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Thoughts on the Naming of the *Tuo* and *Tai* forms

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The Xingyi classics tell us that in practice we should “train our intention, not our form” (练意不练形).¹ This is especially true for our Twelve Animal forms; our teachers have all spoken of the need to not simply mimic the movements of the Twelve Animals, but instead to train their unique innate spirit. During his time with us, Master Liang Kequan in particular stressed this, saying:

Practicing the Twelve Animals doesn't mean you want to copy that animal's actions; you don't want to become that animal. In other styles, they try to become like an animal. That's not right. Humans are more developed than other animals, and it's hard enough to be human; why would you want to try to be like a lesser being? We train the special qualities of each animal, their energies, but we always remain human.

To adhere to this ideal then requires us to ponder the nature of the animals we study, and what it is that makes them unique. For most of the animals, this is straightforward; we all have seen—at least on tape—the movements of a tiger, monkey, horse, chicken, swallow, sparrow-hawk, snake, eagle or bear. Even the dragon—as the classics note, the only mythical animal—does not present too much of a problem, as the various depictions and descriptions of dragons in Chinese folklore give us a fairly clear picture of its nature. Confusion begins to arise, however, when we come to the *Tuo* and *Tai* forms—commonly referred to in English as Turtle and Phoenix. Various names exist for these forms—primarily due to issues of translation—and so understanding their unique character can be difficult. With a bit of exploration into their history, we can determine exactly which animals these terms represent, and thereby enhance our understanding of their correct practice.

The *Tuo* form is most commonly translated incorrectly as Turtle; sometimes correctly as Alligator; or, more rarely, incorrectly as Water-Strider. The character *Tuo* (鼉), in both its classical and modern usage, refers specifically to *alligator sinensis*, the Yangtze River Alligator. Reaching around two meters in length, the Yangtze River alligator was historically found along the lower reaches of the Yangtze in the provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui². The usage of ‘Turtle’ as a translation of *Tuo* appears in 20th-century, stemming from the writing reforms undertaken by the Chinese government in 1956 and 1964. In an effort to simplify the writing of Chinese characters and improve literacy, complex characters were streamlined to less complex forms. In rare cases, more than one traditional character was altered to the same simplified form.

¹ This and all subsequent quotes of Chinese texts come primarily from materials collected and passed on to NATSTA by Master Liang Kequan.

² Current populations continue to dwindle, and the Yangtze Alligator is now listed as “critically endangered”

The traditional characters for *Tuo* (鼃) and *Gui* (turtle, 龜) were both simplified to the same character (龟) and subsequent modern writings about Xingyi or reprints of earlier works used this simplified character. Translators and readers without knowledge of the classical antecedent would naturally assume that ‘Turtle’ was the original character, thus giving rise to the mistranslation. The less-common translation of ‘Water Strider’, described in some writings as “a kind of insect able to glide on the surface of the water” is a misunderstanding that comes from incomplete transmission of the Xingyi classics: “The *Tuo* has the lightness to float on water. (鼃有浮水之輕)” The full text of the classics first lays out in short form the nature of each of the Twelve Animals, then later elaborates on these more fully with a short explanation. The full text reads:

‘The *Tuo* has the lightness to float on water’ points to its ability to enter from an angle and strike from the flank. It advances with scissor-legs.
(鼃有浮水之輕指斜進側打. 進走剪子股)

With this full description, and with certainty of the animal represented, we can begin to understand the qualities that make the Alligator form unique. First, the Alligator form should exhibit a light and floating quality, but this is in service of its ability to attack obliquely. This floating refers to stealthiness; just as an alligator does not float *on top* of the water, but just below the surface, camouflaged until its the prey draws near, the attack of the Alligator form should come with surprise to the flanks rather than head-on. Second, the form advances with strong driving leg motions. ‘Scissor-legs’ commonly refers to the way in which the two legs stay close together and shear back and forth as one moves. Bagua stepping, for example, is sometimes also referred to as ‘Scissor-leg stepping’. Finally, if we picture how alligators walk, drawing front and back legs together, it is not hard to see how the movement of all four of our limbs resemble the energy of an alligator as it walks. From this we can discern that the power of the form comes from the strong leg action, in coordination with all four limbs, to attack from the side.

The *Tai* form has a variety of orthographic variants in Chinese, and a corresponding variety of English translations. The classical character is so rare that it is absent from most modern Chinese font sets, and appears in only in the most comprehensive Chinese-language dictionaries such as the *Zhongwen Dacidian* and the *Kangxi Cidian*. The definition given in both is simply “name of a bird.” Because of the relative obscurity of this character, it is understandable that many boxers unfamiliar with this term sought a more familiar variant, of which there are many. This variety of possible names stems in part from the fact that the classics are none too helpful in their description of the *Tai*:

‘The *Tai* has the ability to stiffen its tail’ points to guarding the tail and using the tail. The two fists gather from the abdomen; coordinate the body and use hip skill.
(鳥台有堅尾才干是指護尾和用尾. 雙拳取小腹, 調身用胯功)

The original *Xinyi Liuhe Quan* of Ji Longfeng had only 10 animal forms. According to most Xingyi histories, in the 1700’s Dai Longbang added the *Tuo* and *Tai* forms after observing their unique movement qualities. As later generations of boxers lost the direct transmission and understanding of the classics, varying interpretations of the nature of the *Tai* form arose. The correct form of the character *Tai* consists of the bird radical on the left and phonetic *tai* on the

right (鳥台). Lacking a better explanation, many simply described this as a mythical bird, leading to the English equivalent translation—Phoenix. Some retained the bird-like quality while transforming the character into *Tuo*, ostrich (駝) or *Ge*, dove (合鳥) [consisting of phonetic *he* on the left and bird radical on the right]. Others transformed the animal into *Tai*, an inferior horse (駘) or *Tuo*, camel (駝) striking with its hooves; still others tried to describe it as a fish *Tai*, whipping its tail, (鮐, Atlantic mackerel). Since Dai is recorded to have traveled extensively in Shanxi, He’nan and Anhui provinces, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the animals he studied were found there as well. Based on this, we can logically disqualify some of the possible interpretations of *Tai* outright. It is doubtful that Dai would have seen an Atlantic mackerel alive in the ocean long enough to study its movements³; the ostrich is not native to China; and camels are found only in China’s far western provinces. This leaves the dove, which seems an unlikely inspiration for fighting spirit; and an ‘inferior horse’, which hardly seems worthy of close study—especially since the Horse form already exists as one of the Twelve Animals. As these interpretations seem unlikely, and the classics themselves state that Dragon is the only mythical animal, then the *Tai* must be yet another identifiable animal. The clearest explanation for the identity of that animal came from Master Liang Kequan in 2001, who said:

Tai is the classical name for a *Tuhu* (兔虎), a type of bird in Hebei that hunts rabbits. It soars high up in the sky looking for prey. When it spots a rabbit, it tucks its wings and dives and then, at the last second, pulls up and uses its two legs to crush the rabbit’s head against the ground.

Tuhu is the common name in northern China for a Saker Falcon, which, like the Peregrine, hunts by diving at high velocity, then extending its claws to stomp on and grab its prey. Falcons were formerly found throughout China and have been bred there as hunting birds for at least a thousand years. Master Liang’s description of the *Tai* form is not only historically plausible, but also clearly evocative of our form in practice, and in this light the classics become much more understandable. ‘Guarding the tail’ is a phrase used in calligraphy to describe the movement of the brush tip where, at the end of the brush stroke, the brush tip is twisted and pulled back, evocative of the way the fists turn and drill to strike. ‘Using the tail’ refers both visually to the attack of a Falcon, and also to connecting one’s strike to the pelvis and sacrum, reinforced again with the admonition: “The two fists gather from the abdomen; coordinate the body and use hip skill.”

As shown with these two examples, difficulty in the transcription, transmission, and translation of knowledge can lead to wildly varying understandings of the subject studied. Terminology that is very specific, if misunderstood, can quickly devolve and become vague or even incorrect. On the other hand, linguistic conventions, once established, are hard to change. Replacing ‘Turtle’ and ‘Phoenix’ with ‘Alligator’ and ‘Falcon’ in our everyday speech and writing may indeed be an unwieldy and unnecessary burden. However, regardless of which names we may use day-to-day, it is crucial that we clearly understand and transmit the true identity and true unique nature of these animals. Armed with a clear understanding of the unique nature of all the Twelve Animals we may more fully explore their true expression in application, and thereby seek a deeper understanding of the subtle and profound nature of Xingyi boxing.

³ Shanxi, He’nan and Anhui all being landlocked.