

Yang Chengfu The Essence and Applications of Taijiquan



Translated by
Louis Swaim

一、太極拳要點。凡十有三。曰沈肩垂肘。含胸拔背。氣沈丹田。虛靈頂勁。鬆腰膀。分虛實。上下。大。鬆。不。只。拳。內。體。合。用。氣。松。全。書。

靜。動靜合一。式式均勻。七十三點。凡一動作。皆要主意。不可無一式

中。而無此十三點之觀念

一、本拳之用。為已熟練太極

正。偶皆。試。因。如。未。熟。練

少。效。功。學。者。未。能。上

一、太極拳祇有一派。無二法門

可移易之處。自。明。迄。今。已。幾。百。年。如。有。可。改。之。處。昔。人。亦。已。先。我。行。之

矣。烏待吾輩乎。願後之學者。弗惟外之是驚。而惟內之是求。欲進精醇

。期日可待。要之拳式細目。非取形似。必求意合。惟恐私心妄改。以誤

傳誤。易失體用之真傳。以致湮沒昔賢之本意。茲照舊本校正。以垂為正

Yang Chengfu

The Essence and Applications
of Taijiquan



Translated by
Louis Swaim



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This book is dedicated
to the memory of my father,
John Wesley Swaim.

Acknowledgments

My work on this book translation began some years ago, and because of various commitments, I was only able to pursue it in spare moments over time. During that time, I benefited from many discussions with friends. Some of the people who have either encouraged me — or challenged me to clarify and re-think my approach to translating — include Jerry Karin, Audi Peal, Jeff Crosland, and a host of contributors to online discussions. Barbara Davis, Douglas Wile, and Jeff Crosland each read late drafts of the manuscript, and generously offered detailed suggestions for its improvement. Kathy Glass copyedited the manuscript with grace and efficiency. I, of course, am responsible for any remaining oversights or errors of interpretation.

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I wish to thank my mom and my sisters for the support that only family can give. My daughter Emma, with her thirst for knowledge, love of literature, and zest for life, has been a constant inspiration.

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Translator's Introduction

The publication in 1934 of Yang Chengfu's book, *Essence and Applications of Taijiquan* (*Taijiquan tiyong quanshu*), marked a milestone in the modern evolution of the art of taijiquan. It is the written culmination of Yang's teachings on the art. Yet, as popular taijiquan has grown to be, few taijiquan enthusiasts in the West know anything about the contents of this seminal book. There are a number of likely reasons that this source has been overlooked for so long. For one, the book is difficult to translate, since it is written in a style that is distilled and compact — a presentation that differs from speech or vernacular writing, and that includes frequent classical or literary turns of phrase that remain obscure unless the reader is familiar with, or can discover, the sources from whence they came. In addition, there are numerous problems in the features and organization of the text that cause difficulties of interpretation. Finally, there are questions about the authorship of the book that need clarification. In my approach to this book translation, I have tried to address each of these issues in a way that I hope will help the modern taijiquan enthusiast to get a grasp of Yang's valuable insights.

Early published manuals on taijiquan from the 1920s and 1930s should be understood within a greater context of a gradual evolution from oral tradition and highly codified written texts that were privately transmitted, to more explicit notation of detailed body mechanics that were publicly transmitted. The kind of detailed kinesiological description witnessed in modern manuals (written in the late 1950s and early 1960s), such as those by Fu Zhongwen or Gu Liuxin, were strongly influenced by advances in formalized physical education instruction.¹ The earliest written taiji documents, such as what we now call “the classics,” are probably best understood as supplementary adjuncts to personal, oral instruction. These fit into a common mold with historical Chinese military training manuals, archery manuals, and the like.² The earliest taiji texts functioned less as explicit descriptions of movement than as distillations of experiential principles. They might be viewed as a sort of “prompt book” for advanced students and masters.

An analog in Chinese literary tradition is a body of literature known as *huaben* (talk book) or stories. *Huaben* literature most likely came out of a tradition of teahouse storytellers. The storytelling art was passed down from master to student, or within a family tradition. Slowly a written tradition developed that recorded the stories in a bare bones and formulaic presentation, whose sole purpose was to preserve the outlines of the stories and to serve as a memory prompt. Later, these prompt books were built upon and fleshed out into more narrative form by literary-minded writers for publication. Thus what had been accessible to the public only through teahouse storytellers now became available to a reading public as a sort of proto-novel.

If the classical texts of taijiquan represent subjective experience expressed through the insightful records of early masters, the later manuals represent a more objective, distanced, and analytical approach to the physical movements. Yang Chengfu's *Taijiquan tiyong quanshu* occupies a transitional position somewhere between the earlier “experiential” texts and the later physical education-oriented manuals. As such, it provides a rare glimpse into the direct hands-on teaching of the art by Yang Chengfu by means of what is best termed

“demonstration narrative.” That is, it is a record of Yang going through the form, section by section, demonstrating the functional aspects of the art while simultaneously explaining the applications. Each section consists of a photo of Yang Chengfu in the sequenced ending posture, accompanied by a narrative describing a suggested application scenario. In most cases, the scenario begins with words such as, “Suppose the opponent strikes at me with his left hand,” then proceeds with the suggested application. Each posture is treated as a separate scenario. A perfunctory linkage from one section to the next is effected with introductory phrases such as “From the previous posture, suppose an opponent comes from behind me....” In some cases, but not all, the linkages give logical insight into the transitional moves from one posture to posture. The perspective is clearly that of Yang Chengfu, perhaps demonstrating with one of his students responding to cues and striking or feinting at Yang accordingly. Once the reader understands this context of “demonstration narrative,” the teachings of Yang Chengfu will come across with an immediacy and liveliness unavailable before.

The suggested scenarios should by no means be construed as the exclusive or definitive applications for their given forms. In fact, Yang’s narrative occasionally suggests alternative scenarios of response, depending upon the potentially changing circumstances of the attack. One of the values of the text is the emphasis it places upon maintaining postural alignment and equilibrium, while seeking strategies to unbalance and overcome the opponent. Rather than providing an inventory of martial techniques, the suggested scenarios only help to illustrate how the advanced taijiquan practitioner can develop these deeper strategies.

If the form narratives in fact represent the direct teachings of Yang Chengfu, one might ask how it is they came to be recorded in book form. It has long been speculated that the book was actually ghostwritten by Zheng Manqing (Cheng Man-ch’ing). Yang Chengfu’s second son, Yang Zhenji, made it quite clear when he stated, “*Taijiquan tiyong quanshu* was written by my father’s disciple, Zheng Manqing, according to my father’s performance narratives and requirements. This is factual.”³ Yang Zhenji thus makes it clear that the basis of the book was his father’s “performance narratives” (*yanshu* 演述). However, one must dig a little deeper to clarify Zheng’s role in writing the book. To this end, I have compared the form section text of *Taijiquan tiyong quanshu* with an earlier book published in 1931 under Yang Chengfu’s name, *Taijiquan shiyongfa* (Application Methods of Taijiquan). That book is known to have been compiled and edited by another of Yang’s students, Dong Yingjie (Tung Ying-chieh). The earlier version was likely an assemblage of observations and notes collected over time from Yang Chengfu’s teaching sessions. These “class notes” were then distilled into Dong’s terse, semi-classical style of writing.

One immediate difference between the texts is that the earlier *Shiyongfa* sections are unpunctuated, while the form sections for *Taijiquan tiyong quanshu* have punctuation. Traditional Chinese books were not punctuated, and it was the reader’s job to parse the sentences, determine which clauses were subordinate, and to match up subjects and predicates. Dong Yingjie was a classically trained scholar and evidently did not feel compelled to use punctuation in his writing. However, among the many changes in society and education during China’s encounter with modernity, there came the introduction in the early twentieth century of Western-style punctuation (*biaodian* 標點). Increasingly, modern readers who were not trained in reading classical Chinese writings relied upon punctuation for their comprehension. The addition of punctuation in Yang’s later book was evidently a

editorial decision on Zheng Manqing's part. Zheng was classically trained, but he must have felt the need to make the book more accessible to modern readers.

In many cases, the added punctuation is the *only* difference between the earlier and later form section texts. In other cases, some rough or ambiguous wording has been smoothed or reworked. Finally, in a number of cases, there are identifiable qualitative changes and additions. These include cases where there are added allusions to literary or philosophic texts that we know Zheng was versed in. Most educated Chinese at the time would have had at least passing familiarity with Zheng's allusions to such texts as the *Zhuangzi*, the *Daodejing*, the *Daxue* or "Greater Learning," and the *Xici*, sometimes called the "Great Commentary" or "Appended Phrases" section from the *Book of Changes*. Chinese writers typically did not attribute such quotations. They were simply run into the writer's text with the expectation that the reader would recognize them and know their significance. I have done my best to identify the allusions for the reader. Other changes evidently added by Zheng are what might be termed "envoi" statements frequently used to close the individual sections. These often appear as little formulaic remarks such as, "There is no one who will not fall down" as a result of the given technique, or "This will ensure success." Some of the envoi statements are more expansive than others, and some of them survive in Zheng Manqing's own later book *Zhengzi taijiquan shisan pian* (Master Zheng's Thirteen Chapters on Taijiquan).

The comparison of the 1934 book, *Taijiquan tiyong quanshu* with the 1931 book, *Taijiquan shiyongfa*, clearly indicates that Zheng Manqing's role was to edit and polish the earlier version. A statement in Yang Chengfu's "Introduction" supports this: "This book is based on the previous books, revised and corrected, to remain as a standard model." The underlying demonstration narrative is substantially the same in both books, and its structure strongly suggests that it was a direct record of Yang Chengfu's own teachings.

While there appears to be a strong case accounting for the development of the main form description section of the book, it is less clear how the sections on push hands and *daoyin* developed, and to what degree they reflect Yang Chengfu's direct narratives. These sections do seem to be consistent with the "demonstration narrative" model, but the descriptions in *Taijiquan tiyong quanshu* differ rather substantially from those in the earlier book. The earlier book, *Taijiquan shiyongfa*, also included a separate applications (*shiyongfa*) section, with descriptions of martial applications for some of the major sequences of the solo form. These descriptions were accompanied by photos of Yang Chengfu demonstrating the application with a partner.⁵ In addition, the earlier book had sections on a staff or spear form, along with several early texts and commentaries not included in *Taijiquan tiyong quanshu*. It may be that some of these materials were to have been incorporated into the proposed second volume on sword and spear methods mentioned in Zheng's foreword and Yang's introduction, but Yang Chengfu died before that volume materialized.

More problematic with regard to authorship are the "Preface" and "Introduction" presented under Yang Chengfu's name. The "Preface" has Yang Chengfu recounting first-hand conversations with his grandfather, Yang Luchan. This is an impossibility, given the fact that Yang Chengfu was born in 1883, eleven years after the date recorded as the year Yang Luchan died: 1872.⁶ One could speculate that Zheng wrote the "Preface" and "Introduction" based upon second-hand accounts of Yang family anecdotes. The anecdotes may have been true, save for the awkward anachronism of Yang being in his grandfather's presence. But even

apart from this sticky situation, a good deal of the discourse in the alleged conversation seems a better fit with the social and political background of Zheng Manqing than that of Yang Luchan's generation.

A few remarks are in order with regard to the title of the book. The literal translation of the title, *Taijiquan tiyong quanshu* 太極拳體用全書, is *The Complete Book of the Essence and Applications of Taijiquan*. The “complete book” would probably have more accurately applied to the proposed two-volume set, of which only the first book was ever published. The important term in the title is *tiyong* 體用. The term *tiyong* has a long history as a philosophical concept. Its earliest appearance was in a commentary to Laozi's *Daodejing* by Wang Bi (226–249 CE). As a philosophical formulation it has had a varied career, surviving into the late imperial period. It can be variously translated as “theory and application,” “structure and function,” “essence and practical use,” and the like. In early modern China, with the increasingly intrusive presence of Western nations, the *tiyong* formula found new significance as a political slogan during what was called the “self-strengthening” movement — “Chinese learning should remain the essence, but Western learning should be used for practical development.” This was a potent formula for preserving cultural identity while appropriating modern military, institutional, and engineering advances needed for national survival.

In taijiquan, the *ti* generally refers to form practice, and the *yong* to practical application. However, Zheng Manqing may have deliberately used the *tiyong* term because of its resonance with the earlier philosophical meaning as well as its political overtone. After all, here was a method for self-strengthening that affirmed the very best of Chinese culture and essence.⁷ Zheng used the *tiyong* term in the title of a poem he wrote, “Tiyong Ge” (Song of Essence and Application), as did Li Yiyu (1832–1892) at an earlier time, “Taijiquan Tiyong Ge” (Song of the Essence and Application of Taijiquan).⁸ Early texts among those called the “Yang Family Forty Chapters” include references to the *tiyong* formula, including a brief text titled “Taiji Tiyong Jie” (Explanation of the Essence and Applications of Taiji), and one titled “Taiji Wen Wu Jie” (Explanation of the Civil and Martial in Taiji).⁹ The latter correlates the civil (*wen* 文) with essence (*ti* 體), and martial (*wu* 武) with application (*yong* 用). So taijiquan had from an early time incorporated the concept into its theory.

In doing this book translation, my goal has been to bring the teachings of Yang Chengfu to light for modern taijiquan enthusiasts. I have used a comparative approach to try to identify and reveal the direct demonstration narrative as recorded and filtered through his student. I've added commentary where I think it may add interest, ferreting out allusions, cracking the occasional tough nut, and pointing to probable additions from Zheng Manqing's pen. For the sake of historical documentation of the traditional Yang family form, I have made occasional reference to the “received form” as taught by Fu Zhongwen, Yang Zhenji, and Yang Zhenduo where doing so may clarify some ambiguity or lacunae in the form descriptions as presented. I have also included a few comparative references from the earlier form manual of Xue Yusheng, *Taijiquan shi tujie* (Taijiquan Forms Illustrated), where it sheds light on taiji terminology.

I hope that this book will be a useful study tool for fellow practitioners, as well as a point of departure for future comparative studies of early taijiquan writings. Even more, I hope that the demonstration narratives revealed here will enable taiji enthusiasts to feel closer to the source.

Conventions

I use the Chinese *pinyin* system of romanization for Chinese words, except in some translations of excerpts or book titles where an older system was employed. For some technical vocabulary, I use the Chinese term rather than translate each occurrence. For example, I employ the term *kua* throughout the book, which in taijiquan usage refers to the thighs, hips, or hip joints, but is more inclusive than any one of these terms in English. I have avoided using the English term “posture” for the named movements depicted in the photos in this book, preferring the word “form.” Posture implies something static, but the sequenced configurations of taijiquan express a dynamic quality that is not well-served by “posture.” As I employ the word, “form” can refer to an individual movement configuration, such as “White Crane Displays Wings,” or to the entire set of movements from beginning to end: the taijiquan form.

Notes

1. Gu Liuxin (1908–1990) was an innovator in applying modern analytical research methodology to the study of taijiquan history and theory. He played an important role as an acquisitions editor for *Renmin Tiyu Chubanshe* (People’s Physical Education Publishing), facilitating the publication of modern manuals for all of the major modern taijiquan styles, including Fu Zhongwen’s Yang style manual. For a useful account of the modern development and formalization of physical education (*tiyu* 體育), see Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People’s Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
2. See the excellent study by Stephen Selby, *Chinese Archery* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2000).
3. Yang Zhenji, *Yang Chengfu shi taijiquan*, p. 250.
4. See T.Y. Pang, *On Tai Chi Chuan*, pp. 240–242.
5. See Douglas Wile, *T’ai-chi Touchstones*, for these application photos.
6. See Wile, *T’ai-chi Touchstones*, p. iv, et passim, for additional assessments of the problem in Yang’s “Preface.”
7. For insightful analysis into taijiquan’s public emergence in the self-strengthening context, see Douglas Wile, *Lost T’ai-chi Classics from the Late Ch’ing Dynasty*, pp. 22–30.
8. Zheng’s poem is translated in Benjamin Lo, *Cheng Tzu’s Thirteen Treatises on T’ai Chi Ch’uan*, pp. 217–218. Li Yiyu’s poem is translated in Wile, *Lost T’ai-chi Classics*, pp. 50–51, 130.
9. Wile, *Lost T’ai-chi Classics*, pp. 70–71, 138–139.

澄甫太極專家體用全書

鍛鍊身心

蔣中正題



“Temper and train body and mind.”
— Jiang Zhongzheng (Chiang Kai-shek)

國術精華

楊澄甫先生著

太極拳體用全書

吳鐵城



“Essence of our national arts”

— Wu Tiecheng

可以禦侮可以衛生願以此
有百利而無一害之國粹
為四百兆同胞之典型

楊澄甫先生太極拳體用全集

蔡元培題



“Averting insults and protecting health, this national treasure has a hundred benefits for willing students, and will serve as a standard for four hundred million countrymen.”

— Cai Yuanpei

後學楷式

張厲生題



“A model form for students”

— Zhang Lisheng

寓剛于柔

張乃燕題



“Storing the hard in the soft”
— Zhang Naiyan

澄甫先生太極體用全書

龍騰虎卧

吳思孫題



“The dragon leaps; the tiger sleeps.”

— Wu Siyu

自強不息
張人傑題

“Strengthen yourselves without cease.”
— Zhang Renjie

民族精神
庞炳鑫



“Vital spirit of our people”

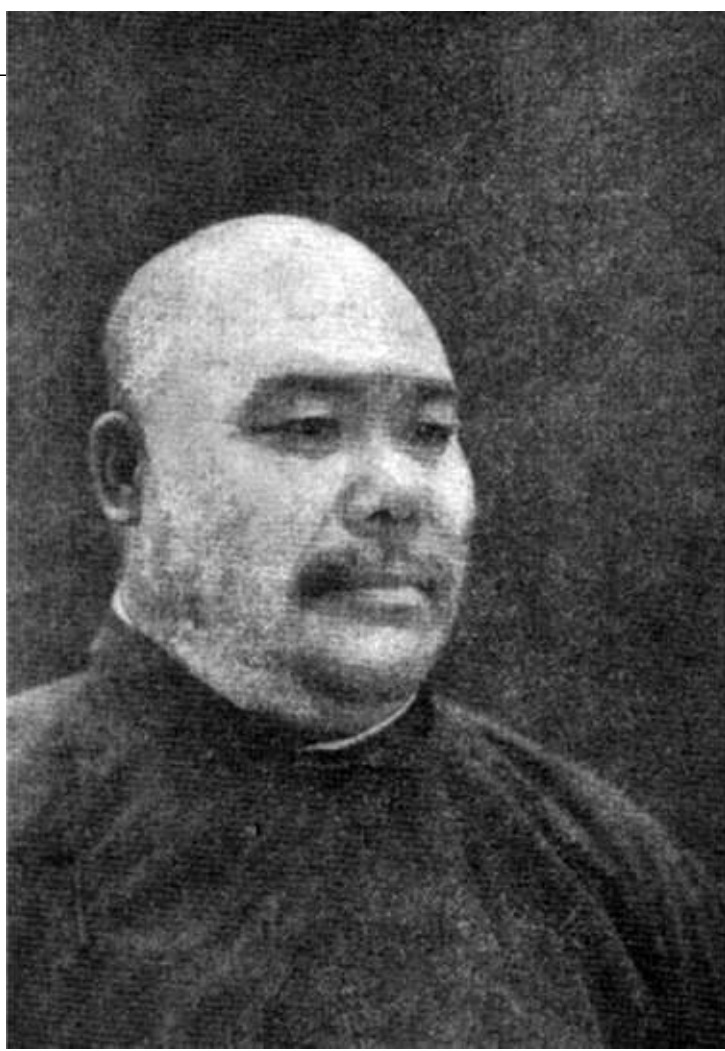
— Pang Bingxun



Yang Jianhou



Yang Shaohou



Author, Yang Chengfu



Yang Shouzhong

Zheng Manqing's Foreword

In the natural realm, only by the hardest can one prevail over the softest, and yet it is only by the softest that one can prevail over the hardest. The *Book of Changes* says, “Hard and soft stroke each other, the eight trigrams stimulate each other.”¹ The *Book of Documents* says, “The reserved and retiring are subdued with strength, those of lofty intelligence are subdued with gentleness.”² The *Book of Songs* says, “Neither devour the soft nor reject the hard.”³ If it is so that all of these follow the same principles in the applications of hard and soft, how is it that Laozi alone said, “In the natural realm, the softest things ride roughshod over the firmest”?⁴ And, “The soft and weak win over the hard and strong”?⁵ I was highly skeptical about this.

At the end of the Song Dynasty the sage Zhang Sanfeng created the technique of taiji soft fist, with what is called “having *qi*, then there is no strength; not having *qi*, then there is pure hardness.”⁶ Is this not strange? I felt that this concept seemed even more at odds with Laozi's theory in particular, and asked, “Why is this so?” I certainly already knew of the softness that comes through not using strength, but had not heard that there was such a thing as not using *qi*. If one doesn't use *qi*, how indeed can one have strength, and then attain pure hardness?

In 1923, I assumed a teaching position at Beijing Fine Arts Academy. A colleague, Li Yongchen, was good at this art of taijiquan. Because I was emaciated and weak, he urged me to study. Barely a month passed before I had to quit because of important commitments, so I was not able to catch on to the art.

In the spring of 1930, because of overwork while establishing the China Academy of Literature and Arts, I had reached the point of coughing up blood, so I resumed study and practice of taijiquan with my colleagues Xiao Zhongbo and Ye Dami. In less than a month, my illness swiftly subsided, and my constitution became stronger daily. From that point on, I practiced day and night with steady efforts. Within two years, when I matched up with men ten times my strength, I could beat several of them! I was beginning to believe that softness was sufficient to defeat hardness, but still didn't understand the subtlety of not using *qi*.

In the first lunar month of 1932, I met Master Yang Chengfu at Mr. Pu Qiuzhen's house. After the old gentleman had introduced me, I humbly presented myself at Master Yang's door, and received his teachings, including his oral instructions of the inner work. I began to understand the meaning of not using *qi*! By not using *qi*, I follow the flow, while the other goes against the flow. One has only to follow, then softly yield. The way that softness subdues hardness is gradual, while the way hardness subdues softness is abrupt. Abruptness is easy to detect, and so it is easily defeated. It is more difficult to sense gradualness, so it often prevails. This notion of not using *qi* is the extreme of softness. Only the extreme of softness can produce extreme hardness.

When I reached this, I came to understand. It was, after all, consistent with the treatises of the sage (Zhang Sanfeng) and Laozi, and with the teachings of the *Book of Changes* about the resonant exchange of hard and soft.

I was still afraid that those hearing my words would share the feelings of doubt that I once had, when I sought for explanations and proof. So my fellow student Kuang Keming and I went together to Master Yang Chengfu and said, “The methods of the former masters were

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