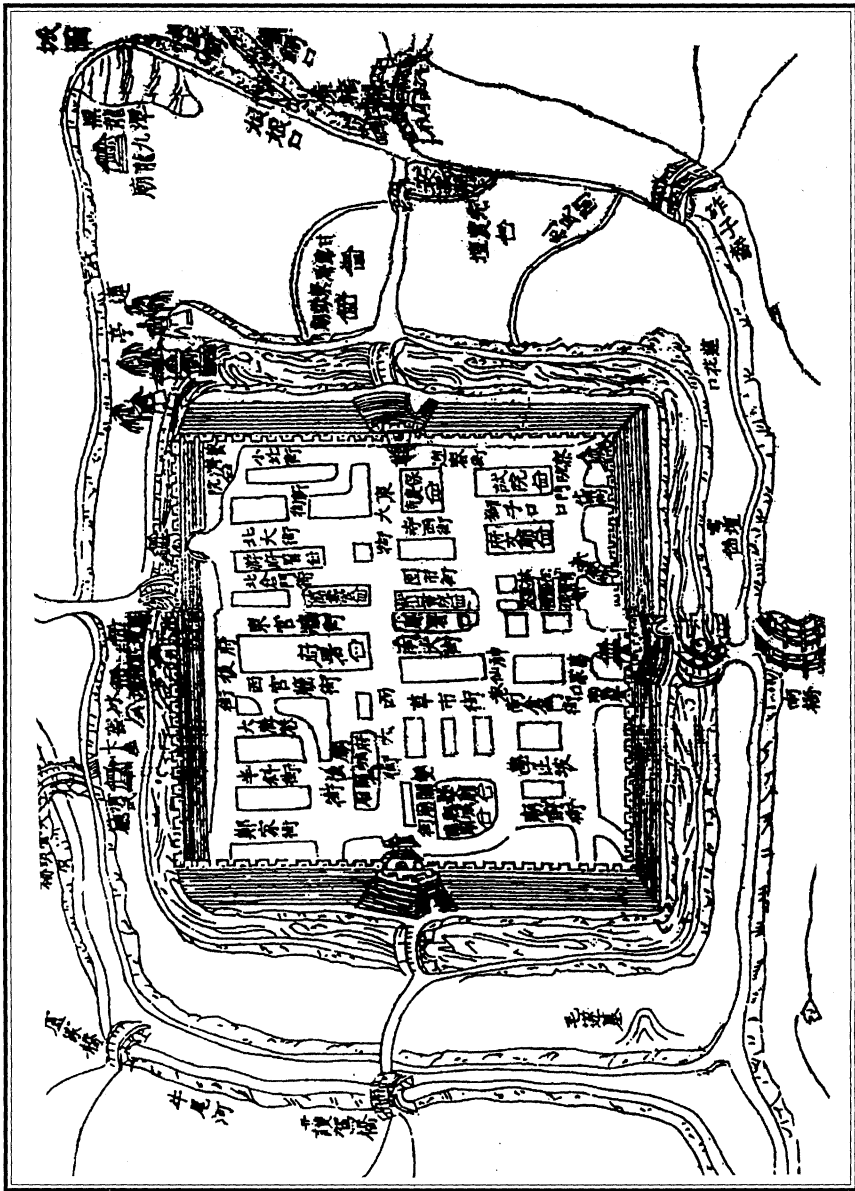


SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND  
OF T'AI-CHI CH'ÜAN  
IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY



Map of Kang-p'ing City showing the Lien-t'ing (Lotus pavillion) restored by Wu Ju-ch'ing at the upper right, Tung ta chieh (East grand street) dividing the eastern half of the city north and south where the Wu family lived, and the Nan-kuan (South gate) where the Yang family lived south of the city walls. From the *Yang-nien Gazetteer*.

The Wu brothers came of age at the turn of the nineteenth century, a time when Manchu overthrow, defeat at the hands of the West, and large-scale peasant rebellion were all unthinkable. As the Wu brothers entered middle age, the Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion shook the foundations of the dynasty and caused the near collapse of the world as they knew it. It was in the midst of this crisis that Yang Lu-ch'an returned to Yung-nien from Ch'en Village, Wu Yü-hsiang studied with Ch'en Ch'ing-p'ing, and Wu Ch'eng-ch'ing reportedly found the classics in Wu-yang. These momentous events for the evolution of t'ai-chi ch'üan did not take place on mist-wrapped mountains. Modern intellectual historians are able to place the ancient Greek Olympics in the context of classical ideals of physical beauty and health and admiration for feats of strength and endurance. Nineteenth-century romantics' rage for swimming can likewise be seen in light of their reaction against crass industrialism and bourgeois conformity, their desire to commune with the gods and goddesses of woods and water, and their flirting with the mystery and danger of the sea. However, the tendency to treat the story of t'ai-chi ch'üan in an historical vacuum has been correctly identified by Wu Wen-han:

In the past, students of the development of t'ai-chi ch'üan have ignored historical, economic, and political conditions and have focused narrowly on the art itself and a small number of masters.<sup>1</sup>

Anything earlier than the Republican period (1911–49) tends to slip into the mist of "ancient China," and we often overlook the fact that Yang Lu-ch'an and the Wu brothers were of the same generation as Darwin and Marx, and that the Li brothers were contemporaries of Einstein, Freud, and Gandhi. Railroads, telegraph, and missionary schools were already part of the Chinese landscape, and Chinese armies (and rebels) sometimes carried modern Western rifles. How often have we stopped to reflect that Yang Lu-ch'an was probably in Beijing in 1860 when British and French troops stormed the capital and the Manchu Emperor took flight. It is our proposition, then, that this watershed period in the evolution of the art and theory of t'ai-chi ch'üan did not take place in spite of larger social and historical events but somehow in response to them. Although the "classics"

and early writings, the focus of our study here, have a timeless, art-for-art's-sake tone, this should not prevent us from asking who were the Ch'ens, Yangs, Wus, and Lis, why did they involve themselves in the martial arts, and why did they create this kind of martial art? This section will begin to describe in a very general way the world of the Wus, Yangs, and Lis and what can be gathered from actual historical documents of their family backgrounds.

## China and the Nations

The century that bounds the lives of Wu Ch'eng-ching (b. 1800), Li I-yü (d. 1892), and the Yung-nien t'ai-chi circle began in one world and ended in another. For China, whose cultural self-image was still one of centrality and superiority, to confront a swarm of new barbarians "from across the sea" while old barbarians from the north still sat on the dragon throne was a complex political and psychological ordeal. The Manchu tiger, now old and enfeebled herself, still jealously guarded the bones of China's old carcass from the strong young jackals at the gates. However, by the early 1800s, fired by industrialism, science, democracy, evangelical Christianity, and, above all, a belief in the divine right of trade, the West, led by Great Britain, would not be barred from China. Britain's reliance on opium smuggling to offset an unfavorable balance of trade, and the general incompatibility of the political and economic instruments of interface, led to the Opium War of 1839, which after China's easy defeat exposed the military weakness of the dynasty. The Treaty of Nanking, signed in 1842, and subsequent "unequal treaties" wrested from China Hong Kong, five Treaty Ports, the International Settlement, extraterritoriality, a war indemnity, a 5 percent tariff limit, most-favored-nation protection, and missionary access. Thus, in the first years of the 1840s, China suffered a humiliating defeat and substantial loss of sovereignty.

Still not satisfied with Chinese concessions, the British and French attacked again in 1856, seizing Canton in 1858 and Beijing in 1860. Better channels of communication were then developed following the Treaty of Tientsin, which paved the way for Western diplomats to reside in Beijing, the establishment of the Tsung-li ya-men to handle negotiations, and even the opening of a Ch'ing embassy in London in 1877. The scent of blood from the wounded empire excited the ambitions of rapidly modernizing Japan, who seized the Ryukyu Islands in 1872, followed by expeditions against Korea and Formosa. The Russian czar won access to the eastern coast of Manchuria in 1860, and in 1880 a dispute over the Ili

region in Turkestan brought Russian ships to menace the port of Ningbo. French colonial expansion in Indo-China led to the Sino-French War in 1883, culminating in France's attack on Taiwan and the bombardment of the Fuzhou shipyards. Although Li I-yü died just two years before the Sino-Japanese War of 1894, the century ended with China's most humiliating defeat, the loss of Taiwan and Korea, and the international race to "carve up the Chinese melon."

The economic effects of foreign penetration touched even more lives than did "gunboat diplomacy" and "unequal treaties." Opium trafficking created a huge underground economy, draining silver from the country, corrupting officialdom, and devastating the lives of millions from all classes. Importation of foreign factory goods undercut domestic Chinese handicrafts, an essential supplement to peasant income. Cash cropping and the rapid expansion of commercialism created new wealth for the few who benefited from cooperation with the West, but led to inflation and rising taxes that further increased the misery of the peasantry and nascent proletariat. Revenues diverted from public works into military defense led to a neglect of dikes, canals, and granaries and exposed the populace to the ravages of flood, drought, and famine.

The shapers of modern t'ai-chi ch'üan thus witnessed repeated military defeat and reduction of the empire to semicolonial status. T'ai-chi ch'üan as we know it today rose from the ashes of a collapsing empire. With roots that clearly reach back farther than the nineteenth century, t'ai-chi's association with national revival did not become explicit until the twentieth. China's anti-imperialist struggles began in the nineteenth century, yet t'ai-chi writings from this period do not yet show self-conscious patriotic sentiments. Succeeding sections of this chapter will explore t'ai-chi ch'üan as a cultural response to China's political predicament.

## Rebellion at Home

T'ai-chi ch'üan as we know it today was born not only in a period of national crisis, but at the geographic epicenter of the most intense sectarian rebellions in China's history. Subjected to nearly annual drought or flood, the provinces of the North China Plain—Hebei and Henan, Shandong and Shanxi—were traditional hotbeds of sectarian rebellion going all the way back to the Red Eyebrows and Yellow Turbans of the Han (206 B.C.E.—220 C.E.), Huang Chao's rebellion during the T'ang (618–907), and the rebel-heroes of the Sung (960–1127) immortalized in the novel *Water Margin*. During the late Yüan (1271–1368) and through the

Ming (1368–1644) and Ch'ing (1644–1911) the White Lotus Sect was a rallying point for popular unrest, and Hsü Hung-ju's rebellion at the end of the Ming was one of the first to combine a millenarian movement with martial arts elements borrowed from the Cudgel and Whip Society. This volatile mix of religious heterodoxy and martial arts flared again in Wang Lun's rebellion of 1774, the Eight Trigrams of 1813, and the antiforeign Boxer Uprising of 1898–1900.

The Wu brothers' hometown, Yung-nien, was located in the middle of the Eight Trigrams Sect's base area, southern Hebei/northern Henan, and the brothers were young boys when a force of Eight Trigrams guerrillas broke into Beijing's Forbidden City itself. Martial arts scholar Chao Hsi-min, who believes that Wu Yü-hsiang wrote the "classics" himself, contends that t'ai-chi theory is simply borrowed from Eight Trigram's sectarian teachings.<sup>2</sup> Other millenarian movements that swept over Yung-nien in the nineteenth century included the Celestial Principle Society, the Celestial Bamboo Sect, and the Prebirth Sect, all of which were prone to turn from magical salvation to militant rebellion in times of crisis.

Passing over regional rebellions in other parts of the empire, the most entrenched and long-lived antidynastic movement in North China during the nineteenth century was the Nien Rebellion. Originating in the area north of the Huai River in Anhui Province, it spread to Shandong, Henan, and Hebei between the years 1852 (when Ch'eng-ch'ing was appointed magistrate in Wu-yang) and 1868 (when Ju-ch'ing declined Tso Tsung-t'ang's invitation to join his counterinsurgency campaign). Although scholars disagree over whether to classify the Niens as bandits, rebels, or revolutionaries, their military strategy shifted from entrenchment in walled communities (originally established to repulse bandits) to reliance on mobile cavalry units. The rusty Manchu Bannermen were no match for the resourceful Nien, and they were suppressed only by the regional Chinese armies of Tseng Kuo-fan (1811–72), Li Hung-chang (1823–1901), and Tso Tsung-t'ang (1812–85).

Although originating in South China among the Hakka minority of Guangdong in 1850, the Taiping Rebellion cannot be overlooked here, because at its height it controlled the rich Yangtze River basin, established a rival capital and dynasty in Nanjing, and was turned back only at Tianjin in 1864. Creatively borrowing from missionary tracts, the movement's leader, Hung Hsiu-ch'üan, proclaimed himself the younger brother of Jesus and preached a message of anti-Confucian and anti-Manchu utopianism. In 1853, the Taiping Northern Expedition overran Ssu-shui, where Ch'ang Nai-chou's descendants still lived, but after crossing the Yellow River were repelled, according to the *Yung-nien Gazetteer*, at Huai-ch'ing

Prefecture (the location of Ch'en Village), and thus Yung-nien was spared. Again the rebellion was successfully suppressed only by regional and mercenary armies when the foreign powers decided to prop up the dynasty by supplying munitions, advisors, commanders, and even troops on the ground. The proliferation of reprints and anthologies of Ming military strategists (Ch'i Chi-kuang, T'ang Shun-chih, Ho Liang-ch'en, Mao Yüan-i, et al.) during the late Ch'ing dynasty attests to gentry-class anxiety over military defense.

The persistence of rebellion during the nineteenth century puts into historical perspective the Wu brothers' participation in militia training, counterinsurgency, community fortification, and contacts with regional military leaders, Tseng Kuo-fan and Tso Tsung-t'ang. Late Ch'ing gazetteer maps show approximately forty garrisons, stockades, and walled villages in the immediate vicinity of Kuang-p'ing Prefectural City, with those located south of the city, facing the direction of greatest anticipated threat, outnumbering those to the north by a ratio of three to one. As far as defense of the prefectural city itself is concerned, the *Kuang-p'ing Gazetteer* describes Ju-ch'ing's role in these words: "He established the militia in the city, arranged for its budget and weapons, and trained them night and day into a powerful force. That the city held against repeated Taiping and Nien rebel attacks was all due to Ju-ch'ing's efforts."<sup>3</sup>

## The North China Plain

Yung-nien County, located virtually at the intersection of the north-south axis of Hebei and Henan and the east-west axis of Shandong and Shanxi is at the heart of what William Skinner calls the "North China macroregion." Continuously populated by humans for half a million years, this alluvial flood plain of the Yellow River stretches flat for hundreds of miles in every direction. Flatness means flooding, and flooding means enrichment by loess (silt) and devastation by water. Continental climate produces cold, dry winters and hot, humid summers. Lacking irrigation, North China was at the mercy of the late-summer rainy season, which, depending on annual vagaries, could bring floods or drought. In spite of these natural hazards, the region's economy in the nineteenth century was still dependent on subsistence grains—wheat, soy, millet, and sorghum—and population density had risen to approximately five hundred souls per square mile, of whom more than 90 percent were peasants. In 1875, according to the *Yung-nien Gazetteer*, the population of the county was 55,344 households, or 232,420 individuals. Although one of the original cradles of

Chinese civilization and the seat of the imperial capital for almost a thousand years, the North China plain was backward in transportation, commercialization, urbanization, and landlordism, the latter being a symptom of poverty and unattractive real estate prospects.

Environmental and economic conditions produced a number of social phenomena of special relevance to the development of martial arts. Exacerbated by female infanticide and polygamy, North China boasted a surplus of unmarried and unemployed males approaching perhaps 20 percent of the population. These "marginal men" were prime candidates for the ranks of bandits, smugglers, beggars, gamblers, sectarian rebels, kidnapers, tax revolters, vigilantes, family feuders, and refugees. As such, they practiced a "predatory" strategy for survival by illegally expanding their resources at others' expense. Some of this was a redistributive form of "social banditry" aimed at hoarders and corrupt landlords and officials, and some was mere opportunism. The reaction to vertical violence coming from those at the bottom was a "protective strategy" by those at the top. This included village militia, private vigilantes, and crop watching. The final phase of this protective response, sometimes called "coercive closure," involved withdrawing into armed forts and severely restricting access by outsiders. To vertical violence operating along class or sectarian lines must be added the equally pervasive pattern of horizontal violence that took the form of interlineage or intervillage feuds motivated by revenge or sometimes simply profit. Becoming a traditional way of life for generations in some locales, feuds involved not only clan members themselves but mercenaries and "adopted sons" hired or raised to fight in the front ranks or to be handed over as compensation for casualties on the other side. Still other regions were plagued by ethnic conflicts, particularly in the mid nineteenth century between Hans and Muslims, as in Yunnan in the southwest, Gansu/Shaanxi in the northwest, and the nearly permanent state of *jihad* in Xinjiang in the far west.

Living in the path of repeated waves of northern invasion, the people of the North China plain developed a justly deserved reputation for their martial spirit. The *Yung-nien Gazetteer*, Chüan 24, "Military Affairs" states: "From the Spring and Autumn Period [770–476 B.C.E.] down through the Yüan [1271–1368] and Ming [1368–1644] Yung-nien has been a battleground." Whether channeled into soldiering or "social banditry," the martial spirit is as much a part of the cultural landscape of northern China as it is for the southern United States. Although records for military-exam passers are not as complete as for civil exams, and data are somewhat inconsistent in different sources, nevertheless conclusions are dramatic and inescapable. For the hundred-odd times the military metropolitan exami-



nations were held during the two and a half centuries of Ch'ing rule, and averaging totals in different sources and reducing them to ratios, the number of top three placers (*chuang-yüan* 狀元, *pang-yen* 榜眼, *t'an-hua* 探花) for Hebei is approximately three times that for Shandong, and the two together boasted more winners than the remaining sixteen provinces combined. Thus Hebei not only led the nation by a huge margin, but nearly tripled the total of its nearest rival, Shandong, which itself was head and shoulders above the rest. That major style founders, Wu Yü-hsiang, Yang Lu-ch'an, Hao Wei-chen, Wu Chien-ch'üan, and Sun Lu-t'ang, all hailed from Hebei, China's most fertile breeding ground for martial arts, must be more than coincidence.

On the other side of the fence, martial arts were also a feature of sectarian and secret-society activities in North China during the nineteenth century. The Boxers (*I-ho-ch'üan* 義合拳) were only the most notorious example, but techniques of invulnerability, such as Armor of the Golden Bell (*chin-chung-chao* 金鐘罩) and of possession, such as Spirit Boxing (*shen-ch'üan* 神拳) have been traced in North China to the early 1800s. So pervasive was martial arts culture that Joseph Esherick, in commenting on one of the forerunners of the Boxers, concludes:

More than anything, the Song Jing-shi rebellion illustrates the extent to which martial artists and sectarians had entered the mainstream of peasant life in western Shandong. The participation of martial artists on both rebel and governmental sides bespeaks the prominence of such people in the social fabric of the region.<sup>4</sup>

The stereotype of the effete Confucian literati has long made it difficult to explain the intense involvement in martial arts of the Wu and Li families of Yung-nien. The extraordinarily violent nineteenth century and the martial tradition of the North China plain go a long way to clarifying the picture.

## Elite Culture

Confucius had said that those who work with their minds rule and those who work with their hands are ruled. Although landlords constituted perhaps 5 percent of the population of 300 million in late Ch'ing China, degree-holding literati were only about 250,000, or less than 0.1 percent, and there were only about 25,000 upper-level degree holders

qualified for important posts in the imperial bureaucracy. Mastery of about ten thousand characters, memorization of the Confucian canon, and essay composition in the "eight-legged" style were the core of the examination system curriculum. Preparation for, travel to, and participation in endless rounds of local, provincial, and national examinations was the life of the literati. The metropolitan exam, the grueling literary Olympics of the system, was held every three years in Beijing. Ch'eng-ch'ing was fifty-two years old when he finally earned his metropolitan degree after eighteen years since his provincial exam, and Ju Ch'ing was thirty-eight with a fifteen-year interval. Moreover, Ju-ch'ing was the only successful *chin-shih* from Yung-nien County in the fifteen years between 1835 and 1850, and he passed in the regular triannual exam. Ch'eng-ch'ing, who won his degree during a specially scheduled exam in 1852, was the only winner from Yung-nien between 1851 and 1859. Thus both men were well into their middle years before "graduating" and winning their first government posts, and this was by no means atypical. Given the content of the exams—largely literary and philosophical—and the slowness of the process, one can see the difficulty of producing men of practical abilities who could respond to new challenges.

With office holding often the sole, and certainly the surest, path to wealth and status, holding public office for private gain came to be the norm. This was done by skimming tax revenues as they passed through one's hands on their way to the imperial treasury and by extorting money from peasants and merchants; "profits" were then invested in land, which was rented to peasants at exorbitant rates. Although these practices were customary and thoroughly institutionalized, the honest official remained an ideal. Ju-ch'ing's biographies praise him extravagantly for prosecuting a case of shortchanging on grain rations for prisoners, accurately reporting on criminal investigations, and refusing bribes.

Elite dominance was maintained, then, first through control of material resources—land, commercial wealth, and military power—but also through social networks. These included clan or kin groups on the local level and might reach all the way up to political cliques in the national ministries and even the imperial court. Personal qualities could also be a significant factor in the elite equation where technical expertise or leadership abilities served to further distinguish an individual and make him useful, particularly in times of national crisis. Much has been made of "symbolic capital" in defining elite status in China, and this includes all the degrees, titles, honors, and ranks, as well as the cultural refinements and lifestyle, of the gentry class. Among the credential-conscious Confucian elite, so coveted were degrees as status symbols during the late Ch'ing,

and so desperate was the government to raise revenues, that one-third of all degrees were secured through purchase. Even worse, two-thirds of office holders had qualified to sink their fangs into the miserable peasantry by the "irregular route" of purchase.

Traditional gentry disdain for commerce began to break down during the nineteenth century as trade with the West and indigenous industrialization rapidly expanded. Degree and office holding were still prestigious, but the supply of posts never equaled demand and high public profile brought exposure to intrigue. Land owning was still considered the most secure investment, but new opportunities for wealth through commerce motivated many gentry families to diversify. A typical strategy was to channel some sons into the examination track and others into business. Looking at families, then, rather than individuals, we begin to see in the nineteenth century a fusion of literati and commercial interests within the gentry class. Yü-hsiang's remaining in Yung-nien while his older brothers pursued national careers may in part be explained by the youngest son's obligation to care for his widowed mother, but economic diversification may also have been a factor.

Elite activity may be conveniently divided into official (*kuan* 官), public (*kung* 公), and private (*ssu* 私) spheres. Official functions were those associated with office holding, which because of the "rule of avoidance" barring service in one's native place, meant being posted in distant provinces or in the national capital. Beset by foreign incursions and domestic rebellion, and ossified by ritual and corruption, the official sphere during the period in question occasioned the highest degree of frustration in the life of elites. By contrast, the public sphere experienced exuberant expansion during the same period as local gentry rose to fill the gap left by thinly spread officials in providing education, relief work, and militia defense. With disaster-prone North China's nearly annual crop of refugees, charitable relief was a traditional part of gentry obligations there, but following the wholesale devastation of the Taiping Rebellion (caused as much by government and regional soldiers as by rebels) the task of organizing reconstruction was added to their voluntary functions. Everything from soup kitchens to the repair of city walls fell into the sphere of public activities. The private sphere included business, on the one hand (land management, real estate, manufacturing, or commerce), and self-development, on the other. Attainment in poetry, music, calligraphy, and painting, or even art, antiques, or rare book collecting, could significantly enhance one's status among gentry peers and further distinguish one from the unwashed masses. Private pursuits among less conventional literati might also include scholarly research in medicine, mathematics, or astronomy.

The above outline of gentry-class life during the nineteenth century demonstrates the degree to which the Wu family of Yung-nien were not only typical but highly successful exploiters of the various options opened up by the age. Wu family matriarch, Madame Wu, an award-winning widow, nurtured her three sons into the ranks of upper gentry, two of them earning the coveted *chin-shih* degree. Moreover, in addition to their success in the examination system and distinguished service to the nation, they were leaders in the public sphere through education, public works, gazetteer editing, and militia training, and in the private sphere through business, scholarship, and martial arts. It is only the last of these pursuits—martial arts—that remains somewhat mysterious. Not only are the extant Wu family biographies completely devoid of any reference to martial arts, but the *Yung-nien Gazetteer* has only one lone biography of a martial artist. Notwithstanding elite reticence about being associated with the martial arts, the Yung-nien records must be contrasted with the *Ssu-shui Gazetteer*, which records not only the martial arts activities of scholar Ch'ang Nai-chou but the biographies of many professional martial artists in the section entitled “Notable Personalities” (*ren-wu* 人物).

### Late Ch'ing Intellectual Trends

The Wu and Li families' orientation to nineteenth-century intellectual trends is potentially the most fruitful area of investigation for understanding their devotion to t'ai-chi ch'üan. If their motivation were simply “self-defense,” we might be more likely to find them clamoring for military modernization, and thus their involvement in t'ai-chi ch'üan must be seen as articulating with some current of thought at the time. This section will attempt to sketch at least the major trends in late Ch'ing thought as the broad context out of which a better understanding of the shaping of t'ai-chi ch'üan as a cultural artifact in the hands of Wu Yü-hsiang and Li I-yü must ultimately come.

Dynastic decline during the late Ming, accompanied by nearly successful peasant rebellion and Manchu conquest, forced intellectuals into a period of intense soul-searching as the alien dynasty closed its grip on China in the mid seventeenth century. The question of loyalty to the Ming—resistance versus accommodation—was the first order of the day. As all hope of restoration faded, attention turned to analyzing the reasons for the failure of the previous dynasty. Philosophically, the Idealist School of Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529) was blamed for focusing on inner life to the neglect of the nuts and bolts of good government. Some, like Huang

Tsung-hsi (1610–85), Wang Fu-chih (1619–85), and Ku Yen-wu (1613–82), sought solutions to fundamental problems of despotism, corruption, and empty erudition. The process of reevaluating the past, and certainly that of protesting the present, was hampered by Manchu censorship and persecution of dissent. Huang, Wang, and Ku were all active in armed resistance, and all refused to serve the alien dynasty before turning to historical, philosophical, and scientific studies. The Manchu state confirmed the orthodoxy of Chu Hsi's (1130–1200) School of Reason, while unofficial scholarly circles were dominated by the Han Learning movement, which turned away from subjectivism and metaphysics to historical and exegetical studies. At the same time, the Eastern Chekiang School, stemming from Huang Tsung-hsi, stressed the importance of empirically based unofficial histories as a counterpoise to self-serving official histories. Another trend promoted by independent minds like Yen Yüan (1635–1704), Li Kung (1659–1733), and Tai Chen (1724–77) argued that universal principles did not exist outside of the material world and that moral progress was a matter not of self-purification but of praxis in the mundane world.

The generation of thinkers that closed out the eighteenth century were able to write critically, but strictly within the native tradition and insulated from Western influence. There is a gap in philosophical discourse between Tai Chen and the radical reformers of the 1890s, like K'ang Yu-wei, Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, and T'an Ssu-t'ung. The generation in between, that of the Wu brothers and Li I-yü, produced two poles: the eremitism of Li Hsi-yüeh's (c.1800–c.1860) Yu-lung Sect and Wei Yüan's (1794–1856) insistence on Western studies, both of whose major works, *Chang San-feng Ch'üan-chi* 張三豐全集 (The Complete Works of Chang San-feng) and *Hai-kuo t'u-chih* 海國圖志 (Illustrated Gazetteer of the Maritime Countries), were published in 1844. The progressive thinkers of Wu's generation, though constitutionally incapable of acknowledging any value in Western intellectual or religious life, accepted the necessity of adopting Western military technology in order to preserve traditional Confucian culture. Reformers like Feng Kuei-fen (1809–87) and Hsüeh Fu-ch'eng (1838–94) could upbraid their countrymen for ineptitude and arrogance and praise the West for intelligence and competence, even while asserting the fundamental superiority of Chinese culture. Meanwhile, Tseng Kuo-fan (1811–72) and Li Hung-chang (1823–1901) seemed to combine personal Confucian virtues and statesmanship with a willingness to adopt Western methods for immediate utility. Wang T'ao (1828–97) begins to anticipate the radical reformers of the generation of the second half of the nineteenth century by suggesting that national renovation go deeper than guns and steamships to the actual educational system and institutions of

government. It was not until the post-Taiping generation that a handful of radical thinkers could begin to conceive of China as politically one among equal nations and Confucianism as one of many equal world religions.

In a general way, I think we would not be amiss in saying that the Wu brothers' thinking was aligned with the Self-Strengthening Movement of the mid to late nineteenth century. There is ample evidence in the gazetteers that Ju-ch'ing enjoyed a relationship of mutual admiration with model self-strengtheners Tseng Kuo-fan and Tso Tsung-t'ang. The *Yung-nien Gazetteer* praises the Wu brothers' local hero Shen Tuan-min as one whose life exemplified the words of the *I ching*, "ceaseless self-strengthening." In a biography of Hao Ch'eng-tsung 郝承宗, the *Gazetteer* approvingly says: "There were some in his village who practiced the Catholic religion. He ordered them to disband." This is in keeping with the Self-Strengthening attitude that China might learn from the West in matters of weaponry, and even administration, but certainly not religion. Faith in the sufficiency and superiority of Chinese culture, if the Chinese themselves would but live up to it, must be seen as underlying the Wu brothers' involvement in practicing and promoting t'ai-chi ch'üan in the late nineteenth century.

Most elites of the Wu brothers' generation were too preoccupied with careerism, class dominance, and national defense to launch any bold new intellectual projects. Moreover, they were forced to respond to the challenge of Western and Taiping ideas and the Japanese model of reform with one hand tied behind their backs—fear of offending their ultraconservative Manchu rulers. The West and Japan might be useful in undermining Manchu power, but there was the danger of simply changing alien masters. Nevertheless, available biographical data indicate that the Wu brothers' Confucian sense of social responsibility had a high degree of articulation with national trends towards localism, practical studies, and the search for solutions to the contemporary crisis in traditional sources. By the late 1850s the Wu brothers had withdrawn from the official sphere and plunged into every aspect of local revival. The two and a half centuries of the Manchu dynasty saw a number of cycles of patriotic scholar-officials shifting their attention from the national to the local scene. Given the court's show of impotence and honest officials' frustration with pervasive corruption and conservatism, one can understand the Wu brothers' decision to return to their roots, to publish the writings of the older generation of progressive Yung-nien scholars, and through education, to raise up a new generation of able and committed talent. Echoes of the Han Learning movement, with its emphasis on relevance, can be heard in this passage from Ju-ch'ing's biography in the *Kuang-p'ing Gazetteer*: "He detested superficiality and devoted himself to practical studies, bringing about a

great reform in the intellectual climate of the locale.” Similarly, Ch’eng-ch’ing’s preface to Yen Pin’s 閻斌 *Yün-ch’uang i-ts’ao* 芸窗易草 (Random notes on the *I-ching* from the rue window), excerpted in the same gazetteer, praises the author for discovering the practical principles hidden in the hexagrams and text of the *I-ching*. Underlying this trend to localism and practical studies is the assumption that new challenges were not qualitatively different from old and that solutions could be found in models of resistance to Manchu conquest or in Han Learning interpretations of the classics. Again, Ju-ch’ing’s publication of Sun Hsia-feng’s 孫夏峰 *Chi-fu jen-wu k’ao* 畿輔人物考 (A study of famous men from the capital region) and *Ssu-shu chin-chih* 四書近指 (Lessons for today from the Four Books) typifies this approach. It parallels on an intellectual level the military regionalism of Li Hung-chang and Tseng Kuo-fan and prefigures the more radical local salvation strategies of the 1890s.

Ku Liu-hsin in a note on sources following his biographical sketch of Li I-yü in *T’ai-chi ch’üan yen-chiu* lists several biographies of Li and Wu family members. These might be useful in reconstructing the intellectual lives of the Yung-nien gentry, but they have not been located. In his *Ta-ch’ing chi-fu shu-cheng*, Hsü Shih-ch’ang, following his biographies of Ju-ch’ing and Ch’eng-ch’ing, lists a number of works written by the brothers. These, together with their writings mentioned in the gazetteers, would obviously be invaluable sources for our purposes here if they have survived and could be found. Hsü’s more detailed biographies in his *Ta-ch’ing chi-fu hsien-che chuan* provide some interesting internal and comparative clues. Ch’eng-ch’ing’s biography mentions his interest in “Lao tzu and Taoist occultism” and the writings of Mei Wen-t’ing (1633–1721), Chiang Fan (1761–1831), Chiao Hsün (1763–1820), and Juan Yüan (1764–1849). A survey of all the biographies in Hsü’s collection shows that an interest in Taoism was rare indeed. Of course, no reference is made to martial arts, and brother Yü-hsiang does not merit a biography at all. As for the four Ch’ing thinkers, what they have in common is that in approaching the native tradition they attempted to uncover the true Confucian essence buried beneath Buddhist and Taoist influence, and in approaching the West they tried to assert the priority and superiority of Chinese science and mathematics. The movement to exhume evidence of China’s superiority to the West may be related to the Wu and Li brothers’ creation of a superior fighting art based on the quintessential Chinese principle of softness overcoming hardness. In this way, when the “Treatise” says, “There are many other styles of martial arts, but they are nothing more than the strong bullying the weak,” we cannot rule out the possibility that Wu was thinking of the West as much as other schools of Chinese martial arts. The

appeal to Chang San-feng and Wang Tsung-yüeh may also be an attempt to give the art deeper roots and make it seem less like a contemporary creation. It is indeed ironic that although it is a synthesis of many traditional elements in the culture—martial arts, *chi-kung*, Taoist philosophy, medicine, and military strategy—t'ai-chi ch'üan stands as one of the most creative, lasting, and internationally influential contributions of the Ch'ing period.

### Reexamining the Biography of Wu Yü-hsiang

To martial arts enthusiasts Wu Yü-hsiang is student of Yang Lu-ch'an and Ch'en Ch'ing-p'ing, discoverer of the Wang Tsung-yüeh classics, writer of classics in his own right, and founder of the Wu (Hao) style of t'ai-chi ch'üan. To gazetteer editors, however, he is merely the brother of Ch'eng-ch'ing and Ju-ch'ing; to official historians he does not exist. This irony demonstrates that despite the academic and political successes of Ch'eng-ch'ing and Ju-ch'ing in their day, they have been forgotten by history, whereas Yü-hsiang, obscure in his own day, is known throughout the world wherever the story of t'ai-chi ch'üan is told. Unfortunately for martial arts history, this means that we have standard reliable sources for Ch'eng-ch'ing and Ju-ch'ing but only anecdotal information for Yü-hsiang. Li's "Short Preface" is extremely stingy, and grandson Lai-hsiu's "Biography" only slightly better; dates are lacking, both obfuscate the relationship between Wu and Yang Lu-ch'an, and neither mentions the source of the Wang Tsung-yüeh classics. In truth, Wu Yü-hsiang, although his historicity is indubitable, is only slightly less shadowy than Chang San-feng and Wang Tsung-yüeh.

The cultural biases of the local gazetteers are apparent in both what they include and what they omit. Yang Lu-ch'an, for example, arguably Yung-nien's most famous native son from today's vantage point, merits not a single word. Highest priority is given to examination success, official appointment, meritorious service to the state, charitable activity, and awards. Merchants and peasants are largely invisible, and the economic life of scholar-officials is vague and nonspecific. Women enter only through the back door marked "faithful widows." Given the Wu brothers' participation in the writing and editing of the *Yung-nien Gazetteer* (Ch'eng-ch'ing was one of the principal editors and Ju-ch'ing a contributor), we should not be surprised to see them emerge from its pages as the model Confucian family.

Biographies of Yü-hsiang written in the twentieth century invariably refer to the Wus as a wealthy scholar family, but they are not unanimous in explaining the source of the wealth. T'ang, Hsü, and Ku mention only Wu family ownership of the building rented to Ch'en Te-hu of Ch'en



Village, who operated it as the T'ai-ho Pharmacy.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary Wu (Hao) style exponent Hao Yin-ju states, "The Wu family was wealthy, possessing vast lands and real property. The T'ai-ho Pharmacy was rented from them."<sup>6</sup> Hsüeh Nai-yin gives the most detailed account: "The Wu family was rich and operated two tea dealing shops, one each on East and West Streets in Kuang-p'ing Prefectural City. Later they combined the tea dealing business in the East Street shop and rented the West Street shop to Ch'en Te-hu as a pharmacy."<sup>7</sup> Chou Ming adds, "Pharmacy real estate was an old occupation of the Wu family."<sup>8</sup> Although these various accounts are not mutually contradictory, it is unfortunate that in no instance is any source cited for the information.

Looking at the Yung-nien County and Kuang-p'ing Prefecture gazetteers, we read that Yü-hsiang's grandfather Ta-yung impoverished the family through charitable contributions to other families in distress, that his father, Lieh, died at only thirty-three years of age, and that his widowed mother sold her jewelry to hire tutors for her sons. In this way, the Wu family fortune must have been made (or remade) in one generation—Wu Yü-hsiang's own. If wealth was not inherited in Yü-hsiang's generation, there can be only two sources: Yü-hsiang's business acumen and/or Ch'eng-ch'ing's and Ju-ch'ing's official posts. Although it is not impossible that Yü-hsiang made a fortune in tea dealing and real estate, it should be remembered that North China had the lowest rate of commercialization and landlordism of any nonborder region in the empire. In relation to office holding, it should be remembered that salaries alone did not begin to cover expenses (the Yung-nien magistrate's salary was only 45 ounces of silver), but that great wealth could be accumulated in a short time through customary tax skimming and bribe taking. Gazetteer biographers' portrayal of Ju-ch'ing's incorruptibility leaves a lot of unanswered questions regarding the source of Wu family wealth.

Research on the Wu family of Yung-nien conducted by T'ang Hao and Hsü Chen in the 1930s, summarized in Ku Liu-hsin's 1963 *T'ai-chi ch'üan yen-chiu* and 1982 *T'ai-chi ch'üan shu*, and repeated in most subsequent accounts, contains the following bare bones:

1. As boys, Wu Yü-hsiang and his brothers studied the martial art handed down in their family (in more recent sources usually identified as Hung Boxing 洪拳).
2. Yü-hsiang, a martial arts amateur, was impressed with Yang Lu-ch'an, who, returning to his native Yung-nien after more than thirty years as a bond servant in Ch'en Village, stayed in Ch'en Te-hu's pharmacy rented from the Wu family.

*Lost T'ai-chi Classics from the Late Ch'ing Dynasty*

3. Wu studied with Yang and arranged for him to go to Beijing, where Yang and his sons were employed as instructors in the Manchu garrisons.
4. On his way to visit his brother, Ch'eng-ch'ing, newly appointed magistrate in Wu-yang, Henan, Yü-hsiang passed through Ch'en Village, where he studied for a short time with Ch'en Ch'ing-p'ing.
5. Proceeding to Wu-yang, Yü-hsiang was shown the Wang Tsung-yüeh manuscript that Ch'eng-ch'ing found in a salt shop.
6. Returning to Yung-nien, Yü-hsiang edited and supplemented Wang's writings and created a style of t'ai-chi ch'üan synthesizing Lu-ch'an, Ch'ing-p'ing, Wang's indications, and his own insights.
7. As a member of the upper gentry, Yü-hsiang had no interest in being a professional martial arts master, and so his only students were his nephews Li I-yü and Li Ch'i-hsüan.

Alternatives to the above account have focused mainly on Yang Lu-ch'an's status and the circumstances of his sojourn in Ch'en Village. Some have claimed that he was a scholar and/or that he traveled to Ch'en Village as an adult and stole the secrets of t'ai-chi ch'üan by spying. More recently, other versions have attempted to explain how Yü-hsiang as an outsider was able to win Ch'ing-p'ing's confidence or even to assert that he received the Wang texts from Ch'ing-p'ing. These new interpretations, emanating largely from Chao-pao Village and other Neo-Chang San-fengists, take advantage of key loopholes in existing sources, filling them with speculation presented as fact without advancing any new primary sources. However, triangulating from information in the gazetteers and Hsü Shih-ch'ang's biographies allows us to amplify and question some aspects of the standard picture.

The notion that the Wu brothers studied some family art is nowhere stated in available documents, and I believe it is based on hearsay from the Hao family or supposition stemming from previous generations' military careers. Grandfather Ta-yung, however, according to his biographies in the gazetteers, turned to literary studies, determined to steer the family onto the civil track, and explicitly forbade his sons Lieh and Hsü to engage in martial arts. Moreover, we are told that Yü-hsiang's father, Lieh, destroyed his health mourning his mother's passing, pursued studies outside the county, and died at thirty-three while his oldest son was not more than ten. It seems likely that the Wu brothers had some background in the martial arts before they met Yang Lu-ch'an, but, as can be seen, the family transmission theory is not without its problems.

As to the discovery of the salt shop manuscript, the "Short Preface" and "Biography of My Late Grandfather" do not state that Yü-hsiang went

to Wu-yang, but only that he traveled to Chao-pao Village. Even the "Post-script" of Li I-yü says only, "This manual was obtained in a salt shop in Wu-yang," and does not state that Yü-hsiang traveled there personally. I believe that T'ang Hao may have speculatively connected the given dots in order to form a logical picture. Widening the data base, however, to include contemporaneous biographies and historical facts makes the story of Yü-hsiang's journey to Wu-yang far less plausible. Ch'eng-ch'ing passed his metropolitan exam in 1852 and was appointed magistrate in Wu-yang County, Henan, the same year. In 1851, the previous year, Ju-ch'ing, as vice director in the Ministry of Justice assigned to Sichuan, was sent on an investigation to Gansu. Thereafter he spent some years in Beijing, returning to Yung-nien no later than 1860, as the gazetteer attests. This means that in 1852 it is very likely that Yü-hsiang was the only son at home with a widowed mother then in her seventies. Under these circumstances it is difficult to explain why he would have undertaken a journey to Wu-yang at the outbreak of the Nien Rebellion and on the eve of the Taiping Northern Expedition. We need more than "business" to explain why Yü-hsiang was on the road when every other rich man in the region was pulling up the drawbridge.

Although reliable biographical data on the Wu family provides no more than marginal references to Yü-hsiang, extrapolating from material on other members allows us to raise some additional questions about received wisdom. For example, the birth and death dates for Yü-hsiang given by T'ang and Ku in their *T'ai-chi ch'üan yen-chiu*, and repeated by every other martial arts scholar without exception, are 1812 and 1880. The *Yung-nien Gazetteer*, written while the brothers were still alive, gives precise birth and death dates only for grandfather Ta-yung, so there must be some other source for the T'ang/Ku's dates, yet they do not mention examining gravestones or family genealogies. Calculating from his mother's marriage at nineteen and her widowhood at twenty-nine, it is difficult to account for a twelve-year gap between Ch'eng-ch'ing's birth in 1800 and Yü-hsiang's in 1812, even allowing for the statement that she was pregnant at the time of her husband's death and actually gave birth after his passing (遺腹生子). Furthermore, based on data in her biography, Yü-hsiang's daughter was married at eighteen and widowed at twenty-five and had been a faithful widow for twenty-one years in 1877. Therefore, she must have been born in 1830, which means that Yü-hsiang, if born in 1812, could have been no more than eighteen at the time of her birth, two years before the traditional "capping ceremony" generally associated with manhood and marriage for gentry-class males. All of this points to an earlier birth date for Yü-hsiang. Yü-hsiang's own grandson, Lai-hsü, in writing

his grandfather's biography, was unable to provide either birth or death dates, and thus one must wonder at others' ingenuity.

What was the relationship between the Wu and Yang families? Generally accepted accounts today explain the Wu/Yang connection through the T'ai-ho Pharmacy in Yung-nien and Lu-ch'an's introduction to the Manchu princes through Ju-ch'ing's contacts in the capital. The idea that Lu-ch'an's son, Pan-hou, pursued literary studies for a time under Yü-hsiang is also often repeated. There is nothing implausible here, but scholars have struggled a bit with the fact that Li I-yü's "Short Preface" refers to Yang Lu-ch'an only as "a certain Yang" and says that Yang was very circumspect in teaching, forcing Wu to seek the secrets himself in Ch'en Village. At first glance, given that Yü-hsiang himself is nothing but a name in the *Yung-nien Gazetteer*, it is not surprising that a poor peasant like Yang is left out altogether. However, on closer examination, in the section of the *Gazetteer* entitled "Men of Special Talent" (*T'ai-i* 材藝), we find the biography of a Wang Fu-sheng of whom it is said: "He was a native of Kao-ku Village who excelled at the martial arts. His students numbered in the thousands. He was devoted to good works and righteousness." If Lu-ch'an's relationship with the Wu family was so close, and if his fame in Beijing boxing circles really earned him the epithet "Yang the Invincible," why is it not he instead of Wang Fu-sheng, or he along with Wang, whom the *Gazetteer* touts as Yung-nien's pride?

### Approaches to Understanding Wu and Li Involvement in T'ai-chi Ch'üan

Nineteenth-century China, "late imperial China," is one of the most intensively studied periods in Chinese history. In the past, peoples who challenged China militarily (northern warriors) did not also do so intellectually, and those who challenged China intellectually (Indian Buddhism) did not also do so militarily. The nineteenth century, however, saw a total assault on Chinese culture. China's "response to the West," "semi-colonialism," "millenarian rebellion," and "the fall of the last dynasty" have been studied by sinologists in and out of China in great detail, yet nothing in the scholarly literature can explain the involvement of the Wu and Li families in t'ai-chi ch'üan. The Wu family was in so many ways both ideal and typical. They fit the Confucian ideal of scholarship, service to the state and people, filial piety, and faithful widowhood. They also match the typical pattern of the age down to some of the smallest details. Mary Rankin could have been writing about Madame Wu's endowment of a school for

poor scholars when she observed, "Continuing annual operations [of charity schools] required more automatic sources of income. The time honored method was to acquire an endowment of agricultural land."<sup>9</sup> Drawing an examination-degree graph of the family over the generations shows that they also conform to the typical curve described by Esherick and Rankin: "Upper degree holders usually come in the middle of a cycle of rise and decline."<sup>10</sup> The division of labor noted among the Wu brothers could also be a case study proving Rankin's generalization: "Despite numerous local variations, merchants and gentry can no longer be considered two separate classes in the nineteenth century—particularly if one looks at the career pattern of entire families as opposed to isolated individuals."<sup>11</sup> Ju-ch'ing's editing of the works of anticollaborationist Shen Tuan-min also falls within Esherick and Rankin's purview when they describe the private sphere of late Ch'ing elites as including "affinial ties, poetry clubs, and historically oriented scholarship with links back to dead heroes of anti-Manchu resistance."<sup>12</sup>

There is nothing explicit in premodern Wu family biographies alluding to martial arts, and Western scholarship of the period offers no insight into how a gentry family could become so intensely involved in shaping and projecting an art like t'ai-chi ch'üan. James Hayes, for example, in his "Specialists and Written Materials in the Village World," delineates twelve categories of written documents commonly found in the Chinese village, but there is no category in his scheme that would remotely embrace the t'ai-chi manuals or classics.<sup>13</sup> Esherick and Rankin, in noting the extra-curricular high-culture pursuits of the gentry, observe:

Cultural mastery thus overlapped, but did not duplicate, the skills required for examination success. In both local and wider avenues the ability to write poetry was, for instance, a mark of elite refinement that was not directly oriented toward acquiring an official degree.<sup>14</sup>

Again, there is nothing specific, or even a theoretical niche, in this analysis that could explain or advance our understanding of the Wu and Li brothers' devotion to t'ai-chi ch'üan. Omission of any reference to martial arts in their official biographies is consistent with our understanding of conventional norms of propriety, but we have no idea whether they operated in secret or with whom they felt free to share their interest in martial arts. Outside of official documents, there may have been considerable dissonance between propriety and practice during this period.

Edward McCord, writing specifically on elite participation in local

defense, and focusing on one family in southwestern Guizhou who enhanced their status and fortune in the process, says, "In 1810 Liu Yanshan and his four sons led local residents in constructing a stone fortress and then began to train local residents as militiamen."<sup>15</sup> Many scholars in recent decades have attempted to destereotype our image of Chinese elites as corrupt and effete by pointing out their volunteerism and activism during this period of crisis. However, while everyone takes note of their leadership in local defense and militia training, no one has explained how men whose lives were oriented toward classical exegesis and essay composition suddenly qualified as drill sergeants. How did they acquire sufficient competence in weapons, military engineering, and strategy to command the respect and cooperation of tough peasants, remembering that even military examination graduates seldom rose far in the army because men would only follow proven leaders who had come up through the ranks.<sup>16</sup> When martial arts are mentioned in the work of modern scholars of the late imperial period, it is in the context of sectarianism and rebellion. For example, Susan Naquin, in her article "Transmission of White Lotus Sectarianism," says:

Sectarian martial arts were probably also greeted with suspicion, if for different reasons. Fighting skills were associated as much with criminal activity as with good health. Furthermore, to train groups of men privately in boxing and fencing was to encroach on the jealously guarded Manchu military monopoly.<sup>17</sup>

This statement not only gives us no clue into elite participation in martial arts, but is difficult to reconcile with Han martial arts masters such as Yang Lu-ch'an in the Manchu garrisons and local masters like Wang Fu-sheng with followers in the thousands. Similarly, Joseph Esherick's *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* helps us to understand the geographic and social milieu of North China and the practice of martial arts in secret societies and even crop-watching associations, but again nothing that would explain elite involvement in a martial art with unique characteristics.

If neither Western social science nor Chinese martial arts research can answer the fundamental question of why men like Wu Yü-hsiang and Li I-yü involved themselves in t'ai-chi ch'üan, it may be that the question has never been posed. What was the conscious political or unconscious psychological motivation? We have tried in the preceding chapters to hang the backdrop of macrohistory behind the flat facts of gazetteer biography in order to develop at least a two-dimensional picture of t'ai-chi ch'üan in the nineteenth century. In what follows we will speculatively stretch for the third dimension—inner motivation—in order to illuminate both the

origins of the art and another aspect of the intellectual milieu of late Ch'ing China. The method here is purely heuristic: to present a number of possible perspectives, some mutually complementary, some mutually contradictory, as a basis for further research and reflection.

Taking the classics and new material at face value and on their own terms, what we have is simply a prescription for a superior martial art. The "Treatise" states, "This art has many rivals . . . , but they are all based on native ability and have nothing to do with the real science of power." Even Li's "Short Preface" simply presents a picture of individuals—Wang Tsung-yüeh, Wu Yü-hsiang, Ch'en Ch'ing-p'ing, Yang Lu-ch'an, and Li I-yü himself—devoted to mastering an art of self-defense with absolutely no personal or historical context. The new material is similarly self-contained, trans-personal, and ahistorical—in other words: technical. The question of why is utterly absent at this stage, and even a formula as abstract as "to establish health and avoid humiliation" does not appear until the twentieth century. Why were certain members of the intellectual and political elite so bent on discovering, mastering, and elaborating the ultimate martial art at a time when gunboats, cannons, and rifles were determining the fate of the nation? Reading the classics and new material in a vacuum, one would assume that t'ai-chi ch'üan for t'ai-chi ch'üan's sake was the only thing in their lives, or at least the most important thing. Was it? No serious intellectual historian could accept a simple yes as the answer to this question.

Juxtaposing China's political and cultural crisis during the nineteenth century with a coterie of elites perfecting a subtle system of personal self-defense forces us to consider the possibility of escapism. While missionary universities sprang up in China, rails and telegraph startled the spirits of "wind and water," Chinese students traveled to Europe and America, and Chinese sharpshooters (*chiang-shou* 槍手) sold their services to the highest bidder, were the Wus and Lis simply burying their heads in the sand and escaping into a nostalgic and antiquarian hobby? Judging from available biographical data, by the late 1850s the Wus and Lis had all retired from official posts and confined themselves to public and private concerns on the local level. Although available accounts are couched in traditional formulas of filial piety, we do not know what else prompted them to withdraw from national politics and sit out the period known as the T'ung-chih Restoration (1862–74). Where did they stand in relation to the ultra-conservative Empress Dowager, the accommodationist Prince Kung, the Purist Party, the Self-Strengtheners, or the advocates of Western Learning? Were they unwilling to lend further support to propping up the Manchu regime? Or were they optimistically convinced that rebellion was pacified, the West appeased, and they could return to local and personal interests?