

# 太极拳經

## Taijiquan Classics

Translation by Lee Fife



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# Preface

## Fractured Bones and a New Translation

As a serious student of taijiquan, I've spent lots of time with various translations of the Taijiquan Classics. When I first read them, I admired the poetic "Wisdom of the East" but found the contents completely obscure and mysterious. Over the years, I've found that portions of them have become actually quite clear and specific while other parts remain obscure and mysterious.

When I started translating various writings in our tradition, I always thought there was no real reason for me to work on the Classics. After all, there are multiple translations already available, done by people with better taijiquan skills and much better Chinese skills than I have. In particular, the two main translations we work with and recommend, by Ben Lo, et al., and by Barbara Davis, are definitive and accurate. (See the References section at the end for details on these translations.) Lo's version is the first we encountered as new students and is the one we memorized. His phrasings are what comes out of my mouth most frequently when teaching. Davis also includes considerable historical research as well as following references to other works in her rendition of the Classics. We continue to heartily recommend these two versions.

Nonetheless, at the end of last year, I found myself preparing for a taijiquan retreat in Costa Rica where we intended to spend time discussing the Classics. I started with the Lo and Davis versions and was pulling out excerpts from each to bring to the retreat. As I went through the excerpts, I kept finding myself returning to the source Chinese, trying to understand specific terms and jargon, and researching various topics directly or tangentially referenced in the Classics. Doing that, I noticed places where the Lo version, while poetic and easily memorized, drifted from the literal text even as it maintained the essence of the meaning. Davis stays much closer to the original text, but ends up with a wordier, less poetic translation. So, I started making notes on the source Chinese, my explorations from the source, and some possible translation sketches.

Shortly before the end of the year, I was looking at the first line of the text attributed to Wu Yuxiang, whose title I've translated as *Understanding the Skills Developed by Practice of the Thirteen Postures*:

以心行氣。務令沉着。乃能收斂入骨。  
Using mind, mobilize the *qi*;  
Command it to sink and become calm;  
Then it will be able to gather and enter the bones.

While mulling over this text, I ran outside to pull some dinner out of the freezer in our garage. Not paying attention, I completely lost my footing on the snow and ice and slammed down on my side. I ended up fracturing my pelvis in 3 places, just three weeks before our planned retreat. Happily, I didn't need surgery, was able to participate in the retreat, and to make quick progress recovering during the retreat and afterwards.

In that time though, I spent a lot of time working with that line trying to understand what it meant to use the mind to mobilize the *qi*, how I could command the *qi* to sink and become calm, and how I could then watch it gather and enter my broken bones to help repair them. I think much of my relatively quick recovery from this fracture is due to the years of taijiquan practice and to the work calming the *qi* and helping it gather and enter my bones. Suddenly the Classics were very personally relevant.

At this point, I just accepted that I was going to translate the Classics. My goals included my usual translation goals to make clear the technical terms and taijiquan jargon, and to explore relevant cultural, theoretical, and historical background. In this case, I also wanted to try to regain some of the poetic approach of the Lo translation while keeping the literalness of the Davis translation.

I've left a number of Chinese terms untranslated -- see the Glossary at the end for the meanings of these terms. Some are obvious. There's no reason to translate *qi* into "breath" or "energy," and doing so can actually be deceptive: while *qi* covers some of the concepts we'd call breath or energy, it doesn't actually mean the same as either of those words. As serious taijiquan practitioners, it's not too hard to learn the handful of relevant technical jargon and to develop our own understanding of these terms based on our concrete practice and experience. I think that's much better than shortcutting understanding by replacing jargon with English terms that are not equivalent.

This version starts with a complete unannotated translation of the Classics. Next is an extensive section on the background and philosophical trends that influenced the Classics. Following this is the translation of the Classics again, this time with many notes and comments. References, Glossary, etc., are at the very end.



## Acknowledgments

My work on the Classics would not exist without my taijiquan teachers. First acknowledgment is due to my primary teachers, Jane and Bataan Faigao, and to the other senior teachers who have taken me under their wings, including Maggie Newman and Ben Lo.

This version wouldn't exist without extensive discussions with and review by my partner and spouse, Beth Rosenfeld. Beth also took on copyediting and proofreading of this translation.

Many thanks to the advance reviewers of this translation: Jennifer Lord, Robyn Tighe, and David Gatten.

And of course, thanks to the people who participated in the taijiquan retreat in Costa Rica that prompted me to take on this translation and contributed to discussion about the Classics on the retreat: Aiden Hovdee, Art Greene, Barbara Forbes, David Gatten, Heather Craig, Jeanne Winer, Jenna Merlin, Jennifer Lord, Karryl Salit, Robyn Tighe, and Rocky Cagan.

Mistakes are all mine. And I will certainly appreciate being notified of any that readers notice.

# The Taijiquan Classics, Unadorned

## Taijiquan Classic

ATTRIBUTED TO ZHANG SANFENG

In every motion, the entire body must be *qingling*,  
And most important strung together.

The *qi* should be excited; the spirit should be gathered internally.  
Do not allow defects or deficiencies,  
Do not allow any hollows or projections,  
Do not allow starts or stops.

Its rooting is in the feet, issuing in the legs, controlling in the *yao*, and taking shape in the hands and fingers.

From the feet, to the legs, and then the *yao*, there must always be one unified *qi*. Then stepping forward and backward, you'll catch the opportunity and achieve the advantage. Failing to gain the opportunity and advantage, the body becomes disordered. Seek the error in the *yao* and the legs.

Upward, downward, forward, backward, left, and right are all the same. In each case, the distinction is in the *yi*, and not in the external. When there is up, there is also necessarily down; when there is forward, there is backward; when there is left, there is right. If you want to send your *yi* up, you must also send the *yi* down. Then the other will break their root by themselves and will quickly be dispatched without a doubt!

Clearly separate empty and full. Any part of the body must have empty and full. Every part of the body must always distinguish empty and full. The entire body must be strung together without the slightest break!

Long Boxing is like an unceasing torrent, a river flowing ever onward.

The Thirteen Postures: Wardoff, Rollback, Push, Press, Pull, Split, Elbow, and Shoulder are the Eight Trigrams. Stepping Forward, Stepping Back, Looking Left, Looking Right, and Central Equilibrium are the Five Phases.

Wardoff, Rollback, Push, and Press are *kan, li, zhen, dui*; these are the Four Cardinal Directions. Pull, Split, Elbow, and Shoulder are *qian, kun, gen, xun*, which are the Four Corners.

Stepping Forward, Stepping Back, Looking Left, Looking Right, and Central Equilibrium are Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth.

Together then, these are the Thirteen Postures.

*Cloud note on original manuscript:* the founder Zhang Sanfeng of Wudang Mountain left this manuscript. Desiring that all outstanding people below heaven achieve longevity, not merely treating this as writing about empty, nonessential techniques.

## Taijiquan Treatise

ATTRIBUTED TO WANG ZONGYUE

Taiji is born from wuji; it is the mother of yin and yang.  
When moving, separating.  
When still, uniting.

Without overshooting or falling short.  
Following curves, accommodating extension.

The other is hard, I am soft: this is called yielding.  
I go with, the other goes against: this is called sticking.  
Moving quickly? I respond quickly.  
Moving slowly? I follow slowly.

Though the changes are endless, they are threaded together by one principle.

Your skill ripens from experience of touch: coming in contact with others. Then you can achieve gradual enlightenment and understanding of *jin*. From understanding *jin* you can achieve spiritual brightness. There is no sudden enlightenment: instead you must apply your efforts over a long time.

*Xu ling ding jin,*  
*Qi sinks to the dantian,*  
Not inclining, not leaning,  
Suddenly hidden, suddenly appearing.

If left is heavy, then empty; if right is heavy, then disappearing.

Looking up, it seems even taller; Looking down, it seems even deeper.  
Advancing, it's further away; Retreating, it comes ever closer.

A single feather cannot be added, a fly cannot alight.  
The other does not know me, I alone know the other.  
In this way, a hero becomes invincible: in every place, without enemies.  
This describes it all!

There are many techniques and schools of martial arts. Even as their postures have differences, they are all the same in not going beyond the strong bullying the weak, the slow conceding to the fast, those with external power striking those without, and the slow hand giving way to the fast. These are all from innate, pre-heaven ability and not a result of studying internal power and developing it. Consider the phrase "four ounces deflects one thousand pounds." Obviously, this doesn't describe winning by relying on force. Consider the appearance of an elderly person withstanding a crowd. How could that ability be simply speed?

Stand like a balance scale, moveable like a cartwheel.  
Sinking on only one side enables following.  
Double weighting causes stagnation.  
Whenever you see a skilled martial artist who has practiced for many years but is unable to neutralize and instead is led around by the other, it is because they have not realized the error of double-weighting. Wanting to avoid this error, you must understand yin and yang.

Sticking is yielding, yielding is sticking  
Yang is not apart from yin, yin not apart from yang.  
Yin and yang complete each other.  
From this method you can develop understanding of *jin*  
After understanding *jin*, more practice, more power.

Memorize this treatise and ponder it deeply.  
Gradually, you'll be able to follow the intention in your *xin*.  
The foundation is "give up the self and follow others."  
Many make the mistake of "give up the near and seek the far."  
This is called "off by the width of a hair, miss by a thousand miles."  
Students cannot understand this without careful study.  
This is the treatise!

# Understanding the Skills Developed by Practice of the 13 Postures

ATTRIBUTED TO WU YUXIANG

Using *xin*, mobilize the *qi*; Command it to sink and become calm;  
Then it will be able to gather and enter the bones.  
Using *qi*, transport the body; Command it to respond smoothly;  
Then it will be able to easily follow the *xin*.

If the spirit achieves the skill of lifting and rising up, then you have no worry of slowness or heaviness. This is called “suspending the head-top.”

Achieving the interchange of *yi* and *qi*, you’ll be alert.  
Only then will you reap the marvel of roundness and liveliness.  
This is called “the alternation of empty and full.”

To *fajin*, you must sink, relax thoroughly, and concentrate in one direction.

When standing, the body must be centered and upright, and peaceful and comfortable.  
This way, you support the eight directions.

Mobilize the *qi* like a pearl with nine bends so it can smoothly reach all points.  
(This is known as “*qi* everywhere throughout the body.”)  
Transport the *jìn* like steel folded a hundred times so it can overcome any obstacle.

Hold yourself like a falcon pouncing on a rabbit;  
Let your spirit be like a cat catching a rat.  
Still like a lofty mountain; Move like a great river.

Store *jìn* like drawing a bow; Issue *jìn* like releasing an arrow.  
In the heart of the curve, seek the straight; Gather, and then issue.  
The strength passes through the spine to issue; The steps follow the changes of the body.

Receiving is immediately releasing; Breaking and then reconnecting.

In meeting and responding, there must be folding.  
In advancing and retreating, there must be changing.

Reach the utmost of softness, then reach the utmost of hardness.

From the skill of breathing, you can achieve the skill of being agile and lively.

The *qi*, by means of the upright, is cultivated excellently.

The *jin*, by means of the curved, is stored in abundance.

The *xin* is the commander, the *qi* the flag, the *yao* the banner.

First seek the open and expanded, then seek the compact and gathered. In this way, you will make meticulous progress!

It is said: The other doesn't move, I do not move. The other moves the slightest bit, I move first.

*Jin* that seems relaxed is not relaxed. *Jin* about to expand is not expanded. Even if the *jin* is broken, the *yi* is not broken.

It is also said: first in the *xin*, then in the body.

The belly is relaxed, the *qi* sinks and enters the bones.

The spirit is comfortable, the body is calm.

At every moment, focus the *xin*.

Always remember, with any movement, there is nothing not moving; with any stillness, there is nothing not still.

As you lead the motion back and forth, the *qi* sticks to the back. And collects there, entering the spine.

Internally, the spirit is firm; Externally, display peace and ease.

Take steps like a cat walking; Transport the *jin* like drawing silk.

The whole body's *yi* is on the spirit, not on the *qi*. If it is on the *qi*, then it is stagnant.

Focusing on the *qi*, there is no power. Focusing [on the spirit and] not on the *qi*, there is pure hardness.

The *qi* is like a cart's wheel, the *yao* is like a cart's axle.



# Thirteen Postures Song

ANONYMOUS

The Thirteen Postures should not be taken lightly;  
The meaning originates in the *yao*.  
The *yi* must focus on the interchange of empty and full;  
The *qi* is everywhere in the body, not stagnant in the least.

Stillness within movement, movement also has stillness;  
Adapting to the opponent, change and neutralize, show marvels!

Posture by posture, ensure the *xin* applies the *yi*;  
You must work hard to achieve the level where this happens effortlessly.  
Moment by moment, keep the *xin* in the *yao*;  
The belly is relaxed internally completely, and then the *qi* soars!

The base of the spine is upright and balanced; The spirit passes all the way to the head-top.  
The whole body is *qingling*; The head-top is as if suspended.  
Carefully pay attention and study the directions [of the changes];  
Listen during bending and extending, opening and closing so they can alternate freely.

To enter the courtyard and be led on the path, you must have the oral teaching.  
*Gongfu* without resting is the method for self-cultivation.

Speaking of form and function, essence and application, what is the standard?  
*Yi* and *qi* are the rulers, flesh and bones the subjects.  
Pondering the usage of *yi*, what is the purpose?  
To benefit and prolong life, so it is always springtime, never aging.

Oh this song! Oh! This song has one hundred forty characters.  
Each and every character is true, exactly correct with nothing left out.  
Without studying deeply, your hard work will be wasted, leaving only sighs of regret.

# Pushing Hands Song

ANONYMOUS

Be conscientious in Wardoff, Rollback, Press, and Push.  
Upper and lower mutually follow each other.  
The other finds it difficult to advance.  
Even if they try to hit me with an enormous force,  
I lead their movement using four ounces to direct their 1000 pounds.  
Lead the other forward into emptiness, unite, and immediately issue.  
Adhere, connect, stick, and follow; Neither disconnecting nor resisting.

# Introduction

## Names and Mechanics

For the rendition of the Classics that's easiest to read, refer to the Classics, Unadorned section above. In the rest of this translation, I dive deep into the references made in the Classics and explore bits of background that I found interesting while researching the translation. I still try to keep it readable, but I don't hesitate to interrupt the text with exploration. With any luck, you'll be interested in the side trips I take.

I use pinyin, the official transliteration scheme, for Chinese terms. Many of us were introduced to taijiquan, the art and the important figures in its history, using transliteration schemes based on Wade-Giles, a scheme developed by two 19th century British academics. So, we learned of T'ai Chi Ch'uan, concepts like ch'i and hsin, and referred to people such as Lao Tse and Wu Yu-shiang, who lived in or visited Peking, Canton, and other places in China. In pinyin, these would be Taijiquan, qi, xin, Laozi, Wu Yuxiang, Beijing, and Guangzhou respectively.

I leave a few names in the old transliteration or latinization. The use of Confucius is just too widespread and ingrained and so I stick with Confucius instead of Kongzi. Similarly, I refer to 郑曼青 as Cheng Manching or Professor Cheng since his family uses Cheng rather than the pinyin Zheng and I figure they're the ones who know what their family name is.

When referring to Chinese historical figures, it's customary to introduce them once with their full names, e.g. Yang Luchan, and then subsequently refer to them simply with their personal names, e.g. Luchan. This can make it less confusing when discussing a group of relatives, e.g. Luchan's children, Banhou and Jianhou. It's easier to just refer to Banhou rather than to keep repeating the family name too, Yang Banhou.

However, it can become more confusing to use just the personal names when it's a figure like Zhu Xi who we discuss occasionally and who is the only Zhu family member we mention at all. In these cases, it's easier to remember who I'm talking about if I refer to Zhu rather than Xi. So, I use both methods depending on what seems clearer.

I specify dates as CE, Common Era, and BCE, Before Common Era. If there's no suffix, the date refers to a CE date.

Rather than litter the discussion and translation with scholarly references, I've collected all the image credits and source references as well as pointers for additional investigation at the end, after the translation. It should be obvious which sources were used for any section. Direct quotes are attributed inline.

## Background of the Classics

The origin story of the Taijiquan Classics is like many of the origin stories for the art itself: sometimes implausible, complicated and confusing, and without supporting evidence.

The official story involves the Wu brothers, students and perhaps patrons of Yang Luchan, the founder of Yang style. In the early 1800s, Yang Luchan left home to live in Chen village where he studied some form of martial art with Chen Changxing, a member of the Chen family. On his return home in the 1830s, he taught his new art to the Wu brothers, Yuxiang and Chengqing. Both of the Wu brothers were educated in the Confucian tradition and Chengqing, the older, obtained 進士, *jìnshì* rank by passing the highest level of Imperial exams and subsequently was given a government position in another city, away from home.

In 1852, or 1853 or perhaps 1854, Yuxiang, on his way to see his brother, first stopped at a village near Chen village where Yang Luchan had studied. There Yuxiang found another teacher who taught him “the essence” of the art. Yuxiang then met up with his brother, Chengqing, in Chengqing’s new home. While visiting, Yuxiang happened to stop by a “salt shop” where he found a book that happened to be what we now know as the Taijiquan Classics. Returning home, Yuxiang showed the manuscript to Luchan who agreed that it contained the authentic teaching.

There are a number of odd details in this story. And not much that can be corroborated besides the existence of Yang Luchan and the Wu brothers.

Luchan was said to be “illiterate” while the Wu brothers were both “educated.” In context, *illiterate* doesn’t mean that Luchan was unable to read or write. He’s in fact said to have worked in a pharmacy where he would have filled written prescriptions. Instead, *illiterate* means Luchan, unlike the Wu brothers, wasn’t educated in the Confucian classics and wasn’t able to compose essays and poems meeting the scholarly standards of the time. A good number of Chinese could read and write even if the majority were unable to do either. Estimates are that about 1/3 of the population in Luchan’s time in the late Qing could functionally read and write and this probably included Luchan even if he was not educated as a scholar like the Wu brothers. Luchan certainly was not able to write the Classics, although they may be based on oral teaching that came via Luchan.

Finding a book at a “salt shop” is not as implausible as it sounds. The salt trade was heavily regulated by the government with taxes on the salt trade providing up to one half of total government revenues. Salt merchants themselves were the largest single commercial group in the Qing era. Trade and transport in China was very expensive and most areas provided almost all their own food, clothes, and products locally. As a trade good, salt was unique: it was not produced locally, and being a necessity, was distributed to every village and market:

Salt was one of the few items in which most rural villages in China were not self-sufficient and it thus had to be imported from distant places. (Jiang 1975, p17)

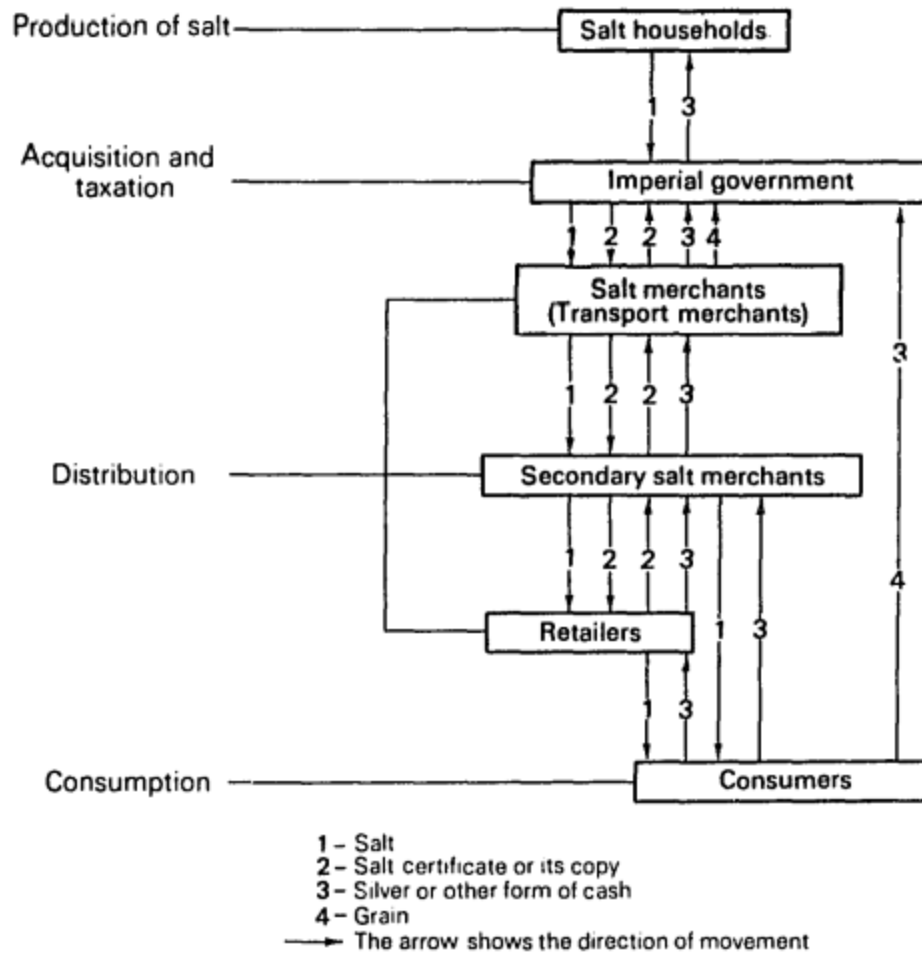
The salt trade itself was hugely complicated. It started with a network of small household salt producers found in every part of China and culminated in sales of salt to people in every village market in China. Over 1% of the total land in China was devoted to salt production with over 2 million people working as small salt producers. Salt producers had to hold government licenses, had to meet annual production quotas, and could only sell to specific intermediaries.

The distribution network consisted of a hierarchy of intermediaries called “merchants.” At the top of this hierarchy were “transport merchants” (*yunshang*<sup>1</sup>) who were granted geographic licenses to be the sole buyers from salt producers and to be the sole distributors for a region. The transport merchants arranged to move the salt from producer to various markets and then sold either direct to salt consumers or more frequently to retailers or other secondary merchants. The following diagram from Jiang shows the whole network:

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<sup>1</sup> 運, *yun* is “transport”, one of the movement words discussed below.

## MOVEMENT OF SALT IN CH'ING CHINA



With sole control over the trade of a necessary commodity and with significant leverage over government officials due to the high revenue from salt taxes, salt merchants were extremely wealthy and influential:

Many of these merchants used their wealth to patronize scholars and poets or to cultivate such expensive hobbies as *book and art collecting*. The amount of money so spent appears to have been unusually large, attributing greatly to the splendid cultural and intellectual development [of the time]" (Jiang 1975, p4, emphasis added.)

Given the large sums of money involved and the geographic spread of the market, there was considerable corruption and "illegal" salt trade. The unlicensed and untaxed illegal trade sometimes made up 50% of the market. The distribution network from transport merchants to retail sales with nominal taxation at each step offered many opportunities



for corruption and payoffs: merchants diluted salt so they could sell more than they purchased, underreported sales, and paid government officials under the table to avoid paying larger amounts in official taxes. All of this contributed to the power and status of salt merchants.

It's thus not as ridiculous as it sounds for the original manuscript to come from a "salt shop." The merchant running the shop could well have been a book collector and could have pulled out an obscure martial arts manual when he found out that the Wu brothers had an interest in martial arts, especially given that one of the brothers was a local high government official with whom the merchant probably had an important financial relationship.

An equally plausible explanation is that one or both of the Wu brothers wrote the Classics based on oral teaching and possibly some written manuals provided by Yang Luchan. The Classics themselves are written in Literary Chinese (often called Classical Chinese, although that label is properly reserved for texts from the classical eras rather than more recent texts written by literati) and the Wu brothers, unlike Luchan, could write Literary Chinese. They certainly could have polished oral teaching or written materials to assemble what we now know as the Classics.

The Wu brothers were upper-class elite members of society, perhaps financial patrons for Luchan, and in their various other writings, appear to have downplayed their relationship with Luchan. For example, Yuxiang credits his taijiquan instruction to a visit to a village near Chen village where he spent several weeks with a named teacher who happened to not be Luchan's teacher. Li Yiyu, Yuxiang's nephew and one of his students wrote introductory notes to the first Wu/Li version of the Classics and contributed a piece called the Five Character Secret. This version of the Classics was circulated within the Wu and Li families in the 1880s. In his introductory notes, Li mentions Yang Luchan only once, as "a certain Yang". And "finding" the Classics in the salt shop provided a reasonable explanation that didn't involve Luchan.

On the other side of this story, Yang Luchan moved to Beijing in 1850, ending up as part of the greater court of Prince Duan. Luchan and his son Banhou provided martial arts instruction in that court. Luchan is supposed to have brought a copy of the Classics with him and this was used as the basis for the Yang version of the Classics which was first published publicly in 1911. The Yang version, while textually very close to the Wu/Li version, does not mention the Wu brothers despite including the text titled *Understanding the Skills from Practicing the Thirteen Postures*, attributed to Wu Yuxiang in the Wu/Li version.

And then, as always with these stories, there are date problems: Wu Yuxiang didn't visit his brother until 1852, or possibly as late as 1854, which is when he found the manuscript in the salt shop. How could Yang Luchan bring a copy of the Classics when he moved to Beijing in 1850 if Yuxiang didn't obtain them until after Luchan left for Beijing? And if Luchan was already gone, how did Yuxiang bring the manuscript back for him to review and give his approval to?

Given all of this, it seems most likely to me that the Wu brothers recorded, assembled, and edited the Classics based on material provided by Yang Luchan. They did this sometime in the 1840s, after they'd studied with Luchan for many years. Yang Luchan then took a copy with him to Beijing, feeling that this copy was the written version of the teaching he'd provided. Wu Yuxiang took a trip after Luchan's departure to get follow up instruction at (or near) Chen village, which included the visit to the salt shop. And the Wu brothers then constructed a plausible story of finding a manuscript rather than taking credit themselves for assembling them or giving credit to the lower-status figure of that "certain Yang."

Assuming Yang Luchan did provide the source materials, oral and possibly written, that the Wu brothers then recorded and edited, what form did these materials take? We know that many arts and practices, including martial arts, heavily relied on oral teaching. Ben Lo told us that students would chant the Classics in class, and he relayed great personal disappointment when he asked a class to repeat Yang Chengfu's Ten Essential Points and the class was unable to do so.

Chinese Medicine provides an example of another practice that relied heavily on oral teaching and that has many of the document forms we find in the Taijiquan Classics:

Most physicians did not formally teach their knowledge in academies (*xueyuan* 學院), medical schools (*yixue* 醫學), or imperial medical bureaus (*taiyiyuan* 太醫院); rather they transmitted their medical knowledge and healing strategies privately through master–disciple, clan and lineage relationships, and through non-familial social networks of like-minded friends and colleagues. (Hansen p81)

Teaching in these private networks relied heavily on oral formats, making it possible to accurately transmit theory and practice of the art while keeping printed copies from circulating outside the network. Oral teaching increasingly relied heavily on rhyming prose and chants for ease of memorization:

By the early tenth century, some medical book titles started to use *ge*, 'song', to signify another form of versification... To sum up, between the sixth and early tenth centuries there is evidence of three rhematic terms for versified narrative forms – *jue*, *fu*, and *ge* – of medical knowledge ranging from pulse taking and

sexual cultivation arts to discerning syndromes and determining cases of either life or death. During the eleventh century, new titles of publications that contained versified mathematical algorithms and problems also appeared in extant sources. This evidence demonstrates that in [this] period there was a broader strategy of versifying text to facilitate learning mathematics as well as medicine by the book. (Hansen p84)

Among the formats used were:

- *Jing* (經), Canonical classics which provided a theoretical summary and overview of a complete field
- *Lun* (論), Treatises or Discourses, analyzing a particular subject in depth. The most well known *Lun* in the west is the Confucian Analects, or *Lunyu* 论语, literally the Spoken Treatises or Spoken Discourses, that records supposed conversations between Confucius and his students.
- *Yao* (要), Essentials, usually in list format
- *Jie* (解), Explanations, containing prescriptive descriptions of a subject and its best practices, and
- *Ge* (詞), songs or chants designed for easy memorization.

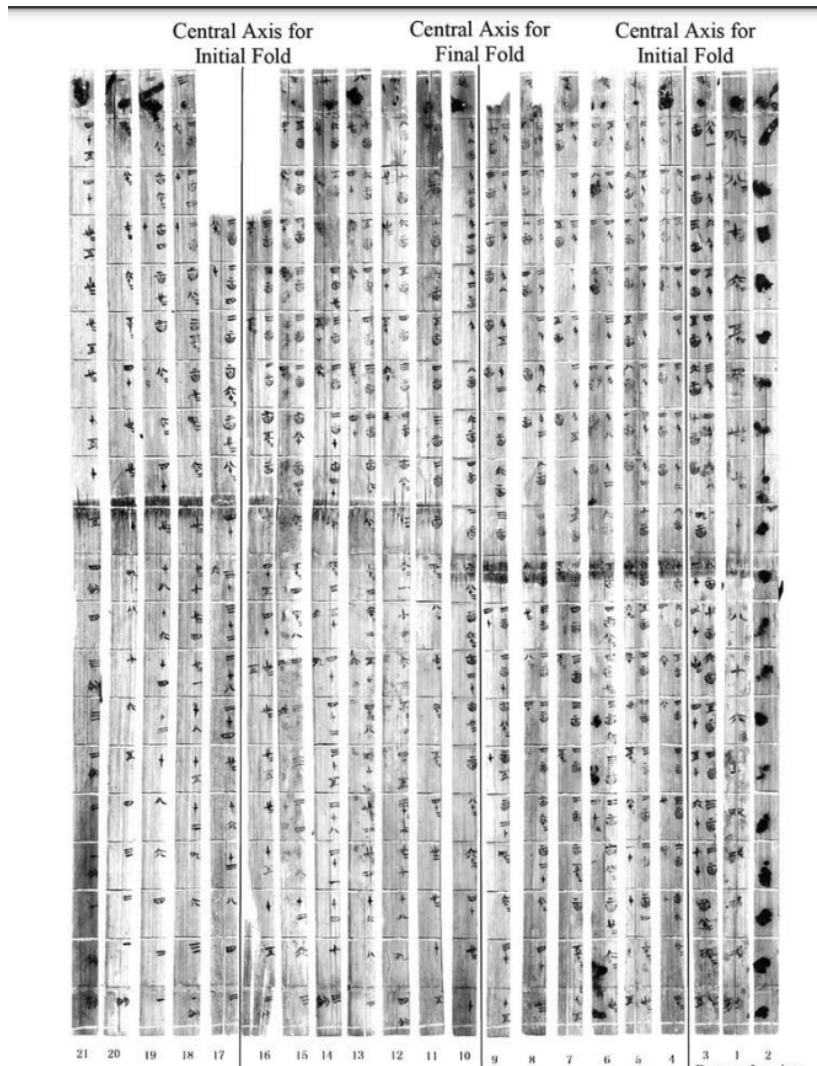
Interestingly, we find the exact same names, formats, and teaching lineages and networks in taijiquan. The Classics as a whole are referred to as the “Taijiquan *Jing*” as is the first document attributed to Zhang Sanfeng. Next up comes the Treatise or “Taijiquan *Lun*”, followed by the Explanation (*Jie*) of the Skills Developed by Practice of the Thirteen Postures. The core collection is then filled out with two *Ge*: the Thirteen Postures Song and the Pushing Hands Song. Yang Chengfu’s Ten Essentials (*Yao*) is often included in Yang editions of the Classics.

The names may have been applied more to give the Classics legitimacy than to actually describe the documents within the collection. The Taijiquan *Jing* doesn’t seem to provide a theoretical summary and overview of the field anymore than the *Lun* (Treatise) or the Understanding *Jie* (Explanation). Similarly the *Lun* doesn’t analyze one part of the art in depth. And the *Jie* doesn’t have more prescriptive descriptions than any of the other documents.

It seems likely that Yang Luchan brought teachings in multiple formats which the Wu brothers then formalized, assembled, and edited to create what we now know as the Taijiquan Classics. And that just as with mathematics and medicine, the teaching from Luchan heavily relied on verse and rhyming formats. Some of the material Luchan brought may have been purely oral and some may have been printed.

China has a long history of book making and recording written knowledge. Books were originally handwritten on bamboo or wooden tablets and on silk. The tablets or silk “slips” were collected into *juan* 卷 or scrolls. *Juan* could be a single chapter of a larger “book” or could represent the book as a whole. *Juan* were probably copied by teams, where one scholar would read the text and others would write the characters in ink on a new scroll.

Here’s an example of a *juan*, showing how it could be folded for storage:



Starting in the Tang Dynasty (600s CE), manuscripts began to be printed on paper using woodblocks. A calligrapher would write the text in ink on paper which was then placed facedown on a woodblock covered in rice paste. Ink would be transferred to the woodblock by running a roller over the paper and an engraver would then carve out the space around the characters. Ink could then be spread on the woodblock and fresh paper laid down over it with the ink transferred to the paper as a roller ran over it.

Moveable type printing where individual blocks are created for each character and then assembled into a frame to represent a page was invented in 1050 using ceramic and wooden type blocks and again in the 1100s using metal type blocks. However, the sheer number of Chinese characters and the difficulty of having sufficient type blocks of the right types to use moveable type printing meant that most printing in China continued to use single woodblocks for an entire page into the 1800s.

It's likely that the "salt shop" manuscript or any written materials that Yang Luchan had were either hand copied or woodblock printed and may have mimicked older book formats. One of the annotations that Chen Weiming includes refers to the original manuscript as a "silk *juan*," indicating it was written either in the style of, or actually on, a silk scroll.

Commenting, annotation, and marginalia have always played a large role in Literary Chinese works, e.g., all the commentary included as a standard part of the *Yijing*<sup>2</sup> (Classic on Change) or in the various Confucian classics codified by Zhu Xi (see below for more discussion of Zhu's philosophy and its influence on the Taijiquan Classics).

We find similar marginalia and annotation in all editions of the Taijiquan Classics. One of the first public editions of the Taijiquan Classics was from Chen Weiming, published in 1925. This version is the one that both Barbara Davis and I used as the basis for our translations. In it, Chen provides commentary after each line or two of the Classics. Chen's edition also includes an explicit bit of marginalia in the "Cloud Note" attached at the end of the first chapter, the Taijiquan Jing.

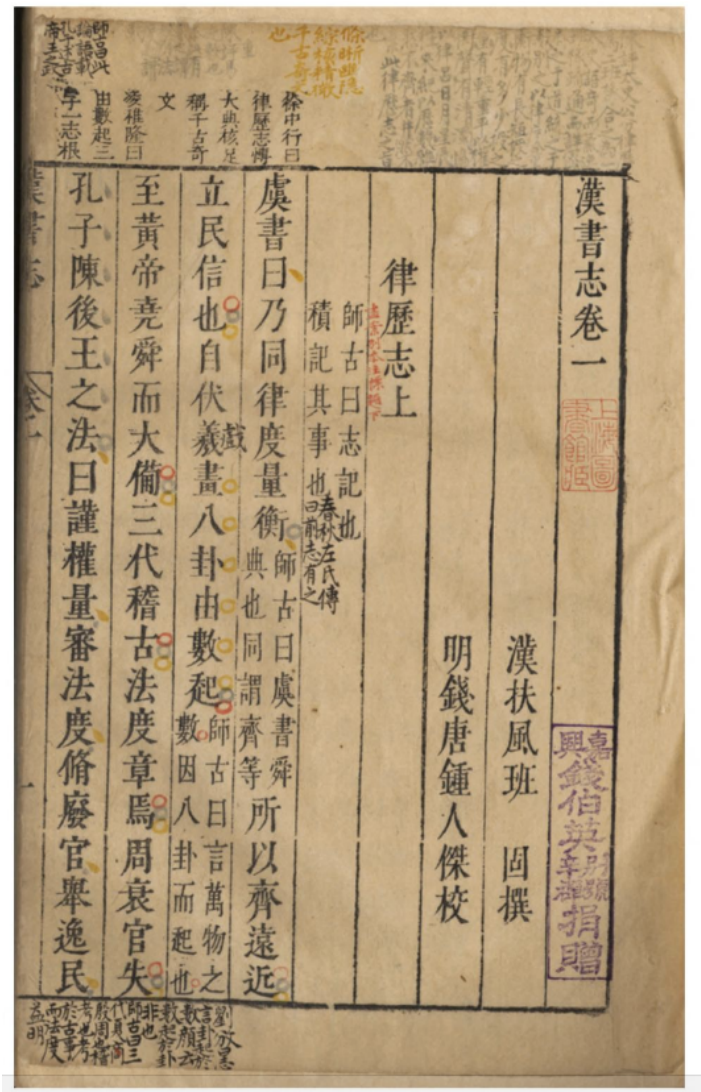
Chen was a student and teacher of Yang taijiquan. He started teaching in Shanghai while Yang Chengfu was still in Beijing and Yang Jianhou, Chengfu's father, was the official head of the lineage. After Jianhou died and Chengfu moved to Shanghai, Chen Weiming acknowledged Chengfu as his official teacher, although it's not obvious that Chen spent much time learning directly from Yang Chengfu. Chen was highly admired in the Yang taijiquan circles in Shanghai, and Cheng Manching acknowledged Chen as a senior classmate. Before Cheng publicly introduced his variant of the Yang taijiquan form after Yang Chengfu's death, Cheng pointedly went to Chen Weiming for approval. Ben Lo frequently referenced Chen Weiming's writing and recommended his Questions and Answers, *Da Wen*, to us for study.

I've sometimes referenced Chen's commentary and provided translations of parts of it in my own annotations. So, this version of the classics has at least three levels: the original text, Chen's commentary, and my commentary which sometimes references Chen's.

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<sup>2</sup> *Yijing*: The Classic (*jing*) of Change (*yi*). Commonly transliterated as I Ching.

Marginalia and annotations were distinguished visually by placement on the page as well as ink color and they were preserved as books were copied and printed. Here's an example of a woodblock print from around 1600 reproducing a page from the *Hanshu*, Book or History of the Han people, originally dated 111CE, together with multiple layers of marginalia and annotation:



One half-leaf of the *Hanshu*, woodblock edition carved in the Wanli reign.  
It contains marginalia in black, red, blue and yellow ink  
COURTESY OF THE SHANGHAI LIBRARY (CALL NUMBER: XS816474-513)

These annotations, commentary, and marginalia were considered both an integral part of the core text and something special that added value to a particular edition. For example, Zhu Xi collected the standard editions of the Confucian classics used as the basis for



scholarship and education from the 1000s to the end of the Qing Dynasty around 1900. These editions included his commentary on the classics.

Commentary could include references and quotations for other works, textual criticism of the current work, and individual annotations such as “Wonderful!” or “Marvelous” written in the margins. I’ve heard stories of the “eyebrow comments” handwritten in the margin of one of Yang Chengfu’s books by one of his senior students. This book was supposedly mostly recorded by Cheng Manching based on Yang Chengfu’s oral teaching, and the eyebrow comments from the senior classmate of Cheng Manching criticized Cheng’s understanding of Yang’s teaching. There may have been a political aspect in these comments as Cheng Manching had only studied with Yang Chengfu for a few years at that time and was playing an increasingly large role in the school, including assisting Yang in his classes and sometimes teaching them by himself.

I’ve tried to follow in the tradition of annotation by making all the layers of commentary in this translation visually distinct.

## **Neo-Confucian Philosophy and the Taijiquan Classics**

Confucius, 551 - 479 BCE, is one of the towering figures in Chinese history, thought, and culture, and arguably the single most influential person in all of world history. As such, it’s not surprising that Confucian-derived principles and forms had a large influence on the development and philosophy of Taijiquan, especially as embedded in the Taijiquan Classics.

Over the eras of Chinese history since Confucius, Confucian principles and practices were always present as a broad cultural underpinning. At some points, government and society were explicitly aligned with Confucian teaching while at other points, they identified with Buddhist and Daoist teaching. But, even when Buddhism or Daoism were the leading models, Confucian thought was widespread and assumed as the basis for culture, governance, family relations, and philosophy.

Confucius is a latinization of the sage’s Chinese name, 孔夫子, Kong Fuzi or 孔子, Kongzi, both meaning “the Master Kong.” In many texts, he’s referred to simply as 子, the Master.

Standard quasi-mythical Chinese history begins with legendary emperors and heroes who founded the first dynasties, the Xia and Shang dynasties. The historical record comes into clearer view, with stronger documentation, in the Western Zhou Dynasty,

1045 - 771 BC. Confucius lived in the aftermath of the Western Zhou: the dynasty officially claimed to continue and is known now as the Eastern Zhou, but the capital was moved east and the government lost control over much of China.

Confucius lived and taught during the “Spring and Autumn” period. His followers in the next several generations worked during the “Warring States” period. Eventually, China coalesced again as a single empire in the short-lived Qin Dynasty, which had only a single emperor, and then the longer Han Dynasty, which ruled from 202 BCE - 220 CE. It was during the Han that Confucian principles were officially adopted by the government and propagated as the basis for society.

Following the Han Dynasty, Buddhism was introduced from India in the west and together with Daoism gained growing political recognition and support in China. Finally, during the Tang Dynasty, ~600 - 900 CE, Buddhism was adopted as the official state religion and Confucian principles were no longer the official standard. Chinese culture, of course, continued the practices that Confucianism had codified such as ancestor worship, filial “piety,” and gender-based privileges and restrictions. But, Buddhism, and to a lesser extent Daoism, were increasingly important religions and formed the basis for government policy.

## **Neo-Confucianism and Zhu Xi**

Confucian scholars and philosophers continued to have status and power, and responded to the increasing status of Buddhism and Daoism with a new movement based on Confucian teaching and philosophy developed during the Song and Ming dynasties ( ~950 - 1650 CE). This movement was known as 道学, *Daoxue*, Study of the Dao or Way, and as “neo-Confucianism” in western academia, and represented a dramatic recasting of Confucian thought to absorb ideas and practices from Buddhism and Daoism. During the Song, neo-Confucian teaching was officially adopted and the core principles for education, family relations, and governance that it defined became the official state ideology from that point to the early Republican era starting in the 1910s.

When most of us think of Confucius or Confucian ideology today, we’re really thinking of neo-Confucianism. When the Communist government, led by Mao Zedong, instituted campaigns to eradicate Confucianism from Chinese society, they were responding to neo-Confucianism. And when the Taijiquan Classics were edited and assembled in the mid 1800s, they were built on concepts informed by neo-Confucianism.

Neo-Confucian concepts permeating the practice of taijiquan and its Classics include the idea of Taiji or non-dual polarity itself, pairs of polar opposites such as empty / full and stillness / movement, and the practice of a meditative moving physical discipline

intended not just for personal enlightenment but to improve effective interaction in the world.

Zhu Xi, 1130 - 1200 CE, was the leading intellectual who codified the neo-Confucian movement, specified and edited the core set of texts known as the Four Books that defined Confucian thought and served as the basis for education and literary accomplishment, and outlined the civil-service examination process adopted after his death and used until just a few years before the end of the Dynasty system and the establishment of the Republic in 1912. Zhu's versions of the Four Books and the rest of the Confucian canon, complete with his, often unmarked, edits and annotations were used as the canonical primary sources of Confucian texts. Modern scholarship and the discovery in the late 1900s of truly ancient Han-era manuscripts at sites such as Mawangdui and Dunhuang has enabled scholars to reconstruct "original" versions of the Confucian classics, making Zhu's revisions more clear, which emphasizes the strong editorial hand of Zhu in defining the Confucian canon.

As Zhu codified the Confucian canon, he effectively promoted one of the 2nd generation of Confucian thinkers, Mengzi (379 - 289 BCE) to the top level, calling Mengzi "the second sage" after Confucius, "the first sage." Zhu included Mengzi's dialogues with students as one of the Four Books. All educated people following Zhu Xi's reforms were expected to memorize the Four Books and be able to quote freely from them. Civil-service exams frequently required composing extemporaneous essays on current events with backing references and quotations from the Four Books. The Books are the *Analects*, a collection of short aphorisms and dialogs between Confucius and his students; *Great Learning / Da Xue*, a series of essays that Zhu Xi extracted from the classic *Book of Rites* and promoted to a classic on its own; *Zhongyong*<sup>3</sup>, literally "the application / use of 中, *zhong*, the center or balance"; and the *Mengzi* which contains dialogs between Mengzi and his students.

## **Mengzi and the Sprouts of Virtue**

Both Zhu Xi and Mengzi formed their philosophy during a time of competing doctrines and schools. Mengzi developed the teaching and ideas of Confucius and faced opposition from the Mohists and others. Zhu Xi found a way to re-envision the ideas of Confucius, incorporating influences from Buddhism and Daoism while laying out a path different from either of those.

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<sup>3</sup> The *Zhongyong* is often referred to via the title *James Legge*, an early British translator of Chinese texts, translated as "The Doctrine of the Mean."

The key issues that Mengzi and the Mohists debated included whether human beings are fundamentally good and how to best structure society and government to benefit people. Mengzi believed that people have the innate tendency to be good and the key issue for society is cultivating those tendencies. People who have developed their innate possibility to be good have four key virtues: benevolence or kindness, righteousness or justice, wisdom, and propriety. Each virtue “sprouts” from an innate emotional response, e.g., benevolence or caring for others sprouts from the natural feeling of compassion and propriety sprouts from the natural feeling of ritual seriousness and composure. Mengzi argued that this shows virtue is *internal* and that the key questions surround how to best nurture or cultivate the sprouts of virtue so they grow. Virtue is shown by external actions but those actions are determined by internal qualities.

Both Mengzi and Confucius argued that people are inherently biased: of course, you’ll give preferential treatment to family and friends. Confucian doctrine says this is a good thing: family should be given top priority, followed by your community, and then people as a whole. Confucian ethics are explicitly situational and relational, depending on your relationship to the other parties. The problem is then how to ensure justice or righteousness for all from a society built on appropriately biased people. Propriety and ritual (these are the same word, 禮, *li*) are foundational to justice.

The Mohists, following the teaching of Mozi, argued differently: people are innately clean slates that can tend towards good or evil. Virtue is a result of how people are raised and the society they live in. Education and self-cultivation are important. Bias towards friends and family is a bad thing and we should not promote such bias. Instead, society should be oriented towards delivering the maximum benefit, 利, *li*, to everyone. In order to do this, we should establish a competent government, promote a feeling of inclusive care, 兼愛, *jian ai*, sometimes translated as “universal love,” and apply unbiased justice to ensure rule of law rather than nepotism and favoritism. Because people develop virtue based on their environment, virtue is *external* and must be taught and imposed. Achieving justice is a matter of finding external objective standards and applying them, not following propriety and established ritual.

For our purposes, it’s interesting that the *internal* / *external* debate was present so long ago and that self-cultivation, nurturing the “sprouts,” is seen as the primary means of developing virtue. We’ll find references to Mengzi below in the commentary on the Classics.

## Neo-Confucian Resolution

In Zhu's time, the major doctrinal question orbited around, not Confucianism vs. Mohism, but rather the conflicts between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. One of Zhu's major accomplishments was finding a resolution, both personally and in terms of doctrine, that let him integrate elements of Buddhism and Daoism into Confucian practice. Zhu's resolution included a deeper understanding of Taiji, unifying of opposites into one, and finding a daily practice that led to incorporating stillness and quiet into activity within the community and world.

As Buddhism, and Daoism to a lesser extent, rose in prominence in Zhu's time, they came under criticism from the Confucian establishment. Some of the criticism may have been based on Buddhism's growing economic and political power, but most of it was couched as doctrinal and practice disagreements, primarily around the issue of "leaving the family." Chinese culture, especially as described in Confucian theory, was oriented around the family, community, and nation. Buddhist and Daoist practitioners "left the family," breaking their family and community ties and either joining a religious community or becoming solo practitioners and hermits. Some monasteries and religious communities were large landholders and did hire from the surrounding community for farming, housekeeping, etc., needs and so contributed to the communities' economies. But the ideal was practitioners who withdrew from any economic activities and disconnected themselves from their previous lives.

There was an ongoing effort to find a reconciliation and unification of the "three schools" of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism – called 三教合, *sanjiao heyi*, three schools unified as one – that Zhu participated in as he tried to incorporate elements of Buddhist and Daoist practice and theory into his neo-Confucianism.

In addition to doctrinal and political power conflicts between the "three schools," Zhu lived at a time that had seen ongoing failures of good government. The Song Dynasty that Zhu believed was the legitimate Chinese government was losing power: the Song had to relocate the capital to southern China, following which the dynasty was labeled the Southern Song, and relinquished control of northern China to the incoming Jin Dynasty. And even in the areas that the Song still controlled, there had been a series of government failures to deliver reforms Zhu thought important.

Confucianism had always addressed good governance: much of the teaching directly ascribed to Confucius, e.g., in the Analects, consists of dialogs with rulers and Confucius's suggestions for good rule. Zhu spent a lot of effort defining educational programs and core texts that Confucian students should use as a primary basis for their

work in government. The system of civil examinations that populated the government bureaucracy, instituted following Zhu's death and lasting into the 1900s, was based on Zhu's work.

At the same time, Zhu felt that Confucian practice had to focus on two poles: one pole of perfecting society through good government, and the other pole of perfecting the self, and thus relationships in family and community, through self-cultivation, 修身, *xiushen* or 修养, *xiuyang*. And as he did basically everywhere, rather than seeing these two poles as separate opposites, he united them into a single non-dual Taiji polarity. Via self-cultivation, one could develop virtue and become a 圣人, *shengren*, sage or 真人, *zhenren*, an authentic or realized person.

### **The Daily Practice of Self-Cultivation**

The virtues to be developed were based on Mengzi's notion of sprouts of virtue to be nurtured via self-cultivation and then embodied primarily in activity and involvement in the community and family, and shown in how one acts: Do you act from benevolence and righteousness? Do you act with wisdom and propriety? Do you remain centered and balanced in activity and do you return to peace and calm after activity? Zhu said the challenge of self-cultivation

requires rectifying the mind (*zheng xin* 正心) and making one's intentions authentic (*cheng yi* 誠意) [so as] to make the principle of 中和, *zhong-he* [centered equilibrium and harmony] manifest in outer actions.

(Adler 2008, p59 with minor edits)

Buddhism and Daoism were criticized for practicing self-cultivation for personal reasons, to achieve enlightenment and transcendence individually, rather than seeing the goal as living as a good person embedded in a functioning society. This was called aiming for "an empty Buddha nature." Daoism was criticized for valuing emptiness or vacuity<sup>4</sup> and nonexistence<sup>5</sup>.

As a result of focusing on self-cultivation, Zhu Xi needed to develop a framework for personal, daily practice. As a young adult, he initially studied both Daoism and Chan Buddhism. During these studies, he first encountered the writings of Zhou Dunyi, a primarily Daoist-influenced teacher who Zhu later promoted to being the first true Confucian sage since Mengzi. Zhou recorded the first version of the symbol that eventually became the Taiji symbol of paired yin and yang we know today. And Zhou's focus on Taiji as a non-dual polarity gave Zhu Xi a model for reconciling the many polar

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<sup>4</sup> 虛, *xu*, emptiness as in taijiquan's empty and full.

<sup>5</sup> 無, *wu* as in *wuji*, non-polarity, or *wuwei*, non-action.

opposites he encountered, including in governance and personal behavior, theory and practice, and stillness and activity.

Following his initial Daoist and Buddhist studies, Zhu became a disciple of Li Tong, a Confucian teacher. Li taught Zhu the practice of 靜坐, *jing-zuo*, quiet sitting: a Confucian seated meditation practice that Li and Zhu were careful to distinguish from Buddhist or Daoist sitting. In Zhu's words:

Quiet-sitting should not be like entering *samadhi* in Buddhist Chan sitting, cutting off all thoughts. Just collect the mind and do not let it go and get involved with idle thoughts. Then the mind will be profoundly unoccupied and naturally concentrated. When something happens, it will respond accordingly. When the thing is past it will return to its [still] depth.

(Adler 2008, p61)

Note: *samadhi* is 入定 *ruding*, entering fixedness/stability.

Buddhist Chan sitting is 坐禪, *zuo-chan*, known to us via the Japanese pronunciation *zazen*.

As a result of his Confucian studies, Zhu built his theory around a passage in the first chapter of the classic *Zhongyong*, the Application of Balance, or the Use of the Center:

Before feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow or joy are expressed (未發, *wei-fa*), it is called centrality (中, *zhong*, center or equilibrium). Once these feelings are expressed (已發, *yi-fa*) and each and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony (和, *he*, harmony). *Zhong* is the great foundation of the world and *he* is its universal, penetrating path. When *zhong* and *he* are realized to the highest degree, heaven and earth will attain their proper order and all things will flourish.

(Adler 2014, pg 93, minor edits)

For reference below, note that “express” is 發, *fa*, issue, discharge, or express. We will encounter this again in the *Taiji Classics* when they discuss issuing force or *fajin*.

Zhu also often referenced a line from the Xici appendix to the *Yijing*:

寂然不动, 感而遂通

*Jiran budong, gan er sui tong*

Silent, not active; stimulated then immediately penetrating.

From these passages, Zhu developed a theory of how a realized person responds to stimuli and changes in the world:

- 1) Initially, the mind is in equilibrium (*zhong*) and stillness (*jing*). This is the point before expression (*wei-fa*) and is described as silent, not active (*jiran budong*).

- 2) An outside stimulus or sensation (*gan*) is felt by the mind. Immediately, one interpenetrates (*sui tong*) the entire situation. This is called “incipience” (幾, *ji*).
- 3) Following proper expression (*yi-fa*), the mind should return to a state of harmony (*he*).

The issue for Zhu was what kind of daily practice would result in the balance of stillness and activity, of equilibrium and harmony. And during his teacher Li’s lifetime, Zhu focused on the pole of stillness and equilibrium.

Following Li’s passing, Zhu became doubtful. To be completely still (silent and non-active) and in equilibrium, the mind had to become the no-mind (*wuxin*) of Buddhism and Daoism. To be ready, while preserving balance, to respond to changes in the world, kept the mind from being completely silent. Zhu’s silent mind was thus not silent.

Zhu tried to solve this problem by focusing instead on the pole of action and harmony: engaging in civil works, studying and advancing his knowledge. Ultimately, he decided seeking harmony in action had the opposite problem to seeking equilibrium in stillness: if the key moment was the moment of incipience and the interpenetration, or not, of all factors in the moment, focusing on harmony after expression was too late. By then, your action has already occurred and it was either sagelike or not. Focusing on harmony afterwards is to miss the moment.

This moves the focus to that moment of incipience and to the question of interpenetration. Which is where Zhu reached for Zhou Dunyi’s teaching about Taiji. Prior to the Zhou/Zhu reinterpretation of Taiji, yin/yang polarity was conceived of as a dual relationship: yin or yang, one or the other. This was called the 两仪, *Liang-yi*: the Two Modes or Two Images: as the Yijing says “Taiji creates the Two Modes,” each illustrated with a single standalone line, either solid (for yang) or broken (for yin).

Zhu and Zhou saw Taiji as a single, unified, non-dual polarity: yin and yang existing in every situation. The archetypal example of this yin/yang non-dual polarity is stillness and activity. Zhu then extended it to include pairs such as empty and full, perfecting society and perfecting the self, and *ti-yong* (essence and manifestation, form and function, body and application). The non-dual nature of these polarities is enabled by “interpenetration” (*sui tong*, immediately penetrating) and illustrated in the Taiji symbol where each half of the symbol holds a central dot representing the other half: yin within yang, yang within yin, stillness within activity, activity within stillness.



Consider Zhou's Explanation of the Taiji Symbol. As he did with the core Confucian classics, Zhu edited and adjusted Zhou Dunyu's Explanation of the Taiji Symbol and commented extensively throughout. Here are a couple excerpts from the Explanation<sup>6</sup>.

### Zhou Dunyi's Explanation of the Taiji Symbol

Non-polar (*wuji*) and yet Supreme Polarity (*taiji*)!

The Supreme Polarity in activity generates yang; yet at the limit of activity it is still. In stillness it generates yin; yet at the limit of stillness it is also active.

Activity and stillness alternate; each is the basis of the other. In distinguishing yin and yang, the Two Modes [appear].

Within Heaven and Earth, there is only the principle of activity and stillness, in an endless cycle; there is absolutely nothing else.

This is called change<sup>7</sup>.

Since there is activity and stillness, there is necessarily the principle of activity and stillness.

This is called the Supreme Polarity (*taiji*).

Zhu commentary, a question and answer discussion with his students:

Question: the text says "The alternation of yin and yang is called the Way": Is this the same as Supreme Polarity?

Reply: Yin and yang are simply yin and yang. The Way is Supreme Polarity— that by which there is alternation of yin and yang.

Further Zhu commentary:

When it is active, it is simultaneously still. Therefore [Zhou] says "no activity." When it is still, it is simultaneously active. Therefore [Zhou] says "no stillness." Within stillness there is activity, and within activity there is stillness. When still it is capable of activity, and when active it is capable of stillness. Within yang there is yin, and within yin there is yang. The permutations are inexhaustible.

(Adler 2008, pp68 - 75)

These passages could be incorporated almost seamlessly into the Taijiquan Classics.

The notion of interpenetration was drawn not just from the Zhongyong's "stimulated and immediately penetrating" (*gan er sui tong*) but also from Buddhist teaching. Zhu's Chan teacher, Daoqian, was in turn influenced by Huayuan Buddhism (a related school of

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<sup>6</sup> I've used Adler's translation. He translates 無極, *wuji* as "Non-polar" as in non-differentiated and 太極, *taiji* as "Supreme Polarity" as in complete separation contained within unity.

<sup>7</sup> *Yi* like the *Yijing*, Classic of Change.

Chinese Buddhism). Huayuan Buddhism described interpenetration in terms of “obstructions”: Removal of obstructions (無礙, *wu-ai*) is the key part of the two Huayuan notions of interpenetration: 理事無礙 *li shi wu ai*, the removal of obstructions between principle and being, and 事事無礙 *shi shi wu ai*, the removal of obstructions between different beings. The removal of obstructions between principle and being means that any principle must contain all the beings conforming to that principle and each being must express the principle. Hence principle and being interpenetrate. Similarly, the removal of obstructions between beings means that any one being is present in all beings. Hence all beings mutually interpenetrate. We’ll find reference to interpenetration and to removing obstructions in Chen Weiming’s commentary on the Classics.

Zhu initially believed self-cultivation should focus on the *jing zhong* phase, the phase of stillness and equilibrium. After that, he centered his work on the *dong he* phase: the phase of activity and harmony. Ultimately, he decided the work of self-cultivation needed to focus on incipience, the moment of being aroused and immediately penetrating, the line in the Taiji Symbol separating yin from yang, and the interpenetration of stillness and activity.

The key work in self-cultivation is thus to develop a practice that involves stillness within activity and activity within stillness. With such practice, one can develop a posture, internal and external, that maintains equilibrium and harmony whether active or quiet, that is ready to act immediately when encountering the world, and that returns to stability after such action. Zhu described the 心, *xin* of 中合, *zhong-he*, equilibrium and harmony as requiring an attitude of 敬, *jing*<sup>8</sup>, seriousness, reverence, mindfulness. This attitude is the attitude of propriety and composure during a ritual. And holding this serious attitude, developing reverential mindfulness, is the work of daily self-cultivation.

Doing the daily work of self-cultivation and developing a continued attitude of seriousness and mindfulness, one has a chance of becoming a 圣人, *shengren*, or 真人, *zhenren*, an authentic person or a sage. Zhu quoted Zhou Dunyi:

Sagehood: “Silent and non-active (*jiran budong*)” means being authentic (*cheng*). “Penetrating when stimulated (*gan er sui tong*)” means being spiritual. That which is active but not yet formed, between existing and not existing is incipient (*ji*). Authenticity is pure and therefore clear. Spirit is responsive and therefore mysterious. Incipience is subtle and therefore obscure. One who is authentic, spiritual and incipient is called a sage.

(Tongshu 4 by Zhou, Adler 2014 (trans), p218)

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<sup>8</sup> not the same *jing* as 靜, stillness.

And

Question: Can Sagehood be learned? And if so, what are the essentials?

Reply: To be unified is essential. To be unified is to have no desire. [Zhu comments that being “without desire” is exactly the same as holding the attitude of reverent composure (*jing*).]

Without desire one is empty while still (*jing xu* 靜虛) and direct in activity (*dong zhi* 動直). Being empty when still, one will be clear; being clear one will be penetrating. Being direct in activity one will be impartial; being impartial one will be all-embracing. Being clear and penetrating, impartial and all-embracing, one is almost a Sage.

(Tongshu 20, Adler 2014 (trans), p279ff with minor edits)

As we read the Taiji Classics below, keep these themes from Zhu Xi’s thought in mind: Taiji as a unified non-dual polarity, the interpenetration of stillness and activity and of centeredness/balance and harmony/unity, the removal of obstructions to enable that interpenetration, the critical role of the moment of incipience, the importance of daily self-cultivation practice, and the need to maintain an attitude of seriousness, mindfulness, and ritual attention.

## Stillness and Activity, Mobilizing and Transporting

A primary topic of discussion in the Classics is the relationship between *jing* and *dong*, stillness and activity, including the ways that stillness is always present in activity while activity should also always be present in stillness. As we’ve seen, this was a major concern for Zhu Xi in both his personal practice and the neo-Confucian doctrine he codified.

動, *Dong* refers to any kind of activity as well as specifically to physical movement. I’ve translated it as either “activity” or “movement” depending on context. Within the domain of activity, the Classics make two additional distinctions: 行 *xing*, move, walk, travel, do, behave; and 運, *yun*, move, carry, transport, use, apply. *Xing* is the word used in 五行, *wuxing*, the Five Phases<sup>9</sup>. I’ve translated *xing* as mobilize and *yun* as transport. The first phrases in the Understanding Skills Classic use *xing* and *yun*:

以心行氣。

以氣運身。

Using the mind (*xin*) mobilize (*xing*) the *qi*

Using *qi* transport (*yun*) the body.

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<sup>9</sup> *Wuxing* has also been called the Five Elements. The current consensus is to use Five Phases since “elements” implies some kind of underlying substance that everything is made out of rather than 5 different modalities of change and evolution.

靜, *Jing* is the paired pole to *dong*. I've translated it as either "stillness" or "quiet" depending on context.

## A Note About the Thirteen Postures

The art taijiquan is referred to a number of times in the Classics as "The Thirteen Postures." This name is derived from theory that breaks taijiquan movement and applications into 8 different "hand" techniques and 5 different "steps." Adding eight to five, we get thirteen.

Of course, combining 8 hand techniques with each of 5 steps would give a total of 40 combinations. And it's interesting for students to examine the form looking for, e.g., wardoff/peng (a hand technique) with stepping forward, stepping backwards, turning left, turning right, and staying centered (the five steps). But, the Classics count the combinations as thirteen. And hence, the art is sometimes called the Thirteen Postures.

We're told that Yang Luchan called his art 柔拳 *rouquan*, soft boxing or 棉拳 *mianquan*, cotton boxing. It wasn't until Luchan got to Beijing that the name *taijiquan* or integrated, non-dual polarity boxing was given to the art. The story is that Luchan was giving a demo, probably at Prince Duan's compound, and onlookers were so impressed that one wrote a quick poem praising his skill and the art and calling it so marvelous it deserved the name *taijiquan*.

This is why it's not too surprising that taijiquan appears only in the titles of the various Classics, and in the writings themselves, the art is referred to as The Thirteen Postures or Long Boxing. Assuming the Wu brothers were the editors and compilers of the Classics, they most likely put the Classics together before Luchan moved to Beijing and before his art was renamed *taijiquan*.

# The Taijiquan Classics

Complete with annotations, digressions, and Chinese text.

## Taijiquan Jing (Taijiquan Classic) 太极拳經

ATTRIBUTED TO ZHANG SANFENG

A standard Chinese trope is to not take credit for creating something, but rather to attribute it to past historical figures. Assuming the Wu brothers did edit and assemble the Classics, it's not unusual for them to claim authorship by a legendary figure. Especially one like Zhang Sanfeng, known as a "Daoist immortal."

Of course, there's no evidence that Zhang had anything to do with taijiquan or for that matter, with any martial arts. But, that doesn't keep people from attributing various arts to him. As Douglas Wile said

Various accounts of Zhang place him in the Song, Yuan, or Ming dynasties; there are three ways of writing the name and claims of three different figures; and there are 81 different traditions attributed to his creation. Of the 'three old manuscripts' copied by Li Yiyu from his uncle Wu Yuxiang, the preface to the 1867 copy in the possession of Ma Yinshu says: 'Taijiquan began with Zhang Sanfeng of the Song dynasty'. However, Hao He's 1881 copy is more cautious, saying, 'I do not know the origin of taijiquan, but its subtleties and marvels are exhaustively described by Wang Zongyue'. This inconsistency has contributed to the general lack of consensus. Nevertheless, for traditionalists, attacking the Zhang Sanfeng creation theory is tantamount to committing cultural treason. (Wile 2016, p21)

Cheng Manching addressing the issue of Zhang's role in creating taijiquan said:

Taijiquan was created to improve health and longevity, and its efficacy outweighs any doubts surrounding its historical origins. I would not practice an ineffectual exercise even if it was conclusively attributed to the Yellow Emperor or Laozi. It is pointless to doubt that the Immortal Zhang Sanfeng created taijiquan. (Hennessy, p19, edited to use pinyin)

Note that Cheng doesn't say taijiquan can be conclusively attributed to Zhang Sanfeng. He merely says it is pointless to argue about it.

一舉動周身俱要輕靈，尤須貫串。  
氣宜鼓盪，神宜內斂。  
毋使有缺陷處，毋使有凸凹處，毋使有斷續處。

In every motion, the entire body must be *qingling*,  
And most important strung together.  
The *qi* should be excited; the spirit should be gathered internally.  
Do not allow defects or deficiencies,  
Do not allow any hollows or projections,  
Do not allow starts or stops.

*Qingling* is one of the key principles discussed in the Classics. *Qing* means light, of little weight, and references the body. *Ling* means alert, spirited, clever and references the mind. Together *qingling* as a compound means agile, skillful, quick. In this case, I think we can take the directive that the entire body must be *qingling* as telling us the body must feel light, the awareness must be very alert, and overall, you must be agile and quick.

“Strung together” is 貫串, *guanchuan*, meaning connected and linked together. *Chuan* 串 shows two chinese coins hanging on a string that runs through the holes in their centers.

“*Qi* should be excited”: excited is *gudang*. See [Cheng’s Treatise 3](#) for an extensive discussion of *gudang*. *Gudang* describes responsive vibration from an impetus, e.g. water vibrating in a glass if you tap the glass, a drum head vibrating after being hit, or the waves on the surface of a lake in the wind. So, we could also say something like “the *qi* should be stirred,” “the *qi* should ripple,” “the *qi* should vibrate.”

The characters for projections and hollows are amusingly specific and really need no translation: 凸凹.

其根在脚，發于腿，主宰于腰，形于手指。

Its rooting is in the feet, issuing (*fa*) in the legs, controlling in the *yao*, and taking shape in the hands and fingers.

This line has tripped up many translators and commentators who understandably find themselves supplying a referent for “it”: “the *qi* is rooted in the feet, etc.,” “the motion begins in the feet, etc.,” and “the *jin* is rooted in the feet, etc.” Making the whole situation trickier, the word for “it” is pronounced *qi*, not the same as the energetic *qi*, but different only in the tone (*qi*, the energy, has a falling tone; *qi*, “it,” has a rising tone). The Chinese text does not say what “it” is and so I’ve left it alone.

其 *Qi* can reference an object or quality (“it”) or can indicate a possessive (“its”). We could translate the phrases as “it is rooted in the feet, issued in the legs, etc.” Or as I did here, focus on rooting, issuing, and so forth as verbs and actions that take place in certain parts of the body. I prefer to think of rooting as an active process rather than a static description as implied by “rooted.” Rooting is something you do, not something you achieve once and then no longer need to focus on.

形 *Xing* is shape, appearance, manifestation. The last clause is telling us the manifestation of the active process of rooting, issuing, and directing is seen in the hands and fingers.

由脚而腿而腰，總須完整一氣。

向前退後，乃能得機得勢。

有不得機得勢處，身便散亂。

其病必於腰腿求之。

From the feet, to the legs, and then the *yao*, there must always be one unified *qi*. Then stepping forward and backward, you'll catch the opportunity and achieve the advantage. Failing to gain the opportunity and advantage, the body becomes disordered. Seek the error in the *yao* and the legs.

This is one of my favorite lines in the Classics. At the heart of it is the notion of 得機得勢 *de ji de shi*: catching (*de*) the opportunity and gaining (*de*) the advantage. *De* describes an active and difficult achievement, something notable to accomplish. This line tells us that the key thing is the opportunity and that the advantage will naturally follow gaining the opportunity. Opportunity is 機 *ji*, an inflection point or pivot point. The character for opportunity, 機 *ji*, contains the character for incipience, 幾 *ji*, together with a tree radical, 木. Incipience figures heavily into Zhu Xi's model of how to balance stillness and activity. Advantage is 勢 *shi*, strategic advantage and position, or power. Focusing on gaining the advantage rather than being alert to and ready for the opportunity is to "focus on the far and miss the near."

Overall, this line works as a classic Confucian syllogism. Reading it forward tells us what to do: develop a unified *qi* from feet to legs to waist. Keeping this as you move back and forth will let you be ready when there's an opportunity. And advantage will proceed naturally from being able to catch the opportunity.

And reading it backwards, the syllogism diagnoses the cause of failure. Your body is disordered, not in the right place at the right time. This is because you couldn't gain the advantage which is because you didn't catch the opportunity. The failure to notice and catch the opportunity is because you lack one unified *qi* from feet through legs to waist. And the source of that problem is in the waist and legs. So, start working there!

上下前後左右皆然

凡此皆是意，不在外面

有上即有下，有前則有後，有左則有右

如意要向上，即寓下意，

若將物掀起，而加以挫之力，

斯其根自斷，乃攘之速，而無疑

Upward, downward, forward, backward, left, and right are all the same. In each case, the distinction is in the *yi*, and not in the external.

When there is up, there is also necessarily down; when there is forward, there is backward; when there is left, there is right.

If you want to send your *yi* up, you must also send the *yi* down.

Then the other will break their root by themselves and will quickly be dispatched without a doubt!

The Classics often refer to an opponent or practice partner when describing how to apply taijiquan. Usually, the other person is simply referred to as a person, 人, or as “the other party”, 彼. Occasionally, the reference is explicit to an opponent, 敌. When the reference is just to the other person, I translate it as “other.” Only when it’s explicitly to an enemy or foe, do I translate as “opponent.”

虛實宜分清楚，一處有一處虛實，處處總此一虛實，  
周身節節貫串毋令絲毫間斷耳

Clearly separate empty and full. Any part of the body must have empty and full. Every part of the body must always distinguish empty and full. The entire body must be strung together without the slightest break!

長拳者。如長江大海。滔滔不絕也。

Long Boxing is like an unceasing torrent, a river flowing ever onward.

Long Boxing, 長拳 *changquan*, refers to taijiquan not the similarly named Shaolin art “long fist”. We’re told that taijiquan was called Long Boxing because of the flow of continuous movements, unlike arts with shorter disconnected and independent *kata*. Even a short form can be “long boxing” if the movements form a single flow, like a river flowing ever onward.

十三勢者。棚捋擠按採捌肘靠。此八卦也。進步退步右顧左盼中定。此五行也。

The Thirteen Postures: Wardoff, Rollback, Push, Press, Pull, Split, Elbow, and Shoulder are the Eight Trigrams. Stepping Forward, Stepping Back, Looking Left, Looking Right, and Central Equilibrium are the Five Phases.

棚捋擠按。即坎離震兌四正方也。採捌肘靠。即乾坤艮巽四斜角也。

Wardoff, Rollback, Push, and Press are *kan, li, zhen, dui*; these are the Four Cardinal Directions. Pull, Split, Elbow, and Shoulder are *qian, kun, gen, xun*, which are the Four Corners.



The eight hand techniques correspond to the eight trigrams from the Yijing as illustrated below: wardoff = *kan*/water, rollback = *li*/fire, push = *zhen*/thunder, press = *dui*/lake, pull/pluck = *qian*/heaven, split = *kun*/earth, elbow = *gen*/mountain, shoulder = *xun*/wind



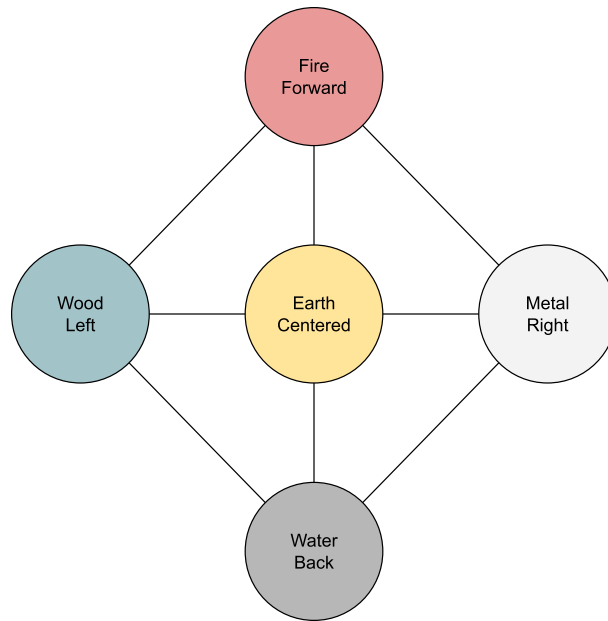
進退顧盼定。即金木水火土也。

Stepping Forward, Stepping Back, Looking Left, Looking Right, and Central Equilibrium are Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth.

Stepping forward, back, and so forth are the Five Steps. Central Equilibrium is 中定, *zhongding*, literally stable center, balanced stability, or, read as a compound, equipoise. I kept the translation as Central Equilibrium since that's the standard translation even as I might think "stable center" is more descriptive.

The Five Steps in turn must correspond to the Five Phases or Five Elements. There are multiple diagrams representing the Five Phases. They are often shown as five points in a circle where each Phase feeds the following. E.g., Wood feeding Fire.

In this case, the diagram with Earth in the center and the other 4 Phases around it seems more appropriate as a match to the Five Steps.



合而言之，曰十三勢。

Together then, these are the Thirteen Postures.

原書注云。以上係武當山張三丰祖師所著。欲天下豪傑。延年益壽。不徒作技藝之末也。  
*Cloud note on original manuscript:* the founder Zhang Sanfeng of Wudang Mountain left this manuscript [silk *juan*]. Desiring that all outstanding people below heaven achieve longevity, not merely treating this as writing about empty, nonessential techniques.

This “cloud note” is an example of the kinds of annotation or marginalia found in Chinese manuscripts. It was presumably added at some later date after the Wu brothers initially assembled the Classics.

As befits something called a Classic, the “original version” supposedly left by “Zhang Sanfeng” must have been handwritten on silk slips or bamboo scrolls (*juan*). The cloud note specifies a silk slip. It may be that the version found in the “salt shop” or perhaps manuscripts that Luchan brought back from Chen Village were done in the style of silk or bamboo *juan*.

# Taijiquan Lun (Taijiquan Treatise) 山右王宗岳太極拳論

ATTRIBUTED TO WANG ZONGYUE

It's odd that this section is attributed to an unknown, Wang Zongyue, rather than a legendary figure like Zhang Sanfeng. Davis suggests this might well mean that Wang was an actual historical figure who wrote this section, since otherwise there would be no good reason to attribute this section to him.

太極者。無極而生。陰陽之母也。

Taiji is born from wuji; it is the mother of yin and yang.

This and the following lines reflect the influence of Zhu Xi and the neo-Confucians.

動之則分。靜之則合。無過不及。隨曲就伸。

When moving (*dong*), separating.

When still (*jing*), uniting.

Without overshooting or falling short.

Following curves, accommodating extension.

I interpret the first two lines as applying to your own posture. In stillness, all the parts of your body are integrated into one whole, as in the first standing posture. When you start moving, the various parts move on their own as needed and the rules about separating empty and full apply.

Chen Weiming's commentary on this line:

我身不動。渾然一太極。如稍動。則陰陽分焉。

If my body is not moving (*dong*), then it's one integrated taiji.

If it moves even a little, then yin and yang separate.

The last line can be translated in multiple ways. Following Chen, I think of it as applying to the way you relate to another.

Chen:

彼屈則我伸。彼伸則我屈

If the other bends then I extend, if the other extends then I bend.

I read "following curves, accommodating extension" as describing your interaction with another: If the other bends or curves, you follow those curves. If the other tries to expand and extend, you accommodate that extension, rather than resisting it.

就, *Jiu* which I read as “accommodating” here, could also mean “right away” or “immediately.”  
Then, it might be an instruction about how I should act:  
“Following the curve, and then immediately extending.”

人剛我柔。謂之走。我順人背。謂之粘。  
動急則急應。動緩則緩隨。

The other is hard, I am soft: this is called yielding.

I go with, the other goes against: this is called sticking.

Moving quickly? I respond quickly.

Moving slowly? I follow slowly.

This passage and the following touch on several core Taijiquan skills.

Yielding is *zou*, 走. The ideograph shows a person walking along with another person. In Taijiquan, it means to go along with the other’s motion and energy, offering no resistance while not disconnecting. Yielding is closely related to *hua*, 化. When we were learning, *hua* was translated as “neutralize,” as in neutralizing the other’s force and ability to reach me. Perhaps a better translation would be “transform,” but we usually say “neutralize” since that’s how we were taught. A successful *hua* should change the whole situation so that the one who initially appeared to have the advantage discovers themselves at a disadvantage and unable to recover.

Sticking is 粘, *zhan* or *nian*. It describes being sticky, like glue or fly paper, as well as staying right with something, sticking to it. (Some transmissions make a distinction between *zhan*, stick, and *nian*, adhere. I’ve never understood the distinction and we treat them as essentially synonyms.)

Two other important ideas are 背, *bei*, and 順, *shun*. *Bei* is literally the back of the body, and as a verb means going-against or getting backed up. I translate *bei* as “going-against” when it describes a relationship between two people, and as “back” when it references the body. *Shun* is smooth or comfortable, and as a verb means going along with or accommodating. I translate it as “going-with” when describing a relationship between two people. One of the tactics in Push Hands is to go along with your practice partner and cause them to become backed up and resistant. Which opens them up to a discharge and being thrown.

Chen’s commentary on these lines (note that obstruction is *ai*, a reference to the neo-Confucian and Buddhist notion of enabling interpenetration (*tong* or *sui tong*) by removing obstructions between principle and being and between separate beings):

人剛我剛。則兩相抵抗。人剛我柔。則不相妨礙。  
不妨礙則走化矣。

If the other is hard, and I’m also hard, then we’ll be mutually linked into resistance. If the other is hard and I’m soft, then there’s no mutual obstruction.

Without mutual obstruction, I can yield (*zou*) and neutralize (*hua*).

既走化。彼之力失其中。則背矣。我之勢得其中。則順矣。

Once I yield and neutralize, the other's force (*li*) will be off-center. And the other will inevitably go-against (*bei*). My posture maintains its center. And thus, I can go-with (*shun*).

以順黏背。則彼雖有力而不得力矣。

I apply going-with to stick to the other's going-against. Then, even if the other has power (*li*), they'll be unable to realize and apply that power.

我之緩急。隨彼之緩急。不自為緩急。則自然能黏連不斷。

My slowness or swiftness follows the other's slowness or swiftness. When I don't determine the speed on my own, then I naturally have the ability to stick, adhere and not lose connection.

然非兩臂鬆淨。不使有絲毫之拙力。不能相隨之如是巧合。

若兩臂有力。則喜自作主張。不能捨己從人矣。

Unless both of my arms are relaxed (*song*) and not using even the smallest bit of clumsy force, I won't be able to mutually follow and skillfully unite with the other. If either of my two arms has strength (*li*), then I'll happily act on my own inclinations and I won't be able to "give up the self and follow another"!

雖變化萬端。而理唯一貫。

Though the changes are endless, they are threaded together by one principle.

由著熟而漸悟懂。由懂而階及神明。

然非用力之久。

不能豁然貫通焉。

Your skill ripens from experience of touch: coming in contact with others. Then you can achieve gradual enlightenment and *dongjin* (understanding of *jin*). From *dongjin* you can achieve *shenming* (spiritual brightness). There is no sudden enlightenment: instead you must apply your efforts over a long time.

Cheng Manching identifies a [sequence of development](#) in taijiquan composed of three levels each in turn made up of three steps. The first level requires relaxing the body, the second opening the joints, and the third focuses on awareness and application. Within the third level, Cheng lists three steps: *tingjin* (listening to *jin*), *dongjin* (understanding *jin*), and *shenming* (spiritual brightness, spiritual clarity, or spiritual insight).

Regarding “sudden enlightenment,” there has long been a distinction among schools and approaches between gradual (渐悟, *jianwu*) and sudden enlightenment (顿悟, *dunwu*). This was a burning issue in Chan (Zen) schools in China in the Tang Dynasty. Buddhist teacher Guifeng Zongmi (780 - 841 CE) made a distinction between 5 different approaches to the question of enlightenment and cultivation. Each can be either gradual or sudden. And the cultivation can precede and be required for enlightenment, or can follow enlightenment and represent further development. The five approaches are:

gradual cultivation followed by sudden enlightenment,  
sudden cultivation followed by gradual enlightenment,  
gradual cultivation followed by gradual enlightenment,  
sudden enlightenment followed by gradual cultivation,  
sudden enlightenment and sudden cultivation together.

The Treatise here places taijiquan in the category of gradual cultivation and then gradual enlightenment.

虛領頂筋。氣沈丹田。不偏不倚。忽隱忽現。

*Xu ling ding jin*,

*Qi* sinks to the *dantian*,

Not inclining, not leaning,

Suddenly hidden, suddenly appearing.

*Xu ling ding jin* is the first of Yang Chengfu’s Ten Essentials. It literally means “empty alert headtop *jin*”.

In “not inclining, not leaning,” one term likely refers to leaning forward and backward, while the other refers to leaning side-to-side.

“Suddenly hidden, suddenly appearing” is a fixed expression equivalent to “now you see it, now you don’t.” Chen Weiming explains it saying:

忽隱忽現者。虛實無定。變化不測也。

Suddenly hidden, suddenly appearing means that empty and full must not be fixed (i.e., they must always be changing). Then your changes are unfathomable.

左重則左虛。右重則右杳。

If left is heavy, then empty; if right is heavy, then disappearing.

Presumably this means if the opponent is heavy on the left side, I respond with emptiness on that side. Similarly if the opponent is heavy on the right side, I respond by vanishing.

Chen’s commentary:

此二句。即解釋忽隱忽現之意。

與彼黏手。覺左邊重。則吾之左邊。與彼相黏處。即變為虛。右邊亦然。杳者。不可捉摸之意。與彼相黏。隨其意而化之。

不可稍有抵抗。使之處處落空。而無可如何。

These two phrases explain the meaning of “suddenly appearing, suddenly hidden.”

During Push Hands, if you feel the other’s left side heavy, stick to them, and immediately become empty. Similarly on the right, disappear and become obscure.

This is using the *yi* to make the other unable to feel you. It results from sticking to the other, following the *yi* and neutralizing (*hua*). Don’t offer even the slightest resistance and you will make every part of the other fall into emptiness with no way out.

仰之則彌高。俯之則彌深。

進之則愈長。退之則愈促。

Looking up, it seems even taller; Looking down, it seems even deeper.

Advancing, it’s further away. Retreating, it comes ever closer.

These lines can be interpreted in multiple ways since they leave the players and the point of view ambiguous. Interpreting them from the point of view of an opponent who is trying to reach you to apply force or get away from you, they could mean:

If they try to go over the top, you’re already there and above them. If they try to go under your root, you’re below them. If they try to advance to connect, you recede. If they try to pull away from you, you get even more connected to them.

Chen Weiming’s commentary assumes this point of view as shown in his explanation of the first phrase, *looking up even taller*:

彼仰則覺我彌高。

如捫天而難攀。

If the other looks up, then they feel that I am even taller

Like trying to touch the sky and being unable to reach it.

Chen concludes his discussion by saying:

皆言我之能黏隨不丟。使彼不得力也。

These words all describe my ability to apply sticking (*nian*) and

Following (*sui*) without losing connection (*bu diu*) [to the other],

Causing the other to be unable to achieve their power (*li*)!

The lines could also be addressing the difficulty of achieving high levels of the art with the goal always just out of reach. As Davis points out, these lines are very similar to lines from Analects 9.11 where Yan Yuan, a student of Confucius, sees the Master acting in accord with the highest principles and reflects on how hard that is to achieve:

Yan Yuan sighed in admiration saying: “Looking up to it, it gets higher. Boring into it, it gets harder. I see it in front, and suddenly it is behind me. My master skillfully guides his students a step at a time. He has broadened me with literature, disciplined me with propriety. I want to give up, but I can't. I have exhausted my ability, yet it seems as if there is something rising up in front of me. I want to follow it, but there is no way.”  
(Muller translation)

The two versions are even more obviously parallel in the original Chinese than they are in English. For example, consider the first phrase

*looking up then even taller*

*Classics:* 仰之則彌高

*Analects:* 仰之彌高

The only difference is the inclusion of 則, 'then', to separate the two clauses and make the Classics version fit the five character phrase scheme frequently used in this Treatise.

一羽不能加。蠅虫不能落。

人不知我。我獨知人。

英雄所向無敵。蓋皆由此而及也。

A single feather cannot be added, a fly cannot alight.

The other does not know me, I alone know the other.

In this way, a hero becomes invincible: in every place, without enemies.

This describes it all!

Chen's commentary on these lines says they describe the results of *qingling*. To achieve *qingling*, you must learn how to present no resistance. No resistance is *buding*, part of the formula *budiu buding*: without disconnection or resistance. Resistance can appear either advancing or retreating. Advancing, it manifests as “butting”: forcing your way into the other's space and position. Retreating, it shows up as bracing and resisting: using force to keep from following the other. Similarly when advancing, disconnection is falling short and not staying with the other; when retreating, disconnection appears in running away.

Chen Weiming's commentary:

羽不能加。蠅不能落。形容不頂之意。

技之精者。方能如此。

蓋其感覺靈敏。已到極處。稍觸即知。能工夫至此。

舉動輕靈。自然人不知我。我獨知人。

The saying “a feather cannot be added, a fly cannot alight” describes the skill of *buding* (no resistance). Use the *yi* so that your postures present no resistance (*buding*). Then you can achieve the skill of “feather cannot be added, fly cannot alight.”

Achieving this, your perceptions and awareness can reach an extreme of *ling* and *min* (alert and nimble). As the very first touch of another, you will immediately know their level of *gongfu*.

When all your movements (*dong*) are *qingling*, naturally you will find that “The other doesn't know me, I alone know the other.”



斯技旁門甚多。雖勢有區別。概不外壯欺弱。慢讓快耳。  
有力打無力。手慢讓手快。是皆先天自然之能。非關學力而有也。

There are many techniques and schools of martial arts. Even as their postures have differences, they are all the same in not going beyond the strong bullying the weak, the slow conceding to the fast, those with external power striking those without, and the slow hand giving way to the fast. These are all from innate, pre-heaven ability and not a result of studying internal power and developing it.

察四兩撥千斤之句。顯非力勝。  
觀耄耋禦衆之形。快何能為。

Consider the phrase “four *liang* (ounces) deflects one thousand *jin* (pounds).” Obviously this doesn’t describe winning by relying on force. Consider the appearance of an elderly person withstanding a crowd. How could that ability be simply speed?

立如枰準。活似車輪。  
偏沈則隨。雙重則滯。

Stand like a balance scale, moveable like a cartwheel.

Sinking on only one side enables following.

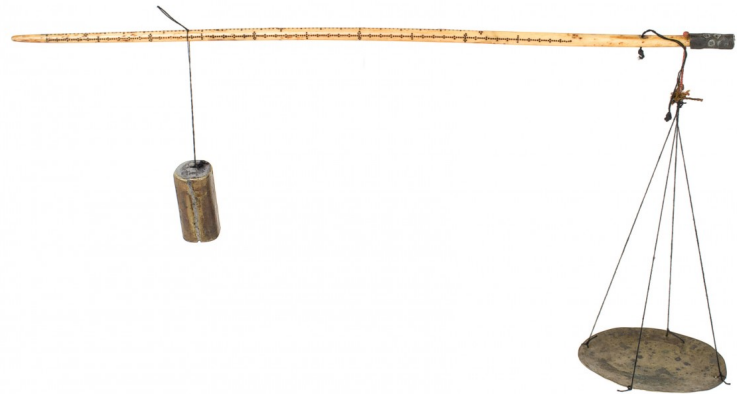
Double weighting causes stagnation.

In the first phrase, “balance scale” is 枰準, *ping zhun*, literally a level or ruler. And some translators read this line as saying that the body, e.g. the two shoulders, should be even and level, measured the same way that a level measures if a surface is horizontal.

I suspect this phrase refers to a weighing balance or balance scale, a 銖秤 whose archaic pronunciation *zhu ping* is similar to *ping zhun*. Balance scales were an early technological development, referenced in many writings during the Warring States era (roughly 500BCE - 200BCE). They are still in use today in markets when vendors need to weigh objects.

The balance apparatus as a whole is suspended from above. It has a top bar, on one end of which, the object to be weighed is placed in a pan. Either there’s a weight on the other end that can be moved along a graduated scale, or the central suspension point is moved between the pan and the weight. Either way, markings on the top bar indicate the weight of the object.

Here are some examples of balance scales:



The second phrase directs us to be “moveable like a cartwheel.” Cartwheel imagery appears in multiple places in the Classics to indicate round curving motions that occur freely, with a central stable axis critical to the functioning of the wheel. This is probably the primary meaning of this phrase.

Carts and cartwheels also occur in Internal Alchemy theory where carts drawn by three different animals represent the process as energy is increasingly refined in a process going up the spine and making it through each of the three gates in the spine (*weilu* or *mingmen* in lower spine, *jiuji* between shoulder blades and jade pillow / *yuchen* where the spine and skull meet). Passing the first gate, *jing* or animal vitality is refined to produce *qi*; passing the second, *qi* is refined to produce *shen* or spirit; passing the third, the spirit can return to void and emptiness (*kong* or *xu* depending on transmission). See more discussion of this subject in Cheng’s [Treatise 11](#) on the levels of Taijiquan.

每見數年純功。不能運化者。率皆自為人制。  
雙重之病未悟耳。欲避此病。須知陰陽。

Whenever you see a skilled martial artist who has practiced for many years but is unable to neutralize and instead is led around by the other, it is because they have not realized the error of double-weighting. Wanting to avoid this error, you must understand yin and yang.

粘即是走。走即是粘。

陽不離陰。陰不離陽。

陰陽相濟。方為懂功。

懂功後愈練愈精。

Sticking is yielding, yielding is sticking

Yang is not apart from yin, yin not apart from yang.

Yin and yang complete each other.

From this method you can develop *dongjin* (understanding *jin*)

After *dongjin*, more practice, more power (*jing*).

“Complete each other” is “mutually cross-the-river,” 相濟. This is a reference to the YiJing hexagrams 63 and 64, Before Completion and After Completion. literally, before and after “crossing the river.” The process of achieving some kind of enlightenment is often described using a metaphor of crossing a river. In this case, the enlightenment is to begin understanding *jin*, to develop *dongjin*.

The Before Completion hexagram contains *li*, the fire trigram, on top and *kan*, the water trigram below. This represents forces pulling away from each other: fire going up and water sinking. The After Completion hexagram reverses the trigrams: water is now on top, fire below. In Internal Alchemy, this means the fire can now heat the water, and send it up the spine, beginning the circulation process that refines raw vitality, *qi*, and spirit.

默識揣摩。漸至從心所欲。

本是舍己從人。

多悞舍近求遠。所謂差之毫厘。謬之千里。

Memorize this treatise and ponder it deeply.

Gradually, you’ll be able to follow the intention in your *xin*.

The foundation is “give up the self and follow others.”

Many make the mistake of “give up the near and seek the far.”

This is called “off by the width of a hair, miss by a thousand miles.”

“Follow the intention in your *xin*” is a literal translation of 從心所欲, a *chengyu* (fixed expression) used to mean “achieve your heart’s desire” or “do as you please.” “Give up the self to follow others,” “give up the near and seek the far,” and “off by the width of a hair, miss by a thousand miles” are also *chengyus*.

學者不可不詳辨焉。是為論。

Students cannot understand this without careful study.

This is the treatise!

# Understanding the Skills Developed by Practice of the 13 Postures

## 十三勢行功心解

ATTRIBUTED TO WU YUXIANG

The title of this Classic is difficult to translate. The final word 解, *jie* indicates that its form is an “explanation.” The first three characters 十三勢, *shisan shi* are Thirteen Postures. Then in the middle we have 行功心, *xing gong xin*: movement skill heart-mind.

I’ve chosen to read the last two characters, *xinjie*, as a compound which means Understanding (while acknowledging that *jie* tells us this piece serves as an explanation). *Xing gong* then becomes practice skills or skills developed by practice. *Xing* could also mean mobilize as in the first line of this text: using the mind, mobilize (*xing*) the *qi*. So another possible translation would be Understanding the Mobilization Skills of the Thirteen Postures.

Our first exposure to the Classics was via Ben Lo, he calls this text *Exposition of Insights into the Practice of the Thirteen Postures*. Wile refers to it as *Mental Elucidation of the Practice of the Thirteen Postures*. Waysun Liao titles it *Heartfelt Explanation of the Internal Exercise of the Thirteen Postures*. Those all feel clumsy to me. Although it’s certainly fun to reference the “Mental Elucidation” when we quote from this text in class. And “Mental Elucidation” does translate the final characters: 心解 *xin jie*, heart-mind explanation.

This is the only text over which one of the Wu brothers claims authorship. Wile, in his *Lost T'ai-chi Classics from the Late Ch'ing Dynasty*, translates several other texts attributed to the Wu brothers.

This text has many references to the Yang Eight Secret Words. These are 4 pairs of attributes we should embody:

*Zhongzheng*, centered and upright; *Anshu*, peaceful and comfortable;  
*Qingling*, light and alert; *Yuanhuo*, rounded and lively.

I’ve noted these words as they appear below.

以心行氣。務令沉着。乃能收斂入骨。  
以氣運身。務令順遂。乃能便利從心。

Using *xin*, mobilize (*xing*) the *qi*; Command it to sink and become calm;  
Then it will be able to gather and enter the bones.

Using *qi*, transport (*yun*) the body; Command it to respond smoothly;  
Then it will be able to easily follow the *xin*.

精神能提得起。則無遲重之虞。所謂頂頭懸也。

If the spirit (*jingshen*) achieves the skill of lifting and rising up, then you have no worry of slowness or heaviness. This is called “suspending the head-top.”

Slowness and heaviness are symptoms of double-weighting and the opposite of *qingling*, the skill we want.

意氣須換得靈。乃有圓活之妙。所謂變轉虛實也。

Achieving the interchange of *yi* and *qi*, you'll be alert (*ling*).

Only then will you reap the marvel of roundness and liveliness (*yuan huo*).

This is called “the alternation of empty and full.”

Note that this is the first instance in the Classics of the non-dual pair of “empty and full.” In current theory, we think of “empty and full” as the primary Taiji polarity and often describe taijiquan as the martial art of separating empty and full. In the Classics, following Zhu Xi, the Taiji polarity is first conceived of as “stillness and activity” and then mapped to yin and yang. Empty and full are just another example of this polarity.

發勁須沉着鬆淨。專主一方。

To *fajin*, you must sink, relax thoroughly, and concentrate in one direction.

*Fajin* is the skill of issuing and expressing power or force. We usually refer to *fajin* as discharging or issuing. *Jin* is skilled, refined force or power as opposed to *li*, clumsy, raw force. There are many different *jin* skills: some are particular ways to shape and deliver your power and others are skills having to do with *jin* as a whole. For example, in *pengjin*, wardoff *jin*, your force expands in every direction to meet the opponent while in *lujin*, rollback *jin*, your force leads the opponent, subtly guides them past you, and allows them to fall into emptiness. These are both examples of particular types or shapes of power.

*Fajin* is a skill with *jin*: it's the act of issuing your power regardless of configuration. E.g., to express in an expansive meeting shape, you'd *fa* your wardoff *jin*. To express as you lead an opponent past you, you'd *fa* your rollback *jin*.

*Fajin* is often thought of as sudden explosive releases of power and these are the kinds of flashy demos you'll see. But, any expression of power, whether fast or slow, explosive or smooth, short or long, is a type of *fa*.

*Fa* is closely paired with *fang*, releasing. And *fang*, a release, is often the trigger for issuing power. The analogy of a bow is frequently used. The power is stored in the bow string and then issued (*fa*) into the arrow when you release (*fang*) the grip on the bow string. The *fang* happens suddenly and is a result of letting go. No power will be issued (*fa*) if you hold on to the bow string and gradually let it go slack rather than releasing it in a moment. Even worse would be trying to fire an arrow by pushing forcefully on the bow string! Finally, the *fa* will be of no use unless you first carefully aim. There are multiple references in the Classics to the bow, releasing via *fang*, and the resultant issue (*fa*) of *jin*.

立身須中正安舒。支撐八面。

When standing, the body must be centered and upright (*zhong zheng*), and peaceful and comfortable (*an shu*). This way, you support the eight directions.

The Eight Directions represent the four sides, e.g. North, South, East, West, with the four corners, one between each pair of sides. These directions are always relative to yourself: whichever direction you face is South, to your left is East, to your right is West, and behind you is North. Eight directions basically means from any direction, i.e., that by being centered and upright, peaceful and comfortable, you'll be able to handle force coming at you from any direction.

Eight directions is also an indirect reference to the eight trigrams and to the eight different hand techniques of the Thirteen Postures.

Chen's commentary:

頂頭懸。則自然中正。鬆淨。則自然安舒。穩如泰山。則自然能撐支八面。

With the headtop suspended, you'll naturally be *zhong zheng* (balanced and upright).

By relaxing (*song*) thoroughly, you'll naturally be *an shu* (peaceful and comfortable).

Be stable like Mount Tai. Then you'll naturally be able to support the Eight directions.

(Naturally is *ziran*, a Daoist term meaning literally self-suchness, or naturally, via essence or intrinsic nature, easily or effortlessly.)

行氣如九曲珠。無往不利。

(氣遍身軀之謂)

運勁如百煉鋼。無堅不摧。

Mobilize (*xing*) the *qi* like a pearl with nine bends so it can smoothly reach all points.

(This is known as "*qi* everywhere throughout the body.")

Transport (*yun*) the *jin* like steel folded a hundred times so it can overcome any obstacle.

The pearl with nine bends is a surprising image. Davis explains it saying:

"The pearl with a crooked passage is used here as a metaphor for the body and the maze of vessels and energy pathways, and the challenge of moving the *qi* through it. Legend has it that pearls such as this were made with one passage carved into nine bends, used to help develop young girls' finger dexterity for embroidery. The nine bends, of course, made the pearl very difficult to thread. One story portrays Confucius learning a secret for threading it from a young girl. She instructs him to tie a silk thread around an ant, and then tempt the ant to go through the pearl's passage by placing some honey at the far end of it." (Davis, p128)

This image suggests skill, dexterity, and penetrating flexibility to reach even the smallest parts of the body.

The nine bends may also be referencing the nine joints or nine gates in the body: shoulder, elbow, wrist in the arm; hip, knee, and ankle in the leg; base of spine, the *jiaji* point between the shoulder blades, and the *yuchen*, jade pillow where the spine and skull meet. The *qi* needs to reach the distal end of each of these segments: heart of palm, bubbling well in the foot, and crown of head. Threading the nine-bend pearl to reach all points may refer to opening each of the joints and reaching to the far end of the body.

The parenthetical remark '(This is known as "*qi* everywhere throughout the body".)' is in Chen Weiming's version but not in most other versions. It appears to be a bit of commentary added at some point that became part of the main text by the time that text reached Chen. Without the remark in the middle, the first and third lines are completely parallel.

行氣如九曲珠。無往不利。

運勁如百煉鋼。無堅不摧。

Mobilize *qi* like nine bend pearl. No direction not reached.

Transport *jin* like hundred fold steel. No barrier not overcome.

形如搏兔之鶻。神如捕鼠之貓。

Hold yourself like a falcon pouncing on a rabbit;

Let your spirit be like a cat catching a rat.

"Hold yourself" is 形, *xing*, shape, appearance or manifestation. This is the same word describing the hands in "rooted in the feet ... manifest in the hands". We could say "Your shape should be like a falcon ..." or "Your appearance should be like a falcon ..." Some translators say "Your form should be like a falcon ..." but that creates possible confusion with the taijiquan form.

I chose "hold yourself" to emphasize the active nature of *xing* / manifesting over a more passive description of how your shape should appear. Actively holding yourself like a pouncing falcon is akin to "dancer's poise": an active and dynamic way of holding the body and moving.

"A cat catching a rat" implies a degree of alertness (*ling*) and reminds me of the sword move Alert Cat Catches Rat where the cat is ready to pounce, covering as much ground as needed.

Chen's commentary on these lines:

搏兔之鶻。盤旋不定。捕鼠之貓。待機而動。

"Falcon pouncing on a rabbit" means to circle indefinitely without any fixed point.

"Cat catching a rat" means waiting for the opportunity (*ji*) and then acting decisively.

As I thought about these lines initially, I realized I had been treating them as almost identical. I was picturing a falcon waiting somewhere, about to pounce on a rabbit, similar to how a cat might wait in front of a mouse hole to catch the mouse when it emerged. Thinking this way, both lines are addressing the alertness and readiness to act decisively.

However, falcons don't pounce from perches. Instead, they circle high in the air and when they see prey, dive down to catch the prey. Falcons can actually reach speeds of up to 200 mph during their dives. (Falcons also primarily hunt other birds rather than ground animals such as rabbits or hares. We'll return to this below.)

With this perspective, both of these lines could be describing an alertness and readiness to act starting from two ends of the *jing-dong*, stillness-activity polarity. The falcon is circling and watching for prey, a very active way of holding itself, ready to release in an instant and plunge towards its prey. The cat is sitting motionless and coiled, a very still way of holding itself, ready to spring in an instant to catch its prey.

Consider how a circling falcon holds itself.



This is a very active posture. The falcon is literally holding itself up on its wings. I used “Hold yourself like a falcon” rather than “Your shape should be like a falcon” to try to convey the feeling of active engagement in your posture illustrated by the falcon.

Louis Swaim, who has done significant work translating the Yang family writings and exploring the references in the writings, believes this line “*xing* like a falcon pouncing on a rabbit” is a reference to a *chengyu*. *Chengyus* are traditional fixed expressions often consisting of four characters. The referenced *chengyu* here is 兔起鶻落, “hare rises, falcon plunges.” Swaim says:

This phrase has become an idiom connoting action that is bold and agile – things coming together in a perfect captured moment of simultaneity. The image originates from an essay on painting bamboo, by the eleventh-century poet-painter Su Dongpo (1037-1101). I've translated part of the essay here ... As one reads the essay, it becomes clear that it is about more than painting bamboo, and applies to one's interface with nature, or to what the Daoist thinker Zhuangzi referred to as “nurturing life.”



When bamboo starts to grow, its joints and leaves are already complete in a sprout of merely one inch. Emerging cicada-belly like, snake-scale like, then ascending like swords to as high as eighty feet, it is born with these qualities in it.

Now when a painter paints it joint by joint, and simply adds on leaf by leaf, how could this be bamboo? Hence, in painting bamboo, one must first get the complete bamboo in your mind, grasp the brush, and look carefully. Then when you see what you want to paint, rise up and pursue it. Arouse the brush to directly follow in order to chase down what you see, just as the rabbit rises when the falcon swoops down [兔起鶻落]. If you let up even slightly, it will be lost. What Wen Tong taught me was like this. I am unable to attain it, but my mind knows how it comes to be so.

When the mind knows how it comes to be so, but one is unable to make it so, this is because the inner and outer are not one; the mind and the hand are not in accord [心手不相應]. It is the flaw of insufficient study.

So, whenever there's a case where you can see something within, but you cannot bring it to fruition, it is because what you may apprehend in your ordinary daily life can suddenly be lost in a crucial moment of application. How can this only be about bamboo?

(Swaim, first post in falcon/rabbit discussion.  
See Sources section below for URL)

As mentioned above, falcons don't naturally hunt hares or rabbits. However, in casual usage, many people don't make a strong distinction between falcons, hawks, and other birds of prey. It's likely that the authors of the classics also didn't make such a distinction and used the term 鶻 *hu* without intending to specifically reference falcons rather than hawks or eagles.

There was a strong tradition of falconry among the peoples of the asian steppes which then entered China from Mongolia and what is now called Xinjiang in the west and from Manchuria in the north.



The primary birds of prey used in *berkutchi*, or “eagle hunting,” as traditional Mongolian falconry is called, are golden eagles. Hawks and several species of falcons are also trained as hunting partners. Falconry was thus imported into China along with other Mongolian traditions such as hunting and fighting from horseback and wrestling as a martial art. Presumably these references in the Classics are influenced by that and we should interpret “falcon” as any of the general class of birds of prey.

靜如山岳。動如江河。

Still (*jing*) like a lofty mountain; Move (*dong*) like a great river.

This verse is another reference to Zhu Xi’s polarity of stillness and calmness vs. activity and movement.

*Jiang-he*, 江河, is translated as “great river.” Each of 江, *jiang* and 河, *he* by themselves can be a generic name for any river. *Jiang* can also mean the Chang Jiang (Yangtze) River in specific. Chang Jiang is literally Long River. Similarly *he* can mean the Huang He (Yellow) River specifically. Together, as in these lines, *jianghe* can mean any large river (aka “a great river”) or the Chang Jiang and Huang He (Yellow) Rivers as a pair.

蓄勁如開弓。發勁如放箭。

Store *jin* like drawing a bow; Issue *jin* like releasing (*fang*) an arrow.

曲中求直。蓄而後發。

In the heart of the curve, seek the straight; Gather, and then issue (*fa*).

Chen Weiming's commentary:

曲是化人之勁。勁已化去。必向彼身求一直綫。勁可發矣。

The curve is how you neutralize (*hua*) the other's force. Once their force is neutralized, respond. Aim in one single direction through the other's body and issue your *jin*.

力由脊發。步隨身換。

*Li* (strength) passes through the spine to issue (*fa*); The steps follow the changes of the body.

In this case, *Li* or strength is synonymous with *jin*, rather than meaning the clumsy force we avoid in taijiquan. Older texts sometimes substitute words that we today treat as having different meanings. E.g., *li* and *jin* being used interchangeably or *xin* and *yi* as synonyms. I suspect some of these fine-grained distinctions are a result of later generations of practitioners.

We asked Ben about this line and he laughed and said it was just a typo. The text was referring to *jin*, not *li*.

收即是放。斷而復連。

Receiving is immediately releasing (*fang*); Breaking and then reconnecting.

Receiving here refers to receiving force from the other, rather than running away from the incoming force or bracing to resist the force. Release, *fang*, then happens immediately and automatically.

Continuing with the bow metaphor for *fajin*, Ben Lo told us that receiving the opponent's force was what stretched the bow: "They stretch the bow for you." Once stretched, you release when given the opportunity.

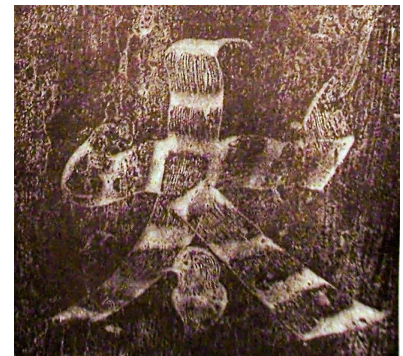
Breaking and reconnecting could refer to several things: breaking the other's root and then reconnecting to them as they're pushed out; a break in the connection between you and the other followed by an immediate reconnection; a break on a physical level while the awareness remains connected as described below by "the *jin* may be broken, but the *yi* is not."

Davis points out that break, *duan*, and connect, *lian*, describe techniques in Chinese calligraphy:

Not only must each stroke in a character be connected, but all the characters within a calligraphic piece must connect with each other. Artists will sometimes use a technique called *feibai* (literally "flying white") in which the brush skips briefly into the air within a stroke. The stroke still seems connected because the intention (*yi*) is maintained even over gaps in the ink. (Davis, p131)

Wu Zetien of the Tang Dynasty was a proponent of the *feibai* technique. She's often referred to as Empress Wu. All male emperors took the title 皇帝, *Huangdi*, supreme ruler, even when a woman was the actual ruler, e.g., as a regent ruling in the name of a child. Wu is the only person publicly identified as a woman who took the title *Huangdi*. I therefore refer to her as Emperor Wu. She is a person to whom the image of "rolling up the screen" applies. (Our sword form has a move called "Rolling up the Screen.") She was initially the chief consort of Tang Gaozang (Emperor Gaozang of the Tang) and his primary advisor. After his death, she ruled as the Dowager Emperor through two of her children who sat successively on the throne. In these times, she was said to have ruled from "behind the screen." After the second child's death, she "rolled up the screen," assumed the title *Huangdi*, and ruled publicly.

*Feibai* is a technique which can be done in any style of Chinese calligraphy. It's usually associated with 行書, Running Script, or 草書, Grass Script, both loose and flowing calligraphy styles. The technique requires an unusual brush. Most calligraphy brushes come to a point at the tip of the brush hairs. *Feibai* is done with a flat brush that connects and disconnects to the page so that the strokes appear ribbon-like, bent in 3 dimensions. Here are three portions of a calligraphy piece by Emperor Wu titled Birds where you can see the almost 3 dimensional strokes of the characters:



Taijiquan and calligraphy are sometimes described as related arts. In this passage, we find the *duan* and *lian* techniques in each art. Two other notions that come from calligraphy and appear in taijiquan are 順, *shun*, "going with" and 逆, *ni*, "going against." In taijiquan, these refer to going with or going against another person and also to having the hands rotate in sync, going with the waist, and having them out of phase, going against the waist. In calligraphy, when the brush tip follows along with the stroke in the same direction, this is *shun*. When the stroke reverses to bunch the tip up, this is *ni*.

Cheng Manching wrote about calligraphy in words that could easily apply to Taijiquan:

Balance, straightness, ease, and stability are our parameters, our guiding rules. The person with self-respect follows his heart's intention while staying within these parameters. When brush and ink possess these four basic rules, your cultivation becomes evident.

What is the most important rule for self-respect? Nourish your *qi*! ... This *qi* allows the dragon to safely lie dormant and unrecognized; when it does rise and roams the heavens, people recognize its spirit. Calligraphy must be approached in the same way and works that do not are unworthy of discussion.

(Hennessy, Five Excellences, p19)

往復須有摺疊。進退須有轉換。

In meeting and responding, there must be folding.

In advancing and retreating, there must be changing.

The idea of “folding” is often confusing when people encounter it here in the Classics. We’ve been taught three different interpretations. Maggie Newman taught us that folding is how you curve or bend the body, storing for a release. And unfolding is what happens as the movement moves through the sequential parts of the body as it expands and the discharge happens.

(Newman, personal instruction)

Wolfe Lowenthal primarily taught it as a yielding and neutralizing technique. He identified 3 “gates<sup>10</sup>” of the body: the shoulder, the waist, and the ankle that should be used sequentially to neutralize the other’s attack:

The technique of folding is to open the first two gates, one after the other; ideally the third should never be opened ... Folding allows the player in the neutralizing mode to in effect assimilate the attacker’s range of movement without sacrificing very much of her own.

Think of an attack as having a potential range from rear to front of 100 percent... The Neutralizer has a similar range, from front to rear, of 100 percent. By allowing her arm to fold in from the shoulder and skillfully turning her waist as her opponent attacks, the Neutralizer can “eat up” the full 100 percent of his attack while only sacrificing a little of her own... At this point, she has opened the “gate of the shoulder.”

Then as desperation takes hold in him, as it likely will, and he lunges in an off-balance attack, she has 80 percent or so left to deal with his suicidal behavior... As he lunges, she withdraws, using as much of her 80 percent as she needs... This withdrawal is “opening the gate of the waist.”

Being pushed is having the gate of the ankle opened. Good folding technique should prevent you from being pushed, so this third gate need never be opened.

(Lowenthal, p69, 70)

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<sup>10</sup> Note that Wolfe’s usage of “gate” and “opening” are different from how we normally use these terms in teaching and practice.

Ben Lo described folding as a technique for attacking where you hit with each point of the arm in sequence: If you push towards the other with your hand and they deflect your hand, you fold and continue attacking with the elbow. If they manage to deflect your elbow, you fold again and continue attacking with the shoulder. (Lo, personal instruction)

Chen's commentary on these lines:

摺疊者。亦變虛實也。其所變之虛實。最為微細。太極截勁。往往用摺疊。外面看似未動。而其內已有摺疊。進退必變換步法。雖退仍是進也。

Folding is a result of the alternation of empty and full. The space needed for this interchange of empty and full is very tiny. Taiji intercepting *jin* (*jie jin*) frequently uses folding. Externally it appears that you're not moving while internally you're already folding. It is necessary to alternate the stepping so that retreating (stepping back) is also advancing (stepping forward).

Davis quotes Chen from elsewhere describing *jie jin*: "If the opponent attacks me with his fist and I don't have time to change, I can use an intercepting *jin* (*jie jin*) to bounce him out" (Davis, p132)

極柔軟。然後極堅剛。

Reach the utmost of softness, then reach the utmost of hardness.

Hardness and force are necessary for a functional martial art. There are indeed some pushes and throws that truly use no force, e.g., when the other is fooled into pushing into empty space, losing their balance, or throwing themselves. Arts like Judo and Aikido focus on these techniques. But, many strikes and pushes, especially those using an explosive *fajin*, absolutely require force. When you discharge into the opponent and they're thrown, you're causing a mass (their body) to accelerate, often significantly. By definition, this involves force. Newton's first law of mechanics defines force as mass x acceleration. There's really no way around this.

However, good discharges *feel* like they use *no force*. You shouldn't feel the force of the push and the other should find themselves accelerating backwards without having felt a strong hard force on their surface. The work is in the setup, the actual issuing of force is effortless. Just as shooting an arrow: the work is in drawing the bowstring and aiming, the actual firing of the arrow is effortless as you let go.

If you push your partner and the push feels powerful to you, then you're spending some of the force of the push inside yourself. It's likely that your arms and body are tense and as the push comes through you, some of that force is wasted in your own body. We want all of the force to go into the other person, passing through our bodies as if we were transparent. And from the pusher's point of view, this feels like ultimate softness and no force.

This line is telling us that there is a very definite progression. First achieve ultimate softness and the feeling of no force. Then, automatically, ultimate hardness will appear. You feel softness while the other feels the hardness.

There are many arts and practices that go just the other way: trying to build force and hardness and then using that for softness. For example, a common relaxation technique is to lie down and scan the body, tightening each muscle in sequence as much as you can and then relaxing it. This can be very useful for people who don't have good sensory perception of their bodies and the baseline level of tension they carry.

Some martial arts teach that you can become flexible, responsive, and "soft" by being as hard as you can. Similarly a number of Push Hands practitioners believe they will develop softness and sensitivity by pushing with hard resistant people. I have to admit I've never touched hands with such a practitioner and thought they had anything like the softness of taijiquan, even if they were able to push me.

The Classics here are telling us not to take that path. Don't imagine you'll become soft by being hard. Instead, strive to reach the extreme of softness. And then allow hardness, as experienced by the other person, to develop from there. Don't ever strive for hardness, not even the least bit.

能呼吸。然後能靈活。

From the skill of breathing, you can achieve the skill of being agile (*ling*) and lively (*luo*).

Chen Weiming commentary:

吸為提為收。呼為沈為放。

Breathing in acts to lift and receive (*shou*).

Breathing out acts to sink and release (*fang*).

氣以直養而無害。

勁以曲蓄而有餘。

The *qi*, by means of the upright, is cultivated excellently.

The *jīn*, by means of the curved, is stored in abundance.

直, *Zhi* is upright, vertical, straight, and direct. It's sometimes translated as "rectitude." Given taijiquan's focus on standing upright and vertical, I've chosen to translate it as upright. It would also make sense to use straight or direct to contrast with the curved and bent in the next line.

Chen Weiming's commentary on the first two lines regarding *qi* and *jīn* quotes Mengzi:

孟子曰。吾善養吾浩然之氣。至大至剛。

以直養而無害。則塞乎天地之間。

Mengzi said: I have the virtue of cultivating my flood-like *qi*. As a result, it's vast and extremely strong.

Using the upright, I can cultivate without harm

(Until my *qi*) fills all the spaces/gaps under heaven. Oh!

This is an interesting passage for Chen to quote. He's presumably using it to emphasize the role of uprightness and rectitude in cultivating the *qi*. Mengzi, in the quoted section, describes flood-like *qi* as a high level of a multi-stage process beginning with developing an unperturbed mind.

Recall from the Introduction that Mengzi described four aspects of virtue -- benevolence, righteousness, wisdom, and propriety -- each of which is born from a quality of the *xin*, e.g., benevolence arising from having the *xin* of compassion. The task of moral development is cultivating and nourishing the sprouts of these virtues as they're born from the *xin*, heart-mind. This self-cultivation process is described using a farming metaphor: cultivating the sprouts is like growing a food crop.

(All Mengzi and Zhu Xi quotes below are from van Norden's Mengzi translation, p37ff, with minor edits for clarity.)

The passage comes from a dialog between Mengzi and his student Gongsun Chou that begins with a discussion of righteousness and justice as applied to governing. Mengzi says that the essential for developing righteousness, 義, *yi*, is an "unperturbed heart," 不動心, *wudongxin*, a not-moving or not-active mind. Gongsun asks what the way to develop an unperturbed heart is and Mengzi replies that it requires courage, giving an example of a soldier who has no fear because he's not attached to the outcome of the battle. Mengzi then quotes Confucius, as relayed by one of his students, saying:

The Master said: If I examine myself and am not upright, even if opposed by a man in baggy rags, I would not try to intimidate him. If I examine myself and I am upright, even if it is thousands or tens of thousands of people who oppose me, I shall go forward.

Gongsun asks about developing courage and maintaining the unperturbed heart and Mengzi replies:

Your will (*zhi*) is the commander of the *qi*. *Qi* fills the body. When your will is fixed somewhere, the *qi* will set up camp there. Hence it is said, "Maintain your will. Do not injure the *qi*."

[This saying "maintain will, do not injure *qi*" means:] When your will is unified, it moves the *qi*. When the *qi* is unified, it moves your will. Now, running and stumbling have to do with the *qi*, but nonetheless, they perturb one's heart.

Mengzi uses the example of stumbling as indicative that the will and *qi* were not unified -- if they had been, then you wouldn't have stumbled. And because the *qi* and will were perturbed and you stumbled, so your *xin* was also perturbed.



Mengzi's sayings "Maintain the will (*zhi*)" and "Let the will be the commander of *qi*" are both familiar and surprising to us: familiar since they're almost sayings from the Classics; and surprising because he specifies 志 (*zhi*, will) where we'd expect to see 心, *xin*, or 意, *yi*. Note that *zhi*, like *yi*, uses *xin* as the radical (look at the bottom of either of the characters) and thus is indicated as an aspect of the mind. As we mentioned above, terminology has shifted slightly over the centuries and we'll find instances where, e.g., we'd specify *yi* or *jin* and instead we find *xin* or *li* in the text. I think this is another of those instances and we can understand these lines as if they said "Maintain the awareness (*yi*) and do not injure the *qi*" or "Let the *xin* be the commander of *qi*."

The passage Chen Weiming quoted comes next after maintaining the will and avoiding injury to the *qi*. Chen only quoted part of it, and left out the story about the Farmer from Song. Here's a fuller quote from the passage, including commentary by Zhu Xi:

敢問夫子惡乎長？

曰：我知言，我善養吾浩然之氣。

敢問何謂浩然之氣？

曰：難言也。其為氣也，至大至剛，以直養而無害，則塞于天地之間。其為氣也，配義與道；無是，餒也。是集義所生者，非義襲而取之也。行有不慊於心，則餒矣。我故曰，告子未嘗知義，以其外之也。必有事焉而勿正，心勿忘，勿助長也。無若宋人然：宋人有閔其苗之不長而揠之者，芒芒然歸。謂其人曰：『今日病矣，予助苗長矣。』其子趨而往視之，苗則槁矣。天下之不助苗長者寡矣。以為無益而舍之者，不耘苗者也；助之長者，揠苗者也。非徒無益，而又害之。

(<https://ctext.org/mengzi/gong-sun-chou-i>)

Gongson Chou asked: What do you excel in, Master?

Mengzi: I understand doctrines [words]. I am good at cultivating my floodlike *qi*.

Gongson Chou: May I ask what is meant by floodlike *qi*?

Mengzi: It is difficult to explain. It is a *qi* that is supremely great and supremely unyielding. If one cultivates it with uprightness and does not harm it, it will fill up the space between Heaven and Earth. It is a *qi* that harmonizes with righteousness and the Way. Without these it starves.

Zhu Xi commentary, quoting one of his teachers, Cheng Yi:

Cheng Yi explains: Heaven and humans are one. There is no division. The floodlike *qi* is just my *qi*. If it is nurtured and not harmed, then "it will fill up the space between Heaven and Earth." But as soon as there is an obstruction from the tiniest selfish thought, one is discontented and starved.

One must work at it, but do not assume success. One should not forget the heart, but neither should one "help" it grow. Do not be like the man from Song. There was a farmer who, concerned lest his sprouts not grow, pulled on them. Oblivious, he returned home and said to his family "Today I am worn out. I helped the sprouts to grow." His son, horrified, rushed out and looked at them. The sprouts were all withered.

Those in the world who do not “help” the sprouts to grow are few. Those who abandon them, thinking it will not help, are those who do not weed their sprouts. Those who “help” them grow are those who pull on the sprouts. Not only does this not help, it harms them.

Zhu Xi commentary:

Those who nurture the *qi* must take accumulating as their task but not anticipate its effectiveness. If they happen to be filled with floodlike *qi*, they should not forget what they are in service to, and must not do anything to “help” it grow. This is the process for accumulating and nurturing the *qi*.

心為令。氣為旗。腰為纛。

The *xin* is the commander, the *qi* the flag, the *yao* the banner.

Re *xin* as commander, *qi* as flag, and *yao* as banner: This is a reference to military signaling from a commander to specific forces. The flag was used to signal from the commander to the leaders of all the troops; Each leader of a group of troops then used a banner to signal just to that group.

先求開展。後求緊湊。乃可臻於縝密矣。

First seek the open and expanded, then seek the compact and gathered. In this way, you will make meticulous progress!

Chen Weiming commentary:

無論練架子及推手。皆須先求開展。

開展則腰腿皆動。無微不到。

至功夫純熟。再求緊湊。

由大圈而歸於小圈。由小圈而歸於無圈。

所謂放之則彌六合。卷之則退藏於密也。

In practicing both form and push hands, you must first seek open and expanded.

From open and expanded, the waist (*yao*) and legs are active (*dong*), even if the motions appear small.

Once you have *gongfu* skill, then seek the compact and gathered.

From big circles arrive at small circles. From small circles arrive at no-circle.

This is called: “release (*fang*) it and fill the six directions. Roll it up and withdraw and hide in the miniscule. Oh!”

又曰。彼不動。己不動。彼微動。己先動。

It is said: The other doesn't move, I do not move. The other moves the slightest bit, I move first.

勁似鬆非鬆。將展未展。勁斷意不斷。

*Jin* that seems relaxed is not relaxed. *Jin* about to expand is not expanded. Even if the *jin* is broken, the *yi* is not broken.

Chen Weiming interprets these lines as applying to the opponent and things you should watch for:

似鬆非鬆。將展未展。皆言聽彼之勁。蓄勢待機。

機到則放。放時勁似斷而意仍不斷也。

“Seems relaxed, not relaxed, about to expand, not expanded”: these words describe how you should listen (*ting*) to the other’s *jin*, gathering your posture (*shi*) to wait for the opportunity.

When the opportunity arrives, immediately release (*fang*). At the moment of release, the *jin* may be broken but your *yi* is not disconnected.

又曰。先在心。後在身。

It is also said: first in the *xin*, then in the body.

腹鬆氣沉入骨。

神舒體靜。

刻刻在心。

The belly is relaxed, the *qi* sinks and enters the bones.

The spirit is comfortable, the body (*ti*) is calm (*jing*).

At every moment, focus the *xin*.

Body above is 体, *ti*, body, essence, substance. Most mentions of “body” in the Classics are 身, *shen* which is the concrete physical body. *Ti* is a more abstract idea and frequently part of the pair 体用, *ti-yong*, form and function, substance and application, body and usage. *Ti-yong* is a concept found widely and we should always recognize a reference to the pair when we see either character by itself.

切記一動無有不動。一靜無有不靜。

Always remember, with any movement (*dong*), there is nothing not moving; with any stillness (*jing*), there is nothing not still.

Chen Weiming commentary:

內外相合。上下相連。故能如此。

When internal and external mutually harmonize and upper and lower mutually follow, then you will have this skill.

(Note that “internal external mutually harmonize” and “upper and lower mutually follow” are two of Yang Chengfu’s [Ten Essential Points](#).)

牽動往來氣貼背。而斂入脊骨。

As you lead the motion back and forth, the *qi* sticks to the back. And collects there, entering the spine.

內固精神。外示安逸。

Internally, the spirit is firm; Externally, display peace (*an*) and ease.

邁步如貓行。運勁如抽絲。

Take steps like a cat walking; Transport the *jìn* like drawing silk.

全身意在精神。不在氣。在氣則滯。

有氣者無力。無氣者純剛。

The whole body's *yì* is on the spirit, not on the *qì*. If it is on the *qì*, then it is stagnant. Focusing on the *qì*, there is no power. Focusing [on the spirit and] not on the *qì*, there is pure hardness.

In his [Eleventh Treatise](#) on progression in taijiquan, Cheng Manching comments on these lines saying:

This statement is very strange. Almost as if it's saying that, regarding *qì*, *qì* alone is not sufficiently important. In fact, this is true.

When one's skill with *qì* achieves perfection, and advances to the application of *jingshen*, This is what's known as the force of non-force (*li* of non-*li*). It's also called *shen-li* (Spirit Power).

氣若車輪。腰如車軸。

The *qì* is like a cart's wheel, the *yao* is like a cart's axle.

# Thirteen Postures Song

ANONYMOUS

This is the first *ge* or Song included in the Classics. Unlike the previous texts which may follow a rough verse scheme but sometimes diverge from fixed syllable counts and rhyme schemes, this Song is truly versified: each line consists of seven characters and adjacent lines are often very parallel.

In order to make the verse structure of the Song clear, I've put all the Chinese text in a single block and then followed with the English translation, rather than interposing the two. I've added line numbers to the right of the Chinese text and next to the translation as appropriate so we can easily refer to the relevant text from the commentary and discussion.

Note that getting exactly seven characters in each line requires some adjustments to the text. For example, in the first line, the Thirteen Postures are referred to as 十三總勢 rather than 十三勢 -- an extra meaningless character, 總, is inserted following "thirteen" (十三) in order to pad out the line to get seven characters.

Chen Weiming made a single comment on this song:

十三勢歌之意。前已講明。故不復注解。

The ideas described by this 13 Postures Song have already been made clear so there's no need for any further commentary.

十三總勢莫輕視。命意源頭在腰隙。	(1, 2)
變轉虛實須留意。氣遍身軀不少滯。	(3,4)
靜中觸動動猶靜。因敵變化示神奇。	(5,6)
勢勢揆心須用意。得來不覺費工夫。	(7,8)
刻刻留心在腰間。腹內鬆淨氣騰然。	(9, 10)
尾閭中正神貫頂。滿身輕利頂頭懸。	(11, 12)
仔細留心向推求。屈伸開合聽自由。	(13, 14)
入門引路須口授。工夫無息法自修。	(15, 16)
若言體用何為準。意氣君來骨肉臣。	(17, 18)
想推用意終何在。益壽延年不老春。	(19, 20)
歌兮歌兮百卅字。字字真切義無遺。	(21, 22)
若不向此推求去。枉費工夫貽歎息。	(23, 24)

The Thirteen Postures should not be taken lightly;

The meaning originates in the *yao*. (2)

Meaning, 命意, *mingyi* (line 2) is made up of two characters: *ming*, life, destiny, mandate, and *yi*, awareness, mind. We could also read this as "the mind's destiny originates in the *yao*."

The *yi* must focus on the interchange of empty and full;

The *qi* is everywhere in the body, not stagnant in the least.  
Stillness (*jing*) within movement (*dong*), movement also has stillness;  
Adapting to the opponent, change and neutralize (*hua*), show marvels!  
Posture by posture, ensure the *xin* applies the *yi*; (7)  
You must work hard to achieve the level where this happens effortlessly.  
Moment by moment, keep the *xin* in the *yao*; (9)  
The belly is relaxed internally completely, and then the *qi* soars!

Note the parallel structure in lines 7 and 9: 勢勢, posture by posture, and 刻刻, moment by moment.

The *weilu* (base of spine) is upright and balanced (*zhongzheng*); The spirit passes all the way to the head-top.

The whole body is *qingling*; The head-top is as if suspended. (12)

I've amended the Chinese text here. Where I have read 輕靈, *qingling*, the original text (line 12) has 輕利, *qingli*, which really doesn't make much sense. *Qingli* means "light and sharp" or "being unconcerned about possible gain (taking profit lightly)." Some translators have tried to read *qingli* as similar to, but not quite the same as *qingli*. Others, e.g., Lo, et al., just skip over the issue and translate it as though the text had *qingling*.

I checked a number of sources for the Chinese text. They all have *qingli* rather than *qingling*. So, I suspect the error, assuming it is a transcription error, was made early and then copied into subsequent editions.

While some books were block printed (as discussed in the Introduction), many continued to be hand copied. A small circulation manuscript like a secret martial arts manual was very likely to be hand copied. In hand copying, there were usually several scribes involved: one would read the source manuscript aloud, and the others would write it line by line. This is a process that can easily result in transcription errors where *ling* could be misheard as *li*.

Carefully pay attention and study the directions [of the changes];  
Listen (*ting*) during bending and extending, opening and closing so they can alternate freely.

“Freely” is 自由, *ziyou*, literally self-caused or self-directed. It’s used to indicate political freedom, free climbing, free gymnastics, free airing of views. While I was looking into this, I came across a collection of poetry from Mao Zedong that includes a poem written in 1925 while he was a student in Changsha. Interestingly, the poem is written in Literary Chinese, rather than Vernacular Chinese (Chinese as actually spoken by real people). The use of Vernacular Chinese was a political issue at the time and it was heavily promoted over Literary Chinese which was seen as a symbol of the old, stodgy, “Confucian” establishment. So, it’s interesting that Mao wrote in Literary Chinese. Mao’s poetry was described by Arthur Waley, a prominent British academic and translator of Chinese texts, as “not as bad as Hitler’s paintings, but not as good as Churchill’s.” Here’s an excerpt from Mao’s poem *Changsha*<sup>11</sup>:

鹰击长空, 鱼翔浅底, 万类霜天竞自由。

Eagles cleave the air,

Fish glide in the limpid deep

Under freezing skies, a million creatures contend in freedom (*ziyou*).

To enter the courtyard and be led on the path, you must have the oral teaching.

*Gongfu* without resting is the method for self-cultivation.

“Enter the courtyard,” or pass through the gate (入門, *rumen*) is a phrase meaning to begin serious studies. It’s also a reference to “indoor teaching” which would take place in a teacher’s home, usually outside in an enclosed courtyard, as contrasted to “outdoor” or public teaching. We’re told that when Yang Chengfu first started teaching in Beijing, he taught publicly in a park outside the Imperial City and that, as appropriate, he’d invite students for private study back in the compound where he lived with his father, Yang Jianhou. Similarly, when Cheng Manching studied with Yang Chengfu in Shanghai, a mark of Yang Chengfu recognizing Cheng’s serious practice was when Cheng was invited into Yang Chengfu’s home for deeper study. (As well as apparently prodigious lunches featuring large quantities of steamed buns.)

“Led on the path” describes the teaching once one has entered the courtyard. Path is 路, *lu*, referenced in the sword move “Immortal Points the Way (path, road).” Sections of the form are sometimes called *lu*. Some forms are described as being made up of multiple roads, where the First Third is the First Road. *Lu*, path differs from Dao, the Way. Dao references the cosmic order of the universe. *Lu* describes which turns to take and which direction to walk.

To begin serious studies and be guided, one must have oral instruction. 口授, *kuoshou*, literally mouth-teaching, represents both direct instruction and the various formulas, songs, and other teaching packaged for oral transmission. This “Song” is one of the *kuoshou* one would receive from a teacher.

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<sup>11</sup> I don’t know who translated this poem. All the versions I’ve found of Mao’s poetry have the same English translation, presumably authorized by the Communist Party, without acknowledgment beyond “The translators.”

工夫, *gongfu* means martial arts specifically, but generically just refers to skill developed by hard work and serious practice.

“Method” is 法, *fa* which means method or system, such as one might be introduced to by a teacher. It also means law and as such is used to translate dharma, the teaching or law passed by Buddha. *Fa* was used by Mohists to mean an objective standard or an unbiased rule, something they thought was very important to avoid the errors of Confucian favoritism and bias.

Speaking of form and function, essence and application (*ti-yong*), what is the standard?  
*Yi* and *qi* are the rulers, flesh and bones the subjects.

Pondering the usage of *yi*, what is the purpose?

To benefit and prolong life, so it is always springtime, never aging.

Oh this song! Oh! This song has one hundred forty *zi* (characters) (21)

Each and every character is true, exactly correct with nothing left out.

Without studying deeply, your hard work (*gongfu*) will be wasted, leaving only sighs of regret.

In line 21, 百卅, one hundred forty, forty is written using an old-style literary form: 卅. Usually forty is written as 四十, four times ten. In one episode in *Journey to the West*, the king falls ill, dies, and goes to Hell, the underworld. He meets a former court official of his there who examines a book kept by the rulers of the underworld which shows each person’s designated lifetime and indeed, the king is supposed to die after 13 (十三, ten plus 3) years of rule. The former official quickly draws 3 more vertical lines on the symbol for 10, 十, making the entry say the king should have 43 (卅三) years of rule. The king is then returned to life by the oddly gullible rulers of the underworld.

Including the character count (140 *zi*) was a technique used in oral teaching to try to preserve the integrity of the text. It was easy for words to be added or dropped as a “song” was passed from one generation to the next. Character counts like this could serve as a kind of “error correcting code” that people could use to be sure they weren’t accidentally causing textual drift.



# 打手歌

## Pushing Hands Song

ANONYMOUS

The title of this song is 打手歌, *Dashou Ge*. 打, *Da* is “hit” or “play”, e.g., playing a guitar is often called *da*-ing the guitar. This song is therefore sometimes translated as the “Playing Hands Song.” However, I suspect that the meaning of “hit” is more appropriate and that the song comes from a time when Push Hands may have been more aggressive and clearly martial. We’re told that Cheng Manching criticized inattentive practice of Push Hands that might be likened to “playing hands” saying “Play, play, play! Doing so, strength and resistance are never far away.”

Many teachers and students are uncomfortable calling the practice Push Hands. After all, one of the first things we always say when introducing new students to Push Hands is that it’s not about pushing and it’s not done with the hands. So, people have come up with nicer, gentler, alternative names such as Listening Hands or Sensing Hands. We stick with Push Hands because that’s what 推手, *tuishou*, the name of the practice, literally means: *tui* is push, *shou* is hand. I suppose we could use the older name of Hitting Hands although that might require even more introductory cautions saying it’s not about hitting! And it’s not done with the hands!

Chen Weiming includes a note following the title

按打手即推手也

*Dashou* is the same as *tuishou*.

棚捋挤按须认真，  
上下相随人难进：  
任他巨力来打吾，  
牵动四两拨千斤。  
引进落空合即出，  
粘連黏隨不丢頂。

Be conscientious in Wardoff, Rollback, Press, and Push.

Upper and lower mutually follow each other.

The other finds it difficult to advance.

Even if they try to hit me with an enormous force,

I lead their movement using four *liang* (ounces) to direct their 1000 *jin* (pounds).

Lead the other forward into emptiness, unite (*he*), and immediately issue (*chu*).

Adhere, connect, stick, and follow; Neither disconnecting nor resisting.

The first line is important for students. Many people, especially in free pushing and competition-style pushing, engage in a kind of stand-up grappling that makes no particular use of taijiquan techniques and makes no effort to distinguish the core hand techniques of wardoff, rollback, press, and push. This is a serious error that both reduces the art to a kind of crude forceful wrestling (“Play, play, play! But strength and resistance are never far away.”) and seriously limits practitioners' understanding and growth.

The final line 粘連黏隨不丟頂, *zhan lian nian sui budiuding*, “Adhere, connect, stick, follow. Not disconnecting, [not] resisting” is repeated in many places in the Classics and other Yang teaching. Adhere, connect, stick, follow describe four attributes of the touch and how you relate to your partner. *Budiu buding* cautions us to avoid the errors of disconnection, running away or not staying connected to your partner, and “butting,” forcing your way into the partner’s space or bracing to resist their push. (To fit the verse scheme of this song, *budiu buding*, is shortened to *budiuding*, neither disconnecting nor butting.)

The first line starts with telling us to be careful practicing the core techniques and to keep our awareness of the specifics of each distinct technique. The final line admonishes us to keep doing taiji, using the correct touch and avoiding the errors of disconnection and of force and resistance.

# End Matter

## Glossary

Qi, 氣:	our internal energy, also the energy that supports the entire universe
Jin, 勁:	skilled internal force, <i>fajin</i> : to issue force, to discharge the opponent
Li, 力:	brute external force
Qing, 輕:	light (in the body)
Ling, 靈:	alert (in the mind)
Xin, 心:	heartmind, center of awareness, the mind that sinks to the <i>dantian</i>
Yi, 意:	directed attention; feeling awareness
Shen, 神:	spirit
Yao, 腰:	waist, lower back
Taiji, 太極:	great separation, non-dual polarity, empty and full distinguished
Wuji, 無極:	no separation, before empty and full are distinguished, the notion of non-duality
Jing, 靜:	calm, still, quiescent
Dong, 動:	active, moving, engaged

## Sources and Further Reading

This section follows the structure above and provides sources and suggestions for additional reading for each section.

### Taijiquan Classics

The Chinese text for the Classics and for Chen Weiming's commentary is from Chen's *The Art of Chinese Boxing* as published on Paul Brennan's translation site. Brennan's site is impressive: he clearly has access to a lot of original source texts for various martial arts manuals and his translation output is prodigious. He publishes a truly remarkable number of translations very quickly. And he includes Chinese text for everything which is hugely valuable to someone like me. The flip side of his voluminous output is that his translations are often a bit unconventional and include his own interpretations without clearly identifying those. I advise using his site as a place to find original texts and to get a quick gloss on meaning rather than as a source for authoritative translations.

The version of the Classics we grew up with, memorized, and continue to find ourselves quoting is the version done by Ben Lo, Martin Inn, Robert Amacker, and Susan Foe (Lo, et al.). This was one of the first translations of the Classics available in English and is very nicely done. The language is poetic, the meaning is clear, and the layout and presentation including calligraphy by Ben are beautiful. It does sometimes stray from the core text. I don't know what the translation process was but it was done within the first decade after Ben moved to the US. I suspect it was a group translation effort: the group went through the Classics line by line with Ben translating the Chinese. There was then group discussion about what it meant followed by the native English speakers crafting a poetic rendition of the meaning. In addition to the core Taijiquan Classics, the Lo edition also includes a "song," the *Ti-yong Ge*, Song of Form and Function, by Cheng Manching, Yang Chengfu's Ten Essential Points, and Li Yiyu's Five Character Secret.

The authoritative reference version of the Classics we recommend is Barbara Davis's translation. Davis is a taijiquan cousin: she studied with our teachers, Jane and Bataan Faigao, and then spent a number of years in Taiwan studying with Liu Xiheng, one of Cheng's top students in Taiwan. She's fluent in Chinese and brings an academic rigor and perspective to translation. Her version includes substantial discussion and research into the background and references found in the Classics. In case of doubt, I would defer to Davis on textual and translation matters, even as I prepared my own rendition.

Louis Swaim is a serious taijiquan practitioner and translator associated with the Yang Family organization based in Seattle, WA. Swaim includes a translation of the core Classics as an appendix to his translation of Yang Chengfu's Essence and Application of Taijiquan. His version is straightforward, unadorned, and faithful to the text.

There are many many other translations of the Classics. Wayson Liao's version is a reasonably typical example of many. Liao certainly has better Chinese skills and presumably more advanced taijiquan skills than I do. His translation is verbose, doesn't stick particularly close to the core texts, and contains extensive commentary some of which is insightful and some of which perhaps projects his understanding onto the Classics. This style of translation is primarily useful to people in the translator's school.

## **Background of the Classics**

Douglas Wile (Wile 1996) provides an extensive discussion of the textual and cultural background of the Classics as well as the role of the Wu brothers in assembling them in the initial chapters of his *Lost T'ai-Chi Classics of the Late Ch'ing Dynasty*. Davis also has valuable introductory chapters in her translation. Together, the two of them go much further than I do in the analysis of the various versions and textual history of the

Classics. I lean heavily on Wile and Davis in describing the Wu brothers and the various origin stories for the Classics. These stories also rely on oral teaching from our various teachers.

Information about literacy in China and the percentage of the population that was literate is from Suleski, chapter 1.

My investigation into the salt trade, driven by the purported discovery of the Classics at a Salt Shop, was fascinating. I started with the Liu paper *Feature of Imperfect Competition of the Ming-Ch'ing Salt Market*. That eventually led me to Jiang's PhD thesis (Jiang 1975). Both of these were very readable, interesting, and full of additional references for exploration.

Ben's story of disappointment on finding that students hadn't memorized Yang Chengfu's Ten Essentials was relayed in personal conversation.

See Hansen for discussion of knowledge transmission in Chinese medicine schools.

For overviews about book printing in China, see

<http://www.fourgreatinventions.com/chinese-printing/history-of-printing/>,

<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/songdynasty-module/tech-printing.html>, and

<https://blogs.loc.gov/international-collections/2021/06/the-history-of-printing-in-asia-according-to-library-of-congress-asian-collections-part-1/> .

Xiao discusses *juan*, bamboo scrolls, and silk slips. Cherniak discusses textual transmission and book culture in the Song Dynasty. Guolong discusses the issues of textual variation and techniques used to preserve textual fidelity. Wei, in the volume edited by Spedding and Tankard, analyzes how marginalia was used and passed on (p52ff).

## **Neo-Confucian Philosophy and the Taijiquan Classics**

For a general overview of neo-Confucianism and Zhu Xi's role, there are a number of good and easily accessible internet resources:

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry:  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/song-ming-confucianism>
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry:  
<https://iep.utm.edu/neo-confucian-philosophy>

- Oxford Bibliographies entry:  
<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199920082/obo-9780199920082-0101.xml>

For details about Zhu's philosophy, his life and teachers, and his promotion of Zhou Dunyi, I rely heavily on Joseph Adler's work, including *Reconstructing the Confucian Dao: Zhu Xi's Appropriation of Zhou Dunyi* (2014) and *Zhu Xi's Spiritual Practice as the Basis of His Central Philosophical Concepts* (2008). The book, Adler (2014), has extensive translations of Zhu's annotations on Zhou Dunyi's writings as well as analysis of Zhu's philosophy. The article, Adler (2008), is easily found online and quite accessible even for non-specialists and details Zhu's path from still sitting through active engagement to reverent composure.

For deeper investigation into specific areas of Zhu's thought, see Meng and Huang, Virag, and Li.

Classical Confucianism and Mengzi's contributions are well covered by numerous overview articles on the Internet. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry is a good starting point: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mencius/>.

Van Norden's book on Mengzi analyzes his thought and provides an annotated translation of the Mengzi classic. This is the most accessible introduction to Mengzi. Van Norden actually says he would recommend reading the Mengzi first for an introduction to Confucian thought and the Confucian classics.

Muller provides an online copy of selections from the Mengzi with both Chinese and English text. The full text together with the Legge translation is available from ctext: <https://ctext.org/mengzi>. The Legge translation reads as rather dated at this point but is clear and literal.

I found Shen's *Dao Companion to Classical Chinese Philosophy* very useful for discussion of self-cultivation and the nature of ultimate reality. See chapters 3, 5, 15 in particular. Jiang (2021) has in-depth discussion of Mengzi's theory of virtue. Chapter 2 goes into depth on the divergence between Mengzi and Mozi. Choi discusses the virtue of righteousness and the image of the floodlike *qi*.

## References in the Commentary

For discussion of gradual vs sudden enlightenment, see Gregory, p279ff.

Similarity of the “Looking up, further away” verse and Analects 9.11, see Davis, p111. Analects translation available from Muller.

*Zhu ping*, weighted balances or balance scales in early Chinese History are discussed in Yan, p52ff. The Bowers Museum pages give an overview of how balance scales work.

For background on falcon behavior and differences from hawks, see <https://www.nps.gov/grca/learn/nature/peregrine-falcon.htm>. For information about Mongolian falconry, see <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20160926-mongolias-6000-year-tradition> and <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/did-you-know-falconry-living-heritage-and-traditional-sport-along-silk-roads>.

For summaries of Chinese calligraphy, *feibai* style, and Emperor Wu’s painting, see <http://www.art-virtue.com/history/tang/tang.htm>, archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230224230137/http://www.art-virtue.com/history/tang/tang.htm> and <https://www.asianbrushpainter.com/blogs/kb/variants>, archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20221126101115/https://www.asianbrushpainter.com/blogs/kb/variants/>.

Mao’s poem Changsha and some additional background can be found at <https://formalverse.com/2021/02/24/odd-poem-changsha-by-mao-zedong/> and <https://socialistpublishing.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/maopoems-newsetting.pdf>.

The stories of Cheng Manching having lunch at Yang Chengfu’s compound in Shanghai along with the large number of steamed buns Chengfu supposedly ate can be found in Qu, p42ff. The first several chapters of Qu’s book have useful background about Chengfu’s time in Beijing and Shanghai and his role as a teacher to Cheng Manching and others.

140 Characters: Note the tradition of “tail-end figures” (end of manuscript character counts) for helping w/ textual fidelity. See Guolong’s Textual fluidity and fixity in early Chinese manuscript culture.

## Image Credits

In order as the images appear above.

Cover *Image*: Mirror with Dragon and Clouds. Tang Dynasty (700s). Smithsonian Museum, Accession #F1938.8. My picture 2022.

*Salt trade network*: Jiang 1975, p184.

*Juan example*: Bamboo MS (mathematics chart), from Xiao, p249.

*Page from the Hanshu*: Wei, p59ff.

*Bagua diagram*: By Pakua\_with\_name.svg: 2006-09-23T21:16:47Z BenduKiwi 547x547 (101558 Bytes) derivative work: Machine Elf 1735 (talk) - Pakua\_with\_name.svg, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10843593>.

*Five Phases and Steps Diagram*: My most excellent drawing.

*Man in Market Using Balance Scale*: Attribution: By DanielFFF - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=59748575>).

*Image of Balance Scale*:

<https://www.bowers.org/index.php/collection/collection-blog/weighing-in-on-steelyard-scales>.

*Soaring Falcon*:

<https://www.nps.gov/grca/learn/nature/peregrine-falcon.htm>

Photo credit: Ron Stewart, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.

*Eagle and Kazakh Hunter*:

<https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20160926-mongolias-6000-year-tradition>

Photo credit: Dave Stamboulis.

*Excerpts from Emperor Wu's Painting titled Birds*: From

<http://www.art-virtue.com/history/tang/tang.htm>, with my image cleanup and editing.

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