

# CH'AN MASTER REN XIANG (1909-2013) AND INTERNAL MARTIAL ARTS

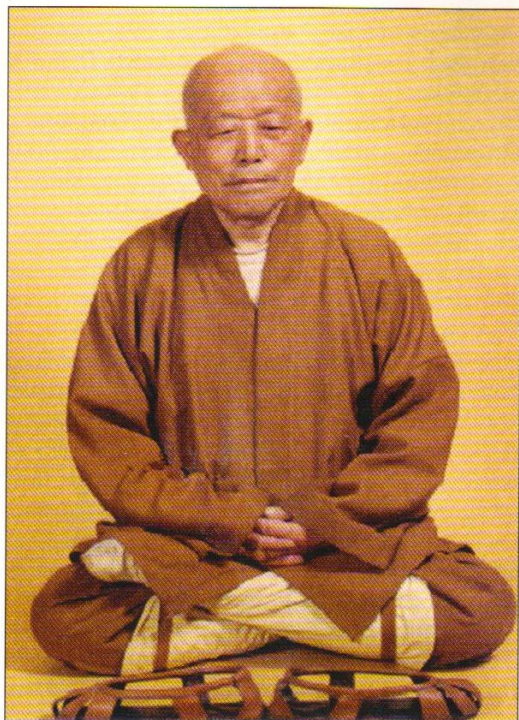
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*Translator's Note: This is an English translation of the original Chinese language text entitled '太极圆功禅拳简介', or 'Brief Introduction to Taiji Yuan Gong Ch'an Quan'. This text focuses on the life of the Ch'an Master Ren Xiang – who lived into his 105<sup>th</sup> year of life. As a layman, he practiced and mastered Taiji Yuan Gong – which can be described as a 'Daoist' martial art – and when he became an ordained Ch'an Buddhist monk, he found that the disciplined and austere lifestyle, (coupled with hours of intense seated meditation), allowed him to enter a whole new level of pristine awareness that in turn, facilitated a transformation in the psychological and physical practice of his art. In acknowledgement of this change, Master Ren Xiang changed the name of his style to 'Taiji Yuan Gong Ch'an Quan'. The term 'Ch'an Quan' can mean 'Meditation Fist', or 'Mind Fist', and refers to the Buddhist notion of enlightenment that penetrates the 'void' and the 'form' evenly. Master Ren Xiang's martial system is premised upon White Crane technique and trains its students to perfect both the 'hard' (external) and 'soft' (internal) energy circulation – so that qi flows freely throughout the body and mind without interruption or contradiction. This energy can be called upon at any moment to manifest whatever type of technique is required without hesitation. This is a direct demonstration of how the cultivated awareness associated with Ch'an Buddhism has directly influenced and evolved a martial arts style. ACW 31.1.15*

**T**he martial art known as 'Grand Ridgepole Circular Power Meditation Fist' (太极圆功禅拳- Taiji Yuan Gong Ch'an Quan) has evolved from the martial style known as 'Grand Ridgepole Circular Power' (太极圆功- Taiji Yuan Gong), and is a type of 'Grand Ridgepole Fist' (太极拳- Tai Ji Quan).

According to legend, Taiji Yuan Gong developed during the years between the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties. It is said that the Taiji Yuan Gong style dominated the other martial arts schools in existence, and was renowned for its martial arts experts (Gao Shou - 高手), who were invited by the Emperor to the inner courtyard of the imperial palace, to privately transmit the teachings of Taiji Yuan Gong to the crown prince – and thus spread this rare art – which became known as 'Imperial Court Fist' (宫廷拳 – Gong Ting Quan). During the latter years of the Qing Dynasty, this style had a good reputation and was known in eastern Beijing as 'Everywhere Li' (四季 – Si Li), due to the fast hands of Li En Rong (李恩荣). Li En Rong was a Grand Eunuch of the imperial



Great Master Ren Xiang (仁祥大师)

palace who served the Emperor in the inner courtyard. It was Li En Rong who accompanied the crown prince when he received instruction in Taiji Yuan Gong, and as a consequence, penetrated the teachings deeply and became an expert in his own right. The young crown prince would learn in the palace (during his recreational time) from important visitors who would teach him martial arts techniques. Li En Rong had a body shaped like a swallow, and possessed hands that moved fast like the wind. This is why he was known as 'Fast Hand Li En Rong' (快手李恩荣 – Kuai Shou Li En Rong), and was famous both inside and outside Beijing for his martial ability – along with 'Single Sword Li Cun Yi' (单刀李存义 – Dan Dao Li Cun Yi) – both names striking terror and respect in all those who knew of their martial reputations.

When the governor of Shandong's Weihai area heard of this, he successfully petitioned the Emperor to grant his request that Li En Rong be allowed to instruct his bodyguard, and this is how Li En Rong first taught Taiji Yuan Gong to the public. When Li En Rong took up the post in Weihai (Shandong), his expertise in martial arts became well-known (under the

name of 'Fast Hand Li') through his teaching of the Taiji Yuan Gong system, and many left their homes to travel to Weihai to seek instruction from a true master. At that time, Zhang Ke Kuan (张可宽) and his family lived in poverty and could not afford to pay for instruction, and so Fast Hand Li did not teach him martial arts. However, Zhang Ke Kuan stayed in the local area and survived by doing odd jobs and different types of chores, whilst frequently visiting and studying with other martial arts masters. Zhang studied 'Eight Trigram Palm' (八卦掌 – Ba Gua Zhang) and 'Form Intention Fist' (心意拳 – Xing Yi Quan). Every morning he would practice under a stone bridge by moving around a stone pillar and performing various martial techniques – striking the pillar as he moved in an evasive and circular manner.

In a few years, Zhang Ke Kuan became famous in the Weihai area for his martial skills after defeating all those who challenged him to a fight. Fast Hand Li heard of Zhang's growing reputation, and eventually let him fight with his own students. The result was that Zhang was defeated, but Fast Hand Li liked his dedication, spirit and intelligence, and allowed him to become a disciple in the Taiji Yuan Gong system. A few years after this, Zhang Ke Kuan reached the pinnacle of martial mastery.

Later, Zhang Ke Kuan travelled northeast to Jilin City (which is situated in Jilin province), where he acquired a boat on the Song Hua River (松花江 – Song Hua Jiang), and made a living as a fisherman. This is why he became known as 'Osprey Zhang' (鱼鹰张 – Yu Ying Zhang). One day, whilst visiting Jilin City, the head of the 'Chang Family Martial Arts Hall' (常家武术馆 – Chang Jia Wu Shu Guan) was walking along the bank of the Song Hua River when he saw a man stood controlling a boat as it floated down the centre of river, but without the use of oars or a rudder. His two feet stood balancing the centre of the boat, whilst his hands (and arms) formed the shape of a large circle – which he turned from left to right, and then back again from right to left. By doing this (whilst changing his foot position) he altered and steadied the direction of the boat as it moved through the water.

Whilst performing these subtle movements, he emitted a rhythmic sound, whilst more than ten large ospreys followed the boat on



**Mr Zhang Ke Kuan – third generation lineage inheritor of the Taiji Yuan Gong style of martial arts – also known as ‘Osprey Zhang’ – 1934 gathering fish from the Song Hua River.**

either side. As the boat moved down stream, the ospreys continuously brought captured fish and dropped them into the boat.

At that time the Chang Family Leader thought that this was extraordinary, and waited for a long time for the ship to approach the shore. After Zhang came ashore, the Chang Family Leader went forward to greet him. He said, “You are a person of high martial arts skill of real capability in the world. I have two children, and I would like to request that you teach them your skill in martial arts, and become their professor.” At that time, Zhang Ke Kuan refused to accept this invitation. However, the Chang Family Leader decided to wait everyday on the banks of the Song Hua River to greet Zhang every time he returned home. They used to chat together for over a month, and eventually began to call one another ‘younger brother’ and ‘elder brother’ (哥兄弟 – Ge Xiong Di). After this, Zhang agreed to be the Chang Family martial arts teacher. Through this opportunity, Zhang met and fought with many renowned martial artists from other styles, and defeated them all. The reputation of ‘Osprey Zhang’ - as an expert martial artist - spread far and wide.

The Great Master Ren Xiang (仁祥大师) was from Jilin City (in Jilin province), and was the

disciple of ‘Osprey Zhang’. The Great Master Ren Xiang is an eminent monk living in modern China. His lay-name was ‘Han Yin Bao’ (韩荫薄), and he is now a 96 year old (in 2005) senior citizen. He settled down at the Fragrant Tang Ch’an Temple (香唐禅院 – Xiang Tang Ch’an Yuan) in Beijing. During his early education, he graduated from Yuwen School (毓文学校 – Yu Wen Xue Xiao), and Changbai University (长白大学 – Chang Bai Da Xue), both situated in Jilin City.

During his childhood, Great Master Ren Xiang had a fondness for martial arts practice, and he trained hard in his martial cultivation (武功 – Wu Gong), and mastered the internal energy (i.e. ‘Qi’ - 气) through self-cultivation (内功 – Nei Gong). After graduating from university, his internal energy development (Nei Gong) was considered extensive – as through daily training he had passed every challenge – both great and small. After being introduced by a third-party, Great Master Ren Xiang went to the home of Zhang Ke Kuan, and in accordance with martial tradition, underwent a ritual formally confirming him as Zhang’s disciple. In this way, Ren Xiang thanked Master Zhang for accepting him as a student. The Great Master Ren Xiang practiced Taiji Yuan Gong day and night, and in the courtyard of his own home he constructed a ‘wooden stick post’ (木板桩 – Mu Ban Zhuang), or ‘wooden striking dummy’ to practice the techniques associated with ‘palm power-striking’ (掌力 – Zhang Li), which included pushing (推 – Tui), uprooting (撩 – Lian), shoulder pressing (肩靠 – Jian Kan), and stamping and kicking with the foot (脚蹬 – Jiao Deng), as well as other martial art movements.

After years of hard training, the Great Master Ren Xiang eventually acquired the true and genuine meaning of gongfu self-cultivation, through the continuous use of the wooden striking dummy, that allowed him to develop ‘internal power’ (内力 – Nei Li). He also mastered ‘martial cultivation’ (武功 – Wu Gong) to its highest and purest levels, so that his ‘fist skill’ (拳艺 – Quan Yi) was recognised as being of the highest excellence. In 1950, Great Master Ren Xiang ordained as a Buddhist monk on Mount Wutai (五台山 – Wu Tai Shan), and later transferred to the Chinese Buddhist Academy in Beijing. When living in the Ch’an Buddhist

temple, the Great Master Ren Xiang continued to practice Taiji Yuan Gong and perfect his internal strength, until qi flowed uninterrupted through the energy channels of the entire body. This new level of energy refinement and cultivation was the product of internal and external energy cultivation, which integrated with the power of the Dharma (功法 – Gong Fa) and its practice, (i.e. the practice of seated meditation, precept keeping, and hard agricultural work, etc.), thus fixing the martial art at its highest level of attainment and practice. The Great Master Ren Xiang possesses a profound and intricate knowledge of the deep interconnectedness of martial science (拳理 – Quan Li), and this is how he carried-out further theoretical research in the ongoing development of Taiji Yuan Gong. Through this advanced understanding, he evolved the style further, and it became 'Taiji Yuan Gong Ch'an Quan', in recognition of the Ch'an Buddhist influence in its development. In the 1980's, his name was included in a book entitled 'Shaolin Martial Training' (少林武功 – Shao Lin Wu Gong), recognizing him as a great master of the martial arts, who had numerous disciples in the Jilin and Beijing areas.



Great Master Ren Xiang and Old Master Yin Ku in Push-hands training (1997)

The martial art of Taiji Yuan Gong Ch'an Quan has many distinct components. In essence, its main features include the; integration of movement and stillness, left and right simultaneous awareness, enveloping circular manoeuvres, the law of dragon coil stepping, circular rolling and turning work, fast and slow mutually interchanging movements, and hard and soft mutually efficient movements.

1) Body Law (身法 – Shen Fa): The following principles of movement and placement must be observed with regard to the use of the body; keep the body central and upright so that it is calm and relaxed, move and place to cover (and guard) the four directions, remain impartial and free of bias (toward the use of physical techniques), allow empty spirit to permeate the inner body, and let relaxation permeate in all great directions of movement.

2) Stake Law (桩法 – Zhuang Fa): The following principles must be observed with regard to standing with a straight, tall, and aligned posture; the lower body must be trained through the laws governing power and strength building exercises in the legs, the front of the legs must not become blocked with the use of excessive force energy, withdrawing must be (without weakness) and full of strength (劲 – Jin) in all directions, stand upright like a single stake (桩 – Zhuang), even and straight in all directions, (let the bones and joints extend) like a stake floating on a cloud, 'Expand the chest to include the back, round the shoulders and drop the elbows, drop the breath (气 – Qi) so that the vital energy gathers as if in an ocean, and the essential spirit becomes strong and all-pervading.'

3) Step Law (步法 – Bu Fa): The following principles must be observed with regard to footwork. Correct timing is of the utmost importance when advancing and retreating. Learn to clearly distinguish between the 'empty' (虚 – Xu) and 'solid' (实 – Shi), and how to transition from one state to the other with ease. When advancing and retreating, the aligned torso and waist must be united through correct 'intention' (意 – Yi), so that the transformation is seamless. This is why the training method known as 'Dragon Entwining a Stake' (龙盘桩 – Long Pan Zhuang) is a unique training aid for the development of (spiralling) power.

4) Open Hand Law (手法 – Shou Fa): The following principles must be observed with regard

to training the hands and arms. The hands and arms must follow the method of being loose, rounded and relaxed. There should be a smooth and efficient interaction between 'hard' (刚 – Gang) and 'soft' (柔 – Rou) techniques. The movements should be continuously spiralling, evading and turning so that the arcs and circles vary in size from large to small, etc. This is the unique training open hand method known as the 'Shade Light Fish' (阴阳鱼 – Yin Yang Yu).

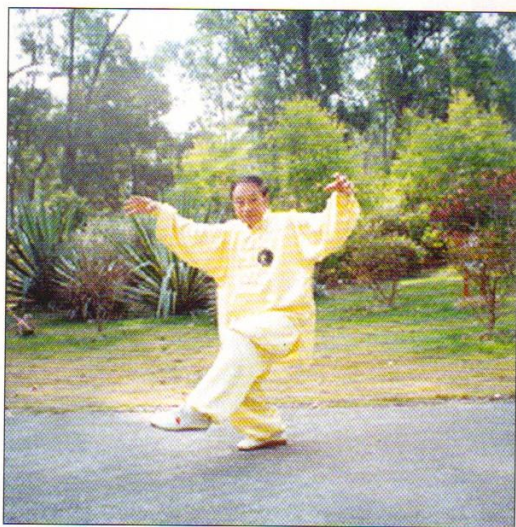
5) Eye Law (眼法 – Yan Fa): The following principles must be observed with regard to training the eyes. Cultivate 'intention' (意 – Yi) with regards to the development of vision through the eyes, and allow this 'awareness' to permeate the hands, feet, and the entire body equally. This is how the hand and eye, 'internal' and 'external', and 'stillness' and 'movement' are integrated together.

The four generative functions (四种功能 – Si Zhong Gong Neng) are also referred to as the four stakes of awe-inspiring deportment (威仪四桩 – Wei Yi Si Zhuang) which are: a) the hands should strike like a meteor (流星 – Liu Xing), b) the eyes should be full of electricity (电 – Dian), c) the waist should move in a circular fashion – like wheels on an axel (车轮 – Che Lun), and d) the feet should probe and penetrate (钻 – Zuan) into the ground. Other important abilities include standing like a pine (松 – Song), moving like the wind (风 – Feng), crouching like a drawn bow (弓 – Gong), and strongly sitting like a bell (钟 – Zhong). The 'intention' (意 – Yi) must be cultivated so that the inner energy (内气 – Nei Qi) is directed to the 'bubbling springs' (涌泉 – Yong Quan) pressure points which exist in the centre of each foot – just below the toe area of the sole. The 'intention' (意 – Yi) must be cultivated so that the inner energy can flow uninterrupted through the waist (腰 – Yao) area. The Taiji Yuan Gong Ch'an Quan style is influenced by animal movements from the 'crane' (鹤 – He), 'wild goose' (雁 – Yan), 'sparrow hawk' (鹞 – Yao), 'eagle' (鹰 – Ying), 'dragon' (龙 – Long), 'tiger' (虎 – Hu), 'horse' (马 – Ma), 'bear' (熊 – Xiong), chicken (鸡 – Ji), 'sheep' (羊 – Yang), 'snake' (蛇 – She) and 'monkey' (猴 – Hou) – over-all there are movements from twelve animals. This is in accordance with the principles of Taijiquan (太极拳), particularly with regard to the 'softness' (柔 – Rou), 'holding' (抱 – Bao),

and 'rolling' (滚 – Gun) of the 'ball' (球 – Qiu) – or the ever-moving and rounded position adopted by the arms and hands in all-pervasive 'holding the ball', etc.

The Old Master Yin Ku (尹库老师 – Yin Ku Lao Shi) is the Great Master Ren Xiang's disciple. He is from Jilin City, situated in Jilin province. When young he trained at the 'Prestigious Refinement Martial Art Hall' (颜斌武术馆 – Yan Bin Wu Shu Guan) situated in Jilin City, which is a training school for Shaolin Boxing (少林拳 – Shao Lin Quan). In 1966, the Old Master Yin Ku paid his respects to Martial Arts Master Yun Xiang (云祥武师 – Yun Xiang Wu Shi), and officially became his disciple. He studied and mastered 'Eight Ridge-pole Fist' (八极拳 – Ba Ji Quan), the 'Curved Sword' (刀 – Dao), and 'Spring and Autumn Big Sword' (春秋大刀 – Chun Qiu Da Dao), as well as other martial equipment. In 1973, he became the disciple of the Great Master Ren Xiang, and dedicated himself to the practice of Taiji Yuan Gong Ch'an Quan.

Regardless of the time of year—be it spring, summer, autumn, or winter—the Old Master Yin Ku trained very hard every day and did not give in to fatigue or suffering. In this way the mind and body was carefully trained through the systematic study of the science of the fist (拳理 – Quan Li). He followed the Great Master Ren Xiang southward to Jiangbei (拳理) in Zhejiang province, to continue his training, and learned all methods of the art (including eye positioning, body positioning, techniques, stances and footwork, etc.) directly from him without exception. This is how the Old Teacher Yin Ku learned the complete martial art of 'Taiji Yuan Gong Ch'an Quan' from the Great Master Ren Xiang, as well as the martial system known as 'Eighty Eight Style Single Type Intercepting Hand' (八十八式单式散手 – Ba Shi Ba Shi Dan Shi San Shou), including 'Stake Cultivation' (桩功 – Zhuang Gong), 'Internal Cultivation' (内功 – Nei Gong), 'Extending Life' (延寿 – Yan Zhou) and 'Health Improving' (养生 – Yang Sheng) techniques, as well as other types of 'Cultivation Exercises' (功夫 – Gong Fu). Today, this training has been ongoing for over 30 years, and the Old Master Yin Ku has steadily progressed in his martial cultivation, and thoroughly learned all the components of an authentic 'Fist Skill'



**Old Master Yin Ku – White Crane Displays Wings**

(拳艺 – Quan Yi). His martial skill (武林 – Wu Lin), has been admired by both his colleagues and scholars alike, and he has been formally acknowledged the authentic second generation descendent of the Great Master Ren Xiang – taking on the responsibility of preserving and propagating the art of ‘Taiji Yuan Gong Ch’an Quan’ for future generations.

The Old Teacher Yin Ku developed the ‘Two Pattern Fists’ (两套拳 – Liang Tao Quan) technique of the ‘Shade Light Fish’ (阴阳鱼 – Yin Yang Yu) method. He states that this technique has been part of the Taiji Yuan Gong Ch’an Quan system since 1995. The ‘One Path Fist’ (一路拳 – Yi Lu Quan) requires mastery of only the ‘soft’ (柔 – Rou) energy technique, but Taiji Yuan Gong Ch’an Quan is a ‘Two Path Fist’ (二路拳 – Er Lu Quan) that requires the mastery of the efficient interchange of ‘hard’ (刚 – Gang) and ‘soft’ (柔 – Rou) power, orchestrated through the correct practice of the unique ‘Shade Light Fish’ (阴阳鱼 – Yin Yang Yu) method.

The biography of the Old Master Yin Ku was included in the 2002 compendium entitled ‘Contemporary Chinese Martial Arts Encyclopaedia’ (当代中华武术大典 – Dang Dai Zhong Hua Wu Shu Da Dian), in Volume II ‘Chinese Taiji Practitioners’ (中华太极人物志 – Zhong Hua Tai Ji Ren Wu Zhi). The Old Master Yin Ku is now 67 years old, and has participated in many different martial arts competitions held in the various provinces of China – with outstanding

results. During November 2004, he participated in the Shenzhen City Martial Arts Association’s (深圳市武术协会 – Shen Zhen Shi Wu Shu Xie Hui) 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary for Martial Arts Practitioners, and in December 2004, he participated in Shenzhen City’s 6<sup>th</sup> Traditional Martial Arts Competition (传统武术比赛 – Chuan Tong Wu Shu Bi Sai) Opening Ceremony. In April 2005, he travelled to Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan and demonstrated the ‘Taiji Yuan Gong Ch’an Quan’ martial art, together with the ‘Shade Light Fish’ method – both of which met with universal approval.

Prior to these more recent achievements, in 1996 the Old Master Yin Ku had already reached the 6<sup>th</sup> level of martial arts proficiency in China – and as a consequence was able to both instruct martial arts and referee martial arts competitions nationwide. In Jilin, he was the training hall manager of the ‘Divine-sky Prestigious Martial Arts Hall’ (天威武术馆 – Tian Wei Wu Shu Guan), as well as being the Chief Instructor of Jilin province’s ‘Martial Arts Association for the Grand Ridge-pole Fist’ (武术协会太极拳 – Wu Shu Xie Hui Tai Ji Quan). He was also the Branch Deputy-Secretary General of the Shenzhen City’s ‘Martial Arts Association of the Lotus Flower Mountain Grand Ridge-pole Fist’ (武术协会莲花山太极拳 – Wu Shu Xie Hui Lian Hua Shan Tai Ji Quan), and he carried-out all these innovative activities whilst still being the Chief Instructor of the Taiji Yuan Gong Ch’an system and popularising martial arts through teaching widely. His contribution to authentic Chinese martial arts has been extensive. ■

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Adrian Chan-Wyles is an independent scholar (and published author) living in the UK. He has been a ‘work scholar’ for Dr. Rupert Sheldrake of Cambridge University, and holds a Philosophy of Mind Certificate from Oxford University. He is the custodian of The Richard Hunn Association for Ch’an Study (<http://wenshuchan-online.weebly.com>), and has written for *The Middle Way*—the journal of the Buddhist Society, London. He holds a PhD in (spiritual) Metaphysics, and writes extensively upon the subjects of Chinese history, philosophy, the paranormal and martial culture. As a Ch’an adept, he continues the lineage of master Xu Yun (1840-1959), as handed down to Charles Luk (1898-1978), and conveyed by Richard Hunn (1949-2006). ©Copyright: Adrian Chan-Wyles (ShiDaDao) 2015.