

TAI CHI

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

Hardness	Forms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition • Light contact (pushing hands, no strikes) • Full contact (strikes, kicks, throws, takedowns etc.)
Country of origin	China
Date of formation	late 16th century
Creator	Chen Wangting or Zhang Sanfeng
Famous practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chen Wangting • Chen Changxing • Chen Qingping • Chen Fake • Yang Luchan • Yang Chengfu • Cheng Man-ch'ing • Wu Quanyou • Wu Jianquan • Wu Yuxiang • Sun Lutang

Taijiquan

UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage



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Tai chi

Traditional Chinese 太極拳

Simplified Chinese 太极拳

Literal meaning "Taiji Fist"

Tai chi is a [Chinese martial art](#). Initially developed for combat and self-defense,^[1] for most practitioners it has evolved into a sport and form of [exercise](#). As an exercise, tai chi is performed as gentle, low-impact movement in which practitioners perform a series of deliberate, flowing motions while focusing on deep, slow breaths. Often described as "[meditation in motion](#)," tai chi aims to cultivate and balance the body's [qi](#) (vital energy), thereby promoting both mental and physical well-being.^[2]

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](#) and [Zhabao Village](#) in [Henan](#) on the [North China Plain](#), a region where centuries of rebellions, invasions, and adverse economic and social conditions nurtured the development of a wide range of martial arts, including those of the [Shaolin Monastery](#) on [Mount Song](#) at the western edge of the plain.^{[3][4]}

Most modern styles trace their development to five traditional schools: [Chen](#), [Yang](#), [Wu \(Hao\)](#), [Wu](#), and [Sun](#). In the early 20th century [Yang Chengfu](#), [Wu Jianquan](#), [Sun Lutang](#), and others promoted and standardized the art for its health benefits in programs supported by the [Nationalist government](#),^[5] an approach that was further expanded and institutionalized by the [PRC government](#) after 1949.^[6] In 2020, tai chi was included in the [UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity](#).^[7]

Etymology

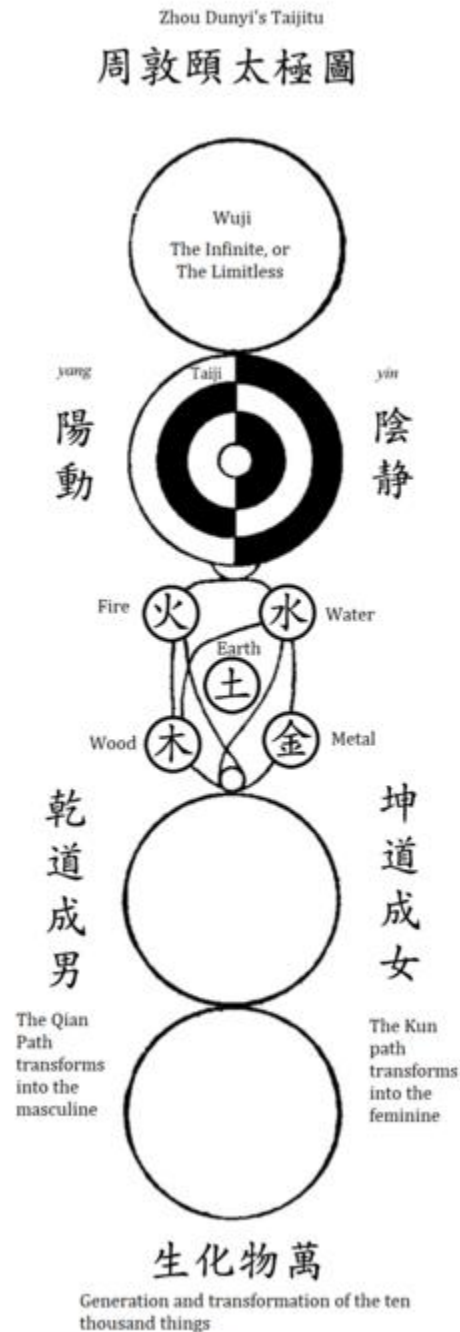
The name "tai chi", the most common English spelling, is not a standard [romanization](#) of the Chinese name for the art (simplified Chinese: 太极拳; traditional Chinese: 太極拳; lit. 'Taiji boxing'). The Chinese name was first commonly written in English using the [Wade–Giles](#) system as "*t'ai chi ch'üan*". But English speakers abbreviated it to "*t'ai chi*" and dropped the mark of aspiration. Since the late twentieth century, [pinyin](#) has been officially adopted in China and replaced Wade–Giles as the most popular system for romanizing Chinese. In pinyin, tai chi is spelled *tàijíquán*.^{[8][9]} In English, tai chi is sometimes referred to as "[shadowboxing](#)".^[10]

Characters	Wade–Giles	Pinyin	Meaning
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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)^[citation needed] or *shisan shi* (十三式; "the thirteen techniques").^[11] In the mid-nineteenth century, the art began to be associated with the philosophy of *taiji* (see [Conceptual background](#)).^[12] 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](#).^{[14][15][16][17]} 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.^{[18][19][20][16]} 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.^{[14][21]}

Philosophical background



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

Chinese philosophy, particularly Taoist and Confucian thought, forms the conceptual background to tai chi.^[22] 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.^[22]

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 ).^{[23][22]} 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'".^[22]

As such, tai chi considers itself an "internal" (*neijia*) martial art focused on developing *qi*.^[22] In China, tai chi is categorized under the *Wudang* group of Chinese martial arts^[24]—that is, arts applied with internal power.^[25] 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).^[22]

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.^[22]

Tai chi's path is one of developing naturalness by relaxing, attending inward, and slowing mind, body, and breath.^[22] 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*).^[22]

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."^[26] 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.^[5]

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.^[27]

Practice

Traditionally, the foundational tai chi practice consists of learning and practicing a specific solo forms or routines (*taolu*).^[22] 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.^[28] Physical fitness is also seen as an important step towards effective [self-defense](#).

Tai chi movements were inspired by animals, especially birds and leopards.^[29]

There are also numerous other supporting solo practices such as:^[22]

- 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.^[30]

There is no scientific evidence for the existence of *qi*,^[31] nor any demonstrating the effectiveness of acupressure^{[32][33][34]} or traditional Chinese medicine^{[35][36]} beyond that of [placebo](#) treatment.

Further training entails learning [tuishou](#) (push hands drills), [sanshou](#) (striking techniques), free sparring, grappling training, and weapons training.^[22]

The fundamental training concepts of the art are detailed in a few dozen classical texts originally written in [classical Chinese](#) by tai chi masters, the "[tai chi classics](#)". In these texts, 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.^[37]

Tai chi is a complete martial art system with a full range of bare-hand movement sets and weapon forms, such as the [jian](#) (straight sword), [dao](#) (curved sword), and [qiang](#) (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. Painting in [Chenjiagou](#), illustrating *taolu* according to the [Chen style](#) of tai chi *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.^[38]