

IN SEARCH OF K

Part III — Tai Chi Chuan

In our August and September, 1988, issues, we brought you parts one and two of Adam Hsu's recent journey to China in search of the origin of several kung fu styles. In the first two parts of the series, Hsu, a BLACK BELT Hall of Fame member and noted kung fu instructor in San Francisco, recounted his discoveries regarding the roots of pa kua chang and shaolin kung fu. This month, Hsu concludes his journey by investigating the origin of tai chi chuan, China's most practiced kung fu style. Follow him now as he travels to Wen County and visits Chaopao and Chenchiaokou, the "village of Treasures," where he uncovers the secrets of tai chi chuan's birth.

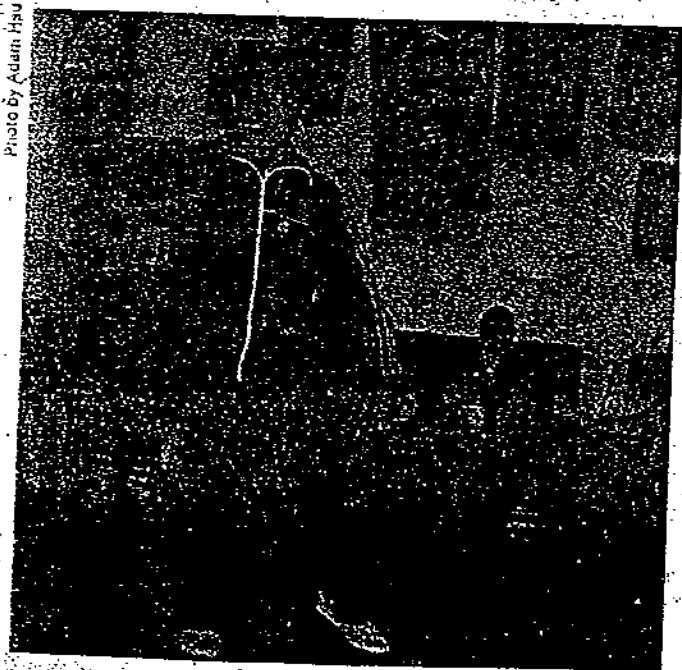
—Ed.

Wen Shen: The Tai Chi Chuan County

It was early morning when my hosts Pai Tsu-Jen, director of the Louyang Sports and Wushu Committee, and Ku Yo I, general secretary of the Henan Wushu Bureau, and I arrived at the Louyang highway station.

It felt disrespectful to be leaving Louyang so quickly. Sleep deprivation induced a reverie in which I could dimly hear the strains of the Henan opera as images of Louyang flickered through my mind: the huge Buddhas—many decapitated by foreigners—who still sit patiently by the Dragon's Gate; the final resting place of the poet, Pai Chu Yi; General Kuan Yu's cypress-shaded tomb; An Lou Wo, the "safe, happy nest" that was home to philosopher Sou Chin Chieh, one of the first to use the *I Ching* to tell fortunes; and the White Horse Temple, silently guarded by stone statues of the two white horses who brought the first Buddhist sutras to China.

We traveled north through countryside brimming with history. After crossing the Yellow River on its longest bridge, towns with familiar names began to appear until we finally arrived in Wen County. Here, my two hosts regretfully had to



Chen Zhong Lei, principal of the tai chi school in Chenchiaokou, demonstrates the posture "white crane spreads its wings" from the government-recognized tai chi chuan form.

part and return to Louyang. My heart was in my throat as I watched them pull away, but before I could release my breath, my Wen County welcoming committee arrived. The group was led by Huang Chia-Ming from Chouchong, the chief editor of *Shaolin Wushu* magazine. He introduced me to the director of the Wen County Sports and Wushu Committee, Wong Dong Feng, and his deputy chief, Yen Tong Chuan. They were accompanied by two excellent coaches, Wong Hsi An and Chu-Tian Chai.

That afternoon I strolled through the tiny downtown area, then visited the outlying towns of Wong and Zhu. I felt as if I had walked into a Chinese peasant painting, or perhaps a Claude Monet impression of the French countryside. Most of the homes I passed were made of earth and straw, a Chinese version of adobe, as bricks are beyond the means of most Wen County residents. Pigs snorted in backyards, while chickens, ducks and an occasional sheep shared space in the front yards. The wooden or bamboo fences were festooned with garlands of garlic and corn hanging in the sun. Flocks of children played in the alleys as farmers rode by on bicycles. I created a small sensation as I passed by, my blue jeans and windbreaker immediately identifying me as an outsider. The cacophony of barking dogs marked my progress, while the pungent odor of animal droppings covered the entire scene like a smelly blanket. I continued my walk in search of tai chi chuan.

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KUNG FU'S ROOTS

an by Adam Hsu



Photo courtesy of China Features

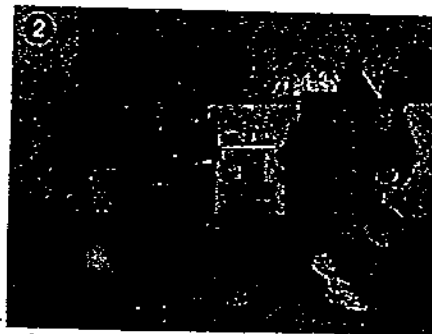
The Wen County Sports and Wushu Committee is housed in a two-story building that contains offices, living space, classrooms, and a conference room. Wong Hsi An, Chu Tian Chai and I sat in the conference room to talk. They had both visited and taught in Japan, and Chu had recently returned from Singapore. Both men are in their early 40s, educated and open-minded from their exposure to the outside world.

My purpose in visiting Chen village, Chaopao, and Wen County was to search out the lineage and roots of tai chi chuan and discover why the tai chi I learned in Taiwan from

Tu Yu Chih is so different from the *chen tai chi* now practiced in China and other countries. This difference has always perplexed me. It's not that my form is so unusual; it basically follows the same sequence. But the way to do it is so different that *anybody*, even a person with no martial arts experience, could see it. Tu told me that our form is called *lao chia*, and was established by Chen Chang Xing, passed down to his son Chen Gung Yun, who in turn passed the art down to his son Chen Yan Xi. Chen Yan Xi taught Du Yu Chih the art while he was employed as a bodyguard by Tu's father, Tu Yen.

There I was in Wen County, beginning my excavation of the beginnings of my tai chi chuan. The first thing I asked the two coaches was "Why is my *lao chia* so different? And why is the current *lao chia* from China practiced so differently

In Chaopao, author Adam Hsu's hosts from the Chaopao Tai Chi Association demonstrated he chia tai chi, consisting of three levels: big movements (1); small movements (2); and even smaller, more internal movements (3).



Photos by Adam Hsu



Above, 81-year-old Chen Hsu Chai demonstrates from lao chia tai chi the posture "slanting body with fist." Above right, Chen Sou Yuen, in her 60s, demonstrates the same lao chia posture.



from the way I was taught?" Both coaches smiled and told me jointly that "What outsiders practice is called *hsin chia*—that is the form modified by Chen Fa Ke in his later years. Peiking became the promotional center for this form. Only in Chen village do people still practice the old lao chia."

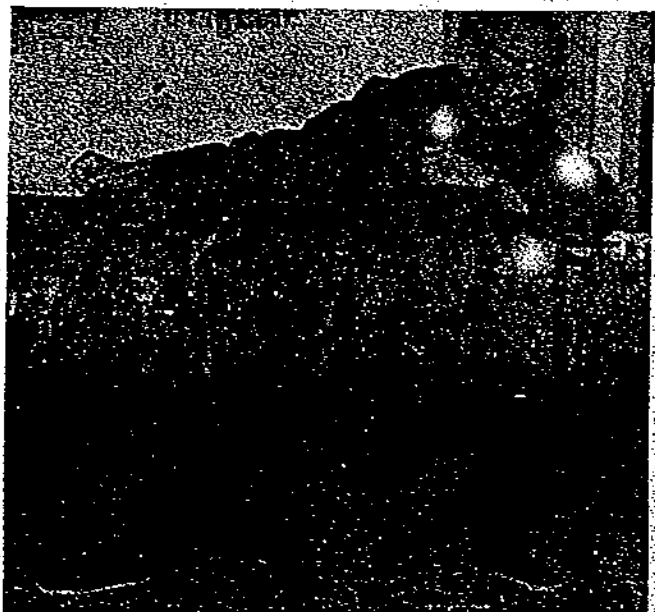
I was so happy and excited to find my first answer so quickly and easily that I immediately asked Wong and Chu to please show me the difference between lao chia and *hsin chia*. Wong showed me *hsin chia*, and it was what I had seen before. Then Chu showed me lao chia, and I must say that I was very disappointed because it was so unlike my form.

I returned to my hostel that evening with all of my unresolved questions, forming a lump in my stomach. Late November in the north of China is not the ideal time for a cold snower, but compared to my internal discomfort, the sting of the cold water was easy to bear.

Chaopao: Visiting the In-Laws

I woke up early, greeted by a chilly dawn. My trip was drawing to a close and even though I had certainly reaped a bountiful harvest of information, the roots of my tai chi chuan still eluded me. I wanted so very badly to know where my tai chi

Chen Pou Hsian, demonstrating the small form of hsiao chia, below, held the key that unlocked the secrets to Adam Hsu's tai chi.



came from. My early rising left me with a large block of free time, so I decided to go over the story I would tell my hosts in Chaopao.

My tai chi chuan instructor, Tu, was the son of Tu Yen, a government official in charge of administering several counties—including Wen County, where Chen village is located. A highly placed official, Tu Yen was able to hire the best available martial artist as his chief bodyguard, and so he procured the services of Chen Yan Xi—the most skilled and feared exponent of chen tai chi. Tu Yu Chih was thus able to learn chen tai chi at a time when it was not taught to many outside of Chen village.

Years passed, and Tu Yen received an appointment to go to Kuanghsi to continue his government service. At this time, Chen Yan Xi informed his employer that he wished to give up his position. The bodyguard had grown old and wanted to retire and leave behind the pressures and risks of his 24-hour-a-day job. A northerner, he had no desire to travel south to be subjected to heat, humidity, a foreign cuisine and other cultural irregularities that would require changes in his ways. In addition, near the end of the Ching Dynasty, guns had become more commonplace; no matter how proficient his tai chi, Chen knew that bare hands were no match for bullets.

Knowing he could not protect his master as he had in the past, Chen carefully picked his successor from within his extended family. His choice was Chen Ming Piao, a skillful martial artist who was also adept at handling firearms. Tu Yu Chih now had the opportunity to continue his studies with Chen Ming Piao and learn *hsin chia*.

Chen tai chi chuan has lao chia, the old form or lesson, and *hsin chia*, the new form or lesson, which began with Chen You Heng and Chen You Beng, two brothers from the same generation as Chen Chang Xing (see chart). These two brothers had a different way to practice chen tai chi, and in order to distinguish the new way from Chen Chang Xing's way, this new method was labeled *hsin chia*—and the new form was passed down from generation to generation.

Another great martial artist, Chen Qing Ping, relocated from Chen village to Chaopao. He composed yet another way to practice chen tai chi based on the original principles. Because this was also a new arrangement, people called it *hsin chia* as well. Having so many *hsin chias* was confusing, so to simplify matters, people took to calling Chen Qing Ping's way "Chaopao chia."

This was the story I tried to tell clearly and concisely when I arrived at the Chaopao Chen Tai Chi Chuan Association. My hopes were dashed once again when no one there could shed any light on my queries; no one in Chaopao had ever heard of Chen Ming Piao.

Not wanting to waste an opportunity, all that was left to

ge was to investigate the current tai chi situation in Chaopao. This was quite easy as my hosts were anything but reticent. They told me many stories, but I remained unconvinced of the veracity of any of these tales. They told me that Wong Chung Yue taught Chiang Fa, who subsequently taught Chen Wang Ting (acknowledged by most Chinese martial arts historians to be the founder of tai chi chuan). They told me there are still some descendants of Chen Qing Ping's family living in Chaopao. These relatives loved emphasizing that Chen Qing Ping's tai chi developed into hao-style tai chi, which later evolved into sun-style tai chi. They were also careful to note that Woo Yu Xiang, who combined the Chaopao style of chen tai chi with his yang style to create woo tai chi, was responsible for writing down and codifying the principles of tai chi chuan.

Certainly Chen Qing Ping's tai chi is different than what is practiced in Chenchiakou, and it is still being practiced in Chaopao. Another legacy from Chen Qing Ping was left by his student, He Zhao Yuen. He traveled extensively through China, and when he returned to Chaopao, his tai chi had changed somewhat. He attracted many followers in the village, and his tai chi came to be known as he tai chi chuan.

I eventually asked my hosts to please show me their tai chi. First they demonstrated Chen Qing Ping's style, which was different than mine. Then they showed me he-style tai chi, which had three levels. The first level had big postures; level two had obviously smaller movements; and level three was also small and was supposed to show internal power. Although the forms were pretty much the same, the way to do them was different.

Again, although no light was shed on my particular problems, I did discover much about Chaopao. There are 6,500 people living there in 1,100 households, and over 1,000 residents are actively practicing tai chi. There are 13 places to learn tai chi in the village. Teaching is done by seven or eight old masters and six or seven young qualified instructors.

Chaopao treats tai chi as its most valuable local product. In exporting their style, residents have sought connections with Hsien, Kwangchou, Hong Kong and even Thailand. Another especially important alliance is the one that has united Chaopao with Wutang, one of the famous Taoist holy places. Wutang is home to the "swordsmen" faction, who describe themselves as the opponents of the Shaolin Temple; this is not supported by any valid historical evidence, only by mov-



Photo by Adam Hsu

Wong Hsi An of China's Wen County demonstrates a posture from the government-recognized chen tai chi chuan form.

ies and the ever-popular fictional swordsmen fantasies. It is interesting to note how everybody tries to use kung fu to enhance their good name, and now we find Chaopao and Wutang working together to create space for their newly revised version of Chinese martial arts history. It is obvious that this aggressive attitude is being used competitively to denigrate Chenchiakou while bolstering Chaopao's reputation in an effort to redirect foreign interest flowing into Chenchiakou to Chaopao.

Chenchiakou: Village of Treasures

I had searched Wen County and Chaopao in vain. My last stop was Chenchiakou, the final place I could hope to find an answer to my questions, and I sensed I would be turned away empty-handed. The cold wind seemed ready to blow only bad news my way.

My Chenchiakou welcoming committee greeted me warmly near an imposing two-story cement building. I was surprised to see such an edifice in that tiny village of only 2,600 people. Roughly 70 percent of the population practice tai chi chuan. Chenchiakou is unique among the birthplaces of kung fu systems in China; only here do the natives actually live out their

The author's notebook (1) marks the approximate resting place of tai chi founder Chen Wang Ting in Chen village. A monument to Chen stands (2) in the tai chi school in Chenchiakou.

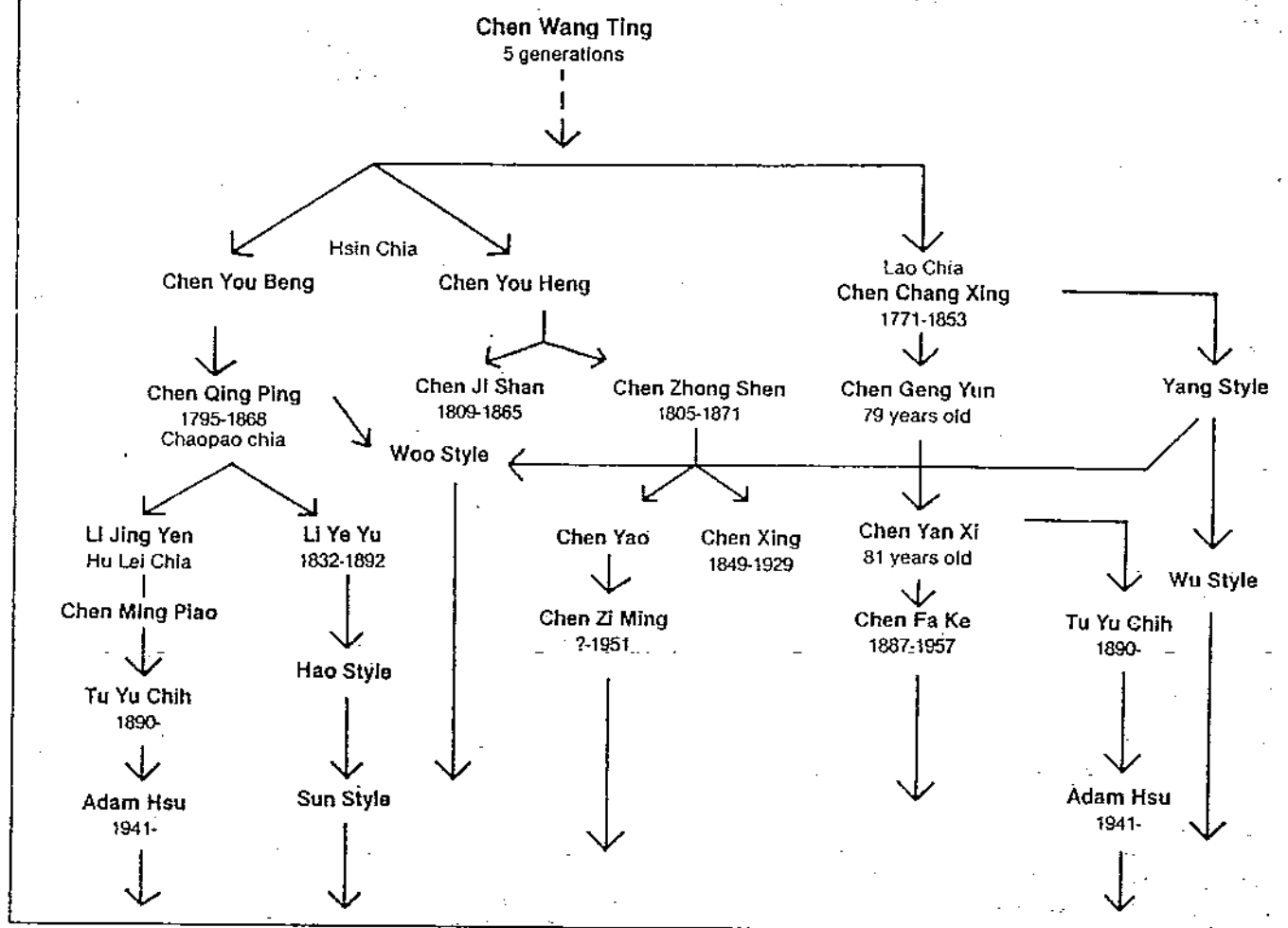


Photo by Adam Hsu



Photo courtesy of Adam Hsu

The Tai Chi Chuan Family Tree



Inheritance by actively practicing and promoting their art in the place where it was created. For this, we have Wong Dong Feng to thank. As chairman of the Wen County Sports and Wushu Committee, Wong made the decision to make chen tai chi a physical education requirement for all grammar school children. In Chenchlakou, it is Western-style sports that are optional—chen tai chi is mandatory. Here children build any early interest in tai chi, encouraged by their parents, most of whom have studied the style. When they grow up and attend college, some of these same youngsters are then able to teach tai chi at the universities they attend. This is the kind of nurturance and respect traditional Chinese martial arts deserve.

My hosts soon began to discuss the history of tai chi chuan. In 1928, Chen Fa Ke left the village and traveled to Peking, where he began openly teaching. There were many ways to do the tai chi form, so in his later years he modified and standardized his style, becoming its model, just as Yang Ching Po did later for yang-style tai chi. In 1964, Chen Fa Ke's son, Chen Xiao Quai, returned to Chenchlakou and showed the villagers his father's arrangement, which they had never seen before.

Today in Chenchlakou, people still practice lao chia, the old form; there are fewer who still do the new form, hsin chia. I asked the masters to perform for me, hoping to gain a greater understanding and clarification. First I saw Chen Zhong Lai, principal of the tai chi chuan school. He did lao chia and then Chen Fa Ke's government-recognized form. I couldn't see much difference between the two forms, and was quite frankly more interested in seeing the old masters' interpreta-

tions. First came Chen Hsu Chal. He was 80 years old, and as he began to move, my heart began to pound—what he did was very close to chen tai chi as I had learned it! Then a lady *sifu* (teacher) in her 60s, Chen Sou Yuen, did her set, and now I could comfortably confirm what I had been told by people who had visited Chenchlakou: "The old people there do chen tai chi just like you!"

When Chen Sou Yuen was finished, a grizzled old man named Chen Pou Hsian performed the hsin chia from the Chen You Heng/Chen You Beng system. What he showed me was quite different from the hsin chia I knew, but when he was done, we began to chat. Peering at me through thick horn-rimmed glasses, he asked, "Do you know where your *sifu* got his hsin chia?" Disillusioned by now, I hopelessly said "Yes, Chen Ming Piao." Chen Pou Hsian looked up casually and said "Oh, Tu Yen's bodyguard."

Looking at the old man in disbelief, I had to control myself so I didn't leap off the couch, grab him and shake him to quickly wring all the possible information out of this living historical reference book. At last, I had dug up my roots; the source of my chen tai chi was about to flower before me. This was the history I had traveled so many thousands of miles to find. I begged Chen Pou Hsian to continue.

"Chen You Beng began hsin chia and had an outstanding student, Chen Qing Ping, who relocated to Chaopao," the old man began. "According to people here, Chen Qing Ping was a rich guy in the rice and grain business. It was through him that woo-style and then *he* and sun-style tai chi chuan developed. All these styles and their main exponents became

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quite well known, but in the village, people knew that Chen Qing Ping had even better students. One in particular was Li Jing Yen.

"Li initially learned from Chen Zhong Shen, but later switched and became Chen Qing Ping's student until the latter's death," the old man continued. "Li's way to do tai chi differed from all the other methods that had been created up until then. His kung fu earned him many compliments from sifu in Chenchiakou and Chaopao, who recognized a valuable variation on chen tai chi when they saw one. Respecting his interpretation and training methods, they chose a name to distinguish his set—*hu lei chia*, the thunder style, alternately explosive, then calm. They called his steps *bou chiao* (continuous sets of waves)."

These were the very things Tu Yu Chih taught me. I cannot describe how happy I felt as I sat furiously writing notes as Chen Pou Hsian spoke.

I asked Chen if there was anybody left in the village practicing his kind of *hu lei chia*. He shook his head in disgust and said "No. It's pitiful. Chen Ming Piao got tuberculosis, at that time a fatal disease, and died young. He had two sons who learned tai chi chuan, but neither of them was very good."

Later, my heartbeats alternately happy, then sad, I walked through the fields to pay my respects to Chen Bou, the "first ancestor" who established Chen village. I had fulfilled the dream of a lifetime, discovering the roots of my tai chi here in this venerable village. Yet, as I walked through the graveyard and saw how many tombs had been destroyed by the Red Guard, the tumbledown cemetery seemed to symbolize the attacks and disruptions tai chi had suffered during the cultural revolution. I saw Chen Bou's tomb, but Chen Wang Ting's remains could only be approximated somewhere in a field. This rough remembrance was all there was to indicate where the founder of tai chi chuan lay at rest.

When the government officially recognized the worldwide value of tai chi, a new building was put up to house the tai chi chuan school in Chenchiakou; this marked the beginning of worldwide promotion of the art. Today the school is self-sufficient, supporting itself with funds generated through teaching. The most frequent foreign visitors to the school are Japanese, with Americans close behind. Classes are divided into long- (six months) or short-term (one month) study. When I was there, 120 students were attending classes, about 20-30 percent of them women. Student's ages crossed three generations, the youngest being 14, the oldest 74. Short-term students pay \$70, which covers their room. Long-term students pay \$250, which includes room and board, although students must bring their own blankets and pillows.

In the school lobby a stone monument has been established to memorialize Chen Wang Ting. The back of the stone shows an old reproduction of Chen seated with Chiang Fa standing behind him in a subordinate position holding a *tao* (long saber). The school plans to establish monuments to all the great masters up to the modern era, and the Chen family temple, also destroyed by the Red Guard, has been slated for improvement by the government. It will be rebuilt as the Tai Chi Chuan Hall of Fame and will house a library, videotapes and other archival material. The government has also approved funds for a tai chi chuan complex that will span 40 acres. Clearly, tai chi chuan has a bright future.

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