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Annual summer wrestling matches among garrison troops held in the Great Buddha Monastery Grounds, Beijing. From *Dianshizhai Huabao* [*Dianshizhai Illustrated News*], 1884.

# The Chinese Martial Arts in Historical Perspective

by Stanley E. Henning  
Combined Forces Command

**T**HE Chinese martial arts, or *wushu* as they are called in China today, are a fascinating yet little understood and inadequately researched aspect of Chinese history. Now comprising Chinese boxing and various weapons techniques practiced in China primarily as a form of exercise and sport, they are all too often wrongly associated outside of China with mystic, martial monks in their mountain monasteries, and called by the none too descriptive term "Kung Fu." This misunderstanding has arisen as a result of two widely accepted, deeply ingrained, and hard to quash myths: one attributing the origins of Chinese boxing to the Indian monk, Bodhidharma, who, according to tradition, is said to have resided in the famous Shaolin Monastery around 525 A.D.; and the other attributing the origins of *taijiquan*, or Chinese shadow boxing as it is sometimes called in the West, to the mythical Taoist hermit, Zhang Sanfeng, whose dates have never been confirmed, but who is variously said to have lived during the Song, Yuan, or Ming Dynasties, sometime between the tenth and fourteenth centuries A.D. The groundless nature of these myths was exposed as early as the 1930s by the pioneer martial arts historian, Tang Hao (1897-1959), and his contemporary, Xu Jedong; however, their persistence to the present continues to be revealed in numerous books published on

the subject in Chinese as well as other languages. This article will therefore, attempt to paint a picture of the Chinese martial arts in proper perspective, based on available historical evidence and will, in the process, hopefully extract them from the realm of myth and pave the way for placing them in the realm of reputable historical research.

Centuries before the Christian era, scattered references were made to various forms of Chinese martial arts, which included archery, wrestling, weapons techniques, and probably boxing; however, the terminology used in many of these early references does not clearly distinguish between boxing and weapons techniques, possibly because of their inseparable relationship, the former being the foundation for the latter. To gain a better appreciation of the makeup of the early martial arts, one can refer to the archaeological record, which includes a variety of swords, knives, spears, axes, and halberds. Over the centuries, the types of weapons proliferated, but a basic 18 eventually became the standard. Currently only four are stressed in Chinese nationwide *wushu* competition: double-edged straight sword, single-edge broad knife, staff, and spear.<sup>1</sup>

Among the early works associated with the Confucian tradition, the *Rites of Zhou* (second century B.C.?) lists six arts to be

mastered by the educated or morally superior man (*junzi*): rites, archery, charioteering, music, calligraphy, and mathematics. Archery and charioteering were clearly military-related skills, and even music contained an element of martial skill in the form of ritual “civil” and “military” dances, the latter incorporating weapons techniques. These dances contained a practical as well as ritual aspect, however — that of a training device which tied together various fighting techniques or forms into sets providing the “dancer” with a safe, convenient method of perfecting them. Early writing, to include the famous *Shiji* (Historical Records, 91 B.C.), show that these dances were performed with the sword, broad knife, and halberd.<sup>2</sup> Sword dancing was especially prevalent during the Tang Dynasty (618-906 A.D.). The famous Tang poet, Li Bo, was an accomplished swordsman, and his friend, the poet Du Fu, dedicated a poem to the skillfully-performed sword dance of a Madam Gongsun. This perfection of form in dance-like maneuvers has been an outstanding characteristic of the Chinese martial arts through the ages, and is the essence of *wushu* as practiced in China today.<sup>3</sup> It has apparently also led to misunderstandings by some Western scholars in their attempts to trace the origins of the martial arts. For example, even Joseph Needham’s monumental work, *Science and Civilization in China*, has, I believe, erroneously associated the origins of Chinese boxing with Taoism based on observation of this dance-like phenomenon. According to Needham, “Chinese boxing (Chhuan po), an art with rules different from that of the West, and embodying a certain element of ritual dance, . . . probably originated as a department of Taoist physical exercises.”<sup>4</sup> In the first place, Chinese boxing was originally a combat skill, not a sport like Western boxing. The ritual aspect has just been explained above. Finally, although Chinese boxing has been associated with Taoist practices, a more likely theory is that these practices were applied to already existing boxing styles, *taijiquan* being an outstanding example.

The *Han History* bibliographies (*Hanshu Yiwenzhi* completed around 90 A.D.) provide the first broad definition of the martial



Xu Ning teaching the use of the hooked spear. Illustration from *Shuihuzhuan* [Water Margin Illustrations], engraved by Rongyutang, Ming Dynasty (rpt. Shanghai: Zhonghua, 1965).

arts, which constituted one of four categories under the major heading, “Military Writings.” They are defined simply as “skills” or “techniques” to practice use of the hands and feet, and to facilitate the use of weapons to gain victory through offense or defense. Based on the bibliographical listing, these skills included archery, fencing, boxing, and even an ancient game of football (*cujū*) for agility and maneuver in the field. The entry on boxing, or *shoubo* as it was called, appears to be the earliest clearly identifiable reference to Chinese boxing. Commentaries on the entry differentiate *shoubo* from wrestling, which was categorized as a military sport as opposed to a combat skill.<sup>5</sup>

The Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) was a period during which conscript armies, trained in the martial arts, expanded the Chinese empire to Turkestan in the west and Korea in the northeast, where commanderies were established. It is possible that Chinese *shoubo* was transmitted to Korea at this time, and that it was the antecedent to Korean Taekwondo. According to one recent Korean source, “Taekwondo is known to have had its beginning in the period 209-427 A.D. . . .”<sup>6</sup> The Chinese commanderies continued in existence in Korea throughout much of this period.

The Tang Dynasty (618-906 A.D.) saw the beginning of an official examination system for recruiting and promoting the military bureaucracy, similar to that already established for the civil bureaucracy. Skill in archery, using the composite short bow from horseback and on foot, remained a major requirement tested during periods when the examinations were in effect, until their termination in 1902. Additional requirements included tests of strength, martial arts skill, and written tests involving passages from the military classics. The only substantive change to these examinations came during the Reform Movement of 1898, when rifle marksmanship began being tested alongside archery.<sup>7</sup>

**B**y the time of the Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), the military manpower system had evolved into one consisting to varying degrees, during different periods, of a professional standing army led by the military bureaucracy, and supplemented by a peasant militia and additional recruitment as necessary.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the martial arts were disseminated amongst an ever broader segment of the population. Under this system, individuals versed in the martial arts were found throughout the population. Many of these were, or had been, military drill instructors such as some of the characters portrayed in the popular fourteenth-century novel, *Shuihuzhuan* (*Water Margin*). A sampling of famous Chinese who received instruction from such individuals includes Song Dynasty patriot, Yue Fei (1103-1141 A.D.); Ming Dynasty generals, Qi Jiguang (1528-1587 A.D.) and Yu Dayou (1503-1580 A.D.); and Qing Dynasty scholars, Gu Yanwu (1613-1682 A.D.) and Yan Yuan (1635-1704 A.D.), to name just a few.<sup>9</sup>

Ming Dynasty general, Qi Jiguang provides us with the best example of a martial arts training program for a force recruited amongst the peasantry. In 1558, Qi recruited about 3,000 men in Yiwu, Zhejiang Province and, through a strict training regimen, melded them into a highly effective fighting force for his campaigns against Japanese and indigenous pirates in China’s coastal provinces. He emphasized training in practical weapons techniques and denounced what he termed the “flowery” techniques then prevalent (probably in reference to emphasis placed on the superficial, outward appearance in practicing sets as opposed to the practical aspect). He scheduled martial arts proficiency tests four times a year, and those who did well were promoted and rewarded, while those whose technique failed to meet prescribed standards were disciplined.<sup>10</sup>

Qi further stressed the proper match of men to weapons in combined arms training. The young and agile were issued cane shields, broad knives, and javelins. Sturdy, mature adults were issued weapons called *langxians* (these were special defensive

weapons, possibly designed by Qi himself, made of lengths of thick bamboo with from 9 to 11 joints of protruding, sharpened branches to prevent the enemy from breaking through a formation. Some were shaped like bamboo but made of iron). Daring, spirited men in their early thirties were issued long spears, and those with slightly lesser qualifications were issued shorter-poled weapons such as tridents, halberds, and staves. These weapons complemented each other in a basic 12-man formation called the *yuanyang* or Mandarin Duck (always shown in pairs) formation, so-called because it could be further divided into two teams of six based on the circumstances of enemy and terrain. Direct fire support was provided by archers, musketeers, and rocket troops.

Qi recorded the basic weapons techniques and standards in his *New Book of Effective Discipline* (1561). He reserved the last chapter for boxing, noting that, although it did not appear useful in preparing for large-scale combat, it served as the basic foundation for all the weapons techniques. Based on his research of about 16 known styles of boxing, Qi developed a practical 32-form set to train his volunteers. Interestingly, about half of the 32 forms illustrated in his manual have the same or similar names as forms found in present day *taijiquan*, and virtually all the forms shown can be found in either the old Chen style or more popular Yang style *taijiquan*, both of which are practiced in China today.<sup>11</sup>

In compiling his martial arts manual, Qi listed the well-known boxing styles and weapons techniques of his day, including a staff fighting set named after the Shaolin Monastery located on Mount Song in Henan Province. His omission of any reference to a boxing style named after the monastery is significant, and is consistent with other Ming period works on the subject. For example, Cheng Zhongdou (1522-1587 A.D.), in his *Explanation of the School of Shaolin Staff Technique*, notes that the monks were working on their boxing technique, which had not gained a nationwide reputation, in hopes of raising it to the level of the highly-polished staff technique. Thus, the boxing practiced at the monastery was apparently not considered noteworthy enough to warrant naming it after the monastery and listing it among the

better-known styles.<sup>12</sup> Qi Jiguang's comrade-in-arms, Yu Dayou, wrote that the Shaolin monks were said to have practiced fencing in the past, but had lost their skill. Yu taught his sword technique to a young Shaolin monk named Zongji, who was a campfollower for a time during Yu's anti-pirate campaigns.<sup>13</sup>

Historically, the fighting fame of Shaolin Monastery can be traced to several recorded incidents during its long history (first built around 496 A.D.), which won its residents the appellation "Shaolin Monk-Soldiers." Two of these incidents are particularly worth mentioning here. First, in 621 A.D., the monks are said to have assisted Tang Emperor Taizong in quelling a rebellion by Wang Shichong, for which the monastery was rewarded. What fighting techniques they used is not recorded, but it is safe to say that they probably used a variety of weapons as opposed to boxing. In the other incident, during the Ming Jiaqing period (1522-1566 A.D.), the monks were summoned by the provincial military governor to assist in defending against pirates in the Songjiang area near Shanghai. A monk called Yue Kong reportedly responded to the call and led some 30 of his followers into battle armed with iron staves. After reportedly dispatching a large number of the enemy they themselves were all killed on the field of battle. Ming period literature contains other scattered references to the martial arts practice of some of the Shaolin monks, which included staff, sword, whip, halberd, and boxing. One piece even describes a monk demonstrating monkey-style fighting technique (monkey boxing was one of the known styles recorded by Qi Jiguang). So, while some of the monks apparently did practice boxing, they appear to have practiced the known styles of the day. In any case, through the end of the Ming period there is no record of a unique Shaolin style of boxing. It was not until after the establishment of the foreign Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 A.D.) that stories associating Shaolin Monastery with a style of boxing began to appear.<sup>14</sup>

**C**HINESE resentment toward Manchu (Qing) rule provided fertile soil for the growth of secret societies and a proliferation of martial arts styles and myths surrounding their origins.

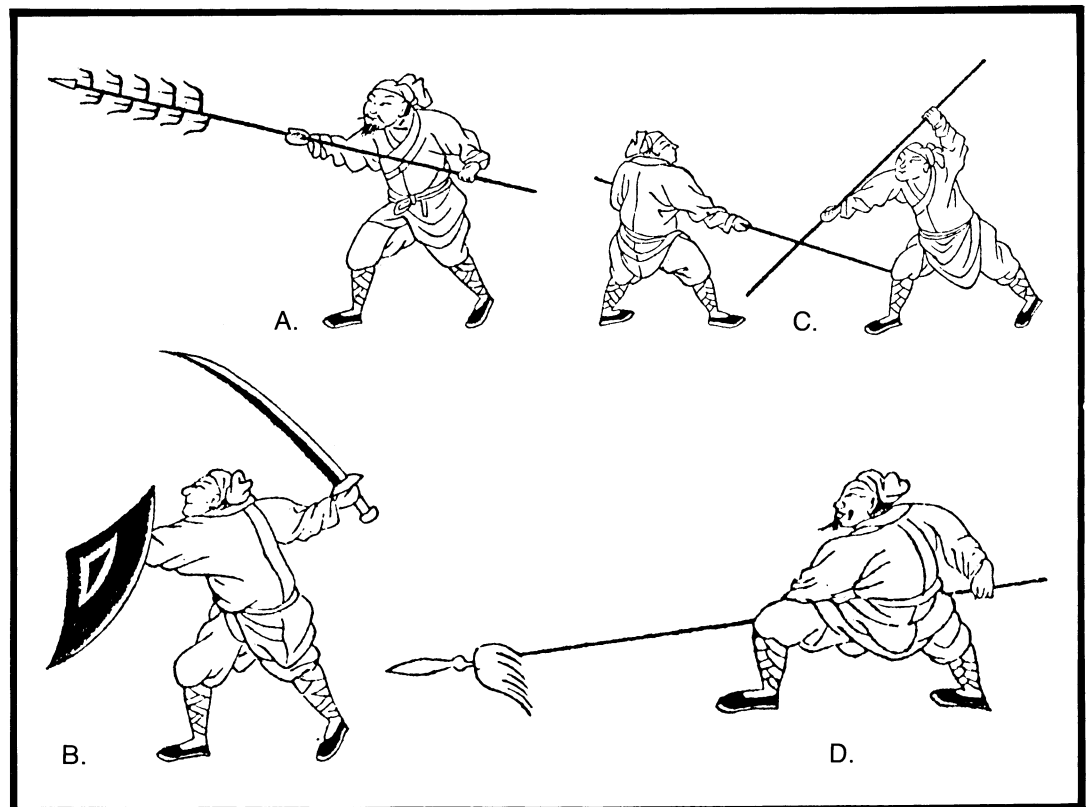
A. Langzian

B. Broad knife and cane shield.

C. Staff fighting technique.

D. Long spear.

From Qi Jiguang's *New Book of Effective Discipline* (rpt. in *Xuejintaoyuan*, vol. 95, early 20th century edition).



Many Confucian scholars refused to serve the new Manchu regime, and, in 1727, 83 years after establishment of the dynasty, Ming loyalists were still actively plotting the overthrow of the government. Among the uncompromising scholars were Huang Zongxi (1610-1695 A.D.), Gu Yanwu, and Yan Yuan, all of whom, to some degree, encouraged martial arts training as a form of patriotic resistance to foreign rule.

Huang Zongxi, whose son Huang Baijia studied boxing under Wang Zhengnan (1617-1669 A.D.), apparently used his *Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan* not only to eulogize the latter, but also to express his anti-Manchu sentiments through symbolism. In the *Epitaph*, Huang refers to the Buddhist Shaolin Monastery as representing what he calls the “external” school of boxing in contrast to Wang’s “internal” school, which allegedly traces its origins back to the Wudang Mountains in Hubei Province, and the mythical Taoist hermit, Zhang Sanfeng. Huang further infers the superiority of the “internal” school which uses Taoist yielding concepts to defeat an opponent as opposed to the aggressive techniques of the “external” school.

Huang’s *Epitaph* is the first reference in the history of the Chinese martial arts to allude to the purported fame of Shaolin boxing, and “external” and “internal” schools of boxing; however, its significance at the time it was written lay not in its reference to boxing, but in its underlying symbolism. Shaolin Monastery and the “external” school of boxing represented foreign Buddhism, and symbolized the foreign Manchu rulers. The Wudang Mountains and “internal” school of boxing represented indigenous Taoism, and symbolized Chinese resistance to the Manchus. The extent of Huang’s anti-Manchu sentiment is further revealed at the end of the *Epitaph*, where he refused to record Wang’s birth and death dates with the appropriate character combinations of the traditional Chinese 60-year cycle.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the lack of historicity in the symbolism of the *Epitaph*, Wang Zhengnan apparently actually was skilled in boxing, and it is quite possible that he incorporated Taoist concepts into his boxing technique. Huang Baijia recored the terminology for Wang’s “internal” style of boxing, but did not explain it and, as it does not correspond with that of any other known style, its true content has been impossible to determine. In any case, it appears that Huang Zongxi, through his *Epitaph*, unwittingly provided a source from which less intellectually inclined perpetrators of the myths surrounding the Chinese martial arts would later draw — truly an ironic contribution from a man who was considered to be a master historian!<sup>16</sup>

By the middle 1800s, the Chinese landscape had become a panorama of conflict, racked by incessant civil strife, foreign incursions, and natural catastrophies resulting in famine and widespread banditry, especially in the northern provinces. Local militias were raised, trained, and disbanded according to the exigencies of the moment. Private protection agencies (*biaojū*) flourished. Run by professional martial artists, they served to escort transported goods and to protect the homes of the wealthy, banks, pawn shops, and other commerical enterprises.<sup>17</sup> Secret societies and religious sects such as the Hungmen Society, Eight Trigrams, Small Knives, Big Knives, Long Spears, and Righteous and Harmonious Fists or Boxers flourished among the frustrated peasantry. Their activities included popular Taoist and Buddhist religious practices and martial arts training, and represented the common man’s way of uniting against lawlessness, oppressive government officials, and privileged foreigners in his midst. In this chaotic atmosphere, martial arts styles multiplied, especially boxing styles, many of which claimed to trace their origins to Shaolin Monastery, the mythical Taoist, Zhang Sanfeng, or the Song Dynasty patriot, Yue Fei.

Eventually, possibly as early as the middle of the Qing period, boxing manuals began to refer to Shaolin Monastery as Chinese boxing’s place of origin.<sup>18</sup> Stories varied in the secret society



Portrait of Qi Jiguang (1528-1587). By the author

atmosphere. Some groups attempted to identify with the patriotic example of the Shaolin Monk Soldiers. For example, the members of the Hungmen Society even went so far as to compose a mythical history which traced their origins to a group of anti-Manchu monks, who were said to have resided in a second Shaolin Monastery in Putian, Fujian Province.<sup>19</sup> By the close of the nineteenth century, these stories had been stretched to claim that the Indian monk, Bodhidharma, had introduced boxing to Shaolin Monastery around 525 A.D. Bodhidharma is traditionally said to have resided in the monastery and to have introduced Zen (*Chan*), the meditative school of Buddhism to China although, historically, this doctrine is known to have already been well-established by that time.<sup>20</sup> He is also traditionally said to have introduced the *Muscle Change Classic* (*Yijin Jing*), *Marrow Cleansing Classic* (*Xisui Jing*), and Eighteen Lohan exercises, the latter supposedly providing the foundation for the development of Chinese boxing. None of these alleged contributions can be historically verified. Finally, in 1915, a book by an unknown author titled *Secrets of Shaolin Boxing* was published, which wove together all these groundless stories. Both Tang Hao and Xu Jedong exposed this book’s lack of historicity but, unfortunately, it became popularly accepted as a key source for Chinese martial arts history enthusiasts, and its pernicious influence has permeated literature on the subject to this day.<sup>21</sup>

The myth surrounding the origins of *taijiquan* appears to date back no earlier than the early 1870s, and was the product of practitioners of the Yang style of *taijiquan*, who seized on the story in Huang Zongxi’s *Epitaph* to claim ancient Taoist origins for their style of boxing. Actually, the style of Chinese boxing which became known as *taijiquan* evolved from a boxing set practiced in the village of Chenjiagou, Henan Province, which Chen Changing (1771-1853) taught to Yang Luchan (1799-1872). The set practiced by the Chen family appears, in turn, to have received considerable inspiration from Ming general, Qi Jiguang’s 32 forms, and was not originally called *taijiquan*. The name *taijiquan* appears to have been adopted around 1854 or later, after the discovery of an old boxing treatise which used the term *taiji* in the opening line to one section. It is also possible that *taijiquan*’s emphasis on Taoist concepts, which has resulted in its evolving into a form of therapeutic exercise, dates from this period.<sup>22</sup>

**T**HE Chinese martial arts entered the twentieth century cloaked in their mantle of myth. After the overthrow of the Manchu regime in 1911, the country continued in a state of confusion dominated by regional warload conflicts which lasted until 1928. In addition to training with more modern weapons, the warlords, such as Xu Shuzheng of the Beiyang Clique, hired mar-

tial arts instructors to train their men. Feng Yuxiang (1882-1948) even organized an elite Big Knife Unit which eventually saw action against the Japanese. During this same period, the common man's reaction to warlord armies and banditry could be seen in the Red Spear Society (named for the spears they carried with red-dyed horsehair fringe affixed just below the spearheads), which was active primarily in north China.<sup>23</sup>

By 1928, the new Nationalist government, still shackled by "unequal treaties" with the Western powers and Japan, and the appellation "sick man of Asia," sought to harness the nationalistic aspects of the Chinese martial arts to its benefit. As part of the effort to develop a "martial spirit" in the people, a Central Martial Arts Academy was established at Nanjing with branches at various levels throughout the country. An attempt was made to popularize the martial arts in nationwide physical education programs and to use them in military and police training. One instructor associated with the new academy, Huang Bonian, even published a manual for military training in boxing, sabre, and bayonet based on the techniques of a traditional style of boxing called *xingyiquan*.<sup>24</sup>

The 1930s witnessed the beginnings of serious scholarly research in the martial arts. Tang Hao, the undisputed leader in the field, claimed that they needed to be purged and put in order. He mercilessly attacked popular myths and even pointed the finger at well-known contemporary martial artists for perpetuating such myths. Xu Jedong was another who took a more exacting approach in writing on the martial arts, but, generally speaking, the efforts of these two men represented a cry in the dark. Some progress was made in organizing the martial arts prior to the War of Anti-Japanese Resistance (1937-1945), but divisive tendencies already prevalent during the Qing period as a result of the secret society mentality, carried over into the Nationalist period, and are still evident today in the martial arts activities in the overseas Chinese communities. Perhaps the high point for the Chinese martial arts during this period was their performance by a troupe at the Eleventh Olympiad in Berlin in 1936.<sup>25</sup>

With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese martial arts or *wushu* came under the guidance of the People's Physical Culture and Sports Commission. The Communists were well aware of the popular base of the martial arts, and they recognized their value as a form of exercise and training discipline during the Jiangxi Soviet period dating back to 1927. In 1953, a Traditional Physical Culture Research Committee was organized to review the traditional sports of the Han Chinese and national minorities. Between 1953 and 1965, standardized sets of *changquan* (long boxing) and weapons sets were developed, and standard rules for nationwide competition were established for

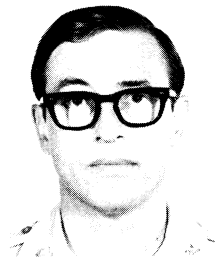
*changquan*, *nanquan* (southern boxing), *taijiquan*, and the four basic weapons. A simplified *taijiquan* set was also developed to serve as a nationwide form of exercise for the people. During this period, the martial arts historian, Tang Hao, continued his research efforts for the People's Physical Culture and Sports Commission until his death in 1959.<sup>26</sup>

In 1965, the Chinese martial arts entered the painful period of over a decade which came to be known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. During this period, vestiges of "feudal" practices associated with the martial arts were criticised, but the arts themselves continued to be practiced as they are today — as a uniquely Chinese form of exercise and sport with origins reaching back through a mythical mist to ancient military combat skills.<sup>27</sup>

As can be seen from the foregoing account, the Chinese martial arts trace their origins to ancient military skills which included weapons techniques and boxing. Placed in proper historical perspective, these arts were gradually spread throughout the population and were practiced by individuals from all walks of life, including some who chose the monastic life, the monks of Shaolin Monastery being the most noteworthy. Generally speaking, however, China did not witness the widespread phenomenon of warrior-priests and mercenary armies associated with Korean and Japanese Buddhism.<sup>28</sup> Some styles of Chinese boxing have emphasized Taoist concepts in their practice. These styles have come to be called "internal" styles as a result of Huang Zongxi's *Epitaph*, while all others have been categorized as Shaolin or "external" styles. Huang's *Epitaph* also served as the nucleus from which the myths surrounding the Chinese martial arts evolved in the anti-Manchu, secret society atmosphere of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

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23. For an excellent description of the warlord period see James E. Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yuxiang* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966). For reference to Xu Shuzheng, see Sun Lutang, *Xingyiquan Quanshu* [Complete Book of Xingyiquan], vol. 2 (Hong Kong: Unicorn Press), addendum by Lee Ying-Ang titled, "Xingyiquan-zhi Fazhan" [Development of Xingyiquan], 7. For a detailed description of Red Spear Society activities see Dai Xuanzhi, *Hongqianghui* [The Red Spear Society], (Taipei: Shihuo Chubanshe, 1973).

24. For developments during the Nationalist period in general and background on the Central Martial Arts Academy in particular see Wu Wenzhong, above. For Huang's training manual see *Xiezhen Quanxie Jiaofan* [Illustrated Boxing and Weapons Instructions], (Taipei: Hualian Press, 1971, originally published about 1928).

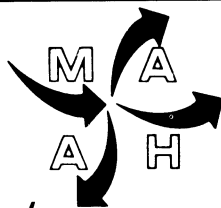
25. Wu Wenzhong, 266.

26. For a general discussion of the early development of martial arts programs in the People's Republic of China see Cai Jing, ed., *Minzu Tiyu-zhi Hua — Tantan Zhongguo Wushu Yundong* [An example of People's Physical Culture: A Discussion of the Martial Arts Sport], (Renmin Tiyu Chubanshe, 1959).

27. Articles in *New Sports (Tiyu)* attacking aspects of the martial arts at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution include Jiao Lubin, "Buxu Jiajie Qigong Mingyi Sanbu Fengjian Mixin Dusu" [False Use of Qigong to Spread Poisonous Feudal Superstitions Must not be Allowed], (March 1965), 25-26; Gu Shenglin, "Zuihan-de Wushu Buke Yao" ['Drunken' Martial Arts are Impermissible], (March 1965), 26; Jing Bai, "Taijiquan Huodongzhong-de Caopo Bixu Qingchu" [The Chaf Must be Separated from the Taijiquan Movement], (April 1965), 22-23; Xiang Ling, "Fandui Guanyu Taijiquan-de Shenmihua Guandian" [Oppose Superstitious Views About Taijiquan], (May 1965), 29-30; Zhao Renqing, "Yong Jieji Guandian Kaocha Taijiquan-de Lishi" [Take the Class View to Investigate Taijiquan's History], (May 1965), 30-31.

28. For Korea, see Takashi Hatada, *A History of Korea* (Santa Barbara: American Bibliographical Center Clio Press, 1969), 18,44; and William E. Henthorn, *A History of Korea* (New York: The Free Press, 1971), 105. For Japan, see George Sansom, *A History of Japan to 1334* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), 222-223, 429.

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