

Dripping Oil onto Parchment: The Importance of Forms Training in Traditional Chen Village Taijiquan By David Gaffney

Journal of Asian Martial Arts

Practicing Taijiquan in its ancestral birthplace, Chenjiagou allows one to cut through many misconceptions and to reach closer to the essence of the traditional manner of acquiring skill. The realisation that you are tracing the footsteps of people like Chen Wangting, the creator of Chen Taijiquan; Chen Changxing, formulator of the system as we know it today; and Chen Fake, who took Taiji to the wider world, in effect, stepping on the same soil, gives one a great sense of continuity.

One area where East and West fully accord is in their belief that one should have a sense of the past to fully appreciate the present. That is why history is taught as a subject in school, and those of us who have been bored by it, and slept through the subject are the poorer for it. With regards to Taijiquan, perhaps even more important than recorded history, is the method of acquiring skill, which has been passed down orally from teacher to student for centuries.

Chen style Taijiquan has its own step-by-step comprehensive training system, of which, it soon becomes apparent, form training provides the foundation. Stories are handed down of the prodigious number of repetitions Chen Fake performed every day. Chen Xiaowang is said to have suspended building work on his house because it was interfering with his daily routine of thirty repetitions of the Laojia Yi Lu (Old Frame First Routine). This tradition has survived with the current emerging masters from the village. Wang Haijun, three times overall champion in the Chinese National Taijiquan Tournament, recalled how his first eight years of training in Chenjiagou consisted solely of practicing the Laojia Yi Lu.

Forms training is demanding. It requires the total attention and participation of mind and body. Elements such as patience, persistence, *yi* (mind intent), strength, relaxation, and qi are crucial in honing one's Taijiquan skills. In Chenjiagou, practitioners have for generations considered the handform to be the base upon which all the other skills of Taijiquan are built. Practicing the Taiji form is not simply a matter of mindlessly repeating the sequences. Each routine has been carefully researched and meticulously arranged. The forms are the culmination of centuries of practical experience, each posture and manoeuvre having been tried and tested then assembled to construct the forms or routines we see today.

Characteristics of the Traditional Handforms

While modern shortened versions of Chen Taijiquan are practiced as an introduction to the system, the main curriculum emphasizes two primary barehand routines. The first and more commonly practiced is the *Yi Lu* (First Route), the second being the more dynamic Cannon Fist or *Paocui* routine. These two routines were compiled by the fourteenth generation standard

bearer Chen Changxing (1771-1853), incorporating the more numerous ancient forms devised by the systems founder Chen Wangting (1600-1680) (Chen Zhenglei, 1993).



When contrasted to the Cannon Fist, the movements of the first routine are comparatively simple, with more emphasis placed upon softness (*rou*) than firmness (*gang*). *Yi Lu* focuses upon the development of *chan ssu jing* through the twining and coiling movements of the limbs and body, interspersed with *fajing* (issuing energy)

movements. In appearance, the form is relaxed, steady and stable. As the Chinese classics say, “like a great river rolling on unceasingly”. Throughout, the limbs are guided by the body in an uninterrupted sequence of opening and closing movements.

Great thought was given to the features of the movements (whether hard or soft, difficult or easy, etc.) so that the complexities of the art could be learned little by little over time. For instance, the beginning movements of the *Laojia* form are relatively straightforward. The movements are comfortable and natural, with silk-reeling as the most important principle. More softness and less hard movement make learning and practicing easier. This employment of coiling and twining movement or “*chan ssu jing*” is one of the major features of Chen style Taijiquan. Practicing the form while accurately following this method leads the student along the path to developing more effective *fajing* and, eventually gaining an understanding of how to apply and escape from *qinna* (joint-locking) techniques. Conscientious training of the first form lays a strong base upon which more complex skills can subsequently be overlaid.

The second routine, *Paocui*, contains a greater level of difficulty. Movements are more intricate, faster and tighter, with shaking energy as the main principle. Through practice of the form comes an appreciation of the different requirements of each movement--for example, the positioning of hands and feet, bodily synchronization throughout the movement, and how to place the body most favourably for attack or defence.

High or Low Postures?

The optimum number of forms practiced and the level of physical difficulty must be decided relative to the strength or weakness, age and vigour of the practitioner. For less-experienced students, it is preferable that actions be large, comfortable and open. The expression of roundness, fullness and continuous motion, as well as the alternation of opening and closing



movements, can be more clearly seen when the spiralling silk-reeling circles are larger.

Whether the form is practiced in a high or low stance is decided according to personal preference. In the early stages of training, low postures allow one to develop the foundation strength of the lower body. In a lecture entitled “How to Practice Taijiquan” given during the first International Chen Style Training Camp (Hebei, 1999), Chen Zhonglei stressed the vital importance of building up the strength of one’s legs. When the legs are strong and can bear weight firmly then the top can relax and sink down into

them, making the top flexible. If the legs are not strong, the upper body is “afraid” of sinking down and remains top heavy and un-relaxed.

Low postures also allow the practitioner to see more clearly the folding movements of the waist and turning of the legs. As the level of skill increases it is normal for the postures to become higher. This higher stance is, however, extremely agile, the practitioner being able to change naturally and easily between high and low positions. For the older beginner, a higher position may be more comfortable. Above all, in practicing the form one should let naturalness be the guiding principle.

Lien Panjia – Training the Frame

The inhabitants of Chenjiagou refer to the practice of Taiji boxing as “lien panjia” or “training the frame of one’s posture.” Great emphasis is placed on the quality of a student’s position and fixing any deficiencies in his or her postural framework. The training syllabus requires the learner to first learn the movements of the form. Once the foundation of familiarity with the form is reached, the process of correcting posture can begin. Correcting posture is a hands on process whereby the teacher adjusts the posture of a student until it eventually fulfils a set of requirements handed down over many generations. This is achieved in much the same way as a sculptor refining ever-greater details from a crude outline.

Familiarity Through Repetition

Chen Zhonglei (1998) likens the process of achieving competence in the form to learning to write Chinese characters. In the early stages of practice one shouldn’t look to far ahead to the more advanced requirements. Like learning the basic calligraphy strokes, the beginner should first concern himself with accurately learning the sequence. Concentration should be focused upon maintaining an upright position and performing the movements in a soft and balanced manner. Inexperienced practitioners often try to run before they can walk and would do well to heed the following advice:

“As for those errors that unavoidably crop up, like raising your shoulders or sticking out your elbows, filling your chest with unrestrained qi, panting when you breathe, your hands and feet

trembling etc. – it is not advisable to delve into these phenomena too deeply” (Chen Zhenglei, 1998)

Different teachers from Chenjiagou often compare learning Taijiquan to the wider educational system. Everybody accepts that they must go through primary education before they are ready to attend high school. Likewise, they must complete high school before they will be able to benefit from a university education. Those trying to acquire the more complex skills upon an inadequate foundation are destined to fail.

Repetitive practice of the form leads to familiarity with the movements. Certain optimum patterns of movement must be established, and these can only become set if they are repeated almost endlessly. Chen Zhenglei (1999) said that the unique nature of Taijiquan’s movement is designed to get rid of all stiffness and rigidity in the body. Through prolonged practice and training, the body’s joints are loosened, the tendons are stretched and elongated and all parts of the body are co-ordinated in motion. Every gap between the joints should eventually developed an elastic quality – this elasticity, the stretching of the tendon added to whole body co-ordination is what is known as Taiji neigong or internal skill (Si Chen, 2000).

In time coordination, flexibility and relaxation are acquired throughout every movement within the form. The quality of movement has to be fluid and unpredictable, changing instantly from slow to fast, from soft to hard, and from light to heavy. Relaxation provides the foundation of accumulating and releasing power (fajing). By seeking complete relaxation the practitioner attempts to rid himself of stiff energy released en route during a movement. Speed and power is greatly increased by lessening the stiff resistance of muscles during movement (Si Chen, 2000).

In his discourse on fighting methods, *Training for Sparring*, Chen Zhaokui writes:

Emphasis on slow movements alone leads to slow strikes which an opponent can counter easily. Emphasis on fast moves only makes it difficult to feel the path of your energy and makes it easy to strike along a longer path than necessary. Being fast refers to the speed generated through familiarity of the energy path. It is a speed without loss of quality (Ma Hong, 1998).

Slowness as a Training Tool

When training the form, emphasis is placed upon slowness. Throughout each individual movement, the practitioner begins slowly, moves smoothly in transition, and gradually settles into the final posture. Using the slow approach allows one to fully concentrate upon each opening and closing, stretch and withdrawal, and raising-and-lowering movement. Over a period of time, slow practice enables postures to be developed exactly, to fulfill the martial applications contained within. Every form trains the body so that the practitioner becomes aware of the optimum position through all stages of each technique, and slowness enables the body to become fixed in its

postures. Following this approach, when a movement is speeded up it becomes natural and will not stray. Posture and movement developed in this way will grow to be habitual and be helpful whenever an individual needs to move quickly and decisively – whether they are speeding up the movements of the form, pushing hands or engaging in *san shou* (free sparring).



Exponents of the external martial arts generally consider the development of direct force and superior speed and strength as the natural way by which an adversary can be defeated. From this perspective, Taijiquan seems to be at odds with nature. At first glance, it seems obvious that, in combat, strength must be superior to weakness and

speed more successful than slowness. Taijiquan philosophy, however, requires the practitioner to accept that this assessment is invalid. Instead, followers of Taijiquan are asked to have confidence in the idea that weakness can prevail over greater strength and that slowness can defeat speed. Performing movements quickly before the postures have become fixed and exact leads only to a loss of detail and efficacy. Consequently, the use of slowness represents one of the distinctive training methods of Taijiquan rather than its ultimate objective.

Fostering Mental Calmness and its Role in the Cultivation of Qi and the Development of Intention

Calmness of the mind is a fundamental requirement if the practitioner hopes to preserve the many finer points contained inside the forms. Impatience merely leads to hurriedness and a loss of detail. Composure of the mind enables qi to become quiet and subsequently to follow the intention. In this manner the intention can be fostered, facilitating the link between *shen* and qi. Chen Zhenglei (1998) suggests that:

“In practicing Chen style Taijiquan you must keep your thoughts quiet, getting rid of all internal and external disturbances. Only in this way will you benefit by restraining your internal energy (*nei qi*), and by guiding the rising up and movement of internal energy (*yin dong gu dang*)”

This approach towards practice in time allows the practitioner of Taijiquan to effect whole-body movement during the form, unifying internal spirit or consciousness with the external form, thereby uniting body and mind. Practicing slowly allows one to cultivate qi, increasing the health and vigor of the body. This provides the foundation from which martial stamina and skill can flourish.

Traditional Taijiquan practice emphasises the importance of the dantian and of the rotation of the dantian. When training the form, the practitioner is required to focus on the dantian region. The dantian, according to the study of jingluo (meridians), is situated in the lower abdomen approximately three fingers below the navel. In this area there is a concentration of internal organs, mainly the reproductive and excretory organs. Concentrating one's mind intent on the dantian region has several benefits: It can lower the body's centre of gravity making the lower plane (xia pan) very steady and balanced; It enables massage of the internal organs, to increase the functions of those organs; It can focus the mind-intent (yi nien) so that when you are practicing your boxing you are actually resting your mind; to enable the execution of dantian breathing, namely abdominal breathing which increases the lung capacity (Si Chen, 2000).

In order not to hinder qi development, the forms should be practiced according to the principles, and one should not place a limit on each movement by focusing on one particular application. Every movement can have many possible applications. Considering each as part of a circle, one realizes that all points on the circle can represent a particular application, depending on the situation. Chen Zhenglei (1999) cautions that one should learn the method not its manifestation. In other words, not to be concerned with individual applications but rather on how the body moves as a completely integrated system.

Fundamental to the correct practice of Taijiquan is the constant involvement of the *yi*, or mind, all movements within the form arising from the mind's "intent." The *yi* moves the *qi*, which in turn moves the body. Training the Taiji form requires the practitioner to develop a deep level of concentration upon the internal sensations of the body, at all times focusing upon the precise movement being performed. In terms of strictness and attention to detail, even the smallest detail must be clearly executed, with no brushing over a movement that is unclear. Each movement within the sequence should be carefully considered as to its function and characteristics--whether it is relaxed enough; where to open and close; whether to turn in the foot; if there is enough spiral movement, etc. The practitioner meticulously works out the requirements, slowly reducing the number of shortcomings and faults. With this mindset each repetition of the form should lead to new discoveries and understandings, and ultimately mastery.



To develop a deep level of *yi* and *qi*, the form must be practiced correctly for a period of time. Distinct stages must be passed through. First the sequence must be mastered until it becomes very familiar. At this stage emphasis is placed primarily upon attaining looseness in the joints and correct body structure. Initially, training should center on standardizing the movements of the form as closely as possible to fulfill the body requirements of Chen

Taijiquan. Each time the student comes to a fixed posture—for example, Lazily Tying Coat (*Lan Zha Yi*), Single Whip (*Dan Bian*) or Preparing Form (*Taiji Qi Shi*)—he or she should focus strictly upon each part of the body, making sure that it conforms to the principles. This process requires considerable mental effort if the student is to avoid deviating from the correct path. Though many people can quote the requirements of Taijiquan and verses from the Taijiquan classics, real understanding can only come through training these into one's body. For instance, it is not enough to know that the shoulders must be relaxed (*song jien*); the practitioner must experiment to discover how to relax them and to what degree. Or when containing or storing the chest (*han xiong*), how is this achieved? At what point is it sufficiently stored? Too much and the waist collapses, too little and the shoulder tightens.

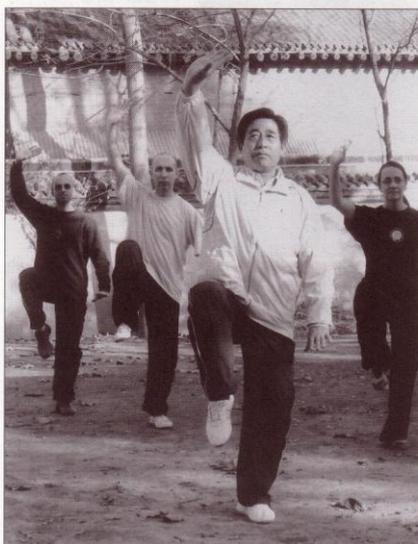
Once the form can be performed naturally, the internal energy can develop. With each completed posture, the qi sinks to the dantian and from there is distributed throughout the body. Through continual, diligent practice more qi is accumulated and stored in the dantian. Chen Zhenglei (1999) likens the dantian to a large river, saying that if the water level is not sufficiently high, then water cannot flow to the smaller tributaries downstream. So, if the dantian has not filled with qi, qi cannot be pushed out to the extremities.

When the fixed postures have been standardized and the basic requirements fulfilled, the practitioner then must consider the movement principles—for example, using the waist as the axis, moving sectionally, etc. At this stage, one must seek the correct route of each movement in the form, incorporating the basic requirements and movement principles. To understand one or two points is considered not bad, as it is not possible to understand every aspect at once. Improvement occurs in a step-by-step manner over time. For example, dividing the body into three sections, a requirement of all basic movements is that the outer sections (hands and feet) hold the energy, the two middle sections (elbows and knees) hold the position and the two root



ABOVE: STATUE OF CHEN CHANGXING.

BELOW: PRACTICING THE OLD FRAME FIRST ROUTINE—GOLDEN ROOSTER STANDING ON ONE LEG.



Through prolonged training, qi becomes fuller and stronger, filling the energy center in the lower abdomen (*dantian*), breaking through blockages in the energy paths (*jingluo*), and then saturating the whole body. The body is like an inflated ball, full of elasticity and overflowing with a physical sensation of inward to outward expansion and strength (*peng jing*). With Chen Taijiquan's spiraling "silk-reeling" movement, this energy can be circulated throughout the body.

The Standing Pole training requirements are carried over to the Taiji form: head erect, shoulders relaxed, elbows sunk down, chest relaxed, hips sunk, knees bent, etc. To correctly follow these basic and seemingly simple principles requires deep concentration. As one develops competence in the different aspects during standing, the feelings and sensations that arise can be transferred to the Taiji form and push hands.

EMPTY-HAND FORMS: THE FOUNDATION OF CHEN TAIJIQUAN SKILLS

Form training has long provided the foundation of Chen Taijiquan's step-by-step training method. Chen Wangting's original art was comprised of

five empty-hand boxing routines that were passed down the next five generations. Chen Changxing (1771-1853), the 14th-generation standard bearer, refined the five routines into the two routines practiced today. These are the First Routine (*Yilu*) and the Second Routine (*Erliu*, also known as the *Pao Cui* or Cannon Fist form).

It has been suggested that some of Chen Wangting's unique art was lost. Chen Xiaoxing, principal of the Chenjiagou Taijiquan School, refutes this: "The synthesis of the five routines was not a matter of losing the old forms but of putting the five together, absorbing the essence of each. The First Routine and the Cannon Fist contain the same essence as the original routines, preserving many of the movements and all of the movement principles" (Chen Xiaoxing, 2004). Today, Chen Style Taijiquan empty-hand forms consist of two main versions (frames): Old and New (*Laojia* and *Xinjia*, respectively). The Old

sections (shoulders and kua) relax. To do all of this simultaneously is very difficult so it is better perhaps to concentrate on one point at a time (Si Chen, 2000). As the movement principles and body requirements are realized, the internal energy from the dantian can be accurately directed to the appropriate point, depending upon which movement is being performed.

The Handform as a Blueprint For Developing Martial Skill

The hand form provides the blueprint for developing the martial skills of Chen Taijiquan. A multifaceted instructional tool, it incorporates many essentials which, when united, allow the practitioner to fully build up his fighting skills. There are no easy options if one seeks to acquire higher-level abilities. Inexperienced students often press the teacher as to the precise application and usage of particular movements early in their training career. With the traditional masters from Chenjiagou answers sometimes seem ambiguous and vague. Instead of being shown some spectacular attack or countering technique the student is told to look to the principle behind the movement. This can be very frustrating to those used to being spoon-fed techniques, after all, it is argued, if you don't learn how to attack an opponent how can this be a martial art? Impatient students may leave with the feeling that the real skill is being withheld or may gloomily conclude that their skill is not deemed sufficient to warrant an answer.

During class one day, Chen Zhenglei likened the martial application of Taijiquan to Chinese medicine with its emphasis on cause rather than symptom. One should, he suggested, try to understand how a movement is generated rather than focusing upon its final expression. Approached in this manner, the form becomes a training method to ready the body for combat. In a treatise entitled "Training Method of Chen Taiji Routine and Push Hands," Chen Zhaokui writes: "every position should be precise and each destination should be clear." (Ma Hong, 1998)



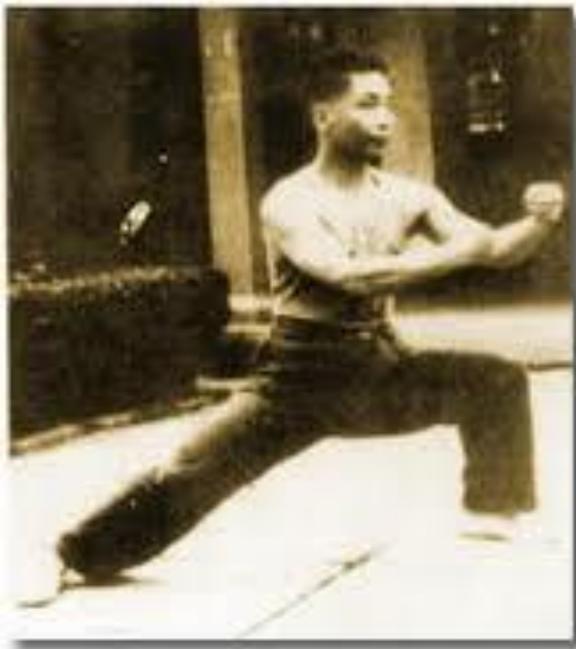
Zhengzhou 1998

Taijiquan is a practical and no-nonsense martial art. Its proficient use rests upon an assimilation of its core principles if one is to grasp the internal substance and avoid the practice "flowery fists" – nice to look, but devoid of content. At all times the

practitioner must seek out the most difficult, the most challenging and the most detailed aspects of the movements contained within the form. The temptation to cheat in order to circumvent demanding movements should be avoided. For instance, when performing the Dragon on the Ground (Que Di Long) posture the practitioner drops into a low stance, and next, even more difficult, moves to the following position through arced movement.

Every movement and every step within the form has been developed to prepare the student for a particular purpose, and all ought to be viewed as being equally important, not just those with immediately apparent martial applications.

Requirements When Practising the Form



Chen Zhaokui

In his book *Chen Style Taijiquan Method and Theory*, Ma Hong (1998) a disciple of Chen Zhaokui, lists sixteen requirements laid down by his teacher, that must be attended to during each posture:

- Eye movement (the direction of the eyes)
 - The shape of the hands, and how the hand changes as the movement is being performed
 - *Shun-chan* and *ni-chan* (silk-reeling) of the arms
 - Footwork (how to execute changes when stepping)
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- *Shun-chan* and *ni-chan* of the legs
 - Opening and closing of the chest and back
 - Rising and falling of the buttocks
 - Dantian rotation (waist and lower abdomen)
 - Shifting weight (the relationship of substantial and insubstantial)
 - Beginning and end points, as well as the transition movements of the upper and lower limbs

- How much strength to use, and where the strength should be concentrated (i.e., where is the attack point?)
- Position and direction of posture
- The rise and fall of spiral movement (top and bottom coordination)
- The change in tempo (alternating slow and fast)
- Breathing (coordination of breathing and movement)
- Listening

The requirements are not rigid measurements but have got to be experienced and polished through continuous training. Their intricacy is reflected in an early Taijiquan adage: *“Only the gods know, impossible to transmit orally.”* To the inexperienced learner, the body requirements of Chen Taijiquan at times appear almost unbearably strict. Nevertheless, by going through this route, an advanced level of ability can be reached in a step-by-step way.

Over time, conscientious practice and study of the form allow the practitioner to identify and build into his arsenal both the attacking and defensive facets of the art. From a defensive perspective, the intention is to achieve the capacity to lure an adversary into emptiness. This requires training to a stage



Chenjiagou 2003

where one can stick, connect, adhere and follow, neither losing contact with nor resisting the opponent. Offensive *gong fu* is acquired by refining Taijiquan’s eight energy methods (*ba fa*) - *peng, lu, ji, an, cai, lie, zhou* and *kou*. In time, the student tries to approach the level of skill often quoted in the Taiji classics whereby *“four ounces can overcome a thousand pounds.”*

To attain this level of accomplishment, the form must be honed until it becomes unbroken, with each movement flowing smoothly into the next, on the surface relaxed but inwardly strong. Where hard and soft elements are combined, the upper and lower body are co-ordinated, and the internal and external (*yi* and *li*) work closely together. Looking at accomplished practitioners you see movement that is highly refined, devoid of all stiffness and clumsiness.

The pace of development cannot be forced. Paradoxically, the more you try to hurry, the more difficult it is to reach achievement. Highly regarded

twentieth generation practitioner Wang Haijun cites a saying by the old teachers of Chen Taiji that skill is acquired like dripping oil onto parchment until eventually the parchment is saturated. He says that the traditional way was to accept whatever the teacher was teaching at whatever pace, no matter how slowly. With prolonged practice skill natural develops. Those persons who train daily for a number of years reach levels of skill that seem impossible to achieve to those unable or unwilling to devote themselves as fully to training.



While individual goals dictate the level of intensity during practice, combat efficiency necessitates a high level of dedication in terms of time and exertion. The forms should not be approached as sequences of movements and techniques to be memorized and then repeated in a parrot-like manner. Rather they are training tools with which one can hone the ability to move and react in a calm, natural and potent way. Chen Xiaowang, in his critique “The Fajing of Chen Style Taijiquan,” suggests that a fitting outlook when practicing the form is to train diligently, ignoring tiredness and accepting the need to work hard. In the words of a well-known Chinese saying, if you hope to reach a high level of skill you must be a willing to “eat bitterness.”



CTGB instructors Mary McGregor & Clive Howells

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