

Tai Chi

Tàijíquán 太极拳

Tai chi is a martial art practiced worldwide whose gentle structured forms combine with deep breathing to balance internal energy, or qi, to improve health and well-being. More popular than ever in its five-hundred-year history, tai chi venues in China today range from large synchronized outdoor groups of all ages to highly competitive tournaments.

Tai chi (*taijiquan*) is a Chinese martial art that is linked to the Daoist meditative, philosophical, and medical tradition. In China invalids and the elderly often perform the soft, slow movements of the popular Yang style of tai chi to strengthen the constitution and to promote longevity. Advocates say that disciplined daily practice enhances the quality and circulation of qi (vital energy) within the body, improves bodily functions, tones muscles, and engenders a relaxed mental attitude. The majority of the millions of people who practice tai chi in China and elsewhere do so for these benefits, but tai chi also is a premier martial art that can be practiced even late in life.

Origins

Chinese legendary history attributes tai chi's origin to Zhang Sanfeng, a Daoist expert who probably lived in the thirteenth century, but was canonized in 1459. Tai chi entered recorded history centuries later as a martial

art practiced esoterically by the people of Chenjiagou in Henan Province. A form of the art was first demonstrated and taught in public in Beijing by Yang Luchan (1799–1872), who had learned it in Chenjiagou. Scholars say Yang accepted all challenges from the many Beijing martial arts masters, never to be defeated and never to seriously injure an opponent. He became known as “Yang the Invincible” and was appointed martial arts instructor to the imperial court. Yang Luchan publicly taught the slow and soft performance of a lengthy sequence of patterns, but he transmitted a much larger and more varied body of lore to his private students, a practice in keeping with martial arts tradition. Popular conceptions of tai chi as an only vaguely martial exercise, although beneficial to health and longevity, are drawn from Yang's and his successors' publicly taught form. This process of simplifying and softening has made tai chi accessible to many more people than would otherwise be the case. But the more obviously martial and physically strenuous Chen style continues to be practiced, as do the derivative Sun, Wu, and Hao styles.

Practice

As a martial art tai chi employs a subtlety of touch to sense an opponent's strength in order to redirect his or her motion so that one's defensive movement neutralizes it and becomes a counterattack as well. In describing this capacity practitioners use such phrases as “when the opponent is still, be still; when the opponent moves, move first,” and “use four ounces to deflect a thousand pounds.”

The technique depends upon the ability to maintain gentle physical contact with the opponent without resisting, that is, to never meet force with force. The tai chi player's counter to the aggressive move, after the instant has been seized and the movement's force captured, can be any of several techniques. Most benignly and simply, the tai chi player can accelerate or redirect the opponent's motion, sending him or her many feet away. Alternatively, a player can use any of several in-fighting techniques, ranging from low kicks to punches to open-hand strikes and grappling techniques, singly or in combination, practically simultaneously with blending with the opponent's force. The initial contact is said to be as soft as cotton; the counter that is said to be as springy as steel.

The strength, sensitivity, skill, and mental attitude required to perform such feats spontaneously and without effort are cultivated partly by the practice of solo forms (sequences of patterns) and partly by other means. Forms vary in length and in their composition and sequence of techniques; players can practice them at different speeds with larger or smaller patterns and in higher or lower stances. In some forms the tempo is even; in others it varies. Instructors say a player should practice forms with the continuity of one "reeling silk from a cocoon." In appearance form practice should resemble an eagle in flight; the attitude should be that of a cat when about to pounce on a mouse. Form practice is a kind of meditation in motion and requires concentration without tension. Paired practice routines, in which one works with a partner to

simulate martial encounters, have degrees of formality ranging from duo form sequences to freestyle sparring. The full range of tai chi skills includes the use of weapons as well; the sword, broadsword, staff, and spear are used. In some schools students practice auxiliary exercises to facilitate the development of the physical conditioning, skills, and mind-set appropriate to tai chi; in others schools tai chi itself is considered the only necessary exercise. In either case the expectation is that players will learn to direct and augment the flow of vital energy within the body with their mind in harmony with the breath and that bodily functions will be enhanced as the body is renewed by improved circulation of chi. Through this internal aspect of tai chi the body is expected to become supple and limber; both traits are essential to good health and to proper performance of tai chi.

Tai chi's mechanical principles involve erect stances that combine stability with nimbleness of foot. Movement begins at the *dantian*, an anatomical point at the body's center of gravity just below the navel. With no tensing of muscles and with mechanical efficiency and relaxed precision, the weight is shifted and energy is transmitted via the waist to the hands. In effect the legs, spine, and arms become like five bows, resulting in springy whole-body strength to be applied at the optimum instant. Footwork should be like the tread of a cat. Tai chi sport competition involves solo form performance and sometimes *tuishou*, or push-hands, a demonstration of mastery of the principles of tai chi.

A group of men practice tai chi on the Bund in Shanghai, circa 1970. An admiring crowd has gathered to watch. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.





A group of women practice tai chi with wooden “swords.”

From a Chinese cultural perspective the psychological and medical value of the art and its martial potential are reasonable expectations. Both are in harmony with Daoist philosophical principles that are believed to be universally valid. The Daoist classics *Daodejing* and *I Ching* promulgate these principles, the interplay and balance of opposites that tai chi embodies. Thus, one can see tai chi as an art of harmonization with nature that includes the ability to harmonize with an opponent's attack and the nurturance of chi that animates every living thing in the universe: Tai chi is considered to be a spiritual discipline as well.

The Future

During China's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) tai chi was under political attack in China, but the situation has changed. Tai chi has been reinstated as a national treasure and a uniquely Chinese form of art and sport. Basic tai chi is taught publicly in parks and other suitable places, as it is in other parts of the Chinese world. Advanced instruction is available, and form competitions are held. Lacking knowledge of Chinese philosophy and its implications for self-defense and medicine, Westerners have generally been drawn to flashier martial arts. However, that situation is changing, too; gradually tai chi is becoming better known in the West. It is of growing interest to the international medical research community and to martial

arts scholarship, but tai chi is still best known in the West as a health and longevity exercise of particular benefit to seniors. Both physically and philosophically, tai chi both influences and defines Chinese health and well-being more than any other non-medicinal practice.

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