Three Generals & the Link Between Tong Bei and Taijiquan

The Life of General Qi Jiguang (1528-1587) was pivotal for the history of China and the development of martial arts. His life affected two other generals who, in specific ways, contributed to the development, evolution and preservation of Chinese martial arts. They were generals Yu Dayou (1503-1579) and Chen Wang Ting (1600-1680). And his military writings influenced a generation of martial study of the Tong Bei concept. As of yet, no previous study has explored this link fully and considered its important implications.

In the historical narratives, General Qi is mentioned in two distinct, but separate, contexts. One is the development of the Great Wall defence around the Shan-hai-kuan area, north west of Beijing, the other is in relation to his martial arts manual entitled 'New Book on Effective Military Techniques' (Qi Xiao Xin Shu), which is often quoted as being the foundation of many martial systems. Within the manual, there is a section called the 'Classic of Closed-Hand Fighting' (Quan Jing). Qi wrote a number of books and was renowned for his martial prowess and scholarly endeavour. It can be inferred from his works that the successful defence of the nation stemmed from the correct and logical defence of the individual 'self'.

"At first glance, combat training without weaponry does not seem to have any direct relation to fighting on the battlefield. However, the study and practice of unarmed combat prepares for immediate action in any circumstance, and may, therefore, be considered the essence or foundation of training for war." (Qi Xiao Xin Shu)

This manual comprises 32 martial postures, with brief explanations for each. General Qi said that he had personally studied 16 martial styles and selected two of the most effective movements from each to be included in a single manual designed for easy access by individuals and groups. The descendents of General Qi still practice this style today and it has affected Chinese martial development far and wide. As Qi ended his professional days in northern China, it is thought that his manual became very well known throughout Shanxi, Shandong and Henan provinces, influencing the development of many martial arts – including Tong Bei.

In 1555, Qi was sent south to deal with attacks from Japanese pirates. His headquarters were in Ningbo, the captial of Zhejiang, the province where he recruited and trained thousands of men. This army would inflict defeat after defeat upon the enemy and, eventually, free southern China of pirate activity. In 1568, Qi was moved north of Beijing to help fight the Mongol invasions. Qi had the idea of linking up the haphazard structures of walled defences, built by previous dynasties, and joining them together, using bricks and mortar, making one enormous, continuous structure. It would take time and cost a massive amount of money. The imperial court agreed with Qi's plan and allowed him to use his army as labourers. They gave him a 5 year deadline and funded the project. Qi's men built the wall we see today with their bare hands. Qi built 1200 towers out of the intended 3000 towers - but court intrigue prevented funding for the remainder to be built. However, what was achieved did save China from a major Mongolian attack, and Qi's tactics were proven correct. The wall was never intended as a static obstacle under Qi's command. In fact, its use might be defined as something of a 'cat-flap' type device. Within this strategy were three distinct phases of defence. Only one of those phases used the wall in a static, blocking capacity:

1) Small skirmish forces would be stationed a mile or so in front of the wall. Their job was to observe any attack before it got near the wall, signal the attack to the wall, and then face the attack with small cannon to slow the attack down.
2) Large garrisons of heavy cavalry were stationed behind the wall. When the signal to attack was received, they would muster forward, through the gates of the wall, and out into the frontal area to directly intercept any attack and link up with the forward observers.
3) If the enemy still existed as a cogent force after stages one and two, then the Chinese troops would retreat beyond the wall and the wall garrison would do its job of fighting the enemy off, from up high.

When the defences were tested during General Qi's period of command the Mongolian attack was halted at phase two by the heavy garrisons of cavalry. Phase three was not required. After Qi retired, however, his tactics fell into disuse and enemy attacks were allowed right up to the wall, without challenge. This allowed the enemy to gather intelligence about the structure and work out weaknesses and effective attacking strategies. This three-phase strategy has its parallels in both Taijiquan and Tong Bei Quan theory and methodology.

"Yu Dayou is also famous for training two Shaolin monks."

The building of the unified wall corresponds with the 'Qi in the Dantian' of the Taijiquan practitioner, where the 'body is held upright', and the Tong Bei concept of 'Ying', or 'hardness'. Phase one of the defence strategy corresponds to the Taijiquan principle of 'Using the will (Yi), but not strength and the Tong Bei concept of 'Mian' which means to 'adhere to and follow' an opponent. Phase two correlates with the Taijiquan principle of 'move later, arrive earlier' and the Tong Bei concept of 'Leng' which implies sudden and surprising speed. Phase three represents the Taiji concept of being 'rooted at the feet' and the Tong Bei concept of 'Qiao' or 'cleverness', as by this time in any enemy attack their force would be so depleted by General Qi's clever and resourceful use of his own forces that it would no longer represent a serious threat.

However, General Qi also had indirect influence on the arts. General Yu Dayou (1503-1580) was a contemporary of Qi Jiguang and is believed to have been something of a mentor and inspiration for Qi's military career. Yu wrote a famous manual entitled the 'Sword Classic' (Jian Jing), but this is considered incorrectly named, as the manual was actually about the use of the staff in combat, for which Yu was famous. General Qi received instruction in the use of the staff from General Yu, and General Yu, together with General Qi, fought the Japanese pirate invasion of Southern China. Yu is also famous for training two Shaolin monks and taking them with him on campaign to the south in 1560. Yu was of the opinion that, although the staff techniques of the Shaolin were of a very good quality, the monks' unarmed skills were unrealistic for actual combat. Yu had close connections with the Shaolin temple of Henan and, in 1571, assisted with the founding of the Ten Directional Hall – a specific and holy space for monks to practice and perfect their martial skills. General Qi incorporated spear techniques of the Shaolin into his corpus of writing, no doubt influenced by the example and guidance of General Yu Dayou, and in return the temple received the first arts from the military. The famous Ch'an Buddhist temple of Shaolin in Henan province also practices a form of Tong Bei that is said to be a development of a pre-existing Shaolin system. The temple itself is not far from the Chen family village and it is known that the mentor of General Qi Jiguang, General Yu Dayou, visited the temple and trained at least two Shaolin monks in the military arts of the day, namely the teachings of General Qi.

General Chen Wang Ting (1600-1680), was born twelve years after the death of General Qi Jiguang, in Chenjiagou (Chen Village), Wen County, in the Henan province of central China. The Chen family ancestor of this lineage was Chen Bu, who had originally migrated from his home in Hongdong county, Shanxi province. His migration began in 1374. He and his extended family finally settled in Chang Yang Village, where they gathered together to form a military force and clear the area of bandits. Eventually, the Chen clan formed the majority of people and the village was renamed Chenjiagou. The Chens were well known for their martial prowess before Chen Wang Ting. But Chen Wang Ting served as a general in the Ming army that made full use of General Qi Jiguang's manuals on military training. It is thought that, whilst in military service, General Chen learnt the unarmed style devised by General Qi, as many of the movements found within the manual (twenty-nine) exist within Chen style Taijiquan. More significantly, however, is the fact that the originating home county of the Chen clan is Hongdong which is the place where Tai Chi Hongdong Tong Bei is said to have developed.

to be continued... the second part of this fascinating article can be found on our website, www.taoigongcentre.com

by Adrian Chan-Wyles Ph.D.
Adrian Chan-Wyles, Ph.D. is a senior instructor for the UK Chan Dao Martial Arts Association - www.chan-dao.co.uk

The first part of this article appears in Qi Magazine Issue 88

Three Generals & the Link Between Tong Bei and Taijiquan

Wu Tian Hsu, in his 1937 book entitled 'Tong Bei Quan Fa' (Through Back Fist Art), says that during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), Tong Bei was known as Tong Quan (Travelling Fist), or just 'Chang Quan', or 'Long Fist'. The Chinese character for Tong, although often translated as 'through' in English, can also have the meaning of 'travelling' from one point to another. This may denote the unified energy of the Tong Bei practitioner, very similar to the aligned postural force of the Taijiquan' practitioner. The energy literally 'travels' through the bones and joints of the body, without interruption or hindrance, with the structure of the physical back acting as a point of integration and transference. This unified power may then be directed through the arms or legs, and emitted into an opponent as a manifestation of internal force. It could also be a veiled description of a form of boxing used for people travelling long distances through dangerous places. Both descriptions could hold true, and be used interchangeably. Long Fist would then be a description of the physical structures incorporated into the styles that make use of this 'unified' energy. The limbs are extended, and the unified energy is generated from the ground upwards, travelling through the back and then out through the limbs and the striking areas.

From a purely academic perspective, the following extract conveys the only known and verifiable references for the existence of Tong Bei as either a concept or a definite style;

"The historical record mentions that General Han Tong, who lived at the beginning of the Song Dynasty, knew Tong Bei Quan; and a second historical document dating from four hundred years ago states, "You Shen's Tongbei skill is the best".
Combat Techniques of Taiji, Xingyi and Bagua: By Lu Shengli – Page 102-103)

In his manual, the Classic of Boxing, General Qi did not claim to invent any new style martial art. Instead, he used his particular genius to gather together the 32 movements that he considered the most effective of the 16 styles he had practised as a professional warrior. And as a professional, he was expected to learn as much as possible about his profession.

But how did General Qi influence the development of Tong Bei and Taijiquan? General Qi's ability to think clearly and anticipate future strategic and tactical requirements saved the nation of China from invasion and foreign domination on more than one occasion. His manual is significant in the study and practice of Chinese martial arts, both traditional and modern. His manual effectively broke with the tradition of 'lineage', whereby the martial art of a particular style was passed on only within the confines of a named clan system, with no one outside the clan being allowed to train. A copy of his manual was found in the Chen village, and the Chen style has the outward structure of most of Qi's chosen movements. The Chen home province of Hongdong is also the place that Tong Bei is said to have originated, again clearly connected to Qi's manual. And there is a connection of name clan (i.e. Chen) to the arts of Tong Bei and Taijiquan. Furthermore, the concept of 'Shan Tong Bei' exists within the Taijiquan system, but does not appear in Qi's manual, a suggestion of a direct link between Tong Bei and Taiji. General Yu, making use of Qi's manual for troop training, could well have introduced Qi's ideas into the Shaolin Temple and this in turn might well have effected the development of Shaolin Tong Bei Quan.

General Chen Wang Ting, during his retirement in the Chen village, spent the second half of his life refining his martial skills and developing the Taiji internal arts concept. The Ming dynasty was under immense pressure of foreign invasion during his time. As a professional warrior it is reasonable to assume that General Chen Wang Ting was aware of Qi's manual and probably had to train in the movements himself. Eventually, incorporating the movements in the Taijiquan system and by a natural progression, Qi's manual and its content might well have found its way back to Hongdong County, Shanxi province.

An obvious aspect of similarity between Tong Bei and Taijiquan is that both systems are 'internal' in nature. Both adhere to a philosophy of 'unity' of force by utilising the entire body. Tong Bei practice can be used as preparation for Taijiquan training, and that Taijiquan training might well prepare the practitioner of Tong Bei for a deeper appreciation of that system. It's as if the two systems share a common essence in both history and development, and that both systems represent exactly the same energy production in two distinct manifestations of internal force (Qi). General Qi Jiguang's manual conveys to us the movements of 16 styles that existed in the 1500's, and perhaps before. Of course, each style of martial art – even the Taijiquan of the Chen village, lays claim to an ancient lineage. The acknowledgement that Qi's manual was highly influential in martial development at a time when China was under pressure from external sources, does not in anyway detract from the legitimacy of those lineage histories. In fact, it shows that despite the use of lineage, outside sources of influence could be used if the circumstances demanded such a course of action. With the slow disintegration of the Ming dynasty, such a circumstance to make martial arts effective in combat was a definite necessity. In addition, far from being different to the point of exclusion, Tong Bei Quan and Taijiquan are complimentary to one another. It is no surprise that both styles, at one time or another, have been referred to as Chang Quan or 'Long Fist'.

What can be seen from the historical narratives suggests that the similarities are more than just in name and that Tong Bei Quan and Taijiquan are in fact two manifestations of the same unified concept of martial energy use and development, albeit at differing stages of that development, stages marked by emphasis of training and 'intent'. The Long Fist structures are certainly suitable for immediate application to self-defence situations. And these applications would work with muscle force. However, as the years of training go by, the Qi energy of the practitioner 'unifies' throughout the body (Tong Bei concept) and eventually internalises from the creation of force outside of the bone in the muscle structures to the cultivating of force within the centre of the bone structures (Taiji concept). With the unified power of Tong Bei, there immediately follows the aligned posture of Taiji. And the momentum power of the 'swinging arm through the back' technique matures into the dropping and rising force of the Taijiquan system. Tong Bei represents horizontal force, and Taiji vertical, dropping and rising force.

"Tong Bei & Taijiquan adhere to a philosophy of 'unity' of force by utilising the entire body."

Both forms of force are variants upon a theme and both forms of energy expression at the advanced levels are three dimensional in effect. A master of the respective systems simply directs the force in the direction required. A Tong Bei practitioner may direct the horizontal force upward and downward, in any direction, and the Taiji counterpart will direct the dropping and rising force laterally, again in any orientation. Both systems develop unified energy use. The surface difference in movement and emphasis is indicative of differing starting points in martial development.

About Adrian Chan-Wyles Ph.D.:
Adrian Chan-Wyles, Ph.D., senior instructor UK Ch'an Dao Martial Arts Association - www.chan-dao.co.uk

Not all of the Chen clan migrated from Shanxi to Henan and it is known that interaction between the two groups continued overtime.

Family members travelled backward and forward between the two areas, possibly cross-fertilising martial development. In this regard, we know that;

"Tongbei Boxing of Hongdong district in Shanxi preserves records that relate this style to both Qi Jiguang's Boxing Classic and Taijiquan's old name of "Long Boxing".'
(Scholar Boxer: By M Wells – Page 23)