



Tai chi

Tai chi is an ancient Chinese martial art. Initially developed for combat and self-defense, it has evolved into a sport and form of exercise. Tai chi is a gentle, low-impact form of exercise in which practitioners perform a series of deliberate, flowing motions while focusing on deep, slow breaths. Often referred to as "meditation in motion," tai chi aims to concentrate and balance the body's *qi* (vital energy), providing benefits to mental and physical health.^[1]

Many forms of tai chi are practiced, both traditional and modern. While the precise origins are not known, the earliest documented practice is from Chen Village, Henan. Most modern styles trace their development to the five traditional schools: Chen, Yang, Wu (Hao), Wu, and Sun. Practitioners such as Yang Chengfu and Sun Lutang in the early 20th century promoted the art for its health benefits.^[2] Tai chi was included in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2020.^[3]

Etymology

The name "tai chi", the most common English spelling, is not a standard romanization of the Chinese name for the art (simplified Chinese: 太极拳; traditional Chinese: 太極拳; lit. "Taiji boxing"). The Chinese name was first commonly written in English using the Wade–Giles system as "*t'ai chi ch'üan*". But English speakers abbreviated it to "*t'ai chi*" and dropped the mark of aspiration. Since the late twentieth century, pinyin has replaced Wade–Giles as the most popular system for romanizing Chinese. In pinyin, tai chi is spelled *taijiquan* (*tàijíquán*).^{[4][5]} In English, tai chi is sometimes referred to as "shadowboxing".^[6]

Tai chi 太極拳



The lower dantian in tai chi: *Taijitu* (yin and yang) rotate, while the core reverts to stillness (*wuji*).



Yang Chengfu (c. 1931) in *Single Whip* posture of Yang-style tai chi solo form

Also known as	See <u>etymology</u>
Focus	<u>Taoism</u>
Hardness	Forms: Competition • Light contact (<u>pushing hands</u> , no strikes) • Full contact (strikes, kicks, throws, takedowns etc.)
Country of origin	<u>China</u>
Date of formation	<u>Daoyin</u>
Creator	<u>Chen Wangting</u> or <u>Zhang Sanfeng</u>
Famous practitioners	<u>Chen Wangting</u> <u>Chen Changxing</u>

Characters	Wade–Giles	Pinyin	Meaning
太極	t'ai chi	tàijí	<i>Taiji</i> , the cosmological relationship of Yin and Yang
拳	ch'üan	quán	fist, or boxing

The etymology of tai chi's Chinese name is somewhat uncertain because of the lack of a record of spoken usage. Before the mid-nineteenth century, it appears that outsiders generically described the art as *zhanquan* (沾拳, "touch boxing"), "Long Boxing" (長拳),^[note 1] *mianquan* ("Soft/Cotton/Neutralizing Boxing"; 軟/棉/化拳) or *shisan shi* (十三式, "the thirteen techniques").^[7] In the mid-nineteenth century, the art began to be associated with the philosophy of *taiji* (see [Conceptual background](#)).^[8] This association may have originated in the writings of the founders of Wu (Hao)-style tai chi, perhaps inspired by a tai chi classic attributed to the semi-mythical Wang Zongyue that begins with the words "*Taiji* is born from *Wuji*; it is the mother of Yin and Yang".^[note 2] However, as the Wu (Hao) founders had no financial need to promote their art, their contributions to the "tai chi classics" were not distributed widely for many years. The first public association between *taiji* and the art was a poem by Imperial Court scholar Weng Tonghe describing a tai chi performance by Yang Luchan.^{[10][11][12][13]} It is not clear whether Weng was making a new connection or whether the new name was already in use. Written evidence for the Yang family's adoption of the name *taiji* first appeared in a later text, possibly completed in 1875 by Yang Luchan's son, Yang Banhou, or no later than the first decade of the twentieth century by one or more of Yang Banhou's disciples.^{[14][15][16][12]} By the second decade of the twentieth century, Yang Chengfu's disciples and Sun Lutang were using the term *taijiquan* in their publications, including in the titles of some of the tai chi classics. It then appeared in a book by a Chen family member, Chen Xin, published after he died in 1929.^{[10][17]}

Philosophical background

- Chen Qingping
- Chen Fake
- Joey Bond
- Marshall Ho'o
- Yang Luchan
- Yang Chengfu
- Cheng Man-ch'ing
- Wu Quanyou
- Wu Jianquan
- Wu Yuxiang
- Sun Lutang
- Wang Peisheng
- Olympic sport
- Demonstration sport

Tai chi	
Traditional Chinese	太極拳
Simplified Chinese	太极拳
Literal meaning	"Taiji Boxing"
Transcriptions	
Standard Mandarin	
Hanyu Pinyin	Tàijíquán
Bopomofo	ㄊㄞˊ ㄑㄩㄢˊ ㄑㄩㄢˊ
Wade–Giles	T'ai ⁴ -chi ² ch'üan ²
IPA	[tʰâi.t͡ɕʰi t͡ɕʰuǎn]
Wu	
Shanghainese	Tha-ciɿ jioe
Romanization	
Yue: Cantonese	
Yale Romanization	Taai-gihk kyùhn
Jyutping	Taa3 gik6 kyun4
IPA	[tʰaǰɿ kɨ̌k̚ɿ kʰyn̚ɿ]
Southern Min	
Hokkien POJ	Thài-kék kûn
Tâi-lô	Thài-kik kûn

Chinese philosophy, particularly Taoist and Confucian thought, forms the conceptual background to tai chi.^[18] Early tai chi texts include embedded quotations from early Chinese classics like the *I Ching*, *Great Learning*, *Book of Documents*, *Records of the Grand Historian*, and *Zhuangzi*, as well as from famous Chinese thinkers like Zhu Xi, Zhou Dunyi, and Mencius.^[18]

Early tai chi sources are grounded in Taiji cosmology. Taiji cosmology appears in both Taoist and Confucian philosophy, where it represents the single source or mother of yin and yang (represented by the taijitu symbol ☯).^{[19][18]} Tai chi also draws on Chinese theories of the body, particularly Taoist neidan (internal alchemy) teachings on qi (vital energy) and on the three dantian. Cheng Man-ch'ing emphasizes the Taoist background of tai chi and states that it "enables us to reach the stage of undifferentiated pure yang, which is exactly the same as Laozi's 'concentrating the qi and developing softness'".^[18]

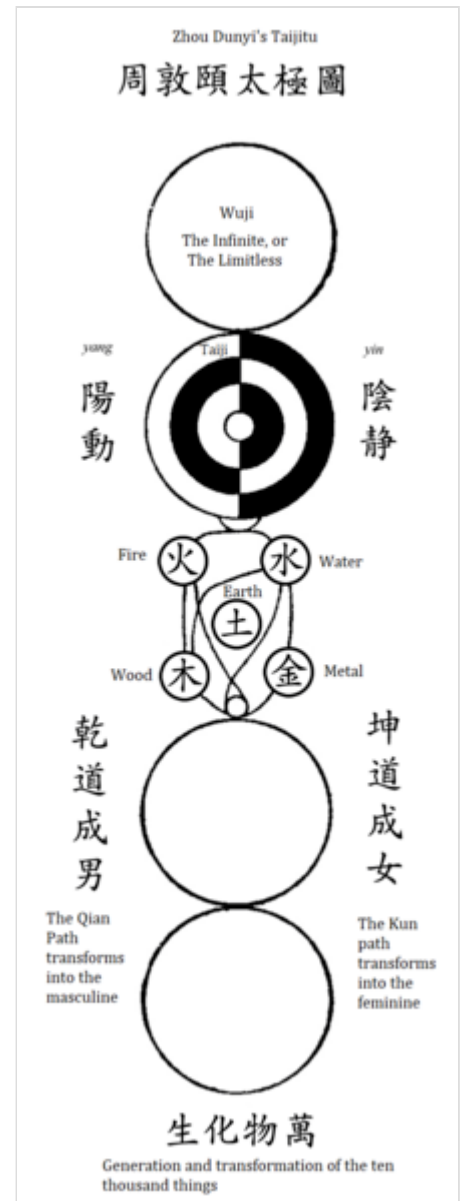
As such, tai chi considers itself an "internal" (neijia) martial art focused on developing qi.^[18] In China, tai chi is categorized under the Wudang group of Chinese martial arts^[20]—that is, arts applied with internal power.^[21] Although the term Wudang suggests these arts originated in the Wudang Mountains, it is used only to distinguish the skills, theories, and applications of neijia from those of the Shaolin grouping, or waijia (hard/external styles).^[18]

Tai chi also adopts the Taoist ideals of softness overcoming hardness, of wu wei (effortless action), and of yielding into its martial art technique while also retaining Taoist ideas of spiritual self-cultivation.^[18]

Tai chi's path is one of developing naturalness by relaxing, attending inward, and slowing mind, body, and breath.^[18] This allows the practitioner to become less tense, to drop conditioned habits, to let go of thoughts, to allow qi to flow smoothly, and thus to flow with the Tao. It is thus a kind of moving meditation that allows us to let go of the self and experience no-mind (wuxin) and spontaneity (ziran).^[18]

A key aspect of tai chi philosophy is to work with the flow of yin (softness) and yang (hardness) elements. When two forces push each other with equal force, neither side moves. Motion cannot occur until one side yields. Therefore, a key principle in tai chi is to avoid using force directly against force (hardness against hardness). Laozi provided the archetype for this in the *Tao Te Ching* when he wrote, "The soft and the pliable will defeat the hard and strong."^[22] Conversely, when in possession of leverage, one may want to use hardness to force the opponent to become soft. Traditionally, tai chi uses both soft and hard. Yin is said to be the mother of Yang, using soft power to create hard power.

Traditional schools also emphasize that one is expected to show wude ("martial virtue/heroism"), to protect the defenseless, and to show mercy to one's opponents.^[2]



Zhou Dunyi's Taijitu diagram which illustrates the Taijitu cosmology.

In December 2020, the 15th regular session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage included tai chi in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.^[23]

Practice

Traditionally, the foundational tai chi practice consists of learning and practicing a specific solo forms or routines (*taolu*).^[18] This entails learning a routine sequence of movements that emphasize a straight spine, abdominal breathing and a natural range of motion. Tai chi relies on knowing the appropriate change in response to outside forces, as well as on yielding to and redirecting an attack, rather than meeting it with opposing force.^[24] Physical fitness is also seen as an important step towards effective self-defense.

Tai chi movements were inspired by animals, especially birds and leopards.^[25]

There are also numerous other supporting solo practices such as:^[18]

- Sitting meditation: The empty, focus and calm the mind and aid in opening the microcosmic orbit.
- Standing meditation (*zhan zhuang*) to raise the *yang qi*
- *Qigong* to mobilize the *qi*
- Acupressure massage to develop awareness of *qi* channels
- Traditional Chinese medicine is taught to advanced students in some traditional schools.^[26]

There is no scientific evidence for the existence of *qi*,^[27] nor any demonstrating the effectiveness of acupressure^{[28][29][30]} or traditional Chinese medicine^{[31][32]} beyond that of placebo treatment.

Further training entails learning *tuishou* (push hands drills), *sanshou* (striking techniques), free sparring, grappling training, and weapons training.^[18]

In the "tai chi classics", writings by tai chi masters, it is noted that the physiological and kinesiological aspects of the body's movements are characterized by the circular motion and rotation of the pelvis, based on the metaphors of the pelvis as the hub and the arms and feet as the spokes of a wheel. Furthermore, the respiration of breath is coordinated with the physical movements in a state of deep relaxation, rather than muscular tension, in order to guide the practitioners to a state of homeostasis.

Tai chi is a complete martial art system with a full range of bare-hand movement sets and weapon forms, such as tai chi sword and tai chi spear, which are based on the dynamic relationship between *yin* and *yang*. While tai chi is typified by its slow movements, many styles (including the three most popular: Yang, Wu, and Chen) have secondary, faster-paced forms. Some traditional schools teach martial applications of the postures of different forms (*taolu*).

Solo practices

Taolu (solo "forms") are choreographed sets of movements practiced alone or in unison as a group. Tai chi is often characterized by slow movements in Taolu practice, and one of the reasons is to develop body awareness. Accurate, repeated practice of the solo routine is said to retrain posture, encourage circulation

throughout students' bodies, maintain flexibility, and familiarize students with the martial sequences implied by the forms. Usually performed standing, solo forms have also been adapted for seated practice.^[33]

Weapon practice

Tai chi practices involving weapons also exist. Weapons training and fencing applications often employ:

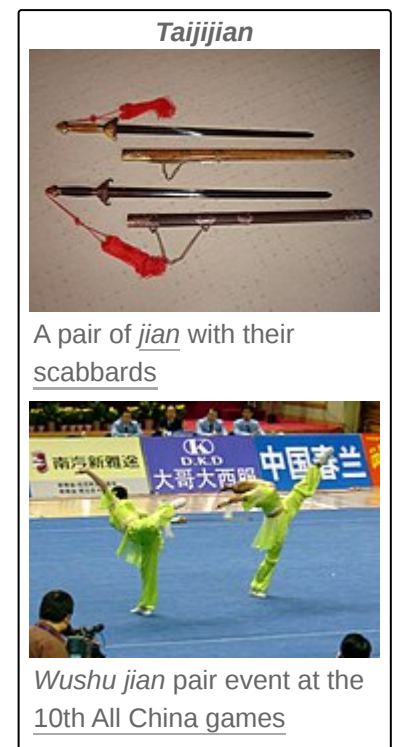
- the jian, a straight double-edged sword, practiced as taijjian;
- the dao, a heavier curved saber, sometimes called a broadsword;
- the tieshan, a folding fan, also called shan and practiced as taijishan;
- the gun, a 2 m long wooden staff and practiced as taijigun;
- the qiang, a 2 m long spear or a 4 m long lance.

More exotic weapons include:

- the large dadao and podao sabres;
- the ji, or halberd;
- the cane;
- the sheng biao, or rope dart;
- the sanjiegun, or three sectional staff;
- the feng huo lun, or wind-and-fire wheels;
- the lasso;
- the whip, chain whip and steel whip.



Painting in Chenjiagou, illustrating taolu according to the Chen style of tai chi



A pair of jian with their scabbards

Wushu jian pair event at the 10th All China games

History

Early development

Tai chi's formative influences came from practices undertaken in Taoist and Buddhist monasteries, such as Wudang, Shaolin and The Thousand Year Temple in Henan.^[34] The early development of tai chi proper is connected with Henan's Thousand Year Temple and a nexus of nearby villages: Chen Village, Tang Village, Wangbao Village, and Zhaobao Town. These villages were closely connected, shared an interest in the martial arts and many went to study at Thousand Year Temple (which was a syncretic temple with elements from the three teachings).^[34] New documents from these villages, mostly dating to the 17th century, are some of the earliest sources for the practice of tai chi.^[34]

Some traditionalists claim that tai chi is a purely Chinese art that comes from ancient Taoism and Confucianism.^[18] These schools believe that tai chi theory and practice were formulated by Taoist monk Zhang Sanfeng in the 12th century. These stories are often filled with legendary and hagiographical content and lack historical support.^{[18][34]}

Modern historians point out that the earliest reference indicating a connection between Zhang Sanfeng and martial arts is actually a 17th-century piece called *Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan* (1669), composed by Huang Zongxi (1610–1695).^{[8][18]} Aside from this single source, the other claims of connections between tai chi and Zhang Sanfeng appeared no earlier than the 19th century.^{[8][18]} According to Douglas Wile, "there is no record of a Zhang Sanfeng in the Song Dynasty (960–1279), and there is no mention in the Ming (1368–1644) histories or hagiographies of Zhang Sanfeng of any connection between the immortal and the martial arts."^[18]

Another common theory for the origin of tai chi is that it was created by Chen Wangting (1580–1660) while living in Chen Village (陳家溝), Henan.^[35] The other four contemporary traditional tai chi styles (Yang, Sun, Wu and Wu/Hao) trace their teachings back to Chen village in the early 1800s.^{[2][36]}

Yang Luchan (1799–1872), the founder of the popular Yang style, trained with the Chen family for 18 years before he started to teach in Beijing, which strongly suggests that his work was heavily influenced by the Chen family art. Martial arts historian Xu Zhen claimed that the tai chi of Chen Village was influenced by the *Taizu changquan* style practiced at nearby Shaolin Monastery, while Tang Hao thought it was derived from a treatise by Ming dynasty general Qi Jiguang, *Jixiao Xinshu* ("New Treatise on Military Efficiency"), which discussed several martial arts styles including *Taizu changquan*.^{[37][38]}

Standardization

In 1956 the Chinese government sponsored the Chinese Sports Committee (CSC), which brought together four *wushu* teachers to truncate the Yang family hand form to 24 postures. This was an attempt to standardize tai chi for *wushu* tournaments as they wanted to create a routine that would be much less difficult to learn than the classical 88 to 108 posture solo hand forms.

Another 1950s form is the "97 movements combined tai chi form", which blends Yang, Wu, Sun, Chen, and Fu styles.

In 1976, they developed a slightly longer demonstration form that would not require the traditional forms' memory, balance, and coordination. This became the "Combined 48 Forms" that were created by three *wushu* coaches, headed by Men Hui Feng. The combined forms



A statue of Chen Wangting, an early pioneer of tai chi



Taoist practitioners practising

simplified and combined classical forms from the original Chen, Yang, Wu, and Sun styles. Other competitive forms were designed to be completed within a six-minute time limit.

In the late 1980s, CSC standardized more competition forms for the four major styles as well as combined forms. These five sets of forms were created by different teams, and later approved by a committee of *wushu* coaches in China. These forms were named after their style: the "Chen-style national competition form" is the "56 Forms". The combined forms are "The 42-Form" or simply the "Competition Form".

In the 11th Asian Games of 1990, *wushu* was included as an item for competition for the first time with the *42-Form* representing tai chi. The International Wushu Federation (IWUF) applied for *wushu* to be part of the Olympic games.^[39]

Tai chi was added to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists in 2020 for China.^[40]

Styles

Chinese origin

The five major styles of tai chi are named for the Chinese families who originated them:

- Chen style (陳氏) of Chen Wangting (1580–1660)
- Yang style (楊氏) of Yang Luchan (1799–1872)
- Wu/Hao style (武郝氏) of Wu Yuxiang (1812–1880) and Hao Weizhen (1842–1920)
- Wu style (吳氏) of Wu Quanyou (1834–1902) and his son Wu Jianquan (1870–1942)
- Sun style (孫氏) of Sun Lutang (1861–1932)

The most popular is Yang, followed by Wu, Chen, Sun, and Wu/Hao.^[18] The styles share underlying theory, but their training differs.

Dozens of new styles, hybrid styles, and offshoots followed, although the family schools are accepted as standard by the international community.

Other important styles are Zhaobao tai chi, a close cousin of Chen style, which is recognized by Western practitioners; Fu style, created by Fu Zhensong, which evolved from Chen, Sun and Yang styles, and incorporates movements from *baguazhang*; and Cheng Man-ch'ing style, which simplifies Yang style.

Around the world in the 20th and 21st centuries, some Chinese emigrants who had learned tai chi in China continued to practice it together in their new communities.

North America

United States



Wu-style master Eddie Wu demonstrating the form "Grasp the bird's tail" at a tournament in Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Choy Hok Pang, a disciple of Yang Chengfu, was the first known proponent of tai chi to openly teach in the United States, beginning in 1939. His son and student Choy Kam Man emigrated to San Francisco from Hong Kong in 1949 to teach tai chi in Chinatown. Choy Kam Man taught until he died in 1994.^{[41][42]}

Sophia Delza, a professional dancer and student of Ma Yueliang, performed the first known public demonstration of tai chi in the United States at the New York City Museum of Modern Art in 1954. She wrote the first English language book on tai chi, *T'ai-chi Ch'üan: Body and Mind in Harmony*, in 1961. She taught regular classes at Carnegie Hall, the Actors Studio, and the United Nations.^{[43][44]}

Cheng Man-ch'ing opened his school Shr Jung tai chi after he moved to New York from Taiwan in 1964. Unlike the older generation of practitioners, Cheng was cultured and educated in American ways, and thus was able to transcribe Yang's dictation into a written manuscript that became the de facto manual for Yang style. Cheng felt Yang's traditional 108-movement form was unnecessarily long and repetitive, which makes it difficult to learn. He thus created a shortened 37-movement version that he taught in his schools. Cheng's form became the dominant form in the eastern United States until other teachers immigrated in larger numbers in the 1990s. He taught until his death in 1975.^[45]

Canada

Moy Lin-shin arrived in Toronto, Canada, from China in 1970, where he started teaching tai chi and related internal arts.^[46]

Europe

United Kingdom

Norwegian Pytt Geddes was the first European to teach tai chi in Britain, holding classes at The Place in London in the early 1960s. She had first encountered tai chi in Shanghai in 1948, and studied with Choy Hok Pang and his son Choy Kam Man (who both also taught in the United States) while living in Hong Kong in the late 1950s.^[47]

Yin and yang

More traditional practitioners hold that the two aspects of health and martial arts make up the art's *yin* and *yang*. The "family" schools present their teachings in a martial art context, whatever the intention of their students.^[48]

Health

Tai chi's health training concentrates on relieving stress on the body and mind. In the 21st century, tai chi classes that purely emphasize health are popular in hospitals, clinics, community centers and senior centers. Tai chi's low-stress training method for seniors has become better known.^[49]

Clinical studies exploring tai chi's effect on specific diseases and health conditions exist, though there are insufficient studies with consistent approaches to generate a comprehensive conclusion.^[50]

Tai chi has been promoted for treating various ailments, and is supported by the Parkinson's Foundation and Diabetes Australia, among others. However, medical evidence of effectiveness is lacking.^{[51][52]} A 2017 systematic review found that it decreased falls in older people.^[53]

A 2011 comprehensive overview of systematic reviews of tai chi recommended tai chi to older people for its physical and psychological benefits. It found positive results for fall prevention and overall mental health. No conclusive evidence showed benefit for most of the conditions researched, including Parkinson's disease, diabetes, cancer and arthritis.^[51]

A 2015 systematic review found that tai chi could be performed by those with chronic medical conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, heart failure, and osteoarthritis without negative effects, and found favorable effects on functional exercise capacity.^[54]

In 2015 the Australian Government's Department of Health published the results of a review of alternative therapies that sought to identify any that were suitable for coverage by health insurance. Tai chi was one of 17 therapies evaluated. The study concluded that low-quality evidence suggests that tai chi may have some beneficial health effects when compared to control in a limited number of populations for a limited number of outcomes.^[52]

A 2020 review of 13 studies found that tai chi had positive effect on the quality of life and depressive symptoms of older adults with chronic conditions who lived in community settings.^[55]

In 2022, the U.S.A agency the National Institutes of Health published an analysis of various health claims, studies and findings. They concluded the evidence was of low quality, but that it appears to have a small positive effect on quality of life.^[56]

Sport and self-defense

As a martial art, tai chi emphasizes defense over attack and replies to hard with soft. The ability to use tai chi as a form of combat is the test of a student's understanding of the art. This is typically demonstrated via competition with others.



Outdoor practice in Beijing's Temple of Heaven



A Chinese woman performs Yang-style tai chi.

Practitioners test their skills against students from other schools and martial arts styles in *tuishou* ("pushing hands") and *sanshou* competition.

See also



- Qigong
- Self-healing
- Wushu
- Yangsheng (Daoism)

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Notes

1. "Long" as in "Continuous"; not to be confused with the external martial art also known as Long Fist or Changquan.
2. Original text: 太極者. 無極而生. 陰陽之母也.^[9]

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