

TAI CHI CHIEN & TAI CHI TAO:

CHINESE TOOLS OF BAD OMEN

by Dorothy A. Odsen

The single- and double-edged swords of the Chinese are traced from their inception through the present day

is available about the Chinese swords and their history and application. Yet, at festivals and martial arts tournaments and exhibitions, you see the graceful sword sets: seemingly gentle movements, blades reflecting silvery highlights, their hilts festooned with red or yellow tassels. The demonstrations fascinate you; you want to learn more about this swordsmanship. But ahead lies seemingly endless barriers to overcome before finally learning what outwardly seemed extremely simple and dance-like. Many students tire and give up the quest ... a dedicated few make it. If you've studied at least five years in tai chi chuan—the major style in Chinese boxing's internal system—you discover you are almost ready for "sword set." Your only obstacle now is finding someone to teach you the weapon.

And what an obstacle that can be. For many Chinese martial artists, the body is the *only* weapon; to teach any other "instrument" is so much showmanship. Other instructors are extremely selective in choosing who will study the sword with them, and rightfully so, for it is not an art for the beginner, nor the showoff. And schools of Chinese swordsmanship? Try to find one.

It's not that the Chinese are being unjustly secretive, nor are they unwilling to reveal the techniques of the Chinese swords to Western minds. Quite simply, they live their beliefs. To the Chinese, weapons are "tools of bad omen." There is no *bushido*, no way of the warrior.

The Japanese interest in weapons (and here we are speaking of hand weapons only) developed first into an ethical code, then an aesthetic appreciation of a fine blade, to the collecting of *tsuba* (sword guards), to today's kendo. One can locate many dojo where Japanese sword arts are taught. They are traditional to the Japanese spirit.

One can even find schools of fencing. These are the modern outgrowths of European swordsmanship. The art

A black and white photograph of a man in a martial arts pose, holding a sword. He is wearing a dark jacket over a light-colored shirt and dark pants with a light-colored stripe down the side. He is in a dynamic pose, with one leg raised and arms extended, holding a sword in his right hand.

Lao Tzu, in the *Tao Te Ching*, said, "Weapons at best are the tools of bad omen, loathed and avoided by those of the Way." They were to be avoided by men of good breeding, and, if their use was unavoidable, to be employed with calm and restraint. Anyone, from the Taoist point of view, who admired weapons was one who took delight in murder.

Because of this apprehension toward weapons, very little information



Photos by Dorothy A. Odsen and Aimie Kurland



is now a sport of the Olympics, with rules, standards, and equipment. Many a Western weapon is now a piece of sports equipment (consider the bow). It is the nature of the European to turn once murderous tools into sport.

The Chinese have learned through centuries of war, raids, and other assorted bloodletting visitations of man upon man, that weapons, indeed, bode no good. Hence, less importance is given to their reality. But, there can be no ignoring the existence of the *tao* and the *chien*.

The *tao* is a single-edged sword generally called the Chinese knife to distinguish it from the *chien*, the double-edged sword. The single edge of the *tao* is slightly curved. This shallow curve places the sword somewhere between the straight blade of Europe and the crescent shape of the Saracen scimitar. Tradition has it that the mythical emperor, Sui Jen Shih, invented the *tao* from gold. The *chien*, invented by Ch'ih Yu, was also made

A delivers a slice to B's thigh with the tao (1). But B allows his right leg to go yin and yield, making a path for the tao, and as it passes by, he thrusts the chien to B's neck (2).

from gold. Both styles had gods ascribed to them; both had their fabled "named" swords—like the Excalibur of Arthurian legend—with supernatural powers. And, there have been male and female *tao* and *chien*, with lengths of up to seven feet.

As in European history, many Chinese swords had sacrifices made to them: the baptism of blood. Aside from the gold swords of myth, swords of both types were made from such various materials as jade, silver, iron, oyster shell and brass. The hilts were of the same material in many cases, but wood, bone, ivory, or gold were

As B attacks A with the chien, A slices upward to the groin with the tao (1). B yields and parries the knife (2), but A runs the blade around the parry and attacks the other side (3). B sidesteps and cuts upward to A's wrist (4).



sometimes used for more contrast and decoration. Some swords were decorated with precious stones. Their respective weights varied. One *tao*, that of a warrior of ancient times, reportedly weighed 130 pounds, which makes one wonder what the warrior who wielded it tipped the scales at.

Thirteen basic tactics are ascribed to the *tao*. Basically it is a striking/chopping weapon. The *chien* has 16 tactics, traditionally. The added advantage of the *chien*, obviously, is that it has two edges for striking, hacking, and cutting; the plus is its stabbing/piercing capabilities. The *chien* swordsman has the ability to not only block with either side of the sword, but is able to use the other edge to cut at the same time. The *tao* can only cut on one edge; use it to block, and you've lost your offensive.

Today's swords weigh anywhere from about two pounds to three pounds, 12 ounces. Their lengths (from tip to hilt end) are measured, to





suit their user, from navel to ground. The blade of the chien can be considered as having three areas: the end is extremely thin and flexible, it is razor sharp, is easily broken, and it is used not for blocking, but for attacking; the middle area of the blade is less sharp, thicker, and is used for directing away and cutting; the last area, nearest the hilt, is used when more violent power is called for, shoving away an opponent, for example.

Unlike the tao, the chien relies on internal power (soft, nonviolent movement). It is the smoothness in motion which is the sword's forte. This is another reason why only those who have studied tai chi chuan for many years should study sword, for its techniques are similar to "push hands." Push hands, sometimes called "joined hands," is the foundation of tai chi free fighting. It is a sensitivity teaching technique in which one learns to "feel" the opponent's power and fine changes of movement. One learns to "stick" to the opponent and, later, to

A delivers a pa kua walking slash attack with the tao to B's neck (1). But B, armed with the chien, ducks under A's neck slice and delivers a slice to his opponent's knee (2).

use the opponent's energy against him, rather than expend one's own energy in defense.

In learning the tai chi chien, one is taught a set of movements first, then their applications, and then, much later, he/she practices with a partner in a kind of fencing drill. The ultimate is free fighting. A truly successful swordsperson, it is said, never touches the sword of his/her opponent, but attacks with quick, deceptive movements. Proficiency in its use requires two to three years of training—beyond the approximately ten years tai chi chuan training leading up to the sword.

The tao and chien sets have anywhere from 40 to 130 movements, depending on how the set is broken down into its components. For example, one list of postures, or move-

ments, may have three motions for the same posture that another list has as the "beginning." While the terms for the tao movements are more succinct: "Thrust knife to rear," or "Chop knife to front," the chien movements are basically described in picturesque terms: "Spirit (alert) cat catches the mouse," "Yellow bee enters the hole," or "Lion shakes its head" are typical of the nomenclature. Of the two, the tao set is more *yang* in appearance. However, though the chien set looks slower, and therefore more graceful, great concentration and control of *chi* is necessary for proper usage.

And not everybody is able to develop that chi, that energy flow so necessary to good swordplay, according to Harvey Kurland, an expert swordsman who studied with Te-houng ta-Chen. "Some people are doing it improperly," says Kurland. "They have not developed the internal concepts, but rather use shaolin technique, and so they are too stiff. One can see improper technique at tourna-





ments where students use mainly their arms to do the form, instead of letting the chi do the work, i.e., the waist and the entire body. The form should be relaxed, but powerful at the same time." (This is in contrast to the "hard" styles which use sheer strength of arm and forearm to make the sword work.) "You are relaxed and using internal energy and the entire body to move the sword," adds Kurland, "rather than just your arm. Most important is the concentration of the mind. Your mind is extended to the tip of the sword."

The same principles of the basic tai chi chuan form are used with both the tao and chien: natural breathing, body upright, keeping the movements integrated, coordinated, and flowing smoothly, etc. The difference is in the focus. For the tao, the broadsword, the focus is on the blade. For the chien, the narrow, double-edged sword, the focus is on its tip. The chien is considered the higher art form, and is more difficult to learn. The tao is basically a chopping and slicing weapon; little skill is needed for that. It was generally the weapon

of the common soldier. The chien was used by the more scholarly and aristocratic Chinese.

The sword was taught traditionally as a weapon, not just as an exercise. Tai chi was a real martial art form then. Today, the sword is not a practical weapon, and for that reason, Kurland's instructor, Tchoung ta-Chen, master of over a dozen sword arts, teaches application of a walking stick form to supplement the sword. He has found it very effective in self-defense against other weapons (he once disarmed and knocked out a gun-wielding attacker with two movements of his walking stick). It is more natural—and legal—to traverse the earth carrying a walking stick than a sword, at least in modern times—and less open to explanation to casual observer and police alike. Tchoung reportedly also subdued a knife-wielding assailant in South Africa, using tai chi movements. He was there teaching the art form to the president of the country.

Tchoung's two episodes are solid rebuttal to those who invariably ask, "What good is it (*it* being kung fu,

karate, sword, etc.) against a Saturday night special?" Maybe any weapon, form, or style, is only as good as the person using it. What good is water against rock? Only the Grand Canyon can answer that.

One can buy tao and chien at any martial arts supply store. There are wooden models ranging in price from





B attempts to cut A's wrist with the chien while A cuts to his neck with the tao (1). B folds and drops under the knife, cutting A's abdomen (2). A continues her cut downward to B's head (3), but B evades the head cut, stepping outside of it to parry upward to A's wrist (4). B continues his movement away from A, cutting to her neck (5). But A evades the neck strike and chops upward to B's arm (6).

\$12 to \$15. They are lightweight and good for practicing the movements. Cheap metal swords are also available. These cost in the vicinity of \$30 and are slightly heavier than the wooden variety. For real elegance, and commensurate price (\$150 to \$350), metal swords are available with engraved blades and ornate hilts. These come with a scabbard. Stands for displaying these weapons range from \$30 to \$60.

No special uniform is needed. Instruction, however, is. There are very few texts on either set. Several texts are available, however, at some bookstores, as well as at a martial arts supply shop. The books usually have a series of photographs demonstrating the postures, with explanations printed beneath each. But trying to learn movements from two-dimensional illustrations is like trying to teach your cat to speak Latin: it hears what you say, and sees what there is to see, but isn't properly

equipped to carry it off. You need a background in tai chi chuan to even understand the basics of either tai chi chien or ta tao. Equally important, one needs a knowledgeable instructor.

Which brings us back to the biggest obstacle we face in learning the sword: finding a teacher. If you are currently studying tai chi chuan, you must wait until your teacher says you are ready to learn sword set. If the instructor does not teach sword, you must ask permission to study with one who does. It is not only the correct thing to do, but some teachers will not accept the students of others without the former instructor's consent. Etiquette and convention dictate proper entry into many a martial arts class. If you do not follow convention with your former teacher, what can your present instructor expect in your treatment of his or her status?

Once one has found instruction, the usual progression is from learning the tao set (about six-to-eight weeks) to learning the more graceful, but more difficult, chien set. This takes much longer. From the sets, one can then learn exercises much like push hands, with the swordsperson developing a new kind of sensitivity and awareness in reacting with an opponent. This "fencing" is very structured, with offensive/defensive movements in a given, formalized order. The final stage is free fighting, a level reached after two-to-three years of continuous study.

Whether or not anyone reaches the stage of free fighting, sword tai chi is a very rewarding experience at any level. Its movements, done correctly, develop one's awareness, timing, grace, and continued good health. In the martial artist, it further acknowledges the sanctity of life.

