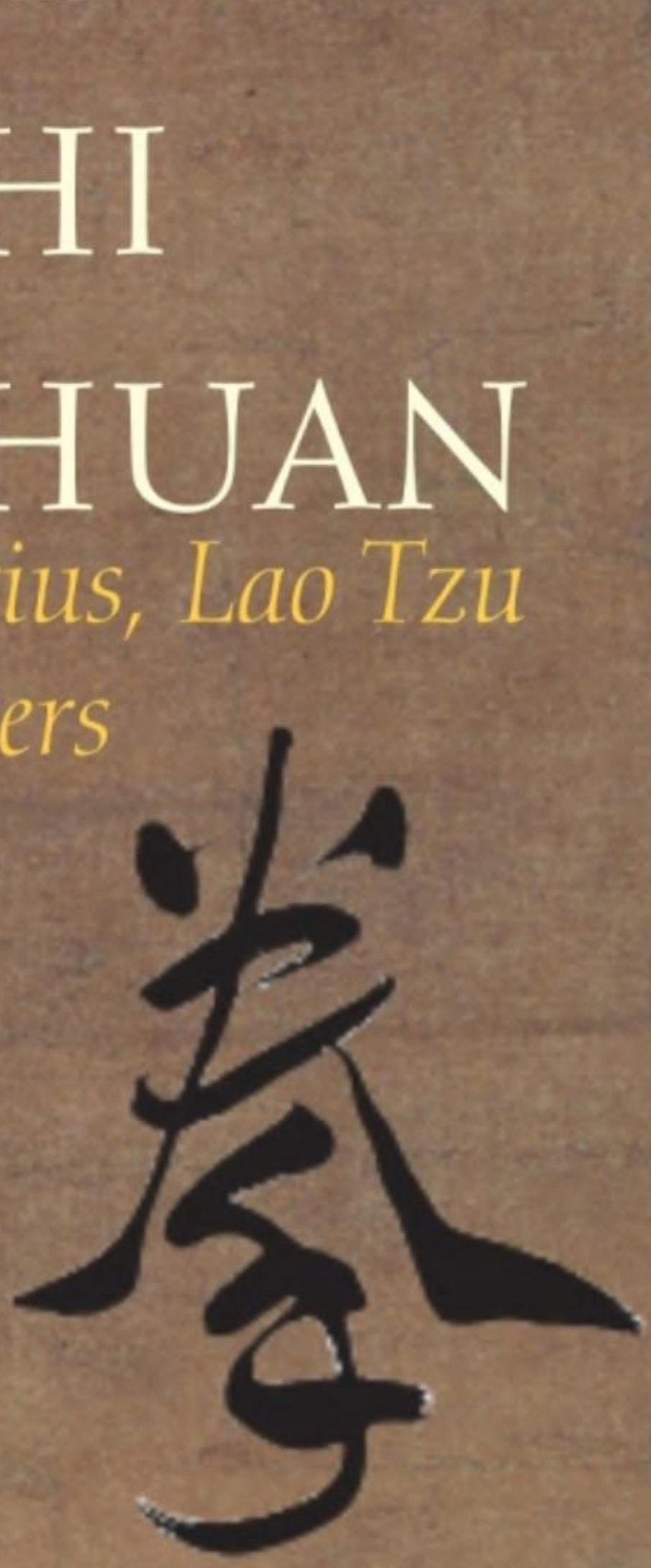
# The Philosophy of Tai Chi Chuan

*Wisdom from Confucius, Lao Tzu & Other Great Thinkers*



Freya & Martin Boedicker

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# *Introduction*

# *Introduction*

Tai Chi Chuan, the art and the practice, is deeply imbued with Chinese philosophy. To learn Tai Chi Chuan is therefore not only to have the adventure of engaging in an exotic form of movement, but also of encountering the profound ideas of Chinese culture and tradition.

It is certainly very fruitful to break away from what is common and taken for granted and to open oneself to new ideas. The rich philosophical thinking of ancient China has fascinated the West for centuries. Those who practice Tai Chi Chuan can experience these ideas in a very special way, because the movements express key concepts of Chinese philosophy. This book should make the close relationship between the philosophical concepts and Tai Chi Chuan even clearer.

We start with a short overview of the history of Chinese philosophy. This is followed by twelve philosophical texts. Each of the twelve is introduced briefly, and then we present parts of the original texts, which have been chosen because they have significance for the student of Tai Chi Chuan.

Throughout this book, we use consistent English translations for Chinese philosophical terms. The Chinese term appears in parentheses following the translation of the concept. These concepts play an important role in Tai Chi Chuan, and they get individual and specific attention in an extensive glossary at the end of the book.

The spelling *Tai Chi Chuan* is now common in the West, and thus we use that spelling consistently in this book. We have avoided the spelling *Taijiquan* or others to avoid confusion. The pinyin transliteration is used for all other Chinese terms.

After studying this book the reader will have a better understanding of the world of ideas of Tai Chi Chuan, providing new inspiration for his or her training.

We hope you enjoy this book. It has been a great pleasure to write it.

Freya and Martin Boedicker

# *A Brief History of Chinese Philosophy*

According to Chinese historical tradition, China is said to have been ruled in the third millennium BC by mythic emperors. These included Emperors Fu Xi, Shen Nong, Huang Di (known as the Yellow Emperor), and Yu the Great, who allegedly founded the Xia Dynasty.

Around 2000 BC the first signs of a highly developed civilization began to emerge. In the middle of this millennium, the Shang Dynasty was in power. For the first time, bronze was produced. From this period, texts of oracles survive, carved on the backs of turtles, bronze containers, and bones.

In the eleventh century BC the Shang Dynasty was overthrown by the Zhou tribe. In the following period, the Zhous introduced feudal rule.

The decline of the Zhou Dynasty in the fifth century BC led to the emergence of a series of smaller states. Because of continuous strife and wars between the feudal lords, the time from approximately 480 BC until the unification of the realm in 221

BC is called the "period of the warring states." It was a time of hunger and turmoil because of the ongoing wars. The invention of iron and of the plough, along with the introduction of monetary economics and consequent changes, fueled efforts to find new ways of living and new values.

The changes in society resulted in manifold forms of intellectual life. This time is also called the "time of the hundred schools of philosophy." At no other time before had speculative thinking been cherished and promoted to such an extent. The competition between different intellectual trends reflects the external conflicts of the time. Among the schools one finds famous representatives such as the Confucians *(rujia)*, the Mohists *(mojia)*, and the Daoists *(daojia)*, as well as the Yin-Yang School *(yinyangjia)*, the Legalists *(fajia)*, the Dialecticans *(mingjia)*, and the Strategists of War *(bingjia)*. Their central themes became social life, the ideal order, and the relationship between human beings and nature. Teaching was based on dialogue, edifying anecdotes, and examples taken from daily life. The plethora of schools of philosophy was not to survive China's political unification in 221 BC.

In 221 BC the state of Qin conquered its last rival. Under its lord, from then on called Qin Shi Huangdi, the first unified Chinese state emerged. During the Qin Dynasty, feudalism was abolished in order to promote the process of unification. Measures, laws, and writing systems were harmonized. The Legalist School based on Han Feizi was made the state philosophy. The Legalist School was not concerned with moral questions; its aim was to establish binding laws for everyone and thus to establish a stable political system unified under one

ruler. The other schools of philosophy were persecuted and their books and documents burned. Following the death of its first ruler, Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi, in 210 BC, the dynasty declined and the Han Dynasty was established.

The Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) severed links with the Legalist School. At the beginning of the dynasty, Liu An, the uncle of the first Han emperor, introduced the work of Daoist Huainanzi. However, this was not accepted as the dominant philosophy. A slightly altered form of Confucianism became the new state philosophy.

One of the leaders of this Han-Confucianism, which is also called New-Text School, was Dong Zhongshu. He systematically described the connection of heaven, man, and earth—that is, between nature and social life. He merged in a complicated way the old Confucianism with the ideas of other schools, such as the Yin-Yang School.

In terms of philosophical history, the Han Dynasty is usually categorized as a neo-classical time because its discussions frequently refer to the "old" schools. However, it should be noted that although no completely new school was founded and despite referring back to classical works, traditions were frequently changed drastically.

The end of the Han Dynasty in 220 AD heralded a time of disharmony and schism lasting for almost 400 years. China split into a series of short-lived states and dynasties. The spiritual and moral vacuum of this time was filled by Neo-Daoism and by Buddhism, which came from India. The center of the Neo-Daoists was a movement consisting mainly of artists and philosophers called "The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove."

This movement rejected social and civic duties, demonstrating this attitude by deliberately provoking the public. The Sui (581–618 AD) and Tang (618–906 AD) Dynasties ended the time of disharmony. A strong central state supported by a system of examinations for civil servants as a way of recruiting a ruling elite emerged. It was during the Tang Dynasty that Buddhism reached its peak in China.

Following the ninth century AD the adversaries of Buddhism focused on Confucianism again. During the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD) leading philosophers like Zhou Dunyi, Shao Yong, and Zhu Xi merged the ideas of Buddhism and Daoism with Confucianism. This resulted in the so-called Neo-Confucianism. The articulation and interpretation of this philosophy was based on Zhu Xi and became the new state philosophy.

In the Yuan Dynasty (1280–1368 AD) China was conquered by the Mongols and fell for the first time under foreign rule. Politically these were interesting times, but philosophically speaking there were no new developments. During the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 AD) Zhu Xi's school of rationalism dominated, but gradually Wang Shouren's idealist Neo-Confucianist School became a leading competitor for influence.

Under the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911 AD) China was conquered by the Manchurians. This was the peak of China's economic and political development. Confucianism remained the most influential philosophy. Within Confucianism, however, there were different traditions, from the philosophy of the classic Song and Ming Confucianism to the more modern ideas such as those of Kang Youwei.

# *Book of Changes*

# 1

## *Book of Changes*

THE *BOOK OF CHANGES (YIJING, I CHING, OR ZHOUYI)* is one of the oldest classics of China and was originally used for divination. The heart of the book consists of sixty-four cabalistic signs, called hexagrams. Each hexagram consists of a combination of six lines, which are either straight or broken. The first part of the *Book of Changes* presents the hexagrams and their meanings. It is assumed that this part existed as early as the eighth century BC.

The second part, the *Great Appendix* or the *Ten Wings,* consists of commentaries and remarks that were added later. But these are not just a treatise on the hexagrams. They explain the general meaning of the *Book of Changes.* The term *taiji* can be found here. *Taiji* represents the origin of the hexagrams and thus, from a philosophical point of view, the origin of all things and beings in the cosmos. (Please note: You will also find *taiji* written as Tai Chi, as in the name Tai Chi Chuan.) This early use of the term *taiji* is special because, in the philosophical

literature of the classical period (before 220 BC), it is otherwise only found in the *Zhuangzi*.

After adding the *Great Appendix,* the *Book of Changes* was not only used for divination but gained a much more general significance. It was now used as an advisor for the ordering of human affairs in politics and society. Several parts of the *Book of Changes* were attributed directly to Confucius, and it was therefore entered in the *Five Classics (Wujing)* and became a central text of Confucianism. Because of its fundamental meaning for Chinese society, it is no wonder that we also find influences of the *Book of Changes* in Tai Chi Chuan. First of all, it structures the world in pairs of opposites generated by *taiji* and in the endless change between these pairs. These two ideas had a fundamental influence on Tai Chi Chuan.

In ancient times,
when the sages created the *Book of Changes,*
they followed the principle
of the inner nature *(xing)* and destiny.
Therefore, they established the way *(dao)* of heaven
and called it yin and yang.
Therefore, they established the way *(dao)* of earth
and called it hard and soft.
Therefore, they established the way *(dao)* of man
and called it humanity *(ren)* and righteousness.
They doubled these three powers
and therefore in the *Book of Changes*
six lines became a hexagram.

Heaven is high, earth is low.
Thus the creative and the receptive were determined.
With the explanation of high and low
noble and mean had their places assigned accordingly.
Movement and stillness received their constancy,
hard and soft were thus differentiated.

Once yin, once yang, this is the way *(dao)*.
What issues from it is goodness.
In completion it is called the inner nature *(xing)*
of all things and beings.
The man of humanity sees it
and calls it humanity *(ren)*.
The sage sees it
and calls it wisdom.
The common man acts according to it daily
but is not aware of it.

Thus, the way *(dao)* of the gentleman is rare.
It manifests itself in humanity *(ren)*
but conceals its workings.
It rouses the ten thousand things *(wanwu)*
without sharing the anxieties of the sage.
Its glorious inner power *(de)*
and its great achievement are supreme.
It fills everything with abundance,
thus is its great achievement.
It renews everything daily,

thus is its glorious inner power *(de)*.
Production and reproduction,
this is called change.

In the change is *taiji,*
which generates the two forms [yin and yang].
The two forms generate the four modes
and the four modes generate the eight trigrams *(bagua)*.

*Confucius*

# 2

## *Confucius*

Confucius (in Chinese, Kongzi) was born in 551 BC in the state of Lu, the descendant of lesser nobility. Because of the relative poverty in which he grew up, he was more or less self-taught. It is said that Confucius became the administrator of the granary of Lu at the age of twenty and that he started to teach not much later. Then he left Lu and traveled with his students to many states, offering his advice to the feudal lords. Thus he became the first "wandering" teacher, although not meeting with much success.

Confucius died in 479 BC without leaving any written work. The book in which his sayings are collected is called the *Analects (Lunyu,* also referred to as *Confucius)* and was written down after his death by his students. Although during his life Confucius had no success spreading his teaching, he became the pioneer for generations of scholars and philosophers.

In his teaching Confucius tried to give society a structure built on morals and rites. The order established through

morals is represented by the word *ren,* which can be translated as "humanity." In the teachings of Confucius, humanity *(ren)* is the sum of human virtues, such as filial piety, trust, loyalty, altruism, and righteousness. Humanity *(ren)* is an inborn quality of human beings, but it has to be developed by learning and education. Therefore, the *Analects* contain intensive thoughts about learning. For Confucius, learning is the foundation for self-cultivation and a lifelong process that cannot be interrupted. In Tai Chi Chuan the student follows this idea. When one begins to learn Tai Chi Chuan, Confucius can become for the student what he has always been for the Chinese people—the Great Teacher.

Confucius said,
To learn and to repeat from time to time
what has been learned,
is this not a pleasure?
To have friends coming from afar,
is this not delightful?
Not to be recognized,
but not to feel hurt,
is one like this not a gentleman?

(BOOK I, VERSE 1)

Master Zeng said,
Three times a day I examine myself.
In acting on behalf of others,
have I always been loyal to their interests?
In my dealings with my friends,
have I always been true?

What has been handed down to me,
have I repeated it again and again?

**(I, 4)**

In practicing the rites,
harmony is of the highest order.
The way *(dao)* of the old kings
took its beauty from it.
It is the cause of great and small matters.
Yet this will not always work.
To know about harmony
but not regulate it by the rites,
this will not work.

**(I, 12)**

The Master said,
At fifteen I set my mind on learning.
At thirty I took my stand.
At forty I had no more perplexities.
At fifty I understood the will of heaven.
At sixty I was able to follow with my ears.
At seventy I was able to follow my heart's desire
without overstepping the boundaries.

**(II, 4)**

The Master said,
Review the old and gain knowledge of the new.
Thus one is fit to be a teacher.

**(II, 11)**

The Master said,
Learning without thinking,
this is bewildering.
Thinking without learning,
this is dangerous.

**(II,** 15**)**

The Master said,
In archery the main point is not
to pierce the middle,
for the reason that strength varies
from man to man.
This is the way *(dao)* of the ancestors.

**(III,** 16**)**

Zigong said,
What I do not want others to do to me,
I do not want to do to them.

**(V,** 12**)**

When Zilu heard something
that he had not put into practice,
his one fear was
that he might hear something more.

**(V,** 13**)**

The Master said,
To know of something is not as good
as to be fond of it.

To be fond of something is not as good
as to find joy in it.

**(VI,** 20**)**

The Master said,
The mean as an inner power *(de)* is supreme.
It is rarely found among the common people.

**(VI,** 27**)**

The Master said,
To be silent and store up knowledge,
learning without flagging,
to teach others without getting tired,
this is my way.

**(VII,** 2**)**

The Master said,
The thought
that the inner power *(de)* is not cultivated,
that learning is not taken seriously,
that one has heard of the right,
but does not move toward it,
that wrongs are not being changed,
this causes me concern.

**(VII,** 3**)**

The Master said,
Set your heart upon the way *(dao)*.
Support yourself by the inner power *(de)*,

lean upon humanity *(ren)*,
and cultivate the arts.

**(VII,** 6)

The Master said,
If one does not burst with eagerness,
I do not teach him.
If one is not trying to put his ideas into words,
l do not help him in his development.
If I show one corner to someone,
and he is not able to transfer it to the other three,
I will not repeat it.

**(VII,** 8)

Master Zeng said,
Gifted, and yet ask those
who are not gifted.
Possessing much, and yet ask those
who possess little.
Having, but yet appear not to have.
Full *(shi)*, but appearing empty *(xu)*.
Attacked, but not contesting.
Long ago I had a friend,
whose ways were such as this.

**(VIII,** 5)

Learn, as if you can't reach up to it,
as though you were frightened
to lose it.

**(VIII,** 17)