

**The Lectures, with Benjamin
Pang Jeng Lo: Commentaries on
“The Essence of T'ai Chi Ch'uan”**

Produced by Martin Inn
2010, IRI Press
240 min. DVD, 4-disc set • \$100.00

Review by Russ Mason, M.A.
Oklahoma State University

Yang-style master Chen Weiming (1881–1958) famously remarked, “Many practice taiji nowadays, but it is not the real taiji Real taiji is very wonderful.” If this was true in the last century, how is the contemporary taiji devotee to discern which interpretation of the art is authentic, true, and correct? Real taijiquan is a martial system characterized by a particular set of fundamental principles, and these concepts are best articulated in what have come to be known as the “classics.” The term “classics” refers to a collection of traditional writings communicating the essence of the art, which have been handed down from generation to generation—a sort of “bible” epitomizing the soul of taijiquan.

Within the Yang-style lineage, the classics have taken a form that includes essays and commentaries attributed to luminaries such as taiji's legendary founder, Zhang Sanfeng, Wang Zongyue, Wu Yuxiang, and Li Yiyu. Each subsequent writer echoed the concepts of the former texts and attempted to articulate them more clearly with insights gained through deep, personal practice.

The late Zheng Manqing (the ghostwriter of Yang Chengfu's 1934 book, *The Essence and Applications of Taijiquan*) followed his illustrious teacher's example by appending the Yang family's version of the classics to his own textbook on the art of taijiquan (*Master Zheng's Thirteen Treatises on Taijiquan*, 1984). The advent of firearms and the cultural changes of Republican Era (1912–1949) Chinese society brought a more open attitude to martial arts instruction and an end to the strict practice of

secret family transmission. Since that time, the classics have gained wide circulation in the taiji community.

If anyone wants to learn the “authentic” taijiquan art, it is essential that he or she understand the classics. However, these essays were composed in the traditional literary style of Chinese, a scholarly style of writing that is notoriously difficult to understand, even for most Chinese readers. Fortunately for both Western and Chinese students of taijiquan, a number of useful English translations have been made.

One of the most well-respected and influential English translations to appear in the last thirty-five years was done by Benjamin Pang Jeng Lo (Luo Bangzhen in Pinyin romanization, or Ben Lo, as he is commonly known, who is the senior-most student of the late Zheng Manqing) and his associates, Martin Inn, Robert Amacker, and Susan Foe. Their translation of the classics, entitled *The Essence of T'ai Chi Ch'uan: The Literary Tradition*, was first published in 1979 (North Atlantic Books), and an annotated and revised paperback edition was released in 2008 by Martin Inn's IRI Press. This helped readers of the classics take the first step in overcoming the challenges posed by the original language.

However, major challenges to understanding remain. The writings themselves are a collection of pithy, telegraphic sayings, sitting squarely within the context of the oral tradition of instruction. Unless the student has a teacher who is qualified to interpret and explain the classics, many passages remain arcane, ambiguous, and bewildering.

This brings us to the request that occasioned the creation of the DVD set under review, *The Lectures, with Benjamin Pang Jeng Lo*. Martin Inn, who is himself a longtime taijiquan teacher, a practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine, and a co-translator of two books with Lo, approached Ben Lo with the request that he meet with a group of their taijiquan students, go through their recently

revised text of the classics line by line, and explain the true meaning of each passage.

Being a traditional Chinese gentleman and a man of humility and integrity, Mr. Lo immediately responded: "No! My level is not high enough." Undaunted, Inn again urged Lo to give it a try. After weeks of consideration, and with reluctance and humility, Lo agreed to attempt it.

With this backdrop in mind, the taiji devotee can appreciate what an amazingly rare and valuable experience it is to hear a high-level teacher explain the founders' views on the essence of the art. Fortunately, Martin Inn had the wisdom to ask, the fortitude to persist, and the foresight to record the resulting event for posterity, capturing the insights gleaned from Ben Lo's sixty years of diligent practice of and research into taijiquan, the first twenty-six years of which were under the direct tutelage of one of the most influential taiji masters of the twentieth century, Professor Zheng Manqing.

The DVD album consists of four sixty-minute discs documenting the lectures, a total of approximately four hours of material recorded during a two-day conference held in San Francisco in 2009. Lo speaks to a group of students, sometimes using a flip chart to write Chinese characters, and sometimes calling up a member of the audience to assist him as he physically demonstrates a point. Passages from Lo's own translation, *The Essence of T'ai Chi Ch'uan: The Literary Tradition*, are shown via overhead projector on a screen behind the speaker as Lo reads through his copy of the classics, expounding on each line. Having a copy of the paperback text on hand makes it easier for the viewer to follow the organization of the lecture.

On-screen menus list the contents of the four DVDs as follows:

Disc #1: Introduction; T'ai Chi Ch'uan Ching, by Chang San-feng; T'ai Chi Ch'uan Lun, by Wang Tsung-yueh (Part I).

Disc #2: T'ai Chi Ch'uan Lun (Part II); Expositions of Insights into the Practice of the

Thirteen Postures, by Wu Yu-hsiang (Part I).

Disc #3: Expositions of Insights into the Practice of the Thirteen Postures (Part II); The Song of Thirteen Postures, by an unknown author; [Song of Hand Pushing, by an unknown author, is included next in the video although it is omitted from the index]; Song of Form and Function, by Cheng Man-ch'ing; [Yang's Ten Important Points, by Yang Cheng-fu with Commentary by Ch'en Wei-ming, Part I, concludes this disc although it is omitted from the index].

Disc #4: Yang's Ten Important Points, by Yang Cheng-fu with Commentary by Ch'en Wei-ming (Part II); Five Character Secret, by Li I-yu; [a final section in which Lo talks about his personal experiences and offers advice on training closes the last disc but is not mentioned in the index].

For the most part, the contents of the DVDs are straightforward and unedited, allowing the viewer to be a virtual member of the audience, experiencing the event almost as did the firsthand viewers. There are also challenges for the viewer.

English is not Ben Lo's native language and, at times, explanations are hampered by limitations in the speaker's linguistic range. Listeners can overcome this challenge with patient and diligent attentiveness. It is well worth the effort.

There are a few small production shortcomings. As noted above, in some places the on-screen indices do not list all of the texts or segments covered in the discs, providing opportunity for confusion. An album booklet or viewing guide insert with a complete listing of all segments would be a helpful addition.

But these are minor quibbles. Such blemishes and small omissions do little to diminish the overall value of the product. There is no question that this is a valuable resource and one from which any practitioner of taijiquan can greatly benefit.

The presentation is spiced with personal stories, punctuated with the occasional "hands-

on” demonstration, and littered with gems of wisdom. What are the standards of learning and what kinds of people are best qualified to learn taijiquan? What was it like to study privately in the traditional way with Professor Zheng? Why did Zheng’s later form postures appear to be different from his earlier postures? How are puns, humor, and Chinese homonyms used to create memorable images in the classics? At what point in history did books on taiji become less reliable and why? What happened to the secret oral transmission of the Yang family? What advice would Lo give learners from his six decades of personal experience? Answers to all of these questions and many more are provided in *The Lectures*.

Would you like to improve your practice of taijiquan, to enhance your level, to deepen your understanding of the “secrets” of the art? To those who understand the classics, there are no secrets. If you incline your ear and apply your heart to the material in these lectures, much light and benefit will accrue. Sit at the knee of one who has studied deeply. Listen and learn.

This four-DVD set will be of particular interest to those who study in the Yang-style tradition, especially those in the lineage of Zheng Manqing. For serious students of the classics and for anyone interested in the insights of a modern master of taijiquan, *The Lectures, with Benjamin Pang Jeng Lo* is an indispensable resource. It will become an important part of Ben Lo’s legacy to future generations of students of taijiquan.

