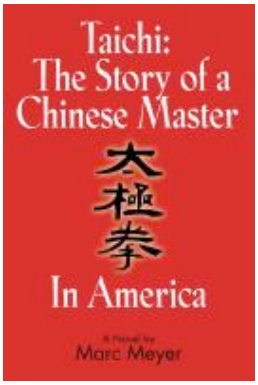
# Taichi: The Story of a Chinese Master


# In America

A Novel by

Marc Meyer




*A T'ai Chi Master embarks on a new life by moving to New York City in the mid 1960's but is surprised by the level of social unrest and violence he encounters. Told through the eyes of his young nephew, "Taichi" sends the reader through a New York besotted by the hippie movement, and provides a small glimpse into the hidden world of yesteryear's martial arts, practiced only in small enclaves of America's Chinatowns.*

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# Dedication

Dedicated to Ruth Lewin for all her love, generosity and support.

# Chapter 1

Emerging from a bank of wet fog in the predawn hour, a merchant ship quietly chugged its way to a slip in New York Harbour with only a few family members and dockhands to greet it. Chinese families swarmed the decks from the stifling holds below, pressing their chests against the railings to catch a firsthand glimpse of this wondrous new land that cost many of them their savings and some their lives. Bedlam broke out almost immediately, as excited and frightened passengers scrambled to stay together, clutching at children and meagre possessions, which for some amounted only to a bag of sundries and a few pots and pans tied with string to their backs. Amidst all the shouting and mayhem stood a serene figure in a shabby brown raincoat and torn fedora. He was tall for a Chinese man, six feet, but possessed of a calm air and dignified manner that set him apart from his fellow travelers.

This was not my uncle's first trip to America. Thanks to one special visit accompanying the wife of Chiang Kai-Sheck as a personal bodyguard and two others in the service of the U.S. Ambassador to China, Uncle Kuo was in possession of one of those most rare and prized commodities in the Chinese world at the time of the Cultural Revolution, a diplomatic passport issued to him by the consulate in Beijing. He took no small pride in flashing the precious leather-bound item before the eyes of awestruck New York Customs officials.

Despite the important government titles my uncle held, he was a simple man who preferred to dress in plain peasant cloth with only a modest wool overcoat for protection against the elements and who often slept in steerage, which he called "fourth class," during voyages on Chinese steamer ships. His unassuming manner and no frills appearance belied the fact that he was also rumoured to be a descendant of royal blood through ancestral ties to the Manchurian courts. I thought he looked a bit

weary and pale as he joined the strange procession down the gangway, clutching a weather-beaten suitcase.

It wasn't the claustrophobic accommodations, lack of decent food or exposure to unsanitary conditions that Uncle minded so much on these crossings as the intrusions on his privacy, which he found at times almost impossible to bear. He remarked on more than one occasion that his fellow passengers were an unsavoury lot and that he had even come to blows with some of them. The joys he felt during past visits to New York had all but been eclipsed by the ordeals of these tiresome journeys, but this time was different. This time, he would be staying.

It was important to note that within my Uncle Kuo's shadowy past lurked yet another persona, one that was kept secret from the general public and rarely discussed even among closest members of his family. He was, in fact, a pugilist of sorts, someone that Westerners referred to as a Chinese boxer. The prestigious title bestowed to him by elders at the Beijing Academy of Martial Arts was "Gatekeeper," a moniker, which to the best of my recollection in those days meant someone who was appointed to safeguard and represent the traditions of a family martial art. Over time this became the main focus behind his decision to settle and establish himself in America. Kuo revealed to us that he wished to open a school in New York City, offering to train students in a highly developed "soft fist" style of martial art previously unknown to Westerners, a school that he hoped, somewhat ambitiously, would foster improved relations between the Chinese and American communities. Unfortunately, no one in my family at that time had a single clue as to what he meant, but we trusted him and loved him, and that was enough.

By coming to America in the early sixties, Uncle would find himself trading one Cultural Revolution for another, albeit a more benign one whose consequences would be considerably less rough on its population.

My family and I watched the gate from a distance as the long queue of Chinese families began to form behind it. I tried to wave at my uncle to get his attention, but we were too far away and so

had to wait patiently behind the barricade. We were at the mercy of a lone customs official sitting behind his desk, slowly unwrapping a sandwich and pouring himself a cup of coffee from a large thermos. He chewed and slurped noisily, staring straight ahead at the clock on the opposite wall, ignoring the long, dishevelled line beginning to settle in behind him. My uncle had been waiting patiently too and was chafing to get into a hot bath and put on some clean clothes, but the customs official never looked up and continued chewing unfazed between more slugs of coffee.

Finally, after a long time had passed, Uncle felt unduly humiliated by the fellow's insolent behaviour and could stand it no longer. He pushed his way in front of several of the ragtag passengers who had by now become a protesting mob and addressed the agent loudly in his best English. "Excuse me, sir!" No answer. "I said, excuse me!"

The official looked at him as if he'd interrupted the deciding shot in a billiard game.

"If you please, sir, my friends and I have made a long journey to this shore, and we are tired. Will you open the gate and let us through? We have little to declare, and our families are waiting for us."

My brother and I were watching, but could just barely hear the exchange between the two men. From a young age, both of us had heard that Kuo was a famous martial artist in China. We were hoping for some fireworks, gripping each other's hands in the cold wind, but were soon to be disappointed.

"What is your business in the U.S.?" the customs official snapped.

Kuo bowed his head in a humble gesture. "I have come here to open a school of T'ai Chi Chuan".

"A what?"

Uncle began again, "I have come here…" but the official cut him off.

"Show me your identification papers." Kuo dutifully pulled out his embassy passport and showed it to him. He kept the item

past its expiration date, even sometime after he retired from public service, but for now, it was still valid. The customs agent greeted it with a suspiciously raised eyebrow, then waved him through impatiently and closed the gate behind him to a chorus of further protests. My uncle's head bowed ever lower to pick up his weather-beaten suitcase, but then his sweet face immediately brightened as he started to make a run towards us. He dropped his suitcase and reached out anxiously to hug my father and mother with his large hands. Then he turned to face my brother and I. Kuo grinned from ear to ear as he stood there, taking us in.

"Well well….look who we have here. These must be the two famous champions I've been hearing so much about!" We must have given each other such a funny look that it prompted everyone to start laughing.

"Come!" said Uncle, "Let's get out of here. I can't wait to sample those delectable noodles I know Mei has prepared for us." He gave us a huge smile with a wink and we felt his enormous hands on both of our shoulders, hustling us off the platform.

"I have brought all of you presents from Hong Kong, you will see," he said, grinning excitedly as we made a fast procession to the taxi stand for a taxi that would take us all back into Chinatown. My brother, Fa, and I remained unfazed by his enthusiasm. We had received gifts in the mail from Uncle Kuo before, and they had usually been cryptic type offerings, meant to instil some lasting moral values in us.

The taxi stand was jammed with uniformed porters blowing their whistles, shimmering yellow cabs, and a thousand people shouting for attention. My father put his hand on the door handle of one of the cabs before the driver could drive off and herded us all in. It was a tight squeeze with four of us in the car, but my younger brother, Fa, sat on my lap in the back seat, and we managed. My father got into the front seat and turned to the driver. "We are going to an address in Chinatown," he said.

# Chapter 5

By the following November, Kuo had accomplished much. His English had improved. He had his citizenship papers, a small apartment in Queens, and a school with a burgeoning roster of students. Jimmy Chow was brought on board as assistant coach along with a slice of a girl named Ba Ling.

Ba Ling, or "Ling Ling," as the students nicknamed her, was a seventeen year old transfer student from Beijing who immigrated to the U.S. through Ellis Island. She was reputed to have been a star of the Beijing Wushu Team at a very young age. The term "wushu" is similar to the word "Kung Fu" used by many Westerners to describe Chinese martial arts.

Ling Ling was slender, to the point of being anorexic, with a long dancer's neck and luxurious black hair reaching halfway down her back which she wore in a ponytail. She had the most perfect skin, eyes, ears, and nose I had ever seen, and I was smitten with her immediately.

Jimmy Chow had been on her trail ever since she moved to New York. He wasted no time introducing her to Kuo and recommending that she be hired as a member of his teaching staff. Needless to say, my uncle's male students were thrilled, and couldn't resist showing off whenever she was around.

I was happy for the few stolen moments that enabled me to catch a glimpse of her stretching or working out before a class. I was afforded these rare moments only when Fa and I were allowed visits to the studio or asked to run the occasional errand for my uncle. I considered it a privilege to watch her sword routine, which paired a kind of lethal femininity with artistic grace.

Jimmy Chow, my uncle, and Ling Ling began to spend a lot of time around each other and it wouldn't be long before they formed a close association. Slowly, Ling Ling was wooed into the bosom of my family like an adopted sibling. To this day, my wife

has exhibited a jealous streak towards her, though Ling Ling is quite a bit older and my marriage a happy one with three children. She took on extra classes for my uncle, backed him through thick and thin, and I suppose there were times when she and I grew close, though nothing ever came of it.

"Remember!" my uncle would call out as we watched him lead a class. "Upper body like a butterfly's wings, legs like steel. Remember to practice stillness within the movement!" The art and practice of T'ai Chi struck a resounding chord in the Sixties with the young holistic set. As a result, my uncle found his studio flooded with longhairs, beatniks, radicalists, and cultists of every sort. Looking out onto the sea of beads and beards, he often wondered if he was getting through to them. He hoped so. He wanted to be a kind of mental therapy for them. God knows they needed it.

Kuo was generous with his time, letting some of them slide on their fees if he knew things were tough at home. He spent extra amounts of time late at night with the more gifted ones, driving them home if they needed a ride. He drove groups of them to our dry goods store in Chinatown, explaining the medicinal qualities of certain Chinese herbs, showing them some of Mei's calligraphy, which he admired very much, or telling them the story of Yang Luchan.

It was at these times Fa and I would invariably be caught and recognized working in our aprons, which was always the height of humiliation for us. Uncle acted as if he keenly enjoyed the entire event, our humiliation included. He made a grand commotion of pulling out chairs and barrels for everyone to sit on, then took great delight in seating us front and center among his best looking female students, beaming with satisfaction at our discomfort and flushed complexions. Fa and I exchanged angry glances at these moments. Who did be think he was anyway? Did he think he owned the place and could give impromptu lectures any time he felt like it? We seethed at the colossal ego and pomposity of the man but decided not to utter a word. Instead we listened obediently to the story of Yang Luchan

while the pungent store odours invaded our nostrils. I can name them all to this day.

"The story of Yang style Taichi begins in a place very much like this," Kuo started in, looking around for emphasis and supporting his back against the sales counter.

"Well, perhaps a bit smaller because Hopei, centuries ago, was a very poor province in Eastern China. In fact, the place looked more like what you would call an apothecary today with hundreds more medicine jars than you could find here. It was called the Hall of Great Harmony. Its proprietor was one of the wealthiest men in town, and the man he hired to run it was one of the greatest Taichi fighters in the country.

"One day, a sick young man by the name of Yang Luchan wandered into the store, looking for a cure, and found two men arguing. A very big customer was yelling at the manager, complaining that the prices were too high. After a few minutes, the manager came out from behind the counter, and with very little effort, threw the customer from the back of the store out into the middle of the street, where he was almost hit by a fast horse." Everyone always giggled at that one. Kuo continued. "Yang was amazed at what he saw, and asked the manager if he would teach him anything about this wonderful martial art. The man hired Yang as a servant, but because he was not a family member, refused to teach him anything." From here Uncle meandered on through the long-winded account of Yang Luchan's life, about how Yang did menial work for the household, biding his time patiently, until one night, he heard yelling coming from one of the buildings next door.

He climbed up the building, peeled off a section of the plaster, and looked through a hole, revealing a training hall filled with practicing martial artists. Each evening, Yang secretly climbed the wall, peered through the hole, memorized everything he saw, and practiced late into the night while everyone slept. Within a few years, he became so accomplished he was able to challenge his employer's family members to a fight, soundly beating them all. After a few more demonstrations, his employer

was flabbergasted and angry, knowing that Yang had spied on them. Yet he had to admit that Yang's skills were better than any of his family members and let the young man study with him for ten years.

Following this long and gruelling apprenticeship, Yang Luchan traveled to Peking to demonstrate his Taichi at a large banquet given for the emperor. When the emperor saw he was poorly dressed and small in stature, he sat him at a place reserved for the least well respected of his guests. Yang quietly for his turn as the match got underway. His opponent, a known champion who had beaten everyone else in the tournament, rushed at him with both fists. Yang sucked in his chest a bit, then seemed to just tap the upper part of his opponent's hand. The opponent shot like a bullet past Yang to the other side of the room, falling with his fists still clenched in the same position. The emperor was impressed and seated Yang Luchan in a place of honour reserved for his highest ranking guests. From that point on, everyone referred to him as "Yang the Invincible."

"Yang Luchan passed on his methods to his sons and it is their version of the art that we are learning today," Uncle finished up to general smiles and some light applause. This had often been my mother's cue to bring in a tray of some baked goods and candies from the store rooms to pass around to the grateful flower children, some of whom looked as though they hadn't eaten in days. Kuo took the opportunity to introduce Mei as a woman of many talents pointing out the delicate brushstrokes of her calligraphy adorning the walls.

Occasionally, Jimmy Chow and Ling Ling joined the assembly to my further chagrin and embarrassment. I still had a deep crush on Ling Ling and longed to converse with her in private anywhere but that store. Whenever Uncle finished telling one of his stories in front of a group, both Ling Ling and Jimmy looked up at him and smiled knowingly. Fa and I surmised that they had grown up with similar legends as kids at a time when they probably held more appeal. I remember being riveted by the stories in his letters when my brother and I were much younger,

and I have continued the tradition of re- telling them for students of mine to this day. We particularly enjoyed tales of the Shaolin warrior monks. They contained a child's treasure trove of heroes, emperors, sword fights, superhuman feats of strength, the weak overcoming the strong, and training methods unthinkable to the average human being, all conveniently wrapped up in life lessons and supposed first-hand accounts of the temple by Uncle Kuo. The one that stood out most in my mind was about a certain Buddhist priest. The third son of a Brahmin Indian King named Bodhidharma.

Bodhidharma left India as a Buddhist missionary, crossing the Himalayas in *526* A.D., and beginning a pilgrimage that would bring him to the gates of the Shaolin, or "Little Forest," temple in Henan China. When he came across the monks at Shaolin, he found them busy at their desks, transcribing ancient Sanskrit into Chinese. He also found them weak, unhealthy, and malnourished from hours of seated meditation and a general lack of physical activity. Thereupon, he immediately prescribed an exercise regimen known as the Luohan, a set of eighteen exercises based on the movements of animals. The bear, snake, tiger, leopard and crane formed the inspiration behind these movements, which became known as the five animal forms.

Gradually through a long period of time, the Shaolin monks developed a fighting system from this exercise into what is now more commonly known as Kung Fu. Kung Fu, the literal translation of which implies skill through effort, uses the five animals' exercises as different strategies for dealing with an opponent. The monks regained their health, and from that day forward, Bodhidharma became an icon. His fame spread throughout Asia, and many likenesses were created of him, one of which had been engraved into the hilt of our swords.

It was still the early sixties in America, however. Bruce Lee movies were a decade away, and Kung Fu was only taught secretly among a few small enclaves of America's Chinatowns. The reaction of our school chums to Uncle Kuo's stories was generally laughter and derision, even though his sudden

apparitions in a kimono often scared the life out of them. Tall, broad-shouldered, and fierce looking with sword in hand, my uncle could have been a page from a history book come to life. A momentary glimpse of him was enough to send schoolmates scattering out of the store and down the block, to our wild delight.

For students seeking knowledge at the hard-working altar of Chinese martial arts, Kuo had the exact opposite effect. They flocked to him, worshiped him, and followed him around, clinging to his every word until he dismissed them with a wave of his hand and a curt farewell.

"I have business; find something to do," he would tell them irritably, then grab Jimmy Chow and Ling Ling and start walking in the opposite direction. If one of them lingered, he would turn around and yell "Go!" until they disappeared.

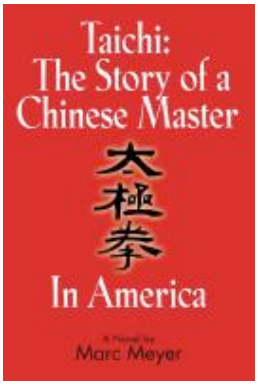
By evening, it would narrow down to the three of them. Uncle, Jimmy Chow and Ling Ling poured into the streets, laughing and chatting with each other until late into the night. The unlikely trio would be recognized here and there, dropping in on friends unannounced with bottles of sake in hand. Fa and I sometimes called them the three stooges when we were feeling spiteful, but since uncle refused to own a radio or T.V set, he never quite caught on. He always gave a suspicious look whenever we said it that sent us into peals of laughter. I dared not make fun of Ling Ling in her presence. I revered this stunning example of young womanhood and gave withering looks at anyone who even disagreed with her. I would have done anything for her; all she had to do was ask. She only asked once. Actually, it was more of a command.

Fa and I had just entered the studio for a visit when I heard her call, "Stand back!" from the other side of the room. The sharp blade of a broadsword whooshed by my arm, narrowly missing it. Ling Ling deftly caught the assailant's hand with a light smack, bringing him to the ground and disarming him within seconds. Then I watched with awe and horror as the student put his arm

around her and they both ran laughing out into the hallway, kissing on the lips.

Flushed and shaken, I stood there embarrassed, not knowing what do with myself until Uncle predictably shook me out of my reverie. “Nephew!” he shouted, “Come over here.” Seeing the miserable state I was in, he put his arm around me and said softly, “I’m sorry, Nephew. You are becoming a young man, and as you get older, you will see that life doesn’t always play fair. Yet sometimes we have to try to accept it with dignity and grace. Now go to the store and get me two quarts of chocolate ice cream. You and Fa can keep one of them for yourselves, and tell Mei I’ve released you from duty for the rest of the afternoon.”

I looked up at him with tears in my eyes and gave him a hug. He always knew the right thing to say. “Thanks, Uncle,” I snivelled into his enormous wool overcoat. Then I grabbed Fa by the sleeve, and we raced downstairs and out the door towards the ice cream shop.

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