

# The Chen Style Cannon Fist

By Hean K. Low

## Introduction

Chen style Taijiquan currently consists of two widely known routines. The first and most widely practiced is called the I Lu, or first road. The second is known as the cannon fist, or pao chui.

It should be noted that there are three frames or styles within the Chen style Taijiquan. They are the "old frame" (laojia), from Chen Changxing (1771—1853), the 14th generation; the "small frame" (xiaojia) evolved from the Zhaobao-style of Chen Qingping (1795—1868), the 15th generation; and, lastly, the "new frame" (xinjia), from Chen Fa-ke (1887—1957), the 17th generation, and Chen Zhaokui (Fa-ke's son).

Other major styles of Taijiquan, such as the Yang style, the two Wu styles and the Sun style, were developed on the basis of the first routine of the old frame.

The first routine is relatively simple in movements compared to the second routine with more rou than gang. (Note: Rou means soft but pliable and resilient; gang means concentrated rou, or firm.) The first routine lays the emphasis on the training of the twining movements of the limbs and body (chan si jin), supplemented by emitting of internal power or energy (fajin). It presents a form that is gentle, steady, and stable, with the body guiding the limbs in a continuous process of opening and closing movements.

The second routine, also known as the cannon fist (paochui), has more complex movements with more gang than rou. It is faster, more compact, and contains more explosive and vigorous movements such as stamping, leaping, and dodging.

However, it should be noted that all its movements consist of continuous turning of the waist and spine, wrist and shoulder, ankle and knee, to form a series of synchronized movements.

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Peter Wu teaches in Melbourne, Australia.

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Peter Wu in Red Fist/Hidden Hand Punch.

There is also more fajin in the midst of soft and smooth movements. The cannon fist's martial techniques emphasize the use of elbow (zhou), split (lie), pull (cai), shoulder-strike (kao), and the four corners (siyue). Complementary roles are played by the four directions (sizhen), or ward-off (peng), roll-back (lu), press (zhi), and push (an).

Why did other major styles of Taijiquan not pass down the fajin movements and the cannon fist routine? The answer is still a mystery. It could be that the fajin movements were deleted to cater to the needs of bringing up one's health, or the cannon fist routine was too vigorous and hard to master, or perhaps the masters of the past wanted to keep the secrets within their own family.

However, it was recorded that when Yang Cheng-fu (1883—1936), the 3rd generation of Yang style Taijiquan, gave exhibitions during his early days in Shanghai, he performed the kicking movements with speed and force. He later modified his form into the present "big frame" (dajia), which is the most popular style of Taijiquan. Some of

Cheng-fu's students, such as Xu Yusheng, Shen Jiazhen, and Li Jianhua, did learn the skills of individual fajin movements from Cheng-fu. These are not seen in the Yang style Taijiquan routine.

When they learned the Chen style Taijiquan from Chen Fa-ke when the latter was in Beijing, they realized that the fajin movements taught by Cheng-fu came from the cannon fist of the Chen style. Yang Shaohou (1862—1930), Cheng-fu's elder brother, had a Taijiquan form known as the "small frame," or xiaojia, of the Yang style, containing many swift, ferocious, and powerful blows. However, this form of Taijiquan was not widely known or passed down.

It is also known as a fact that Li Yiyu (1832—1892), Hao Weijun (1849—1920), both from the Wu style (presently known as the Hao style) Taijiquan of Wu Yuxiang (1812—1880), and Yang Banhou (1837—1892), Cheng-fu's uncle, used to practice fajin and the cannon fist together, with Banhou surpassing the other two.

It is therefore apparent that the Yang and the Wu families of the past still preserve the fajin skills. However, at present the Yang and Wu (Hao) styles have not passed down the art of the cannon fist, but they have preserved the fajin drills.

The following is an interview session I had with Chen stylist Peter Wu of Melbourne, Australia, about the cannon fist routine:

**HEAN K. LOW:** Some people say that Chen style Taijiquan does not look like Taijiquan at all, especially the cannon fist routine. What is your opinion on this issue?

**PETER WU:** This statement is a total misconception. Chen style Taijiquan is the original form of Taijiquan. The famous Taijiquan master, Yang Lu-ch'an (1799—1872), founder of the Yang style, learned his Taijiquan from the Chen village in Henan Province, the birthplace of Chen style Taijiquan, and for that matter, the birthplace of all other styles of Taijiquan.

Over a long period, the offspring of

Chen style Taijiquan have undergone a lot of changes to cater to the general need for health, so much so that even some of them have almost changed beyond recognition. These forms, of course, no longer resemble the original Chen style Taijiquan. It is, therefore, not a question of Chen style Taijiquan not resembling these modified forms of Taijiquan, but rather that the latter have modified too much to resemble the original Chen style Taijiquan.

**HKI:** Can you please explain the unique characteristics of the Chen style Taijiquan cannon fist?

**PETER WU:** At present, the Chen style Taijiquan has two bare-hands routines; that is, the first routine and the second routine, which is also known as the cannon fist. Before we indulge in the characteristics of the cannon fist, I would like to talk about the performance of the Chen style Taijiquan routines in order to help us understand more about the origin of these routines.

How many routines/forms did Chen Wangting (1600—1680), 9th generation of the Chen family and the founder of Chen style Taijiquan actually create is not known. However, if we look into the "Canon of Boxing" of the Chen village, it is stated that at that time, there were seven bare-hand routines; i.e., five Taijiquan routines, one long-fist (changquan) routine, and one cannon fist routine.

Many people have known, as a fact, that by the time Chen style Taijiquan was passed down to Chen Changxing (1771—1853) the 14th generation, there were only the first and the cannon fist routines; the other five routines were "lost."

This fact is totally wrong! According to a descendant of the Chen family, with whom I met, he once told me that when he was living in the Chen village, there were still some old practitioners practicing the so-called "lost" routines. And he himself knew the third routine. He even mentioned that there were two routines that the practitioner can sing (the poem regarding the forms in the routines) while performing the routines.

I remember correctly that it was the 4th and 5th routine he men-



Chopping the Hand.

tioned. When I researched into this matter and referred to the "Canon of Boxing" of the Chen village, I concluded that it must be the 3rd and 4th routine because the text description of these two routines were very similar to song/poem lyrics. The text description of the 5th routine would not be suitable for singing.

One may ask why, at present, there



Enter Straight Into the Well.

are a lot of people practicing only the first routine? This is because the first routine is longer, the martial art content is rich, and the basic foundation is all there, making it much more interesting to perform. The other five routines were short and simple, and one would easily lose interest in practicing these forms. Thus, there aren't many people practicing these forms; but they were not "lost," either.

One of my martial art brothers who knew the Taijiquan Long Fist (108 postures) routine seldom practiced it. When I asked him why, he replied that it was too long and he had lost interest in practicing it. I did learn some of these so-called "lost" routines at a later stage out of curiosity, and indeed, they weren't that interesting. Hence, we can understand why the first and second routines of Chen style Taijiquan are more popular than the other routines. For the sake of interest, in spite of the seven routines, there are some so-called "special hands" (zhuanhou) single techniques found in Chen style Taijiquan that are very applicable in combat situations.

Now let us discuss the characteristics of the cannon fist. The cannon fist belongs to one of the Taijiquan routines, and thus, it must contain the general principles of Taijiquan; for example, loosening up the bone joints, alternating between firmness (gang) and softness (rou), spinning and twinning the body and limbs, etc. It also has its unique characteristics.

Let us first examine why it is called the "cannon fist." The term "cannon" (pao) is used to describe the sound of the explosive (fajin) movements and the stamping of the feet; the term "fist" (chui) is well understood and need no elaboration.

The first routine of Chen style Taijiquan is relatively simpler and slower in movements, supplemented by few fajin movements. However, the cannon fist has more complex movements: the fists are used more frequently, it is faster and more compact, there is more stamping and fajin movements, and it has leaping and dodging movements. These characteristics are only from the external point of view. This is because if one is very well versed in the first routine, one can practice the routine faster and incorporate more fajin and stamping movements, and it

will "look" similar to the cannon fist.

The major differences between the first and the cannon fist routines are in the application techniques. The techniques found in the first routine are mainly used against one opponent. Thus, the movements are gentler and the twinning movements are bigger and obvious, and are very similar to push hands (tuishou).

The applications found in the cannon fist, however, are mainly used against multiple opponents. Thus, the combat techniques are much more realistic and approach free-fighting. For example, some of the techniques involve sweeping, leaping and dodging, changing one's attack and defense quickly, etc. Thus, once we understand that the techniques found in the cannon fist are used against multiple opponents, then the other characteristics can be easily understood.

**HKL:** From your above explanation, can one say that the cannon fist routine belongs to a higher or advanced routine, compared to the first routine?

**PETER WU:** Indeed it is. If you practice the cannon fist routine diligently and strictly follow its essential principles of practice, then although your fajin movements are rapid and fierce, your body, muscle and bone-joints, etc., are still loose. Internally it will be similar to the slow and gentler movements found in the first routine.

Furthermore, most movements look much more straight, but in fact the movements still follow a small and compact circular path. Thus, it appears as if there is "no circle." However, to possess the skills of the cannon fist requires a strong foundation in the first routine and the general principles of practice of Taijiquan, or else your routine will look like any other external martial art and will not have the characteristics of Taijiquan.

**HKL:** Must one learn the cannon fist routine as part of their Taijiquan practice?

**PETER WU:** This depends on your objective in learning the art of Taijiquan. If you learn Taijiquan for health, then it is not necessary to learn the cannon fist. If your aim is for both health and self-defense,



Application sequence in Enter Straight Into the Well.

then it is essential to learn the cannon fist, as it will eventually lead you to the ultimate skills of Taijiquan.

**HKL:** It is also said that Taijiquan does not practice "fajin," or the explosive release of force. But in the Chen style Taijiquan routine, there are many "fajin" movements, especially in the



Subduing the Tiger.

cannon fist routine. Could you throw some light on this controversial point?

**PETER WU:** There should not be any controversy at all on this point. To say that Taijiquan does not practice "fajin" is a total misunderstanding of the Taijiquan principle. Firstly, the name Taijiquan originates from the word "Taiji." Taiji is made up of two basic elements, Yin and Yang, which are complementary opposites but which unite to form a whole. Thus, in Taijiquan, "rou" (elastic suppleness) and "gang" (concentrated "rou") should be complementary to each other.

In other words, there should be the gentle and slow movements for cultivating the "rou," and, at the same time there should also be the fast and explosive spurts of the inner power called "gang."

Secondly, other styles of Taijiquan have dropped the "fajin," and that is in consistency with the limited objective of promoting health and seeking the curative effects of Taijiquan.

Furthermore, to seek the martial aspect of Taijiquan, one needs to practice "fajin." If the Taijiquan routines/form do not have "fajin" movements, then one has to seek the methods of "fajin" from elsewhere; for example, in push hands exercises, etc. Thus, in my opinion, the Chen style Taijiquan routines have both the "rou" and "gang" movements, and they also provide better understanding of the "Taiji" concept in Taijiquan.

**HKL:** Can practitioners of other styles of Taijiquan practice the cannon fist of the Chen style?

**PETER WU:** Yes, they can. According to Mr. Ma Guowen (b. 1866), he often saw his uncle, Li Yiyu (1832—1892), his teacher Master Hao Weijun (1849—1920), both from the Wu style, presently known as the Hao style, and Yang Banhou (1837 -1892), 3rd generation of the Yang style Taijiquan, practicing the Taijiquan cannon fist.

Yang's skills surpassed Li's and Hao's. In the past, Wu (Hao) style Taijiquan incorporated the cannon fist as part of the training curriculum. Nowadays, only Chen style Taijiquan preserves and openly teaches the cannon fist. The cannon fist of other styles of Taijiquan is seldom heard of.

However, at the Yang and Wu (Hao) styles Taijiquan Exhibition in 1991, which was held in Yongnian County, China (i.e., the birthplace of both the Yang and Wu—Wu Yuxiang—styles of Taijiquan), local Wu (Hao) style Taijiquan masters demonstrated the Taijiquan cannon fist. According to them, practicing the cannon fist is part of their Taijiquan training.

Although different styles of Taijiquan share the same basic Taijiquan principles, each style of Taijiquan has its own unique identity and characteristics. If you are a Yang style Taijiquan practitioner, then it would be better for you to learn the cannon fist traditionally passed down by the Yang style generation, as it would be easy for you to learn the routine and grasp all the essential concepts.

The reason for this is that the cannon fist of the Yang style Taijiquan has the same flavor and characteristics of the commonly known Yang style Taijiquan routine. However, if you do not have the opportunity to learn the cannon fist of Yang style Taijiquan, then you can practice the cannon fist of Chen style Taijiquan as a substitute.

Take my own experience, for example. I used to practice Yang style Taijiquan in my early days. After learning the first and second (cannon fist) routines of Chen style Taijiquan, my training then consisted mainly of the Yang style Taijiquan routine, supplemented by the cannon fist of Chen style Taijiquan.

I seldom practiced the first routine of Chen style Taijiquan, as my opinion at that time was that the Yang style Taijiquan routine and the first routine of the Chen style Taijiquan are very similar. Their main emphasis is the practice of resilient softness (rou). Therefore, when practicing the Yang style Taijiquan routine, there is no need to practice the first routine of Chen style Taijiquan. The main emphasis of the cannon fist is the practice of firmness (gang) and speed.

Through this training regime, I obtained several benefits. My body perseverance energy (naili), exploding energy (baofali), and force-issuing (fajin) has increased dramatically. Also, the turning of the torso method



(shenfa) became more agile, and lastly, I obtained the exposure and gained knowledge regarding the application techniques of the cannon fist.

**HKL:** After learning or practicing Taijiquan, when can one start to learn or practice the cannon fist?

**PETER WU:** Not too early. If you have only three months of Taijiquan training and begin to practice the cannon fist, your cannon fist will not have any Taijiquan characteristics, not to mention the characteristics of the cannon fist.

This is because you haven't grasped the essential principles regarding the practice of Taijiquan. Your movements will consist of brute force, as you do not understand how to loosen-up your bone-joints and muscles. Thus, the appearance of your cannon fist will not be much different from other martial arts forms. Even worse, it might hinder your ability to loosen-up your bone-joints and muscles as your Taijiquan training progresses.

However, one cannot wait for a very long time to be able to practice the cannon fist. Traditionally, Chen style Taijiquan practitioners have to wait for at least two to three years before learning the cannon fist routine. In these modern times, this waiting period can be reduced. In my opinion, you can start learning the cannon fist after you have understood and grasped the basic torso method regarding the practice of Taijiquan. This usually

takes about one year. You can start with the movements as slowly as in the first routine, but incorporate all the essential requirements into the cannon fist routine and increase the tempo as you progress.

**HKL:** Can you briefly explain the essential principles regarding the practice of the cannon fist?

**PETER WU:** Understand the characteristics of the cannon fist and practice according to these characteristics; then you will not deviate from the true path. However, I will mention several points here:

Firstly, it is obvious that the cannon fist consists of many force-releasing (fajin) movements. If you cannot grasp the Taijiquan method of force-releasing, then your cannon fist will look like a "hard-fist," i.e., your cannon fist will not possess any Taijiquan characteristics. According to my teacher, grandmaster Hong Junsheng, "The force-releasing of Taijiquan is simply the adding of speed." What my teacher meant is that when you are issuing force, the essential principles regarding the torso method, the ability to loosen-up the bone-joints and muscles, are similar to the slow movements of Taijiquan. It's just the adding of speed that makes the force-releasing movements look different.

If you suddenly found the inability to loosen-up your bone-joints and muscles while practicing the cannon fist, then your movements will become "hard," and it shows that you have been practicing incorrectly. To rectify this problem, you have to go back to the slow movements and achieve the ability to loosen-up and slowly increase the speed as you progress.

Furthermore, if you can loosen-up your bone joints and muscles, as well as control the slow movements, but you cannot achieve the required speed in force-releasing movements, it means that your slow movements are very "dispersed." This means that the movements do not adhere to the requirements regarding the methods of utilizing the energy (jin).

The cause of this fault stems from the inability to grasp the principles that "energy originates from the feet," "movements are dictated by the waist," and other methods of utilizing energy

in Taijiquan.

That is, you have been solely concentrating on the concept of "loosening and relaxing," and neglecting the internal energy (nei-jin) while practicing Taijiquan.

Secondly, since the cannon fist routine contains many fist movements (as the name suggests), you must clearly understand the method of holding your fist in Taijiquan. Many Taijiquan practitioners grasp their fists too loosely; i.e., they leave a big hollow, empty space in between. This is incorrect.

When holding the fist in Taijiquan, the fist should be, as the saying goes, "the shape of the fist shall not be dispersed, and the energy shall not be dead." "The shape of the fist shall not be dispersed" means that when holding the fist, the shape of the fist must be obvious so that power/energy can be concentrated into the fist, and it also reduces the risk of being injured when hitting/striking.

"The energy shall not be dead" means that you have held your fist too tight and it might affect the ability to loosen the arm. Thus, the power from your fist comes entirely from brute force.

In Taijiquan, the fist is only held tight when reaching the target. Once the target has been reached, the fist then becomes loose but not slack, and hence preserves the shape of the fist.

Thirdly, as I mentioned before, one of the main characteristics of the cannon fist is the practice of self-defense techniques, especially in a multiple-opponent situation. Thus, you must bear this characteristic in mind when you practice the cannon fist. If you neglect this characteristic, your explanation of the applications of the cannon fist techniques will be similar to the first routine or push hands. Hence, the objective of the cannon fist is not clearly expressed.

**HKL:** Are there any similarities between the self-defense techniques of Chen style Taijiquan and other styles of Taijiquan, especially when one encounters multiple opponents?

**PETER WU:** Of course, there are some similarities as well as unique differences. For example, all styles of Taijiquan emphasize following and neutralizing the incoming force, and capitalizing on the opponent's momen-



The application of Sleeves Dance Like turning Flowers.

tum to one's advantage.

And, in the multiple-opponents situation, one must always be in the advantage position in order to avoid the attacks from all possible directions. However, in the real free-fighting (santa) situation against multiple opponents, it is very difficult to intercept and make contact with all the incoming attacks. If you misjudge the attacks, you will definitely get hit.

With the very skilled Taijiquan masters, when they are hit on any part of their body, that part of the body can be used to release explosive power and fling the opponent off. However, if your skill is not up to that particular standard, what other method(s) can you use?

Many martial artists and wushu practitioners practice the "resistant hitting" or the so-called "hard qigong" or "hard internal skill" in order to prevent injuries to their body when they are being hit. However, in the self-defense training of Chen style Taijiquan, there is a unique method.

When any part of your body is being hit, you can use the spiraling energy (chan si jin) to protect yourself from any injuries, and, at the same time, cause injuries to your opponent's wrist and reduce his attacking capability. This is the unique application of Chen style Taijiquan's spiraling energy. Thus, the practice of Chen style Taijiquan is practicing this spiraling

energy as expressed by Chen Xin (one of the great Taijiquan theoreticians): "There will be no Taijiquan without this spiraling energy."

**HKL:** As you have mentioned earlier in this interview, the first and second routines of Chen style Taijiquan have their own unique characteristics. And their training objectives are different. Can you briefly talk about the characteristics and objectives of the other routines of Chen style Taijiquan?

**PETER WU:** If you correctly practice each routine of Chen style Taijiquan, you must clearly express the characteristics and objectives in each of the routines. In this way, you can understand their individual value, as well as motivate your interests.

Take, for example, the long fist routine of Chen style Taijiquan. This routine is not only long (108 postures), but the movements and the energy (jin) expressed are also long, with big opening and closing. Furthermore, there are 108 different self-defense applications. This routine is beneficial for increasing the internal energy, as well as for the flexibility of the limbs and body. After practicing the cannon fist, you can use the long fist routine to train and increase your self-defense techniques, particularly for encountering multiple opponents.

Another example is the short fist routine of Chen style Taijiquan. This routine is very short with only 24 postures. The movements and the energy expressed are very short. However, to perform this routine correctly is very difficult, as it contains multiple releases of explosive power. It is faster and more compact. Its self-defense applications are for "short range" combat, using the body to stick to the opponent and then using the waist in coordination with the feet to release one's explosive power. Thus, you need to have a certain skill before you can practice this routine. It belongs to the advanced routines, in comparison to other routines of Chen style Taijiquan I would prefer to discuss more of the routines in the near future.●

Note: The above interview was conducted in Chinese; therefore, any misinterpretation or error is due to inadequate English terminology in the process of translation—H.K. Low.