

The weapons advantage

Mark Peters

A man with a beard and short hair, wearing a dark blue traditional Tai Chi uniform, stands in a park-like setting. He is holding a sword (jian) in his left hand, with the blade pointing upwards and to the right. His right arm is raised, with his hand in a fist-like position. The background consists of dense green foliage and trees, with sunlight filtering through the leaves, creating a dappled light effect. The overall scene is outdoors and appears to be a practice or demonstration of Tai Chi weapons.

Many students come to tai chi thinking that all there is to the art is a slow form they've seen in the parks or on the TV. There is much much more. It is a complete system including strengthening exercises, sensitivity exercises, philosophy and weapons. Different schools have various numbers of weapons but generally they all teach the straight sword (Jian). The reason for this article is to explain their importance and the function of each weapon in their formation of the tai chi whole picture

TAI CHI WEAPONS

I have known schools that teach weapons as a kind of dance; an extra bolt-on to make their system more interesting and lucrative. Let's consider the dictionary definition for weapon: an instrument of offence or defence (the Wordsworth concise English dictionary). I suppose an extremely bad dance could be construed as 'offensive' but I don't think they're quite the same thing.

Different weapons develop different skills or areas of tai chi chuan. Although our school practises straight sword, broad sword, walking stick, staff, spear and fan, I will focus on the most popular three to give a common ground. These are broad sword, spear and straight sword. These are sometimes referred to as the 100 day, 1,000 day and 10,000 day weapons respectively due to their level of complexity to master. I will explore each in turn.

Broad-sword or sabre (dao)

We practise the 32 step Yang style form as described in *Weapons of Primordial Pugilism* by Dr. Tseng Ju-Pai. The blade is curved and single edge thereby making it a hacking and slashing weapon. There are two types readily available: a light flimsy one used by wu shu stylists and a more robust one favoured by tai chi chuan (plus other northern Chinese martial art styles) and made in China by Dragon Well. the blade is usually approx. 28" long. As well as the solo form, individual training exercises are used along with partner work for application practice. This weapon uses coiling and extensively trains the waist as the power is needed to draw the blade through flesh or body (please try not to kill any partners in class). This was ostensibly a battlefield weapon but this does not mean it was designed to be wielded and applied as if you are in an Errol Flynn swash-buckling movie. It is important to use the skill of tai chi i.e. sticking, neutralising, redirecting and applying. When blocking a strike this should be done in a sweeping action and with the side of the blade to prevent damage to the cutting edge (the steel wasn't very good quality) in addition to the use of force against force. The circular and spiralling power developed by this weapon is excellent for use in fixed step push-hands, grappling or throwing.

In terms of modern application, the methodology could be applied to almost anything from the new police batons



to an umbrella, walking stick or rolled up newspaper. The techniques can be applied empty hand against empty hand, or empty hand against a weapon to allow resistance training. In addition to this, heavy weapons improve strength and stamina. Yang Cheng Fu is quoted as saying: "The heavier the weapons the more energies are gained." This is probably the most apt weapon to modern day as it



Mark demonstrates spear technique

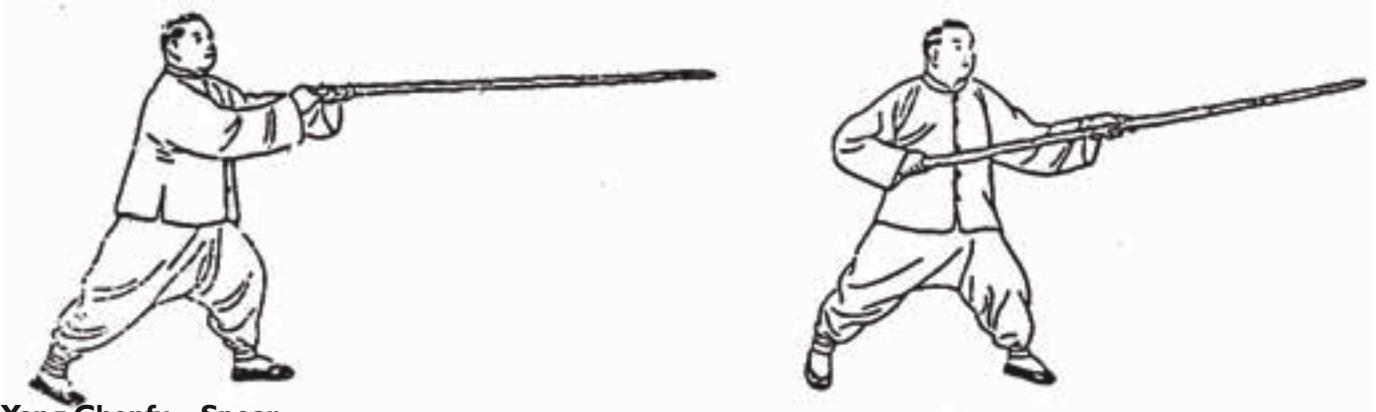
is a close quarters weapon and includes seizing your opponent. It is extremely useful in developing peng jing (ward-off energy), the first and most important underlying energy used in tai chi chuan. It is imperative that awareness of the weapon is developed, as both an extension of the body and improvement of focus. Be aware of the cutting edge as it slices through the air, of the hilt and pommel as striking implements in their own right. Hitting with the butt of the weapon (pommel) is a very painful point strike as well as a method of creating space for the blade to cut through. Wrist locks can also be practised with this section of the weapon and applied to everyday items, even a coke bottle (most likely not a three litre plastic one). We only have to look at aikido to witness the effectiveness of weapons awareness applied effectively in empty hand techniques.

Video clip: <https://youtu.be/zgvZh4ZUZSU>

Spear (qiang)

The spear is an excellent strength building weapon and I remember being told stories of practitioners thrusting the tip into heavy sacks and attempting to throw them away to build this power. A tale regarding the spear was told of Yang Ban Hou, Yang Cheng Fu's brother, who it was said, ordered the heads be removed from spears after his daughter was killed during spear play.

The most simple and common introduction to spear training is that purported to have been taught by Yang Cheng Fu and is commonly known as shaking. This involves three or four movements, dependant on how you count. (1) Swing the head and tassel of the spear anti-



Yang Chenfu – Spear

clockwise by turning your waist and wrist and draw a circle. (2) Swing the head and tassel of the spear clockwise by turning your waist and wrist and draw a circle. (3) Thrust the spear forwards sliding it through your left hand. (4) Pull back and press down. The first two movements are blocks and the third a strike. Although simple these movements are fundamental to correct use of the spear.

From here you can build on to two-person spear work and form training. I have been taught a form developed by my teacher, Master Tan Ching Ngee of Singapore, which I find quite aerobic. The extended focus and footwork is ideal for developing advancing and entering skills. The use of ting jing and Fa Jing are apparent and the feeling of energy extension can be compared to form postures such as double push, single whip or left and right toe kick. Two-person practice should have the flavour of push hands not of Friar Tuck and Robin Hood. Techniques to consider are thrusting, controlled deflection and redirection to enter.

The use of same weapon and mixed weapon

training/sparring will develop empty hand skills as well as weapons awareness. The ability to coil through an opponent's attack and strike at their 'very heart' is a skill especially developed by the extension quality of the spear.

It is said that the red horse hair is used to distract an attacker or their horse (it probably doesn't have the same effect with a car so don't try). It is also said that the hair is to stop blood dripping down the spear shaft and making the user lose grip; I've never put this to the test as you tend to lose students when you stab them.

Video clip (Tan Ching Ngee)

<https://youtu.be/9UkeTVxhZB4>

Straight sword (jian)

'Alive hold the sword, dead hold the sabre'. This Chinese idiom means that the broad-sword is rigid and inflexible whereas the straight sword is lively and flowing.

We practise the 54 step form as taught by Professor Cheng Man Ching. This is my teacher's favourite weapon.



Tai chi sabre (dao)

TAI CHI WEAPONS

We also practice the 13 sword secrets form, developed by Master Tan Ching Ngee, to allow us to focus on the essential methods and hand grips used in proper jian practice. This has long been considered the gentleman's weapon and it has been said that a scholar has to be well-read, and well-versed in fencing. The flavour of sword application is similar to that used in calligraphy. The smooth flow and sweeps require a skilful and light, sensitive grip. It is apparent this weapon requires the highest level of skill and as such is often referred to in Chinese mythology highlighting its importance in their culture. Nigel Sutton referred to this in his book *Applied Tai Chi* where he compares it to the legend of Excalibur. These swords were often called 'bao jian' (precious sword). He stated that Professor Cheng is said to have owned such a sword and was able to pierce holes in coins.

Robert Smith quotes Professor Cheng as saying: "Never put more than four ounces on your opponent and never allow them to put more than four ounces on you." This principle is essential for proper Jian use. To sense your opponents intentions and to offer them nothing is the highest skill in tai chi chuan. Cheng, as with my teacher, lit up at the thought of sword sparring. This sparring is not swash buckling, it has the flavour of free push hands. The combination of ting jing and swift footwork are devastating in action.

The double edge sword is designed to be razor sharp at the tip and be progressively blunter towards the hilt as the blade thickens. This tapered thickness allows for a spring like quality, as with peng, and reduces the risk of the opponent finding your centre. It is designed to stick and deflect lightly then slash swiftly at vulnerable areas e.g. ankle tendons or thumbs. Sparring brings a new life to the weapon and in turn your empty hand techniques. The most apparent skill developed would be fast effective footwork which is essential for quick and effective combat. Moving from standard push hands to striking is a natural progression developed by straight sword methodology.

A notable characteristic of the straight sword is the form of the free hand. This is held with the index and middle finger extended and the ring and little fingers bent and held by the thumb. This is commonly known as 'secret sword hand' and some say is used for striking vital points, in fact; one exponent states that it is used to conceal a knife. A more practical interpretation is that it is used to balance the body and focus the chi; the whole body must have yin and yang, full and empty, and therefore no life in the other hand would brake the principles of tai chi chuan.

Video clips: https://youtu.be/8TjI5OxjO_Q and <https://youtu.be/CGAG8MF89mo>

Essential skills

Each weapon develops essential tai chi skills and highlights them for correct use in all areas of this wondrous, multi-faceted art. The many energies including sticking, neutralising, understanding, redirecting and applying, find their place. Search out a teacher that knows and can apply their weapons, not just hang them on a wall. Here are a few simple rules to follow if you are talking to a potential teacher:

1. research the art
2. ask their background, teachers etc.
3. check if they are members of the relevant governing body – for tai chi it is the BCCMA and TCUGB
4. test their knowledge and application.
5. Or just pay me..!



Mark Peters demonstrates broad sword (dao)

This article is an extract from the book: The view from the back of the class available from the TCUGB shop and Amazon.

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A stab in the dark

The problem with governments – all governments – is their obsession with being seen to do things. Call it WMDS: 'We must do something'. This frequently results in ill-thought-out, poorly drafted legislation, probably introducing a ban of something in an attempt to prevent criminal use. This kind of legislation rarely affects criminals – if you are committing a crime anyway' so what? And it almost always causes inconvenience for and potentially criminalises otherwise law-abiding citizens writes John Roper

The paranoia around knife crime has resulted in the latest 'ban' on dangerous weapons which sets out to ban the ownership of certain knives. When I say that this kind of legislation is ill-thought-out, I could add opportunistic. In its original form, the Home Office slipped a couple of rifles into the mix. Both are only used for target shooting and neither has ever been used in a crime. They are too specialised, and of one type there are only about 500 in private ownership. Both the rifle and the ammunition are VERY expensive, (think £10 for a single cartridge). So not the kind of thing a criminal is going to turn up with.

The main point for us is, of course, bladed weapons. When this was first mooted the Vintage Arms Association became concerned that it might affect shooters who also collect bayonets. There are a lot of old military rifles around and some people like to have the pointy things that go on the end. However the act seems very specific on the weapons that are banned from ownership.

A 1953 act of parliament made it an offence to carry an offensive weapon in public. The 1988 Criminal Justice Act, in section 141, made it illegal to 'manufacture, sell, hire, offer to sell or hire, possess for the purposes of sale or hire, import, lend, or give' the weapons to which the section



applies – see illustration. The 2019 Offensive Weapons Act act specifically amends section 141 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 and makes it an offence to 'possess in private' any weapon set out in that act. Though one reading of the 1988 act seems to make 'possession' illegal anyway.

A pretty comprehensive ban you might think but it has done nothing to reduce knife crime. First of all, as I understand it, the humble kitchen knife is often weapon of choice in many of the incidents we read about. The list published in connection with the 1988 act seems pretty specific and based, largely, on fantasy martial art weapons. No mention of tai chi swords, or fencing

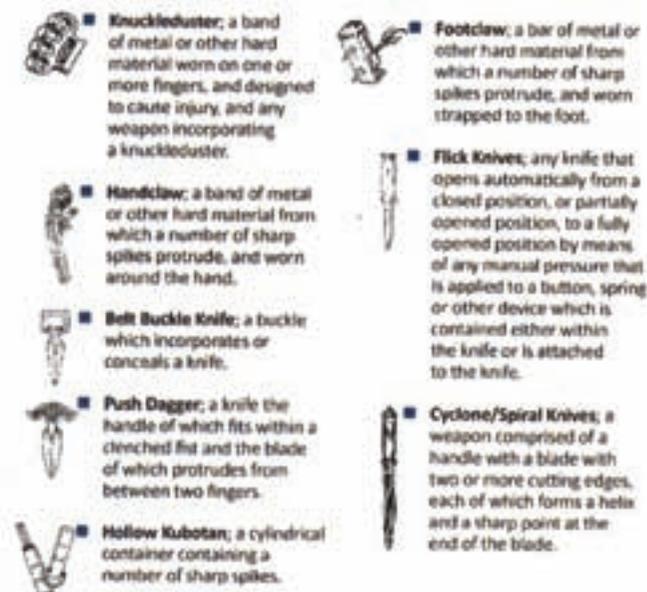
swords or antiques such as military swords.

The ban states that a 'defence' would be that the weapon is used for sport. Otherwise the British fencing team would be flying to Geneva to practise along with the pistol team. And yes, that actually happens. It also mentions re-enactment as a get-out. So I think that we can feel safe as far as straight swords are concerned. My only question is the sabre, as curved blade weapons are specifically mentioned – another problem for Team GB – though, again, there is the 'sporting use' get out. And whilst some over enthusiastic coppers sometimes put their own interpretation on this kind of thing I think in general we should be OK. And we have to bear in mind that it is not us they are after - I don't think the home office knows we exist, if they did they would probably have banned martial arts totally, what with all those violent movies around; apart, of course, from taekwondo, that's a cuddly Olympic event and we tend to do not badly at that.

Ronnie Robinson, organiser of Tai Chi Caledonia, used to advise the local police that Tai Chi Caledonia was taking place and there would be a number of people in the Stirling area carrying various weapons. Anticipation and explanation ahead of the event averted any difficulties.

So the watchword is 'caution'. This is an opinion piece, I am not telling you what the law is and indeed the police admit that they don't know either. I would advise you not to practise sword form in the local park. Even before this it would have got you into trouble under the 1953 act. I would just add that a retired police officer that I know thinks that the 1953 act covered it all: what constitutes an offensive weapon was based on use and intent.

So don't rush down to the local nick to hand in your jian or dao. Better to write to your MP and complain. As I said at the beginning it is really about WMDS. ☯



Some of the specifically banned weapons, on a list published by the home office