

COMMENT:

NEO-CONFUCIANISM AND THE EAST ASIAN MARTIAL ARTS

by David J. Nemeth

Jonathan Seckler, in "Swordsmanship and Neo-Confucianism" (1992), has opened up for discussion the relation of Neo-Confucianism to East Asian martial arts. This is an important topic that also bears on the condition of martial arts training in the West. The following comments may help stimulate further discussion.

Neo-Confucianism

The basic ethical doctrines and public philosophies systematized and advocated by Confucius (551-479 B.C.) are often termed "Classical Confucianism" in the English-speaking world. However, during the Chinese Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), Classical Confucianism underwent extensive transformation to become the highly sophisticated, abstract, and political mode of Confucian philosophy now called "Neo-Confucianism" (Yang and Henderson 1958). Eventually, the Zhu Xi school of Neo-Confucianism became the official state cult in Ming Dynasty China (1368-1644 A.D.) and then also in Yi Dynasty Korea (1392-1910 A.D.) (Henthorn, 1971, p. 170). Seckler (1992) has already alluded to Neo-Confucianism's influence in Japan; Okinawa and Taiwan were similarly influenced. An "East Asian" martial arts region, therefore, roughly coincides with the extent of a traditional Neo-Confucian civilization centered in China. East Asian martial arts can also be discussed as unified and uniform to the extent that their theories and practices were influenced by a single Neo-Confucian cosmological perspective. Cosmology is a branch of metaphysics that deals with the natural universe as an orderly system, and East Asian martial arts can be interpreted as an orderly sub-system within a Neo-Confucian cosmos.

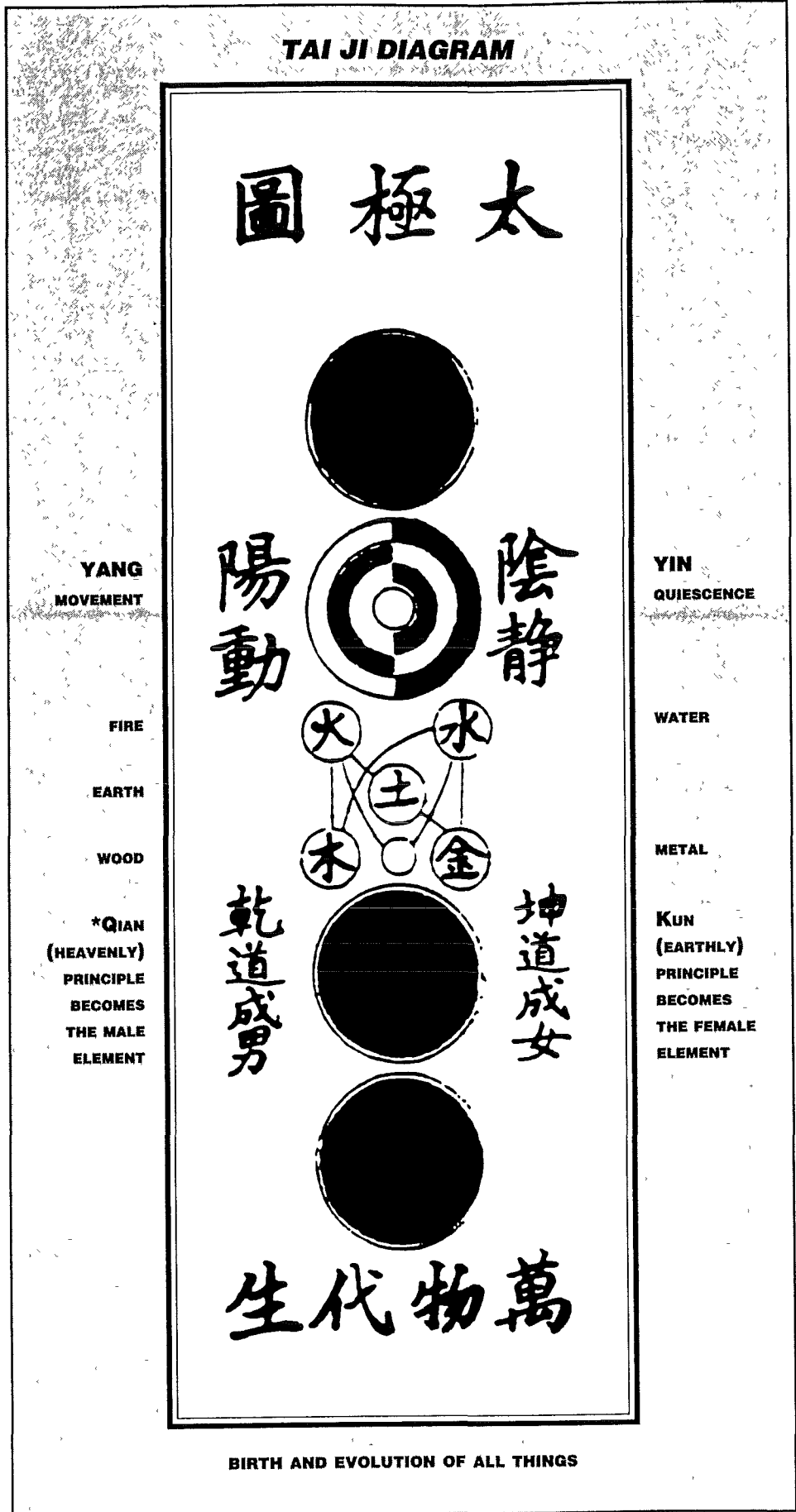
Western scholars who first studied new developments in Song Confucian thought realized that they "were not simply reducible to their classical antecedents" and thus coined the term "Neo-Confucianism" (DeBary, 1981, p. xiv). They attributed the new developments mainly to the influence of the philosopher Zhu Xi (1131-1200 A.D.). Chen (1972, p. 239) maintains that the abstract cosmological "speculations" of the Song scholars were, in fact, more Daoistic than Confucian. They even included Buddhist elements. In other words, Neo-Confucianism was a grand synthesis of accumulated wisdom from many traditional Asian sources.

TAI JI DIAGRAM

太極圖

Figure 1
Zhu Xi Neo-Confucianism developed from his commentary on the "Diagram of the Supreme Pole," illustrated here (Kupter 1906, p. 335).

Translation added by the Editor



* Found in the *Book of Changes*, Qian and Kun are the two primary trigrams and hexagrams

All this background serves to emphasize that the historical development of martial arts after the twelfth century in East Asia occurred within the context of a powerful, pervasive and prolonged Neo-Confucian influence originating in China. Although analysis of commonalities in martial arts theories and practices throughout Asia indicates that the Neo-Confucian synthesis was enriched by ideas and practices developed elsewhere, for example in India, by the sixteenth century Neo-Confucian cosmology was widely accepted in East Asia as the “true” description of natural order of the universe.

It was a “hidden truth” for most East Asian peoples, revealed mainly through arduous education or training. Nevertheless, it was the tap root of knowledge and power that anchored and invigorated all the various branches of East Asian martial arts during the “golden years” of their development. It was the source of enlightenment and the target of the quest of its participants.

Zhu Xi and the Diagram of the Supreme Pole

Zhu Xi’s philosophical commentary on “The Diagram of the Supreme Pole” (Figure 1) is essential to understanding Neo-Confucian cosmology in relation to the development of East Asian martial arts. In part, he discussed how a creative force (Chinese *qi*; Korean *ki*) occupied the central place in the origin of the Natural Order. This force moved, organized and operated as principle, process and pattern. In the Diagram, the central “One” becomes the “Two” of a complementary Yin (negative) and Yang (positive) force field. These eventually manifest themselves through the Five Agents (metal, water, wood, fire, earth) as myriad things in Nature. Since Nature is shaped by this one principle/process/pattern, human nature could be perfected by searching for and merging with the “One,” that is, by participating in Nature’s plan.

Zhu Xi was a scholar who elevated the pen above the sword. He did not directly mention nor promote the martial arts as a path or way to “truth.” However, martial arts are among those ways either revised or devised by East Asians during the long Neo-Confucian era to promote their purposeful and productive participation in the Natural Order, as the histories of their development indicate.

Modeling Martial Arts as a Cosmic Dance

Neo-Confucian insights into Nature’s principles of physical organization are especially useful for interpreting East Asian martial arts theories and practices. What are these principles and how are they revealed? Taking the second question first, according to the Neo-Confucian classics these principles were revealed by closely observing Nature in its myriad forms, for example, by contemplating “the markings of birds and beasts and their adaptations to the regions” (Wilhelm, 1967, pp. 328-329).

The “forms” and “patterns” of martial arts (crane, tiger, and so on), to the extent that they accurately simulate nature, can also be observed to reveal hidden knowledge about the Natural Order, including basic principles and processes of formation that are responsible for nature’s forms and patterns and which ultimately reveal humankind’s proper or “ethical” place in the Natural Order. The most intimate mode of observing Nature is by participating in Nature, for example, through training in martial arts. Here, the “way” to access Neo-Confucian knowledge involves becoming one with Nature.

The various East Asian martial arts introduced thus far in the *Journal of Martial Arts* can all be interpreted from a Neo-Confucian perspective as variations on the same “cosmic dance.” Adepts are the dancers that experience and reveal through their “forms” and “patterns” the major principles by which Nature organizes itself purposefully and productively in physical space, including centrality, connectivity, periodicity, symmetry (proportion), hierarchy, similarity-at-different-scale, and completeness.

To illustrate the above theory, we can reveal Nature’s own principles of spatial organization by interpreting a typical karate *kata*, or practice pattern. From the Neo-Confucian perspective and with reference to the “Diagram of the Supreme Pole,” the

"One" becomes the "Two," thereby creating "myriad things": Just so, the *kata* is "born" at the center (centrality); action emerges from rest as the dancer begins to move purposefully and productively outward; his movements are shaped, guided and empowered by a local field of universal force (the Five Agents), becoming and changing in a sequence of myriad forms (connectivity); the dancer eventually returns through the center (periodicity) where his path changes in another direction (symmetry, or proportion); the experience involves some forms that are more difficult than others or are sequenced according to their comparative difficulty (hierarchy); although all are revealing, some activities become variously shorter or longer in duration or endurance (similarity-at-different-scale); the *kata* fulfills its purpose again at the center, a symbolic death, where activity ceases and rest begins (completeness).

Participation in the *kata* enables the dancer to recreate the Natural Order of the Neo-Confucian cosmos. Thus, the adept's forms and patterns are mnemonic (memory) and didactic (teaching) devices that ideally function to preserve, protect and perpetuate traditional Neo-Confucian knowledge generation upon generation.

Different Kinds of Knowledge

In the West, East Asian martial arts may be taught in various "schools," which claim to promote through instruction a purposeful and productive way of life. It is possible to question the efficacy and integrity of East Asian martial arts from the Neo-Confucian perspective by focusing on this claim.

There are various kinds of knowledge. Millennia of "truth-seeking" in Asia culminated in Neo-Confucian knowledge. The entire system slowly emerged amidst a village-centered agricultural economy and civilization and then rapidly declined. Neo-Confucians closely observed purposefulness and productivity in nature and thus became knowledgeable about it; their collective destiny depended upon maintaining and preserving their place in what they perceived to be the true Natural Order (cosmos).

Neo-Confucian knowledge is now often termed "metaphysical," "mystical" and "pre-scientific" in the urbanized and industrialized West. All these terms have strong negative connotations there. This is because Neo-Confucianism has been reinterpreted according to the perceptions and prejudices of scientism, technocracy and economic growth — all shaped by a different and competing cosmology. Thus, Neo-Confucianism has been wrongly accused of hurting people by promoting ethics and morality above productivity. Neo-Confucianism is even blamed for the "failure" of a scientific revolution in China that occurred first in the West.

In truth, Neo-Confucianism unites ethics and productivity. It is humane. It made a virtue of rejecting those same kinds of labor-saving technologies that became prized in the West and lead to scientific advances that, in combination with a profit motive, have increasingly endangered the Natural Order that Neo-Confucians strove to preserve.

Perhaps East Asian martial arts in the West have drifted too far from their centers of origin in China and from their intellectual roots in Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucian concepts of "purpose" and "productivity" mean very different things in the West today. For example, an orthodox Neo-Confucian would find much to lament in the typical English-language martial arts literature: The largest "schools" are operating as corporations competing "for profit." They grow through the accretion of franchise sites, and each of these sites is selected according to the cunning of economic-location theory. On some of these sites, owner-operators aspire to be affluent cult leaders. In just one paragraph within a self-aggrandizing article within his school's monthly magazine, a prominent Master-entrepreneur ① acclaimed the opportunity "to use modern technology for Taekwondo" (and purchased several computers for his business office), ② complained that "so much of the martial arts is undocumented" (in order to justify the publication of his revisionist history of the martial arts), and ③ announced his new standardization of names for martial arts techniques (which he planned to submit for copyright protection). Zhu Xi would cry.

Returning to the Center and Drawing From the Well

The oldest cosmological model appropriated into the Neo-Confucian synthesis is the ancient well-field model (Figure 2). It is a crude template for constructing an orderly universe. The Song Neo-Confucians revised it as their "Diagram of the Supreme Pole." The lines in the model represent the structure of four overlapping crossbeams, forming a wellhead. A well, the source of life-sustaining water, is represented by the central point. The Chinese, who during their long historical pageant first built the well and organized the space around it for orderly productive purposes, had to frequent the well and draw from it to irrigate their fields to create and maintain their civilization (Poon, 1984, pp. 28-45). During the formation of that civilization, human patterns of livelihood were shaped by Nature's principles of spatial organization as mentioned above — centrality, connectivity, periodicity, symmetry (proportion), hierarchy, similarity-at-different-scale, and completeness.

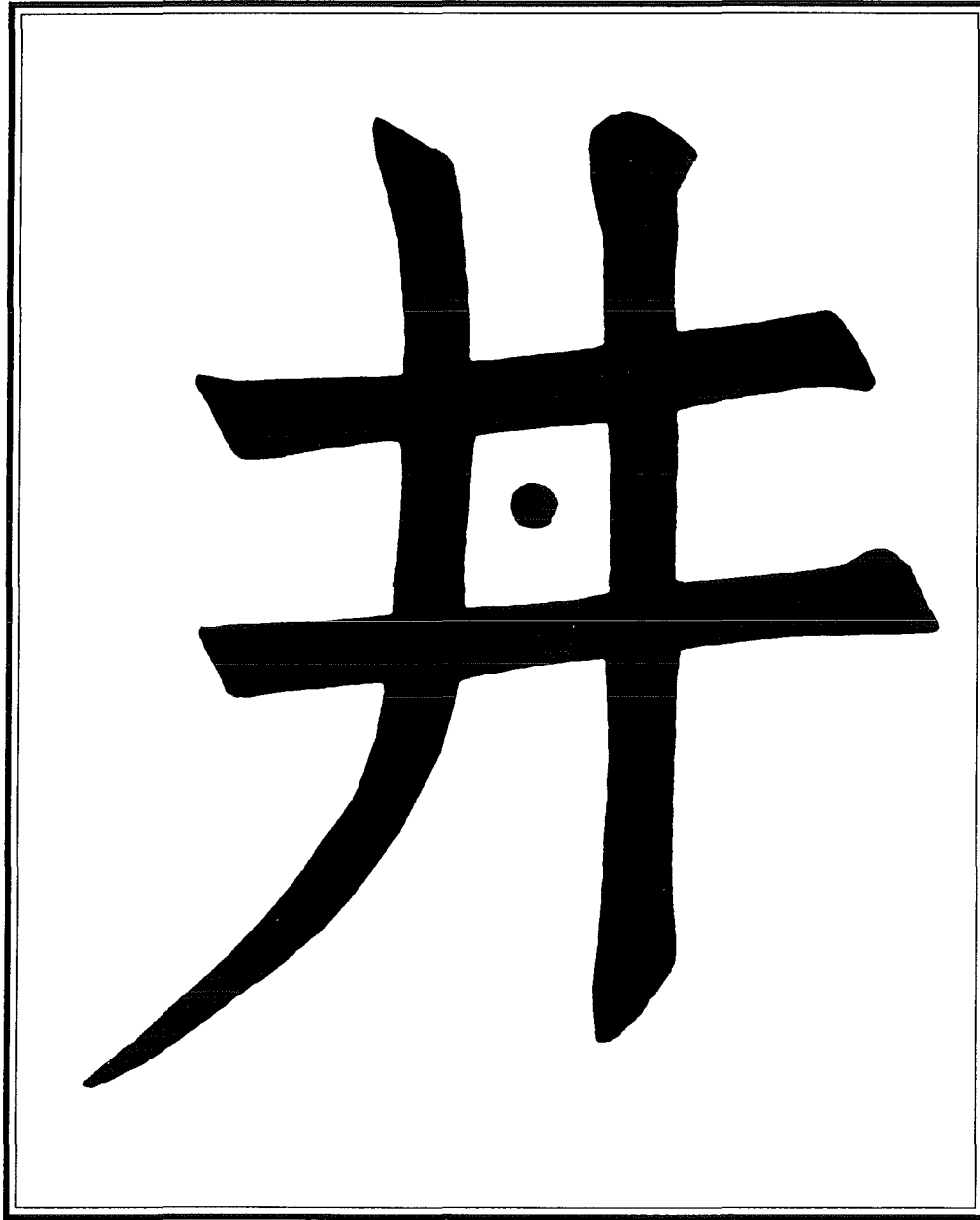


Figure 2.
The ancient well-field model.

The martial arts school is a microcosm of Chinese civilization. The well-field model also "maps out" for martial artists a way to become part of the Natural Order by experiencing Nature's law, or ethic, for example, through participating in the choreography of a *kata* that reenacts the virtue of an endless routine of returning to the center and drawing from the well.

The internal logic of Neo-Confucianism is arcane and esoteric. Some would argue that, as regards its relation with contemporary East Asian martial arts, Neo-Confucianism is irrelevant and obsolete or worse. Nevertheless, it provides the only appropriate critique for evaluating the condition of the East Asian martial arts today. Neo-Confucianism was once the well of knowledge in the East Asian martial arts — "the One" philosophical source. Its origin was in traditional China. Perhaps the integrity of the East Asian martial arts can survive only by returning to that center and drawing again from its well.



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