

Marnix Wells with Wang Shujin 1974



Reaching the source

“All tai chi is qigong, but not all qigong is tai chi.” Marnix Wells concludes his series *Tai chi roots*

Tai chi, pronounced Taijǐ, (ty jee) means ‘grand pole’, the central axis around which the earth rotates. It is the union of yin and yáng, dark and light, female and male, minus and plus. It reconciles opposites, wherever they are found. In the body it is located at its gravitational and energetic centre, the dantián spot just below the navel. Deep breathing, by sinking the qi to this point, promotes balance and calm. It is the focus of tai chi chuan, (taijiquán), ‘grand pole boxing’, once known to Westerners as Chinese shadow boxing, a system of exercise for body maintenance, built around principles of self-defence and health.

Tai chi concepts

The concept of taijǐ was first described in appendices to the *Book of Change* over two thousand years ago. Much later, Sòng dynasty neo-Confucian reformer Zhu Xi (1130-1200) adopted it as the core of his rationalist philosophy. To illustrate the idea that opposites form an integral unity, he borrowed a ‘taijǐ diagram’ which evolved into the circular yin-yáng icon familiar to us today.

The system of exercise we recognise as taijǐ only

acquired this name after it spread to Beijing from the Chén family village (Chénjiagou) in Hénán during the 19th century. Yet the art had already been linked to a highly sophisticated *Book of Change* philosophy. After the fall of the Qīng dynasty in 1912, liberalisation allowed Chén Xin (1849-1929) to publish in a book the secrets of his family tradition (*Chén-shì Taijiquán Tǔshuo*, prefaced 1919). These included a taijǐ diagram encircled with the *Book of Change*’s sixty-four hexagrams, arranged to mirror the progression of ‘sunny’ yáng to ‘shady’ yin and back again. (Figure 1)

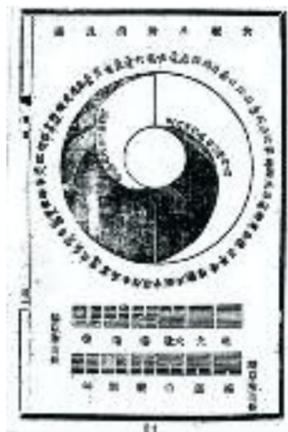


Figure 1

Trigrams

Hexagrams are figures of six lines, whose halves of three lines are called trigrams. The internal martial art of baguàzhāng, ‘eight trigram palms’, names its routines from these eight trigrams, each describing a compass point on a circle. Originally used to foretell the future by divination, they combine all possible combinations of yin ‘shady’ and yáng ‘sunny’ by broken or unbroken lines. They are mirrored by Leibniz’s binary mathematics, which uses just ones and zeroes to form all numbers, and in computer engineering encodes electrical combinations of ‘on’ and ‘off’ states to store data.

Yet Chén Xin was not the first to apply the dialectical principles of the *Book of Change* to the bodily mechanics of martial arts and physical exercise. These had earlier been described by the ‘scholar boxer’, Cháng Naǐzhou (1724-1783?), who resided in the neighbourhood between Shàolín monastery and Chén village. Cháng’s book was now, at last in 1933, posthumously published. (Scholar Boxer, tr. Wells, North Atlantic Books, 2005).

A martial art for health

Both Chén and Cháng utilised another taijǐ concept from the *Book of Change*. This was expressed in the Luò River diagram, from Chinese prehistory, in which the numbers one to nine are balanced in a ‘magic square’ so that their lines in any direction – vertical, horizontal or diagonal – always total 15. (Figure 2)

4	9	2
3	5	7
8	1	6

Figure 2

This diagram provides a template for interlocking zig-zag movement in exercise and martial applications. Lines between numbers in order of magnitude result in alternating spirals in threes, first anti-clock wise (1>2>3) and then clockwise (3>4>5). In other words, a double helix, like that found to be the underlying structure of DNA:

In Chén-style tai chi chuan it illustrates ‘winding-silk power’ (chánsǐjīng). ‘Springing power’(jīng), a key taijǐ concept, is often written as ‘essence’ (jīng) here. Hands and feet thereby turned in mutual opposition generate spring. In the top right-hand diagram of Figure 3, the Chinese numbers linked by lines equal those of Figure 2. The underlying text, translated, explains:

In boxing, winding-silk power runs a path with matching right-hand facing up and left-hand facing down as if embracing (holding a ball). The right hand from below goes from one to two to three towards six, leading the two feet from nine to eight to seven towards four, four and six both facing five (in the centre). They twist and turn with ferocious force in one vibrating energy converging at the central palace...

The opposition of clockwise and anti-clockwise power concentrated at the centre is thus released with explosive vibrating force. The same process is to be performed in different sequences as shown in each of the remaining diagrams. (right)

Contrary to popular belief, the slow movements of taijǐ practice are more than pure relaxation. Relaxation is indeed their starting point and basic premise. Yet it is just the start in a daily exploration of discovery for the body’s potential energies. It is a means of listening to the body, feeling and harnessing the constant interplay of action and reaction within its every movement.

Its regular practice counters raised blood pressure. In

traditional medical theory, the brain is the home of the fire and the belly that of water. *The Book of Change*’s penultimate hexagram ‘Completion’ (Jǐjì, no. 63, not 64, since change is unending) depicts fire under water, like a saucepan on the stove. By reversing positions, fire tending upwards, placed under water tending downwards, dynamic interaction is achieved, namely cooking. In the body, the result is health.

Meditation and movement

By this method, with correct posture, meditation directs energy downwards to calm the mind and integrate it with the whole body. Breath energy circulates through the body creating a feeling of well-being and relaxation. As muscles relax, blood circulates more freely, capillaries (minute hair-like blood vessels) open up, carrying oxygen with a flow of warmth to body peripheries. The other circulatory systems of digestion, lymph in the muscles, and synovial fluids in the joints are likewise benefited.

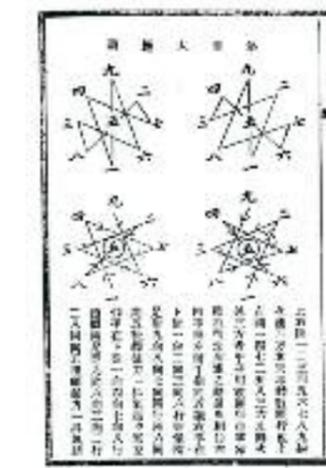
All this is achieved by abdominal or ‘diaphragmatic’ breathing in sitting or standing posture. Qi is the Chinese word for ‘air’, and by extension ‘energy’, generated by burning oxygen; tai chi chuan is thus aerobic. In vigorous exercise, whole body breathing occurs spontaneously but exhaustingly. Meditation consciously by diaphragmatic breathing opens the lungs from the back, engaging abdominal muscles in whole-body action, from the tips of toes via the tip of the spine (perineum) to the crown of the head.

In meditation breath-energy is cultivated through mind control, usually in static postures, as famously in Indian yoga, and chiefly in sitting meditation by Buddhists but also in lying, standing and walking. The basic Buddhist method of mindfulness (vipassana in Theravāda) consists in concentrating on every in- and out-breath, a life and death in miniature, to the exclusion of all distraction. Zen (dhyāna, chán) may focus on a single word or problem ‘case’ kō’an (gong’an).

Dancing beasts

Yet static postures require the supplement of moving exercises. Shamans practised trance dance and impersonation of animals to acquire their powers. The

Documents Classic records a ‘Hundred Beast Dance’ led by a monitor dragon (Kuǐ) in the time of primordial Emperor Shùn. Their movements evolved into stretching and breathing exercises associated with Daoism and the quest for longevity and the ‘golden elixir’ (jīn’dān) of physical immortality. This gave the name ‘elixir field’ (dantián) for the point just below the navel on which, as we saw, breathing meditation focuses.



Examples on silk manuscripts have been recovered, at Māwángduì (Húnán) and Zhāngjiāshān (Húběi), from water-logged second century BC tombs. They illustrate breathing and stretching exercises to restore sexual virility in ageing patients such as the mythical Yellow Emperor. The tradition was further developed in the ‘Five Animal

Sport' (Wú-Qín Xi) of tiger, deer, bear, ape and bird of physician Huá Tuó (ca. 200) as mentioned in the *Three Kingdoms Record*. Versions of it continue to be practised as qigong today.

Buddhist monks at Shàolín, by China's Central Mountain Range (Zhongyuè) in Hénán province, became famous for physical as well as meditational prowess. Legend tells how Indian monk Bodhidharma sat facing a cave wall there for nine years until his legs atrophied. Despite this, or maybe because of it, he became credited with introducing the monks' martial arts for which, by the 16th century, its monks were renowned. Gongfu was a term first used in Zen (Chán) meditation training. 'Gong', meaning 'work', 'effort' and 'training', became fused with 'internal' as neigong, and with 'breath-energy' as qigong. Their qigong 'Eighteen Arhat hands' (Shíba Luóhàn Shòu) eventually spread to the general population.

Creation of a 'boxing form' (quántào) of exercise, with weapons forms, in a series of continuous movements, like a cartoon strip or roll of film, was first printed in a military training manual (Jixiào Xīnshū) by Qi Jiguang (1528-1588). Piracy fronted by Japanese swordsmen was ravishing the eastern sea coast. This necessitated the learning of a new type of amphibious warfare and recruitment of irregular troops, which included Shàolín monks' expert in staff fighting.

Tai chi ancestor

Qi Jiguang's 'long boxing' form of 32 named moves, selected from different schools as he tells us, is the ancestor of our tai chi chuan form. It was transmitted in Hénán, across the Yellow River from Shàolín, by members of the farming Chén clan as a moving meditation exercise for health and defence. There, in the 19th century from 1820, it was learned by Yáng Lùchán (1799-1872) from a medicine firm in the fortress town of Yōngnián in southern Hébei. In 1854 Yáng travelled to Beijing with champion Wú Bànhóu, to teach this art under the new name of 'tǎijíquán' whose source he declined to reveal.

The art was presumed derived from an otherwise extinct 'internal school'. Yáng's fellow townsman had chanced to discover some sheets of 'tǎijí classics' in a salt shop while on an official posting to Wúyáng, just over 200km from Mt Wúdang (Húbei). This houses the shrine to the god of war and Daoist Zhang Sanfeng, accredited founder of 'internal school boxing' (neijia quán). By this skill, boxer Zhang Songqi of Níngbō (Zhèjiāng), in the 16th century, was recorded to have defeated 'external school' Shàolín monks. Details of Zhang Sanfeng's links to boxing are described in *Xiyángjì*, an 'epic novel' of 1597, fantasising Admiral Zheng Hé (1371-1433) and his voyages to the Indian Ocean (Scott Phillips 2019: *Tai Chi, Baguazhang and the Golden Elixir*, 41-48).

Yet, beyond such historical romances, the tangible sources of tai chi chuan remained obscure until the 1930s discovery by Táng Háo of the Chén family, a Qi Jiguang connection, together with the writings of Chén's neighbour Cháng Naizhōu. These background materials enable a fuller appreciation of the current wealth of tai chi chuan literature from every school and their wider relationships.

The whole art

Over the last two millennia, following the introduction of Buddhism from India, China has, with Confucianism and Daoism, followed three major religions or schools of thought which have tended to merge. They have produced

'three-in-one' religions, such as Quánzhēn 'Complete Truth' Daoism of Qiu Chùjī which rose to prominence under 'foreign' Jurchen and Mongol emperors eight hundred years ago. Other examples have been condemned as 'cults'.

Traditionally, Chinese governments have strictly controlled or banned popular practice of martial arts and qigong. Their association with messianic cults and rebellions was endemic. In the 20th century, Yiguàndào, the 'One Consistent Way' of the primaeva mother goddess, achieved popularity in the 1930s during the Japanese occupation in China and East Asia. Though banned in 1949, it was practised by disciples of Cheng Mǎn'chíng (Zhèng Mǎnqíng) Yáng-style tai chi chuan, thinly disguised as a 'Confucius-Mencius Study Society', but received official exoneration by Taiwan in 1987.

On the mainland, during recovery from the Maoist 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution', a quasi-Buddhist movement named Fǎlúngōng, 'Dharma Wheel Cultivation' teaching qigong arose. It spread globally but was banned in China from 1999 following public demonstrations.

In the UK, it appears that the Chinese government supported the creation of a Health Qìgong institute who trade-marked the generic term 'health qigong', which was already in use by local independent schools.

Internal martial arts

The Tai Chi & Qigong Union for Great Britain, by contrast, aims to promote the practice of tai chi chuan and qigong within a loose framework of internal martial arts. Internal martial arts was defined by Sun Lùtáng over a century ago to include the kindred disciplines of baguàzhāng and xīngyìquán to train in self-defence exercise for spiritual, mental and physical health. The use of weapon or fan props can further enhance its exercise and aesthetic value in training and public performance. Within this synthesis, tai chi chuan and qigong are one.

Tai chi chuan as a martial art is not less concerned with health than 'health qigong' (qigong for health). If anything its inherent dynamism and highly developed structure make it more, not less, relevant to health. It is likely to prove especially beneficial to metabolic health in the prevailing crisis of obesity, diabetes, cardio-vascular disease, atherosclerosis, fibromyalgia and cancer. Tai chi has the additional advantages of social interaction, counteracting loneliness and isolation, through two-person exercises and friendly competition. Its martial focus adds an intellectual dimension which increases adrenalin production, spatial awareness and balance. All this has been my personal motivation and experience of over 50 years of daily practice (from 1968 at Tsim Sha Tsui park in Kowloon, Hong Kong).

I leave the decisions of how you choose to proceed in your studies, to your interests and motivations. ☛

Marnix Wells studied tǎijíquán and internal martial arts in the Far East from 1968, with master Wángshùjīn and his disciples Zhang Yìzhōng; Gān Xiàozhōu; Hóng Yìmián; and others. More recently, in this country, he has been learning Zhōngguó tǎijí with Liú Yìzì 'master Yaz'. Marnix is a graduate in classical Chinese from Oxford and PhD SOAS. He has published interpretative translations from Chinese of Scholar Boxer, Pheasant Cap Master and Heguanzi: the Dao of Unity.