



# T'AI CHI

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# Thunder Style Taijiquan

By Adam Hsu

In northern Taiwan, there's a song much loved by children called, "Dark, Dark the Sky." As kids, we used to sing it in a light teasing manner, happily poking fun at our elders:

"The sky's dark, it's going to rain, Grandpa grabs a shovel to dig a ditch (so the water won't run into the house). He digs and digs . . . and digs up a loach (a kind of fish)! Hooray! Hooray! How interesting this is! Grandpa wants it salty. Grandma wants it light. They fight and fight and break the wok (now they can't cook the fish.) Ha, ha, ha!"

Later on, the song was recorded, transcribed into Western music notation, and included, tamed and polished, in junior high school music textbooks. Incredibly, in my music class we poor kids were made to sing it exactly as notated in the book.

Even more horrible, the teacher designated this song for a test. If we hit the wrong pitch or sang the wrong word, points were deducted and we could even flunk.

Well, tests are tests. Teachers need fair and objective ways to grade stu-

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**Adam Hsu is based in Stanford, CA. The cover photo and the photos accompanying this article are by Marie Anthony. The photos of applications show Adam Hsu and Bruce Khavar.**

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Single Whip

dents so from their point of view, this was the correct way to go. Our parents' main concern was to encourage good grades and punish failures. But to us children, this was ridiculous.

The textbook song was acceptable, the meaning somehow like the original. But who gave "them" the authority to say that their version was the better, or even the only version?

Surely we didn't and this was OUR song. We knew that there were at least a dozen ways to sing the humorous story of Grandpa and Grandma's unlucky fight over their lucky dinner. Some versions used different tunes. Some had different words. At times the lyrics were quite different.

Poor us! We were just little children governed by a strict educational system, robbed of authority by grown-ups. We could only obey and amuse them, or get an F and go home to suffer more punishment—early bed without supper, just like Grandpa and Grandma!

Our beloved Taijiquan (T'ai Chi Ch'uan) grew up in the villages just like the song.

Subsequently, it was officially acknowledged by the Chinese government. In the past, China's wushu bureau recognized five different Taiji styles: Chen, Yang, Woo, Wu, and Sun. At the end of last year, they accepted another—Zhao Bao—to bring the total to six. People wish the government would open the door even wider and accept other



Adam Hsu in Jing Gang Dao Chui posture.

valuable branches of Taiji.

In China the government has admirably assumed the responsibility to promote wushu, including Taijiquan. They are probably the only government in the world to do so. In the last ten years they've also begun to create new standardized Taiji forms, movements, and tournament rules. Their main thrust has been to try promoting Taijiquan through fair and objective competition.

I don't think anyone can argue with this idea and certainly no one wishes to refuse helping hands—especially the strong arms of the communist government.

But in some ways it brings back my junior high musical nightmare, particularly because the composers of the new Taiji forms aren't the real Taiji masters.

For example, the standardized Yang competition form was created by Zhang Wen Guang, an Islamic long fist (cha quan) master.

Some Yang style family members such as Yang Zhendou are internationally renown masters, still alive, active, and easily available. It would seem that the government will appoint only those it trusts, thus maintaining con-

trol, rather than reach out for the real authorities of Yang Taijiquan.

The real point here is that standardized forms are a double-edged sword. Yes, it's easier for judges to score contestants.

But at the same time, if standardization is wrongly promoted, meaning over-emphasized, coaches will be seduced into teaching competition forms only and channel their students solely into tournament-oriented practice.

Practically speaking, this will devalue other forms and movements not included in the newly created versions, discourage creativity, and damage Taiji's potential to better serve the needs of our modern lifestyles.

Through videos, or in person, I've observed Taiji competitions in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and the US. It's frightening to think that so many people pour such a great amount of their time and energy into these competition forms.

Yes, they are smooth, fluent, graceful. But I can clearly see that no matter how many years they practice, if they continue on their present training

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paths, they won't be able to advance to the higher levels.

Even if tournaments, governments, or news media proclaim them to be the top Taiji players, gold medalists, and all-time champions, what they've actually accomplished is Taiji suicide, killing their Taiji potential.

If my point is unclear, let pose a question. Is there any possibility that serious, hard, sincere training to win gold medals can actually produce masters like Chen Fa Ke or Yang Chen Pu (Yang Cheng-fu)?

Well, disregarding the future of the art and quality of technical level, the Chinese government has done a great job. However, if they wish to save this art, raise it to its highest possible level, and satisfy the dearest wishes and needs of Taiji lovers, they must leave the music class to mingle with the little kids in the neighborhoods.

They must sing our song, share in our feelings, experience the whole picture. What they find could be much more valuable than their standardized forms or a first place ribbon.

Twenty years ago in Taiwan I trained under my Sifu Tu Yi Che (who passed away in 1990.) He taught me the Chen Family lao jia (the most popular branch) and also the xin jia (a very rare branch.)



He Shou

Five years ago, when I paid my first visit to Chen Village, birthplace of Taijiquan, I was very fortunate to discover, after great difficulty, that the xin jia I learned (there are several other branches of Chen Taiji also named xin jia) originated in Wang Ge Dang, a tiny village right next door.

It was also known as Hu Lei jia, Thunder style. At the time, I was told that unfortunately the style had no successors. All had vanished, and no one practiced it anymore.

I felt happiness to have found my own roots and sadness that the system had perished. I didn't know that Chen village was hiding the truth to protect its own interests and wished to stop any outsiders, especially foreigners, from making contact with other Taiji centers such as Wang Ge Dang and Zhao

### He Shou Application Series (Starts from Left to Right)





Bai He Liang Chi

Taiji, however, is not a religion. Taiji begins like a science and becomes, in its upper reaches, an art. Taiji does possess scientific training methods. Each practitioner has a right to ask "What am I doing? What is this good for? What am I aiming for? Is there a next step?"

Embracing secrecy, some branches were never willing to compose a training system. Others may have had systems which got lost or abbreviated because they were unwilling to share.

So when we talk about rebuilding the art of Taiji or establishing Taiji as an art for our century, what we really mean is building up a systematized training method.

For this reason, I really value Thunder style Taiji (Hu Lei jia) because built into its training system are ten distinct levels which can lead the student from the beginning stages of scientific training to the art.

The clearly defined ten steps of Thunder style (Hu Lei jia) training have been con-

structed follows:

1) Linking. It introduces the beginner to the form, just linking the movements together so that it can be learned without much difficulty.

2) Circling. It introduces the chan si jing (silk reeling energy practice), focusing mainly on the arms and legs, so that it's not too difficult to handle.

3) Twisting. This level begins to create a bridge from the external to internal training. Concentration here is on the torso, twisting the spine when exe-

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cuting the movements.

Without body movement, any martial art can only remain at its elementary levels. Without body movement, whole body usage and power issuing become empty speech.

Generally speaking, on the first three levels, circular movements are performed large and wide open.

4) Extending. The extending is internal, not merely stretching further and certainly not straightening the limbs in order to extend the reach.

5) Power-issuing. This is a half-way point in the training, combining the previous four levels in order to create power. It is nicknamed "er xing jia" which translates loosely as "intense, fearsome appearance." At this level,

### Bai He Liang Chi Applications (Starts from Left to Right)



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one can apply the usage.

6) Squaring. The training emphasis here is to fill in or cover all possible blank spots in both usage and power issuing — all the spaces or corners left open by circles.

Generally speaking, on levels four, five and six, the circles are smaller, of medium size.

7) Raising (also known as yin). From this level on, the movements can't really be described in words, only approximated. The execution looks softer and smoother.

8) Dropping (also known as yang). There's a heaviness and straightness to this level. The essence is internalized, not held in the intellect. It is simple, deep, hard.

9) Yin-Yang. Theoretically, all of the past training is mixed together. The best technique is, of course, half Yin and half Yang.

Generally speaking, on levels seven, eight, and nine the circles are small.

10) Taiji — The highest expression of the art. Only after combining the Yin and Yang on the previous level can you truly claim that you are beginning the actual practice of Taijiquan. On level ten there are no visible circles. The circling movements and energy are all internal.

Of course, the government's standardization program has no place for what I've just described. Understandably they have reasons for setting up acceptable, fair and objective competition standards.

And most likely, those immersed in the goals and activities of these programs may never have need to deal with all the hassles and hardships encountered on the road to the mastery of Taiji.

My old junior high music teacher, Mrs. Wong, was so highly regarded that she was awarded the Confucius Festival Outstanding Teacher Award.

But had she been willing to mingle with her students outside of class, and allow us to share with her our twelve or more different ways to sing "Dark, Dark the Sky," she might have been pleasantly surprised — and removed the F from my report card too! ●

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