

Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan

Monday 7th July: First part of the 108 Yang Form : Beginning



Dunhuang caves, Gobi Desert Wall paintings of Chi gung practice c 600AD

T'ai Chi Ch'uan: Chang San-feng 1279-1386 AD

'In motion all parts of the body must be nimble and strung together.

The *ch'i* (breath) should be excited,

The *shen* (spirit) should be internally gathered.

Let the postures be without breaks or holes, hollows or projections..

The motion should be rooted in the feet,

released through the legs,

controlled by the waist,

and manifested through the fingers.'

Yang's ten important points

Yang Cheng-Fu 1883-1936 foremost Chinese boxer of his day and teacher of Cheng Man Ch'ing 1900-1975. Master of poetry, painting, calligraphy, medicine, and T'ai Chi Ch'uan.

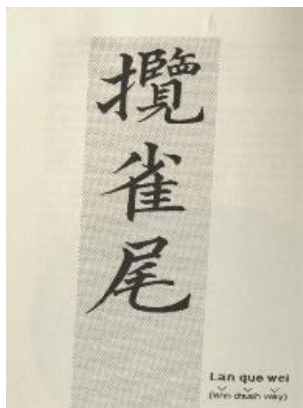
1. **The head should be upright so the spirit (shen) can reach the headtop.** Don't use strength or the neck will be stiff, use breath
2. **Sink the chest and pull up the back**
3. **Relax the waist**
4. **Differentiate insubstantial and substantial** (empty and full leg)
5. **Sink the shoulders and the elbows**
6. **Use mind not force**
7. **Upper body follows the lower body** (movement starts in the feet, works up through the legs, spine, shoulders, arms and fingers)
8. **Inside and outside should coordinate**
9. **The mind is continuous and unbroken** (no monkey thoughts !)
10. **Seek stillness in movement**



Cheng Man Ch'ing 1900-1975

Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan

Grasp the bird's tail



Lan Grasping . . . Taking something into the arms or hands to pay close attention to it.

攬 Hand 才 覽 Examining carefully, considering.

Person bending over. Bowing in respect. (A minister)

Full container. Vase of flowers. (Inspecting)

The eye and legs of a person. (Looking)

Que Sparrow

雀 Something divided in two. (Small) 小 隹 Bird

All birds, even the little sparrow, can represent the connection of heaven and earth, and the activity within the space between.

Wei Tail . . . Hair attached to the body of an animal

尾 Body 尸 毛 Hair

Read this way, the characters seem to suggest we begin by taking in hand what is probably the least significant part of a rather insignificant little bird in order to pay close attention to it. We pay attention to the smallest details. Every time this movement occurs in the form it can be a reminder of the kind of awareness – the being totally present Taiji requires.

ref: Schorre

Birds beak and Single whip



Dan Single . . . Originally, assaulting someone with shouts and a pitchfork, which suggests it may have something to do with piercing sound. How it came to mean single, as opposed to complex, is a mystery to us.

單 Two mouths representing shouts, cries 𠂔 𠂔 Pitchfork

Bian Whip . . . Leather transforming through its flexibility

鞭 Sheepskin spread for drying. (Leather. Wings of a bird. Changing, transforming, removing) 革

Person changing, improving, acting with ease (The modern dictionary meaning definitely loses something when reduced to (1) convenient, (2) ordinary or (3) to relieve oneself.) 便

An older version of this character shows:

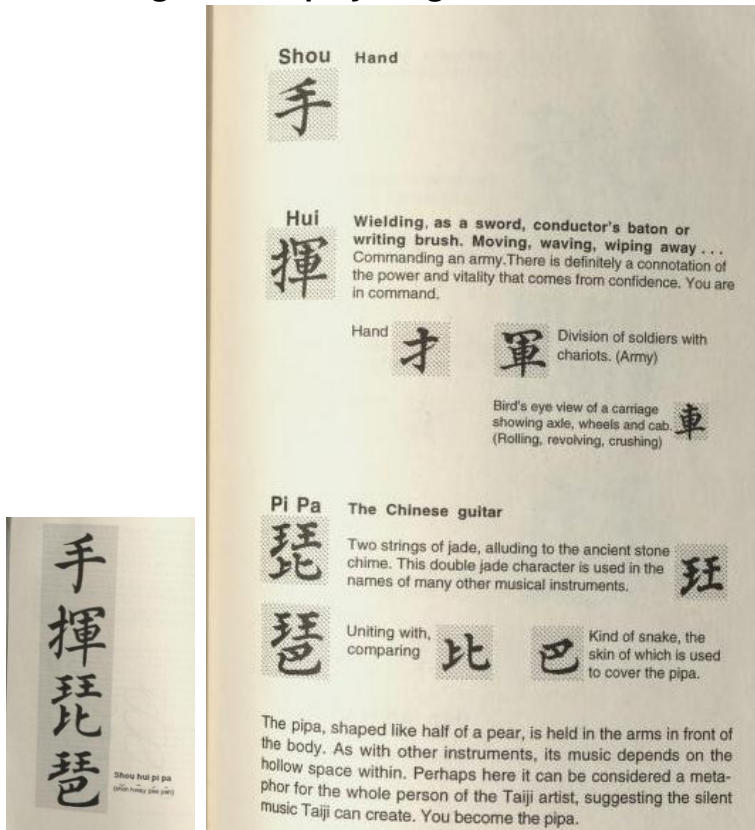
Fire, bad situation 丙 支 Armed hand intervening

Here we see both elements of *bian* are about transformation. In the whip images we have a sheepskin in the process of becoming leather and a person who easily improves a situation. The whip's essence is its power to transform, its flexibility, the ease with which it changes shape. And a part of the whip's power is in the singleness, the unity that is transforming. It remains a whip as it is shaped by any force flowing through it. With this in mind, we see the *Dan bian* movement can be about this kind of transformation. The two arms circle together before opening to become one arm, the single whip, deriving its power from the wave-like force of energy flowing through its softness and suppleness.

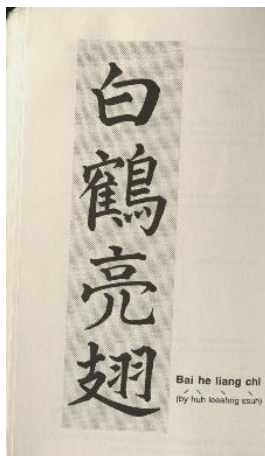
ref: Schorre

Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan

Strumming the lute/ play the guitar



White stork spreads its wings

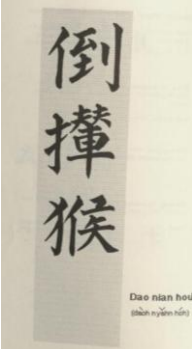


Crane (he 鶴)

The crane is a symbol of longevity because it lives a long life and its white feathers represent old age. It is also a symbol of fidelity

Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan

Tuesday 8th July: Second Part of the 108 Yang Form : Development Step back to repulse the monkey



Dao nian hóu
(dào nian hóu)

Dao Upside down, inverted or in reverse . . . The images are simply of a person arriving. There is no suggestion of arriving in any of these strange ways.

Person 倒 到 Arriving at a destination (Reaching, going to)

Bird, with spread wings, landing on earth 至

Knife, sword 刃

Nian Ousting, driving away, catching up . . . Driving with the hand.

Hand 才 輦 Men pulling a carriage. (Transporting)

Men 扶 車 Wheeled vehicle, carriage

Hou Monkey. Clever child . . . Beautiful, aristocratic animal. What else but the monkey?

Dog, animal 才 侯

Person standing beside a target pierced by an arrow. (Skill in archery, virtue. Aristocrat. Beautiful, excellent)

Monkey is important in Chinese myth, both as one of the animals of the zodiac and as the outrageous hero of the Chinese classic, *Journey to the West*, where he represents human intellect. As such, his adventures are sometimes wonderful and sometimes terrible – but always lively and hilarious. However, when we consider both the name and the movement of *Dao nian hóu*, the story that comes to mind is one told by Zhuangzi:

Once, when the Duke of Wu went to hunt on Monkey Mountain, the terrified monkeys, as usual, ran away to hide in the treetops as soon as they saw him. But there was one monkey who used the opportunity of this audience to show off his great agility by swinging from branch to branch through the trees. When the Duke shot at it, the monkey caught the flying arrow in its hand! Then the Duke ordered his men to shoot and soon the monkey fell dead, pierced by many arrows. The Duke said to his companion, Yen Pui, "Do you see what happened to this animal when it flaunted its skill and cleverness? Remember to not rely on distinction and talent in your dealings with people." Returning home, Yen Pui got rid of all that made him stand out from others, and as a result was held in awe by everyone.

Perhaps this story is what the Taiji movement is about. We learn to step back, and to get rid of the monkey quality of wanting to stand out – of seeking distinction. Laozi also has something to say about this, as in chapter seven, where the Sage finds himself ahead when he places himself behind. He finds self-realization and self-preservation in self-forgetting.

In Chinese culture, the monkey symbolizes a variety of positive traits including intelligence, wit, resourcefulness, and playfulness. It is also associated with luck, honour, and wealth. The monkey is a prominent figure in the Chinese Zodiac, representing the ninth animal sign.

Intelligence and Wit: Monkeys are known for their quick thinking and adaptability, making them excellent problem-solvers.

Resourcefulness: They are clever and capable of finding creative solutions to challenges.

Playfulness: Monkeys are often depicted as lively and mischievous, bringing joy to those around them.

Good Luck and Prosperity: In some contexts, monkeys are seen as symbols of good fortune and financial success.

Long Life: Monkeys are sometimes associated with longevity, particularly in relation to the character Sun Wukong from "Journey to the West".

Health: The monkey can also symbolize good health and well-being.

Control of the Mind: In Buddhist and Taoist temples, monkey figures can represent the ability to



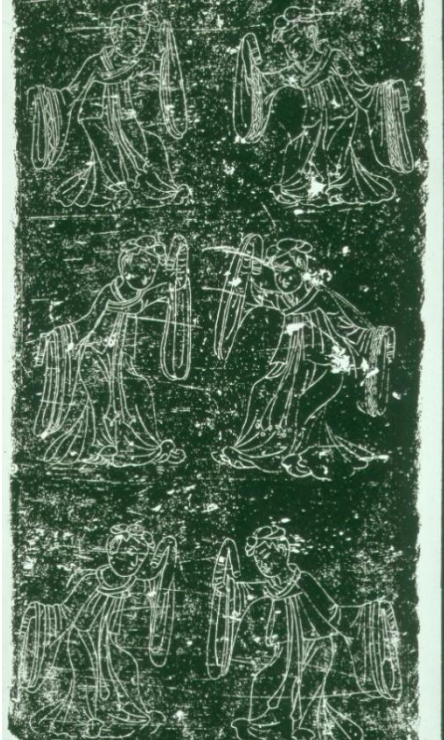
control one's mind and transcend earthly desires.

Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan

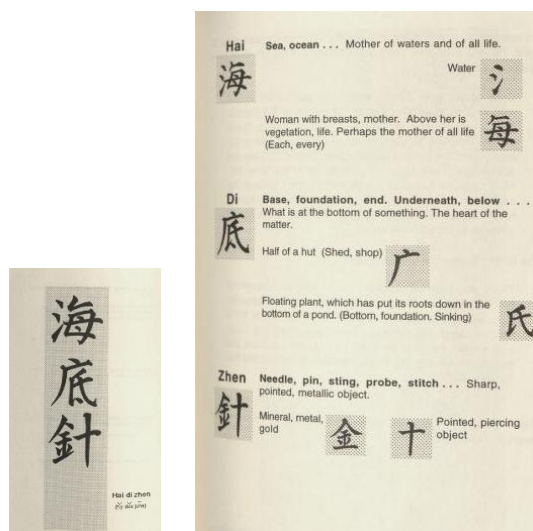
Cloud arms Clouds (yun 雲)

Clouds bring the rain that is vital for farmers and are thus considered auspicious. As a design, clouds appear on ancient Chinese ritual bronzes, lacquerwares, stone carvings, and objects of decorative art. The word for “clouds” is homophonous with “good fortune” (yun 運). Clouds are often combined with bats, cranes, and other symbols of blessing for a long life. Five-coloured clouds are good omens. For this reason, cloud designs frequently appear on imperial robes.

(A Selected Illustrated Guide to Common Chinese Symbols: Smithsonian Museum)



Looking for the golden needle at the bottom of the sea



On hearing “needle at the bottom of the sea,” two stories come to mind. The first is another story about Monkey, from Wu Chengen's *Journey to the West*:

Once upon a time Monkey was on a quest for the perfect weapon. His search led him to the bottom of the Eastern Sea, where he was received by the Dragon King. There all the weapons he tried out were either too light or too heavy, until the Dragon Mother gave him the holy iron rod which had been used to pound the Milky Way flat. Monkey found this to be the perfect weapon because he could use his magic powers to shrink it from its twenty foot length to two feet for fighting, and then to the size of a needle to stick behind his ear.

The other story we are reminded of is:

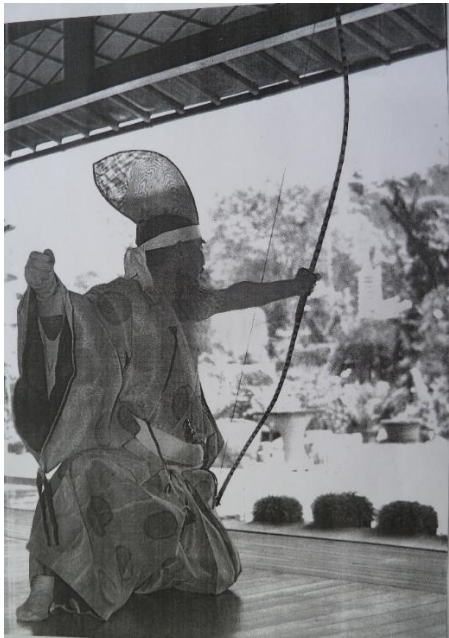
There was once an old Daoist monk who was known for his skill at embroidering. People who came to admire his work would often ask him to teach them the secret of his ability to create such beauty. He always told them, “I can only show you what my hands do. I can not show you the Golden Needle that produces them. You must find that for yourself.”

The Golden Needle is found at the bottom of the sea – in the deep reservoir that is the source of all creativity.

Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan



Shoot out the arrow or fan through the back



The magic bird stands on one leg

Phoenix (feng 鳳)

The phoenix is the “king of birds” and symbolizes good fortune and opportunity as it appears only in times of peace and prosperity. A paired dragon and phoenix symbolize the emperor and empress and refer to marital bliss.

(A Selected Illustrated Guide to Common Chinese Symbols: Smithsonian Museum)

Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan

In Chinese culture, the phoenix, known as fenghuang, symbolizes good fortune, virtue, and the Empress. It is often paired with the dragon, representing marital harmony, and is associated with peace, prosperity, and the union of yin and yang. Unlike the Western phoenix, the Chinese phoenix doesn't rise from ashes but is a divine bird that signifies auspiciousness and appears during times of peace and prosperity.

Symbol of the Empress:

The phoenix is the female counterpart to the dragon, which represents the Emperor. Together, they symbolize the harmonious balance of yin and yang, and the phoenix is specifically linked to the Empress.

Auspicious Omen:

The phoenix's appearance is considered a good omen, often associated with peace, prosperity, and a benevolent ruler.

Virtue and Beauty:

The phoenix embodies virtues like compassion, honesty, knowledge, faith, and good manners. It also represents beauty, grace, loyalty, and honesty.

Union of Yin and Yang:

While generally considered female, the phoenix, along with the dragon, represents the balance and harmony of yin and yang.



Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan

Wednesday 9th July: Third part of the 108 Yang Form Maturity

Parting the wild horses mane Horse (ma 馬)

The horse is a popular subject of ancient Chinese myths. According to one of them, Emperor Mu Wang (ca. 992–ca. 922 BCE) was determined to reach the Western Paradise, the land of immortals, and try the peaches of immortality. He was carried there by eight magnificent horses. Later, “The Eight Steeds of Mu Wang” became a popular motif of poetry, symbolizing a journey or a vehicle of the emperor. The horse in Chinese culture is associated with power; a popular New Year wish incorporates the phrase “the strength of dragons and horses” (longma jingshen 龍馬精神). The horse also symbolizes speed; the phrase “to be on top of the horse” (mashang 馬上) means “immediately” or “soon.” (*A Selected Illustrated Guide to Common Chinese Symbols: Smithsonian Museum*)

The Zhuangzi story on page 70 tells of Bo Le destroying the true nature and integrity of wild horses by training them. The wild horse appears two more times in Zhuangzi, where it is a metaphor for the heart/mind. The Chinese have one word for both heart and mind, clearly showing a very basic difference from our way of thinking.

These two stories from Zhuangzi are:

Cui Ju asked Laozi, “If all under heaven is not governed, how will the human heart/mind be made good?” To this Laozi replied, “You must very carefully never interfere with it. If you try to force it down, it will only spring back higher. It can be gentle and soft or sharp and hard. It can be fiery and hot or icy and cold. In a wink it can go twice beyond the four seas and back again. Resting, it is still as a deep pool. Moving, it can reach to heaven. The heart/mind is a wild horse that can not be tied down.”

And:

The Daoist monk, Yancheng Ziyou, once said to his teacher, Dongguo Ziqi: “As I studied Dao, in the first year I was like a wild horse, in the second year I became gentle, in the third year I became free from cares, in the fourth year I became one with all things, in the fifth year the many became one, in the sixth year I became filled with spirit, in the seventh year I followed my original nature, in the eighth year life and death lost their meaning for me, and in the ninth year I attained the Great Mystery.”

Ye Wild, uncultivated. Untamed, rustic, unruly ... Frontier farming communities who dealt with the barbarian tribes of the open country.

里 Cultivated field. (Inside, inner. Neighborhood, hometown. Mile)

予 Hands giving and receiving. (Communicating, connecting. Me, I)

馬 Horse. At once, immediately, rapidly. Power, perseverance ... Horse, with mane and tail flying.

In addition to being the unspooled horse in the Zhuangzi story told on page 70, ye ma is also used for dust clouds and mirages.

分 Dividing, separating, parting, distinguishing ... Something cut with a knife.

八 Separation, division

刀 Knife

鬃 Horse's mane ... Perhaps the most distinguished long hair.

長 Long hair held by a pin. (Long, growing)

髮 Hair, feathers

宗 Building associated with heaven or the divine. (Ancestral temple. Ancestors, clan, kind, kindred, sect. The most distinguished. Following)

野馬分鬃

Ye ma fen zong

(wild horse hair long)

In Chinese culture, the horse symbolizes speed, perseverance, loyalty, and nobility. It is also associated with the seventh animal of the Chinese zodiac and is seen as embodying Yang, the pure male strength. Furthermore, horses are linked to power, rank, and wealth, and are often depicted in art and used in Feng Shui to attract success and prosperity.

Speed and Perseverance:

The horse's association with speed is obvious, but it also represents perseverance and the ability to overcome challenges.

Loyalty:

Horses are known for their faithfulness and loyalty to their human companions.

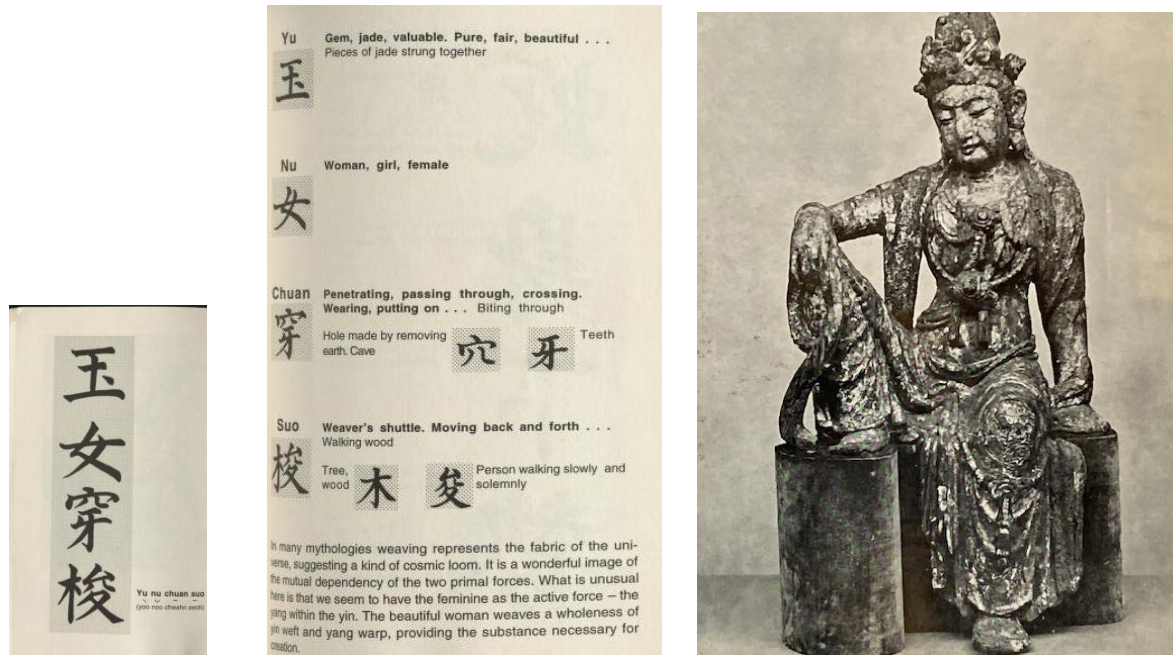
Nobility and Power:

In ancient times, horses were a symbol of status and power, and owning a horse signified wealth and importance.



Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan

Jade maiden works at the shuttles or the four corners of the earth/tortoise



In Chinese culture, the Jade Maiden (玉女, yùnnǚ) symbolizes beauty, purity, and a connection to the divine or spiritual realm. She is often depicted as a beautiful young woman, sometimes associated with the immortals or spirits, and can act as an intermediary between the mortal and spiritual worlds.

Beauty and Purity:

Jade is a precious stone in Chinese culture, and the term "Jade Maiden" naturally evokes images of beauty and elegance. It also signifies purity and virtue, reflecting the ideal of a virtuous young woman.

Intermediary and Guide:

In Daoist practices, the Jade Maiden can be a guide or messenger, helping individuals on their spiritual journeys or connecting them with higher realms.

Symbol of Good Fortune:

In some contexts, particularly during Chinese New Year celebrations, the Jade Maiden (often paired with the Golden Boy) is believed to bring good fortune and happiness.

Connection to the Divine:

The Jade Maiden is often associated with the heavens and immortals, representing a link between the earthly and spiritual planes.

Daoist Concepts:

In Daoism, she is associated with the concept of purity, being untouched and immaculate, and can be seen as an aspect of the divine feminine.

The Jade Maiden's symbolism is multifaceted, drawing on her association with jade, her beauty, and her role as a spiritual entity. She represents ideals of beauty, purity, and spiritual connection within Chinese culture.

The four corners of the earth or the tortoise

In Chinese culture, the tortoise (or turtle) is a powerful symbol with multiple positive connotations, primarily representing longevity, stability, protection, and wisdom. It is also associated with the north direction and the god of knowledge, longevity, and learning. The tortoise's association with longevity is linked to its long lifespan, and its hard shell symbolizes protection and stability.

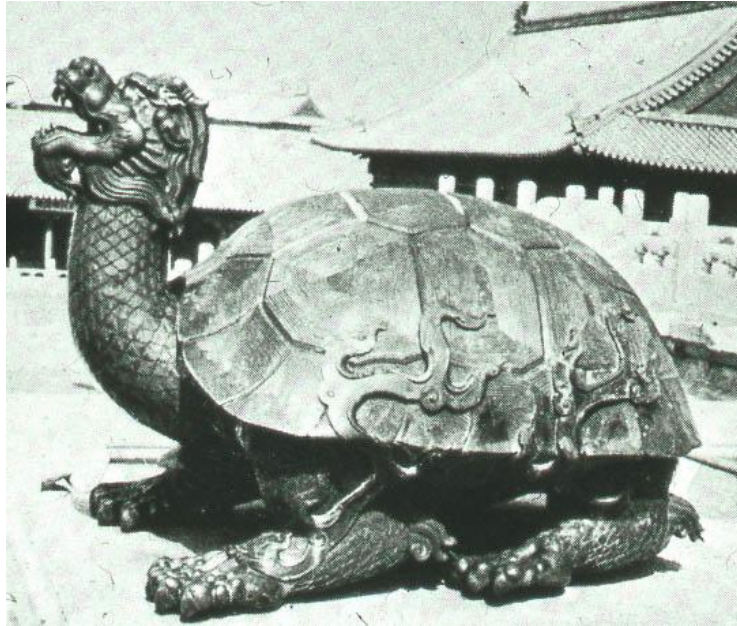
Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan

Stability and Protection: The tortoise's sturdy shell is seen as a symbol of protection and stability, providing a sense of security and grounding.

Wisdom and longevity: The tortoise's association with wisdom comes from its long life, which allows it to accumulate knowledge and experience.

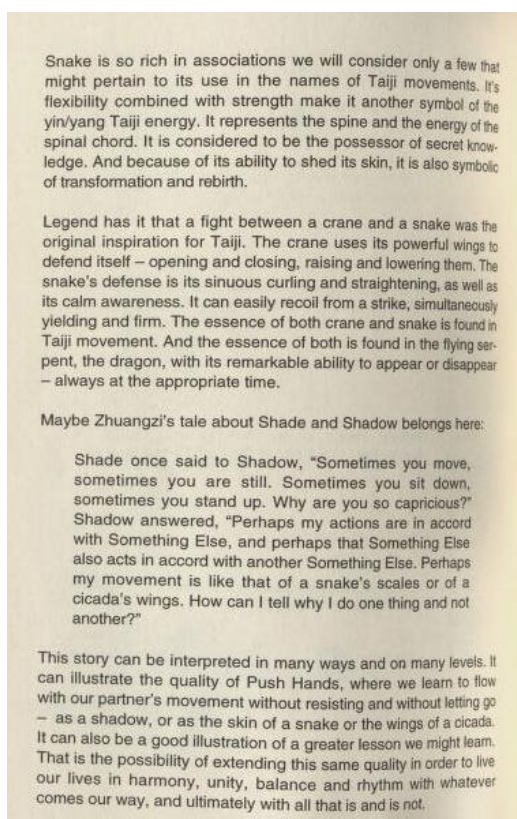
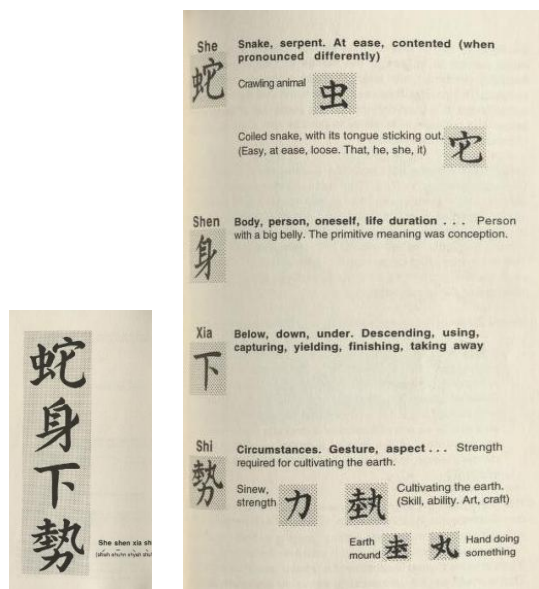
Cosmic Symbol: In some interpretations, the tortoise's shell and body are seen as representing the universe, with the shell symbolizing the heavens and the body the earth.

Mythology: In Chinese mythology, the tortoise is sometimes depicted as a creature that carries the world on its back, further emphasizing its association with stability and foundation.



Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan

Thursday 10th July: Prepare to return to the mountain - Death
The snake creeps down into the water



In Chinese culture, the snake is a complex symbol representing wisdom, mystery, transformation, and sometimes even divinity, despite its negative connotations in some Western cultures. It's associated with good fortune, fertility, and healing, and in the Chinese zodiac, the snake is linked to intelligence, charm, and elegance.

Wisdom and Intelligence:

The snake is often seen as a creature of deep wisdom and strategic thinking.

Transformation and Rebirth:

Shedding its skin symbolizes the snake's ability to transform and renew itself, representing new beginnings and letting go of the old.

Fertility and Eternity:

The snake is associated with fertility and eternal life in some myths, with the creator goddess Nüwa often depicted with a snake's body.

Healing and Medicine:

In traditional Chinese medicine, snakes and their parts have been used for medicinal purposes, solidifying their connection to healing.

Good Fortune and Prosperity:

In some contexts, the snake is seen as a symbol of good luck and prosperity, particularly during the Year of the Snake.

Divinity and Sacredness:

In some instances, snakes are viewed as messengers of the divine or guardians of sacred places.

Ambiguity and Duality:

While often associated with positive traits, the snake also carries a duality, representing both sacredness and potential danger.

Zodiac Animal:

In the Chinese zodiac, the snake is the sixth animal, associated with people born in the Year of the Snake, who are believed to be intuitive, strategic, and intelligent.


Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan



Grasp the seven stars

Qi Seven
七

Xing Star . . . Living sun. Giving birth to light.
Sun, light 日 生 Growing plant (Giving birth to, living)

Weiger says the ancient character shows "the quintessence of sublimated matter, that ascended and crystallized into stars." 

Here, in our Taiji movement, our forearms seem to form the character *qi* as they cross in front of our face. We can think of this as a sort of salute to the seven stars of the Northern Dipper, considered in China to be the sacred, polar center of cosmic order. It is called the Heavenly Gates, and it represents the place of origin and return, the unmoved mover, and the still point of the turning heavens. To reach the seven stars is to be in unity, rhythm and harmony with the movement of the universe.

What a delightful surprise it was to discover that The Northern Dipper plays a great part in some ancient Daoist meditations. One of these is a moving meditation called Pacing the Dipper, or Pacing the Network of Heaven. Evidently this constellation, along with the network of stars surrounding it, is drawn on the earth as a kind of labyrinth. The meditator then dances along this in a prescribed way – finally reaching the last star (which is the Celestial Gate), turns, and "is elevated to the higher realms of heaven."

七星
Qi xing (seven stars)

103

Pick up the lotus

Lotus (he 荷, lian 蓮)

The lotus is the flower of the sixth month and summer. It is a symbol of purity because it emerges from the mud to bloom. The Chinese word for "lotus" (he 荷) is a homophone with the Chinese word for "harmony" (he 和). (*A Selected Illustrated Guide to Common Chinese Symbols: Smithsonian Museum*)

Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan



Some symbolism in the Tai Chi Chu'uan



Further reading:

Looking for the Golden Needle – an allegorical journey Gerda Geddes MannaMedia 1991 (currently out of print)

Dancer in the Light: the life of Gerda 'Pytt' Geddes Frank Woods Psi Books 2008 (Limited copies available for sale)

I Ching or book of Changes Richard Wilhelm translation Routledge and Kegan Paul 1978

Tao Te Ching Lao Tsu Vintage Books 1989

Taoism: the way of the mystic J C Cooper The Aquarian Press 1972

How to grasp the bird's tail if you don't speak Chinese: Jane Schorre North Atlantic Books 2000

The essence of Tai Chi Ch'uan : the literary tradition Lo/Inn/Amacker/Foe North Atlantic Books

Tai-Chi Cheng Man-Ching Tuttle 1971

Tai Chi Ch'uan and I Ching Da Liu Routledge and Kegan Paul 1971

Selected Illustrated Guide to Common Chinese Symbols: Smithsonian Museum