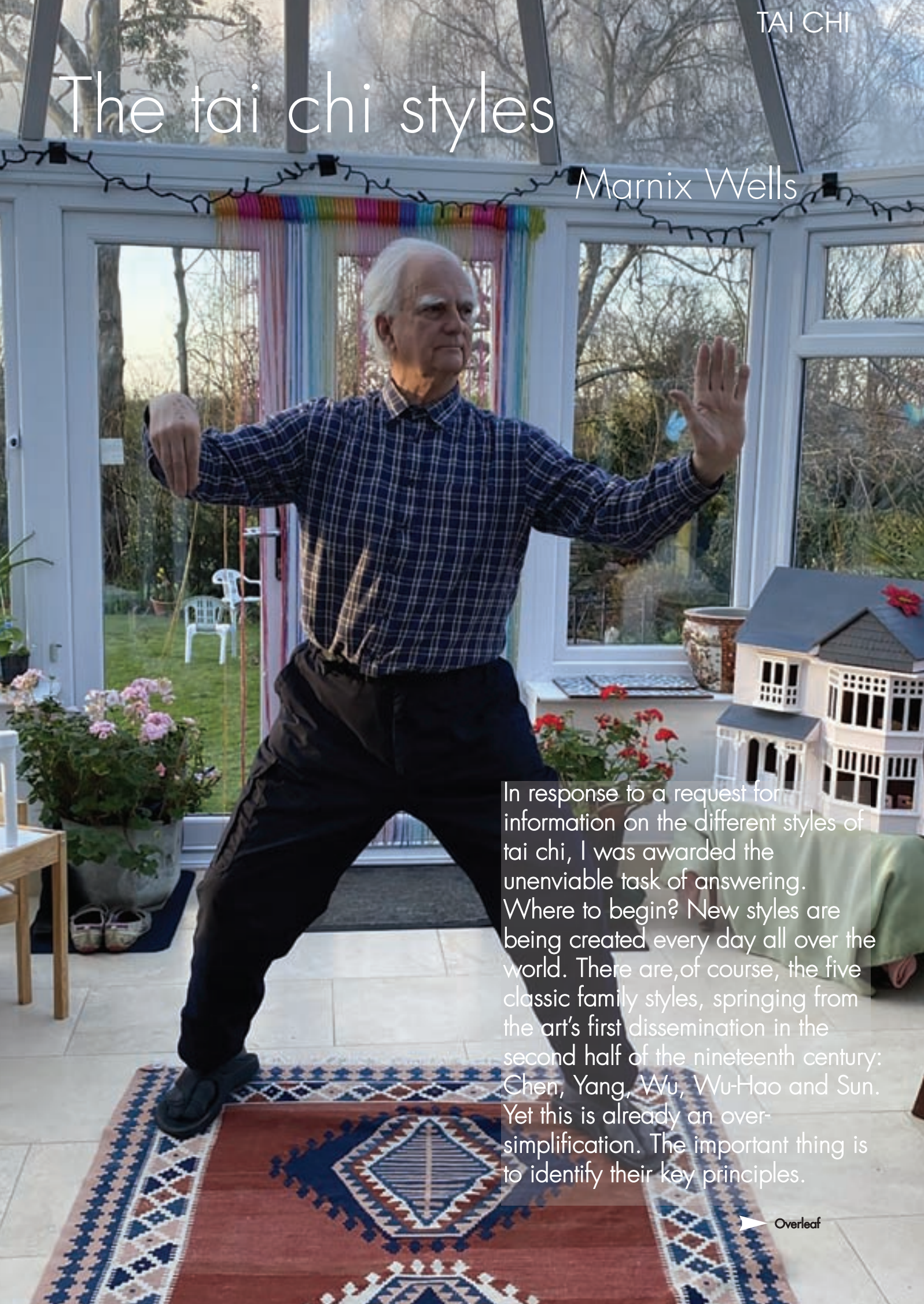


# The tai chi styles

Marnix Wells



In response to a request for information on the different styles of tai chi, I was awarded the unenviable task of answering. Where to begin? New styles are being created every day all over the world. There are, of course, the five classic family styles, springing from the art's first dissemination in the second half of the nineteenth century: Chen, Yang, Wu, Wu-Hao and Sun. Yet this is already an oversimplification. The important thing is to identify their key principles.



## 1. Martial Medicine

In China, civil and martial (wen and wu) have been seen as complements as yin and yang, minus and plus, female and male, dark and light. The earliest recorded ‘boxing form’, from which the Chen family form can be traced, is that illustrated by the late Míng General Qi Jiguang when training recruits to combat Japanese and local pirates by, he tells us, improving their health.

Nowadays, we hear a lot about tai chi and qigong for health, as if this was not always their chief goal. In China this aim would have been called ‘longevity’ (chángshòu), implying an active and happy retirement. In traditional China, medicine shops (yàofāng) sold an array of dried herbs and animal parts designed to restore virility and supplement qi energy (bùqì). They might also double as bone-setters (diédā) and, to demonstrate the efficacy of their wares, featured street displays of martial prowess, involving acrobatic feats and imperviousness to assault by fist or weapon.

I witnessed an example of this, fifty years ago, in the person of a famous ‘monkey boxer’ in the Wànhuá (Bangka) district by Dragon Mount Temple of old Tàipei. Amongst his other amazing accomplishments, he could, when not dispensing prescriptions, fold himself up flat in a rice-basket.

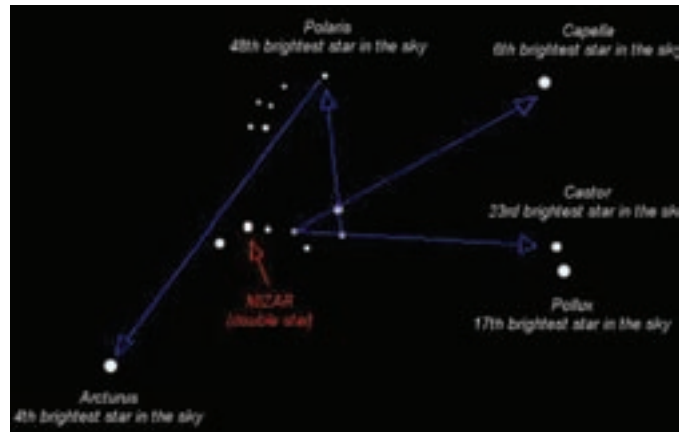


**Figure 2a. Chén style Tàijí Standing Meditation posture, clearing the mind for infinite potentiality; and erect starting posture ‘Vajrapāni Pounding Mortar’, facing the North Pole Star reverently to receive ‘central energy’.** (Chén Xin prefaced 1919. i: 2a-3a, 177-179; 3b-4a, 180-181)

The process by which tai chi (tàijíquán) became, in the 1920s, a national, and from the 1970s an international, art started from the fortress city of Guāngfū (in Yōngnián, southern Héběi). There, the Chén family of Chénjiagou, Hénnán, now famous as ‘tai chi ancestors’, in 1820 recruited Yang Luchan into their pharmacy, the ‘Grand Harmony Hall’ (Tàihé Táng). (cf. Barbara Davis 2004: *The Taijiquan Classics*, North Atlantic Books: 9-14) Thus this art, while martial, has a history of linkage to medicine and health.

## 2. Taichi and the Cosmos

The art of Chen, modified by Yang, was first taught as ‘soft boxing’ at Yōngnián where it was identified with an earlier ‘internal school’ of boxing, attributed to syncretistic Daoist recluse Zhang Sanfeng (ca. 1400?) of Mt. Wudang (Húbèi). It was reputed to have overcome the crude force of the Buddhist Shaolín ‘external school’. Then *Tai Chi classics*, by an unknown Wáng Zongyuè, were



**Figure 1. The Dipper/Plough constellation’s seven stars, pointing north to the Pole star, and approximately aligned with bright stars Arcturus on its west and Capella on its east. Taiji is a symbol of the Pole Star as representing the Earth’s central axis.**

allegedly discovered ca. 1854 at Wúyáng (southern Hénnán) and grafted by scholar Wú Yúxiang and Lǐ Yiyú onto Yang’s art and repackaged as ‘tàijí boxing’.

The term tai chi has been translated as ‘supreme ultimate’. It represents the union of opposites, yin and yang from the philosophy of the ancient *Book of Change*. It is literally the polar axis at the centre of the Earth’s rotation. Chen Xin (*Tàijíquán Illustrated and Explained*, prefaced 1919) says, when practising, it is not necessary to physically face north, but to do so mentally to connect to its ‘true controller’ zhenzài. (Figures 1-2) In the sky, it equates to the Pole Star; in the body, it is the dantián point, about an inch below the navel, about which the waist turns and where we focus abdominal breathing.

Thus, it is an apt description of this art which, though martial by nature, is a tried means of improving health, mental and physical, and strengthening the immune system. It offers a full range of practices for this purpose, all of which are integral to a deeper understanding of the self and body. Abbreviated versions need to be evaluated in terms of a complete ‘work-out’ within the restraints of time and individual capacities. Supplementary qigong ‘warm-up’ exercises are generally combined with form practice.

## 3. Practical Examples

For example, we may compare different versions of the same move as illustrated in the manuals of different schools. As it happens, none are found in Qi Jiguang’s manual but are great resources for qigong. A signal move, used to open and conclude its set is unique to Chén Jiagou (and its off-shoot at nearby Zhàobào), except possibly for Sun’s ‘Crotch Pounding’ (Dāngchuí, no. 85). Its title ‘Buddha Warrior Presents Club’ (Jīngāng Xiànchū) has distinctively Buddhist aspects which may point to a Shaolín origin. It is also known as ‘Vajrapāni Pounds Mortar’. (Figure 3)



**Figure 2c. Qigong ‘Vajrapāni Presents Club’.** (Wéituó Xiànchū, *Yijin Jing*, Meir Shahar 2008: The Shaolin Monastery, University of Hawaii, 161-162)



**Figure 3a. Shàolín's Gold Cock on One Leg, a.k.a. Drunken Immortal Step, with Buddhist monk tonsure. (Xuánji Héshàng, Zhang Kōngzhào: Quán Jing, Quánfā Bèiyào. Shahar 2008: 122)**

A move common to all tai chi styles, is 'Gold Cock on One Leg' (Jinji Dúli), also illustrated in an old Shàolín boxing and acupuncture manual. It is valuable for training balance and in defence a platform for knee strikes, kicks and throws. (Figure 4)

One of the most iconic tai chi moves is 'Waving Hands in Clouds' (Yúnshòu). It is performed with multiple repeats by all styles, in parallel-feet stance by Chén and with side-stepping by others. It is a vital qìgong exercise for directing the arms from the dantián. It can help induce peristalsis bowel movement. "Ankles and knees provide the spring to keep the hips and head

level, the waist provides the ability to turn to the left and right." Carl Bateman 2021: *Sun Style Tai Chi Chuan i.* 133-136) At a recent London workshop, visiting master Chén Xiàowáng taught a full gymnasium to train 'reeling silk' technique in it for a whole hour. (Figure 5, cf. Kinthissa 2009: *Turning Silk, Lunival*, Oxford, ch. 8)

#### 4. The Whole Art

Let us examine the common nature of tai chi, both as a mental and physical concept from which its exercise as a system for health and defence originated. It may be practised ideally outdoors but if necessary indoors and even in a very confined space, to be like Hamlet as if 'bounded in a nutshell' yet 'king of infinite space'.

In the human body, the most obvious manifestation of yin and yang's opposing yet complementary forces is in breathing, exhalation and inhalation, the interchange of carbon-dioxide and oxygen. Air, qì, as oxygen is carried by the blood through arteries and hair-like capillaries to nourish every cell in the body. This process is enhanced in qìgong, the cultivation of deep, slow and relaxed breathing in meditative stillness and mindful movement to boost the immune system, which is at the heart of tai chi practice.

The earliest five schools share the same basic movements. Yet each reveal considerable divergences of



**Figure 4a. Cloud Hands, Chén Xin ca. 1919.**

interpretation within the same named movement. Every teacher, even of the same lineage, will project their own character in response to their deepening level of understanding and that of their students. Furthermore, each named movement contains a multitude of potential macro- and micro-dynamics which can scarcely be captured on film.

To sum up: Chén Chángxing (1771-1853)'s system is characterised by a greater number of forms, low postures, twining-silk energy (chánsijìng), leaps and explosive releases of power (fàjìng). Yáng

Lùchán (1799-1872) has most emphasis on softness and relaxation with effortless 'uprooting' techniques. Wú Jiànquán (1870-1942) is characterised by a forward leaning, wrestler-like posture. Wú Yúxiang (ca.1812-1880)/Hào Wèizhen (1849-1920) and Sun Lùchán (1861-1933) have a concentrated narrow stance with small movements. Sun related it to Buddhist cultivation in a threesome with the 'internal arts' of straight-line zig-zag advancing xíngyìquán and circle-walking baguàzhāng.

The Yáng solo form has 42 sections, excluding repetitions, of which some comprise two or more parts. Sun has a 97-posture form that includes repetitions. Post-1949 China promoted a 24-move short form. At an advanced level partner forms are taught, both static and stepping (dàiyù). Yáng has an 88-step 'sparring form' (sànshòu). 'Weapons' forms include straight-sword, broadsword, pole, and fan among others. ☯



**Figure 4b. Yáng style Cloud Hands. (cf. Chén Yánlín: Tàijiquán Zhenchuán 104-33)**

Fundamental is whole-body engagement, flow and roundness of limbs, knees and hips (kuà) kept slightly flexed to protect joints as suspension shock-absorbers and protection against arthritis and falling. Its essential components may be summarised under ten headings:

1. Straight back in erect posture by 'sitting the hips' with vertical pelvis
2. Abdominal breathing
3. Smooth, centred movement
4. Meditative focus
5. Relaxed flexibility
6. Set forms practised daily
7. Internal power (nèijìng)
8. Partner work, 'pushing hands', sticking and following
9. Applications, for defence and joint protection
10. Weaponry and props, sticks, fans etc