributed to the Song Dynasty Daoist Priest Zhang Sanfeng* by Stuart Olson (Author, Translator). Published by Valley Spirit Arts, 2011.

Stuart Olson not only translates and adds commentaries to Zhang Sanfeng's *Tai Chi Treatise* (arguably the most important document of all Tai Chi classical literature) but also provides an in-depth biographical sketch of this elusive and shadowy figure of Daoist immortal Zhang Sanfeng, whose life appears to have spanned three dynasties and reportedly lived 170 years, from the late Song dynasty through the Yuan and into the early Ming dynasty. Zhang's life exemplified the Chinese ideal of a true wandering immortal. His *Tai Chi Treatise* shows not only the depth of his knowledge, but highlight the Daoist origins of the art of Tai Chi that go beyond Tai Chi merely being a martial art.

- *“In addition to the story of Zhang watching the bird and snake leading to the invention of Tai Chi, another story tells of the discovery he made when dwelling in his famous meditation hut on Wu Dang Mountain. This story relates that late one evening he went outside to practice his Tai Chi. When he began doing the movements of Step Back and Repulse the Monkey repeatedly, he found that when he kept his buttocks opened and relaxed, his qi would rise up his spine into his brain. So he kept practicing this method night after night until he finally achieved immortality. It is the story that elevated Tai Chi from being just a method for health and self-defense into a working method of internal alchemy.”*

Stuart Olson has gone through the Daoist stories of Zhang Sanfeng and made an insightful compilation of stories that set an interesting context when later in the book reading an in-depth analysis of Zhang Sanfeng's *Tai Chi Treatise*. Stories of Zhang studying Buddhism at the age of nine, of how he left his family and position as a Magistrate at 43 to become a Daoist Priest, stories of him as a reclusive hermit and reaching immortality, as a benevolent healer, as a par excellence martial artist, and as an internal alchemist and meditation master. We clearly do not have historical documents to demonstrate the existence of Zhang Sanfeng, but as Stuart says:

- *“Over many years of studying the teachings attributed to Zhang Sanfeng, it has become vividly clear that the actual historical evidence of this Daoist immortal is for the most part unimportant, as it is the myths of Zhang that are so inspiring to all cultivating Daoists. Hence, to accept his existence is not nearly as important as accepting and applying the teachings attributed to him.”*

In the second part of this book Olson's commentary provides clear descriptions on each verse of the treatise and how it applies to actual Tai Chi practice. Stuart Olson, was a longtime protégé of Master T.T. Liang (1900–2002), and in his commentaries includes stories of his time learning and studying with T.T Liang.

For example, when discussing one particular verse from Zhang Sanfeng *Tai Chi Treatise*, The energy is rooted in the feet, issued through the legs, directed by the waist, and appears in the hands and fingers, Olson shares the following story:

- *“When Master Liang was studying Tai Chi in Taiwan, he had the good fortune of meeting with a Daoist priest by the name*

of Yang (not a member of the Yang Luchan family) ... With this priest, Master Liang witnessed something he had never seen before with any of his other teachers. Yang could stand on one leg, yet his thigh and calf would remain as soft as cotton. This really impressed Master Liang, and it really taught him the enormous importance gap between what was really meant by hard and soft styles of martial arts. Daoist priest Yang had, in all respects, mastered the principles of sinking all the energy into the Bubbling-Well points (on the bottom of the feet), and so could issue and direct intrinsic energy through his legs and waist quite expediently. [p.63]."

Olson is not only a long time Tai Chi practitioner, who learnt Tai Chi from a great Tai Chi master, but is also a translator and scholar with a knack for telling stories, which makes this an enjoyable and insightful read. Highly recommended read in its entirety!

Enjoy,
Elena

Elena Moreno

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