



Figure 1  
Chinese Calligraphy  
of Tai Chi

The taiji concept first enters the lexicon of Chinese philosophy during the third century BC of the Warring States Period (453-221 BC). This time itself witnessed the slow decline and disintegration of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-256 BC) into seven self-contained regional states, militarily vying with one another for power and influence. A time of immense destruction and loss of human life, fate eventually saw the emergence of the state of Qin as military victor and the establishment of a unified China under the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC). The earliest mention of the taiji concept occurs within a commentary text of the *Zhuangzi*, or *Book of Changes*. This commentary serves as one of ten chapters which were added to the *Book of Changes* between 500 BC and perhaps 100 AD. Collectively, they are referred to as the 'Ten Wings' (or *shen*), and serve to explain the concept of 'change' (or *yi*), and how an enlightened person is expected to act, so as to be in accordance with change. The taiji concept first appears in the fifth commentary of the *Ten Wings*, which is believed to have been written around the third century BC.

At this point of its origination, the taiji concept has no symbolic representation attached to it other than the Chinese ideograms (refer to Figure 1 - both characters), which appear in the early commentary of the *Book of Changes*. The black and white roundels (associated associated today with the taiji) concept, are in fact representative of the yin-yang theory, and not the taiji concept. Other the last two thousand years, the two distinct concepts

the 'outermost', and certainly suggests that which is transcendent of the ordinary in both remoteness and superiority. It is beyond 'great', and is often translated into English as 'grand', or 'supreme'. It is a prefix that denotes an extreme contextual 'specialness'. The ideogram for 'yi' (refer to 2nd Character of Figure 1) however, is practical and shows a supporting beam, or ridge pole that is used to hold up a roof of a house or granary store. It is a central pillar of support. This pillar, when viewed philosophically, is considered to be universal in nature, as it unites the earth with what is above, and the above with what is below. As it unites the 'above', with the 'below', it may be considered an 'ultimate' expression of balance. Taken together, the concept taiji may be translated into English as Grand Ultimate.

The Chinese ideogram for 'tai' (refer to 1st Character of Figure 1) translates as the 'highest', or

## The Taiji concept and the development of Yin-Yang symbolism

by Adrian Chan-Wyles

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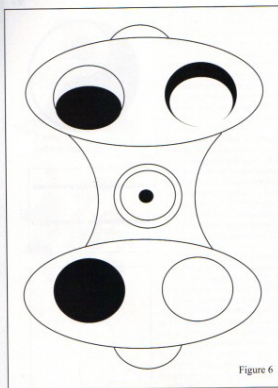


Figure 6  
al development and attainment

The Five Ranks System, again makes use of the light and dark element to express inner spiritual attainment. This is significant as it represents a core philosophical expression that runs through the creation of symbolic representation in ancient China. With Yang representing 'light', and yin representing 'dark'. The implication being that through the regulation of the breath, and the focusing of the mind, the qienergy can be so regulated so as to refine its essential quality and thus 'up lift' the aspiring spiritual seeker to new heights of wisdom, knowledge and physical ability. This trend is continued with the wuji tu, or diagram attributed to Chen Tuan (Chen Xiyi 906-986), a Daoist

The neo-Confucian scholar, Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073), adapted the wuji tu to Chen Tuan, and re-interpreted it to fit into a distinctly Confucian philosophical framework. In so doing however, Zhou may well have been working toward a philosophical common ground between Daoism and Confucianism. Zhou renamed the wuji tu as the taiji tu. The diagram of 'unlimitedness' had been transformed into the diagram of the 'Grand Ultimate'. This is the first time in history that the term 'taiji' had been attributed to a developmental diagram. Zhou Dunyi's taiji tu serves as the first reliable example of a yin-yang symbolism, given the name 'taiji'. Zhou's diagram looks like this:

have become philosophically associated with one another, even though they both denote particular ways of viewing the universe. In its originality, the taiji concept itself has little to do with the yin-yang theory, or the development of the system of round symbols, based upon it. To understand this, a study of yin-yang symbolic development must be undertaken.

The modern yin-yang symbol (see Fig. 2) is named the taiji tu in Chinese, literally translating as 'grand ultimate symbol'. However, what the symbol actually shows, is the interplay between the forces of light and dark. That is, between yang and yin respectively. The ideogram for 'yang' represents the sun shining upon a hill, while the ideogram for 'yin' denotes a cloud 'covering' the sun, so that light does not shine upon the hill. There is no hint within these two ideograms of a supporting beam. Yang may be interpreted therefore, as 'light', and yin as 'shade', or an 'absence' of light. The yin-yang concept is designed to explain the fading or appearing of light.

The earliest extant writings regarding the concept of yin and yang date from about the fifth century BC. Within the *Ten Wings* commentaries of the *Book of Changes* mentioned above, the concept of yin-yang was gradually incorporated into the ancient book of divination, with a single straight line representing 'yang', and a broken line representing 'yin' (refer to Figure 3).

Although various symbols have appeared on early Shang bronzes (that are believed to be representative of natural forces), the earliest round symbolism of the interplay of yin and yang has been represented by the phases of the moon. Although there is no direct evidence that the line symbolism of the *Zhuangzi* served as the basis for the concept of the

rounded symbol, there follows a logical explanation (based in the geometry of *Feng Shui*) of how a straight line and a broken line may theoretically evolve into a rounded symbol. Making use of the space available, and moulding the linear structures into curves, or indeed 'dots', and expanding the lines to create 'shading'.

During the Jin Dynasty (265-420 AD), the Daoist immortal known as Po Yang Wei compiled a manual regarding neidan, or Daoist internal meditation. He used the six observable phases of the moon (refer to Fig. 5), as stages significant of inner development, reflecting the interchange of light and dark energy, or qi.

Some four hundred years later, during the Tang Dynasty (618-907AD), the Ch'an school of Chinese Buddhism was flourishing. And in a particular school of Ch'an, the so-called Caodong school, rounded symbols were used (along with trigrams and hexagrams from the *Yijing*, or *Book of Changes*). Founded by master Dong Shan (806-869), and perpetuated by his Dharma successor master Cao Shan (940-901), five rounded symbols (refer to Fig. 6), similar to those used by Po Yang Wei, were designed to signify and represent meditation.

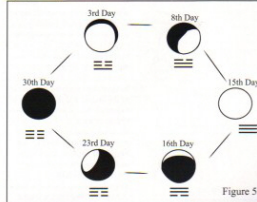


Figure 5

TAI CHI



Figure 2  
Yin-Yang symbol

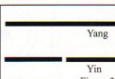


Figure 3

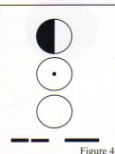


Figure 4

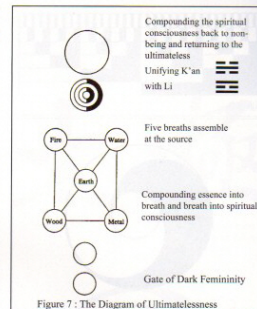


Figure 7: The Diagram of Ultimatelessness

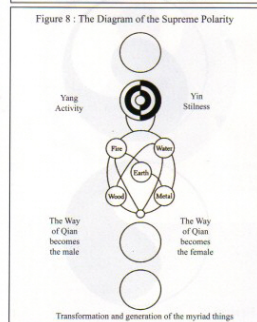


Figure 8: The Diagram of the Supreme Polarity

His interpretation however, runs directly counter to that of Chen Tuan's. Whereas Chen builds his diagram from the base upward, Zhou re-interprets the diagram (refer to Fig. 8) from the top downward. Effectively reversing the original Daoist position. However, Zhou emphasises balance over chaos. He asserts the 'wuji' is found in the 'taiji', and that through the correct balancing of the yin and yang energy, the 'five phases' work in balance. The last two circles at the bottom of Zhou's version of the diagram are not clearly explained. In both Chen Tuan's and Zhou Dunyi's diagrams, yin and yang are clearly represented by a rounded symbol, with light and shaded parts.

A contemporary of Zhou Dunyi - the Daoist and Confucian scholar Shao Yong (1011-1077) must also be mentioned for a diagram he created, again using the 'light' and 'dark' shading to represent the yin-yang ideal, as a theoretical manifestation of the taiji concept. Thus demonstrating a general philosophical trend during the Song, to link the taiji concept to the distinct yin-yang theory.

Zhou Dunyi's taiji tu does not resemble the common yin-yang symbol found the world over today. It does however, contain a crucial symbolic representation of yin-yang theory in a rounded form. The association of the term 'taiji', with a 'rounded' symbolic representation of the yin-yang theory, begins with Zhou's diagram. Prior to the Song Dynasty (960-1279), the term 'taiji' remained obscure and was usually considered synonymous with the Daoist term 'wuji' (or Grand Oneness), that is first seen in Chinese philosophical writing around the 3rd century BC, the approximate date for the writing of certain elements of the *Book of Changes*, where the

Compounding the spiritual consciousness back to non-being and returning to the ultimateless  
Unifying K'an with Li

Five breaths assemble at the source

Compounding essence into breath and breath into spiritual consciousness

Gate of Dark Femininity

Figure 7: The Diagram of Ultimatelessness

Figure 8: The Diagram of the Supreme Polarity

Yang Activity

Yin Stillness

The Way of Qian becomes the male

The Way of Kun becomes the female

Transformation and generation of the myriad things

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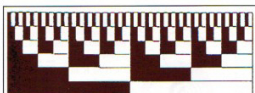


Figure 9



Figure 10

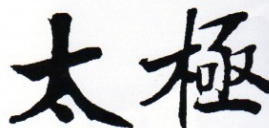
term 'taiji' is first encountered. Neither concept of 'taiji' or 'taiji' suggests link with yin and yang theory, which appears to have developed in a quite independent manner, prior to the Song Dynasty. Before this time, 'taiji' had no symbolic representation, outside of the Chinese ideograms designed to express the concept. Whereas, prior to the Song, many examples of yin-yang roundels exist. By equating 'wuji' with 'taiji', Zhou Dunyi single-handedly created a philosophical position, whereby the abstract concept of 'wuji' became associated (and then subsumed) by the light-dark symbolic representation of the yin-yang theory. To such an extent, that today, the term 'taiji' is synonymous with the term 'yin-yang'. Much philosophical speculation and interpretation has been applied to justify this position, but the fact remains that prior to the Song, the 'taiji' concept had no association whatsoever with the yin-yang theory. This revelation is important for martial history, as prior to the Song Dynasty, a style of 'taiji' is recorded. During the Later Liang Dynasty (907-923), Han Gongyue is said to have taught Cheng Xing Li a martial art called '14 patterns of taijitraining'. Having distinguished himself in battle, Cheng is said to have been awarded by the government of the day, with the governorship of five counties. Whatever this style was, it is doubtful that it incorporated the yin-yang theory. As the taiji concept at this time was not generally well known, and as yet still unassociated with the yin-yang theory, it is more probable that the style was based upon the Chinese ideograms used to represent the concept. Namely, the 'ridge-pole' of the 'ji' particle, that supports that which is above, with that with is below. All energy (qi) traversing the central column or supporting beam. If this is the case then this is very similar to the 'long be' (or 'tough back') concept of

power development found within Longfist martial systems and may suggest a contextual link between the two styles.

Whatever the case, the taiji-quan styles that developed well after the Song Dynasty, show the yin-yang influence at work. Zhou Dunyi's association of the 'taiji' concept with the 'yin-yang' theory, has been clearly integrated into the physical technique and philosophical underpinning of modern taijiquan. And the fact that an art based upon the yin-yang theory is called 'taiji' is further evidence that these styles must have developed after the Song Dynasty. It is interesting to note, that the contemporary taiji tu symbol (refer to Figure 10) that represents the interchange of yin and yang, also developed sometime after the Song. Its exact date of origin is unknown, but as a rounded symbol, it has many representations.

It is a yin-yang symbol, ingenious in its direct simplicity, named after an abstract concept found within the commentary chapters of the Book of Changes. An abstract concept that has had at least two martial systems named after it (that is pre-Song taiji, and post-Song 'taijiquan'), which may have influenced the development of early long bei northern martial systems. If the original 'taiji' concept allowed for stability and centred power, then the interchange of the yin-yang theory, allowed in turn, the ability to maintain that stability whilst moving in a fluid and relaxed manner. The modern yin-yang symbol is often viewed as a cross-section of the original 'Grand Ultimate'. As a distinct and easily recognisable symbol, it developed over thousands of years. Amalgamating many differing symbolic roundel representations of the yin-yang theory, until the now famous form of the 'double fish' appeared. This seems to have been towards the latter part of

the Song Dynasty. The works of the neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi (1130-1200) – particularly his commentaries upon the Book of Changes, are said to contain this symbol.



Pre-Song Dynasty Taiji ideograms - Grand Ridge-pole



Post-Song Dynasty Yin-Yang symbol of the taiji tu

#### About the Author

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