

# Five sections to learning

## Sam Masich

Is Sam Masich's five section programme a comprehensive beginner's programme or preparation for traditional training? Forms and practices from the five section tai chi chuan programme have been adopted by tai chi chuan schools throughout Europe, the Americas, and even in Asia. This modular programme has been designed to meet the needs of contemporary recreational tai chi chuan groups and to prepare committed students for traditional full-curriculum tai chi chuan training.

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Wuduan taijiquan, as it is called in Chinese, has been designed to be flexible and fun, following the premise that students who enjoy the learning process will stay around to take on more difficult challenges.

In the early days of the spread of tai chi chuan in the West, an issue emerged that affected many teachers. Traditional tai chi chuan forms were very long – usually around one-hundred movements or so – making it difficult for newcomers to commit to practise and training. The problem had been identified long before in Asia and approaches had already emerged to deal with the matter. The Cheng Man-ch'ing (Zheng Manqing) thirty-seven movement routine as well as the Beijing-government twenty-four movement 'simplified tai chi chuan' form created in 1956, represented two of the first attempts to actually design a curriculum to accommodate the specific needs of a particular populace in a given era. In both cases, a short form edited down from traditional Yang-style tai chi chuan was used along with other traditionally taught material that included sword forms and push-hands.

Not everyone tried to solve the short-form problem with the 'Zheng's 37' or the 'Beijing 24' however. Many

instructors with a background in traditional tai chi chuan styles would offer up, as a basic introduction to tai chi, the first 'section' of their long form – from 'raise hands' to the first 'cross hands.' Others would simply make up their own short form by pasting together a few sequences such as 'grasp bird's tail' left-side followed by the right-side variation.

While this served the interests of those eager for a 'taste of

tai chi', it made it difficult for students who wanted to take on tai chi chuan as a larger traditional study, as it remained unclear as to how one could progress from beginner to intermediate to advanced stages of the art. It is from this set of problems that the five section tai chi chuan programme was born.

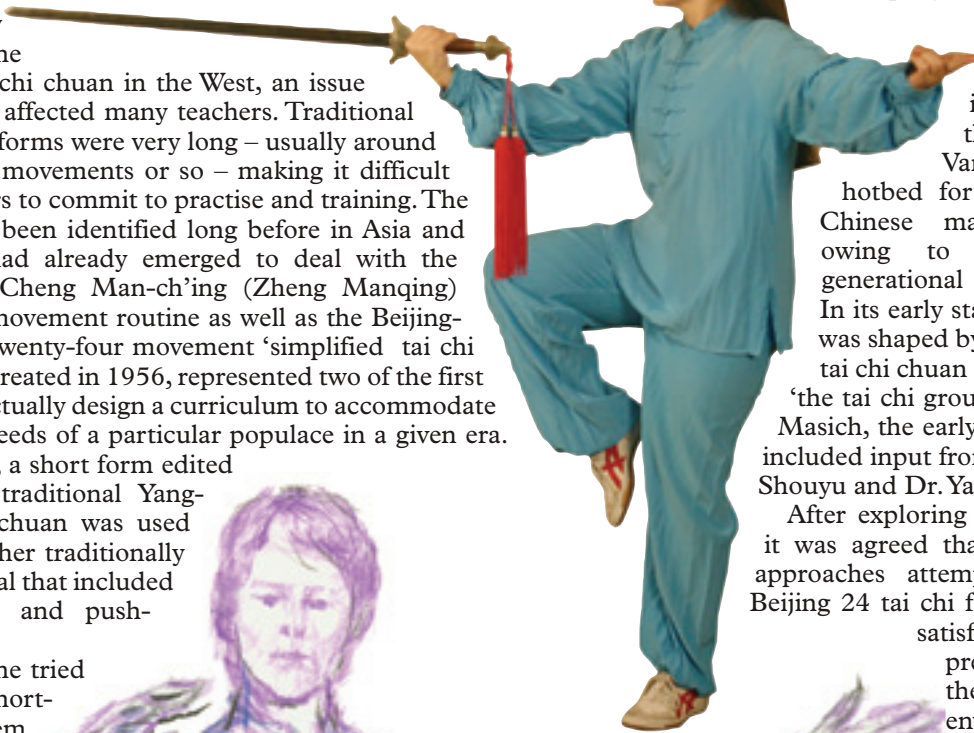
The five section tai chi chuan programme began its development in the late 1980s in Vancouver, Canada, a hotbed for tai chi chuan and Chinese martial-arts generally owing to its large multi-generational Chinese community. In its early stages, the programme was shaped by a small collective of tai chi chuan instructors known as 'the tai chi group'. Directed by Sam Masich, the early efforts of the group included input from both master Liang Shouyu and Dr. Yang Jwing Ming.

After exploring various possibilities, it was agreed that, of all short-form approaches attempted thus far, the Beijing 24 tai chi form came closest to satisfying the basic prerequisites of what the group had envisioned. Aside from its previously mentioned attributes, 'the 24' had the added advantages of being practised worldwide, connecting to the other People's Republic of China standardised forms and having much educational material already published and available. These seemed to be very good conditions for creating a large, cooperative, and good willed community of individuals.

A problem with the 24 was that not all of the movements are really simplified; for example, several of the transitions between forms, the complex angles and difficulty level of the kicks, and the two forward-stepping 'push down and stand on one leg' movements (better known as 'snake creeps down' and 'golden rooster stands on one leg') are probably better described as intermediate-level skills. It was decided to further edit the Beijing form, removing more difficult movements that tend to frustrate beginners, while still retaining the five-section structure and accessible and standardised feel.

This led to the development of the 'five section tai chi chuan solo barehand form (Yang-style)' which can be described as an edited version of simplified 24 tai chi form. The rest of the programme developed over time with important input from both masters Liang and Yang as well as Eston Hospedales, Chantal Fafard, Trude Smoor, and others.

Since tai chi chuan training includes much more than solo-barehand routines, development continued with barehand-partner, solo-sword, and partner-sword versions of the five-section choreography as well as a Chen-style variation. These four other routines were



developed as a representation of the overall art so that a beginner could experience a wide range of tai chi chuan practices. Importantly as well, the five section tai chi chuan programme could also function as a preparation for full curriculum training in any traditional style.

The ‘five section tai chi chuan partner barehand form’ reflects various traditional push-hands and sparring practices. The ‘five section tai chi chuan solo sword form’ and the ‘five section tai chi chuan partner sword form’ represent and prepare for traditional taiji sword and sabre studies. The fifth of the five-section routines is the five section tai chi chuan solo barehand form (Chen-style) which provides an experience of the older tai chi chuan



style while preparing students for the dramatic differences that can be experienced between styles.

There is no single set order for working through the five section tai chi chuan programme although some paths of study work better than others. This means that an instructor can work with a student or group of students in how the programme is implemented. Encouraged to take an active part in devising their own path of learning, practitioners can make personally-relevant training choices, still respecting and benefiting from the values of a traditional art.

Beyond the five routines – the ‘five-fives’, as it were – are practices having to do with partner-connection and with core-principles. These practices are meant to be interwoven with the learning of the five routines.

The five section tai chi chuan programme consists of material organised in three layers:

1. **Outer Layer (Form)**
2. **Inner Layer (Connection)**
3. **Deep Layer (Core-principles)**

It is advantageous to work concurrently with material from each of the three layers.

For example, core-principles material can be used to illustrate details



● Five section tai chi chuan ‘sensing-hands’

multi-functional partner work that supports solo and partner barehand form studies.

● Five section tai chi chuan ‘sensing-sword’ multi-functional partner work that supports solo and partner sword form studies.

### 3. Deep Layer (Core-principles)

The third layer trains core-principles underlying every aspect of five section tai chi chuan. These are explored through the ‘five words brocade’ (wuci tairan wuduanjin), a five

within the forms. Partner ‘sensing’ practices can deepen practice of partner forms. The long-term study of five section tai chi chuan allows students to understand the curriculum in terms of the outer, inner, and deep layers.

Following is a list of the full curriculum of Wuduan tai chi chuan programme accompanied by an ‘overview diagram’ that provides an at-a-glance view of the programme. The diagram depicts the programme’s three-layered structure and sketches out the connection between the various forms and practices. By illustrating the relationships of the component parts, the graphic can be used as an aid in devising optimal paths through the curriculum for individuals and groups in different circumstances.

### 1. Outer Layer (Form)

The ‘five section’ forms, each derived from the five section Yang-style solo barehand form, comprise the outer layer. They are:

- Five section tai chi chuan solo barehand form—Yang-style (Wuduan Yang-shi tai chi chuan; 20 forms, beginner)
- Five section tai chi chuan partner barehand form (Wuduan tai chi chuan sanshou; 50 forms, intermediate)
- Five section tai chi chuan solo sword form (Wuduan tai chi chuan; 27 forms, beginner/intermediate)
- Five section tai chi chuan partner sword form (Wuduan tai chi chuan duilianjian; 64 forms, intermediate/advanced)
- five section tai chi chuan solo barehand form—Chen-style (Wuduan Chen-shi tai chi chuan; 23 forms, intermediate)

### 2. Inner Layer (Connection)

The middle layer deals with connected interaction and is explored by two practices:


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part neigong practice which includes:

- Five words of self-composure (wuci tairan)
- Five section tai chi chuan core-principles (Wuduan hexin dinglu)

## A modular programme

The five section tai chi chuan programme is 'modular' in its design, meaning it is possible to present the individual curriculum components in different sequences depending on the needs and aims of individual participants or a particular group. It is possible to move through the material in many ways following different lines of reasoning. It is possible to integrate core-principles at any stage or to weave lessons from jue-shou into the solo-form training. One could even create a 'formless' curriculum working with core-principles, the five words of self-composure, jue-shou and jue-jian. 



Five section tai chi chuan programme full curriculum instructor's intensives have taken place in Canada and in Spain in 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2015.

The first ever five section tai chi chuan international festival and masterclass will take place in Winchester, U.K from July 1-7, 2023. A seven-day, all-inclusive event, where one can meet, eat, and train together with tai chi chuan enthusiasts and experts from around the world. The event will run from Saturday, July 1 to Friday, July 7, 2023 and consists of two main components: July 1-2: the weekend festival where you can explore all things five section. July 3-7: the five-day five section tai chi chuan masterclass with master Sam Masich. The event is open to tai chi chuan players of all backgrounds



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