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Chen Masters: 2nd from left Chen Zhenglei, 3rd from left Chen Chunlei, 4th from left Chen Quanzhong, 6th from left Zhu Tiancai, 7th from left Chen Qingzhou. All others unknown.

# Chen Style Taijiquan

By Arthur Rosenfeld



Master Chen Zheng Lei test drives the author's Motorcycle.

**C**hen style Taijiquan is considered to be the senior branch of the five main Taijiquan family styles and the third in terms of popularity. Compared to the other main Taijiquan styles, Chen style today is known for its lower stances, so-called silk reeling technique, and bursts of power known as *fajing* (發勁). While there are many hundreds of schools teaching Taijiquan around the world, the five family styles are said to go the farthest in emphasizing the martial art style of teaching that has long defined Taijiquan.

## History

The Chen family was originally from Hong Tong County, Shanxi Province. The village was known as Chang Yang Chun or Sunshine Village. Later, because of the number of Chen family inhabitants and because of the three deep ravines (Gou) besides the village, the village came to be known as Chen Jia Gou (陳家溝) or Chen Family Gorge.

Some people claim the system was founded by first generation Chen family member Chen Pu (陳卜), who migrated from Shanxi to Wen County, Henan Province. While no definite records exist, Chen Pu may well have been a martial artist, as the beginning of the Ming dynasty was a chaotic period in Chinese history and martial skills were critical for survival. Interestingly, the next three generations of the family produced only one son, so the line was nearly extinguished during that period.

The latest documented discovery is that the system as we know it today began with ninth-generation Chen Wangting (陳王庭 1600-1680). In those days, it was the custom to convey information in poetry. While Wangting's style had no name, it was put forth in a poem he titled, "Long and Short Song."

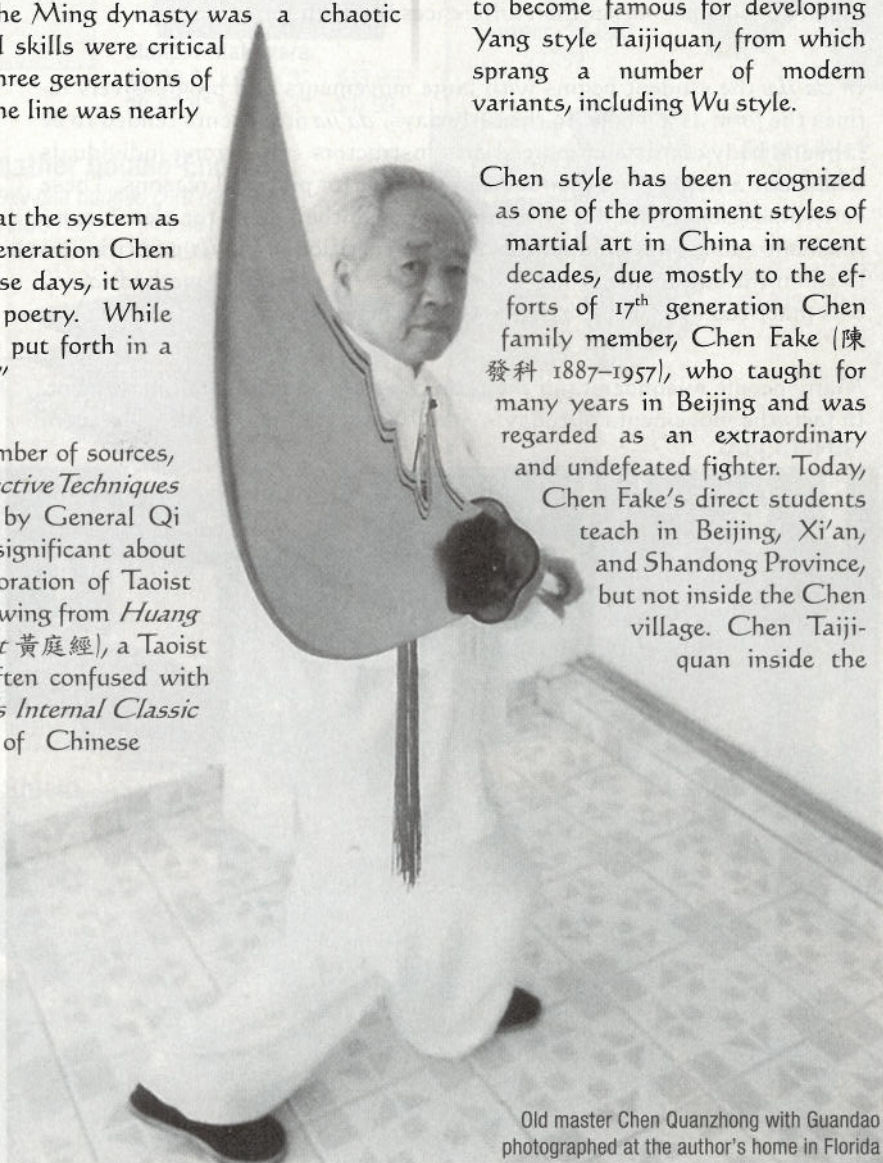
In creating the art, he drew from a number of sources, including *Jixiaoxinshu* (New Book of Effective Techniques 紀效新書), a military classic penned by General Qi Jiguang (戚繼光). But what is most significant about Wangting's contribution is his incorporation of Taoist philosophy into his martial system, drawing from *Huang Ting Jing* (Classic of the Yellow Court 黃庭經), a Taoist book of high-level spiritual training often confused with *Huang Di Nei Jing* (Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic 黃帝內經), the foundation volume of Chinese medical theory.

Recent evidence credits the Li family, Wangting's mother's side, with the Taoist influence. There was a mythical figure, Wang Zhongyue (王宗岳), author of the classic *Taijiquan Lun*. We now know that Wang was a schoolteacher hired by the Li family. Interestingly, the Li family also has their own martial art called *Wuji* (無極) system. *Wuji* is the word for

the Taoist concept of emptiness, the state of the universe, pregnant with infinite possibility, before it organized into the harmonious interplay of opposing forces known as taiji. Wangting's training partner was Jiang Fa (蔣發), a rebel who hid with the Chen family after fleeing a government crackdown on Song Mountain.

In the generations since, the Chen village has since produced many Taijiquan experts. Perhaps their best-known, if not the best, teacher was fourteenth-generation Chen Changxing (陳長興 1771-1853). Chen Changxing taught Yang Luchan (楊露禪) for a period of eighteen years during the early nineteenth century. Yang went on to become famous for developing Yang style Taijiquan, from which sprang a number of modern variants, including Wu style.

Chen style has been recognized as one of the prominent styles of martial art in China in recent decades, due mostly to the efforts of 17<sup>th</sup> generation Chen family member, Chen Fake (陳發科 1887-1957), who taught for many years in Beijing and was regarded as an extraordinary and undefeated fighter. Today, Chen Fake's direct students teach in Beijing, Xi'an, and Shandong Province, but not inside the Chen village. Chen Taijiquan inside the



Old master Chen Quanzhong with Guandao photographed at the author's home in Florida

# "The student begins with large movements & progressively refines the form as a whole."

village now derives from Chen Zhaopi (陳照丕), who was not a direct student of Chen Fake. Chen Zhaopi's lineage includes modern masters Chen Xiaowang (陳小旺), Chen Zhenglei (陳正雷) and others.

## Variants

(*Lao*) *da jia* - (Old) Large frame (老大架) and *xiao jia* - Small frame (小架)

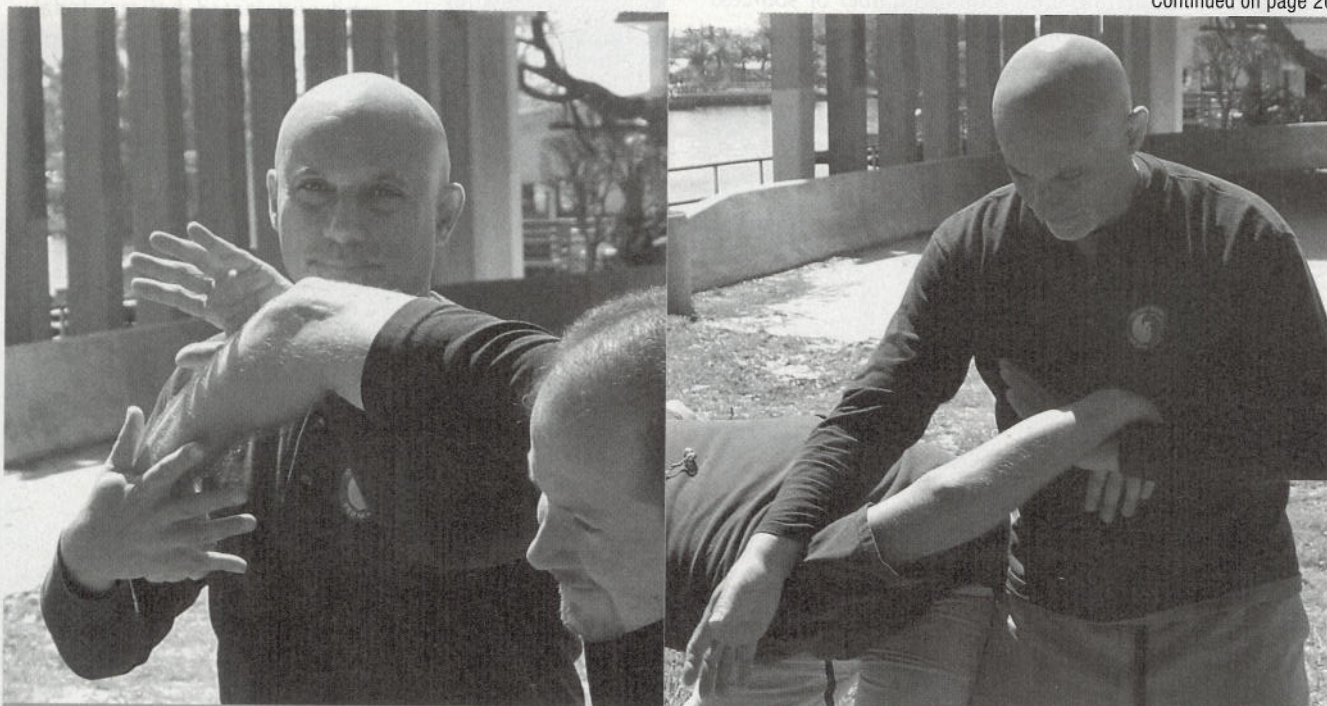
The name "old frame" or "old style" arises from the fact that this form, or sequence of movements, is sometimes regarded as being older in origin than *xiao jia*. This view is especially predominant in Western sources; however, no literature concerning Chen style before 1932 mentions anything about new, old, big or small styles. It is more useful to think of the descriptive names "small" and "large" as pertaining to training methods, lineage and social dimensions, rather than differences between forms.

In *da jia*, the student begins with large movements and progressively refines the form as a whole. In the early days, *da jia* proponents tended to be farmers, bodyguards and martial arts instructors - fit, strong individuals who made a living from their art, or needed it for practical reasons. These early practitioners did not have time to polish their skills for pleasure; refinement came through application and repetition. *Da jia* practitioners lived on the south side of the Chen village. As a training method, *da jia* was practiced by Chen Changxing and Chen Fake.

Many people misunderstand the term *xiao jia* to mean small movement. In fact, the movements of today's *xiao jia* are not small at all. The word

*xiao* refers to detail, not size. In *xiao jia* training, minute attention is paid to each movement as it is learned. Early *xiao jia* practitioners were scholars, businessmen, family chiefs, landlords, and government officials from the north side of the Chen village. Being individuals of means, they had more leisure time to perfect each move as it was learned. Because *xiao jia* emphasizes detail at the beginning, it is more challenging at the outset, and therefore not as popular as *da jia*. However, historically, *xiao jia* also produced many famous masters. In the Qing dynasty, the government predominantly gave titles to Chen family *xiao jia* masters. Famous exponents include Chen Qingping (陳清萍), a wealthy merchant and teacher of Wu Yuxiang (武禹襄), founder of Wu Taijiquan, (which later led to Sun style) and Chen Xin (陳鑫), author of the classic Illustrated *Chen Taijiquan*. Chen Xin's descendents are Chen Kezhong (陳克忠) and contemporary master Chen Boxiang (陳伯祥) who resides in the family village.

Continued on page 20



The author demonstrates Chen style qinna. Notice there is no grabbing.

## Xin Jia, or New Frame

Rather than a different standard form, the term *xin jia* (新架) refers to any of a number of form variants created by specific teachers. Chen Zhaokui's (陳照奎) *xin jia*, for example, emphasizes forearm turning. Of course, in the face of deeper understanding, the significance of such emphasis vanishes because any part of the body can be moved according to silk-reeling principles. Silk-reeling refers to a particular concept of three-dimensional movement, given its quasi-mystical name after the elusive process of turning the thread of the silk worm into fabric. It is important to note that today, the Chinese government's Chen-style Taijiquan competition form is based on Chen Zhaokui's version of *xin jia*.



## Derivatives

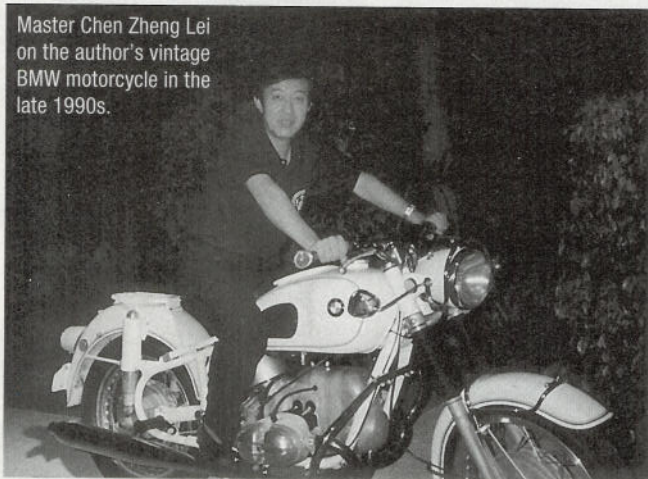
Chen Fake's student Feng Zhiqiang (馮志強) created Chen style *Xin Yi Hun Yuan Taijiquan* (陳氏心意混元太極拳) based on *lao da jia* with an influence from Shanxi Xingyi.

In Shangdong Province, another group practices Chen-style combat Taijiquan, which is based on Chen Fake's fighting movements.

Chen Qingping lived in Zhao Bao town, and his students there developed a style today referred to as *zhao bao* (趙堡), a *xiao jia* derivative.

After 1980, many masters began to create their own shortened version of Chen Taijiquan.

Master Chen Zheng Lei on the author's vintage BMW motorcycle in the late 1990s.



## Non-form Training

Before teaching the forms, the instructor may have the students do stance training such as standing-post (standing meditation) and various qigong sequences and silk reeling exercises. These are done to condition and strengthen the body for the correct frame and alignment before moving to the more complicated movements that comprise the forms. Other methods of training for Chen style use training aids such as the Taijiquan ball, Taijiquan ruler, and pole/spear shaking exercises.

In addition to the solo exercises listed above, there are partner exercises originally known as *ga shou* (touching hands 靠手). Nowadays, and with the less-accurate name of "pushing hands," these drills are designed to help students maintain the correct body structure when faced with resistance. There are also a few rolling-arm patterns—now known as moving-step push hands—that students learn before they move on to the free-style exercises that are a prelude to free sparring.

## Weapons Forms

Chen Taijiquan has several unique weapons forms, all of which are derived from battlefield combat.

- Jian* (劍) Straight Sword form
- Dan Dao* (單刀) Thirteen-Posture Broadsword single broadsword form
- Qiang* (槍) Spear form
- Da Gan* (大杆) Long Pole, an advanced version of the spear form
- Guan Dao* (關刀) Halberd form
- Langya Bang* (狼牙棒) Wolf-tooth mace form
- Shuang Dao* (雙刀) Double Broadsword form
- Shuang Jian* (雙劍) Double metal club form
- Zhan Jian* (粘劍) Sticking sword—two person form
- Zhan Qiang* (粘槍) Sticking spear—two-person form

Arthur Rosenfeld is an authority on the cultural, social and spiritual dimensions of Eastern thinking for a Western world. A Renaissance man, and philosopher, Rosenfeld is a contributor to national magazines including *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Parade*, and has been seen on Fox News and other networks. Along with the Dalai Lama, he was a finalist for the prestigious Books For A Better Life award for his bestseller *The Truth About Chronic Pain* (Basic Books, May 2003) and has been cited in national media including *Newsweek*, *Ebony* and *Parade*. He is the author of *The Cutting Season* and *The Crocodile And The Crane* (October, 2007), and is also the penned several optioned motion picture screenplays, two non-fiction books, and six novels, including the critically acclaimed work of magical realism *A Cure For Gravity*, and the hard-boiled mystery *Diamond Eye*, the first and only novel to be promoted by the Federal Government and sold on a government website. For more, see [www.arthurrosenfeld.com](http://www.arthurrosenfeld.com)