

Chen Style New Frame or Old Frame – Which is Better?

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At the 2005 training camp in the Chenjiagou Taijiquan School in Henan, China, organised by Chenjiagou Taijiquan GB (CTGB), Chen Xiaoxing presented an interesting comparison of Chen style Taijiquan's Old Frame (Laojia) and New Frame (Xinjia) routines. He also spoke about the attitude required by modern practitioners to make a success of their Taiji. Chen Xiaoxing is a nineteenth generation master of Chen style Taijiquan who learned from Chen Zhaopei, Chen Zhaokui and his brother Chen Xiaowang.

Evolution of the Old and New Frames



Chen style Taijiquan was created in the ninth generation by Chen Wanting and continued for five generations until the time of Chen Changxin. Chen Changxin synthesised the routines practiced at the time into the Old Frame First Routine (Laojia Yilu) and Second Routine (Erlu, also known as the “Canon Fist”) that together make up the foundation forms from which subsequent generations of Chen Village practitioners have developed their capabilities until the present day.

Chen Xiaoxing, a lifelong resident of Chenjiagou, explained that the overriding principle of

Taijiquan is the co-ordination of soft (rou) and hard (gang) and of fast (kwai) and slow (man) movements. The characteristic of the first routine leans more towards soft and slow. With this basis one would practice until the body's posture is correct; until shape and qi are harmonized and one can physically manifest this understanding, and not simply intellectually theorising it. The next progression would be the Canon Fist, the aim of which is to train and increase stamina and explosive power (bao fali). “With the two sets together you then fulfil the requirements of gang rou xiang ji”, that is alternating and combining hardness and softness.



Chen Changxin

The next significant evolution within Chen Taijiquan was the development of the New Frame. “The routines devised by Chen Changxin continued uninterrupted until the seventeenth generation and my grandfather Chen Fa-ke. He went to Beijing in 1928 to teach Taiji. During the several decades he was in Beijing, based on his own understanding, experience and knowledge, he added new movements onto the Old Frame, still based upon the principle of Taiji, to create the New Frame branch of Chen family boxing which is widely practiced today”.

Unique Characteristics of the New Frame

According to Chen Xiaoxing, the main characteristics of the New Frame are the smaller circles, the extra emphasis placed upon the turning of the wrists and the more visible folding of the chest and waist. Rotations of the waist and dantien are also more obvious. The New Frame additionally lays greater stress upon bringing out the spiral energy usage in applications, with extra fajin (energy release) and qinna (joint locking) movements throughout. The form also consists of more dynamic, springing and jumping movements. However, Chen Xiaoxing stressed that the fundamental principles of the two frames are the same with regards to postural requirements and movement principles. Both require the practitioner to exhibit movements that are continuous, round and pliant, connecting all movements section by section and closely synchronising the actions of the upper and lower body.



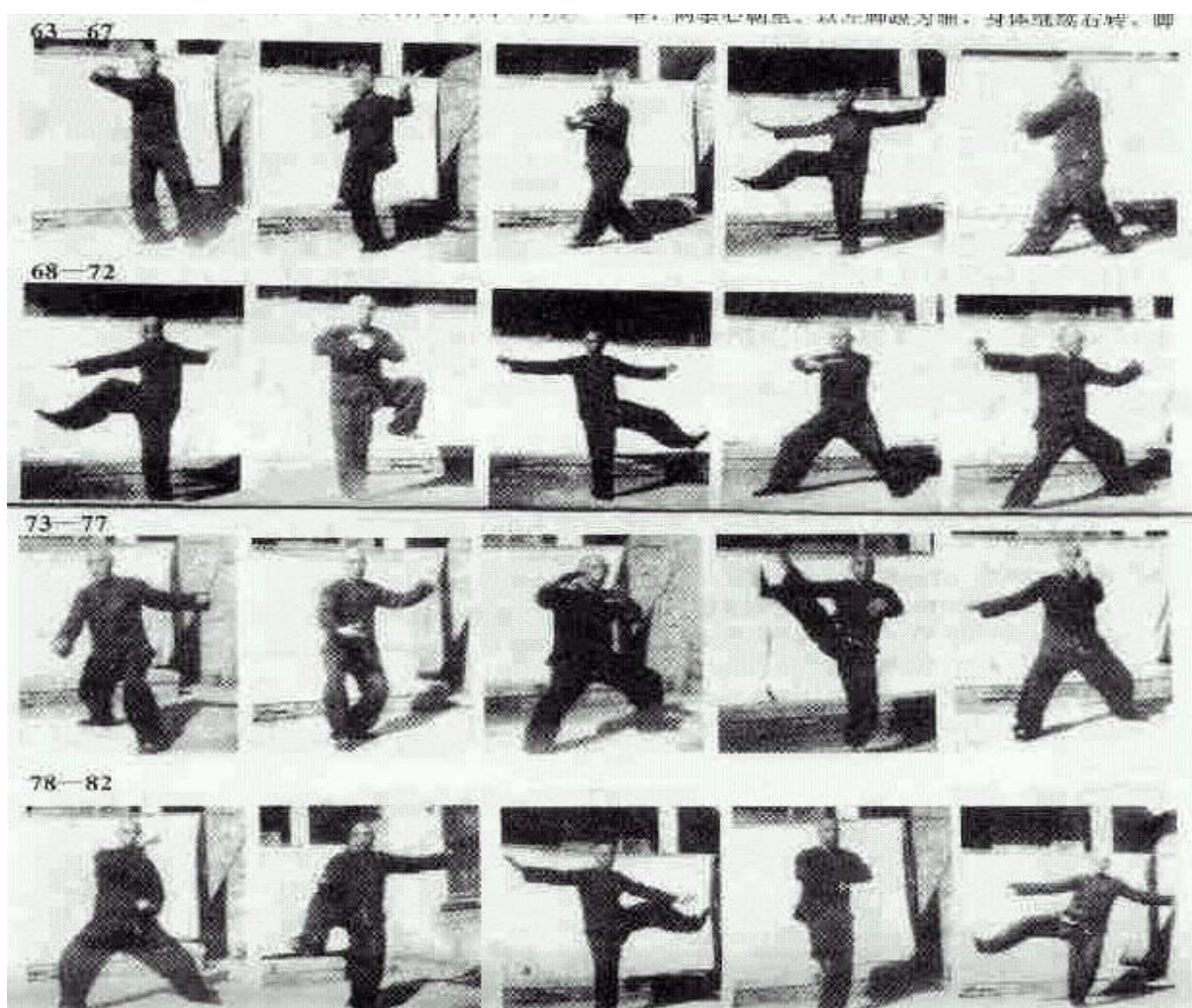
Handform as Foundation

Chen Xiaoxing explained that the handform provides the foundation upon which all the other skills of Taijiquan are subsequently built. Whether you are

following the Old or New Frame, the most important thing is to give one hundred percent mentally and physically. Factors such as patience, persistence, *yi* (mind intent), strength, relaxation, and *qi* are fundamental in increasing one's Taijiquan skills.

Why Did Chen Fake Create the New Frame?

"In essence the Old Frame and New Frame are the same. In contrast, however, the New Frame has more explosive movements and therefore is more demanding physically. In this sense, the New Frame is considered more suitable for people who are younger and fitter". So why did Chen Fake feel the need to create the new form? Chen Xiaoxing offered the explanation that many of the Beijing people who initially went to Chen Fa-ke had already practised martial arts to quite a good level and were eager to see the applications hidden within the original routine. So he added some extra movements with more outward expression and obvious martial functions. Due to the requirements of the time he made changes so that it was more suited to the temperament of the young and fit city dwellers of Beijing.



Chen Fake - creator of the Xinjia routines

In Beijing, the New Frame is taught as the first form, whereas in Chenjiagou the Old Frame is considered the foundation form and is always taught first. In

response to this, Chen Xiaoxing said that “the Old and New Frames should not be viewed as different entities because both are foundation forms. If you look beyond the superficial differences, the Old Frame and New Frame are the same style, sharing the same origin and guiding principles. However, the latter is harder to perform well because of the complexity of the smaller spirals, and so the former is usually taught first. In Chenjiagou, the Old Frame is used as the foundation form because it is steady and fluid, so it is easier to understand and realise the principle. In Chenjiagou people have the advantage of knowing both the first routines”.

Confusions About the New Frame

It is often suggested that Chen Fa-ke created the New Frame, but his son Chen Zhaokui fixed and standardised the form. “To be accurate, Chen Zhoukui is the one who spread and popularised the New Frame. After the death of his father in 1957, he travelled extensively in the 1960s teaching in Shanghai, Nanjing, Zhengzhou and other cities. In the 1970s he came back to Chenjiagou every year. So it would be more accurate to say that the New Frame was created by my grandfather, but was taught by my uncle”.



Chen Zhaokui

Confusion has arisen, he said, because of the wide variation in how the New Frame is performed even though it is a relatively new form. Chen Fake’s students stayed with him at varying periods of his life and for different lengths of time. The new form took a period of time to evolve and some students have come during his early days in Beijing, some later. Most of them practised for a period and then left. Chen Zhaokui is the only one who was with him from beginning to end. That is why if you look throughout China you can see different interpretations of Chen Fake’s teaching.

For example, practitioners in Shandong Province mostly follow Hong Jun Sheng’s style. In Beijing, different groups can be seen practising in the styles of Chen Zhaokui, Feng Zhiqiang, Lei Muni and Tien Xiuchen among others. Chen Xiaoxing said that the various interpretations should not come as any great surprise. He explained that “everybody has got their own unique body shape, size and temperament. Just as I’m teaching the few of you here, each individual within the group has a different physique and practises according to his or her own level of understanding - and all go away and say they have learned from Chen Xiaoxing.”

Over-Elaboration of Movements

It is sometimes said that it is more difficult to realise the principle when you are starting with the New Frame as the movements are comparatively more complex. A common mistake made by many practitioners of the New Frame is the inclination to over-elaborate the spiralling movements. This leads to a number of problems, the most serious being the separation of the individual parts of the body from the waist. Individuals practising the form in this way fail to understand the underlying silk reeling principle. Chen suggested “if you really want to strictly separate and compare the two, the smaller spirals of the New Frame are harder to execute and the internal feeling of the form takes longer to experience. If incorrectly understood, this often leads to erratic, exaggerated swaying movements, which can look very ugly”.

How to Approach the Learning Process

Whether you practise the Old Frame or New Frame routines it is more important to know how to approach the learning process. Commenting on the best way to practice, Chen Xiaoxing suggested that Gongfu (fundamental skill) is really about time. “It is only from lengthy practice that you realise the skill. It is like going to school, it has to be progressive. You have to spend one year in primary one, another in primary two and so on. You cannot spend half a year in primary one and expect to go to primary two and then jump to secondary school, university etc. You have to put in the time. The most important thing is to pay attention to the teacher when he is teaching you and then practice according to the teaching during whatever time you have”.



Chen Xiaoxing is uncompromising on this point and showed little patience with the excuses people often put forward that the modern pace of life makes it more difficult to find enough time to train as much as practitioners did in the past. “Unfortunately, that is the route you have to take, there are no two ways about it. People

somehow think that in the past the teachers have a lot of time to practice and didn't have to work like people do today. Work nowadays is actually a lot easier. People usually have a set time of maybe eight hours a day. When I was doing farmwork, we didn't have machines. Even when machines began to be used to ease physical labour we could not afford to buy them. Work was very hard and not limited to a few hours a day”. He is quite adamant that if you are really serious about developing a good level of Taiji skill, it is all about discipline and organization. If you work an eight-hour day and want to spend two hours a day training this is really not impossible. “You can easily fit ten repetitions of the form in two hours. Do this everyday and in 365 days,

doing the form ten times everyday, imagine how many repetitions you will have done. It is all a matter of determination and perseverance - if you really want it.”

Chen Xiaoxing concluded by saying that, irrespective of whether one practices the Old or New Frame, it is this consistency that will eventually bring results. “Repetitive practice of the form leads to complete familiarity with the movements. Over the course of time co-ordination and flexibility are naturally attained throughout every move contained within a form. What you must aim for is to be able to perform every movement in a fluid and unpredictable manner, shifting without warning from slow to fast, from soft to hard, and from light to heavy.”